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A Critical Archaeology of Ancient Egypt: Grass-roots, Gender, and Decolonisation. An Interview with Richard Bussmann

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Richard Bussmann, Professor of Egyptology at the University of Cologne, recently published the book *The Archaeology of Pharaonic Egypt: Society and Culture, 2700–1700 BC* (2023, Cambridge University Press), which places people at the centre of an analysis of the so-called “Pyramid Age” of Ancient Egypt. The book focusses on life “in the shadow of the pyramids” by exploring aspects of daily life (and death) as well as social interactions beyond the traditional Egyptological focus on royal and elite spheres. Bussmann examines cross-cultural themes such as urbanism, materiality, non-elite culture, political and religious practice, gender roles, and perceptions of the body. As a comparative approach to ancient societies and as a study drawing heavily on anthropological and theoretical concepts, the book raised the interest of the FKA Editorial Board. To allow us and the author to critically reflect on some of the issues raised in our discussion, we took the opportunity to pose a set of questions to Richard Bussmann, which he kindly answered.

Editorial Collective of Forum Kritische Archäologie (FKA): *Tell us briefly about your new book The Archaeology of Pharaonic Egypt. What are the main themes?*

Richard Bussmann (RB): The book appeared in the Cambridge World Archaeology Series and, as other books in the series, is designed to draw a portrayal of ancient Egyptian society from a comparative perspective. Norman Yoffee, the editor of the series, asked me, “What has Egyptology to bring to the table?”, and so I was trying to think broadly and look at ancient Egypt and Egyptology from a distance. I asked myself what I would wish to learn about other early complex societies and tried to come up with an answer for ancient Egypt.

I address themes typically discussed in the context of early complex societies, such as the rise and development of urbanism, funerary culture and temple ritual, sacred kingship, and the state, but I also engage with topics in interpretive archaeology, including gender, the body, and marginalized social groups. I have been surprised how often it was necessary to go back to the essentials that I thought were self-evident but turned out to yield a great deal of interpretive potential when exposed to explicit reasoning. For instance, one would assume that there are many discussions of how to interpret Egyptian funerary culture given the enormous wealth of tombs recorded from ancient Egypt but, with the usual exceptions, the complexity of the material seems to have prevented the definition of interpretive models. A result of this was that during the writing process I became interested in identifying such models in Egyptology and how these could be developed to advance interpretation.

The time span covered in the book is the approximately one thousand years from the consolidation of the ancient Egyptian “state” in the early Old Kingdom by 2700 BC to the end of the Middle Kingdom by 1700 BC, broadly the Early and Middle Bronze Age. Many different stories can be told about this period, and mine is written with an emphasis placed on local contexts and material culture, while written and visual sources that reflect central concerns are also included.

FKA: *You define your new book as an “archaeology of people”. What exactly do you mean by this term, and how does your book differ from other syntheses of Ancient Egyptian history? What other archaeological disciplines and theoretical concepts have inspired you?*

RB: There are a range of good historical overviews, handbooks, and introductions to ancient Egypt but rather few syntheses that have an explicit agenda and encourage engagement with theoretical debates. I am interested in how human beings in ancient Egypt accommodated their lives in response to the environment, social order, and

ideational concepts. Settlement archaeologists, for example, have long tended to describe material arrangements in excavated settlements, define typologies of settlements, and distil social structures and institutional arrangements from the organisation of towns. All this is useful, but an archaeology of people would ask who the inhabitants were, how people were related to each other in this built environment, what a female experience of settlement life was, or what privacy means. This type of approach has been pioneered by Barry Kemp in his seminal *Ancient Egypt: anatomy of a civilization* (1989 [2006, 2018]). I have used Kemp's book widely and developed further discussions that he has initiated, for example of great and little traditions and urban growth. I also tackle themes not addressed by Kemp, such as how to approach funerary culture. Another difference is that I argue my positions more explicitly than Kemp does in the light of comparative discussions.

An archaeology of people differs from writing the intellectual history of ancient Egypt. I would see Jan Assmann in this field as the biggest synthesiser for Egyptology, specifically his works of the 1980s and 1990s (1984, 1990, 1992, 1996). Assmann's work is admirably broad and farsighted, but people and society almost appear as by-products of, or at best as an historical stage for, ideas to unfold rather than as their producers and consumers with specific identities. As others have observed, his way of thinking is inspired by structuralism, with its tendency to abstraction and defining key principles, quite different from analysing the complexity, denseness and incommensurability that people experience in their daily lives.

