ARCHAEOLOGIES *of* SOCIAL LIFE

LYNN MESKELL

Archaeologies of Social Life

Age, Sex, Class *et cetera* in Ancient Egypt

Lynn Meskell

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Les historiens, s'ils n'ont pas eu tort de renoncer à expliquer les actes du peuples par la volonté des rois, doivent la remplacer par la psychologie de l'individu, l'individu médiocre.

Marcel Proust, *A la recherche de temps perdu*

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Prologue

> Society is a very complex structure, and therefore the study of it cannot be simple. In any country at one time there are many varieties of it in different classes, and probably the contemporary differences are as great as those of many centuries in any one class. In different lands under different climates, with different ancestries and different religions, and still more different modes of life, the diversity far exceeds our power of realisation . . . It is not too much to say that the discoverer is the maker of society. Each step of discovery or invention reacts on the structure of social relations.
>
> W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Social Life in Ancient Egypt*

Flinders Petrie, acclaimed as the father of Egyptian archaeology, was perhaps a greater theoretician than has previously been thought. He saw the un-realized potentials of variability and difference in archaeology, especially Egyptian archaeology, and the importance of a contextual approach. Perhaps more importantly, he acknowledged that we make our own history in a very real sense. These issues are central concerns of this book. Difference and individuality are key concepts throughout this volume since they are indelibly linked to the fundamental social factors of sex, sexuality, class, status, ethnicity and age. Some might feel that these issues are very much of our time and perhaps not relevant to antiquity: they say more about us than them. Countering this I would suggest that for many groups, such as Egyptians of the New Kingdom (*c.*550–1070 BC), these identity issues were also pressing, although they may have been played out in very different ways. However, I also agree that we are writing our own history as we write the past. Questions of difference have a particular valency for me at the time of writing. Being Australian, female and coming from a social position which has no correlate in the British class system has subsequently reinforced my own variant position within the Oxbridge system over the past five years. When I was

interviewed for the fellowship at Oxford, the first question posed by the panel concerned my place of birth, a small seaside town in northern New South Wales. They asked simply: how did *you* get here? Somehow I had transgressed my expected role in the scheme of things. Identity issues are always political ones: recognizing the valency of difference in the contemporary setting prompts us to consider the power of such machinations in the past. And the personal is always political, yet that measure of rebalancing the scales – past and present – should be viewed as a vehicle for positive re-evaluation.

It is for these reasons that I embrace a third wave feminist approach and apply it throughout this volume. While issues of sex are central to this approach, other salient identity issues are given prominence, be they class, sexuality, ethnicity or age. For many feminists these other vectors are just as important, if not more so. Simply being female has never proved substantive grounds for unity, and experience in the academic world serves to reinforce this. So while it is true that applying a third wave feminist approach is part of a personal project, I would argue that it is similarly a closer fit to the ancient evidence. Unsurprisingly, social life for women of the Egyptian elite classes was very different from that of domestic servants and slaves, and this is conclusively borne out by the Egyptian material data. Social experience also changed radically over the course of one's life and that recognition of temporality is something we might share with the ancients. In view of this, one could argue that the traditional woman-centred approach of gender archaeology, while valuable, cannot completely encompass the range of social relations experienced in the village of Deir el Medina (*c.*1500–1100 BC), the subject of this volume. I hope to have gone beyond finding or adding women (Wylie 1991: 34), although perhaps the *stirring* remains.

For many reasons this is an unorthodox project. It is not often that social theory is applied to Egyptian material and even less often that archaeologists are faced with the archaeology of Egypt – a *rapprochement* between fields could only be a productive step forward. Here I realize that my research falls outside many traditional categorizations. An interest in the archaeology of village life and of ordinary people is not always seen as the usual domain of Egyptologists. According to Andrén (1998: 41), '[t]heir focus on texts, pictures, and architecture has led to a concentration on philology, art history, and to a certain extent political history.' I hope to present another face of Egyptian scholarship to a wider archaeological audience who often deride the field for its inherent conservatism and general irrelevance. As an archaeologist primarily, I am always aware of the aura Egypt

holds, especially when surrounded in the UK with colleagues interested specifically in prehistoric Europe. Many consider Egyptian material too exemplary and too different to bear on other research. But Egypt does offer a viable data set, perhaps comparable to the complex societies of Meso-America, and one which cannot be ignored simply because of the wealth of its data. It is also one of the most convincing test cases for the application of social theory in archaeology, as I hope the current work will demonstrate.

