

ANCIENT HISTORY

NO. 59



AN EGYPTIAN DARK AGE?

THE FIRST INTERMEDIATE PERIOD

A KINGDOM RISES

Just as Egypt was in decline, the Kingdom of Kerma was rising to its south.

WHO WILL RULE

After the Old Kingdom, Egypt was divided between various competing regional powers.

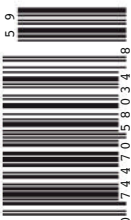
A GOOD TRADE

Central Asia was the cross-roads of Eurasia, connecting China and the Mediterranean.

ALL WORK, NO VOTE

Enslaved people were critical to both Athens' economy and the overall social order.

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ON THE COVER

A painted stele, dated to ca. 2080-1940 BC, possibly from Gebelein, Egypt, depicting a Nubian and his wife. Despite being traditionally associated with war and chaos, the First Intermediate Period was also a time of profound social change, such as the increased presence of Nubians in Egypt, and the development of regional artistic styles, as reflected in this stele.



© National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden



AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

The First Intermediate Period (FIP) of Egypt is often characterized as a dark age, a time of famine and war. In recent decades, this view has come under increasing scrutiny – the truth appears to be far more nuanced.

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EDITORIAL – AN AGE OF INSTABILITY?

It is often stressed that ancient Egypt was socially, culturally, and politically conservative. For example, over thousands of years, even after Egypt came under the rule of foreign powers like the Achaemenids and the Romans, Egyptian art retained a very standardized look. While there is some merit to the idea that Egypt maintained a 3000-year-long period of continuity, it also suffered from periods of internal instability.

These periods, known as the First, Second, and Third Intermediate Periods, in contrast to Egypt's traditional stability, are seen as times of chaos — especially the First Interme-

diate Period, the subject of this issue. The First Intermediate Period is often characterized as an era of political and cultural turmoil, with extended periods of famine and war. However, this understanding has been increasingly questioned in recent years. In this issue, we hope to bring you a comprehensive overview of the debates about this fascinating period and offer a nuanced snapshot of the political and cultural transformations Egypt underwent.



Owain Williams
Editor, *Ancient History*

Altar to household gods found in Cologne

A Roman shrine to household gods (*lararium*) is among several significant finds uncovered in the German city of Cologne. Archaeologists made the discovery during excavations linked to the construction of an underground tour for the LVR-Jewish Museum in the Archaeological Quarter (MiQua).

The *lararium* was found within the Roman governor's house (*praetorium*). Offerings and prayers were given there to the *Lares*, guardian deities of the household, whose

figurines once stood in a niche. Dating from the second century AD, the site, which still shows traces of paint, is considered unique north of the Alps. Comparable examples are known from cities around Mount Vesuvius, including Herculaneum and Pompeii.

Excavations also uncovered a staircase dating to the late first century AD. It once linked a low-lying area near the Rhine to a higher part of the early *praetorium*. The staircase's upper end has not been identified.

Race to record Iron Age footprints from the sea

In a race against time, archaeologists recorded ancient footprints on a storm-damaged beach before they disappeared. The prints were discovered at Lunan Bay in eastern Scotland after a powerful storm exposed a fresh layer of clay in the sand dunes.

The remarkable find was made by local residents. They alerted Aberdeenshire Council archaeologist Bruce Mann. A team, led by Kate Britton from the University of Aberdeen, rushed to investigate. Working in winds of up to 88.5 km/h (55 mph), archaeologists spent two days documenting the site even as tides eroded it.

"It's very rare that you get involved in a genuine archaeological emergency where, if we didn't do it very, very quickly, the whole site would be gone," Kate Britton said in a video about the discovery.

The archaeologists used drones, photography, and 3D modelling software to document the prints, while plaster moulds were taken from some of the best-preserved specimens. The tracks included those of barefoot humans as well as animals such as red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*). Beneath the footprints, archaeologists uncovered a layer of charred plant remains,



© University of Aberdeen

One of the footprints revealed on a beach in Lunan Bay in eastern Scotland by a storm, which has now been washed away by the sea.

which radiocarbon dating suggests are from the Late Iron Age, making them 2000 years old. Researchers say the site indicates the area was once a muddy estuary used by people, possibly for hunting deer or gathering wild plants.

When the team returned a week later, the footprints had vanished, washed away by the sea. Britton speculated that similar sites may exist, waiting to be revealed by shifting coastal landscapes.



A preserved Roman shoe from the Mithraeum in London.

© Amanda / Flickr



A bronze statuette representing the goddess Diana holding a libation bowl from Cologne.

© Dorieo / Wikimedia Commons

A view of the *lararium* and the stairs within the *praetorium* of Cologne.

© *Lararium*: Michael Wiehen; Stairs: Franziska Bartz

Additionally, the foundation of the apse of a massive, multi-aisled basilica dating from the fourth century AD was revealed. The structure had previously appeared only as a slight depression in Cologne's town hall square. Examination of the cross-

section showed it was not Roman cast concrete, but layered rock (including tuff, basalt, and limestone) bound with a durable mortar made from brick and gravel. The remains are now accessible to visitors for the first time.

In Cologne, early Roman features have been protected after being covered with fill material during Roman times owing to their location on and below the former Rhine embankment.

A statue of a woman named Nehy, dated to ca. 1250–1230 BC, who was likely a chantress of Hathor.

© The Walters Museum

Coffins of the 'Amun Chanters' stacked at Luxor

A cache of painted wooden coffins containing mummies, along with a group of rare papyri, has been uncovered by an Egyptian archaeological mission while excavating on Luxor's West Bank. The discovery was made in the southwestern corner of the courtyard of the Tomb of Seneb in the Qurna area.

Excavations revealed a rock-cut rectangular chamber used as a funerary storage facility. Inside, archaeologists found 22 painted wooden coffins. The coffins had been stacked in ten horizontal rows, with lids separated from their bases, to maximize the space within the chamber.

According to Dr Zahi Hawass, who heads the mission, the discovery dates to Egypt's Third Intermediate

Period (ca. 1077–664 BC). Most of the coffins bear professional titles rather than personal names, with the most common being 'Chanter' or 'Chantress of Amun', suggesting links to temple singers and religious chanters. Amun was a principal deity worshipped at nearby Karnak.

Eight papyri were also discovered inside a large pottery jar, some still bearing their original clay seals. Researchers say the fragile texts will need to be studied, restored, and translated before their contents are revealed.

The work at the excavation site is being carried out by a mission affiliated with Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities and the Zahi Hawass Foundation for Heritage and Antiquities. Excavations at the site are continuing.

Several papyri found in a large ceramic jar within the cache discovered in the courtyard of Seneb's tomb in Qurna.

© MoTA Egypt





The funerary relief known as the *Hydriaphoros Stele*, dated to 350 BC, depicts a woman holding a *hydriskos*, a small water vessel used in purification rituals and agricultural ceremonies.

© George E. Koronaiois / Wikimedia Commons

Thousands of votive vessels placed at Demeter-Kore temple

Around 3000 small terracotta vessels have been uncovered by archaeologists excavating a sanctuary in western Turkey. The artefacts are believed to have been used in ancient ritual offerings.

According to excavation director Prof. Dr Yusuf Sezgin, archaeologists identified a deliberately arranged zone in which thousands of the small ceramic vessels had been deposited. Researchers say the scale of the deposit suggests organized ceremonial activity carried out repeatedly over a long period.

The discovery was made at the Temple of Demeter and Kore in the ancient city of Aigai (near Yuntdağı Köşeler). Researchers say the vessels (*hydriskoi* in Greek) represent one of the largest concentrations of votive objects found at the site. *Hydriskoi* were typically used to carry small amounts of water and are thought to have been offered during purification rituals and seasonal ceremonies linked to agriculture.

"Demeter is the goddess of the earth and fertility," Dr Sezgin said, noting the importance of agricultural continuity in the region — Aigai, situated on Mount Gün in western Anatolia, controlled a fertile rural hinterland. Clean water would have been presented to the goddess at specific times of the year, and the vessels then placed in a designated area of the sanctuary.

The excavations, carried out under Turkey's Ministry of Culture and Tourism 'Legacy for the Future' initiative, began in April 2025 and took almost seven months. It marks the first systematic excavation of this particular temple area. Excavations are expected to continue in 2026.



Several of the *hydriskoi* discovered at the temple of Demeter-Kore in Aigai.

© DHA - Demirenen Haber Ajansı

Roman lead pigs unearthed on Welsh farm

Two 2000-year-old Roman lead ingots, discovered in a field in West Wales, have been declared Treasure at Inquest in January 2026. The objects, commonly known as lead 'pigs',

were found by metal detectorists Nick Yallope and Peter Nicolas in the Llangynfelyn area, north of Aberystwyth in Ceredigion, in October 2024.

Ancient Indian names scratched in Egyptian tombs

Inscriptions written in Indian scripts have been identified inside tombs in Egypt's Valley of the Kings, offering new evidence of contact between South India and the ancient Mediterranean world.

Researchers documented around 30 inscriptions across six tombs in the valley. Twenty were written in Tamil-Brahmi, with others in Prakrit and related early Indian writing systems. The texts were dated to between the first and third centuries AD, when Egypt was a province of the Roman Empire.

One repeated inscription reads "Cikai Korran vara kanta" (Cikai Korran came and saw). The name appears eight times across several tombs, indicating the presence of a Tamil visitor in the pharaonic burial complex. In the tomb of Ramesses IX (r. ca. 1126–1108 BC), Korran wrote his inscription 5–6 m above the tomb entrance. He also left his signature by the tomb entrance of two New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1070 BC) pharaohs, Tausert and Setnakhte. Another text reads "Kopan varata kantan" (Kopan came and saw), while a further inscription records the name Catan, a common South Indian name found in early Tamil-Brahmi records.

The discoveries extend earlier evidence of Tamil links with Egypt, which had previously been associated mainly with trading centres, such as the Red



© Ingo Strauch and Charlotte Schmid

One of the Tamil inscriptions from the Valley of the Kings recording the name Cikai Korran. The same name appears eight times across several tombs.

Sea port of Berenice Troglodytica. Professor Ingo Strauch, University of Lausanne, said the inscriptions indicate that visitors from India travelled inland rather than simply conducting coastal trade.



An image of the Muziris Papyrus, part of an inventory of a merchant ship bringing goods to Roman Egypt from India.

© KannanVM / Wikimedia Commons



Each cuboid pig features a raised inscription across the top surface: “IMP DOMIT CAES AVG XIII COS” ([Property of the] Emperor Domitian Caesar Augustus, consul 13 times). This dates them to AD 87.

The Romans extracted lead and silver from lead sulfide, which was mined in the Central Wales Orefield, the Llanengan area near Abersoch, and the Dolgellau gold-belt. Lead was used for waterpipes and pewter tableware.

Geraint Jenkins, on whose farmland the pigs were discovered, described the discovery

as astonishing. He added that it was remarkable to think land now farmed organically once formed part of a Roman landscape.

Having been officially declared treasure, it is hoped that the ingots will go on public display. Carrie Canham, curator of Amgueddfa Ceredigion Museum, said the find could feature in a new gallery due to open in 2027.

In 1886, a lead pig (*RIB* 2404.31) weighing 86 kg, was found in the Roodeye, southwest of the legionary fortress of Deva (modern Chester). It is dated to AD 74.



(Top) A view of Cwm Ystwyth, a mining site in Ceredigion, Wales, in use from the Bronze Age to the Middle Ages. There is evidence of Roman-period mining facilities there.

© Chris Popham / Wikimedia Commons

(Bottom) The two Roman lead ingots discovered in Wales.

© Alex Martin

Pot contains coin hoard from the Kushan Empire

A hoard of more than 150 copper coins dating to the first century AD has been discovered in southern Tajikistan.

The coins were found in a small ceramic vessel, buried in the soil. Despite being heavily corroded, the coins retain identifiable features, including iconography, inscriptions, and weight standards that place them firmly within the early imperial phase of the Kushan Empire. Researchers say the hoard appears to have been deliberately buried, possibly during a period of instability.

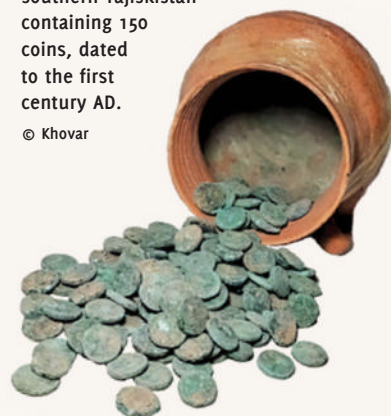
According to Professor Abduvali Sharifzoda, a numismatist who presented the coins to journalists, most were minted during the reign

of Vima Taktu (r. ca. AD 80–90). Although often overshadowed by his later successor Kanishka I (Kanishka the Great, r. ca. AD 127–151), Vima Taktu governed during a key transitional period following the expansion of the Yuezhi tribes from China into Bactria and northern India.

Since its announcement, the hoard has been transferred to the Academy for conservation and study by specialists at the Institute of History, Archaeology, and Ethnography. Once conserved, the coins are expected to provide insights into Kushan minting practices, trade networks, and the economic life of the Kushan Empire.

The recently discovered coin hoard from southern Tajikistan containing 150 coins, dated to the first century AD.

© Khovar



500 AD

1 AD

ANCIENT ATHENS ca. 500 – 300 BC

500 BC



A detail of an Attic black-figure *hydria*, dated to ca. 510 BC, depicting the inside of a pottery workshop. Enslaved workers manufactured many of the goods that were for sale on the Greek market.

THE ROLE OF SLAVERY IN DEMOCRATIC ATHENS ENDEMIC AND CRUCIAL

Few cities in the history of the world have had as significant a cultural impact as Classical Athens. Famous works by Athenian artists and writers have shaped the culture of the modern world over millennia. Athens was also the first complex democracy — or the first we know of. Yet while this political system was based on equality and liberty for its citizens, Classical Athens held a great number of non-Athenians in slavery. In fact, it has been argued that slavery was not only endemic in, but crucial to, Athens' democracy.

By Jason Douglas Porter

umented as the labour force on agricultural estates and many wealthy Athenians owned workshops of a handful to dozens of slaves manufacturing goods for sale. The physical labour that extracted the resources from Athens' considerable deposits of silver, which provided a good deal of the city's wealth, was provided by slaves. Similar industries, like quarrying and clay-mining, depended on an enslaved workforce, too. Some slaves acted as managers, supervisors, and business agents for their masters. A few of these were allowed independence and their own property. Publicly owned slaves performed crucial tasks for the Athenian state under the direction of free magistrates, such as keeping records and supervising transactions in Athens' market.

The extent of slave ownership in Athens

Certainly not all Athenians owned slaves. Aristotle wrote in his *Politics* that Athens' poor used their wives and children as servants because they could not afford slaves, though what proportion of the population qualified as 'poor' here is unclear. Some sources appear to suggest that slave ownership was relatively widespread even outside of Athens' elite households. Thucydides claimed that Athens' citizen foot-soldiers on campaign were paid two drachmas each in wages, one for each soldier and one for their slave attendant. Many

Slaves are ever present in depictions of Athenian life that have survived — from plays, forensic speeches, philosophical treatises, inscriptions, and visual art — to such an extent that it is beyond doubt that the wealthy in Athens owned slaves. Well-to-do Athenians appear to have been surrounded by enslaved domestic servants in their homes and were accompanied by enslaved attendants on campaign and in public.

The work of slaves provided a significant source of income for Athens' elite. Slaves are doc-

A marble funerary relief for Amenokleia, daughter of Andromenes, dated to the second quarter of the fourth century BC, depicting an enslaved girl helping a woman put on her sandal while another woman holds a jewellery box.

© George E. Koronaios / Wikimedia Commons

A silver Athenian tetradrachm, dated to ca. 449–407 BC, minted with silver mined by slaves.

© The Cleveland Museum of Art



DID YOU KNOW?

There may have been monthly slave auctions called *kykloi* ('circles') held in the Athenian agora, possibly as part of a wider livestock market. There would also have been private sales between individuals.

of Aristophanes' surviving plays feature protagonists who appear to represent the Athenian everyman — all invariably own slaves. In a fascinating speech delivered in court against his father's freedman, Phormion, who had gained freedom and considerable wealth working as a banker, the speechwriter and plaintiff Apollodorus says the following:

"The best way for you to understand how much I have been wronged, I'll demonstrate, if each of you pictures the slave you left at home, and then being treated by him as I have been by Phormion! ... They are slaves and he was a slave; you are masters and I was a master"
(Demosthenes, 45.86).



A terracotta statuette dated to ca. 450 BC showing a woman — possibly a slave — grinding grain in a basin.
© Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons

Apollodorus was appealing to the hundreds of randomly selected Athenian judges who decided this case as fellow slave owners, to rule against a man who had been his family's slave. Some historians argue, however, that these sources, regardless of who they were written for or what they were describing, reflect the experiences of slave-owning elites. The financial burden of buying and maintaining slaves made it unlikely that many families outside the very wealthiest owned slaves. Since most Athenians were farmers and farming is often a highly seasonal occupation, it might not have made economic sense for Athenian families to own slaves they had to feed year-round in return for a few weeks' work at the harvest.

There has been a long-standing counterargument that slave labour was widely utilized year-round to care for crops or to perform other profitable work, a theory that



An Attic black-figure amphora, dated to ca. 520 BC, depicting two youths and two bearded men gathering olives from three trees.
© ArchaiOptix / Wikimedia Commons

has been bolstered by recent historical research pointing out the high degree of monetization in Athens and the city's numerous markets, in which farmers presumably sold crops and bought other goods. Another counterargument is that the appeal of slave ownership to Athenians was not purely economic but was based on the lifestyle it provided. Whether or not slave ownership was strictly profitable does not necessarily have any bearing on its desirability and slave ownership is often presented not as an investment but as a means of lessening the burden of necessary agricultural and domestic labour in literary sources.

In the comic playwright Menander's play *The Misanthrope*, a character remarks how an eccentric, wealthy misanthrope who owns a large estate "farms it all by himself, without the help of anyone — no household slave, nor a



A pair of iron shackles, dated to ca. 600–550 BC, from the Sanctuary of Demeter Malophoros in the Greek colony of Selinous on Sicily. They are thought to have been dedicated on the occasion of the manumission of an enslaved person.
© Dan Diffendale / Flickr

(Top) A view of the silver mines at Laurium, in southern Attica. The mines employed thousands of enslaved people in unsafe, unsanitary conditions to generate much of Athens' wealth.

© Rab Lawrence / Flickr

(Bottom) An aerial view of the Greek colony of Olbia, on the northern shore of the Black Sea. The city had a close relationship with Athens, exporting grain, fish, and slaves.

© Sun_City / Shutterstock





A copy of the Vetren inscription, which was discovered on the bank of the Maritsa River in the heart of Thrace, leading to the identification of Pistiros, a Greek trading centre. Thrace was a major source of slaves.

© Heiko Fischer / Wikimedia Commons

hired worker from the area, nor a neighbour!" (328–332). A slave is, tellingly, the first source of additional labour mentioned in this passage. As well as being desirable for its own sake, the greater opportunity for leisure slave ownership could provide was probably a mark of social status, as was being attended by a slave in public or having a slave serve your guests in private.

This explains why slave ownership may have been attractive to Athenians of even moderate means. Indeed, an unskilled slave usually cost around 200 drachmas, close to an average Athenians' yearly wages. Buying a slave was a big expense for a normal Athenian household, then, but was it prohibitively so? In the monetized Athenian economy borrowing and debt seems common, often referenced in literary sources. The plot of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, for example, revolves around an Athenian's attempt to stop his son from accumulating personal debt; and Theophrastus, in his *Characters*, says that a miserly man will constantly chase his debtors and charge compound interest on loans. Even for a family with little liquid wealth, buying a slave on credit was at least a possibility. If having a slave was viewed as crucial to their income or social standing, many families probably did.

A statuette of a slave character from Greek theatre, dated to the late fifth to early fourth century BC.
© The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Another possibility was that poorer Athenians rented slaves rather than buying them. Theophrastus' stingy (but rich) man will rent a slave to accompany his wife in public rather than buy a handmaiden, and there is considerable attestation to other well-to-do families renting or renting out slaves that suggests a considerable market for leasing enslaved labour.

The consequences of Athenian slavery

It has not been lost on historians that the escape from necessary labour provided to the average Athenian through slavery may have been the crucial factor that allowed a significant proportion of the citizen body to participate in the city's democracy. Unfortunately, the size of Athens' slave-owning class and the size of its slave population can at present only be safely conjectured as large ranges — possibly 25–70 per cent of citizen families owning 60,000–

140,000 slaves. Not speculative, however, is the fact that slavery engendered many inequalities, cruelties, and injustices.

We know of many slaves who died in Athens' mines or were subjected to hard labour in this industry and others, and of many who were tortured, sexually exploited, and humiliated by their masters or as a consequence of the city's unequal laws.

We should look also to the regions from which Athens drew its slaves for

The origins of Athenian slaves

Though some Athenian slaves were born to enslaved parents in Athens and referred to as *oikogenesis* ('born in the household'), the majority were imported into Athens. Aristotle famously defended slavery on the grounds that it was natural for Greeks to rule over non-Greeks, although the enslavement of Greeks by other Greeks was a problem he felt obliged to contend with. In truth, the exact ethnic origins of individual Athenian slaves are often unclear. A few sources do provide us directly with the origin of individuals or groups of slaves, and the names of slaves can also be useful, so long as they are used with caution. Slaves were renamed by their masters and the Greek names they were given erased their ethnic identity. Certain common names given to slaves do, however, associate them with a broad region (e.g.

Thratia, which means 'Thracian', or Syros, which means 'Syrian'); in the few cases we can compare slaves' names to their stated ethnicity, such names have been shown to be sometimes misleading but in the majority of cases do correspond to their imprecise geographical origin.

This evidence gives us a vague impression of the varied geographical locations from which Athenian slaves were imported. We know of Scythian slaves from the Eurasian Steppe and an Ethiopian slave described as an exotic expense. Most slaves, however, seem to have come to Athens via major trade routes with regions immediately to the east of Greece: modern Bulgaria, Turkey, and the Levant. Like Thrace, the ancient region of Phrygia in central Turkey was explicitly identified as a major source of slaves.



Two bronze Hellenistic statuettes of seated, bound, dark-skinned slaves, dated to the third to first centuries BC.

© Gary Todd / Flickr



A coloured reconstruction of a fragmentary marble statue from the Athenian acropolis known as the Persian or Scythian Rider. Enslaved Scythians were employed as a police force in Athens.