That said I would not draw a sharp line between such different perspectives since abstract phenomena, for instance royal ideology that we study through texts, images, and monuments, is also part of the human experience. The question is how to bring these approaches into a productive dialogue. The work of John Baines (2007, 2013) offers routes into such a conversation, as he explores elite culture as a context of "real people" interacting and using their resources strategically in communication and display rather than just fulfilling cultural norms. The archaeology of people – and this is another dimension of the term – looks at the bottom of the social hierarchy, so I understand "people" as relating to something like "common life", "ordinary population", "low-ranking social groups".

On the level of theory, an archaeology of people treats the past as a human business. Some archaeologists might criticise this as anthropocentric. Posthumanism offers fertile ground for critical thinking and establishes a welcome bridge from material culture to philosophy, but my book looks at the various social dispositions and relationships, the behaviour of people in specific historical situations, and at changes of society through time as reflected in the empirical evidence, and these are questions that require a focus on human beings. I believe that there is scope for developing discussions of materiality, which is more than describing the physical remains of society, in Egyptology. Someone should write a book about it.

I have drawn on a variety of theoretical strands from social anthropology and cultural history. Theories of practice have inspired the book, for example by interrogating the extent to which activities observed in the material record correspond to, were informed by, and changed ideas expressed in texts and images, for which I would refer to the works of the sociologists Anthony Giddens (duality of structure) and Pierre Bourdieu (habitus) and the cultural historian Roger Chartier (representations and practices). Approaches to microhistory have been adopted, whether implicitly or with references to theory, by many Egyptologists, and I have used these studies, yet emphasising the importance of linking small-scale contextual analyses back to higher social orders and formalised ideology. Post-colonial theory has recently been embraced by several Egyptologists, predominantly for modelling Egypt's interaction with her neighbours, but it has also great potential for cultural theory "within" Egypt whenever asymmetrical power relationships between dominant and subaltern groups are a key parameter in the analysis.

FKA: *What is an approach "at the grass-roots level"? And what are its advantages and challenges for the study of ancient cultures?*

RB: Grass-roots means to understand how social complexity is rooted in the fabric of the entire society. I use it to confront "civilisation", a term that is criticised for its normative underpinnings and focuses attention on the political, economic, and ideological centre of past societies. The advantage of grass-roots is that it asks for a holistic picture of ancient Egyptian society and might help explain why many early complex societies were fairly resilient, despite the fragility and periodic collapse of their centres. Civilisation is not just central ideology imposed on society but developed dynamically as grass-roots concepts travelled up the social ladder, were made exclusive, and were then re-appropriated by the wider population. Such processes are easier to advocate theoretically than to demonstrate empirically, but I think that it is worth trying to trace these exchange mechanisms.

There is also an intellectual challenge. Social organisation and cultural orientations at grass-roots level are less explicit than elite culture and difficult to identify with academic glasses that are trained in interpreting images, texts, and monuments. These three types of sources exhibit a degree of intertextuality in the sense that they relate to each other, and Assmann used the term “monumental discourse” to describe this “high cultural complex”. By contrast, a simple tomb of an ordinary individual finds no explanation in a text or an image, so we tend to define it by the absence of traits in the better studied “elite culture”. Simply put, from this perspective, only the elite had a culture whereas the non-elite were culture-less. This position is hardly bearable ethically and contradicts the fact that even in low-status contexts there are re-current patterns, just the question is how to explain them adequately. A misconception is that what we term, again for the lack of a better expression, the elite and the non-elite are clearly distinguished social groups, each with discrete bodies of practices and ideas. Rather, these are nested and studying ancient Egypt with this in mind sheds fresh light also on alleged elite concepts.

