Ancient States and Pharaonic Egypt: An Agenda for Future Research

Juan Carlos Moreno García
CNRS—France
jcmorenogarcia@hotmail.com

Abstract

Comparative history on ancient empires has seen a flourishing renewal in recent years. Many studies are devoted either to the study of a particular aspect (or aspects) in many societies of the past, or to the analysis of selected characteristics present in two ancient states, usually China and Rome. However, pre-Ptolemaic Egypt is conspicuously absent in such discussions despite the considerable wealth of Pharaonic sources and archaeological evidence. Therefore, several paths for prospective comparative research are proposed, from the organization of agriculture and productive activities in general to the ways in which ancient states promoted and “captured” flows of wealth through trade, imperialism, and taxation; from the reproduction of power and authority in the long run to the integration of different actors with their own (and often diverging) interests into a single political entity. The final aim is to contribute to a theory of ancient states where long-lived monarchies like ancient China and Pharaonic Egypt could play a leading role.

Keywords

Comparative history – ancient states – tributary states – taxation – agriculture and irrigation – ancient trade

Introduction

One of the most significant trends in recent historiography is the boom of comparative non-Eurocentric research, which seeks to explore the dynamics of historical transformation in an alternative way to those more traditional
interpretations that are based on narratives about the relentless rise of the West from its Graeco-Roman roots. Books like Edward Said’s Orientalism have convincingly exposed the ideological biases underlying old views about the alleged contrast between a historically progressive, economically innovative, socially democratic, and culturally triumphant Western world against the background of a stagnant, backward, despotic, and pre-rational “Orient.” Other works have questioned the Western historical “uniqueness,” in some cases by exploring how Europe departed, beginning in late Roman times, from a tributary basis common to other societies of the past; in other cases, by searching for traces of “modernity” in non-European societies, like large-scale industry, complex banking, or rational-minded enterprise.1 These works might be interpreted as particular expressions of a larger postmodern perspective, whereby former meta-narratives centered on the idea of Western continual progress and historical exceptionalism have gradually given way to more qualified ones, emphasizing the role played by alternative actors and regions, by different but neglected pathways of historical change, and by aspects relegated to the margins of historical narratives. In this vein, Christopher Bayly’s seminal book The birth of the modern world or Kirti Chaudhuri’s Asia before Europe, among many others, might be regarded as significant proof of the increasing importance of “global history.” Their emphasis on common patterns of historical development, and even on contemporarily similar economic, social, and cultural dynamics in quite disparate areas of the world, downplays the apparent singularity of the West while stressing the importance of contact, exchange, and circulation.2 Thus, integrative patterns emerge through vast regions of the world and provide more sophisticated frameworks for explaining interaction than old-fashioned diffusionism or the supposed desire to emulate Western achievements. Models based on concepts like center-periphery, world-system, and colonial encounters are probably the best illustrations of such patterns.3 Another tendency becomes increasingly visible in the field of ancient economics. Its goal is to explore the validity of modern economic


2 Maurel, Manuel d’histoire globale; Hunt, Writing History in the Global Era.

concepts (e.g., “market,” “capital,” “rationalism,” “enterprise”) for ancient and traditional societies and to find economic mechanisms—at least in some sectors and periods in the past—comparable to those prevailing in present times. In this way, local traditions and particularities in the organization of work, production, and exchanges could finally be subsumed under larger, comparable economic structures and contribute to a dialogue between ancient and modern economics. The final aim should be the analysis of long-term trends in economic growth, regional integration, and the global division of labour and specialization. Finally, exploring the different historical dynamics followed by, apparently, similar societies raises two crucial questions: how did variability in power organization produce such distinctive dynamics? And why did precocious forms of capitalism in non-European societies (like merchant capitalism) not lead in the end to capitalism and industrial revolutions in other parts of the world? Rethinking the very basis of state and economic organization is thus stimulating a new impetus in comparative research on pre-industrial states.

Ancient history has not escaped from this movement, and similar concerns underlie the rapid development of comparative studies on ancient societies, in some cases overcoming the traditional terms under which such research has been carried out. Thus, for instance, ancient Rome is not only studied against the background of Hellenistic monarchies, but also, and increasingly, in contrast with ancient China, while historians of Roman economy do not hesitate to use the tools provided by modern economics in order to detect patterns of growth, investment, rationality, and economic integration. On a different level, the growing body of historical and archaeological evidence in Central Asia has contributed to a new understanding of economic organization in the ancient world.

---


Asia also makes it possible to surpass the apparent gulf between the ancient Mediterranean world (including the Near East) and East Asian societies.8 Recent research on ancient trade routes and pathways of diffusion of plants, animals, goods, and techniques across the northern Indian Ocean provides additional clues about long-distance exchanges, which were capable of linking together vast areas of the world, and not necessarily sponsored by states or by powerful institutions like temples.9 In fact, a new emphasis is put on commercial diasporas and informal actors (e.g., itinerant traders, mobile populations, fishermen, etc.) as significant players in such contacts.10

Under these conditions, it comes as no surprise that Hellenistic and Roman Egypt have succeeded in integrating themselves into these new patterns of comparative research, and their contributions to studies of ancient economy and state organization are quite relevant. The vast amounts of preserved Graeco-Roman inscriptions and papyri make this period of ancient Egypt a unique candidate for creating economic and social models on an acceptably quantitative basis. But this is not the only reason. Egypt’s location at the crossroads of Eastern Africa, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Near East, combined with its early implication in Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman politics, and the use of Greek in administrative, economic, and legal matters since Ptolemaic times, places at the disposal of scholars from neighbouring disciplines a considerable mass of documents relevant to their own work.

However, accessibility to previous periods of Egyptian history (say, pharaonic times) has been obscured both by the intricate writing systems then employed (hieroglyphic, hieratic, demotic), and the relative scarcity of economic and administrative documents. In addition, the harmful but extended myth of an alleged “Egyptian exceptionalism,” whereby pharaonic Egypt