© Livius.org



A clay pinax, dated to ca. 570 BC, depicting enslaved people either working in a mine or extracting clay.
© ArchaiOptix / Wikimedia Commons

further important effects of Athens' dependence on slavery. Certain common names given to slaves appear to indicate a broad geographic origin. Historians have concluded from this evidence that slaves in Athens were imported from across the broader Mediterranean world, but there are regions that appear more frequently as the origin of slaves than others, most prominently the neighbouring region of Thrace. The Athenian writer Xenophon describes the part he took in a Thracian conflict as the leader of a mercenary contingent at the end of his *Anabasis*, which included the capture and sale of slaves on a large scale. Such conflicts and resultant regional instability were plausibly engendered or at least encouraged by the market for slaves in Greece. Another major supplier of slaves was the region of Phrygia in modern Turkey, and archaeological research has noted the lack of state and infrastructural development in this region compared to its neighbours, arguably an

indication of the prominence of local slaver warlords in the region.

Absent much detailed information on the Greek slave trade, judging the extent to which Athens depended on imports of slaves is one means of engaging with this issue, as well as evaluating the legacy of the world's earliest-known democracy. **AH**

Jason Douglas Porter has published widely on the history of slavery in ancient Greece and comparative history. He is currently a member of the European Research Council funded 'Slavegents' project based at the Institute for Mediterranean Studies in Rethymno, Crete.

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The Acropolis as seen from the Athenian agora. Regularly occurring slave markets called *kykloi* ('circles') may have been held here, and enslaved people would likely have manned stalls in the agora, too.

© Joke van Eeghem / Shutterstock

A red-figure *dinos*, dated to ca. 375-350 BC, depicting a slave pouring wine into a *krater* during a *symposium*. Enslaved people were present in all areas of Athenian daily life.

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A WILD GOOSE CHASE

Almost every textbook on the late Roman Republic refers to two categories of politicians, the *optimates* and *populares*, often with the implication that they formed actual political parties or at least ‘pseudo-parties’. Ideologically, they are identified as the right-wing ‘establishment’ and their reformist opponents. This understanding of Roman politics, despite its ubiquity in the modern literature, can be traced back to a single ancient text: Cicero’s speech in defence of his friend Publius Sestius.

In 56 BC, Cicero’s younger protégé was charged with *vis* (‘political violence’), and Cicero presented the main oration for the defence. Halfway through the speech he embarks on a long digression on Roman politics, which begins with the following statement:

“In this community of ours those who have been eager to engage in public life and make their mark in it have always been divided into two classes: one group has chosen to be thought of and to be in fact populares, the other optimates. Those who wished their actions and words to please the multitude were put in the former category, those who set out to win the approval of the better sort in the latter”

(*For Sestius* 96)

This passage has been hugely influential in shaping modern understanding of Republican politics, as it seemed to suggest that Roman politicians could all be divided into two categories based on their ideological leanings. So, when the first scholarly works on Roman history were produced in the nineteenth century, Cicero’s distinction was translated into a model of ‘left-wing’ reformers opposing ‘right-wing’ conservatives. Indeed, to the leading Roman historian of that era, the great Theodor Mommsen, these groupings were directly comparable to the contemporary parliamentary parties that had emerged with the rise of representative

democracy. Ever since, the *optimates* and *populares* have been a fixture of almost any account of late Republican Rome, although interpretations of their identity and aims have often varied and no consensus currently exists about who they precisely were.

Character or class?

The ‘two-party’ model is not just anachronistic in its projection of modern politics onto ancient Rome, it is also based on an overly literal reading of Cicero’s speech *For Sestius*, which is not an attempt to explain how Roman politics worked (that would not have been necessary) but a response to the specific details of the case and its political context. Most importantly, Cicero does not describe two ‘parties’ with programmes, policies, or ideologies, but two types of people, good citizens and bad citizens. For, as he goes on to explain, those he calls *optimates* are simply the good, responsible, and sane people of Rome, in principle any decent person, even a freedman. The *populares*, on the other hand, are people of bad character, criminals, bankrupts, and madmen. We are, therefore, not presented with two parties pursuing different political aims, but a division based on purely moral criteria. Cicero’s terminology in his *For Sestius* is also very unusual, in fact, quite unique. The standard meaning of *optimas* (the singular of *optimates*) is aristocrat, a member of the ruling class. In that sense, it could be used about elites of any country, including those of foreign states. It was, therefore, a generic term for a social class, albeit a rather flattering one since it implies they are the ‘best men’. So, what Cicero does in this speech is quite unusual, since he turns it into a moral category and extends the social application to all upstanding men whatever their class.

When he contrasts them with so-called *populares*, he is also departing from common political language. *Popularis* (the singular of *populares*), in contrast to *optimas*, is a vague term that somehow associates a person or thing with the people, the *populus*. As such, it can assume a range of meanings, positive as well as negative. Often it was entirely neutral and could denote a fellow country man or a member of a group or association. In the positive sense it can mean popular, the people’s friend, or acting in the people’s best interest. The negative usage is rarer and typically describes a person who pretends to be the people’s friend and uses populist methods to pursue his own interests. This degree of semantic complexity would have made it very difficult to use *popularis* as a political label; one would always have to explain in what sense it was used.

Given these anomalies, it is perhaps not surprising that Cicero’s use of the terms *optimates* and *populares* has no parallels, not even in his own works. In his other speeches and in his private letters, *optimates* always

The Roman Senate of the Late Republic is often divided into two political parties — conservatives and reformers. Yet politics was far more informal.

© Marek Szysko

means the senatorial elite, while *popularis* is employed in the full spectrum of meanings, outlined above. On some occasions, he even claims to be a *popularis* himself. For example, when he assumed the consulship in 63 BC, he declared publicly that he would be a true *popularis* consul and protector of the people's interests (*On the Agrarian Law* 1.23, 2.6–9). In its positive sense, *popularis* was, therefore, a quality any Roman politician would happily claim for themselves. That makes Cicero's speech *For Sestius* so intriguing, since he seems to play with familiar terms and concepts and turn conventional usages on their head. In order to understand what he is doing, we must look at the context for this court case.

Cicero, Sestius, and Clodius

Cicero, the talented new man from an Italian backwater, had achieved the unthinkable and was elected to the consulship in 63 BC, in large part because of his skills as an orator but also by appealing to the wealthy, middling elite class of so-called *boni*. That also made him enemies, however, the most dangerous being the patrician Clodius, who managed to drive Cicero into exile in 58 BC, with the loss of both citizenship and property. But after this serious blow to his life and career, Cicero's political fortunes quickly improved, not least because Pompey and Clodius fell out. Pompey had initially acquiesced to Cicero's removal for political reasons; Cicero having been a harsh critic of the 'triumvirs' in 59 BC. But Clodius soon turned on Pompey, perhaps encouraged by Pompey's rival Crassus, even going as far as publicly harassing the great man who could no longer leave his house. So, in 57 BC, Cicero was formally recalled with Pompey's blessing, and while he tried to present his return as a major triumph celebrated by all good men, his position had been severely damaged.

During his exile in Greece, friends back in Rome had campaigned energetically for his restoration, which often led to open clashes with Clodius and his men. Among Cicero's friends was Sestius, who the following year was charged with *vis* ('political violence') at a trial orchestrated by Clodius. Since Cicero was the real target, he naturally assumed the defence, and it was on that occasion that he presented his famous *populares/optimates* model of Roman politics.

In most of the speech, Cicero attacks his nemesis Clodius, who is mercilessly pilloried and ridiculed. But Cicero's attempt to save his client and rebuild his own political capital faced a major obstacle, since Clodius was by far the most popular politician in Rome at the time, having passed several measures as tribune in 58 BC that directly benefited the urban plebs, most conspicuously the introduction of free grain. That gave him enormous prestige and an unassailable public position; Cicero's strategy must be seen as a direct response to this challenge. What he did was to create two categories of

politicians: those who do the right thing because they are responsible and sound of mind, and those who recklessly seek popularity by any means, even when it is detrimental to the common interest. Among the latter he counted politicians like the Gracchi brothers, whose popularity Cicero acknowledges although he did not approve of their policies or methods. Clodius, on the other hand, tried to emulate the Gracchi but failed in his populist measures and gained none of the genuine popularity of his role models. Therefore, Cicero claims, his apparent popularity is a scam, since his followers are all paid to turn up, some of them even slaves. In this way, Clodius emerges not just as a populist, but as a failed populist, while Cicero becomes the leader of the so-called *optimates*, all decent men in Rome. As if by magic, their roles are suddenly reversed, the new man becoming a pillar of the establishment and the noble aristocrat a despised outsider.

Whether anyone in Rome bought Cicero's rhetorical trickery is an open question. Clodius' popularity was indisputable, as were his noble credentials, which far exceeded Cicero's. It was a one-off attempt at turning the tables on Clodius, and Cicero never returned to it again. In the rest of his published works, *optimates* are simply aristocrats, while the vague term *popularis* rarely features as a political label. In fact, the two terms are never contrasted in this way again, and Cicero's near contemporary, the historian Sallust, never uses them in a political sense, let alone as 'party' labels. To him, the great divide in Roman politics ran between the *nobiles*, the entitled old families with consular ancestry, and the rest of the elite, whom they tended to dominate and exclude from power. This class-based understanding of Roman politics is quite different from the modern 'party' model, which ultimately owes its existence to Cicero's appetite for publicity and fame.

The practical world of politics

As the great self-publicist Cicero was, he made sure his speech *For Sestius* was widely distributed during his own lifetime, which enabled it to survive to the present day. *For Sestius* is a remarkable testament to Cicero's rhetorical skill and ingenuity. As a guide to Roman politics, however, it is a red herring, which has sent generations of historians on a wild goose chase in search of 'parties' in the late Republic. It has also generated endless discussions of what they stood for and who their members were. But while we can be fairly certain that no political groupings ever existed that were known by these terms, that still leaves open the question how Roman politics functioned and how it was structured: were there general fault lines dividing senators and shaping the political events of the last century of the Republic — even if these were not associated with terms like *optimates* and *populares*?

The absence of parties in ancient Rome is not surprising; after all, modern parties reflect the introduc-

tion of representative parliamentary democracy in the nineteenth century. Neither should we necessarily be looking for familiar left-right divisions; again, these were historically specific and first appeared during the French Revolution when fundamental issues regarding the future shape of society were debated and politicians split into conservatives and reformers.

In Rome, such debates never happened. Most political issues were related to the day-to-day business of running the city and its ever-expanding empire. The basic balance of power in Rome was never up for discussion. Enshrined in the *mos maiorum* and elevated to venerable tradition, political authority rested with a small, semi-hereditary elite, which the People lent their legitimacy through increasingly formalized procedures of consent.

Moreover, senators and magistrates were only politicians in the broadest sense of the word, for while they engaged in public affairs, they were not comparable to modern politicians who are expected to represent a particular vision of society. Roman magistrates never ran for office on a political platform and neither did they promise specific laws or measures in order to be elected; even Clodius did not advertise his ambitious — and wildly popular — programme before taking office, instead taking the public by surprise with his radical measures.

Roman senators and magistrates often quarrelled; indeed, it is difficult to think of a single issue they all agreed on, but it is difficult to trace any consistent ideology or set of principles behind the positions each of them took. That does not mean that politicians had no convictions; there is no reason to doubt that the Gracchi genuinely believed in their policies and thought they were vital to the Republic. But that does not make them the 'proto-socialists' of the modern imagination; while they single-mindedly pursued their programmes, they were also high-born Roman aristocrats embedded in a culture of competition and rivalry. Similarly, Cicero was eventually prepared to risk — and sacrifice — his life when faced with the prospect of autocracy, but throughout his career he had often been accused of inconsistency, even facing accusations of being a turncoat. That was far from the exception, however, and most politicians seem to have been remarkably flexible, happily shifting their positions whenever the circumstances changed. Sometimes they would be swayed by influential individuals like Cato the Younger, who appears to have had impressive powers of persuasion. Or it might be a case of simple expediency, siding with the most powerful men in the hope of furthering their own careers. Such self-interest was, for example, widely exploited by the so-called first 'triumvirs', Pompey, Caesar, and Crassus, who all extended their patronage to sections of the senate in return for political support.

Historians often try to divide Roman politicians into reformers and conservatives based on their rhetoric,

but virtually all politicians would frame their views in conservative terms and present their measures, however novel, as a restoration of a lost or endangered status quo. At the same time, they would also claim to act in the best interest of the Roman people, to whose liberty and greatness they would routinely defer. The political debates in Rome were, therefore, strikingly uniform in terms of the values to which they appealed and the aims they claimed to pursue. All politicians, including those later historians have classified as 'conservatives' would couch their arguments in the same 'democratic' language as those who have been seen as 'reformers'. Therefore, the Romans appear to have lacked a vocabulary to discuss the big issues, which further illustrates why there were no 'parties': whatever disagreements may have divided politicians, they all defended their positions using the same arguments.

In the end, the Republic was too steeped in convention and shared values to give rise to any groupings, parties, or cliques that defined themselves in opposition to the traditional ideals. At the same time, the practical world of politics was also too diffuse and unstructured to allow stable factions to form. Fluidity and decentralization were integral to the system, since every politician in principle was a one-man political unit. He might have had friends and allies, but he had no organization or political hinterland behind him. In fact, he had to re-establish his electoral 'machine' every time he ran for office, which most politicians did only three to four times in their career. The rest of the time they were distinguished citizens who sat in the senate but held no personal authority. During those long periods, many of them were not even politically active, as the poor attendance in the senate shows. This kind of gentlemanly politics did not lend itself to 'parties' and the suggestion that they might have belonged to one would probably have come as a great surprise to them. **AH**

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1000 BC

1500 BC

EGYPT ca. 2200 – 2050 BC

2000 BC

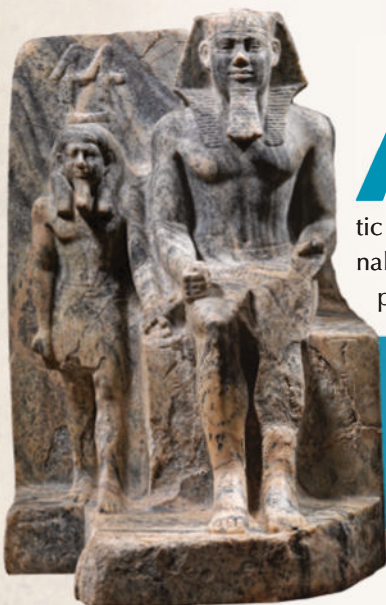
2500 BC



A painted limestone relief, dated to ca. 2311–2281 BC, depicting various agricultural scenes. Drought and famine are often cited as reasons for the First Intermediate Period, but evidence for any dramatic, sustained agricultural catastrophe is limited.

THEME THE END OF THE OLD KINGDOM IN EGYPT A TIME OF CHANGE AND MISUNDERSTANDING

It is paradoxical that one of the most dynamic and innovative periods in Egyptian history is frequently characterized as an era of social and political collapse. Treating Egypt's collapse around 2200 BC as an established fact has encouraged interpretations of preceding centuries as an inevitable decline toward disaster. Ironically, growing evidence of material prosperity, provincial affluence, administrative sophistication, and international exchange with other cultures has often been interpreted as contributing to the eventual downfall of the state.



A major limitation of these narratives — perpetuated by uncritical readings of literary, epigraphic, and artistic sources — is their neglect of internal transformations, as they often prioritize top-down perspectives and

A sculpture representing King Sahure, a ruler of the Fifth Dynasty, and a personification of the Coptite *nome*. The creation of the *nome* system led to the political fragmentation of the First Intermediate Period.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art

By Juan Carlos Moreno García

depict Egyptian society as inherently static. As a result, explanations for the crisis tend to emphasize external factors, such as invasions or climatic disruptions, or a sudden and irreversible fragmentation among the elites. This approach overlooks the internal dynamics that underpinned Egypt's extended period of political stability in the Near East from 3100 to 2160 BC.

In recent decades, interpretations of this period have shifted, with archaeology playing a central role in this reassessment. Material culture from cemeteries dating to the late Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period does not indicate abrupt poverty, widespread violence, or increased mortality. Instead, individuals were buried with status markers such as inscribed statues, stelae, and libation offerings, items previously reserved for the elite. The use of writing became more widespread; for example, 'letters to the dead' were composed by private individuals to their deceased relatives, seeking assistance with domestic matters. Funerary compositions such as the *Coffin Texts* were produced in multiple localities throughout Egypt. New social values are evident in biographical inscriptions on private monuments, which emphasize personal initiative and economic independence, as owners accumulated significant wealth, including land, herds, ships,

and servants. Archaeological evidence further demonstrates that settlements expanded, trade networks with foreign regions remained active, and certain areas, such as the central and western Delta and Middle Egypt, experienced prosperity. Additionally, inscriptions from the very late Old Kingdom do not indicate political disruption. This evidence prompts a reconsideration of what actually transpired during this period (see Morris, this issue).

Reassessing the late Old Kingdom

With the emergence of the Egyptian monarchy around 3100 BC, royal authority extended over a landscape dominated by various local leaders who controlled towns, districts, and provinces. To secure acceptance of their rule, kings had to negotiate with these established

authorities. Once the monarchy was consolidated, these local leaders reinforced their positions through collaboration and, in some cases, familial connections to the royal family. They were responsible for administering the crown's assets in the provinces, particularly royal estates and newly founded agricultural holdings. The kings of the Sixth Dynasty, facing internal opposition, increasingly relied on provincial leaders to strengthen their authority.

Furthermore, a notable collection of royal decrees found in the temple of Min in Coptos from the late Old Kingdom indicates that the sanctuary, which appears to have been controlled by the same family for generations, received royal land donations and accumulated valuable objects and metals exempt from taxation — one local magnate contributed a substantial quantity of precious-metal objects, lapis lazuli, and other items to Min's temple. Thus, the temple of Min likely served as a power base for the family that controlled it.

Concurrently, Egypt became more integrated into international exchange networks. Evidence from the Ebla archives in Syria indicates robust trade with the Levant. Trade with

Nubia and the Eastern Sahara also intensified, as demonstrated by the establishment of logistics facilities in the Dakhla Oasis and the dispatch of caravans from Elephantine. Provincial leaders managed a network of royal logistics facilities along the Nile to facilitate the movement of goods, traders, and expeditions. These leaders greatly benefited from the wealth generated by these trade routes. In Upper Egypt, many provincial leaders adopted the new title Great Chief of the Province, highlighting their elevated status. Simultaneously, the position of Overseer of Upper Egypt was introduced, ostensibly to control taxation in the region. However, the inscription of Weni of Abydos, who served as both Vizier and Overseer of Upper Egypt, suggests a more informal



A reconstructed faience broad collar found in Sedment, dated to the First Intermediate Period.

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While Egypt was a unified political entity in the Old Kingdom, it was politically fragmented during the First Intermediate Period as regional elites competed for power. Further south, the development of a large, centralized society in Nubia — which centered on Kerma — further exacerbated political disunity.

© Richard Thomson

One of the Coptos decrees of Neferkaure, dated to ca. 2103–2101 BC, recording the appointment of Idi as Governor of Upper Egypt.
© The Metropolitan Museum of Art



A painted wooden model of a boat owner, dated to ca. 2040–1648 BC.
© The Cleveland Museum of Art





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Inscription on the exterior of Harkhuf's tomb in Qubbet el-Hawa. Harkhuf was an Egyptian official, a caravan leader, and explorer during the Sixth Dynasty of the Old Kingdom (ca. 2270 BC).



© Museo Egizio in Turin / Wikimedia Commons

A fresco from the tomb of Iti and his wife Neferu from the necropolis of Gebelein, dated to ca. 2118–1980 BC, depicting a ship.



© Institute for the Study of the Ancient World / Flickr

The mastaba tomb of Khentika in Balat which is dated to ca. 2323–2150 BC. The tomb is located in the Dakhla Oasis. Khentika was the governor of the oasis under the reign of King Pepi II.

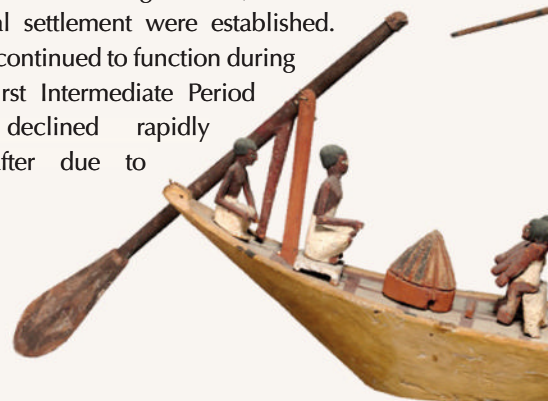
administrative structure, rather than a system of absolute control among the king's deputies. When raising armies for campaigns in the Sinai or the Levant, for instance, Weni relied on levies from a range of local leaders, including chiefs, temple overseers, and town governors.

Within this evolving context, certain provinces experienced greater advantages than others. Initially, officials engaged in foreign trade were interred in the Memphite necropolis, but in later times their burials are found in Upper Egyptian centres such as Coptos, Thebes, and Elephantine, indicating their increasing prosperity and importance. During the Eighth Dynasty, a local magnate of Coptos, Shemai, achieved the position of Vizier, married a princess, and extended his authority over Upper Egypt. According to his tomb biography, Shemai was, among other things, responsible for organizing a mission to 'The God's Land' — most likely Punt, located on the southern Red Sea — and managed ship operations and equipment. His career mirrors those of other magnates who attained high administrative office, retired, and were buried in their home provinces, such as Weni of Abydos, Qar of Edfu, and Tjeti-Kaihep of El-Hawawish.

This development is likely linked to the establishment of a new Red Sea harbour at Mersa Gawasis, near Coptos and Thebes — the route from Coptos to this harbour represented the shortest land connection between the Red Sea and the Nile Valley. Additionally, a land route from the Elephantine region to Punt ran through Eastern Sudan, which saw significant traffic during the First Intermediate Period. Previously, the Oasis route mentioned by caravan leaders such as Harkhuf — running from Dakhla to Gilf el-Kebir and Uweinat — were important for Egyptian trade to the south. At Balat, located on the Dakhla Oasis, monumental mastabas, a governor's palace, chapels dedicated to local governors, and a substantial settlement were established. Balat continued to function during the First Intermediate Period but declined rapidly thereafter due to

An alabaster sistrum inscribed with the name of King Teti, the first ruler of the Sixth Dynasty, dated to ca. 2323–2291 BC.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art



A carnelian pendant in the shape of an oyster shell, dated to ca. 1980–1801 BC.

© The Cleveland Museum of Art



increasing aridity in the eastern Sahara, rendering the Oasis route impractical. Concurrently, Nubia unified into the Kingdom of Kerma, making desert and river trade more challenging and necessitating greater Nubian cooperation — an unpublished scene from Shemai's tomb depicts armed desert people (the Medjay) who appear to have collaborated with him on his expeditions. As a result, Eastern Sudan and the Red Sea became increasingly important as alternative routes.