FKA: *Your book traces the transformations of ancient Egyptian society during the Old and Middle Kingdom, from around 2700 to 1700 BCE – a period that has been called “the Pyramid Age” after its most monumental and enduring material remains. Is the definition of a historiographical era based on royal monuments compatible with a “bottom-up approach”?*

RB: Bottom-up approaches are closely related to investigating grass-roots as they foreground groups at the “bottom” of the social hierarchy, but they raise attention to the importance of scaling social analysis, from local worlds to central milieux and back, and imply a critique of prevailing top-down analyses that tend to take central concerns too readily as reflecting the views of all in a society. It is true that bottom-up approaches may lean towards anthropological constants and the *longue durée*, but understanding how local life relates to changes in the centre remains an important task if we wish to understand the “bottom” of a society, to invoke Braudel’s idea of total history. The term “pyramid age” is meant to express a relatedness of the Old and Middle Kingdoms embodied by the continued use of pyramids as the form of the royal tomb. One of the narratives that ties the two periods together concerns the initial divergence (in the Old Kingdom) and subsequent rapprochement (First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom) of local and central milieux in this period. In the period that follows, the New Kingdom (1550–1071 BC), the attention in the research literature is placed on other types of questions as Egypt turned into an empire. This, too, has impacted local communities, for instance by the influx of prisoners of war.

Perhaps we should also see the pyramids – we often think just of the Fourth Dynasty giants of Dahshur and Giza rather than the more human-scale monuments of later periods – as being embedded in the lives of people including those of low rank who interacted with the pyramids daily and sometimes settled in the valley temples.

FKA: *Recurrent themes in your book are the social diversity of ancient Egyptian society and the efforts of the ancient Egyptian state to produce “cultural cohesion”. How do the two go together?*

RB: We tend to treat “ancient Egyptian culture” implicitly as a coherent set of ideas and use it to explain the patterns we observe in the evidence. However, I believe that, in the past and the present, people – with their varying dispositions, statuses, and interests – might not always understand very well how their culture comes together, how ideas relate to practices, or what the key values of their society are. The social anthropologist McKim Marriott (1955) asked participants of a procession in India in the 1950s what the meaning of the worshipped deity was, and he received all sorts of diverging answers, some even contradictory. One needs to look closely and contextually to the behaviour of people if one wishes to see these complexities in the remote past. Since it is impossible to interview participants of a procession in ancient Egypt, we, as outside analysers, should at least take into consideration that locals may not have known all the theological details that we synthesise from texts and images of different places and periods and that they might even have disagreed amongst themselves on certain interpretations. It is important to give room to such uncertainties before we narrow interpretation too quickly down to a well-rounded, integrated picture.

Social historians have unveiled much diversity by re-reading documentary texts and monumental inscriptions. Archaeology partially overlaps with social history as it offers a window into diverse lived realities, but it also brings in the material world as a specific context of behaviour. There are things one can do and experience with objects and in the physical space that do not simply translate into words. Interrogating cohesion is therefore also an inquiry into the correlation of data sets each with their own logic.

I think that human beings strive for cohesion to find order in the world, but cohesion is something that is made rather than given. The ancient Egyptian state generated cohesion, very often top-down on its own terms and conditions but also in response to symbols and concepts that were understood locally. A bottom-up approach would appreciate peer observation and self-organisation as a mechanism that established a sense of social belonging and cohesion, what theoreticians of complexity might call emergent order.

FKA: *Which social groups were excluded from ancient Egyptian society? How did (and do) these exclusionary mechanisms differ from or coincide with those in other ancient cultures?*

RB: We need to define what is meant by exclusion and what it was that people were excluded from. Exclusion works every day on multiple levels in a society. Think of mobbing or of a group of people turning their backs towards someone who is thus made an outsider. An example from ancient Egypt would be the second wife of a farmer called Heqanakht who writes a letter home to his younger brother Merisu complaining that Merisu did not take care of her as she was treated badly by the rest of the family during Heqanakht's absence.

These informal experiences of exclusion were likely more painful for people in the past than other types of exclusion that they might have taken for granted but are closer to what we mean by exclusion, such as access to resources and upward social mobility. Women, for instance, were by and large excluded from access to priestly titles other than those of a few female deities, from administration, and from military careers. These three were, however, the major fields of activity that offered access to the economic resources and knowledge of the norms and values of the state. Upward mobility can be reconstructed for some prisoners of war who made a career in the Egyptian army of the New Kingdom. Biographies of the Old Kingdom report the gradual rise of officials to powerful positions at court, but these officials were born into privileged families, so this type of upward mobility happened within the core elite. Administration seems to have been restricted to members of the royal family prior to the Old Kingdom and was then opened to include a broader constituency of individuals, but it is doubtful whether individual achievements – meritocracy, as Egyptologists have suggested – rather than existing social ties and dependencies were the reasons for appointing an individual.

