

Using theories of social and political decline to gain greater understanding of the end of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period

*Summary of a talk given to IAA Forum on the 5th of February 2013 by **Edward Mushett Cole** in presentation of his intended area of research to the postgraduate community at the University of Birmingham.*

My talk began by presenting a short history of the periods included within my thesis as many in the audience were not Egyptologists. Beginning with the accession of Merneptah I proceeded through each dynasty detailing the most important events, from foreign invasions under the 19th, 20th and 25th dynasties to the building activities (or lack thereof) under the Libyan 21st, 22nd and 23rd dynasties. This section provided an explanation of the periods for non-specialists, allowing them to follow the rest of the talk more easily. As well as this it provided the background for my thesis, as these were the events that I will be attempting to gain greater understanding of through the use of theories from a range of academic sources, e.g. anthropology, economics, classics etc. I ended this section with a table containing a list of successive kings (from different dynasties) for the entire period in Egypt under study. Alongside that I placed a list of the British kings and queens necessary to create the equivalent period of history (working backwards from the current Queen), which required me to go back as far the beginning of the Wars of the Roses and Edward IV's first stint on the throne. This not only had the effect of very clearly demonstrating the scale of the study period to both specialists and non-specialists, but also helped demonstrate one of my key points, namely that the current descriptions of decline are simplistic for such a large period of Egyptian history.

From this visual aid I moved on to discuss historiography of the periods and their descriptions. Many of these were written towards the end of the 19th and start of the 20th century and thus have strong colonial and racist influences, particularly the early histories of Brugsch and Breasted. A particularly clear example, discussing the origins of the 25th dynasty, comes from Brugsch (1879, 226): 'the minds of an imperfectly developed people must needs, under skilful guidance, soon show themselves pliable and submissive to the dominant priestly caste'. In addition to this I mentioned how it is only in the last 40 years that these periods have been studied as subjects themselves, previously being considered an addendum to the preceding period of empire in the New Kingdom or as a precursor to the Late Period. I explained how this attitude and the relative lack of study has led to the persistence of descriptions of the events of these periods from the older, more general histories and it is precisely for these reasons that I am studying them. I also mentioned that, as a discipline, Egyptology has resisted applying theories developed in other disciplines and thus the use of such theories would make my approach distinctive from those currently utilised. It also may bring out details or explanations overlooked in previous studies of the periods and might, therefore, provide greater understanding of the events that unfolded.

From this I moved on to briefly discuss the theories that I intend to use, although at this early stage I could only suggest broad theoretical areas that I am intending to draw from. These divide into two main sections, those based around theories of decline or catastrophe and those drawn from theories of political structure. I explained that, as the periods have a long tradition of being described as a time of

decline for ancient Egypt, the theories that should be most useful would be those from the first category. However, most of these theories, especially those which deal with the idea of catastrophe, have the society under study disappear to be subsequently replaced by something else. This is clearly not the case with Egypt and so I, therefore, stated that I currently think that these will be of limited use in achieving my aims and that it will be the second category of theories which will actually provide more insight.

I then detailed, roughly, what sort of theories were contained within this category. I explained that most were drawn from anthropology, particularly the theories related to the study of sources of power and their control by institutions and governments. I also attempted to demonstrate why I believe that these theories will help gain greater understanding of the periods, for example the application of theories concerned with the presence of political landscapes. These discuss how societies, particularly ones with centralised governments, establish and reinforce meanings for members of that society to recognise through modifications to the landscape such as the construction of large buildings, irrigation systems etc.

As this was a talk designed to act as an introduction to my research topic and period, I did not have any conclusions to present and so ended with the explanation of the theories with which I am intending to begin my research. After this there were several questions from the audience on a wide range of topics, which continued on over drinks in the pub!

Brugsch, H. 1871, *A History of Egypt under the Pharaohs*, London