This shift in valuable exchange routes likely benefitted Upper Egypt over Lower Egypt. For example, during this period, many settlements along the eastern branch of the Nile in the Delta region were abandoned. As a result, the leaders of Coptos, Thebes, and Elephantine, with their increasing power and independence, may have been inclined to challenge the authority of the monarchy and its allies in distant Memphis, since the crown increasingly appeared as an impediment to their interests.

Ultimately, the rebellion initiated by these leaders contributed to the collapse of the monarchy and ushered in a period of pronounced regional rivalry. Excavations of an elite tomb in the necropolis of Hagarsa, Upper Egypt, between Asyut and Coptos, revealed that six members from different generations of a single family died violently at the same period.

Despite the evidence for localized conflicts in Upper Egypt, the transition between the Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period in the Memphite region reveals no evidence of catastrophe. Artisans continued to produce high-quality objects, such as inscribed stelae, and royal cults persisted without interruption, as demonstrated by monuments deposited by ritualists in the cemeteries of kings Teti and Pepi I. The end of the Old Kingdom was, therefore, marked by the continued operation of the royal administration, with no indication of sudden catastrophes precipitating the collapse of the monarchy.



A painted limestone stele belonging to Khentika, the governor of Dakhla Oasis during the reign of Pepi II, dated to ca. 2323–2150 BC.

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The role of climatic catastrophe

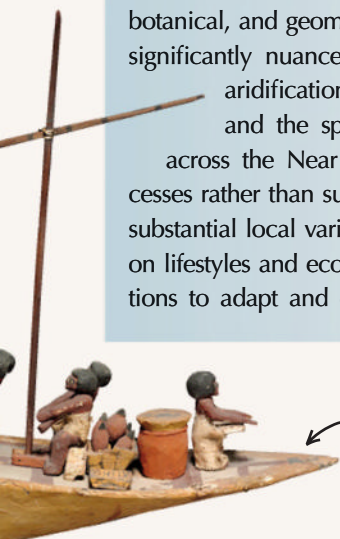
The collapse of a monarchy regarded as efficient and well-organized is often attributed to an unexpected and sudden event — in the case of the Egyptian Old Kingdom, this has frequently been climatic change. Climatic change is used to account for references to famine in numerous inscriptions from the First Intermediate Period. Later literary compositions reinforce this narrative by describing a period marked by the end of the monarchy and widespread chaos. Archaeological evidence has also been interpreted as supporting the notion of a sudden, catastrophic climatic event that precipitated the collapse of several Near Eastern polities around 2200 BC, including the Akkadian Empire in Mesopotamia and the Old Kingdom in Egypt, such as the abandonment of many sites in the Levant.

Recent archaeological, climatic, palaeobotanical, and geomorphological research has significantly nuanced this interpretation. The aridification of northeastern Africa and the spread of drier conditions across the Near East were gradual processes rather than sudden events, marked by substantial local variation and uneven effects on lifestyles and economies, allowing populations to adapt and diversify their subsistence

strategies. While many sites were abandoned, others were occupied, often nearby. Site abandonment resulted from multiple factors, including internal conflicts, economic specialization, soil depletion, and changes in exchange networks. Internal causes appear to have been more decisive than unsubstantiated catastrophic events. As for the collapse of urban life in the Levant, more precise radiocarbon dating shows that it happened around 2500 BC, not 2200 BC as previously assumed. Consequently, recent scholarship favours a multicausal framework over environmental determinism to explain episodes of sociopolitical crisis.

A limestone relief from the causeway of the pyramid of Unas, the final king of the Fifth Dynasty. Dated to ca. 2380–2350 BC it depicts Bedouins starving in the desert. This relief has been used as evidence for famine in the late Old Kingdom, although it has also been suggested that the scene represents the efforts gone to in order to acquire the building materials for Unas' pyramid.

© Panegyrics of Granovetter / Flickr



A model of an Egyptian boat with boatmen, dated to ca. 2040–1648 BC.

© The Cleveland Museum of Art



A stele, dated to ca. 2100 BC, for Iku and Mer-imat. The stele's inscription possibly records the title Overseer of the Oasis Dwellers, likely a position involved in trade, but the reading is debated.

© Mooneena / Wikimedia Commons

Part of the decoration of the painted burial chamber in the tomb of Betju and his son Ideki at Qila ed-Dabba in the Dakhla Oasis. The tomb dates to the Tenth Dynasty (First Intermediate Period). Disruption of Egypt's western trade routes meant that regional elites in Upper Egypt had greater control over trade, allowing them to amass great wealth and challenge the king.

© Roland Unger / Wikimedia Commons



A time of change and innovation

To understand the conflicts that led to the end of the Old Kingdom monarchy, it is essential to analyze the historical context of a specific region in Upper Egypt, stretching from Mo'alla to Dendera. This area served as a crossroads between Egypt, Nubia, the Red Sea, and the oases of the Western Desert. The interests of multiple actors, not all of whom were Egyptian, must be considered, as their alliances and conflicts ultimately influenced Egypt's future.

The biographical account of Ankhtifi of Mo'alla records that "Horus" (likely the king residing at Memphis) dispatched him to restore order in the region between Mo'alla and Elephantine, encompassing Egypt's three southernmost provinces, and to confront the rebellious Coptite and Theban provinces. Ankhtifi's titles also indicate responsibilities for supervising foreign and desert territories and populations. His political interventions extended to Nubia and Dendera, continuing a policy initiated by his father and sanctioned by the Overseer of Upper Egypt, a representative of the crown in this region. Given that Shemai of Coptos and his descendants held the position of Overseer



DID YOU KNOW?

Non-Egyptian contingents were commonly employed in the armies of the First Intermediate Period. Nubian archers had been employed since the Old Kingdom. Asian troops were also prominent in Egyptian armies at this time, especially those of Heracleopolis. So much so that there was an Overseer of Aamu (Asian) Troops.

of Upper Egypt for at least two generations, with interests extending to the deserts and the Red Sea, it appears that two rival families in southern Egypt, based at Coptos and Mo'alla respectively, competed for supremacy and control over increasingly lucrative trade routes. The king in Memphis supported Ankhtifi, possibly to counterbalance the power amassed by Shemai's family. Notably, Ankhtifi relied on his own resources, with no army sent from Memphis, but this is consistent with earlier practices. The conflict centred on control of river and land routes. Ankhtifi's interventions in Dendera required maintaining open desert routes to avoid navigating the hostile Theban and Coptite sections of the Nile.

Subsequently, two kingdoms emerged in Egypt: Thebes in the south and Heracleopolis ('The House of Khety') in the north. Sources from both polities document warfare, particularly in the regions of Abydos and Aphroditopolis, until Thebes ultimately prevailed and King Mentuhotep II reunified Egypt around 2050 BC. For Thebes, the conquest of Abydos/Thinis and the integration of Elephantine were crucial for consolidating a kingdom encompassing Egypt's eight southernmost provinces. However, these conquests encountered periodic setbacks. Thinis rebelled multiple times, a Theban incursion against Asyut was repelled, and military campaigns primarily involved besieging border forts and towns. While inscriptions emphasize warfare, negotiation and shifting alliances likely played a critical role in resolving the conflict. Ahanakht, a leader from Bersheh and former supporter of Heracleopolis, became Vizier under the Theban king Mentuhotep II. When Mentuhotep II travelled to Elephantine to meet a Nubian fleet, he was accompanied by his treasurers and two leaders from former Heracleopolitan territory. The economic interests involved likely favoured a negotiated resolution to the conflict.





An unalloyed copper blade, dated to ca. 2100 BC, with an inscription for Idi, the Overseer of Upper Egypt.
© The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Assessing the human and material costs of war during this period is challenging. Several officials mention famines in their inscriptions, yet these accounts consistently attribute famine to neighbouring regions rather than their own. In contrast, their towns and provinces are described as well supplied. Many individuals boasted of their accumulated wealth, and the archaeological record corroborates that Egypt's economic life was not disrupted by catastrophe, even amid recurrent warfare. Cities such as Elephantine, Edfu, and Dendera expanded; residents of Aphroditopolis, a principal battleground, were interred with gold and precious amulets; valuable goods circulated between Elephantine and Heracleopolis through international trade networks connecting the Red Sea, northeastern Africa, and the Levant; and elites from Thebes, Asyut, or Bersheh acquired valuable funerary equipment, including statues, finely carved stelae, and decorated tombs. There is also epigraphic evidence that reveals the interest of Heracleopolitan kings to create trading facilities in the area of Tell el-Dab'a, the locality that became one of the

most important commercial hubs in the eastern Mediterranean during the Middle and Late Bronze Age. Domestic documents from the period refer to ordinary family disputes rather than subsistence struggles.

The end of the Old Kingdom thus appears to have resulted from a shift in the balance of power between the monarchy and specific regions. This was a protracted historical process, likely driven by Egypt's growing integration into international trade networks. Unequal accumulation of wealth benefitted certain regions, undermined the monarchy's tax-collection capacity, and generated rivalries among the elite due to divergent interests, objectives, and strategies. Local leaders, after accumulating enough wealth and power, claimed kingship, such as Khui, who built an enormous mastaba at Dara, near Asyut, (see Daniele, this issue). The monarchy's inability to address these challenges ultimately precipitated its collapse around 2160 BC. **AH**

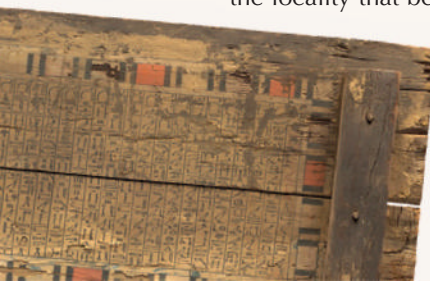
Juan Carlos Moreno García is a Senior Researcher at the National Centre of Scientific Research and Sorbonne University. His research focuses on pharaonic administration, socio-economic history, and landscape organization in ancient Egypt.

A fresco from the tomb of Iti and his wife Neferu in the necropolis of Gebelein. Dated to ca. 2118–1980 BC, it depicts the storing of grain, while literary sources describe a time of famine in Egypt during the First Intermediate Period.

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A limestone stele, dated to ca. 2118–1980 BC, depicting Tejenu, his wife, and a dog on the left facing a servant and four men holding bows. Both Tejenu and the four other men are identified as Nubians. Contingents of Nubian warriors fought in the various conflicts of the First Intermediate Period.

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The lid of the coffin of Khety, Overseer of the Storehouse. Dated to ca. 1919–1800 BC, it is inscribed with religious spells known as Coffin Texts, which were developed in the First Intermediate Period.
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A view of the remains of the Old Kingdom settlement of Ayn Asil, at the Dakhla Oasis, where the governor's palace appears to have been deliberately targeted for attack. Archaeology and literary sources attest to increased violence during the First Intermediate Period.



THE BEST OF TIMES, THE WORST OF TIMES REMEMBERING THE FIRST INTERMEDIATE PERIOD

By Ellen Morris

Nearly everything about the First Intermediate Period is contestable: its name, its length, the identities and order of its rulers, the motives of those who described it, the reliability of environmental proxies, and whether its reception in later literature is too biased to be admissible in historical reconstructions. How do we make sense of this evidence?



Based on archaeology, art, and inscriptions, Egyptologists have characterized life during the First Intermediate Period as either filled with danger and death or as primarily notable for the exuberance with which social boundaries were broken. Clearly, the evidence is ambiguous.

A limestone stele, dated to ca. 1976–1912 BC, of a man named Kai, Overseer of the Western Desert and of Hunters of the Desert Districts. Such stelae became more prevalent in the First Intermediate Period, providing valuable information for the era.

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Archaeological and artistic evidence

The breakdown of the central government had a profound effect on the nature of Egypt's material culture. A few sites have revealed dramatic scenes of destruction at the very end of the Sixth Dynasty. The governor's palace at the site of Ayn Asil in Dakhla Oasis, for instance, seems to have been deliberately targeted for attack, which may enhance the believability of statements in later texts like *The Teaching for Merikare*, which refer to mob violence directed towards governing elites. Similar anger at avaricious institutions in a time of scarcity may also be revealed in attacks on temples. At Mendes, for instance, at least 35 individuals appear to have died besieging the town's temple. That the group was motivated by hunger is suggested by the fact that three individuals seem to have captured a pig, while one young man died clasping a dead rat in his hand!

Perhaps in response to such unrest, evidence for an unprecedented militarism can be noted throughout Egypt. For instance, in the mortuary realm, real and model weapons are more prevalent in funerary contexts, suggesting that individuals who had been armed in life

Model weapons, such as this axe, which dates to ca. 1981–1802 BC, were increasingly deposited in graves in the First Intermediate Period, possibly reflecting increased militarism in Egypt.

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preferred not to enter the afterlife unprepared. So, too, some tombs show two- and three-dimensional representations of soldiers, and especially Nubian soldiers. Moreover, such military men commissioned their own stelae at sites like Gebelein, suggesting that many of the troops that Theban rulers recruited in the south had been settled permanently at strategic sites. That some towns were heavily fortified is suggested by textual references, archaeology, and

A rare wooden stela, dated to ca. 2400 BC, for the judge and royal scribe Kaherset and his family.

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the sudden sophistication of the numerous Middle Kingdom fortresses erected in Nubia.

While evidence for armed confrontations and civil strife during this period is undeniable, other types of archaeological evidence can be interpreted variously. For instance, the observed growth in certain towns in Middle Egypt might be a consequence of the age-old belief that there is safety in numbers. Conversely, however, burgeoning populations of regional towns might be indicative of a newly vibrant civic culture that flourished in the absence of the central government. So, too, perceived spikes in death rates in Middle Egyptian cemeteries have been interpreted by some as confirmation of the toll taken by the various horsemen of the apocalypse (war, famine, and disease) attested in some written sources. Others, however, see the rise in deaths as indicative of increased birth rates, which would be a much more positive sign of the times!

Increased regionalism in the absence of the state is evident in many facets of material culture. While ceramic forms remained somewhat consistent in the north, southern potters developed their own preferred styles. Similarly, the disappearance of institutions of scribal and artistic training in the capital meant that such specialists were trained in their own communities and developed regionally distinct orthographies and artistic styles. While modern connoisseurs have denigrated First Intermediate Period craftsmanship as characteristic of a 'dark age,' the greatly expanded market for personal

commemoration suggests to many Egyptologists not only increased personal wealth among commoners but also decreased social policing. In many cemeteries, it is apparent that commoners expended far more resources commissioning and equipping graves than they ever had previously. Ordinary individuals might, for instance, own highly charged religious symbols that had previously been limited to elite circles and claim the right to an afterlife either with or as the god Osiris. This trend is referred to as the democratization of religion.

First-hand reports

Such an upsurge in personal commemoration has resulted in a potential goldmine for social

(Top) Two frescoes from the tomb of Iti and his wife Neferu in Gebelein, dated to 2118–1980 BC, depicting a funerary offering scene, a coffin, and the sacrifice of a cow. As the centralized system of the Old Kingdom declined, regional styles developed.

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(Bottom) An old photograph of the remains of an Egyptian fortress at Buhen, now submerged under Lake Nasser. Such fortifications, constructed during the Middle Kingdom, may have developed from the fortifications of towns in the First Intermediate Period.

© Nubian Image Archive / Flickr



A stela from Semna, dated to ca. 1860 BC, marking the border between Egypt and the Kingdom of Kerma.

© Magnus Manske / Wikimedia Commons



A fragment of the *Admonitions of Ipuwer*, a hieratic text, dated to ca. 1279–1213 BC, which records a lamentation of a man named Ipuwer, who complains about the dire situation in Egypt.

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A statue of the Steward Meri, dated to 2044–2004 BC. The strong facial features of this statue, such as the prominent ears, and the rounded limbs reflect a style which developed during the First Intermediate Period, when artists were developing local and regional variations.

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The so-called Victory Stele of Naram-Sin, dated to ca. 2254–2218 BC, depicts Naram-Sin, the ruler of the Akkadian Empire, leading his triumphant forces against the Lullubi, a people from the Zagros Mountains. Later traditions attributed the fall of the Akkadian Empire to Naram-Sin's hubris.

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historians. Close to 30 first-hand reports of food insecurity or famine survive from the 'long' First Intermediate Period, extending roughly a decade into the reign of Senusret I (ca. 1910 BC). Cannibalism is referenced twice, once by Ankhtifi of Mo'alla and again, in a letter written by the farmer Hekanakht to his family in Thebes. While, in both cases, the men bragged of their ability to prevent such practices in their own spheres of influence, these remarks, along with the density of other references to hunger, are without parallel in pharaonic history.

Even on this point, however, there is disagreement. Some scholars read such attestations as indicative of suffering. Others maintain that local elites, who, in the absence of a strong king, found themselves in a position to allocate food resources, exaggerated the hardship they encountered, their own ingenuity in solving problems, and the largess they offered the poor. Without the need to attribute one's fortune to the benevolence of the king, narratives focus on personal agency. Thus, even when such men relay information about their actions in the face of war and food shortage, their inscriptions show evidence of 'vigour' and 'optimism.'

In Ankhtifi of Mo'alla's biography, for example, the leader does reference the frantic migrations occasioned by hunger and its widespread death toll. He tells of conquering the distressed neighbouring polity of Edfu, in which civil strife had torn even close families apart, and of travelling with his armed forces as far north as Thebes. Thus, while Ankhtifi's inscription acknowledges hunger and death, it was in this context that he was able to commission the most elaborate tomb

Mo'alla had ever seen and one in which his poses echoed those of Old Kingdom kings!

Later reception

If the proper interpretation of First Intermediate Period material culture and texts is controversial, the same is true for a genre of literature often described, perhaps charitably, as 'pessimistic.' Surviving works date from the Middle Kingdom or even later, and there is much debate over when they would have been composed and for what purpose. As a whole, the genre is anguished and reflective. In *The Teaching for Merikare*, for instance, a king of the Tenth Dynasty earnestly discusses the challenges of managing angry mobs, stemming tides of immigration, and dispatching would-be rivals. He also uncharacteristically expresses regret for wrongs that occurred under his watch, namely for his own armies' desecration of graves at Abydos.

The somber vulnerability expressed in this text is echoed in *The Teaching of King Amenemhet I for his Son Senusret*, a posthumous rumination delivered to Senusret I (1920–1875 BC) by his murdered father. This narrator is the same Ameny of the *Prophecy of Neferti*, whose arrival, it was foretold, would vanquish the chaos that had enveloped Egypt. The tenor of life in Egypt had evidently deteriorated even to the point that in *The Man Who Was Weary of Life*, an individual suffering from an unknown malady preferred to surrender to death rather than to

A copper figurine of a striding man, dated to ca. 2100–1950 BC, a possible development of the First Intermediate Period.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art



The Curse of Akkad

The fall of the Akkadian Empire is often cited as a comparable event to the decline of the Egyptian Old Kingdom. While the applicability of this comparison is questionable, the issues concerning the sources for the fall of the Akkadian Empire do offer a parallel to those of the First Intermediate Period in Egypt.

A notable example is a text known as *The Curse of Akkad*, which describes the end of the Akkadian Empire as a time of drought, famine, and war. While this may seem like a comprehensive explanation for the Akkadian Empire's

fall, this is only a small part of the poem. *The Curse of Akkad* is largely concerned with the hubris of Naram-Sin, grandson of Sargon, which saw divine support withdrawn from Akkad, resulting in its fall. Since *The Curse of Akkad* appears to have been composed under the Ur III dynasty, the poem may have been written to glorify and justify the dynasty's rule of southern Mesopotamia. As such the poem is not a wholly reliable source for the fall of the Akkadian Empire.

A clay tablet, dated to ca. 1800–1700 BC, inscribed with a text known as *The Curse of Akkad*, which relates the fall of the Akkadian Empire.

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survive in a world he deemed “loathsome”.

For scholars who had experienced similarly tumultuous times in Europe around the two World Wars, the chaos these works described felt familiar, and, therefore, they were deemed suitable sources for social history. More recently, however, scholars have raised valuable calls for caution. *The Lamentations of Khakheperresonb* and the *Admonitions of Ipuwer*, for example, both describing periods of misery, hardship, and political turmoil, seem to postdate the First Intermediate Period significantly and may not even refer to it.

Such literature was possibly composed under the sponsorship of the court. Tendentiously, the central government had a vested interest in ensuring that the relative freedom enjoyed during the First Intermediate Period was remembered with horror rather than nostalgia. Thus, pessimistic literature heightened the perceived peace and prosperity of the present and offered a dramatic cautionary tale about life in the absence of strong autocratic rule.

Recent climate research

The various accounts of famine from inscriptions dating to the First Intermediate Period have long been taken to indicate that there was a period of significant drought at this time. Within the last 25 years or so, the techniques employed by climate scientists have grown increasingly sophisticated. A wide variety of long-term studies have been undertaken on proxies in lake beds, Red Sea cores, tree trunks, and other nooks and crannies of the natural world. Meanwhile, studies of the stratigraphy of settlement sites and even the carapaces of beetles have added to our knowledge. When taken together, these studies provide multipronged evidence that, in ca. 2200 BC, a megadrought affected rainfall in the Levant (which would have occasioned a largescale migration of northerners into Egypt), as well as a suppression of monsoon rains in Ethiopia and thus of inundations in Egypt.

Weather is variable, of course, and thus it is undoubtedly misguided to suggest that life was uniformly miserable during the First Intermediate Period. What seems uncontested, however, is that, in this period, no ruler had been able to amass the surplus necessary



to vanquish his rivals and build monumental architecture akin to that produced in the Old and Middle Kingdoms. Yet whether this was viewed as frightening or empowering probably depended on each individual's situation. Just as Charles Dickens characterized the French Revolution, the First Intermediate Period was the best of times, and also the worst of times. **AH**

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(Top) A fresco from the tomb of Khety, the Overseer of the Oryx nome during the Twelfth Dynasty, in Beni Hasan, depicting Khety before an offering table.

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(Bottom) The Famine Stele, dated to the Ptolemaic period (ca. 205–180 BC), tells of a seven-year-long famine during the reign of King Djoser, who reigned ca. 2686–2648 BC. However, this may be a literary motif. Contemporary accounts of famine from the First Intermediate Period were unprecedentedly common.

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(Left) A scribal palette of the chancellor Orkakhety, bearing the cartouche of Merikare, a king of the Tenth Dynasty, dated to ca. 2130–2040 BC.

© Guillaume Blanchard / Wikimedia Commons

One of the surviving papyri letters of Hekanakht, dated to ca. 1961–1917 BC, which describes how his wife was mistreated by members of his household.