Hierarchy seems to have been the strongest mechanism for distinction and exclusion in ancient Egypt, and presumably other early complex societies, and rank in the social matrix – which for the core elite would mean the proximity to the king – seems to have overridden gender, ethnicity, age or profession. In local communities and households, hierarchy might have been tied to gender and age. As has often been argued, much depends on specific situations in which identities, inclusion, and exclusion played out but it may not be easy to retrieve such situations from the archaeological record.

Exclusion is also materialised in architectural arrangements, for example enclosure walls, gates, and doors. However, we do not always know for whom a door was opened in the past. This is a question of a social agreement that does not emerge in any direct way from the material remains. So, these architectural arrangements express the idea of exclusion but not necessarily its practice.

FKA: *In your new book but also in various other studies, you focus on topics such as gender and the human body. In what ways can Egyptological research contribute to widen our perspective on these issues? And how do such perspectives contribute to our understanding of the construction of power relations in ancient societies?*

RB: Ancient Egypt offers a wealth of sources for the study of gender and the human body: the treatment of the dead body, the decoration of living bodies with tattoos, amulets and jewellery, medical texts, the use of body parts in the figurative language, the terminology of statues representing the human body, the visual display of divine and human bodies of almost all ranks, settlements structured in experienced spaces, and many others. Up to the 1990s, research of the body was concerned with how bodies were subjected to social discourse and power, and then developed into questions of phenomenology and embodiment. Gender was originally understood as the study of female realities in the past and has progressed to modelling the role of gender for social organisation. There is also growing interest in non-binary and blurred concepts of gender in ancient Egypt, for instance androgyny in Christian Egypt (Behlmer 2001), the gender representation of the female king Hatshepsut (Matič 2016), and “gender confusion” in the world of the gods (Pries 2011).

Lynn Meskell (1999, 2002; Meskell and Joyce 2003) has been a pioneer in Egyptology for theoretically informed research of gender and the body. Her work is widely cited within and outside Egyptology and was a major step forward in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Her case study was the rather exceptional “bubble” of the New Kingdom community of workmen in Deir el-Medina. The workmen were, in fact, skilled craftsmen and some were buried in outspokenly rich tombs, so the term workmen is a bit misleading here. In any case, looking at other sites and contexts shows that Deir el-Medina is not a model that fits all. The notion of the human body may not have been the same in the Old as in the New Kingdom. There are also hints that gender relations changed in times of weak central power. For example, women, children, and men were buried in rural communities with similar amulets during the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2300–2050 BC), a period of political fragmentation in Egypt, whereas the position of amulets on the body began to differ towards the re-unification of the country in the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2050–1750 BC) as scarabs were placed on the wrist of men and were thus interpreted as sealing devices of male officials while they are found in all positions on female bodies and were apparently interpreted as amulets and jewellery for women (Dubiel 2008). There is scope for extending these research agendas further into non-elite contexts with the rich material from ancient Egypt. This would allow a better understanding of how inequalities and power relations were experienced by all and why inequality was a plausible concept for the society as a whole.

Apart from the archaeological evidence, ancient Egyptian texts offer many insights. Rune Nyord (2009) has explored the large corpus of Coffin Texts of the Middle Kingdom for approaching cognition in ancient Egypt, a contribution to research of the body that is conditioned by the exceptional preservation of these texts. The characters of the hieroglyphic script are also revealing. Many depict parts of the human body (and of animal bodies), which would seem to indicate close observation of the body and an assignment of value to its individual parts. In the standard list of grammar text books for Middle Egyptian, the group of male individuals and their activities amounts to over fifty, while there are only seven signs depicting a woman: one generically meaning “women”, one depicting a female anthropomorphic deity, and all others showing women giving birth or breastfeeding, so performing those activities that male bodies are unable to do and expressing social relatedness, perhaps also inheritance. Not surprisingly perhaps from a comparative perspective on complex societies, including our own, the male body was treated as the standard human being, the female body only filled the gaps.

Gender and the body are now established topics in archaeological research, to some extent perhaps also in Egyptology, but they still have great potential for a critical reading of the past. It is an interesting exercise for any topic to ask what a feminist perspective might look like: what is a feminist perspective on the Old Kingdom, or an agriculture, or urbanism? These questions help with clarifying the points of view from which we speak, and they have been traditionally those of academic educated male archaeologists. I am not saying that these are wrong or bad perspectives but that they need to be identified as specific angles. There is rich data out there to study the body empirically, but it is also worth engaging with qualitative and subjective interpretations, for example what it meant to experience and internalise the world – which would include power, inequality, and such – in order to discover new dimensions in data sets.