A unique case of monarchical continuity and immutable governmental structures for millennia, has been frequently invoked by Egyptologists to justify the excessive insularity of their discipline, their lack of interest in African and Near Eastern history, and their reluctance to theorize or, simply, to build interpretative models about the society they study.\footnote{Moreno García, “From Dracula to Rostovtzeff” and “Penser l’économie pharaonique.”} As a result, it has been difficult for pharaonic Egypt to become fully integrated in comparative research, even with other Near Eastern societies.\footnote{Cf. the marginal role of pharaonic Egypt in recent works like Yoffee, Myths of the Archaic State and Routledge, Archaeology and State Theory. Or its complete absence (not Graeco-Roman Egypt) in Feinman and Nichols, Archaeological Perspectives on Political Economies; Manning and Morris, The Ancient Economy; Bang, Ikeguchi, and Ziche, Ancient Economies Modern Methodologies; Landes, Mokyr, and Baumol, The Invention of Enterprise; van der Spek, van Zanden, and van Leeuwen, A History of Market Performance; Neal and Williamson, The Cambridge History of Capitalism. Promising paths have been opened by Wengrow (Wengrow, “The voyages of Europa”) and, especially, Baines (“Civilization and empires” and with Yoffee, “Order, Legitimacy and Wealth”), and have inspired further discussion: Richards and van Buren, Order, Legitimacy and Wealth.} Furthermore, the traditional emphasis of Egyptology on philology, religion, funerary beliefs, and (descriptive) art history hardly helps overcome the current image of the land of the Pharaohs as an incomprehensible and somewhat ahistorical world. Fortunately, this outdated “exceptionalism” is no longer tenable and cannot ignore, for instance, recent archaeological work in Sudanese archaeology, African palaeobotany, and Eurasian exchange networks that challenges both the alleged uniqueness of pharaonic Egypt and its supposed isolationism. What is more, archaeology helps overcome simplistic narratives of Egyptian history based on a surprisingly restricted set of evidence (official inscriptions, elite monuments, and high quality art) as well as on naive methodologies, as if texts and works of art could “speak” directly by themselves, without any serious historical criticism. Archaeology and more refined models of historical analysis are contributing at last to renew current agendas of research, where production, exchanges, and social power become the main axis for future investigation and promising comparative studies.\footnote{Some of the best and most innovative examples are Trigger, Kemp, O’Connor, and Lloyd, Ancient Egypt: A Social History and Kemp, Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization.} Economics, politics, and social history should thus become central issues in the study of ancient Egypt, and lead Egyptology to its final normalization among social sciences.\footnote{Cf. the preceding note as well as Weeks, Egyptology and the Social Sciences; Lustig, Anthropology and Egyptology; Moreno García, “Penser l’économie pharaonique.”}
A final aspect is the need of “de-orientalizing” historical narratives where “the East” represents a sort of negative of the West. Perhaps one of the most enduring topics in this respect is the still current assumption that many “oriental” states (both ancient and modern) were in fact powerful despotic monarchies, ruled by an absolute sovereign, assisted by an all-encompassing bureaucracy, and aiming for a rigid centralisation of political and economic decision-taking. “Oriental” states were thus represented since antiquity as impersonal constrictive power machines, where individuals were crushed between the demands of the state and duty towards their kin, and where politics was simply non-existent, with the only exception being Court conspiracies and intrigues. However, a growing body of evidence shows a different reality hidden underneath the glitter of palatial culture and royal monuments. The very stability of states depended on pacts and on their flexibility to adapt themselves to the changing balance of power between different sectors of the elite, whose interests did not always coincide with each other, or with those of the king. It also depended on the patterns of circulation of wealth (both internal and external), the success (or failure) in capturing significant parts of it, and the political and geopolitical conditions inspired by such patterns: taxation, “feudalism,” military expansion, and colonialism, among many other factors, are implicit in the organization of power inside and between states; they also open new paths for comparative research aiming to build a true theory of tributary states, both Western and “oriental.” Also in this vein, the weight of informal actors, wrongfully labeled as “marginal,” opens further venues for reflection about the structure and endurance of ancient states, while local chiefs and assemblies of “elders” reveal the existence of poles of authority to be considered by the state. The cycles of urbanization and de-urbanization visible in the Levant, northern Syria, and Lower Egypt, among many other places, suggest subtle changes in the strategies of production followed by local populations where pastoralism was a vital element. Piracy also had a heavy impact on international trade and on the reactivity of ancient states, and it

16 Haldon, The State and the Tributary Mode of Production; Yoffee, Myths of the Archaic State; Moreno García, “Introduction. Elites et états tributaires”; Banaji, Theory as History.
would not be extravagant to consider together, in a comparative perspective, phenomena such as Late Bronze Sea Peoples, Middle Age Vikings, or piracy in the southern coast of China in Tang-Ming times. Finally, itinerant traders and commercial diaspora developed exchange networks sometimes complementary, sometimes alternative, to those controlled by states.

Comparing What? With Whom?

To begin with, the evaluation of some recent publications devoted to comparative research on ancient empires might show the potential, but also the risks, of such enterprise. The first issue to consider is that, in some cases, comparison is usually restricted to a simple juxtaposition of case studies with no real in-depth analysis of common aspects to be dealt with. The chapters in multivolume works of this nature really consist of short introductions to the history of a specific society, or brief descriptions of a particular aspect shared by many cultures of the past. Not surprisingly, volumes produced on this basis have, in fact, the format of a traditional universal history, even when the subject of the study deals with very precise periods (say, antiquity) and specific regions of the world (e.g., China and the Mediterranean). In other cases, a topic with the potential for broad comparison is selected and analyzed in many different societies of the past; in some cases the results reveal common patterns that went unnoticed until then, or the fact that, under apparently similar starting conditions, historical trajectories rapidly diverged because of the particular social, political, environmental, or economic circumstances affecting each case study. However, in other cases, the result mostly consists, once more, in a succession of chapters, each one “locked” within the limits and idiosyncrasy (methodology, types of sources, scholarly traditions, etc.) of its own discipline, thus making true comparison almost impossible in the absence of a previous

19 Alcock, D’Altroy, Morrison, and Sinopoli, Empires; Morris and Scheidel, The Dynamics of Ancient Empires; Bang and Scheidel, The Oxford Handbook of the State; Arnason and Raaflaub, The Roman Empire in Context; Burbank and Cooper, Empires in World History.

20 Some examples from different fields of research: Barnard and Wendrich, The Archaeology of Mobility; Garraty and Stark, Archaeological Approaches to Market Exchange in Ancient Societies; Houston, The First Writing; Marcus and Sabloff, The Ancient City; McAnany and Yoffee, Questioning Collapse; Raaflaub, Thinking, Recording, and Writing History in the Ancient World; Schwartz and Nichols, After Collapse. The Regeneration of Complex Societies; M.E. Smith, The Comparative Archaeology of Complex Societies; Falconer and Redman, Polities and Power; Tvedt and Coopey, A History of Water; Bang and Bayly, Tributary Empires in Global History; Hill, Jones, and Morales, Experiencing Power, Generating Authority.
well-defined agenda for common research. Finally, there are cases where the purpose of the research is to deal with specific topics, but only for a very limited set of societies. Each topic is then treated by specialists in order to produce narratives rooted in a solid comparable basis. However, a current problem with this approach is that the unequal weight of different types of sources (historical, administrative, economic, political, ritual, etc.), plus their uneven distribution in time and space, even within a given society (especially in plurimillenary China and Egypt), makes effective comparison a quite difficult task. In fact these circumstances impose serious limits on each specialist’s approach, as it is determined by the sources available in his own domain of study. One can think, for instance, of the abundance of papyri in Graeco-Roman Egypt; however, as they mainly come from Upper Egypt and the Fayum, this means that some of the most dynamic regions of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, and even of the Mediterranean (Lower Egypt, Alexandria), remain quite shadowy in the papyrological record. Another example is the apparent wealth of economic documents from Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Mesopotamia; however, these texts consist mainly of clay tablets written in Neo-Babylonian, while the administrative language of both empires was Aramaic, written on perishable materials like leather and papyrus. This explains why Aramaic documents are exceedingly rarer than cuneiform ones and remain under-represented in the written record.