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1000 BC

1500 BC

EGYPT ca. 2120 – 1980 BC

2000 BC

2500 BC



A rock carving in Wadi Shatt er-Rigal dated to the later First Intermediate Period. It depicts Mentuhotep II flanked by his wife Iah, his father Intef III, and Chancellor Khety. Egypt, politically disunited during the First Intermediate period, would be reunified under Mentuhotep II, who incorporated elites from competing kingdoms into his state, some of whom had politically sensitive names, like Khety.



THE COMPETING KINGDOMS OF EGYPT

A LAND DIVIDED

After centuries of centralized rule under the kings of the Old Kingdom, authority along the Nile fractured. Provincial governors became rulers in all but name, cities outside Memphis flourished, and rival courts at Heracleopolis and Thebes claimed legitimacy over parts of a divided land.



For much of modern scholarship, and even more so in the imagination of the general public, the First Intermediate Period has been treated as a historical failure. Stretching roughly from 2118 to 1980 BC, it has often been described as a time of chaos sandwiched between the grandeur of the Old Kingdom and the esteemed Middle Kingdom. Ancient Egyptian sources themselves encouraged this view. Later king lists largely ignored the rulers of the period, and Middle Kingdom texts portrayed the preceding age as one of disorder, decline, and fractured authority.

A painted statuette of Mentuhotep II, dated to ca. 2051–2000 BC. He was revered by later Egyptians as the ruler who reunited Egypt, ending the First Intermediate Period.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Yet over the past few decades, this picture has changed rather dramatically. Rather than a 'dark age,' the First Intermediate Period

By Wojciech Ejsmond

is now understood as a transformative era, marked not by collapse but by reorganization. Royal power fragmented, but administration did not disappear. Economic life adapted rather than failed. Provincial elites rose to unprecedented prominence, reshaping culture, politics, and ideology across Egypt. At the heart of this period stood two rival political formations, the Heracleopolitan kingdom in the north and the Theban kingdom in the south, whose interaction culminated in the reunification of Egypt under Mentuhotep II, one of the most consequential rulers in Egyptian history.

From Memphis to the provinces

For nearly a millennium, Egypt had been ruled from Memphis, the 'Residence' of the Old Kingdom kings. Royal authority was centralized, monumentalized in pyramid complexes, and expressed through an administration that radiated outward from the capital. By the late Sixth Dynasty, however, subtle but profound shifts were underway. Provincial governors — *hery-tep aa* in Egyptian, but we call them 'nomarchs' after their Greek name — had become deeply entrenched in their districts, often controlling multiple provinces and accumulating

A painted limestone relief, dated to ca. 2051–2000 BC, depicting Mentuhotep II wearing the White Crown, symbolizing his rule of Upper Egypt.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art



local wealth and influence, which they were trying to pass within their lineages.

Royal policy itself encouraged this development. Kings granted land and tax exemptions to temples and local elites, formalized through decrees. Dynastic marriages linked royal daughters with provincial magnates and vice versa, strengthening personal ties and solidifying local power bases. Over time, provincial administrators were no longer merely intermediaries between Memphis and the countryside; they became regional authorities in their own right. Some had royal ancestry and were no longer content with their status as provincial managers, who could be dismissed, especially by a new dynasty.

When the Sixth Dynasty weakened and subsequently ceased to exist after the exceptionally long reign of Pepi II (perhaps as long as 94 years on the throne, according to Manetho), the system temporarily collapsed. The Seventh Dynasty, described by later sources as 70 kings ruling for 70 days, is likely a symbolic construct representing chaos rather than a historical reality. The Eighth Dynasty, which ascended the throne in Memphis, continued many Old Kingdom traditions, and the state still functioned much as before as a centralized kingdom. At some point, however, power shifted decisively away from Memphis. A new royal line established itself at Heracleopolis, marking the beginning of the political configuration that defines the First Intermediate Period.

A cylinder seal of Mentuhotep II, dated to ca. 2033–1710 BC.

© Rama / Wikimedia Commons



Khety Meribra I, Merikare, and Imhotep. Manetho divided these rulers into the Ninth and Tenth Dynasties, but they may have formed a single line — the House of Khety. Their royal names echoed Old Kingdom traditions, often invoking the sun god Ra, which hints at an ideological effort to present themselves as legitimate successors of the Memphite kings. Their authority was recognized in much of Middle Egypt for most of the period, and, at the beginning of the period, the names of the Heracleopolitan kings are attested in the southern part of the country. Nomarchs in regions such as Asyut openly aligned themselves with the northern court, emphasizing

(Top) The burial chamber of Henu, found at Saqqara, dated to the late Old Kingdom or First Intermediate Period.

Photo by Wojciech Ejsmond

(Bottom) A detail of the relief from the tomb of Neferkharu, governor of Heracleopolis, and a woman named Sat-Bahetep, who was probably his wife, dated to the First Intermediate Period.

© MiguelHermoso / Wikimedia Commons



The House of Khety

The rulers of Heracleopolis, known in contemporary sources as the House of Khety, are among the most elusive figures in Egyptian history. Their capital is traditionally placed at Heracleopolis, about 90 km south of Memphis, although no royal tombs have been securely identified there. Elite burials and administrative evidence nevertheless confirm the city's importance as a political centre.

Only a handful of Heracleopolitan kings are known by name, among them

A funerary mask, dated to the Middle Kingdom, belonging to a man called Khety.

© Hyspaesines / Flickr





The column of Intef II from Karnak, where it is believed Intef II initiated the construction of the earliest temple at the site.
© Marsupium / Wikimedia Commons

personal ties with the royal family and loyalty to the House of Khety, sometimes by adopting the royal name for the local nomarchs.

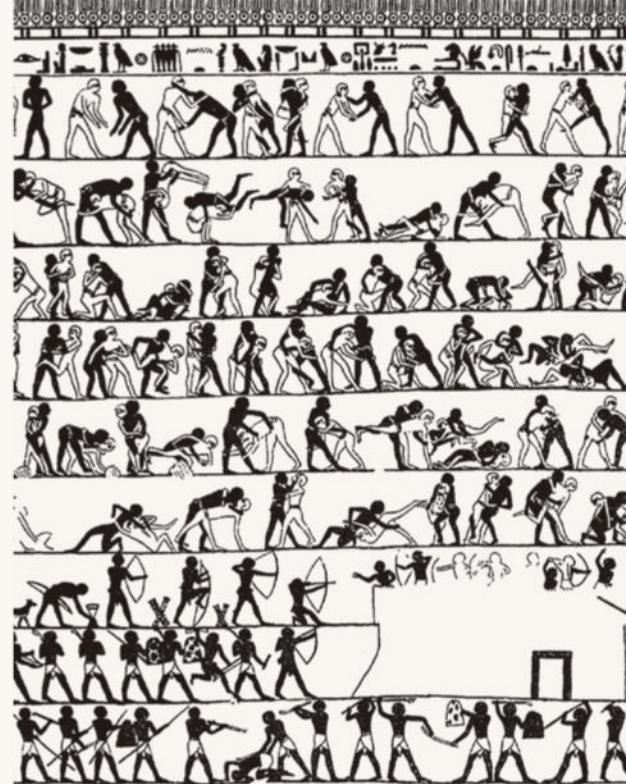
Texts from Asyut reveal a worldview in which the king, representing the old regime, remained central. Nomarchs defined their status through proximity to the ruler, not independence from him. This suggests that the Heracleopolitan kingdom aimed to preserve the Old Kingdom model of kingship, even as the realities of provincial power made that model increasingly difficult to enforce.

Southern ambitions

In contrast, the Theban kingdom emerged from a very different political landscape. During the Old Kingdom, Thebes had been a minor administrative centre. Its governors were buried in modest rock-cut tombs, and the city played little role in national politics. That changed drastically during the First Intermediate Period.

The key figure in this transformation was Intef the Elder, a Theban nomarch whose titles reveal an extraordinary concentration of power. He served simultaneously as provincial governor, Overseer of priests, military commander, and, crucially, claimed authority over all Upper Egypt. At least initially, Intef appears to have operated within the framework of Heracleopolitan authority, perhaps even with its approval.

Whatever the original arrangement, the Theban rulers gradually consolidated control over southern Upper Egypt, absorbing the territories once held by powerful figures such as Ankhtifi of Hefat, buried at the necropolis of Mo'alla, portrayed in modern



historiography as an archetypal nomarch of the period. Ankhtifi's self-presentation text preserved in his tomb is one of the most vivid and unapologetically egomaniacal autobiographies from ancient Egypt:

I was the front of mankind (and) end of mankind, since my like has not come into existence, nor will he come into existence. My like has not been born, nor will he be born. I have surpassed what my forebears did: my antecedents will not equal me in what I did in this millennium since. As for, indeed (when) this battalion of Hefat is quiet, this land stands by, being quiet. If, now, one treads upon my tail like a crocodile, the South (and) North of this land to its limit will be a-tremble.

(trans. K.J. Edwards)



A fragment of a painted limestone relief, dated to ca. 2055–2004 BC, depicting Queen Kemsit, one of Mentuhotep II's wives who may have been Nubian.

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People and identity

Estimates suggest that Egypt's population during the First Intermediate Period may have reached 1.6–2 million. Skeletal evidence does not indicate widespread famine or exceptional stress, challenging older narratives of demographic collapse. Population movement from the Memphite region to the provincial centres has been proposed. However, many aspects of the period remain a mystery. As in other periods of Egyptian history, our evidence is largely restricted to the administrative elite who could afford funerary goods.

The weakening of centralized power and the loosening of the strict canonization of artistic language made provincial workshops more liberal, allowing the expression of nuanced identities. Egypt at this time was also ethnically diverse. Nubians were prominent in southern Upper Egypt, especially in the Gebelein region. Funerary stelae occasionally depict them as elite figures, sometimes with Egyptian spouses and children of mixed heritage. Nubians served not only as soldiers but also as officials and royal consorts — Mentuhotep II himself had Nubian wives.

Two steatite scarabs, dated to the Middle Kingdom. One, from 1981–1850 BC, is decorated with swirls, a symbol that became popular in the early Middle Kingdom. The other, dated to 1840–1640 BC, is decorated with the symbol of Unification.

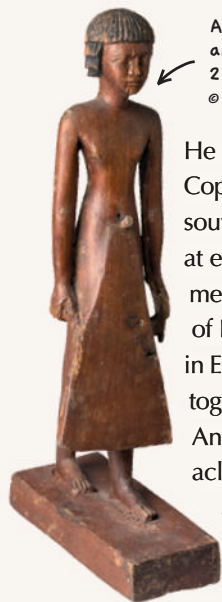
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A wooden statue of Iti II of Gebelein, an army commander, dated to ca. 2181 BC.

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He competed with the Theban and Coptite nomarchs for dominance in southern Egypt, perhaps even aiming at establishing a new ruling house. He mentions that he defeated the House of Khuu, an ephemeral dynasty based in Edfu, which he added to his domain, together with Aswan. Officially, Ankhtifi recognized the king in Heracleopolis, Merikare, but his name appears in a rather marginal spot in the tomb. Despite controlling the three most southern districts of Upper Egypt, he did not succeed

in establishing a new dynasty on the ruins of the Old Kingdom monarchy. His domain was eventually incorporated into the rising power of the Theban kingdom, which was ruled by the Eleventh Dynasty. This annexation was not necessarily violent. The lack of systematic destruction in Ankhtifi's tomb suggests a negotiated transition rather than outright conquest.

In Thebes, Intef's successors, Mentuhotep I and the kings known as Intef I-III, went further, adopting royal titles and building monumental tombs at el-Tarif, where a new architectural form emerged: the *saff* tomb. These vast complexes, with rows of pillars opening onto courtyards, did not focus on

a traditional pyramid structure of the Old Kingdom. Instead, they emphasized links with the local elite by providing burials to the members of the royal court within the *saff* tomb structure. The Theban kings were not isolating themselves from society; they were embedding themselves within it and placing themselves at the apex.

The road to reunification

By the reign of Intef II, Theban ambitions extended northward. The capture of Thinis (Abydos) marked a turning point, bringing the Theban and Heracleopolitan spheres into direct conflict. For the remainder of the First Intermediate Period, the contested zone stretched between Abydos and Asyut and featured changes of alliances and rebellions, which devastated the area. The discovery of a

A drawing of a wall painting from the east wall of the main chamber of tomb 15 at Beni Hasan, believed to be that of Baqet III, a Great Chief or nomarch of the Oryx Nome in Upper Egypt. The upper registers of the wall painting depict men wrestling, while the lower registers depict conflict between men armed with bows, axes, and shields, including what appears to be a siege.

© Wellcome Collection

A stele dedicated to Intef, dated to ca. 2000–1988 BC, describing Intef as a servant of the king (presumably meaning Mentuhotep II) and Overseer of a fortress in the region of Heracleopolis. It is possible that Intef was a member of a prominent family that had been loyal to the Heracleopolitan kings, since Mentuhotep II employed many such officials from the northern regime to help govern a reunited Egypt.

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► THE CENTERFOLD

A Theban monarch visits the first temple at Karnak, constructed by Intef II. Unlike the rulers of the Old Kingdom, who presented themselves as equals of the gods, the Theban rulers derived legitimacy from serving the gods.

© William Webb



A limestone stele, dated to the fourteenth regnal year of Mentuhotep II (ca. 2041 BC), commemorating the Theban official Intef, who is depicted with his three wives. The inscription on the stele records a rebellion in Abydos.

© Dale Cruse / Flickr

monumental structure at Dara, ca. 30 km north of Asyut, which is believed to be an unfinished pyramid, suggests there may have been a rising power centre in this contested zone, but since the structure was never finished, it was a short-lived entity.

The course of the Theban-Heracleopolitan conflict is known primarily from inscriptions in elite tombs, especially those of the nomarchs of Asyut. These texts reveal a complex and shifting political landscape. Early accounts emphasize loyalty to the Heracleopolitan kings and successful resistance against Theban advances. Later inscriptions were revised, plastered over, or rewritten in more neutral terms — silent testimony to changing fortunes.

By the time Mentuhotep II ascended the Theban throne, the balance had shifted decisively. His reign, lasting over 50 years, culminated in the reunification of Egypt. Yet this was

not a single dramatic conquest. A stele dated to his fourteenth regnal year refers to a rebellion in Abydos, while an inscription from his 41st year confirm control over the entire country.

The fate of the Heracleopolitan kingdom remains obscure. Elite tombs at Heracleopolis show signs of destruction, suggesting violence, but the survival of the funerary cult of King Merikara at the Memphite necropolis well into the Middle Kingdom points to a degree of respect, or political pragmatism, on the part of the victors. Mentuhotep II even employed officials from the former northern regime, some of whom retained politically sensitive names, such as Khety. These powerful governors possibly switched their allegiance when Mentuhotep II was approaching, thus surviving the reunification of Egypt.

This was not merely a military victory. It was a carefully managed transition, combining force, negotiation, and ideological redefinition. The new Theban dynasty sought divine legitimization of its rule. In contrast to Old King-

Administration and economy

One of the most striking innovations of the Theban kingdom was its approach to provincial administration. Unlike the Heracleopolitan rulers, who appear to have tolerated hereditary nomarchs, the Theban kings effectively eliminated the office in their core territories. The only exception were later Middle Kingdom Egyptian governors.

We can learn about the provincial developments, key figures, and nomarchs from inscriptions in their tombs. From the end of the Old Kingdom, southern self-presentation texts, the so-called 'autobiographies', developed into a genre of self-praise, emphasizing personal virtue, moral authority, and personal initiative. The famous self-presentation of Ankhtifi, boasting of feeding the hungry, restoring order, and surpassing all predecessors, advertises the almost independent authority of the nomarch. However, when southern Upper Egypt fell under Theban rule, provincial managers in the kingdom, no longer called nomarchs, adopted a servile tone praising the monarch, to whom they owed their personal advance. The Eleventh Dynasty governed through royal agents, entirely dependent on the crown.

Despite political fragmentation, Egypt's economy did not collapse. In some areas,

towns grew two- or threefold, but they were protected by defensive walls — a sign of instability. Archaeological evidence from settlements such as Elephantine, Dendera, Edfu, and Kom Ombo shows urban expansion, continued administration, and increased artisan production in the provinces (although the quality was often compromised). Provincial elites were ordering stelae and funerary models — wooden scenes of daily life — for their tombs. Pottery styles regionalized. Scarabs became stamp seals and proliferated, indicating the growing importance of private economic activities. Objects once restricted to the highest levels of society became more widely accessible. Above all, the genre of the autobiography flourished, providing insight into lives beyond the capital.

These developments are not signs of decline, but of diversification. Provincial workshops flourished, and local identities were expressed materially. The culture that developed at the royal court in the Old Kingdom spread beyond Memphis in unprecedented ways.

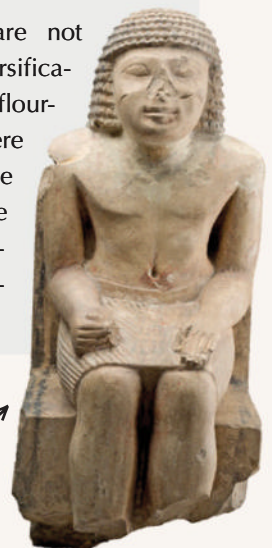


A painted stele, dated to ca. 2135–1994 BC, containing an autobiographical text of the dignitary Samontuoser. During the Eleventh Dynasty, regional governors no longer had authority independent of the monarchy, centralizing administrative control over Egypt.

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A seated limestone statue of Idu II, a nomarch of Dendera during the reign of Pepi II. Dated to ca. 2246–2152 BC, it has been executed in a provincial style.

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dom pharaohs, who were the sons of the Sun and equal to the gods, the Eleventh Dynasty received its right to rule by serving the gods. While the funerary monuments of the kings of the pyramid age were far grander than divine temples, this trend reversed during the Eleventh Dynasty. The divine mandate became the key dogma of the Egyptian monarchy for the rest of ancient Egyptian history. It is not accidental that the first known architectural element in the Karnak temple bears the name of Intef II while

A wooden statuette of a man hoeing, dated to the later reign of Pepi II, ca. 2200–2152 BC.

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Mentuhotep II launched a country-wide program of temple building, including, among others, edifices at Gebelein and Abydos.

An age of regions, not ruins

The First Intermediate Period is one of the most enigmatic and controversial epochs of Egyptian history due to disagreement over its general interpretation. The

extent of alleged climate change and the veracity of reports of famine episodes are matters

of debate. Furthermore, almost nothing is known about the Delta at the time.

Nevertheless, in retrospect, the period was not a breakdown but a re-invention. Power shifted from Memphis to the provinces, cities grew, culture diversified and flourished beyond the capital. The Heracleopolitan rulers sought continuity with the terminal Old Kingdom tradition; the Theban kings pursued centralization and a shift in the ideology of royal power. Their encounter reshaped Egypt, making Thebes the new political and religious heart of Egypt for the next two millennia. The fact that there was a profound crisis of the unified monarchy influenced the negative attitude of the official historiography. Ancient Egyptians could not imagine their state divided into competing centres because the royal power was one and sacred. Anything else would be an abomination of the cosmic order known as *ma'at* — the triumph of order over chaos.

Mentuhotep II's reunification was, therefore, not simply the end of a crisis. On the one hand, from our perspective, it was the culmination of a century-long process that



transformed how Egypt was governed and how power was legitimized. On the other hand, for later generations of ancient Egyptians, Mentuhotep II stood alongside Menes/Narmer, the founder of the monarchy, who overcame the crisis of the monarchy, re-unified Egypt, and brought back *ma'at*. **AH**

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(Top) A view of several rock-cut tombs at the necropolis of Mo'allā, the centre of power for the nomarch Ankhtifi, who fought against the Theban Dynasty.

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(Bottom) A limestone stele made for a man named Tjetji, who served as treasurer under the kings Intef II and Intef III in the Eleventh Dynasty, ca. 2112–2055 BC. The inscription chronicles his service to the king, moving away from more self-congratulatory inscriptions of the First Intermediate Period.

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Fragments of a section of the Turin King List, dated to the reign of Ramesses II, ca. 1279–1213 BC. While the section detailing the Seventh Dynasty, at the start of the First Intermediate Period, is lost, it may have listed as many as 70 kings in 70 days, indicating a period of political upheaval.

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A NEW POWER ON EGYPT'S SOUTHERN FRONTIER

ANCIENT NUBIA AND THE KINGDOM OF KERMA

The twilight of Egypt's Old Kingdom at the end of the third millennium BC is often remembered as an age of crisis, which historians call the First Intermediate Period. In traditional narratives, the focus has been almost exclusively on internal developments. Yet at the same moment when Egypt was grappling with disunity, disparate cultural and political groups in Nubia were consolidating into what would soon become the Kingdom of Kerma.

By Dr Simone Petacchi

Kerma's rise did not directly trigger Egypt's political fragmentation, nor can the two developments be seen as straightforwardly dependent on one another. Yet the emergence of a powerful Nubian presence extending over the Second Cataract area during the First Intermediate Period significantly influenced the political landscape of Egypt. As Kerma consolidated, it redirected trade routes, supplied Nubian mercenaries to Egyptian struggles, and, eventually, extended pressure into Theban-controlled lands. Examining Kerma's early history thus not only broadens our view beyond an Egypt-centric narrative but also highlights the dynamic interplay between Nubia's unification and Egypt's disunity.

Emerging Nubian power

The A-Group culture of Nubia, which flourished between roughly 3800 and 3100 BC, and developed between the First and Second Nile Cataracts, represents one of the earliest complex societies of the Nile Valley outside of Egypt. They were instrumental in channelling resources such as gold, ivory, incense, feline skins, and other exotic products from sub-Saharan Africa towards Egypt. In return, they acquired Egyptian goods. They also produced their own pottery, which was usually highly polished, with red surfaces and black-topped rims, resembling the pottery of Predynastic Egypt. Additionally, their cemeteries reveal a clear degree of social differentiation. While many graves are simple oval pits, others contain elaborate stone or mud-brick linings, rich offerings, and imported objects from Egypt.

The A-Group culture vanished abruptly around 2800 BC, most likely as a result of the territorial ambitions of

An incense burner from Qustul, dated to ca. 3200–3000 BC, from the A-Group Culture. The many Nubian groups that lived to the south of the First Cataract of the Nile had a long history of relations with Egypt, both conflict and trade. By the end of the third millennium BC, the disparate Nubian groups had coalesced into a powerful centralized state that rivalled Egypt.

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A reconstruction of what the settlement at Kerma may have looked like at the end of the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2050 BC). Several buildings in the settlement, such as the Western Deffufa and a monumental roundhouse, suggest the settlement was the site of a major political authority.