FKA: *You have also engaged with the study of ancient Egypt in the broader context of decolonisation and the production of knowledge. In your opinion, what has been achieved in this field and what still needs to be addressed? Considering recent discussions on restitution in that context (e.g., Sarr and Savoy 2018), would you argue for a return of Nefertiti to Egypt?*

RB: The colonial history of Egyptology was first exposed by researchers from outside Egyptology – history, social anthropology, and comparative literature – before Egyptologists have picked up the discussion with views from inside the subject. The “decolonization of academia” raises attention to the epistemic and institutional hegemony of Euro-American Egyptology but has not yet been critically examined in a way that we understand how it might function as a heuristic tool to change the situation.

There have been many initiatives by Egyptologists widening participation in the production of knowledge, e.g., by capacity building during fieldwork, field schools, fellowships for and cooperation with Egyptian colleagues. Archaeological fieldwork – for example, whether or not participatory methods are permitted and how heritage can be used for social well-being – is to a large extent determined by Egyptian legislation and by the decisions of local authorities. Some projects have managed to implement successfully forms of co-production of knowledge with local communities. I have learned from colleagues in social anthropology that such tandem research is a difficult

issue also in their subject, which means that there is no best practice template that one could simply adopt. In my own fieldwork in Zawyet Sultan (Bussmann and Vanthuyne 2022; Bussmann 2024), located 350 km south of Cairo, a fairly direct line links my investigation of subaltern groups in ancient Egypt with attempts to make heard the voices of local inspectors and villagers that are silenced in clinical archaeological field reports. This, too, is a challenge and requires a source-critical approach to the interpretation of their statements.

Whatever the best way forward might eventually be I find important to remain sensitive to the topic and listen. An Egyptian inspector asked me why I am interested in ancient Egypt and why my university spends money for my research given that I could more easily excavate in Germany. The question, as I understood from the context of the conversation, was asked out of intrinsic curiosity, and I struggled answering what I (my university, German society, the West, the Global North generally) has to do with a non-elite cemetery in provincial Egypt dating 4000 years back in time. This kind of irritations from “post-colonial conversations” can inspire fresh perspectives on Egyptological research.

Restitution is part of decolonization and has recently become again a key concern for many museums and collections. Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy explicitly single Egypt (and Algeria) out from the rest of Africa, and I, too, believe that the history of Egyptology in Egypt differs from the colonial histories of sub-Saharan African countries that they discuss. As for Nefertiti, much has been written about the political and cultural history of the restitution debate, whether or not the bust left Egypt legally and whether the laws and regulations effective in 1912 are an acceptable basis for answering the question. But we should perhaps better ask how we can use the restitution debate productively to negotiate the relationship between Egypt and Germany today. The restitution, however it is put into practice, would be a strong signal that acknowledges the value the bust has in Egypt as an icon of the pharaonic past of the country, and the act of returning and the discussions surrounding it – the “restitutionary work” (Rassool and Gibbon 2024) – might even be as important as the eventual presence of the bust in Egypt.

Decolonisation thus raises important questions about the social and political contexts of Egyptology but requires sensitivity as to who is discussing it in which context. I asked an Egyptian colleague, who has an international career, about his opinion about decolonisation, and he said that it is the task of Egypt (meaning: not of European Egyptologists) to transform universities and regimes of knowledge in the country. I also noticed that debating decolonisation with Egyptian colleagues means to create something like “us” and “them”, and this kind of othering can have an alienating effect. Other Egyptian Egyptologists are strongly engaged in debates of decolonisation and argue for a revision of existing arrangements in Egyptology (Hanna 2022). I find important to understand the diverse dispositions and interests of all involved actors and how they are enabled and constrained by institutional frameworks, such as funding bodies that expect new research results and leave little time for community engagement, bureaucracy on all levels in Germany (in my case) and in Egypt, and the social and legal contexts of archaeological fieldwork in Egypt. The situation is complex on all sides. But if decolonisation is understood as an encompassing endeavour that inspires new research practices and is used for enriching our thinking about the intellectual foundations of Egyptology, then I think that it will be a productive context for the future of the subject.

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