Recent attempts to produce partial comparative studies between ancient Rome and China reveal the possibilities, but also the limits, of such initiatives and might illustrate the problems just evoked. Such is the case of the book edited by Walter Scheidel, which stems from an ambitious research project aiming to analyze the economic, political, and social structures of ancient Rome and China. The volume considered is, in fact, a first preliminary step. Organized around a limited set of topics (military and state formation, law, imperial courts, tribute, gift circulation and monetary systems), each one of them is studied in both societies by the same scholar, usually a specialist either in Roman or Chinese history. Quite naturally, this method implies that the authors, not being proficient in both political formations, can provide insightful analysis on their own domains of competence, but only general approximations on the other society, given the difficulty in dealing with original sources or with current developments in the archaeology, history, literature, etc., of that

21 Eisenstadt, *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*; Areshian, *Empires and Diversity*.

area. In the end, the chapters thus produced might appear quite unbalanced. Fritz-Heiner Mutschler and Achim Mittag, editors of the second volume, sought to overcome these difficulties by choosing a very specific topic capable of stimulating a fruitful dialogue between classicists and sinologists. The focus of their study is the formation and the development of the concept of empire, and select manifestations of it (in arts, ancient historiography, representations of the world, philosophy, etc.) are simultaneously dealt with by two scholars, one a specialist in ancient Rome, the other in ancient China. The result is a well-written and ground-breaking volume providing state-of-the-art research on the concept of empire and the cultural aspects related to it in two distant societies. Finally, works like that edited by Richard King and Dennis Schilling stand half-way between those of Scheidel and Mutschler/Mittag.²³ It addresses a very specific topic (the discussion of ethics in ancient China and the Graeco-Roman world), but the method of study consists of a general introduction (with two chapters) devoted to methodological and theoretical considerations followed by several essays grouped in three sections (China, Greece-Rome, and comparisons).

The comparative studies mentioned above constitute a useful background against which Egyptologists should think about our limited knowledge on crucial aspects of ancient Egypt. They also provide insight into the most promising paths for achieving a more balanced and complete picture of pharaonic society, evaluating the particularities and commonalities of Egypt with its neighbours, and determining its role in a complex world where geopolitics, exchange networks, and wealth flows left their mark on the organization of power, society, and economy. Among the most important issues limiting a broader, and better, understanding of all facets of ancient Egypt, one must mention the still insufficient use of archaeology in the study of, for example, the changing organization of the landscape,²⁴ the impact of productive strategies on it, the different sub-regions resulting from land use and human density and, lastly, the network and hierarchy of settlements and the fiscal geography created in order to concentrate, make circulate, and control flows of wealth (roads, harbours, customs, trade facilities, work and stock centres, etc.). Another area where the contribution of archaeology is indispensable is in the analysis of entire sectors of Egyptian society that remain poorly documented in official

²³ King and Schilling, *How Should One Live?* Comparisons in other cultural aspects like history writing know a recent flourishing thanks to the work, among others, of Martin, *Herodotus and Sima Qian* and F.-H. Mutschler.

sources; not only a peasantry more diversified than the biased image provided by literary and administrative documents, but also mobile populations, people involved in the exploitation of natural resources (fishermen, gatherers, etc.), itinerant traders, and other occupations whose contribution was pivotal in the circulation of goods, information, and techniques.\textsuperscript{25} The cultural manifestations of all these populations and the complex interactions and combinations between high and low, domestic and public, palatial and provincial culture also deserve careful attention in order to detect how social cohesion was built up in the \textit{longue durée}. This naturally leads to the analysis of the construction of power relations between competing sectors of the elite and how they affected the stability and transmission of authority, from Pharaoh at the top of the social pyramid to local potentates and village chiefs at the bottom. Finally, the characterization of ancient Egypt within the framework of state theory and tributary states remains a promising field of research. Much has been written about the alleged absolute authority of the Pharaoh. However, under the apparent continuity of regalia, iconography, titles, and symbols over millennia, the actual fabric of the monarchy varied with time; it depended on concrete relations of power, which were constantly changing and subject to thorough revisions and rebuilding after the recurrent periods of crisis within the central power. Yet the reluctance of Egyptologists to engage in a dialogue with social scientists means that ancient Egypt is too often absent from discussions on the construction of social power, authority, and statehood in the ancient world, with the exception of the usual clichés about the absolute power of Pharaohs that, in fact, completely neglect how authority was truly created in ancient Egypt.\textsuperscript{26} Recent developments on state theory, and on the concept of tributary state and empire, invite these subjects to become nevertheless a promising area for comparative research in Egyptology.\textsuperscript{27}

These observations provide a fertile ground for a better understanding of the pharaonic state in the light of ancient states, and will be further developed

\begin{footnotes}
\item[26] Some exceptions are Baines and Yoffee, “Order, Legitimacy and Wealth in Ancient Egypt”; Campagno, “El modo de producción tributario y el antiguo Egipto”; Moreno García, “Introduction. Elites et états tributaires” and “The ‘other’ administration.”
\item[27] Some examples from different theoretical perspectives, ranging from marxism to neo-institutionalism are Banaji, \textit{Theory as History}; Bourdieu, \textit{Sur l’État}; Haldon, \textit{The State and the Tributary Mode of Production}; North, Wallis, and Weingast, \textit{Violence and Social Orders}; Bang and Bayly, \textit{Tributary Empires in Global History}.
\end{footnotes}
in the next section of this article. This obviously leads to a “simple” question: which are the best candidates for such an intellectual enterprise? 