© Rocío Espin



early pharaonic Egypt. Rock carvings at Gebel Sheikh-Suleiman, near the Second Cataract, provide symbolic evidence of this conquest, the earliest known depiction of an Egyptian military campaign into Nubia. It depicts a large scorpion grasping a bound Nubian captive, and a falcon atop a *serekh* clasping a prisoner holding a bow, a traditional emblem of Nubia, which was often called Ta-Seti, or the 'Land of the Bow'.

From the Second Dynasty onwards (ca. 2900–2750 BC), Lower Nubia came under Egyptian dominion, secured by fortresses at Qubban and Buhen. Nevertheless, King Khasekhemwy's adversaries were likely the so-called 'pre-Kerma' populations, situated further south of the Second Cataract, with their territory probably stretching as far as the Fourth Cataract.

By the late Old Kingdom (ca. 2258 BC), Egypt had exerted significant cultural and eco-



conomic influence over Nubia (see Mumford, *AH 53*). Expeditions into Lower Nubia secured access to precious resources such as gold, ivory, incense, ebony, feline pelts, and cattle. Fortresses and trading stations dotted the Nile between the First and Second Cataracts, projecting Egyptian power deep into Nubian territory. Nubian elites adopted Egyptian goods, iconography, and prestige items, but remained politically fragmented, represented by local chiefdoms rather than a unified state.

As Egypt's central government weakened in the late Sixth Dynasty (ca. 2334–2258 BC), however, this presence diminished. Egyptian garrisons were abandoned, trade posts fell into disuse, and the Nubian frontier became less tightly integrated into Egypt's economic system. This withdrawal created space for local

Nubian groups to consolidate power. Out of this landscape, a proto-state emerged around Kerma, near the Third Cataract, which would grow into the capital of a kingdom rivalling Egypt in wealth and influence.

The timing is significant. Just as Egypt fractured internally, Kerma's leaders were beginning the process of political unification. Thus, when Egypt looked south in the First Intermediate Period, it no longer encountered diffuse groups but an increasingly structured and assertive state.

The formation of Kerma

Unlike Egypt, Kerma left no written records during its early centuries, so our understanding of its society depends almost entirely on archaeological evidence, including settlements, burial practices, and material culture. Excavations at Kerma reveal clear signs of early state formation. At the heart of the city, monumental mud-



A statue of Demedji, who is seated, and his wife Hennutsen, dated to ca. 2465–2438 BC. Demedji's offices included Overseer of the regions of foreign bowmen and Overseer of the King's fortresses. Nubian mercenaries had been employed in Egyptian armies since the Old Kingdom, but their presence increased during the First Intermediate Period, possibly reflecting diplomatic ties between Kerma and regional Egyptian elites.

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A mirror from the tomb of Iti and his wife Neferu, dated to ca. 2118–1980 BC. The mirror is from Gebelein, where Nubians settled in large numbers.

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A Classic Kerma beaker, dated to ca. 1802–1640 BC, discovered in an Egyptian tomb at Abydos.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art





A limestone stele from Gebelein, dated to ca. 2118–1980 BC, of a bowman and his wife. Nubians were famed as bowmen in Egypt, with the Egyptian name for the region, Ta-Seti, literally meaning 'Land of the Bow.' During the First Intermediate Period, Nubians regularly served in the armies of the various competing powers in Egypt.

© Museo Egizio In Turin / Wikimedia Commons

brick buildings known as deffufas likely served as temples or administrative centres. Their impressive size and complexity suggest a centralized authority capable of organizing large-scale labour. The cemeteries at Kerma further illustrate pronounced social stratification. Massive tumuli containing rich grave goods, including imported Egyptian items, mark the resting places of chiefs or high-ranking elites, while surrounding satellite burials of retainers point to practices of human sacrifice, emphasizing the rulers' authority and religious legitimacy. Evidence of specialized craft production, such as workshops for ceramics, metalworking, and faience, indicates a thriving urban economy, while the scale of Kerma itself — far larger than any neighbouring settlement — underscores its role as a political hub. Taken together, these features show a society transitioning beyond simple chiefdoms into an organized kingdom by around 2100 BC, with concentrated power that allowed Kerma to dominate surrounding Nubian groups and control key stretches of the Nile corridor.

One of the clearest indicators of Kerma's emergence as a regional power is its role in trade. The Nile Valley had long served as a corridor connecting sub-Saharan Africa with Egypt and the Mediterranean, but by the First Intermediate Period, these trade patterns were beginning to shift. With Kerma asserting control over southern trade routes, the Egyptians turned more frequently to maritime trade via the Red Sea, where they founded new harbour outposts to support maritime trade. Excavations at Mersa Gawasis have revealed harbour

facilities, storage areas, and artefacts like ropes and anchors, indicating expeditions possibly to Punt — likely located in what is now eastern Sudan, Eritrea, or parts of Ethiopia — and the broader Horn of Africa. Similarly, Ayn Soukhna, near the Memphite region, served as a strategic port for trade and communication across the Red Sea.

Another dimension of Kerma's early impact is visible in military affairs. Egyptian sources from the First Intermediate Period and the early Middle Kingdom reference Nubian bowmen

serving in Egyptian armies, and depictions of Nubian bowmen appear in Egyptian art with increasing frequency. These groups appear in the employ of regional leaders, particularly Theban nomarchs. This military involvement highlights a relationship of mutual dependence: Egypt's fragmented rulers relied on Nubian troops, while Kerma leveraged this connection to exert its influence within northern power struggles. That said, Nubian mercenaries had been employed in Egyptian armies during the Old Kingdom, with Weni of Abydos supposedly being the first to do so. By the reign of Mentuhotep II (ca. 2045–1994 BC), who reunified Egypt and established the Middle Kingdom, portions of territory under Theban control had come under Nubian sway, demonstrating how effectively Kerma exploited Egypt's period of weakness.

Archaeological evidence has shown that Nubians permanently inhabited a vast area of Upper Egypt. They were not exclusively bowmen; rather, the majority were herdsman and hunters. In recent decades, archaeologists have discovered settlements and cemeteries at sites such as Hierakonpolis, Elephantine Island, Aswan, and Gebelein. At these locations, some members of the Nubian communities left painted stelae that confirm their Egyptianization and full adoption of Egyptian funerary customs, while still preserving their ethnic markers in the iconography.

Egyptian perspectives

From the Egyptian point of view, early Kerma occupied an ambivalent posi-

A painted figurine of a Nubian woman, dated to ca. 2030–1981 BC, possibly one of the Hathor priestesses and royal wives of Mentuhotep II.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Reconstruction of a Kerma Culture burial, dated to ca. 2050–1750 BC. The deceased is interred on their side with their arms and legs drawn up, and is accompanied by sacrificed sheep or goats and pottery.

© Mike Peel / Wikimedia Commons



A papyrus fragment bearing part of an administrative text, dated to ca. 2435–2305 BC, from Gebelein, Egypt, where Nubians settled in significant numbers during the First Intermediate Period.

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tion. On the one hand, Nubians were long stereotyped in Egyptian art and literature as outsiders — sometimes wretched, sometimes admired for their strength. On the other hand, Egypt relied on Nubia for exotic resources and access to relevant African trade routes.

During the First Intermediate Period, when centralized authority in Egypt had collapsed, this ambivalence became more pronounced. For certain nomarchs, the Nubians represented valuable allies or a potential private army. For others — most notably the Theban rulers who would later consolidate power — they were evidently seen as rivals pressing into Egyptian territory.

This tension laid the groundwork for the Middle Kingdom's aggressive campaigns into Nubia. During the Twelfth Dynasty (ca. 1991–1781 BC), Theban rulers launched campaigns to reassert control over Nubia, reclaiming trade routes and reestablishing an Egyptian presence south of the First Cataract. The Middle Kingdom rulers subsequently constructed a chain of fortresses in Lower Nubia to contain and monitor Kerma's growing influence. Yet this very effort underscores the seriousness with which Egypt regarded its southern neighbour. Kerma had emerged not as a peripheral culture, but as an active and dynamic kingdom to be reckoned with, a force shaping the very heart of Egyptian politics.

A new world

The First Intermediate Period in Egypt was not an isolated or chaotic collapse but part of a broader transformation along the Nile Valley. As pharaonic authority weakened, Nubian societies to the south underwent their own process of political centralization, culminating in the rise of Kerma.

Kerma's emergence had direct consequences for Egypt. Trade routes were redirected, Nubian mercenaries participated in Egyptian conflicts, and southern territories increasingly came under Nubian control. Although Kerma was not the cause of

A coiled
basketry
quiver from
the Middle
Kingdom,
dated to ca.
1981–1550 BC.
© The Metropolitan
Museum of Art



Egypt's political fragmentation, its growth helped shape the conditions under which Egyptian rulers sought reunification.

Thus, the First Intermediate Period was not merely a story of Egypt's internal turmoil, but also the formative moment in the emergence of a powerful, unified Nubian kingdom that would stand as Egypt's equal and rival by the time centralized rule was restored in the Middle Kingdom. To understand one, we must also reckon with the other. **AH**

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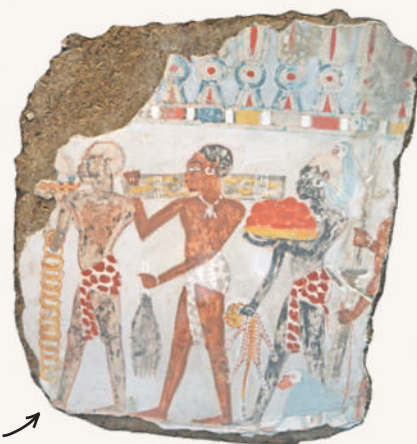
(Top) The exterior of Heqaib's tomb, governor of Elephantine during the reign of King Pepi II (ca. 2284–2214 BC), who led military expeditions into Nubia.

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(Bottom) A view of the Western Deffufa, a massive mudbrick structure at the centre of Kerma, which required substantial labour resources to construct, reflecting the power of the rulers of Kerma.

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A piece of a painted stucco from the tomb of Sobekhotep, depicting Nubians carrying offerings to the Pharaoh. The fresco dates to the reign of Thutmose IV (ca. 1400 BC).
© Lauren van Zoonen



1000 BC

1500 BC

2000 BC

EGYPT ca. 2700 – 1990 BC

2500 BC



A view of the Red Pyramid of King Sneferu, with his Bent Pyramid in the distance. The Red Pyramid was the first proper smooth-sided pyramid and the third largest pyramid from ancient Egypt. Over time, pyramids would shrink and, eventually, disappear altogether.

THEME EGYPTIAN PYRAMIDS' CHANGING FACES A TALE OF DECLINE AND RENEWAL

By Marco Daniele

When we think of ancient Egypt, the image that most readily comes to mind is the pyramid. Yet pyramids, like all monuments, were not static creations. Over time, their shape, building techniques, and materials evolved, mirroring the political, economic, and religious changes of the Egyptian state.



The traditional tombs of the first two dynasties of Egypt were mastabas: low, bench-shaped structures made of sun-dried mud bricks. The earliest pyramids of the Third Dynasty were step pyramids, formed by stacking several mastabas one on top of another. Smooth-sided pyramids emerged at the beginning of the Fourth Dynasty under Sneferu, who, through a process of experimentation, had no fewer than three funerary monuments built. The first, at Meidum, collapsed under the weight of its own outer casing. The second, known as the Bent Pyramid, was completed,

A statue of King Djoser, of the Third Dynasty, under whom Imhotep is said to have thought of the idea of stacking mastabas atop one another, an initial stage in the development of the pyramid. An iconic image of ancient Egypt, the pyramid would disappear by the Middle Kingdom.

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but structural problems forced a change in angle that resulted in an awkward profile. Only the third attempt, the so-called Red Pyramid at Dahshur, achieved the ideal form.

Changes in the Late Old Kingdom

The peak of pyramid construction achievement was reached by Sneferu's son, Khufu, and his son Khafre. Together, with the pyramid of Menkaure, Khafre's son and successor, their pyramids form the core of the Giza Pyramid Complex. However, the process of pyramid construction would develop in a way that reflected developments in the pharaonic state during the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties of Egypt (ca. 2500–2181 BC).

One of the most noticeable transitions was with regards to the size and workmanship. The later pyramids of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties were not as grand as those of Khufu, Khafre, or Menkaure. To give just a few examples, the pyramid of Userkaf rises to about 49 m, that of Sahure to 47 m, and both Pepi I and Pepi II's pyramids reach approximately 52 m. By comparison, Khufu's pyramid originally stood 146 m tall, while Khafre's reached a height of 143 m. This reduction in scale should not be seen as a decline in technical skill, but rather as the result of a different approach to managing resources. While the central state remained powerful, wealth and responsibilities were

increasingly distributed among local elites and officials. This limited the ability to concentrate vast resources on a single monumental project.

The methods of construction were also transformed. While the pyramids of the Fourth Dynasty used stone cut from the quarry into very large blocks and placed in position with an extraordinarily good fit, the following ones used a fill of rubble and sand and an exterior casing of limestone. This approach was quicker and more economical, but far less durable.

Of equal importance were developments in the realm of religion. In the Fifth Dynasty, there emerged the worship of the Sun god, Ra, with the result that solar temples, as well as the temples in connection with the pyramids, came

One of two copper statues of King Pepi discovered at the temple of Horus in Hierakonpolis.
© Holger Uwe Schmitt / Wikimedia Commons

to be emphasized, often more so than the pyramids themselves. Yet towards the end of the Fifth and during the Sixth Dynasty, sets of religious texts, known as *Pyramid Texts*, were inscribed onto the walls of the burial chamber for the purpose of magical protection, both of the physical and spiritual being of the pharaoh, aiming for his ascension among the gods and his eventual union with the solar god Ra.

The First Intermediate Period

The First Intermediate Period saw the breakdown of central authority, while local governors, known as nomarchs, rose in influence and autonomy. In time, Egypt came to be ruled simultaneously by several dynasties, each controlling a different region.

Under such conditions, one might expect the pyramid to have disappeared altogether, given the enormous resources and long construction times such funerary monuments required. Surprisingly, however, several pyramids from this period are still attested. Some of these pyramids have never been located or excavated by archaeologists and are known only through brief references in inscriptions. These include the burial places of Iti and Neferkare Neby, both pharaohs of the Eighth Dynasty, and of Merikare, a ruler of the Tenth Dynasty.

A different case is represented by the funer-

A part of the *Pyramid Texts* from the burial chamber of King Unas, containing the utterances 254-260.
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An aerial view of the Giza Pyramid Complex, including the pyramids of Khafre and Khufu, the two largest pyramids in Egypt, all of which were constructed in ca. 2600-2500 BC.

© Dennis Jarvis / Flickr



The remains of the pyramid of Unas, dated to ca. 2367-2347 BC, the smallest of all pyramids constructed during the Old Kingdom.

© Jorge Lázcar / Flickr



The Bent Pyramid of King Sneferu, the second pyramid constructed for the pharaoh, dated to ca. 2600 BC, which stands over 100m tall.



The funerary complex of Khui, located in the necropolis of Dara near Asyut, must once have been considerably more imposing. What survives today includes part of a mud-brick enclosure wall, the badly preserved remains of what was probably a funerary temple, and a large rectangular mud-brick structure measuring approximately 146 by 136 m, whose interpretation remains uncertain. Some scholars identify it as the base of a gigantic mastaba; others see it as the first stage of a step pyramid, recalling those of the Third Dynasty. In either case, it would represent a regression compared to earlier generations, marking a return to more archaic burial forms than the smooth-sided pyramids of the Old Kingdom.

Taken together, these monuments reveal a world in which royal ambition persisted, but without the organizational strength that had once turned ideology into stone.



Two wooden figurines, dated to ca. 2160–2000 BC, from a tomb in Asyut.

© Didier Descouens / Wikimedia Commons

The nomarchs' tombs

While kings struggled to uphold the architectural language of authority, local governors increasingly found new ways to express their own status in death. Even before the Fifth Dynasty, people other than the

king and royal women had been granted the right to build monumental tombs, but these were usually princes, viziers, and high officials closely connected to the royal court. Since the pyramid shape was strictly reserved for the pharaoh and his closest relatives, they had to settle for the still-impressive mastaba. It was in tombs of this type that figures such as Hemiuunu, vizier of Khufu and possibly the architect of the Great Pyramid; Ankhhaf, Khufu's half-brother and vizier under Khafre; and Kagemni, vizier and perhaps son-in-law of Teti, were buried.

For most of the Old Kingdom, however, the nomarchs were neither autonomous nor wealthy enough to undertake truly monumental funerary projects. This began to change in the Fifth Dynasty, when the earliest rock-cut tombs of the nomarchs of Wadjet were excavated at Hemamieh. The best-known

(Top) A view of King Djoser's step pyramid, made by superimposing mastabas atop one another, an innovation ascribed to Imhotep. The pyramid dates to ca. 2670–2650 BC.

© Punrawit Suwattananun / Shutterstock

(Bottom) A painted relief from the mastaba of Perneb, a palace administrator of the Fifth Dynasty, dated to ca. 2381–2323 BC. While pharaohs and their relatives were buried in pyramids, elites were buried in mastaba tombs.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art

ary complexes of Qakare Ibi and Khui, both generally assigned to the Eighth Dynasty, although Khui's attribution remains a matter of debate. Ibi's pyramid at Saqqara was excavated between 1929 and 1931 by Gustave Jéquier. It was a modest structure, which when complete would have risen to only about 21 m in height. Today, it survives as little more than a heap of mud and limestone chips, while its original casing of limestone blocks appears to have been dismantled and reused in later constructions. In both plan and scale, the pyramid closely resembles those of the queens Wedjebten, Neith, and Ipout II, consorts of Pepi II, to such an extent that it has been suggested that it was originally intended as the tomb of Queen Ankhesenpepi, another wife of Pepi II, and later usurped by Ibi. Beside the pyramid, a small mud-brick chapel was discovered, where the king's funerary cult was performed.



A painted limestone fragment from a relief in the saff tomb of the vizier Dagi, dated to ca. 2010–2000 BC or ca. 2000–1981 BC, depicting either two officials or Dagi's sons.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art

and best-preserved of these belonged to Kai-khenet II, who held the titles Overseer of the king's people, Overseer of the phyles of Upper Egypt, and Overseer of all work in the middle provinces of Upper Egypt.

A ritual implement, dated to ca. 1961–1840 BC, used to open the mouth of a statue or a mummy.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This new trend intensified under the Sixth Dynasty. Around 2400 BC, Izi, nomarch of Wetjes-Hor, built himself a mastaba at Edfu and was even venerated as a local deity in later centuries. Harkhuf, governor of Upper Egypt under Merenre I and Pepi II, excavated a large rock-cut tomb at Qubbet el-Hawa, near Aswan. On its walls he had his autobiography inscribed, recounting his official missions, trade ventures, and military expeditions into Nubia.

The most striking case, however, is the necropolis of Deir el-Gabrawi, near modern Manfalut, where the powerful nomarchs of the Dju-fet nome chose to be buried. Some of them, such as Ibi and Henqu, bore the title Overseer of Upper Egypt, a clear sign that their authority extended well beyond a single province, while Hemre Isi rose all the way to the office of vizier.

During the First Intermediate Period, the weakening of pharaonic authority further fuelled the ambitions of local governors, and nomarchs' tombs multiplied. Among the most famous necropolis sites are Asyut, where the nomarchs of Atef Khentet were buried, and Mo'alla, not far from Luxor, where Ankhtifi, nomarch of Nekhen and likely a rival of the Theban rulers Intef the Elder and Mentuhotep I, ancestors of the Eleventh Dynasty, built his tomb. These monuments are of enormous importance not only because they reflect the power and wealth achieved by these officials, but also because their walls are covered with autobiographical inscriptions in which they celebrated their successes, their conquests, and the care they claimed to have taken of their lands in an age of widespread chaos. Yet none of these nomarchs ever built a pyramid. Either their wealth did not extend that far, or it was simply considered inappropriate to 'usurp' a form of burial reserved exclusively for the king.

The pyramids of the Middle Kingdom

None of the Theban kings of the Eleventh Dynasty chose to be buried in a pyramid.



An Old Kingdom-period wooden coffin, dated to ca. 2435–2305 BC, decorated with a 'palace facade'. The coffin belonged to a man named Perim, and was found in a chamber dug at the bottom of the middle shaft of a mastaba.

© Museo Egizio In Turin / Wikimedia Commons

The interior of the mastaba of Kagemni, vizier to King Teti of the Sixth Dynasty, dated to ca. 2330 BC. Mastabas could be richly decorated, even if they were not so grand and imposing as pyramids.

© Richard Mortel / Flickr



The pyramidion of Khendjer, a king of the Thirteenth Dynasty, which topped Khendjer's pyramid.

© Onceinawhile / Wikimedia Commons



The so-called Edwin Smith Papyrus, which dates to ca. 1600 BC, describes 48 different medical issues and their various treatments. Imhotep was credited with advancing medical knowledge, and was even deified as a god of medicine.

© Jeff Dahl / Wikimedia Commons

An Egyptian Leonardo da Vinci

The idea of superimposing mastabas on one another, thereby creating the first example of pyramids in Egypt, is credited to Imhotep, a true Leonardo da Vinci of ancient Egypt: priest, physician, astronomer, poet, and above all the architect of King Djoser. He was later venerated in Egypt as one of several sages — the oldest historical personage among such figures — and was even, eventually, deified as a god of medicine, the son of the god Ptah, with the Greeks equating him with Asclepius. He was credited with writing various wisdom texts and with advancing medical knowledge.

Yet despite his reputation in Egyptian traditions, we have very little reliable information about Imhotep. A single contemporary

inscription records the various positions he held during his lifetime, indicating his prominent — and likely powerful — position in the court of the King Djoser. Later, in the New Kingdom, a story possibly described him performing a miracle at the court of the King Djoser. Another narrative, known as *The Life of Imhotep*, dated to the Greco-Roman period, was likely composed by Alexandrian scholars, incorporating thousands of years of Egyptian traditions. It is unlikely we will ever know what Imhotep actually achieved.

A statuette of Imhotep, dated to ca. 664–30 BC. All sorts of innovations are traditionally ascribed to this Old Kingdom figure.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Intef I, Intef II, and Intef III instead selected the necropolis of El-Tarif, near Thebes, opting for a new type of rock-cut tomb known as a *saff* tomb. These tombs followed a clear sequence: a large forecourt, enclosed by stone or mud-brick walls, with a funerary stele honouring the deceased; a facade carved into the cliff, featuring decorated square pillars and one or more entrance doors; a funerary chapel where priests performed daily rituals and presented offerings to sustain the deceased's soul; and finally, a long corridor leading to the burial chamber, which contained the sarcophagus and the funerary goods.

