

**Yasmin El Shazly:**

We are very pleased to have with us today Professor Miroslav Barta. He will be talking to us about kingship during the Egyptian Old Kingdom. Professor Barta is a Czech Egyptologist, an archaeologist who studied for his PhD in both Prague and Hamburg between 1994 and 1997 and has been professor of Egyptology at Charles University Prague since 2009. In 2011, he was appointed director of the Czech excavations at the atmosphere pyramid field. Since 2016. He has been the director of the Czech Institute of Egyptology and Prague. Professor Barta specializes in the archaeology and history of the third millennium BC. He authored and coauthored more than 20 monographs and collected volumes and over 100 scientific papers. Thank you so much, Professor Barta for accepting our invitation today.

**Miroslav Barta:**

Thank you for having me.

**El Shazly:**

In popular culture, Pharaoh is often portrayed as a ruthless ruler who enslaved his people. As an Egyptologist within depth knowledge of ancient Egyptian history and culture, can you please talk to us about the most prominent roles of an ancient Egyptian King?

**Barta:**

With pleasure. Indeed, as you indicated, this has been a very popular concept that is coming from the study of the Bible. Egyptian archaeology itself became popular before the discovery of the King Tut's tomb due to the biblical stories that were related to Ancient Egypt. Founder of Egyptian archaeology, Flinders Petrie, and many others before and after him came to Egypt to excavate sites that were related very closely to the Bible in the Old Testament. In reality, the truth may be different. Obviously, there were strong and despotic kings or rulers, but at the same time, there are also kings, as we know from the written sources that were venerated, and in later times, remembered for decades or even centuries.

If we are to talk about the most prominent and general roles of ancient Egyptian King similar to him, for instance, to Maya or other civilizations, which are very close to the US, I may mention our three basic characteristics. The King on the symbolical level was supposed to reinforce the preordained world and cosmic order, to link himself as the royal ancestors and divine beings, and to legitimize the right to rule with these appropriate to royalty and his divine status. At the same time, however, we have contemporary and iconographic sources originating from the Old Kingdom pertaining to the finishing of Old Kingdom kingship, which indicates that the ancient Egyptian King was considered to be a godly creature begotten by the god Ra, and guarantor and keeper of order and countries unity and prosperity, which means he was the only guarantor of natural cycle in the nature and the world order. Which came into being as a consequence of the act of creation by the gods. He was obviously mediator between the alternate mortal people and the gods, and messenger and executor of the gods will and instructions. And last but not least, we may not forget that this is the general characterization of the official dogma of the Divine kingship of the Old Kingdom king. By the same time, the Egyptians themselves knew very well, that king was at the same time a mortal creature, and therefore, especially from the sixth dynasty, we have several sources indicating that there were hareem conspiracies oriented against the king, or even attempts to assassinate the king. So, this is to start with our discussion today.

**EI Shazly:**

This is very fascinating material. The divinity of the king is also... it has always fascinated me because the idea that the king was a God, but at the same time he was mortal and vulnerable, as you pointed out. It is commonly believed that the pyramids were built by forced labor. How true is this idea?

**Barta:**

This is, this is another very complicated issue, to be frank, for sure. People had to be brought to one spot and organize to perform specific activities on the construction side. Text or Old Kingdom texts of the period show that there were royal officials who traveled the country and collected people for special

expeditions organized by the crown. So, there were groups of conscripts coming from all possible corners of the country, down to Aswan. And in some cases, including even Lower Nubia, most likely, if we talk about really the biggest, largest scale construction site, attested from the Old Kingdom, which is obviously, Giza Pyramid field, we can say that these people had to be collected all over the country and brought to a pyramid city that was discovered years ago by my friend and colleague, Mark Lehner, who just hours east of the pyramids there, the city was constructed to house at least five, maybe 10,000 people who were receiving regular provisions, enjoyed housing and worked on a daily basis on the construction of the pyramid. So, I wouldn't say it was a forced labor, but it was a labor organized by the state and you as a Egyptian participating in it, you are receiving payment in kind. And this is very important part of the general story of the Old Kingdom, because we can we think that there was a king separated from the rest of the population and the population itself. But in fact, there was a very important relationship between the ruling elite and the rest of the of the Egyptian population, we call it even today social contract, which is the way the manner how the ruling elite coordinates or shares the profits of the country with the population. And by building the state sponsored projects, the king shared significant wealth of the country with the population because this population depended on these construction sites in terms that they were receiving payments and these payments they used not only to feed them themselves, but also to bring it back to their families. most frequent payment beer jars with beer, and we know from the market scenes featuring on the on the walls of many non-royal tombs that these beer jars been taken by these people, workers, craftsmen, etc., to the local markets, and exchanged for some other things. They had a generally accepted value, economic value, so they were used as a pre monetary means to pay for some other goods. So, maintaining social contract was very important and in this in this relationship, the king was equally important as the population.

**EI Shazly:**

So, they were definitely not slaves. They were paid.