The cultural, environmental, and socio-economic affinities found among the “great” monarchies of the ancient Near East suggest many paths of research still to be explored. Contacts between the Near East and the Nile Valley are well attested since Predynastic times and they possibly exerted an influence on the historical trajectories of both areas that cannot be reduced to old diffusionist models. They contributed to, or stimulated, depending on the circumstances, certain internal forces that finally led to the distinctive particularities of each region. Yet such contacts also intensified in the course of centuries and triggered deep changes. One can think, for instance, of the growth of commercial flows since the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age, and the subsequent consolidation of states/empires encompassing substantial territories and involved in an unprecedented rivalry for their control. Chariotry, a new military ethos but also a shared pattern of artistic symbols, diplomatic language, technical skills, and poetical conventions, left its mark on very different societies.28 One can also think of the role of temples as social and economic “stabilizers” that provided institutional continuity and security to the elites, which possessed huge amounts of land, resources, workers, and precious metals, and which played an autonomous role in the creation of wealth and in the development of economic circuits. Even periods of political disruption or short-lived monarchies offer many possibilities for a comparative analysis of distinctive trajectories in the Nile Valley and Mesopotamia. And, on the contrary, periods of exceptional monarchic continuity in Near Eastern history, like the Kassite period, still await an in-depth analysis against the more volatile and short-lived background of many other Mesopotamian states.29

In terms of historical continuity and state structures, ancient China provides striking parallels.30 The discovery of thousands of bamboo slips with invaluable information about administration, legal matters, taxes levied on households, etc., opens new venues of inquiry about the centralization of power (sometimes ephemeral) concomitant with massive architectural achievements and highly elaborate Court rituals. Some regions of the country also remained as

---

28 Liverani, Prestige and Interest and “The Near East: The Bronze Age”; Aruz, Benzel, and Evans, Beyond Babylon; Aruz, Graff, and Rakic, Cultures in Contact; Sauvage, Routes maritimes et systèmes d’échanges internationaux; Monroe, Scales of Fate.


“reserves of statehood” during periods of political division, from which centralized monarchies emerged, expanded and reunified the country again. The creation of a bureaucracy as well as a corpus of classic texts used in the formation of administrators offers fertile ground for comparative research with Egypt; so too the particularities of the balance of power between mighty regional lords and the central government. The absence of a true feudal system in periods of monarchical crisis, as well as the recurrent recovery of central power after them, offer further parallels with pharaonic Egypt which should be explored. The management of irrigation, the role played by households in the organization of production, or the complex interaction between central power and mobile populations living on the borders of the kingdom, could cast some light on both societies, Egyptian and Chinese, as well as on the particular ways that expansionist policies abroad were achieved by both powers. In the long term, the historical trajectories of the two most long-lasting states in history could provide exciting points of comparison.

With regard to geographical proximity, states appeared in the East-African Saharan-Sahelian region that provide a fascinating glimpse into alternative paths of state formation and socio-economic organization. The discoveries in Nubia reveal that, far from common assumptions about backward Nubians forced to emulate Egypt in order to build their own forms of state, things appear quite different. Nubian political organization seems more flexible, capable of integrating populations dispersed over vast distances encompassing both the Nile Valley and the deserts around it. What is more, a distinctive pattern of cereal production and consumption (porridge and beer-like alcoholic beverages) was rooted in particular forms of commensality that expressed and cemented group identities, their autonomy, and their social cohesion. Moreover, Nubians appear to have been involved in long-range commercial activities that were autonomous and alternative to the circuits controlled by Egyptians. It is quite possible that trade played a key role in the formation of states that developed sophisticated forms of water collecting for their agricultural, housing, and herding needs in this harsh environment, from Libyans in the north to Nubians, Garamantes, and others in the East-African Saharan-Sahelian belt.

33 Pope, “Epigraphic evidence for a ‘porridge-and-pot’ tradition.”
34 Liverani, “Looking for the southern frontier of the Garamantes”; Manzo, A. “From the sea to the deserts and back” and “Nubians and the others on the Red Sea”; Pope, The Double
In examining the use of writing as a means of expression of elite self-identity and royal historical consciousness, ancient Mesoamerica and, more particularly, the Mayan world, offer fascinating parallels. Noteworthy for comparison are the construction of genealogies and the choice of building activities, ritual, and war as topics that best conveyed the social and divine role played by the monarchy. The fact that writing first appeared in Egypt and the Mayan world not as a primary administrative device but as a symbolic, ritual, and decorative tool, provides further points of contact between both cultural areas.\(^\text{35}\)

Finally, and on a more general, theoretical perspective, it is the very concept of the tributary state that should prove its operability and heuristic viability through the comparative analysis of selected case studies. The contribution of ancient Near Eastern societies, including pharaonic Egypt, would be crucial in this respect, thus continuing and deepening the promising paths opened by Mario Liverani and Carlo Zaccagnini, among others, in the 1970s and 1980s and, more recently, by John Baines and Norman Yoffee.\(^\text{36}\)

**Ancient Empires and Pharaonic Egypt**

*Land Use, Agro-Pastoral Diversity and Productive Alternatives*

Several topics offer a fertile ground for comparative research. The first one is the study of the very basis of production and, especially, of agriculture and irrigation. Usually considered as the quintessential paradigm of a despotic centralized hydraulic civilization, the pioneering work by Karl Butzer, Ghislaine Alleaume, and others stressed the fact that centralization and state-sponsored large-scale works played a minor role, if any, in the organization of irrigation in ancient Egypt.\(^\text{37}\) In this line, subsequent studies based on the analysis of pharaonic titles and administrative documents, or on ethnographic studies, revealed that irrigation management was usually an internal community affair, and that the role of the state was often limited to calculating the expected amount of taxes based on the level of the seasonal flood.


Sometimes the state promoted irrigation works, but only on a limited scale and restricted to very specific areas (like the Fayum in the Ptolemaic period). And what was considered—until recently—as traditional irrigation systems and practices surviving almost intact since pharaonic times (like basin irrigation), a more attentive analysis has revealed that, in fact, they were introduced in the 19th century CE as part of a vast reorganization of the irrigation network, the agricultural landscape, and the crops grown in order to cope with the financial needs of ambitious rulers like Muhammad Ali. Yet the distinctiveness of early landscape structures, their regional variations depending both on environmental conditions and on complementary and/or competing land uses (agriculture, pastoralism, woodland, swampy areas, etc.), and even their transformations over time (foundation and abandonment of settlements, changes in the course of the Nile, etc.), still deserve much more in-depth attention. While promising paths have been opened by researchers like Alleaume, Andrew Wilson, Joshua Trampier and others, Egyptology is still far from producing a well-informed synthesis like that of Tony Wilkinson’s *Archaeological Landscapes of the Near East*. Central issues such as the impact of production activities, taxation, and settlement structures on the organization of pharaonic landscape, irrigation systems, and economic practices are just beginning to be addressed by some scholars. It is to be expected that the advances and the experience accumulated in neighboring disciplines can help Egyptologists develop more sophisticated models for examining the relationship between environment, production and historical landscapes.38

Such influence would be particularly welcome in the study of pharaonic agriculture. Egyptologists still consider pre-Ptolemaic agriculture as a somewhat undifferentiated activity, where techniques and organization remained substantially unchanged for millennia. In this view, peasants are supposed to have produced—quite “naturally”—crops like cereals and flax (which, by the way, happened to be of the highest fiscal interest for the monarchy), raised cattle, and worked extensive domains belonging to temples and the royal palace; these institutions, in turn, provided for the needs of peasants and their own workforce through a redistributive system. The pernicious effects of such simplistic assumptions, not supported by the documentary evidence, still hamper the comprehension of pharaonic agriculture. More sophisticated alternative models have been proposed in recent years, but much still remains to be