Even Mentuhotep II, the pharaoh who reunited Egypt under a single authority around 2040 BC, chose not to build a pyramid. Perhaps the military effort required to reunify

the country had been too great to allow for the construction of such a monumental tomb, or perhaps he deliberately continued the path set by his predecessors. His funerary complex at Deir el-Bahari represents an evolution of *saff* tombs, while also drawing on earlier traditions, from the early royal mounds of predynastic rulers to the proto-dynastic mastabas and even the pyramid complexes of previous eras. Like those earlier pyramidal complexes, it featured a valley temple connected by a nearly 1-km-long causeway leading to the main funerary temple. This consisted of a terraced structure with colonnaded façades, which in antiquity likely included tree-lined courtyards and, at the top, either a tumulus or, according to some, a small pyramid. The king's actual burial place, however, was the underground chamber carved into the rock, accessible via a long corridor that opened at the rear of the temple. With its monumental scale, this complex laid the foundation for the temple complexes of the New Kingdom. We do not know where or how Mentuhotep III and Mentuhotep IV, the last pharaohs of the Eleventh Dynasty, were buried, so it remains unclear whether they followed Mentuhotep II's model or introduced new practices.

Interestingly, the only pyramid from the Eleventh Dynasty does not belong to a king

A view of the necropolis of Hemamieh, where the Old Kingdom tombs belonging to the nomarchs of the Wadjet nome can be found.

© Roland Unger / Wikimedia Commons



The black granite altar from the pyramid chapel of King Senusret I, dated to ca. 1971–1929 BC.

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but to a high official named Reherishefnakht. This was the first time such a monument was built for someone outside the royal family, reflecting the wealth and power that local governors could now wield. His pyramid was erected at Saqqara, not far from that of Pepi I, yet in size it was modest, even smaller than the tiniest royal pyramids of the Eighth Dynasty — its base measured just 13 by 13 m, and most of the construction material consisted of recycled limestone debris taken from other buildings.

With the rise of the Twelfth Dynasty (1991–1802 BC), which marked the peak of the Middle Kingdom, the pyramid returned as the standard royal tomb. The prosperity Egypt enjoyed during this period is reflected in the size of its new pyramids, which rivalled or even exceeded those of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties. Senusret I's pyramid reached 62 m in height, while Senusret III's soared to 78 m. Yet these colossal structures were notoriously unstable and fragile, built with cores of mudbrick and only a simple limestone casing. The outcome is easy to imagine — once the outer casing was stripped away, often scavenged for other construction projects, the crumbly inner core was exposed to the elements and deteriorated rapidly. What remains today is usually little more than a mound of rubble, hardly recognizable as the towering monuments they once were.

More interesting, perhaps, are the funerary complexes of which the pyramid was only a part, often so vast that they were almost self-contained monuments. A striking example is the so-called Labyrinth of Moeris within Amenemhat III's funerary complex: a sprawling maze covering 70,000 sq. m, containing some 3000 rooms over two levels.

The last pyramids

With the rise of the Thirteenth Dynasty, Egypt entered a new phase of fragmented central authority, but pyramids did not disappear overnight, just as they had not vanished between the Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period. Various rulers throughout the Second Intermediate Period built smaller pyramids. The very last pyramid of this tradition dates to the early New Kingdom: Ahmose,



One of two wooden Guardian figurines discovered in the area around the pyramid of Senusret I at Lisht South, dated to ca. 1919–1885 BC.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art



(Top) A view of the pyramid of Amenemhat III in Dahshur, known as the Black Pyramid, constructed in ca. 1850 BC. The pyramid contained a 70,000-square-metre maze with 3000 rooms.

© Diego Fiore / Flickr

(Bottom) The pyramid of pharaoh Senusret II in Lahun, dated to the early nineteenth century BC. The exterior limestone facade was stripped by Ramesses II for use in his own building projects.

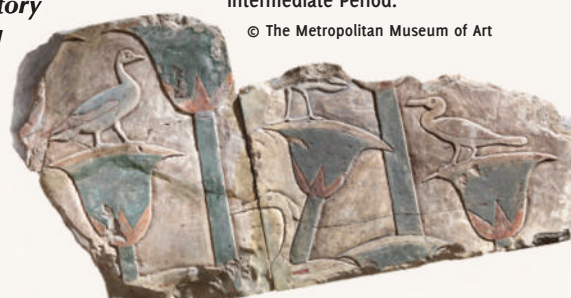
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founder of the Eighteenth Dynasty and reunifier of Egypt after driving the Hyksos from the Delta, built one at Abydos. Like the pyramids of the First Intermediate and Middle Kingdoms, it had a core of rubble and mudbrick with a limestone casing. It appears not to have served as a true tomb, but rather as a cenotaph. Subsequent pharaohs opted decisively for underground tombs. **AH**

Marco Daniele is an Italian history and geography teacher. On social media and through a website, he runs 'Storia & Dintorni', a historical outreach project in Italian aimed at a wider audience.

A painted limestone relief depicting birds in a papyrus thicket from the temple of Mentuhotep II, dated to ca. 2030–2000 BC. Mentuhotep II, despite reuniting Egypt and ushering in the Middle Kingdom, was not buried in a pyramid but in a *saff* tomb, continuing practices from the First Intermediate Period.

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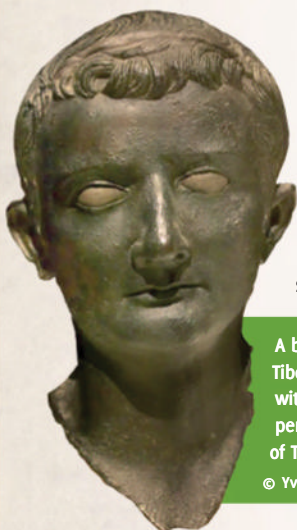


The interior of the cave at Tiberius' estate in Spelunca (modern Sperlonga), where Sejanus shielded Tiberius from falling rocks when the cave collapsed in AD 26. Sejanus used his position close to Tiberius to increase his own influence.

THE RISE AND FALL OF SEJANUS

AN INFAMOUS OPPORTUNIST

In AD 14, Tiberius became the ruler of the Roman Empire after the death of Augustus, his adoptive father. However, he soon became disillusioned with the reluctance of the Senate to participate in imperial governance. The ruthlessly ambitious Lucius Aelius Sejanus stepped into this vacuum and became one of Rome's most infamous political opportunists.



Sejanus was not a member of the Roman aristocracy but came from a prominent Etruscan equestrian family. His rise reflected a shift in Roman political dynamics, where imperial favour began to outweigh traditional birthright. Upon Tiberius' accession, Sejanus initially shared command of

A bronze bust of Tiberius, dated to the first century AD. Tiberius was a reluctant emperor, eventually permanently withdrawing to the island of Capri, after which Sejanus' personal authority increased, even beginning to eclipse that of Tiberius himself.

© Yves Tennevin / Wikimedia Commons

By Phil Wood

the Praetorian Guard with his father, Lucius Seius Strabo. However, in AD 15, Strabo was appointed Prefect of Egypt and Sejanus assumed sole leadership of the Praetorians.

A relentless ascent

The Praetorian Guard emerged as a formidable political force in AD 23, when Sejanus obtained permission from Tiberius for all nine cohorts to be lodged in a single barracks just outside Rome. Augustus had previously stationed six cohorts throughout Italy to avoid the concentration of military power near the capital. This relocation elevated the Praetorian Guard and its prefect to unprecedented influence.

In the same year, Tiberius' son, Drusus, died unexpectedly, and Sejanus emerged as the emperor's most trusted advisor. The prefect manipulated Tiberius' escalating paranoia by deploying an extensive network of informers, whose denunciations instigated a series of treason trials directed against the senatorial elite. The trials further intensified the emperor's suspicion of the Roman elite and provided a legal pretext for Sejanus to eliminate his political enemies.

In AD 26, Sejanus' influence over Tiberius deepened when he

A coin struck during the reign of Tiberius with the name of Sejanus erased.

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saved Tiberius' life. According to Tacitus, the pair were dining in a cave at the imperial villa of Spelunca when the roof collapsed. Sejanus "braced over Caesar with both knees and hands, put himself in the way of the falling rocks" (*Annals* 4.59).

That same year, Tiberius withdrew permanently to the island of Capri, convinced the treason trials had revealed genuine threats to his safety. With the emperor absent from Rome,

Sejanus controlled the flow of information to him and tightened his grip on the capital.

According to Cassius Dio, Sejanus had the Senate under his control, "partly by the benefits he

conferred, partly by the hopes he inspired, and partly by intimidation" (58.4.2). Moreover, Tiberius acknowledged Sejanus as "the partner of his toils" (*Annals* 4.1). He thus became, effectively, co-emperor and Rome's *de facto* ruler.

The prefect subsequently targeted the imperial family. He persuaded Tiberius that Agrippina the Elder, widow of the emperor's nephew Germanicus, was plotting against him. Agrippina and her eldest son, Nero, were exiled, and her middle son, Drusus, was imprisoned. Only two male heirs remained free, Agrippina's youngest son, Caligula, and Tiberius' grandson, Tiberius Gemellus. Then, in AD 31, Sejanus became consul alongside Tiberius and received permission to marry Livilla, the widow of Tiberius' son, Drusus.

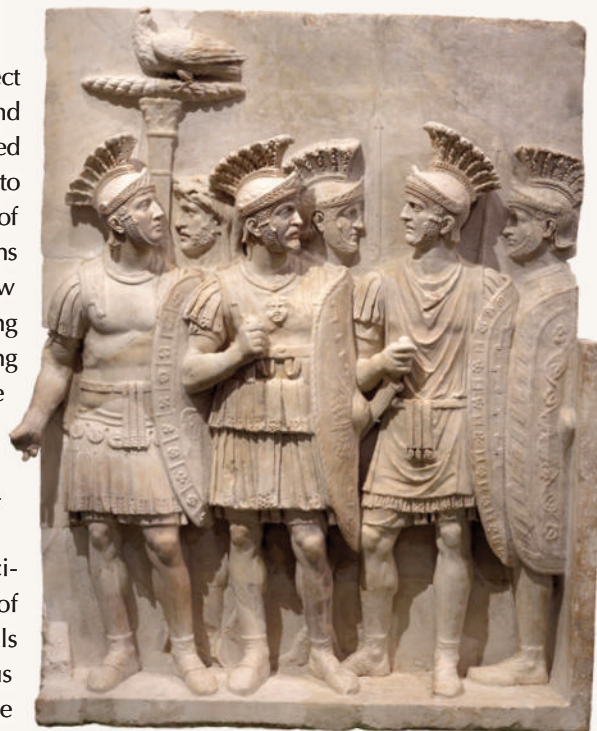
A grisly fall

However, Tiberius began to question Sejanus' loyalty. Suetonius declared that the celebration of Sejanus' birthday, with the proliferation of statues erected in his honour, appeared to the emperor as "a preliminary step to his usurpation of the throne" (*Tiberius* 65). Similarly, Cassius Dio noted that Tiberius was alarmed over reports that "senators and the rest" looked up to Sejanus as if he were "actually emperor and held Tiberius in slight esteem" (58.4.1). A pivotal moment occurred when Nero, Agrippina the Elder's son and prospective heir to the throne, was forced to commit suicide under the

influence of Sejanus. The prefect had exceeded his authority and this miscalculation enhanced Tiberius's distrust. According to Josephus, conclusive proof of Sejanus' malevolent intentions came from Antonia, the widow of Tiberius' brother. Fearing for the safety of her remaining grandson, Caligula, she wrote to Tiberius warning him of "a very dangerous plot laid against him by Sejanus" (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.6).

Tiberius acted decisively and initiated one of the most dramatic reversals of fortune in history. Sejanus was secretly replaced as the Praetorian Prefect. He confidently appeared before a meeting of the Senate where he anticipated the conferment of tribunician powers. Instead, a letter from Tiberius, containing a scathing denunciation of his former prefect, was read aloud. The Senate condemned Sejanus, and he was seized and strangled. His body was dragged to the Gemonian Steps, where it was exposed to the wrath of the people for three days. His relatives and supporters shared an equally grisly fate as Tiberius sought vengeance for the betrayal of his trust. **AH**

Phil Wood has written for a number of history publications. He has a special interest in the late Roman Republic and early Roman Empire.

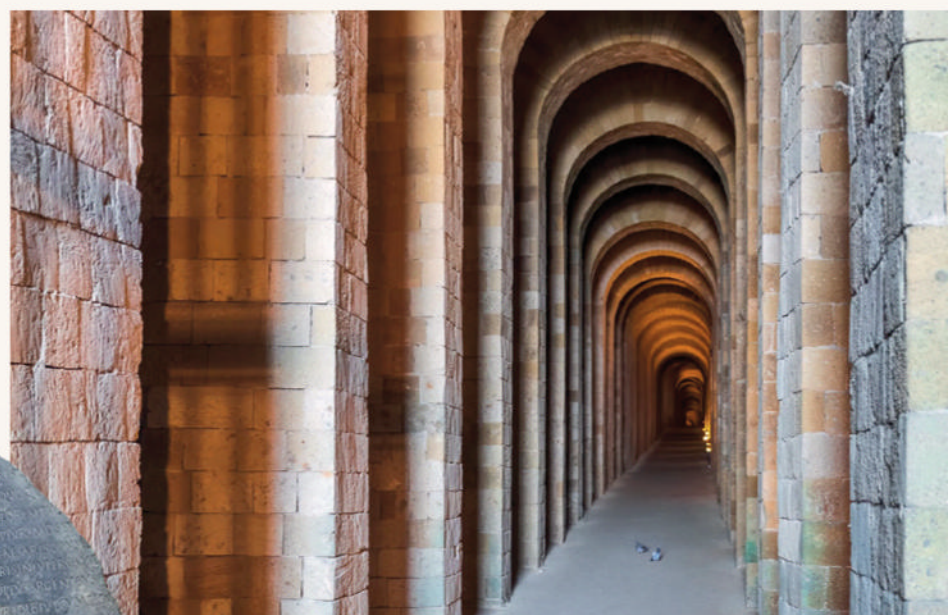


The heavily restored Praetorians Relief from the Arch of Claudius in Rome, erected in AD 51 to commemorate Claudius' conquest of Britain. Sejanus rose to power as Prefect of the Praetorians, turning them into a powerful political force after receiving permission to garrison all the Praetorian cohorts in Rome.

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A view of the so-called Cave of Sejanus in Naples, a Roman tunnel dug through the Posillipo hill in the first century BC and enlarged by Sejanus.

© Lev Levin / Shutterstock



A fragmentary inscription recording the funerary honours bestowed on Drusus, the son of Tiberius, upon his death in AD 23.

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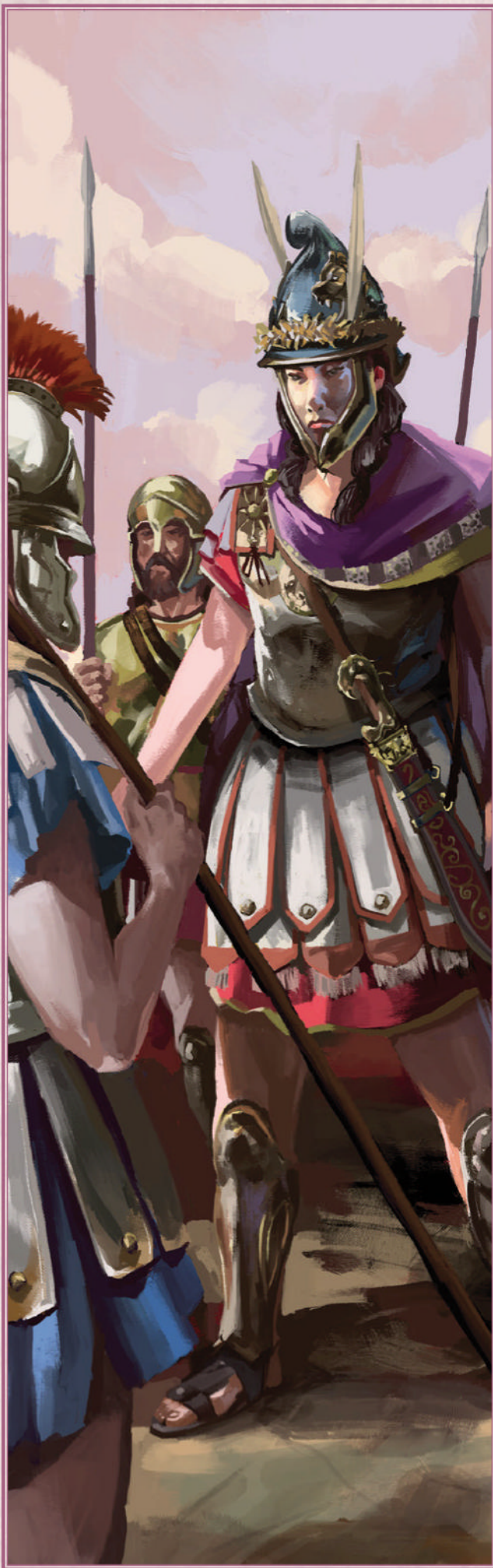
MACEDON ca. 323 – 316 BC

500 AD

1 AD

500 BC

1000 BC



HELMETS AND CROWNS

In the turbulent world of the Argead dynasty, the founding dynasty of the Kingdom of Macedon, where women usually secured influence through dynastic marriages and courtly manoeuvring, three figures stand out for defying expectations: Cynane, Eurydice, and Olympias. Each carved her own path to power. Cynane through martial feats, her daughter Eurydice through public assemblies and political daring, whilst Olympias wielded her might through ritual authority and ruthless elimination of rivals.

Due to the clan-like nature of the Argead dynasty, Argead women — whether blood relatives or wives of the king — occupied prominent positions in Macedonian politics. While the earliest known Argead women — Gygaea, daughter of Amyntas I, and Stratonice, sister of Perdiccas II — appear

Macedonian queens, such as Cynane and Eurydice II, donned armour and led armies in the dynastic struggles after the death of Alexander the Great.

© Ashkay Misra

only as political pawns in the source material, later Argead women, beginning with Eurydice I, wife of Amyntas III, took on a more active role in Macedonian politics. By the later fourth

century BC, Argead women were so politically prominent as to lead armies in pursuit of the power.

Cynane

As our earliest example, Cynane stands out as a startling anomaly: a Macedonian princess who was not only of royal blood but also a warrior trained in arms with the intent of using them. As the daughter of Philip II of Macedon and the Illyrian princess Audata, this half-sister to Alexander the Great inherited a unique blend of Macedonian lineage and Illyrian martial culture which was uniquely open to women. Polyaeus records that she was “famous for her military knowledge; she commanded armies, and in the field charged at the head of them” (*Stratagems* 8.60). Her military prowess would impact not only her, but her future daughter during the rise and violent fall of Alexander the Great’s empire.

Cynane’s reputation was forged in the heat of battle. In one campaign against the Illyrians, Cynane is said to have fought and killed an Illyrian queen in single combat. The imagery is striking — we are told that “she herself slew their queen with a fatal blow to the throat; and she defeated the Illyrian army with great slaughter” (Polyaeus, *Stratagems* 8.60). Such a feat spoke directly to Macedonian ideals of personal courage and military prowess, qualities normally reserved for their kings and cavalry commanders. More than just an anecdote, this duel reinforced Macedonian dominance over the Illyrians and cemented Cynane’s martial reputation in Phillip’s court. She was not a marginal figure; she was both a dynastic princess and a symbol of victory.

This martial persona proved useful in the years of uncertainty following Alexander’s death in 323 BC. With the empire fragmented and the Diadochi (Successors) jostling for supremacy, Cynane saw an opportunity to secure her daughter Adea’s position — and, by extension, her own. She arranged Adea’s marriage to Philip Arrhidaeus, Alexander’s half-brother and one of the surviving male heirs of the royal house. Arrhidaeus, however, is noted in sources to have been mentally and physically impaired; Cynane clearly intended for her daughter to take a leading role in Macedonian politics as his queen. What made Cynane exceptional was not merely the marriage alliance she sought, but that she advanced her cause with an army at her back. Polyaeus tells she; “crossed the Strymon [river], forcing her way in the face of Antipater, who disputed her passage, and then passed the Hellespont to meet the Macedonian army” (*Stratagems* 8.60). Even when Alectas, brother of the regent Perdiccas, advanced to stop her with a powerful force, the Macedonians hesitated to fight: “The Macedonians at first paused at the sight of Philip’s daughter, and the sister of Alexander; but after reproaching Alcetas with ingratitude, undaunted at the number of his forces, and his formidable preparations for battle, she bravely advanced to fight against him” (Polyaeus, *Stratagems* 8.60). Her family position commanded

legitimacy and her actions confirmed it. According to Poly-aenus, she chose to face death undaunted, preferring “a glorious death, rather than, stripped of her dominions, accept a private life unworthy of the daughter of Philip” (*Stratagems* 8.60). When Perdiccas ordered her assassination, the soldiers were so indignant at the death of Philip’s daughter that they compelled him to allow the marriage between Adea and Arrhidaeus to go ahead. Arrian corroborates, telling us “the marriage subsequently took place, with the approval of Perdiccas, to appease the increasing indignation of the soldiery, which had been aroused by the death of Cynane” (*Events After Alexander* Frag. 9.22–23). Adea would wed Arrhidaeus and soon emerge as Queen Eurydice II.

Cynane’s legacy is twofold. She embodies a form of female agency on the battlefield which is rare in the ancient world; commanding troops, confronting generals, and compelling deference in the Macedonian army before dying a hero’s death. Moreover, she ensures her daughter’s entry into Macedonian politics not through quiet arrangement or political intrigue, but through bold military action. This combination of battlefield reputation and dynastic manoeuvring makes her a dangerous yet admirable figure, and one her daughter would emulate with great energy.

Eurydice II

If Cynane’s career ended in tragedy, her daughter Adea, better known under her regal name Eurydice II, ensured that her mother’s legacy did not fade. Having been trained in martial skills by Cynane, Eurydice came of age in a world where dynastic survival demanded boldness. As Alexander the Great’s empire fell into the tearing hands of the Diadochi, Eurydice married and swiftly proved herself unwilling to accept the role of a silent consort. Arrhidaeus’ physical and mental impairments pushed him to the backseat in leadership, with Eurydice confidently taking the wheel.

Diodorus describes Eurydice’s interference at the Treaty of Triparadeisus, intended to redistribute power among Alexander the Great’s generals after the regent Perdiccas’ death, in 321 BC (18.39). The Macedonian army had become frustrated with the “guardians of the kings”, Pithon and Arrhidaeus, beginning instead to listen more closely to Eurydice’s commands. The spectacle of a young queen seizing authority over her male counterparts, especially in the military realm, was extraordinary: “the Macedonians were paying more and more attention to her commands”, Diodorus observes, forcing the regents to resign their guardianship. Even when Antipater arrived and attempted to overrule her, “he found Eurydice stirring up discord and turning the Macedonians away from him”, it was only after an assembly and “thoroughly frightening Eurydice” that he managed to pause her propaganda within the armed forces (Diodorus, 18.39). As the dust settled on the new treaty, Antipater emerged as regent with guardianship of the kings, cementing his authority in Macedon; Ptolemy secured Egypt, strengthening his position as one of the most stable successors; while Antigonus gained command

in Asia with wide-ranging military authority. These outcomes made Antipater, Ptolemy, and Antigonus the principal leaders, shaping the next phase of the Wars of the Successors in which Eurydice would add her influence.

