

Atzler, Michael

Untersuchungen zur Herausbildung von Herrschaftsformen in  
Ägypten

(Hildesheimer Ägyptologische Beiträge, 16)

Hildesheim, Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981, 263 pp.

The question of the origin of the Early State has recently attracted much attention from anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, and political scientists. Amongst the major studies on the subject covering the last twenty years mention can be made of: Morton H. Fried, *The Evolution of Political Society* (New York, 1967); Robert L. Carneiro, *A Theory of the Origin of A State* (in: *Science*, vol. 169, 1970, 733-738); Elman R. Service, *Origins of the State and Civilization* (New York, 1975); and, in particular, two collections of papers edited by J.M. Claessen and Peter Skalnik: *The Early State* (The Hague - Paris - New York, 1978) and *The Study of the State* (same places, 1981). Clearly, the subject forms one of the major topics in the social sciences at present.

In this connection it should be a pleasure to announce the appearance of a study on the origins of the state in Ancient Egypt, one of the earliest in human history and, moreover, one of the few pristine states. On the one hand, an up-to-date presentation of the available evidence would be a valuable tool to the comparatists, who could then test their theories on an example which, until today, has hardly been attainable to their studies (1). On the other hand, attention paid to the formation of the state would mean that the notorious insularity of Egyptology, rightly deplored and condemned

---

(1) The egyptological literature is, unfortunately, barely comprehensible to outsiders; for instance, Kaplony's studies on the inscriptions of the Early Dynastic Period. Summaries of the development during the late Prehistoric to Early Dynastic Periods, such as Emery's *Archaic Egypt* or Edwards' chapter *The Early Dynastic Period in Egypt* in the *CAH*, 3rd ed., do not present material to solve most of the questions put by the comparatists.

in several recent publications (2), would begin to be replaced by a dialogue with specialists in other fields of study. Without actualizing the dialectical relation between factual data and theory, both a deeper insight into specific cases (e.g., the state in Ancient Egypt) and a progressive understanding of the problems in general is simply impossible.

Unfortunately, the publication here reviewed fails completely in both aspects. The author hardly seems aware of the extensive literature on the subject which has appeared during the last twenty years. Admittedly, some of the studies mentioned above were only published after he had completed the manuscript, according to the Preface in 1976. Even so, it seems to me unwarranted to publish a book just five years later without any attempt to bring it slightly more up-to-date, especially in view of the rapid developments in the recent discussions. But even those major studies mentioned above which were already published prior to 1976 appear to be unknown to the author. Carneiro's paper, for instance, does not feature in the bibliography, although mention of an earlier article by that scholar proves that Atzler at least knows of his existence. Some other well-known social scientists are indeed quoted, like Boserup, Sahlins (3), Steward, and, particularly, Wittfogel (*Oriental Despotism*). That the latter's theory concerning irrigation as the prime mover in the emergence of the early state was rejected by numerous scholars (on account of evidence from countries all over the world) before 1976, appears to be unknown to Atzler (4).

(2) See, particularly, Kent Weeks (ed.), *Egyptology and the Social Sciences* (Cairo 1979). For evidence that the unfortunate insularity of egyptologists as regards social problems - it does not hold true for the study of language or religion, which have for a long time been evaluated with full knowledge of the general disciplines in these fields - may draw to an end, I mention the thesis of Detlev Franke, *Altägyptische Verwandtschaftsbezeichnungen im Mittleren Reich* (Hamburg 1983), who shows to be familiar with the terminology and theories of the anthropologists.

(3) Not his important work: *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago 1972).

(4) For a concise and critical survey of the hypotheses and theories on the Origin of the State, see Claessen and Skalnik, *The Early State*, chapter 1. Cf. also Cohen's defense of a multicausal explication, same work, chapter 2.

Even if the book under review falls short in its theoretical aspects, it could yet be useful if it presented the Egyptian data in such a way that comparatists would be able to use the evidence. This, however, is also not the case, since Atzler hardly presents any facts, but, instead, mainly his own theories and suppositions. Moreover, the book is written in a language that strongly reminds us of the style of the 19th century German philosophers, with sentences of, in many instances, seven or more lines and endlessly repeated compound words, which makes it barely legible for the non-German reader.

Furthermore, even the Egyptian data are now partly out of date. In his adherence to the theory of Wittfogel, the author refutes Schenkel's thesis that artificial irrigation on a large scale was first introduced at the end of the Old Kingdom. It is true that Schenkel's book, *Die Bewässerungsrevolution im Alten Ägypten* (Mainz 1978), was not published until after Atzler's study had been written, so that he could only direct his arguments against Schenkel's preliminary summary in *GM* 11 (1974). The fact that Atzler did not take the trouble to revise his manuscript in view of the full argumentation of Schenkel in his book appears unjustified (5). Moreover, the arguments with which Schenkel's thesis is rejected are not very convincing. In the extensive note 160 (p. 59-60) he begins to state that it is "letztlich müssig, darüber zu streiten, welche wassertechnischen Massnahmen zu welcher Zeit zuerst auftraten". This is the core of the matter; one does not have to dispute about the facts, one has to attempt to prove them, whether "müssig" or not. References to *Urk. I*, 212 (the degree for the Snofru pyramid by Pepy I, hence from the VIth Dynasty, though indeed not yet the end of the Old Kingdom), statements that the canals were rarely, if ever, purely means of communication (what proof is there for that ?), or, that it is "kaum möglich, alle erscheinenden Hinweise auf wassertechnische Unternehmungen allein auf Gartenbau zu beziehen" (why not? How many certain instances are known?) - all these

---

(5) The more so since Erika Endesfelder in her paper *Zur Frage der Bewässerung im Pharaonischen Ägypten* (*ZÄS* 106, 1979, 37-51), came to roughly the same conclusions quite independently from Schenkel.

are not really convincing arguments. The conclusion (p. 60): "Auf jeden Fall dürfte es wenig wahrscheinlich sein" that the irrigation works date only from the First Intermediate Period, does not look too strong. One expects a scholar to present the facts embedded into a theory, not to state that things are "kaum möglich" or "wenig wahrscheinlich".

Another example of this style of reasoning - as well as of the mode in which the author expresses his ideas - may be the following sentence (p. 56): "Wie wäre es z.B. anders zu erklären, dass die Entwicklung neuer, für die ägyptische Überschwemmungs-Wirtschaft typischer, gesamtgesellschaftlicher Organisations- und Kooperations-Formen und zentraler Leitung - und das zuerst im Siedlungsmasstab mit allmählich steigenden Zentralisations-Tendenzen bis hin zu Territorial-Herrschaften und Einheits-Reich - jeweils mit einer spürbaren und beschleunigten ökonomischen Expansion vergesellschaftet ist". Even if the facts here referred to are correct, simultaneousness is no proof for a causal relation. One feels inclined to refer the author to studies such as Richard Hodges' *Dark Ages Economics* (London 1982) for an example of how such complex questions are dealt with in modern science. Sentences like "wie wäre es anders zu erklären" smell too much after the tricks of the sophists and should not occur in scientific studies.

Not only is the book written in a muddled style, without using theoretical views nor presenting the Egyptian data, but the entire style of the author's reasoning reminds the reader of that of the 19th Century philosophers, if not of that of Locke or Rousseau. "Grössere erdbewegende und wasser-technische Massnahmen sind dauerhaft nur bei entsprechender gesellschaftlicher Kooperation möglich, d.h. sie entwickeln sich als fester Bestandteil des ökonomischen Systems erst im Zuge der Ausbildung einer Herrschafts-Integration mehrerer Gruppen und ihrer Gebiete, wobei eine allmähliche Vergrösserung der Herrschafts-Gebiete sinnvoll erscheint und dementsprechend auch die technologischen und kooperativen Möglichkeiten und damit die Qualität des wassertechnischen Systems eingeschätzt

werden sollte" (p. 63). What, exactly, does all this mean? What, for instance, means here "Herrschafts-Integration"? The Dutch "waterschappen" came into existence during the Middle Ages without inference from the state. What exactly happened in Egyptian Prehistory, if - what I do not believe - irrigation works date from that time? One can easily *reason* that the integration of areas and the origin of irrigation are interdependent, but is that correct? One may note that Endesfelder (see note 5) argues that, even in the New Kingdom, the management of the irrigation works was entirely in the hands of local communities, the state only exercising a vague sort of control. Whether this is correct requires further proof, but *proof*, no "rational" theorizing such as Atzler presents.

Of course, a book of 263 pages must contain *some* material that may be of value. However, the second main thesis of the author, namely the gradual development during the Prehistory of a class society, can hardly be termed surprising. "Ägyptische Herrschaft bildet sich allmählich eigenständig im Schoss eines fest gefügten hausgemeinschaftlichen Systems mit weitgehend hausgemeinschaftlicher Verfügung über Produktions-Mittel und Mehrprodukt, als Leitungsinstanz unter spezifischen Bedingungen der ägyptischen Überschwemmungs-Wirtschaft zum Nutzen der Gesamtgesellschaft und nicht vorrangig und sogleich nur als Unterdrückungs-Instrument - selbst wenn eine allmähliche Macht-Akkumulation bei der Führung anhebt" (p. 179). Hence, not quite the idea of Friedrich Engels, but the same speculative type of reasoning, without sufficient data. A theory, and an antiquated at that, with no newly discovered facts that could actually show how the emergence of class society and state has taken place. That the available material from a funerary context, which the author presents in his appendix, could be used to support such a general theory, is clear; but, arranged along other lines, this evidence could just as well be used to sup-

port any other theory about the origin of the state (6).

A few years ago the author, in an article entitled *Randglossen zur ägyptischen Vorgeschichte* (JEOL VII, No. 22, 1972, 228-246), refuted the, even today not yet quite abandoned, theory that the Egyptian state originated from the conquest of the Delta by the nomads of Upper Egypt, a late - probably mostly unconsciously conceived - offspring of Franz Oppenheimer's "Überlagerungstheorie". Atzler's argument that there was not sufficient difference in the ecological situation between the Nile Valley and the Delta to warrant this theory was quite convincing. One would have expected the author to proceed along those lines, and it is therefore the more of a deception to find him returning in the present book to the style of reasoning of the 19th Century. One wonders why the editor of the *Hildesheimer Ägyptologische Beiträge* accepted it for his valuable and reputable series of monographs.

Leiden, August 1983

Jac. J. JANSSEN  
Emmalaan 38  
2341 JR Oegstgeest

- 
- (6) Michael A. Hoffman, *Egypt Before the Pharaohs* (London and Henley, 1980), presents the prehistoric evidence in a far more extensive and useful way, not the least because this book is written in a style that makes it enjoyable for the layman. He devotes part of it (p. 267-354) to the transition from Prehistory to the Early Dynastic Period, dealing mainly with social, economic and cultural aspects, but not without penetrating remarks regarding the political development. Although he too still believes in the simultaneous emergence of artificial irrigation and state, this book at least fulfills the two requirements of presenting hard facts and applying current theories.