38 Cf. the preceding note, as well as Moreno García, “L’organisation sociale de l’agriculture pharaonique” and “Recent developments,” 4–9.
done.\textsuperscript{39} Models of agricultural production based on the integration of many diverse variables might help to understand how production was organized, and should certainly reveal local differences, from soil quality to crop rotation, from pasture and wooded areas to agricultural fields, from networks of channels to roads, from consumption patterns and storage facilities to the interaction between peasants, gatherers, and mobile populations. Of course the basis of such models should be archaeological projects aiming to produce representative sets of selected case-studies, thus inspiring an archaeology more attentive to the study of settlement and landscape structures. The potential of such models is becoming increasingly evident in Mesopotamian and New World archaeology,\textsuperscript{40} but has been only timidly applied to pharaonic Egypt.\textsuperscript{41}

Two aspects are intimately related to these considerations: on the one hand, the actual autonomy of peasants in the organization of their work and in their production choices (crops, husbandry, gathering, occasional transporting and craft activities, \textit{etc.}), which depended on the impact of royal taxation; and, on the other hand, the resistance to, and alternatives developed against, this tax system. As stated before, it has been long assumed as “natural” that peasants preferred to produce cereals and flax instead of, say, more diversified and balanced forms of production combining cereal cultivation, horticulture, gathering, fishing, and extensive herding. Less dependent on a single crop and on the uncertainties of the annual flood, such diversified patterns of production could ensure a more reliable and regular supply of food. However, tax systems seek for easily storable, marketable and durable agricultural produce, usually exigent in terms of labour, investment and care, like cereals, oil and wine. As for flax, it was the favorite textile fibre in elite garment production. The imposition of taxes in cereals and flax obviously had an impact on how peasants organized their work, their fields, and their relationship with the environment and its resources, not to mention their choice of crops and the techniques to be used (like the use of a plough instead of a hoe, \textit{etc.}). Far from being “natural” choices, taxation had a deep impact on everyday activities, reduced mobility, and provoked economic uncertainty not justified by the alleged high returns.

\textsuperscript{39} For a general overview, cf. Moreno García, “L’organisation sociale de l’agriculture pharaonique”; Eyre, “The water regime for orchards and plantations in pharaonic Egypt,” “How relevant was personal status to the functioning of the rural economy in pharaonic Egypt?” and “The village economy in Pharaonic Egypt.”

\textsuperscript{40} Kohler and van der Leeuw, \textit{The Model-Based Archaeology of Socionatural Systems}; T.J. Wilkinson, McGuire Gibson, and Widell, \textit{Models of Mesopotamian Landscapes}.

\textsuperscript{41} Symons and Raine, “Agent-based models of ancient Egypt.”
of cereals. That is why in periods of political crisis, the dislocation of the tax system was often followed by a return to more diversified forms of production, where fishing, gathering and extensive pastoralism went hand-in-hand with mobility and “rebelliousness,” thus making fiscal control even more difficult. The historical consequences are essential for a better understanding of the interaction between sedentary and pastoral/nomadic populations, the succession of periods of sedentarization and of a return to more mobile lifestyles, or the conflicts arising out of the use of pasturage areas. Whereas such interaction has been well studied in other regions of the world, it still remains subsumed in Egyptology under naïve narratives where nomads are conspicuously depicted as “invaders.” However, an increasing body of evidence shows the existence of a vast area within Egyptian borders where pastoralism remained an important activity both for Egyptian and foreign populations (Nubians, Libyans, Canaanites), and where porous borders were crossed by populations circulating between the Nile Valley and its neighboring areas. A related aspect that still awaits exploration is the role played by wool in the Egyptian economy. While flax is a crop obviously concomitant with agriculture, sedentary settlement, and high-demanding work, wool was part of pastoral production. The symbolic role of white linen in elite self-presentation and in luxury garments (including ritual and funerary uses) probably hides and downplays the role played by wool, especially if it was associated with foreigners and the humbler sectors of Egyptian society. The social and economic aspects of the so-called Egyptian preference for linen instead of wool should be studied in depth and it cannot be excluded that the contrast between, say, an Egyptian “linen civilization” and a Mesopotamian “wool civilization” might turn out to be somewhat artificial and too dependent on the biased self-representation of the elite in their monuments. Pork consumption is a good example that reminds us of the dangers of relying too much on elite and religious texts and cultural choices.

Resistances and alternative lifestyles are not only visible within Egyptian society but also in foreign populations, and Nubians represent an excellent case in point. Recent archaeological research shows that during the 3rd and early 2nd millennium BCE Nubians occupied more than the regions situated just south of the Egyptian borders. In fact, their presence is well attested over vast areas of the Western Desert west of the Nile and even within Egypt itself,

43 Moreno García, “Invaders or just herders?” with bibliography.
particularly in the area between Thebes and Aswan, but also around Bersheh, in Middle Egypt, and in the Western oases.\textsuperscript{45} However, their close contact with Egyptians did not preclude the abandonment of their culture and dietary customs. Their preference for millet, porridge and alcoholic beverages based on beer, as well as their pastoral lifestyle, were part of social practices and relations built on values very different to those of Egyptians. Emulation was not the ultimate destiny of Nubian culture. Quite the reverse, the attachment of Nubians to a more mobile lifestyle, with extensive networks of alliances and social solidarity in the absence of an absolutist monarchy, reveals that cereal cultivation and sedentarization were not the inevitable and exclusive path leading to “progress” and “civilization.” In fact, alternative forms of social and productive organization (combining agriculture, herding, trade, even seasonal mining, \textit{etc.}) were based on different forms of social power that enabled Nubians to preserve more autonomous and decentralized lifestyles. And these were in no way incompatible at all with complex urbanism and sophisticated culture, as recent work at Kerma reveals.\textsuperscript{46} Similar tensions between China and its nomadic neighbors offer further ground for comparison,\textsuperscript{47} as does the fact that the effective power of emperors within the borders of their territory was not uniform. In fact, conflicts between northern and southeastern China, sometimes ending in political division, reveal differentiated socio-economic and political regional patterns masked by the appearance of a monolithic and homogeneous state. Finally, East Asian culinary traditions are linked not only to crop choice, ceramic use and grinding practices but also, as in the case of Nubians, to particular forms of kinship and social construction cemented by distinctive cultural practices,\textsuperscript{48} while the contrast in the use of cotton and silk clothes was based on social status.

\textit{Flows of Wealth, Trade and the Role of States and Empires}

Older views on Mesopotamian and Pharaonic trade combined an evolutionary historical perspective with a general interpretation of states as despotic. Thus, from the very beginning of Near Eastern history, “big” institutions like temples (“house of the god”) and palaces (“house of the king”) were supposed

\textsuperscript{45} Forstner-Müller and Rose, \textit{Nubian Pottery from Egyptian Cultural Contexts}; Nüser, “Nomads at the Nile” and “Structures and realities of Egyptian-Nubian interactions.”
\textsuperscript{46} Bonnet, \textit{Édifices et rites funéraires à Kerma} and \textit{La ville de Kerma}.
\textsuperscript{47} Rogers, “Inner Asian states and empires.”
\textsuperscript{48} Fuller and Rowlands, “Towards a long-term macro-geography of cultural substances”; Rowlands and Fuller, “Moudre ou faire bouillir?” In general, cf. Prakash Tamang and Samuel, “Dietary cultures and antiquity of fermented foods and beverages.”
to monopolize commercial exchanges with foreign territories and to control internal flows of wealth mainly consisting in transfers of commodities within institutions. Under these conditions private trade and the circulation of “money” (silver) was considered marginal, as was private property. Only gradually, Mesopotamian states opened some spaces to private business, mainly because of the weakening of central powers and the instability of monarchies during the early 2nd millennium BCE. As for Egypt, the alleged absolute power of the king and his governmental apparatus meant that every economic and commercial activity was promoted and closely monitored by the state.

While such a view still remains alive and well in Egyptology, the publication of several crucial cuneiform archives has completely transformed the interpretation of trade and commerce in ancient Mesopotamia. The archives of the Middle Bronze Age Assyrian traders found at Kanesh/Kültepe (Anatolia) or the documents produced by families deeply involved in commercial operations (like first millennium Babylonian Murashus and Egibis) have promoted discussions about the role of private traders and entrepreneurs, not necessarily operating only at the service of temples and palaces but also able to develop their own business.49 The recent publication of some archives dating from the 3rd millennium has proved that such merchants were not a 2nd and 1st millennium innovation, issued from state-centered trade precedents but, in fact, a phenomenon already present in Mesopotamia since early times. Furthermore, silver appears as a common means of exchange and has stimulated an intense discussion about the role of “money” and “monetization” in the Mesopotamian economy prior to the proper invention of coined money around the middle of the 1st millennium.50 Although these historiographic developments are mostly based on the publication and analysis of written documents, archaeology as well as palaeobotany also reveal that small-scale “silent” forms of trade made possible the exchange and circulation of plants, animals, and commodities over long distances, thus challenging the alleged monopoly of traders and “big”

49 Wunsch, “Neo-Babylonian entrepreneurs.”
50 Dercksen, Trade and Finance in Ancient Mesopotamia; Bongenaar, Interdependency of Institutions and Private Entrepreneurs; van Driel, Elusive Silver; Istituto italiano di numismatica, Per una storia del denaro nel Vicino Oriente antico; L’argent nella storia monetaria del Vicino Oriente antico; Abraham, Business and Politics under the Persian Empire; Steinkeller, “Toward a definition of private economic activity”; Paoletti, “Elusive silver?”; Baker and Jursa, Approaching the Babylonian Economy; Graslin-Thomé, Les échanges à longue distance en Mésopotamie au 1er millénaire; Jursa, Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia; Garfinkle, Entrepreneurs and Enterprise in Early Mesopotamia; Ouyang, Monetary Role of Silver.
institutions in the organization of maritime and long-range trade. Therefore, while international trade flourished and stimulated the circulation of goods, ideas, and artistic styles in some periods of antiquity, usually in the context of intense diplomatic exchanges between states, it is also true that, in fact, they were preceded and followed by periods when trade relations also flourished in the absence of powerful monarchies.

From this perspective, the commercial operations promoted by “big” institutions appear only as part of broader flows of wealth also including independent traders, mobile populations and, quite probably, a modest or “popular” demand. In fact, this perception should not come as a surprise. Since the Neolithic (at least) networks of exchanges made possible the circulation of obsidian, copper, and other goods across the Near East and its neighboring areas; so it would appear strange that such networks became suddenly somewhat “compressed” and limited to the demands of states. This misconception is probably due to the change of focus of modern scholars, from archaeology in pre-literate times to written documents (recording institutional activities) when writing first appeared. However, recent archaeological discoveries also show the vitality, extent and increase of exchanges during the 3rd and 2nd millennium BCE, when states were both powerful and weak, including the so-called “intermediate periods” in Egyptian history. States appear then not only as promoters of trade but, perhaps more accurately, as “capturers” of lucrative existing exchange networks, both to control such flows of wealth for their own profit, to increase their own income, and to avoid competing powers that could take advantage of them. Archaeology also reveals that such networks connected the Near East to Central Asia, north-eastern Africa, the Mediterranean and the areas bordering the Indian Ocean. Similar flows of wealth had China and South and Southeast Asia as their main foci, and animals and plants


52 Monroe, Scales of Fate; Sauvage, Routes maritimes et systèmes d’échanges internationaux; Aruz, Graff, and Rakic, Cultures in Contact; Canepa, “Understanding cross-cultural interaction.”

53 Parkinson and Galaty, Archaic State Interaction; Fuller, Boivin, Hoogervorst, and Allaby, “Across the Indian Ocean”; T.C. Wilkinson, Tying the Threads of Eurasia; Moreno García, “Egypt, Old to New Kingdom (2686–1069 BC).”

54 Mair and Hickman, Reconfiguring the Silk Road.
spread out from this vast area into the northern Indian Ocean and East Africa. The use of money and silver presents nevertheless quite distinctive particularities in ancient China when compared to the Graeco-Roman world.  

Another point for comparison is the role played by states in promoting large-scale “industrial” production and the consequences of such initiatives. Recent work in sites like Ramesside Qantir, among others, reveals the importance of craft activities promoted and supported by the state and linked not only to its military needs but also to the production of luxury items (high-quality textiles, glass, ivory, stone vessels, etc.) exchanged between courts or circulating between elites. Such activities required the supply of raw materials not always locally available but, quite often, sought for in distant areas, thus stimulating activities linked to maritime and overland traffic, to specialized labor division, to increased merchant operations, etc. These circuits could finally merge or complement parallel circuits held in independent hands (nomads, itinerant traders, gatherers, etc.) and stimulate more traffic and new routes, in some cases circumventing those controlled by central powers. In the same vein, emulation of the tastes and prestige goods used by the elite could result in the growth of a new demand, which, though less wealthy, would be able to sustain important commercial and production activities increasingly independent from those controlled by the states. The complex interaction of all these networks of exchanges could finally crystallize in an unstable equilibrium susceptible to unforeseeable developments. Disruption of former trade circuits (for instance when wars erupted, when traffic was hindered, or when states invested less resources in craft and trade activities) could thus ignite successive shock waves over broad areas. Seafarer populations might thus turn to more independent, alternative, and lucrative operations like piracy and settlement in distant areas (like the Sea Peoples and Vikings); new routes could bypass those traditionally controlled by states and open the path for the emergence of new states (like the ancient South Arabian or Garamantes monarchies), or even for the consolidation of the autonomy enjoyed by others (like the Phoenicians). An increasing but less wealthy demand could also result in the consolidation of new techniques of craft production based on cheaper materials (like iron, or vitreous materials), or in a broader use of substances formerly reserved to the elite or completely new, from frankincense, perfumes and oils, to silphium, silk and others. Finally, the reaction of former states could result first, in their reorganization, and later, in their transformation into impe-

55 Scheidel, “The monetary systems of the Han and Roman empires.”
56 Hodgkinson, “High status industries”; Rehren and Pusch, “Alloying and resource management in New Kingdom Egypt.”
rial powers seeking to control lucrative routes and producer areas over vast territories (like the Assyrian and Achaemenid empires or the Saite kingdom).