The Roman historian Justin provides a glimpse of Eurydice’s ambitions following the treaty and her calculated pattern in, “taking advantage of her husband’s weakness” (*Epitome* 14.5). Dissatisfied with ceremonial duties, Eurydice uses her husband’s name to intervene directly in Macedonian politics. Her first battle was to be a war of words. When Antipater died, he left Polyperchon, a Macedonian general, as regent of Macedon rather than his son Cassander. Cassander went to Eurydice for support, speaking volumes to her place and power in Macedonian politics. In turn, she wrote under the name of her husband to Polyperchon, demanding he hand control of the Macedonian forces to Cassander. We are told she sent similar letters to Antigonus, the famous one-eyed general of Alexander the Great, who had assumed governorship in Phrygia. Cassander, for whom she gave support, was so won over by her wiles that Justin acidly reports “he was managing everything according to the will of that ambitious woman” (*Epitome* 14.5). Far from being a pawn, Eurydice became a central player in the complex web of Diadochi politics tearing Alexander the Great’s dissolving empire apart. Her defiance eventually set her on a collision course with Olympias, the formidable mother of Alexander the Great.

Eurydice’s public image was sharpened by martial display in her conflict with Olympias. Duris of Samos, reports that she confronted the forces of Olympias and Polyperchon, wearing Macedonian armour (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 13.560). Whilst it is uncertain whether she was in direct command of the troops, her symbolism echoes the militarism and confidence of her mother. In a world where men won power through battlefield presence, Eurydice fashioned herself as their equal.

Olympias

Born a Molossian princess of Epirus, Olympias secured her place in Macedonian history through ritual power, ruthless intrigue, and the authority of being Alexander the Great’s mother. Marrying Phillip II in ca. 357 BC, Olympias quickly established herself as a formidable presence in the Macedonian court. Ancient authors, especially Plutarch, portray her as steeped in religious mysticism: a devotee to Dionysus, reputed to handle sacred snakes, and skilled at harnessing ritual spectacle to elevate her status. In one particularly poignant episode, Plutarch tells us she was “addicted to the Orphic rites and the orgies of Dionysus ... [and] used to provide the revelling companies with great tame serpents, which would often lift their heads from out the ivy and the mystic winnowing-baskets, or coil themselves about the wands and garlands of the women, thus terrifying the men” (*Alexander* 2.9). Beyond this, Olympias is well remembered for the brutal removal of any who stood in her way. It was

thought she set Pausanias, the man who murdered her husband, to the task of doing so. The removal of Philip was arguably ignited by his taking of a new bride, Cleopatra, and the birth of her infant son. Their fate was to be even worse, with Olympias sending them to their graves by dragging them over a bronze vessel filled with fire (Pausanias, 8.7.7). Even Arrhidaeus, son of Philip and husband to Eurydice, is said to have been poisoned by Olympias which “injured his body and ruined his mind” (Plutarch, *Alexander* 77.4). Olympias’ *modus operandi* with her enemies was not to end there. These stories — half slander, half reverence — show how Olympias blurred the line between queen and priestess, turning piety into political theatre, and was consistently able to bring down any of her or her son’s enemies by whatever means necessary.

With Alexander’s death, Olympias’ power only grew. She returned from Epirus to Macedon at Polyperchon’s invitation in 317 BC to protect the interests of her grandson, the boy king Alexander IV, son of Alexander and his queen Roxanne. She and Polyperchon invaded Macedonia from Epirus while Cassander was campaigning in the Peloponnese (Justin, *Epitome* 14.5.6–9) and convinced Eurydice’s Macedonian army to desert to her. Her arrival transformed the struggle in Macedon, as soldiers and citizens alike deferred to her unmatched dynastic prestige. Where other women were tolerated for their boldness, Olympias was obeyed because she embodied Alexander’s bloodline. Diodorus paints a grim picture of Eurydice’s final days. Captured along with her husband, she was imprisoned, starved of dignity, and finally offered a sword, noose, and hemlock with which to choose her own death. Her husband, who had ruled behind his wife for just over six years, was stabbed and killed by Olympias’ men. This did not seem to slow Eurydice, “who was expressing herself without restraint and declaring that the kingdom belonged to herself rather than to Olympias” (Diodorus, 19.11). The next scene is chilling: Olympias displayed no pity for her rival, deeming her worthy of greater punishment, and Eurydice, undaunted, prayed that her enemy might one day suffer the same fate. According to Diodorus, Eurydice composed herself, prepared her husband’s body for burial, and hanged herself with her girdle (Diodorus, 19.11) — a defiant death befitting a woman who had refused to be humbled. Olympias’ rage did not ebb there, the following months would see her execute the brother of Cassander, overturn graves, and slaughter the 100 most prominent of his Macedonian allies.

Eurydice’s career demonstrates how crises could open unexpected paths for royal women. Where Cynane had won renown through personal combat and military marches, Eurydice asserted authority through assemblies, letters of command, and public appearances in armour. Both mother and daughter were respected by soldiers who recognized their actions were embedded in the martial virtues of Macedon. That recognition could not ultimately save Eurydice from Olympias’ vengeance, but it prolonged her influence

long enough to shape succession politics during one of the most volatile moments of the Wars of the Successors.

Her story also illuminates the double-edged nature of female power in Macedon. On the one hand, Eurydice drew legitimacy from her lineage and from her projection of martial strength, qualities Macedonian troops valued. On the other, her assertiveness provoked hostility among male regents who considered her interventions intolerable. Antipater silenced her at Triparadeisus, Perdiccas had assassinated her mother for less, and Olympias eliminated her as a rival without hesitation. In this sense, Eurydice’s downfall reveals the limits of female authority in a militarized monarchy.

After eliminating Eurydice, Olympias’ hold on the throne did not last long, however, and did not go according to plan. Cassander immediately moved to invade Macedonia and Olympias withdrew to Pydna, taking Roxane and her grandson with her. There, Cassander besieged her and, when he took the city in 316 BC, he ordered her death; according to Justin, her cruelty and bloodthirstiness when she had taken the throne had alienated the Macedonians from her. Cassander’s soldiers, however, balked — they refused to kill the mother of Alexander the Great — and so Cassander had to find her personal enemies to do the killing. Fortunately for him, there were no shortage of those (Justin, *Epitome* 14.6.1–10). According to Justin, in meeting her death, Olympias

“did not shrink from the sword or the blow, or cry out like a woman, but submitted to death like the bravest of men, and suitably to the glory of her ancient race, so that you might have perceived the soul of Alexander in his dying mother. As she was expiring, too, she is said to have settled her hair, and to have covered her feet with her robe, that nothing unseemly might appear about her”

(Justin, *Epitome* 14.6.11–12).

Olympias’ career completes the triad of Macedonian women who thrust themselves into the Wars of the Successors. Cynane embodied martial courage; Eurydice, political audacity; Olympias, dynastic vengeance. Each met a violent death, yet together they demonstrate that in the fractured empire of Alexander the Great, women could seize crowns, command loyalty, and terrify generals. Olympias, the last to fall, proved both the possibilities and the perils of ruling Macedon as a woman. Yet her career should not be dismissed as a brief aberration. The presence of these warrior queens — Cynane, Eurydice, and Olympias — demonstrates that royal women could, under pressure, embody the very virtues celebrated in Macedonian kingship: courage, lineage, and military leadership. All three figures challenged assumptions about the proper roles of women in war and politics, and their memory reminds us that leadership in ancient Macedon could, at times, wear a woman’s face — even one framed by a soldier’s helmet. **AH**

Anneka Rene is a regular contributor to Ancient Warfare and Ancient History magazines.



A relief from the audience hall of the Achaemenid palace at Persepolis. Dated to the fifth century BC, it depicts Sogdians and Indians offering tribute to the Persian King Darius I. The Sogdians were incorporated into the Achaemenid satrapal system, which facilitated long-distance exchange, including trade.

CENTRAL ASIA AND LONG-DISTANCE EXCHANGE

THE KINGDOMS THAT CONNECTED EURASIA

With limited written history, Central Asia seems a mysterious presence in the ancient world, becoming synonymous with the 'Silk Road', often imagined as a network of trade routes traversed by camel caravans laden with all manner of exotic goods. But our surviving data give far more insight into how the 'Silk Road' here really worked: diverse kingdoms and polities on the well-provisioned stage of Central Asia cultivated unprecedented scales of connectivity across pivotal nodes in trans-Eurasian networks over time.

Central Asia lacks indisputable physical geographical boundaries. In antiquity, it coincides with the territories between the Hindu Kush and the Eurasian steppe. Especially pivotal for Eurasian history were the ancient regions of Bactria-Tokharistan, centred on the upper Amu Darya (ancient Oxus), and Sogdiana along the

A painted clay head representing a Bactrian ruler, dated to the third – second century BC. Central Asian states were at the heart of trans-Eurasian interactions, which included trade, gift giving, and loot.

© Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons

By Lauren Morris

Zerafshan and Kashka Darya. These lands constituted a frontier between sedentary and steppe worlds, encompassing diverse landscapes. Alongside substantial capacity for agricultural and pastoral production, significant mineral resources were also found here: gold placer deposits, polymetallic ores, and the ancient world's primary source of lapis lazuli in the Badakhshan mountains.

In antiquity, legends circulated about the wealth of these distant lands, especially Bactria. Tales were told of deep silver mines (Ctesias, *FGH* 688 F 45.26), a land of a thousand cities (Strabo, 15.1.3; Justin, *Epitome* 41.1.8), the river Oxus bringing down lumps of gold (*On Marvellous Things Heard* 46), fields producing gigantic grain (Theophrastus, *History of Plants* 8.4.5), and lands supporting vast populations and horses (Curtius, 7.4.30).

The rich resources of Central Asia shaped the emergence of complex societies long before the historical period. Diverse systems of political and economic organization evolved through layers of interaction, with typically mixed agropastoral economies. Following the collapse of the Bronze Age Oxus Civilization around 1500 BC, the Iron Age saw fragmentation into rural villages, before large, fortified settlements rose again, sug-



A gold twenty-stater of Eucratides, a Greco-Bactrian king, dated to the second century BC.

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An Achaemenid gold scabbard for a short sword, part of the Oxus Treasure, dated to the fifth–fourth century BC.

© Lauren van Zoonen



gesting movement towards new centralization of political and religious power.

Achaemenid foundations

Central Asia appears in written history with the conquests of the Achaemenid Persian Empire in the mid-sixth century BC. The Achaemenids integrated these territories into their satrapal system, with Bactria administered from the capital Bactra, often by a member of the royal family. This system relied on collaboration with local dynasts and elites to extract revenue and mobilize labour (see King, *AH* 56). Satrapies in Central Asia sent tribute to the imperial capitals as well as groups of *kurtaš* for construction projects in the imperial heartland (see Culley, *AH* 50). New administrative tools supported this: Aramaic served as a chancellery language, and the net-



A 'toilet tray' depicting a nomad-styled noble and attendants.

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work of royal roads facilitated movement of officials, goods, and personnel.

Prestige goods flowed, too: horses and garments came to the centre, while silver plate, jewellery, textiles, and weapons reached steppe elites. Such goods might represent gifts or rewards exchanged for military service or marriage alliances, and traders were likely co-opted to facilitate exchange. The wealth of these lands is refracted in the Oxus Treasure, which included rich examples of Achaemenid court art, likely the deposited contents of a temple treasury.

Hellenistic consolidation

Achaemenid imperial infrastructure laid foundations for new developments in Central Asia's Hellenistic age. While Alexander the Great's conquests in Bactria and Sogdiana in 329–327 BC marked the end of the Persian Empire, his successors forged new dynamics: the Seleucids recaptured this territory in the late fourth century BC, and the independent Graeco-Bactrian kingdom seceded in the mid-third century BC, although Sogdiana was lost soon thereafter.

Bactria's new Greco-Macedonian kings established dynastic rule on Hellenistic models, bol-

A Bactrian chlorite weight with a handle, dated to the late third–early second century BC.

© The LA County Museum of Art



stered by settlement and military conquests expanding into the northwestern Indian frontiers (establishing Indo-Greek kingdoms), and secured with fortresses scattered across the landscape. Wealth concentrated among Bactria's ruling elites. To extract it, the former satrapal system was leveraged alongside Greco-Macedonian instruments of state finance: royal coinage, with mints striking gold, silver, and bronze coins on the Attic standard to facilitate expenditure (like payment of soldiers), with bronze coinage slowly spreading among society (see van Regenmortel, *AH* 56). Officials also managed revenue collection and verified legal tender. Although mobile pastoralist groups to the north represented a threat, ties were maintained — one document indicates a

(Top) A view of the archaeological site of Kampyr Tepe, a settlement on the banks of the Oxus River that flourished in the Kushan period.

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(Bottom) The site of ancient Samarkand in Sogdiana.

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A dagger with gold sheath decorated with turquoise, dated to the late first century AD, from the burial of a nomad-styled male noble at Tillya Tepa.

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payment in coin to a group of Scythians, perhaps hired as mercenaries.

Tribute and booty from conquered territories, especially at the frontiers of India, were a significant source of imperial finance. By the second century BC, Gandhāran urbanism was well-developed, connected to cities of the Gangetic plains via the *uttarāpatha* (northward route), bolstered by Mauryan royal road infrastructure. Trade and diplomatic connections deepened, as did ties with Indian polities. An ambassador of the Indo-Greek king Antialcidas set up a pillar at Vidisha around 113 BC, and in the mid first century AD the *Periplus* mentions old drachms of the Indo-Greek kings Apollodotus and Menander still circulating at the market in Barygaza (47).

As wealth concentrated in Bactria, a new royal capital was developed at Ai Khanoum, with a monumental palace, gymnasium, theatre, and temples. The palace treasury included unworked lapis, and treasures from afar — an inlaid ivory throne from India, olive oil, incense, and cinnamon — alongside administrative records documenting revenue in both drachms and Indian *kārsāpanas*. The regional sanctuary of the Oxus Temple at Takht-i Sangin also received significant patronage, indicated by sculptures of royal donors.

Sogdiana followed a different trajectory, where we hear of nomadic groups active by the later third century BC. Yet the fiscal legacy of Hellenistic rule persisted in silver imitation coinages struck by authorities in Kesh (of Alexander the Great), Samarkand (of Antiochus I),

and Bukhara (of Euthydemus I), presumably for larger-scale transactions of wealth.

Nomadic transformations

Transregional geopolitical forces reshaped Central Asia in the second century BC. The Xiongnu Empire expanded across the steppe, to Han concern, driving other nomadic groups into new lands, including Bactria and Sogdiana. Hellenistic rule in Bactria ended in the mid-second century BC, resulting from these pressures alongside internal and regional conflict, including with the Parthians. Here, around 128 BC, the Han envoy Zhang Qian, sent by Emperor Wu seeking an alliance against the Xiongnu, met the Da Yuezhi. Though unsuccessful, he conveyed new information about Central Asia's peoples and resources, recorded in Han chronicles (*Shiji* 123).

Bactria's nomadic conquerors transformed rather than erased political and economic systems they encountered. Zhang Qian described Bactria (Daxia) as militarily weak but commercially active, with centres ruled by petty chiefs, noting also that bamboo and cloth from Sichuan were available in Bactra (Lanshi) via merchants in India. He also described Kangju, a 'mobile state' between Da Yuezhi and Dayuan (Ferghana).

Over the next two centuries, the Yuezhi divided their new territory, eventually known as Tokharistan, among five *yabgus* (sub-rulers), one being the Kushan. 'Lesser kings' were likewise established in Sogdiana under the expanding Kangju, operating as a confederacy under a king in the middle Syr Darya. Imitation Hellenistic coinages continued in Sogdiana and Bactria (now of Eucratides, Demetrius, and Heliocles), though without bronze issues, suggesting a monetary economy restricted in scope. Bactrian urban centres slowly expanded or formed (such as Termez), and existing Sogdian centres grew, though society remained largely rural.

Central Asia remained in Han sights. Kangju, its subordinate kings, and Yuezhi *yabgus* sent envoys to the Han, recorded at Xuanquan postal station. Prestige gifts were exchanged — one case documents camels sent from Kangju and Suxie (Samarkand).

An altar topped by a statuette of Marsyas playing the *aulos*. Dated to the second century BC, it is dedicated to the god of the Oxus by Atrosokēs in the Oxus Temple in Takht-i Sangin. The altar reflects the cultural blending of Central Asia, since Marsyas is a Greek god, while Atrosokēs is a Bactrian name.

© Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons

A view of a road from Samarkand to Shahrīsabz, the site of ancient Kish, in the Hissar Mountains. Central Asia was linked into the Achaemenid royal road network, facilitating transport across the empire.

© AlexeiA / Shutterstock



A statuette of a kneeling warrior from Xinjiang, dated to the fifth to third centuries BC, in a Greco-Bactrian style.

© James Glazier / Flickr





Diplomatic ties, marriage alliances, and warfare also connected Kangju with the Xiongnu and Han. Steppe connections persisted, seen in burial practices and grave goods showing links across Sarmatian and Xiongnu spheres. Gifts flowed both ways — embroidered tapestries depicting Yuezhi elites appear in first century AD Xiongnu royal tombs at Noyon Uul.

Kushan horizons

The mid-first century AD saw new political and economic pivots with the rise of the Kushan Empire. The Kushan *yabgu* Kujula Kadphises captured Bactria and Gandhāra; his successors claimed northwestern India to Mathura. Early Kushan elite orientation towards the steppe persisted — Kujula styled himself in a nomadic vocabulary of power, and the burials at Tillya Tepa contained spectacular steppe-affiliated gold ornaments alongside prestige goods from across Eurasia: Chinese mir-

rors, Roman glass, an Indian ivory comb, and an imitation Parthian coin.

The Kushans soon reframed themselves as Iranian kings, drawing on the iconography of their Arsacid peers alongside Indian and Hellenistic traditions. The king likely ruled from a mobile court, surrounded by high officials like *karalrangs*, tasked with provincial governance and infrastructure projects — including the sanctuary of Surkh Kotal, raised in Kanishka's name, honouring a Bactrian-Iranian Zoroastrian pantheon. Beneath this imperial stratum, local elites likely managed the extraction of revenue and manpower. Booty from conquests, like Kanishka's Indian campaigns, provided irregular but significant income.

While little suggests imperial interest in everyday administration and trade, the Kushans reinvigorated their monetary system with wide-reaching impacts. The Soter Megas copper coinage was injected into Bactria and Gandhāra's debased silver-copper system, and a gold-copper system was established under Wima Kadphises. Kushan copper circulated widely, even among rural communities and sometimes beyond imperial frontiers, dem-

Many networks spanned Central Asia, connecting the Mediterranean world with China while facilitating trade and communication. Various settlements were core hubs of these networks. At these locations, goods brought by merchants, diplomats, and travelling warriors from Rome, Persia, and China could be found.

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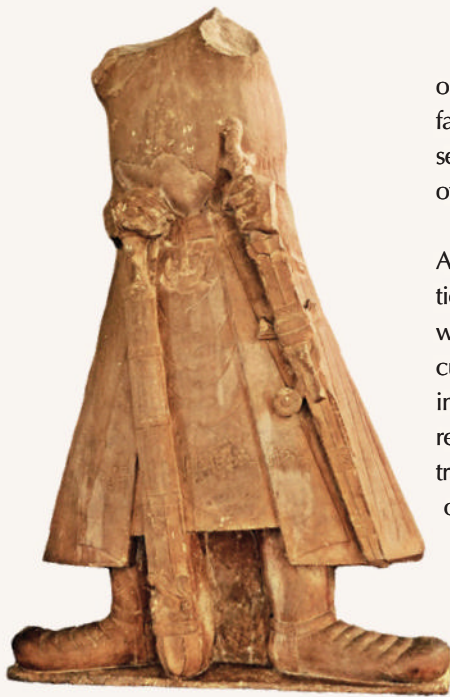
The stone column known as the Heliodorus Pillar, erected by an ambassador of the Indo-Greek king Antialcidas in ca. 113 BC at Vidisha.

© Dilipkumarf1977 / Wikimedia Commons

A fragment of a wool tapestry found in Sampul, in the Tarim Basin, which is dated to the second or first century BC. The upper decorative register depicts a centaur, while a nomad-styled warrior is depicted in the main register.

© Ismoon / Wikimedia Commons





A headless statue of the Kushan king Kanishka, dated to the second century AD, from Mathura in India. The Kushan Empire emerged from Bactria and expanded to northern India, adopting earlier traditions of power.

© Biswarup Ganguly / Wikimedia Commons

onstrating how successfully this instrument facilitated new scales of exchange. Gold dinars served for larger transactions, like disbursement of largesse, or long-distance transfers of wealth.

Kushan Bactria witnessed ancient Central Asia's densest extent of urbanism and irrigation systems, coinciding with growing surplus wealth among long elites and urbanites. They cultivated specific consumption preferences for imported goods across Eurasia, shaped by the region's cultural history. Their capacity to drive trade is reflected in the hundreds of fabulous objects deposited at the urban site of Begram (Kapisa, just beyond Bactria's southern frontier), likely within a former temple, including luxurious Roman glassware, articles of Indian ivory furniture, and Han lacquerware. Although Bactria in the *Periplus* is a hazy entity, lying beyond the ports of Barbarikon and Barygaza, Central Asian consumption and trade clearly fed into intensifying maritime networks: at Barbarikon one could obtain lapis lazuli and Chinese pelts, and sell glassware and silverware (36); Chinese silk products were also sent via Bactria to Barygaza (64). Bactrian merchants were likely organized into kinship-based associations for better management of resources and logistics. Bactrians

also travelled across the Indian Ocean — a certain Humyag inscribed his name on a cave wall at Hoq on Socotra. 'Yuezhi' merchants are even mentioned exporting horses by ship to a Southeast Asian king (*Taping yulan* 359.1650a), although such trade could also have been managed by mobile pastoralists.

Buddhist institutions also emerged as significant economic actors in Gandhāra during this period, becoming implanted in Bactria through monasteries near urban centres, its proponents also moving east through the Tarim Basin into China. Local elite patronage bolstered these institutions, perhaps also attracting craftspeople from the distant West for producing donative sculptures.