**Barta:**

Yes, I definitely believe they're not slaves and even Pierre Tallet, another esteemed friend colleague discovered several years ago in the in the caves of the Red Sea, not only, parts of the boats that were used to traverse the Red Sea towards the Sinai, but also the logbooks of the steward Merer who describes how he and his people operated a ship that was regularly bringing stones from Tura quarries on the eastern bank of the Nile to the harbor of Khufu in front of the Giza Pyramids and how he was sending people to Heliopolis to bring bread and food and other staples for his people. So, I definitely believe, I'm convinced that there, there was no slavery in the Old Kingdom and if only very, very limited, in a very limited way.

**EI Shazly:**

This is truly interesting, what role did the elites and high officials play in the perpetuation and upkeep of kingship?

**Barta:**

When dealing with this set of questions or issues, we have to bear in mind that the Old Kingdom lasted almost half a millennia. Djoser, the founder of the Third Dynasty built his pyramid complex during the 27th century, and the terminal stage of the Old Kingdom is dated, or placed into the 22nd century, so we can really feel the depth of time in front of us, you know, at least five or six centuries. And this is very important because if we talk about least about high officials, we have to use a concept that applies to the Third and Fourth dynasties on one side, and to the Fifth and Sixth dynasties on the other side. Why I am saying this? Down to the end of the Fourth Dynasty, ancient Egypt, or ancient Egyptian state was surrounded by a very limited number of people, most of them were belonging to the directly to the royal family, there are royal princes that during the First and Second dynasties build their tombs in North Sakkara. During the Third and Fourth dynasty, members of the royal family very buried, either in Sakkara during the 3<sup>rd</sup> dynasty, or during the 4th dynasty, around the Great Pyramids of Giza, whereby

the complexity of the state was growing in time, by the end of the Fourth dynasties, say by the end or sometime during the 25th century BC, the complexity was so high that the king, that the administration had to look for different means how to run the country that was highly complicated organism. You had to control a territory starting on the north of the Mediterranean Sea and ending at least at Aswan if we decide not to include Lower Nubia. So, it's a stretch that is almost 1000 kilometers long. And for this, you need sophisticated, highly trained and educated body of officials and the complexity was such that, at the beginning of the Fifth Dynasty, the king had to make a very important decision to let into the administration, including the highest echelons of the administration, people of non-royal origin, because he needed to increase the number of efficient administrators. And the Fifth and Sixth dynasties is completely different story because the royal family started to step aside. The king, obviously most of the top of the pyramid, both symbolically and in reality. But at the same time, there was a huge group of high officials that had a non-royal origin. And this largely changed the political landscape of ancient Egypt because these high officials as we as they proceeded in time, during the Fifth and Sixth dynasty started to observe more and more power in the state and during the middle of the Fifth dynasty, typically during the reign of Neuserre we can observe that these high officials start to build huge mastabas that, in many ways, are similar to mortuary temples of the ruling kings. They start to develop a very strong tendency towards nepotism, which means that these high officials were sending their sons the second generations in the family to follow in the footsteps of their fathers. So, the officials stopped to be awarded according to your education or your abilities. But you were your primary authorization was coming from the connections. And this is one of many reasons why I say that each Egyptology archaeology, which works with long data ranges is highly political, because it reveals and describes processes that we can easily identify also in our modern societies.

**El Shazly:**

I have a question related to what you said about the Fifth and Sixth dynasties. The Step Pyramid in Saqqara and the three pyramids of Giza are the most famous, and most people do not know anything

about the smaller rubble filled pyramids of the Fifth and Sixth dynasties, the interiors of which were inscribed with Pyramid Texts. Can you please talk to us about the reason behind the changes in pyramid architecture and decoration, and if this reflects changes in royal ideology?

**Barta:**

I will do it with a pleasure. If I take the Third, Fourth, Fifth and Sixth dynasties this one after another, I will characterize them with regard to the pyramid complexes in the following way. If you think Djoser, for instance, Third Dynasty, his complex shows architecture of explicit forms and statements because his whole complex is imitating his palace in the Nile. During the Fourth Dynasty what we have in front of us, is what I would call overwhelming monumentality; Just a brutal force of monumental forms of gigantic stones that explicitly demonstrates your superiority, your top authority, your divine status. In the Fifth Dynasty, they appear to move towards architecture of more sophisticated symbolism. In the Fifth Dynasty, the sheer size of the pyramid does not matter that much anymore. What becomes of primary importance is the elaborate mortuary complex as a whole which means the valley temple, the causeway and the mortuary temple. Unlike in the Fourth Dynasty, where these elements are minimally decorated, in the Fifth Dynasty just the sheer area of decorated walls rises steeply. And Sahure for instance, in contrast to the Fourth Dynasty features perhaps five times more decoration than only several decades before. And by the way, the royal complex of Sahure is the complex from which we have the largest collection of royal reliefs from the third millennium BC. So is the symbolism is the decoration, is the sophistication of individual architectural elements that tell you the whole story of the king passing from the sphere of the earthly existence towards his divine dwelling. And in the 16th dynasty, I would call the 6th dynasty period of elaboration or elaborate encoding through the Pyramid Texts that are being put on the walls of the interior of the pyramid, accompanied by the struggle for the authority of the king. So, in the Third dynasty it's an explicit architecture of telling forms telling you a story of the king, Fourth Dynasty is just a sheer monumentality, Fifth and Sixth dynasties is the focus on the pyramid, complex decoration, while the pyramids itself do not matter so much anymore. And from