To conclude this section, comparative research on exchanges and flows of wealth should focus its attention beyond the role played by the states in their creation, control, and capture. “Marginal” populations appear increasingly as important actors whose initiatives, reactivity and adaptive potential were also essential in promoting, managing, and eventually diverting such flows when states flourished and collapsed, in collaboration with or in opposition to them, but always in their own interest. Furthermore, activities like financing and organizing trade or the use of silver, among others, can no longer be seen as depending almost exclusively on the initiatives implemented by states. Merchants and “entrepreneurs” operated alongside or independently from rulers, and their strategies of investment and social elevation affected the way in which economy and institutions were organized and, consequently, they altered the balance of power between different sectors of the elite. Therefore, their operations, together with those of mobile populations, are inseparable from the existence of “invisible” markets and flows of commodities and materials whose impact on, and complex relations with, states suggest new venues for future research. Finally, strictly private affairs and private interests were also carried out by people bearing court, priestly and administrative titles. Their governmental connections should not disguise the fact that they also carried out private business or that they used institutions for their own profit, for example, as holders of prebends and institutional land, including Egypt itself.

**Building and Passing on Power: The Fabric of Ancient States**

Ancient Near Eastern states were thus far from monopolizing every source of wealth, from monitoring all the activities of their subjects, and from controlling

---


all flows of wealth passing through and alongside their borders. However, monarchies succeeded in consolidating themselves as undisputed centers of supreme power and wealth in the territories under their authority, in preventing the consolidation of feudal landlords and, apparently, in avoiding the consolidation of significant alternative poles of accumulation of authority and wealth able to defy their rule.⁶⁰ To put it another way, cases where trade was intense and “money” was used in transactions, at least in some states and periods, did not result in capitalist relations of production, while the existence of territorial magnates did not lead towards the emergence of feudalism. What is more, periods when states collapsed or when “monetization,” markets, investment and even (pre-)capitalist relations seemed to gain in importance hardly witnessed any evolution towards feudal or capitalist forms of production. Here lays the main core of the very notion of a tributary state, solid enough to preclude the consolidation of any durable alternative to its power and resilient enough to preserve monarchies for long periods of time. Thus, tributary states succeeded in some way to “seal” spaces where a class of autonomous landlords with exclusive, inalienable, and heritable rights over their tenures could have flourished; or where money-based relations could have finally spread out and transformed everything into commodities, from land to labor. In fact, limited forms of merchant and agrarian capitalism, usually restricted to specific economic sectors (like plantations, international trade, or textile production for export), were common in many pre-industrial societies, without resulting in a progressive evolution towards capitalist relations of production comparable to those of modern Europe.⁶¹

Taxation appears as the predominant element. In a world where agriculture was the main source of wealth, power, and income, tributary states managed to establish a direct and unrivalled relation of extraction of surplus with producers (mainly peasants) through taxation. The obvious implication is that this system left no room for other modalities of significant surplus extraction, like rents imposed by feudal landlords over their subjects or tribute “privatized” by imperial governors. Therefore potentates, high dignitaries, members of the court, and nobles depended on revenue granted by the state in order to keep their standard of living; they also depended on a ceremonial apparatus made of public rewards, rituals, specific cultural codes and honors bestowed by the king which conferred prestige and promoted emulation among members of the nobility. However, such state nobility should not be equated with

---

⁶⁰ In some dubious cases states appear as confederacies of autonomous rulers who recognized a common sovereign (Potts, “Monarchy, factionalism and warlordism”).

⁶¹ Banaji, “Putting theory to work.”
an independent aristocracy, capable of its own means of living (through land ownership) and of coercion (private armies, law courts). That is why it is so difficult to detect significant independent landowners in ancient Near Eastern societies. Land tenures were usually associated with institutions (temples, the crown) and extensive kin-groups, while buying and selling rights over institutional land tenures were common practice but never lead to the consolidation of a land market where land was considered a commodity like any other. Land was certainly bought and sold among particulars but it seems that this practice was limited and that, in any case, it never led to the consolidation of a class of landlords owning extensive private holdings. Social practices (like fictive adoptions), royal measures (like sporadic cancellations of debts), and dense networks of reciprocity and social obligation (kinship, village solidarity), further contributed to limit the scope of a land market.62 As for “commercial firms,” they appear basically as family enterprises subject to periodic divisions due to inheritances, marriages, etc., and involved in a diversified set of activities (borrowing and lending “money,” tax-farming, financing trade operations, investing in plantations and building land, acquisition of prebends in temples, etc.), thus making it difficult to transform into durable capitalist “firms” with long-term consolidated capitals. Finally, the economic and symbolic resources at the disposal of the crown provided this institution with an indisputable authority to manipulate and settle disputes among factions of the ruling class, as well as to grant wealth and status. While, at the local level, potentates, chiefs of villages, etc., constituted a largely autonomous sub-elite, the reduced extent of their authority made them no rivals for the king and his agents. At a higher level, the wealth and social position of the nobility depended on their connections to the king and the royal administration. The monarchy appears thus as indispensable in building an elite aligned with its interests and concerned with the preservation of an institution to which they owed their prominent position. Certainly, nobles, favorites, and potentates could usurp royal prerogatives and income; but such episodes were ephemeral in the long term, and hardly result in their transformation into feudal landlords. They manipulated and used for their own benefit the tools put at their disposal by the state, but their acts were confined nevertheless within the limits of the state. This explains why, when central authority collapsed, what emerged in its place was a myriad of micro-states or local powers, each one replicating the

governmental structures and tax system of the disappeared monarchy on a much more limited territorial sphere.