The Kushan dynasty remained diplomatically entangled with their neighbours; envoys, tributary gifts, an attempt at marriage alliance, and military tussles were exchanged with the Han and their agents in the Tarim Basin.



A Gandharan stucco head of Buddha, dated to fourth century AD, reflecting artistic influences from other ancient cultures.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Roman glass in East Asia

The Silk Road is drawn on many maps of the ancient world — but does this explain how goods moved across vast distances? The fragmented biography of a curious glass bowl reveals what we miss when we reduce exchange networks to lines on a map.

Sherds of a purple and white ribbed mosaic glass bowl were excavated in 1980 from a robbed tomb in eastern China. A gold seal recovered near the tomb suggests its main occupant was Liu Jing, the prince of Guangling, who attempted to overthrow his brother, Emperor Ming of the Eastern Han Empire. Glass bowls of this type are a distinctive output of glassworking in the Roman Empire. This bowl's raw glass bears a typical soda-lime-silica composition with natron flux, formed likely in Levantine or Egyptian primary workshops, and then coloured. The glass was then reworked in a specialized secondary workshop, likely in Italy or Egypt.

It is unclear how this bowl made it to China. Sherds of diverse Roman glass, including mosaic, have been found at Indian Ocean port sites known from the *Periplus*, notably Pattanam/Muziris, and beyond into the Malay Peninsula, though not much further. Comparable bowls were imported overland for consumption in Central Asia, from where they could have also been redistributed. For example, a comparable contemporary bowl, albeit of different manufacture, was found in a burial at the Gol Mod 2 Xiongnu royal necropolis.

The gaps in this object's fragmentary biography, and the questions they raise, are not easily resolved by referring to Silk Roads of any variety (overland, maritime, or steppe) or speaking of market or gift exchange alone. Travelling from a specialized Roman glass workshop to the tomb of an ambitious Han prince, this bowl passed through the intersecting economies of many still-obscure polities and peoples between Rome and China.



Two Roman blown glass bowls, one blue and the other burgundy, each with white trails, dated to the first century AD. There is evidence of comparable bowls as far away as central China, such as the fragments of a purple cast bowl from a princely Han tomb in Gaungling, dated to the first century AD, and a blue ribbed Roman glass bowl from a burial at the Xiongnu royal necropolis at Gol Mod 2.

© The J. Paul Getty Museum



A Chinese bronze mirror, dated to the first century AD, which was discovered in a nomad-styled female noble's grave at Koktepa in Uzbekistan.

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Sogdian lords and merchants

The first century AD also saw significant change in Sogdiana. Authorities under the Kangju minted silver coinage depicting rulers styled as nomads, with burgeoning copper coinage production in Bukhara and Nakhshab. Yet by the second century AD, central Kangju authority was dissolving, with power dispersed among the lords of Sogdian centres. Wealth remained concentrated among such elites, with fewer cities than in Bactria driving the economy. Still, prestige goods found in burials reached them from vast distances such as the Chinese nephrite scabbard slide at Orlat, or the Han bronze mirror, Sarmatian-type bone comb, and Syro-Palestinian glass beads at Koktepa. These might have arrived in various ways — gift exchange, booty, or trade. Kangju also received small animal pelts as tribute from Yan in the northern forest-steppe, which could have been redistributed among elites, or converted to other commodities by co-opted merchants.

Long-distance terrestrial trade was risky and expensive, probably undertaken by few mercantile organizations in elite orbits. Eventually, and perhaps motivated by decline in the Zerafshan in the second century AD, such organizations accumulated sufficient capital and knowledge to develop communities with traders operating between Kroraina and China. The Sogdian Ancient Letters, found near Dunhuang, vividly illustrate this network by the early fourth century AD, which maintained ties with Samarkand and could remit wealth through high-value commodities like musk.

Yet significant pivots occurred in Bactria and Sogdiana in the third and fourth centuries AD. Kushan rule disintegrated; new Kushano-Sasanian rulers claimed Bactria, and parts of Sogdiana entered the Sasanian sphere. Soon after, steppe peoples of unclear origins, such as the Kidarites and Hephthalites, enter the picture. As Bactria became a prolonged battleground, its political structure fragmented and cities contracted. Sogdiana, however, saw increased settlement, agricultural extension, new settlers from north and south, urban growth, and new wealth from trade driving a new regional phase of cultural development.

Connectivity reframed

Trans-Eurasian networks were driven less by camel caravans than by diverse polities on Cen-



tral Asia's well-provisioned stage. Achaemenid satraps, Hellenistic kings, nomadic elites, and Kushan emperors transformed inherited political and economic systems to extract wealth and extend circuits of exchange. Diplomatic ties, military entanglements, and elite consumption preferences linked Central Asia's polities to the north, south, east, and west, forging new scales of connectivity between nodes in the heart of Eurasia. **AH**

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An Indian ivory plaque, possibly from a chair or throne, and a glass beaker decorated with the abduction of Europa. Both are from the Begram Hoard, and date to the first or second century AD.

© Merryjack (ivory) and Carole Raddato (cup) / Flickr

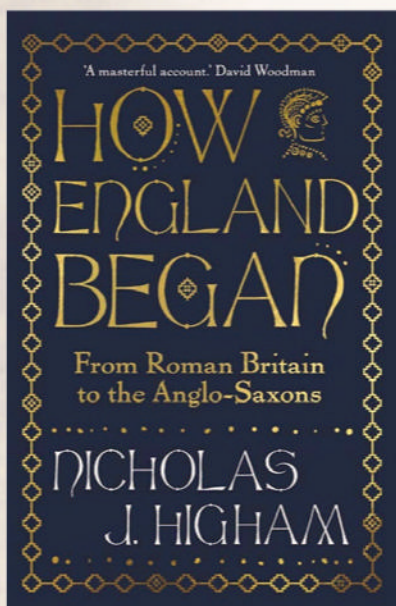


(Top) A reconstruction of a fortified Xiongnu city at the Ivolga archaeological site, founded in the third century BC and destroyed in the first century BC.

© KoizumiBS / Wikimedia Commons

(Bottom) A reconstruction of the king's tomb in kurgan 31 at the Noin-Ula burial site in Mongolia. The Xiongnu were a key actors in trans-Eurasian connections.

© Bernard Gagnon / Wikimedia Commons



How England Began
From Roman Britain to the Anglo-Saxons

By Nicholas J. Higham
ISBN: 978-0300254921
Yale University Press (2026) – £25.00
yalebooks.yale.edu

Having recently published a work on the same period myself (*Finis Britanniae*, Amberley Publishing, 2024), this work leapt out at me. Higham, former Professor of Early Medieval and Landscape History at the University of Manchester, covers the period from ca. AD 400–750 in 267 pages, discussing the end of Roman Britain and the emergence of Anglo-Saxon England. The book is, however, 350 pages long and a large chunk is devoted to notes (pp. 269–349) and the extensive bibliography (pp. 315–350), which is all you could every wish for. While Higham wrote on the same subject 30 years ago this is “a fresh look at the entire subject” (p. vi), taking advantage of new research and discoveries. Commendably, he admits that he will distance himself from arguments he made earlier in his career when he was now clearly in error. He also notes that there are a multitude of disciplines to incorporate into a new examination of the material, some of which did not even exist

when he first wrote on the subject. His approach is chronological, and he combines as many disciplines as he can. He deals with late Roman Britain in Chapters 1 and 2, the imperial collapse in Chapter 3, and then moves on to an examination of Gildas (our only surviving near-contemporary witness) in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 6 looks at the continental invaders themselves, before looking at the Christian reclaiming of the island from 597 onwards in Chapter 7, and then the transition from Roman Britain to England more widely in Chapter 8.

Although he has recently penned a work on Arthur, some readers will be disappointed that, here, Higham maintains that “we need to resist the temptation to view the Britain of the late fifth and early sixth centuries through an Arthurian lens” (p. 8). He maintains that “we should have no truck with any ‘Age of Arthur’” and that Arthur remains (and always was) a figure of medieval storytelling. Instead, the author intends to “reclaim for the historian and their written sources a role” (p. 15) in the transition of late Roman Britain into Anglo-Saxon England.

Higham explores the expanding Anglo-Saxon invasions of England (from the south and east) and the shrinking Brittonic (that is native) populations in the west and north, exemplified by Wales, Cornwall, and tracts of Scotland. He is also aware that terms like England and English are loaded, but he traces its roots from the Anglii of Tacitus into the more familiar even though that is fraught with preconceptions and troubles. There are many terms with similar issues of modern loading. Terms like Britain, Germanic, Celtic, and Anglo-Saxon all have their problems.

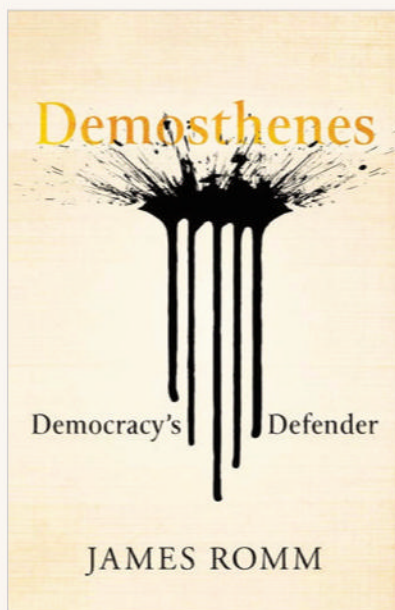
Language, both the emergence of English (that is, those who spoke the Germanic-based language which eventually became English) and the shrinking of the Brittonic (or Brythonic) languages are important in

Higham’s discussion. Place-names play their part, too, as does the framing of Anglo-Saxon expansion vis-à-vis religion (especially since several of our sources, such as the accounts of Bede and Gildas, framed their own accounts in such a manner). I like that Higham considers that the end of Brittonic (Welsh) resistance to conquest by the ‘English’ lasted until Llywelyn ap Gruffudd in 1282 — more than 700 years of resistance to conquest.

According to Higham, there is a marked absence of evidence for mass immigration to Britain. However, this is slightly misleading. Even using his own arguments, there was, in fact, an abundance of immigration to Britain, although never in single movements — more like a steady and regular flow, both before and after the Roman Empire fell. He is also right, however, that much of the local population appears to have remained, rather than being wholly displaced by Germanic incomers. For example, Penda, the king of Mercia, is thought to come from a family with British and Christian roots (p. 247), and early English law codes contain provisions for unfree dependents, likely members of the indigenous peasantry (p. 256). While most scholars hold nuanced views combining elements of migration and acculturation hypotheses, Higham observes that there is still a view which maintains that Britain remained largely indigenous, untainted by immigrants. Such a view is problematic and represents an ideology-driven version of history which is misguided at best and, at worst, destructive. Indeed, this idea flies in the face of the evidence. Unfortunately, such an approach to various nations’ histories is on the rise again today.

There is much to fascinate here and, although the reader might not agree with every conclusion, there is a great deal to mull over. **AH**

– Murray Dahm



Demosthenes
Democracy's Defender

By James Romm
ISBN: 978-0300269383
Yale University Press (2025) – £18.99
yalebooks.yale.edu

The Athenian orator and politician Demosthenes can rightfully be listed alongside Themistocles and Pericles as the most famous politicians of Classical Athens. His nearly life-long resistance to the rise of Philip II, king of Macedon and father of Alexander the Great, has ensured his permanent appearance in history books about ancient Greece. However, despite his fame and importance, he is rarely the focus of history books orientated towards the general reader. James Romm's *Demosthenes: Democracy's Defender* shines a much-deserved light upon the life of one of ancient Greece's most impactful politicians.

Unlike most biographies of ancient figures, which tend to rely on contextual information to fill the gaps in their subjects' lives, the surviving works of Demosthenes, as well as those of his political opponents, provide valuable contemporary information with which to reconstruct Demosthenes' life. In doing so, Romm vividly reconstructs the

cutthroat world of fourth-century Athenian politics, where "slandering one's opponents with wild exaggerations or outright lies was the quickest route to success" (p. 43), liberally quoting from the surviving speeches of Demosthenes, Aeschines, and their friends and enemies. Furthermore, Romm brings a great deal of pathos to Demosthenes' life, especially his later years, which are often omitted from more general histories of the period, since Demosthenes is no longer at the centre of political developments. Thus, we see the full course of Demosthenes' life and career, from the plucky young politician to the superior statesman and, finally, the desperate exile.

However, despite noting how the forensic testimonies of Demosthenes, Aeschines, and their contemporaries needed no basis in verifiable facts, Romm does not offer any substantial discussion as to how historians are meant to discern reliable information from the surviving speeches. For instance, Romm notes how Demosthenes and Aeschines' claims about each other are "our best source for the two men's careers, yet those speeches are riddled with monstrous untruths" (p. 44). What's more, Plutarch's biography of Demosthenes, the most-cited source in the book besides the speeches of Demosthenes and Aeschines, similarly, does not receive any critical attention. Plutarch's biography of Demosthenes, written nearly four centuries after Demosthenes' death, is based on any written or oral sources he could find (*Demosthenes* 31.7), and, according to Romm, he "tried to see the best in his subject and reject criticism" (p. 103) and "selected the versions he found most dramatic" from his contradictory sources (p. 163). Why, then, should we trust any element of Plutarch's biography? Romm does not say.

There is also a similar lack of elaboration when it comes to the historical context of Demosthenes' life and career. Romm tells us that "Dem-

osthenes lived in diminished times" (p. 12), when "the balance of power in Greece had become volatile and unstable" (p. 17), but Romm does not provide much background to this period. The Battle of Mantinea is referenced once or twice, as are Athens' reduced fortunes compared to the fifth century BC, but the reader would not know, from this book alone, about the Spartan and Theban hegemonies nor about Athens' decline and attempted rise since the Peloponnesian War. Additionally, Athens' long relationship with Macedon in the fifth century BC, especially with kings Perdiccas II and Archelaus, goes unmentioned, even though it may have explained Athens' initial ambivalence to the rise of Philip II. There is clearly an assumption that the reader will have a substantial understanding of fourth-century-BC Greece. At times, it sometimes feels as though Romm's own understanding of aspects of this period is lacking. Most notably, when discussing why Sparta remained apart from the League of Corinth, Romm notes that the Spartans correctly deemed that "Philip would not extend himself so far south or challenge such a formidable fighting force" (p. 94). Except, Philip did invade Laconia, drastically reducing Sparta's already reduced territory, in 338 BC (Polybius, 9.28). This lack of proper grounding in a historical context undermines the effectiveness of this biography. Demosthenes' career would appear all the more impressive if we better knew what he was struggling against.

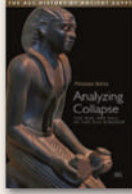
Ultimately, this is an accessible, engaging biography hampered by its brevity and narrow focus. Had Romm expanded his discussion to give more emphasis to the wider world, both before and during Demosthenes' career, this would have been an excellent work. As it stands, it is still a good book, albeit one which may leave readers less familiar with ancient Greek history somewhat lost. **AH**

– Owain Williams

READINGS: AN UNCERTAIN AGE What do we really know about the First Intermediate Period in Egypt? Here are some more books and articles to check out.

ANALYZING COLLAPSE: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE OLD KINGDOM

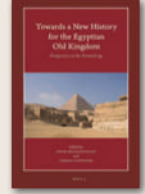
By Miroslav Bárta
Cairo University Press, 2019
ISBN: 978-9774168383



Taking on a long-term perspective, this book discusses the development and evolution of Egypt during the Old Kingdom, such as the growth of the bureaucracy, and, as the title suggests, how these developments ultimately led to the collapse of the Old Kingdom, placing the First Intermediate Period in its proper historical context.

TOWARDS A NEW HISTORY FOR THE EGYPTIAN OLD KINGDOM

By Peter Der Manuelian and
Thomas Schneider
Brill, 2015
ISBN: 978-9004301887



Collecting articles by academic historians and archaeologists, this book offers a reconsideration of the Egyptian Old Kingdom, moving away from a traditional focus on its most famous monuments, and instead detailing social structure and economic organization of the period, which, in turn, reveals much about the First Intermediate Period.

THE MIDDLE KINGDOM OF ANCIENT EGYPT: HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY AND SOCIETY

By Wolfram Grajetzki
Bloomsbury, 2024
ISBN: 978-1350455542



Wolfram Grajetzki, after offering an overview of the history of Egypt from the end of the Old Kingdom to the beginning of the Middle Kingdom, here examines the culture and society of Egypt in the early second millennium, much of which developed during the First Intermediate Period, drawing on recent archaeological studies.

THE RISE AND FALL OF ANCIENT EGYPT

By Toby Wilkinson
Bloomsbury, 2011
ISBN: 978-1408810026



Covering the 3000-year span of ancient Egyptian history, from the Early Dynastic Period to the reign of Cleopatra VII, this book places the First Intermediate Period within the wider history of ancient Egypt, allowing readers to recognize trends within Egyptian history and to determine how typical or otherwise the decline of the Old Kingdom was.

Other books and articles

A land divided (Wojciech Ejsmond)

- Burn, J. W. *A River in "Drought"? Environment and Cultural Ramifications of Old Kingdom Climate Change*. Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2021.
- Schneider, Thomas. "What Is the Past but a Once Material Existence Now Silenced?" *The First Intermediate Period from an Epistemological Perspective*. In *The Late Third Millennium in the Ancient Near East: Chronology, C14 and Climate Change*, edited by F. Höflmayer, 311–322. Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2017.
- Ejsmond, W. "The Nubian mercenaries of Gebelein during the First Intermediate Period in the light of recent field research." *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 14 (2017): 11–13.

A time of change & misunderstanding (Juan Carlos Moreno García)

- Moreno García, J.C. "Egypt in the First Intermediate Period." In *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East*. Vol. 2: From the End of the Third Millennium BC to the Fall of Babylon, edited by K. Radner, N. Moeller & D. T. Potts, 47–120. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
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Ancient Nubia and the Kingdom of Kerma (Dr Simone Petacchi)

- Bonnet, C. *The Black Kingdom of Nile*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2019.
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A tale of decline and renewal (Marco Daniele)

- Lehner, M. *The Complete Pyramids: Solving the Ancient Mysteries*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2008.
- Rosalie, D.A. *The Pyramid Builders of Ancient Egypt: A Modern Investigation of Pharaoh's Workforce*. London: Taylor and Francis: 2002.
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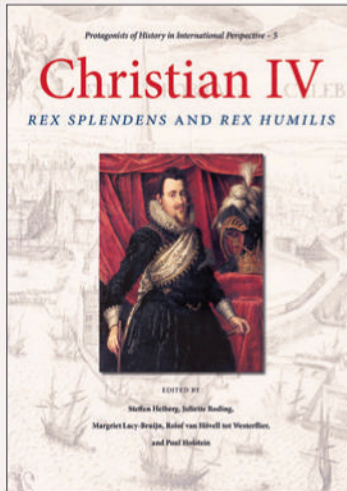
Remembering the First Intermediate Period (Ellen Morris)

- Bárta, M. "Long term or short term? Climate change and the demise of the Old Kingdom." In *Climate and ancient societies*, edited by S. Kerner, R.J. Dann, and P. Bangsgaard. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2015: 177–195.
- Moeller, N. "The First Intermediate Period: a time of famine and climate change?" *Ägypten und Levante* 15 (2005): 153–167.
- Morris, E. "Reassessing the value of autobiographical inscriptions from the First Intermediate Period and "pessimistic literature" for understanding Egypt's social history." In *Ancient Egyptian Society: Challenging Assumptions, Exploring Approaches*, edited by D. Candelora, N. Ben-Marzouk, and K. Cooney, 265–278. New York: Routledge, 2023.



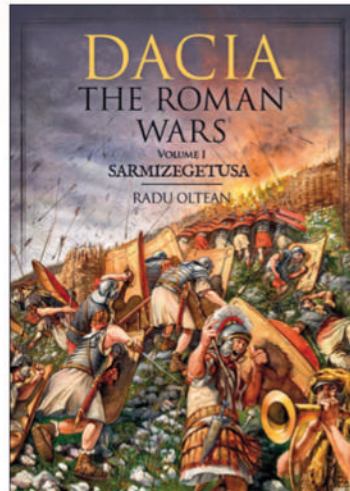
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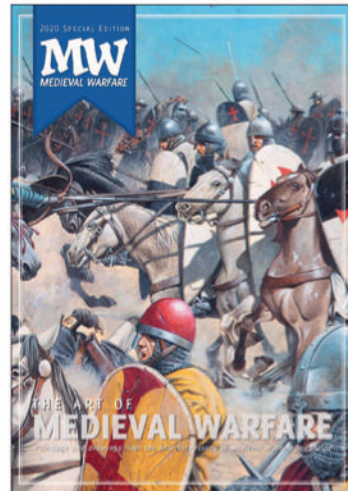
CHRISTIAN IV: REX SPLENDENS AND REX HUMILIS

Edited by Steffen Heiberg, Juliette Roding, Margriet Lacy-Bruijn et al.
ISBN: 978-94-90258-22-1
424-page hardback, full-color



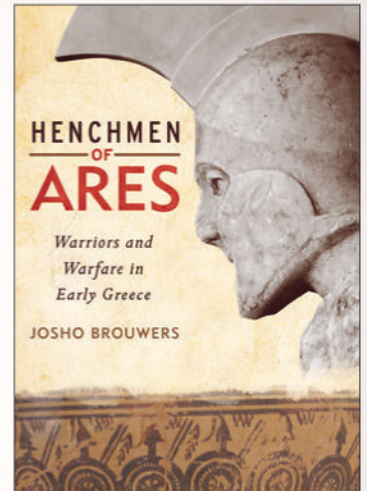
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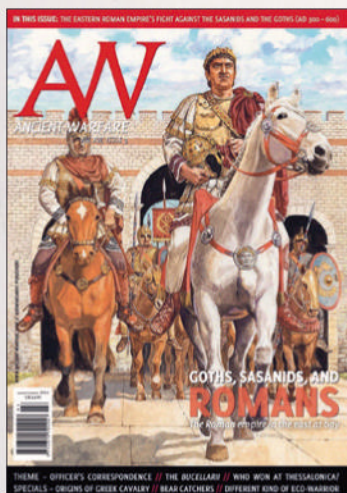
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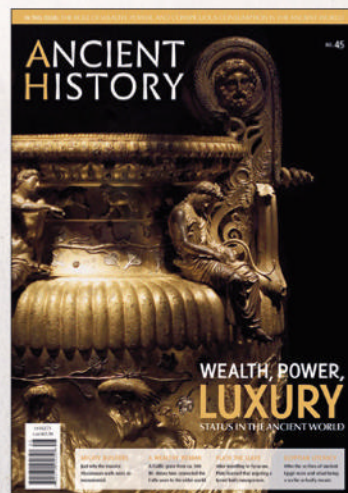
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