the reign of Unas, which is the last king of the Fifth Dynasty, we have additional storage, which is the story of the pyramids, the texts that were composed and brought in into the pyramids to facilitate the departure of the king from the burial chamber towards the sky when he joined the other gods including his father, Ra. So it was for the Egyptians It was not so important to build a big pyramid because the size didn't matter anymore, so much.

**EI Shazly:**

So, I believe that they should all be seen as equally impressive in different ways.

**Barta:**

Yes, imagine that you have a certain amount of energy, and you can use this either to spend it on the monumental, gigantic construction of the pyramid itself, or you are invested into a more sophisticated things like decoration carving of beautifully executive that relieves tax, putting in different forms of encoded messages for the priests serving in the mortuary power of the king, and so on and so forth. So, this it was an Old Kingdom was period of different strategies all and this applies also, for the strategies are preferred by the by the royal authority.

**EI Shazly:**

Okay, you mentioned that, by the end of the Old Kingdom, high officials were usurping power and you have high officials also employing people who are well connected to them. So, I assume that this led one was one of the factors that led to the decline of the Old Kingdom. What other reasons are there for the decline of the state at the end of the Sixth Dynasty? What role did the King play in this decline?

**Barta:**

You mentioned part of the story quite precisely. I would say first and foremost on the in the very at the very beginning is that there applies no silver bullet rule. There are no single factors, no single factor that

we could use to explain the overall collapse or a decline of the Old Kingdom. As you mentioned that it was the rise of high officials who, among other things, initiated also the so-called status race, in relation to the state. Typically, during the Fourth Dynasty, or during the Third Dynasty, it was only the king who was building his monument, mortuary monuments, completely out of stone. And step by step, the high official said, "Oh, I would love to have a stone-built chapel as well." And so, a couple of decades later, they overtook the stone architecture in the Fifth Dynasty in the reign of Neuserre, which is the appearance of monumental tombs like Ptah-Shepses in Abuser, The tomb of Ti at Saqqara, the later tombs of Ka-gemeni, Ptah-hotep, Mereruka. So, all this starts exactly in the in the reign of Neuserre. When these high officials said, Oh, we love the idea of having a multi room mortuary complex and they start to use open courts, magazines and east west orientated chapels that was associated before this period, exclusively for the king and so on and so forth. We have by the end of the Fifth Dynasty, we have the pyramid text and obviously during the Sixth Dynasty, these pyramid texts again, formerly associated exclusively only with the king become usurped first by several queens of Pepi I and Pepi II and even later on by high officials of the First Intermediate Period. So, this is what I mean in brief by the status race overtaking of formerly exclusive privileges of the king by the elite of the country. We have during the Fifth and Sixth dynasties, we can observe an incredible rise of bureaucracy, in numbers of officials participating in the state administration. And of course, these officials required payments. So, the pressure on the state treasury was increasing. Mandatory expenses were increasing, you had this rise exploding a tendency towards nepotism in combination with one important external factor, which we call even today climate change. This climate change had a severe impact on the late 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> dynasty history because we know that already in the 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty, the annual Nile flood was becoming lower and lower and obviously the Nile flood was limiting the amount of collected taxes that vary, originating from the agriculture. And if the taxes were diminishing, and the mandatory expenses rising, the number of bureaucrats rising. You can see that there was a huge contrast that was rising. As they proceeded in time, and at the end, the King, don't forget that the King was considered to be a godly creature ruling the country. And if you are god, you are obviously expected to take care of your



population of your subjects, you are supposed to be the exclusive factor that maintains the social contract. If you fail to do so, obviously, the king failed to do so because he had very low taxes, very low income from the annual taxes by the end of the Old Kingdom, he was not in a position to maintain the high complexity to which the Egyptians were used to, in the case before the end of the Old Kingdom. And ultimately, his divine status was becoming more and more compromised. And at the end, the king lost his legitimacy.

**EI Shazly:**

That is really interesting.

**Barta:**

If you look at that, it's very simple to observe it, you have a huge bag of different factors that are very mutually enforcing the negative impact of each other. The compromised legitimacy of the divine status of the king on the symbolical level, the nepotism, the interest groups of high officials, and the declining or diminishing taxes. And all this together was a ticking bomb that during the 22nd century BC brought the Old Kingdom era of the pyramid builders era to a bitter end.

**EI Shazly:**

Well, on that note, we will end our podcast and thank you very much, Professor Barta for a very interesting and thought-provoking discussion.

**Barta:**

It was my pleasure. Thank you very much.