In the first two chapters I attempt to set the theoretical scene in terms of individuals, bodies and personhood, as well as clarifying many of the new issues surrounding sex, sexuality and difference. The following chapters attempt to demonstrate how they are to be put into practice with a substantive data set, the village of Deir el Medina. These are complex themes and the reader might ask 'why Egypt?' or, more specifically, 'why this village?' For me, Deir el Medina is the Montaillou of the East (Le Roy Ladurie 1980), and there are many stories to tell. Its history begins early in the New Kingdom, probably under the reign of pharaoh Tuthmosis I (*c.*1504–1492 BC). At that time the settlement was known as the *Place of Truth*, or simply *the village* by its occupants. The inhabitants formed a rather special community, specifically assembled by pharaoh and the state and placed in a purpose-built village surrounded by an enclosure wall. Their *raison d'être* was clear, they were the architects and workmen who created the royal tombs in the adjacent Valley of the Kings. These men constructed the rock-cut tombs, decorated them lavishly and were involved in the final burial of pharaoh. The team was drawn from a number of locations and permanently housed, with their families, in regularly constructed dwellings (Gutgesell 1989). The state also provided for them, sending rations on a monthly basis (Černý 1973; Valbelle 1985). They also supplied slaves or servants to each household to assist with domestic duties. It appears to have been a unique existence, closely intertwined with and even monitored by the state. It would seem to be the perfect exemplar for a top-down approach to social history, ripe for studies of structuration or habitus, of inculcation and emulation. The village should have functioned in a more structured way, as opposed to other settlements that were free to develop more fluid, organic social and material trajectories. But *the village* has challenged many of our preconceptions and the villagers themselves led extraordinary lives. Of their many stories are tales of murder, assault, bribery, robbery, private enterprise, legal battles, adoptions, illicit pregnancies, social climbing, seductions and affairs, and a surfeit of family problems. It renders a colourful tapestry of

social and anti-social behaviour in which individuals manoeuvred rather freely. As for the state, the workmen liberally took days off, some stole from the royal tombs, many went on strike due to slow payments and engaged in private enterprise at the state's expense. But there were also more routine incidents, such as the constant modification and expansion of village houses, trading state-supplied servants for other services, taking female slaves as partners, and so on. The possibilities were wide open. If we imagine that the villagers led a constrained life, perpetuating views and practices sanctioned by the state, leading the lives of dupes – we are creating a misleading fiction and selling short their vivid life experiences.

The village provides a perfect scenario to explore the tensions of society and self. In one of the most state-oriented contexts of the New Kingdom we can observe the desires and practices of people who stand outside the system, impelling us to question what constituted Egyptian experience, what counted as representative or normative? But the story does not end there. The richness of the material presents a vast social mosaic, which is comprised of the experiences of many individuals: elite men and women, servants and slaves, children of various ages, foreigners, the disabled, the elderly and outcast. Each presents a different picture of life in the village, challenging the nomothetic analyses one might ordinarily proffer. They catch us up, making our narratives more complex and messy, and potentially closer to ancient realities. Many of the issues surrounding these social relationships find a resonance in our own society: love and desire, the fluidity of relationships, family tensions, domestic violence, loss and betrayal. Irrespective of these familiar themes, the villagers experienced such issues through their own cultural lens and sought to resolve the disjunctures of social life in different and distinct ways. We might draw from this that social life is immensely varied and contingent and that what we take as essential or normative is predicated solely on recent experience: 'sexuality' is one such sphere, the construction of 'childhood' is another. It is not simply that the theoretical arguments bear upon modern social experience, but that the actual evidence of ancient encounters might open up a horizon of possibilities – another 'etc.' in the spectrum of cultural potentials.

Sourcing these fragments of social life, we find much evidence embedded in the substantial materiality of Deir el Medina. Today the site has some 68 well-preserved houses within an enclosure wall. From the archaeological remains we know that the 18th Dynasty village (*c.*1500–1307 BC) was smaller, some 40 houses, and the burials

reveal a markedly ranked community. The wealthier cemetery was situated on the western escarpment, while the poorer cemetery was on the eastern slope. The Ramesside Period (*c.*1295–1069 BC) was marked by a larger, more cosmopolitan village with inter-related families and larger, more complex generational tombs. Many family members, including women and children, were incorporated into the tombs of the Western Necropolis, while the Eastern cemetery fell out of use. These tomb complexes show much greater wealth in terms of construction and decoration and suggest a less ranked community than in earlier times. The enclosed village was surrounded by almost 400 tombs containing burials dating from the 18th Dynasty to Graeco-Roman and Christian times. Those bodies have extraordinary histories, imparting knowledge about concepts of the self and embodiment, cultural trends, social difference, age/sex/class/ethnicity issues and, ultimately, personal histories. In addition, Deir el Medina is the most literate extant village in pharaonic history, yielding thousands of ostraca (inscribed potsherds or limestone flakes) and fragments of papyri, presenting yet another important corpus of evidence to draw upon and to use dialectically with material sources. John Baines (1988: 209) eloquently said of this dialectic that 'archaeology and writing complement each other's silences.' Despite the richness of the textual data, specifically in gleaning social information, we must be critical of its elite production, its canonical styles and specific genres. The archaeological remains may not always reveal the specificities of social interactions, yet they can offer more concrete evidence of social inequalities and differences, for example, which may be smoothed over in textual accounts. These are methodological issues not specific to studies of Egypt, but to many archaeological cases where texts are implicated (see Andrén 1998), be they Near Eastern, Mediterranean, classical, Mayan, medieval or historical archaeologies.

Many apologies have been made by Egyptologists for the particular nature and differential preservation of the Deir el Medina material, one result being that no complete, systematic research has been undertaken for the house or tomb assemblages *in toto*: this current research represents a first attempt at quantifying the extant data. While many qualifications need to be made, the Deir el Medina data still represent our best evidence for a New Kingdom settlement and associated cemeteries. Some years ago a rather unorthodox Egyptologist also attempted to uncover the people of Deir el Medina. John Romer (1984: xi) prefaced his book *Ancient Lives* by saying: