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ON HEKANAKHT PAPERS

BRIEF REFLECTIONS AS A HOMAGE TO CIRO CARDOSO (1942-2013)

Augusto Gayubas | University of Buenos Aires / CONICET

On June 29, 2013, historian Ciro Flamarion Cardoso died at the age of 70 in the city of Niterói, Rio de Janeiro. Since the seventies, he has been internationally known for his contribution to historical research and his concerns with the methodological foundations of the historian's work. His major interest was to study historical issues privileging theoretical approaches.

His contribution to the study of ancient Egypt falls within these broader concerns. It is evident in a number of books, theses and articles (e.g., *O Egito Antigo*, 1982; *Trabalho compulsório na antiguidade*, 1984; *Uma interpretação das estruturas econômicas do Egito Faraônico*, 1987; *Sete olhares sobre a antiguidade*, 1994; *Deuses, múmias e ziggurats: uma comparação das religiões antigas do Egito e da Mesopotâmia*, 1999). His work makes him one of those exceptional researchers who incorporate critical theoretical thinking—in his case, of Marxist roots—into the analysis of ancient societies and, in particular, of what we usually call ancient Egypt. A review of Cardoso's egyptological work would require many pages of reference to his multiple contributions. My aim here is somehow different: to simply evoke his memory by considering his interpretation of the so-called "Hekanakht papers."

These documents consist of seven papyri found in 1922 at Deir el-Bahri, Western Thebes,[1] and dated to the Eleventh Dynasty (mid-twentieth century BC). They are divided into five letters and two documents of accounts and records. What is interesting about these papers, published for the first time in 1962,[2] is that they provide most valuable information about the life of Hekanakht, a funerary priest who served the cult of vizier Ipi and wrote several letters to his own family with instructions on how to manage his rural residence and resources in his absence. Hekanakht might be described as the head of a household: he was responsible for the estate, the economic resources (cereals, flax and cattle) and the people who lived there (all of them relatives, except for a trusted

married workman and some unmarried female servants).

Among other issues discussed by scholars, it is particularly relevant the question of the economic role of Hekanakht in relation to the general functioning of the ancient Egyptian economy. This has been a controversial issue. With regard to the interpretation of some passages of the letters and accounts, British egyptologist Barry Kemp argued that Hekanakht would have taken economic decisions strictly based on the calculation of profits; this would make him a private economic agent subtracted from the economy of the state.[3]

Cardoso opposes Kemp's "formalist" interpretation to Klaus Baer's "substantivist" one. In a certain way, the first of Baer's statements does not seem far from the formalist stance put forward by Kemp: according to Baer, Hekanakht effectively represents a figure who seeks to accumulate wealth through strategies of maximization of incomes and rationing of family resources in times of scarcity.[4] Nevertheless, what distinguishes Baer from Kemp and justifies the opposition traced by Cardoso is that, for the former, the aim of this private accumulation would not be linked to an economic and acquisitive mentality (as proposed in fact by Kemp, who sees Hekanakht as a specimen of the *homo economicus*). To Baer, Hekanakht's main interest would have been to ensure the resources needed to have a burial proper to his social status.[5]

The position adopted by Cardoso in this debate implies to recognize the existence of economic practices at a local or "private" scale managed by Hekanakht, including calculation strategies for a better administration of the resources, purchases and sales, loaning and leasing of land for cultivation.[6] However, the author points out that this does not imply the existence of a private or market economy *rising* in Egypt, as proposed by Kemp, but: a) a kind of practice that is provisional and "temporary," in the sense that it is specific of a particular period of Egyptian history (i.e., early Middle Kingdom)

which is still influenced by the effects of the political and economic decentralization of the First Intermediate Period; and b) a kind of practice that is not inserted in an economy ruled by the law of supply and demand — even if the head of the household could seek some enrichment (similar discussion with Kemp’s arguments can be found in Cardoso’s book *Sociedades do Antigo Oriente Próximo*, 1986).[7] These remarks are important because they might be useful to avoid one questionable idea: that the logic of market lies at the basis of any society, waiting for the historical conditions that will allow it to become the dominant economic practice.

Fábio Frizzo, one of Cardoso’s young disciples, proposed at an academic event in Buenos Aires in the winter of 2011 (III Coloquio Internacional del PEFSCEA / XXXIV Coloquio Internacional GIREA) that it might be useful to *connect* elements taken from different theoretical schemes whenever they can be *complementary* in addressing a historical problem. I would like to illustrate the potential of this approach by presenting some brief reflections on the issue we are dealing with.

Cardoso characterizes Hekanakht’s family group as a “plebeian family,” since they had not regular access to the pharaoh’s court, and he considers the head of this family as a “small or medium landowner,” because he was in charge of a small or medium productive unit above the subsistence level and could not rival the wealth of the state’s high-ranking officials. These reflections bring to the fore two main issues that I consider important and that, in my opinion, can be enriched with an approach that *connects* elements from the analysis of different authors.

On the one hand, the “family” structure clearly expresses the role of kinship in the articulation of social and economic relations within the household. Juan Carlos Moreno García points out that in contexts of political decentralization of the state, family cohesion — as well as probable patronage ties — acquire visibility in written records.[8] He associates this situation with the idea that the family group would act as a space of solidarity and protection against possible crisis. Without challenging this consideration, Marcelo Campagno emphasizes the aspect of continuity of kinship as a social logic that, even subordinated to state dynamics, would continue to operate as a means of articulation *within* households.[9] One could also conceive the existence of another kind of social tie, even at a nomarchal level, such as patronage: this specific bond could explain the role of Nakht son of Heti, the above-mentioned “trusted married workman,” who was not part of the kinship network but was subordinated to Hekanakht.

The other question arising from Cardoso’s reflections is that Hekanakht’s estate would not be a family inheritance, but the result of his function as a funerary priest of vizier Ipi. This matter has, in my opinion, an implication that deserves to be pointed out. It is not the kinship tie, nor a “private” economic procedure,

what originated Hekanakht’s wealth, but a practice associated with the state: that is, Hekanakht’s specific relation with a high official of the state. Cardoso appropriately recognizes that Hekanakht had a limited income because he was not directly related to the pharaoh’s court; but no less important is the fact that Hekanakht’s estate, although modest in relation to the wealth of any high official, only makes sense because of the relationship between this priest and the state. Therefore, Hekanakht papers would be one of those eloquent testimonies which allow us to infer, in terms of Campagno, a “coupling” between the logic of kinship, which here internally regulates the household, and the logic of state, which is the condition of possibility for such a household to exist.[10]

In conclusion, it is my wish that these brief reflections on Cardoso’s significant study of the Hekanakht papers may highlight the need to connect and integrate theoretical tools and analysis of different perspectives in addressing specific historical issues from a critical point of view. There is much that could be added in regard to Cardoso’s intellectual interventions for the study of ancient Egypt. However, I would like to conclude these lines with a final remark. As Baer wrote about the work of T. G. H. James, who first published Hekanakht papers, we can also say about the contributions of Ciro Cardoso: the only way to express our gratitude is by further discussion ■

Notes

1. H. E. Winlock. 1923. “Hekanakht Writes to His Household.” In: *Scribner’s Magazine* LXXII (3), pp. 288-296.
2. T. G. H. James. 1962. *The Hekanakhte Papers and Other Early Middle Kingdom Documents*. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Egyptian Expedition.
3. B. J. Kemp. 1989. *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization*. London-New York, Routledge. For a critical review of Kemp’s book, see J. J. Janssen. 1992. “Ancient Egypt. Anatomy of a Civilization. By Barry J. Kemp.” In: *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 78, pp. 313-317.
4. K. Baer. 1963. “An Eleventh Dynasty Farmer’s Letters to His Family.” In: *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 83 (1), pp. 1-19.
5. C. F. Cardoso. 2009. “Las unidades domésticas en el Egipto antiguo.” In: M. Campagno (ed.), *Parentesco, patronazgo y Estado en las sociedades antiguas*. Buenos Aires, Universidad de Buenos Aires, pp. 87-106.
6. Cardoso’s reflections on the Hekanakht papers were stated for the first time in an unpublished thesis presented at the Universidad Federal Fluminense (*Hekanakht: pujança passageira do privado no Egipto antigo*, 1993), and later in some articles: C. F. Cardoso. 2003. “Uma casa e uma família no Antigo Egipto.” In: *Phoînix* 9, pp. 65-97; C. F. Cardoso. 2009. “Las unidades domésticas en el Egipto antiguo.” In: M. Campagno (ed.), *Parentesco, patronazgo y Estado en las*

sociedades antiguas. Buenos Aires, Universidad de Buenos Aires, pp. 87-106.

7. B. J. Kemp. 1983. "Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period." In: B. G. Trigger, B. J. Kemp, D. O'Connor and A. B. Lloyd, *Ancient Egypt. A Social History*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 71-182; C. F. Cardoso. 1986. *Sociedades do Antigo Oriente Próximo*. São Paulo, Ática.

8. J. C. Moreno García. 2004. *Egipto en el Imperio Antiguo*

(2650-2150 antes de Cristo). Barcelona, Bellaterra.

9. M. Campagno. 2009. "Parentesco, patronazgo y Estado en las sociedades antiguas: una introducción." In: M. Campagno (ed.), *Parentesco, patronazgo y Estado en las sociedades antiguas*. Buenos Aires, Universidad de Buenos Aires, pp. 7-24.

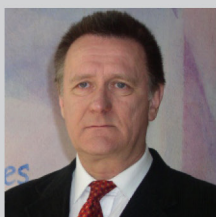
10. *Ibid.*

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CEHAO NEW MEMBERS



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René Krüger studied at ISEDET (Lic. Theology, 1974; PhD. Theology, 1987) and at the Free University of Amsterdam (PhD Theology, 2003). He is Full Professor of Bible (New Testament) at ISEDET and Adjunct Professor at the Catholic University of Argentina (Faculty of Theology). He was Dean at ISEDET between 1999 and 2007. Field of research: Biblical Studies - New Testament.

IN MEMORIAM GABRIEL NÁPOLE

R. P. Gabriel Nápole OP passed away on December 26, 2013. He was ordained in the Dominican order in 1986, and directed the "Pedro de Córdoba" Institute (Centre for Advanced Studies of the Dominican Order in Latin America and the Caribbean) between 1997 and 2002. He studied at the Catholic University of Argentina (Lic. Theology), the École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem (Élève titulaire and Diplômé) and the Faculty of Theology "San Vicente Ferrer" in Valencia (PhD Theology). Since 2004, he was in charge of the group of Argentine scholars involved in the project 'La Bible en ses Traditions' from the École biblique. Gabriel had close ties with the CEHAO at both the human and academic levels. He will be sorely missed.