States managed then to build and model the ruling elite, to integrate it within the structure of the monarchy, and to prevent the emergence of any serious rival to its own authority. In some way, states and their institutions could be considered as highly effective in destroying kin solidarities among the elite and in transforming kinship networks into a socially dismembered body of individuals depending on the king for their own reproduction as members of the ruling class. Such “depersonalization” is apparent in the recruiting methods applied in many different domains, from bureaucracy to clergy, from eunuchs to slave/foreign soldiers (mamluks, jenizars): social construction based on kin links were destroyed and replaced by new ones where titles, specific competences, ceremonies, and rituals recreated alternative forms of re-socialization of individuals, cemented on intermarriage between members of the elite and the royal family, formally ignoring the extensive kin in which such individuals were born. Obviously this does not mean that such people severed all links with their extended families, or did not try to benefit them through their position and rank (but in competition with other families). However, the mechanisms of reproduction of the whole system were independent of such family ties and relied on more impersonal ones.

Institutions like temples played a crucial role in such “depersonalization” and acted as a kind of socio-economic “modulator” that helped avoid the consolidation of alternative foci of wealth and authority. From a social point of view, temples opened paths for social promotion and acquisition of wealth and prestige; and Pharaohs used them to integrate local and palatine elites into the machinery of the state (as when kings proclaimed that they had recruited priests from among the members of the elite). Once again one should differentiate between local temples, usually in the hands of the local elite, and “national” temples largely dependent on the king’s largesse. However, the priesthood also involved some kind of depersonalization and distance from the rest of society: purity norms, dietary restrictions, literacy competence, highly regulated sexuality, etc. Whether priests enjoyed considerable temple resources these remained, nevertheless, inalienable. From an economic standpoint, temples appear as economic agencies involved in the exploitation of huge amounts of land, in trade activities, in the transformation of agricultural and craft production (like textiles) into “money,” and in fueling market activities. But, at the same time, and contrary to modern enterprises, profits were not reinvested but largely treasured and transformed into sumptuary consumption, as lists

---

of precious temple statues and equipment reveal. In this way, temples modulated flows of wealth and diverted them from modern forms of accumulation and reinvestment based on individual initiative. While being important economic actors, the inalienability of their considerable resources (land, precious metals) detracted them from “markets” and thus helped prevent the consolidation of significant poles of accumulation of wealth outside the monarchy.

Another way of achieving this goal was through the inalienability of their patrimony; the patronage of kings and the protection of gods made them ideal providers of institutional security. Such security could take the form of regular revenue (prebends, remunerated ritual service, participation in offerings presented to divinities, access to temple land). In other instances it appeared as inclusion into a protective patronage network, well-linked to potentates, high dignitaries, even the royal palace itself. Temples thus attracted “investments” through the provision of prebends and priestly positions. Another strategy consisted in attracting donations that further increased their patrimony. It would be too naïve to consider donations simply as pure acts of piety. They also conformed to specific strategies aiming, particularly, to join a solid institution with extensive networks of influence and power and to benefit from the security it procured, especially when individual strategies of social promotion were at stake or when preserving one’s patrimony became urgent in periods of political turmoil. In any case, donations made by individuals further increased the fragmentation of their kin and their resources.64 Such strategies were common in pre-capitalist societies, including Egypt65 and many regions of Asia.66

To finish this section we should have a final word about the territorial organization of ancient empires. According to modern perceptions about territorial states with well-defined borders and well-delimited and exclusive areas of sovereignty, historical maps tend to present ancient empires as continuous territories submitted to the control of a central power. This perspective might prove to be quite deceptive as populations living in mountainous areas, forests, swamps, and tribal zones inside their frontiers could enjoy a large autonomy—if not a complete independence—because of their relative remoteness and the logistical difficulties for imposing an effective control upon them. In other

64 Moreno García, “Introduction. Élites et états tributaires” and “The ‘other’ administration”; Campagno, “El modo de producción tributario y el antiguo Egipto.”
65 A recent discussion can be found in Moreno García, “Conflicting interests over the possession and transfer of institutional land” and “Land donations.”
instances, states took the form of networks of nodes of authority separated by areas frequented by mobile populations; borders became thus porous and fluctuating, as did the claims from different polities over a given ill-defined area.67 Nomadic populations also frequented vast areas, and their control by central powers was usually problematic, fluctuating between alliances and collaboration to overt conflict. Finally, marked differences in resources, settlement density, environmental conditions, connectivity, and ritual significance favored certain areas as potential nodes of power; when several of them coexisted in a single policy, as in the case of Egypt, their durable integration within the monarchy could pass through the acceptance of their political idiosyncrasies (including the prominent position of their elites), thus paving the way for future instability and, eventually, the split of the kingdom. Inversely, other areas appear as “reserves of statehood” through which monarchies managed to reconstruct themselves after periods of division, like the Theban area in Egypt, or northern China.68

All these considerations reveal the existence of many paths for comparative analysis which should help characterize the particularities of the pharaonic monarchies, especially in the light of recent discussions about the organization of tributary states. More generally, they also suggest the areas in which ancient Egypt could positively contribute to a renewed formulation of a state theory in the line of prestigious precedents like Michael Mann’s *The Sources of Social Power* or Shmuel Eisentadt’s *The Political Systems of Empires*.

### Conclusion

This essay certainly does not intend to explore all possible paths for comparative research between ancient Egypt and other pre-industrial societies of the past. Rather, it aims to suggest some areas where such work could prove stimulating in order to answer crucial questions frequently neglected in Egyptology. Hence contributions from other pre-industrial societies, under a multidisciplinary perspective, should certainly help reinterpret the pharaonic past and provide more solid conceptual and heuristic tools in order to achieve this task. Too often considered the quintessential example of “despotic,” “hydrau-


lic” absolute power, sometimes reduced to the condition of a historical anomaly made of conservatism, monarchical continuity, and an astonishing historical length, Egypt can and should contribute to current debates about how ancient states were structured and interacted in the longue durée. Furthermore, the alleged exceptionalism and conservatism ascribed to ancient Egypt are nothing more than outdated vestiges of late nineteenth-century historiography based on a too literal interpretation of ancient sources. However, the effects of such notions still hamper the analysis of the pharaonic past. That is why concepts like “monarchy,” “kingdom/empire,” “intermediate period,” “unity,” “centralization,” “politics,” and many others deserve a full reinterpretation before reintegrating (or rejecting) them as operative tools in a new narrative that, in the end, should reveal that ancient Egypt was a dynamic and “normal” node within a vast network of political entities spread across the ancient world.

Abbreviations

JANEH Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History
JESHO Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient
KASKAL Kaskal. Journal of History, Environment, and Cultures of the Ancient Near East

Bibliography


――――. “The limits of Pharaonic administration: patronage, informal authorities, mobile populations and ‘invisible’ social sectors.” In Diachronic Trends in Ancient


———. “‘Sea Peoples’ and the economic structure of the late Second Millennium in the Eastern Mediterranean.” In *Mediterranean Peoples in Transition: Thirteenth to


