Monumentality in context – a reply from Egyptology

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Monuments have shaped and are still shaping contemporary views on the past. Gothic cathedrals, the Chinese Wall, and Egyptian pyramids open a window into past civilizations and the lives of people who imagined the world differently from us today. Cross-cultural research into early complex societies tends to be focused on monuments of the elite, partially because these seem to embody the essence of a society, and partially because comparison requires flying from society to society at some distance above ground, where monuments stand out, while their context begins to disintegrate (Trigger 2003).

In their introduction, the editors of this volume show that monuments have complex stories to tell. Levenson distinguishes between intended (builder), perceived (people for whom a monument was built) and received (cultural memory) dimensions of monumentality, implying that these need not coincide. He also considers forms of monumentality other than built environment. Buccellati suggests an agenda for the study of built monuments, which embraces labor organization, typological variation, institutional history, use analysis, phenomenology, spatial context, echoes in later representations, and object biography. Many of these themes are well designed to bring people back into the discussion of monuments. Departing from this agenda, Hageneuer and van der Heyden offer examples of life cycles of monuments, from their planning, building and afterlife to modern three-dimensional reproductions.

The approaches adopted by the editors rightly make it clear that monuments were not static buildings, but embedded in dynamic processes and various types of social interaction. I would add that historical context, both of the making and the reception of monuments, is a key dimension for approaching monuments. Since pyramids and cultural memory are mentioned in the introductory chapters, I would like to respond to these themes from the point of view of my discipline, which is Egyptology.

The pyramids of Egypt are an example of what one could describe as a mismatch between intended, perceived, and received monumentality. In the cultural memory of Egypt in the West, pyramids have long played a recurrent, but rather modest role. Travelers speculated about the historical meaning of the pyramids,

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specifically the pyramid of Khufu who was portrayed by Herodotus as a despotic and hubristic ruler. However, religious knowledge of ancient Egypt mattered more to European scholars and enthusiasts than pyramids alone did (Ucko/Champion 2003; Assmann 2006). In contrast, today the pyramids are icons of ancient Egypt. They are actively promoted by the tourist industry, and traveling to Egypt has become sufficiently affordable for many to experience these monuments physically.

The pyramid of Khufu belongs to a small group of extraordinarily gigantic pyramids built in the early Fourth Dynasty, around 2600 BCE. These pyramids had gradually developed from smaller versions and ultimately from much simpler forms of the royal tomb (Lehner 1997). Although the pyramids of the Fourth Dynasty are undeniably technological masterpieces, knowledge of how to build them and how to organize labor rested on centuries of experience. A carpet of settlements, workshops, and barracks, located at the foot of the Giza plateau, is archaeological evidence of labor management and the accommodation of service personnel (Möller 2016: 117–157). Papyrus documents, recently discovered at a harbor site on the shore of the Red Sea and belonging to an official involved in the logistics of pyramid construction (Tallet 2017), also show that pyramid building was an enormous but essentially manageable effort.

Khufu's pyramid was just one element of a much grander social project. It was set centre stage in a planned cemetery, cascading from the royal pyramid and its associated boats to the pyramids of the queens, large tombs to the east of the royal pyramid for the princes, and finally a set of smaller tombs to the west for high-ranking courtiers (Jánosi 2005). The Khufu cemetery continued a tradition of large-scale cemetery planning apparent already under his predecessor Sneferu at Dahshur and Meidum (Alexanian 1995). A few centuries earlier, at the beginning of Pharaonic history, the royal tomb was surrounded by rows of subsidiary tombs of almost equal size, suggesting that the king was imagined as a primus inter pares (Vadou 2008). While the Khufu pyramid at Giza surely emphasizes the centrality of the deceased ruler, the king is presented here as entangled in a more complex set of relationships than the earliest Pharaohs were. The actual monument at Giza, one could argue, is the building into stone of a ranked court community focused on the royal family.

Gordon Childe (1945) argued that the monumentality of royal tombs reflected the transition of a society towards territorial statehood. According to Tobias Kienlin (2007), monumentality and ritual expenditure, in the case of the early European Bronze Age tomb of the 'Fürst' of Leubingen, were a means of establishing social coherence in a period of transition, when previous forms of social organization were being reshaped. Along similar lines, Mirsolav Bárta (2013) has seen the Giza pyramids as symbolizing the transition to a fully-fledged administration in Egypt. I have argued elsewhere that the gigantic pyramids might reflect the beginning of

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the territorial integration of the country and that the planned arrangement on the cemetery foregrounds the royal family as the core of court society, thus emphasizing dynastic inheritance patterns (Bussmann 2014; 2015). Whatever the most adequate interpretation, historical context matters for explaining why and how gigantism at Giza happened in this particular period.

With the shrinking size of pyramids in the following centuries, building efforts gradually shifted towards the temples attached to the east of pyramids, where offerings were made to the deceased kings (Posener-Kriéger 1976). Involvement in the royal funerary cult was a lucrative business. According to their official titles and inscriptions, courtiers were rather eager to get a share of the revenues. Consequently, it was not the size of a pyramid that mattered to the courtiers, but the social practices centered on the royal funerary cult.

As a final note on pyramids, and returning to Buccellati's comment on the relevance of institutional history, the matrix of Egyptian 'high culture' developed in the context of the royal tomb. It is only over a millennium later that temples of deities started playing a significant role for central administration and royal display (Kemp 2006: 111–135). In fact, speculative thought in the 3rd millennium BCE revolved around the question of what a king is rather than what a deity is. Theology was a much later offspring in Egypt (Assmann 1983). This development was paralleled by a steady increase in the size of temples, until these dominated the landscape along the Nile in the 1st millennium BCE, when early travelers from ancient Europe made their first encounters with the people of Egypt. Today religious and administrative buildings are often dwarfed by the buildings of private companies and banks, a reflection of the capitalist organization of societies. Comparing and contrasting monuments through time and across cultures can thus reveal the different institutional settings of societies and help with explaining the varying strategies for the display of core values.

The pyramids and temples of ancient Egypt are bound up in what Egyptologist Jan Assmann (1991; 1996) has referred to as the 'monumental discourse'. The monumental discourse encompasses stone-lined buildings, the hieroglyphic inscriptions and visual scenes displayed on their walls, and handwritten religious texts, in short: formalized knowledge, access to which was restricted to the elite. The term 'discourse' highlights a self-referential dimension of this history, meaning that a monument can respond to a previous monument rather than to a reality outside the discourse. Simplifying a little, building a pyramid can be a statement about continuing an existing order rather than about the actual power of an individual king. For this reason, monuments do not speak directly to a visitor or a reader, but require contextual analysis within the language – material, visual, or written – in which a society communicates.

The monumental discourse lies at the heart of the cultural memory of ancient Egypt. Following Assmann (1992), one can distinguish between individual mem-

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orizing, social memory based on face-to-face communication, and long-term cultural memory, which requires formalized institutions for the transmission of knowledge, predominantly in writing. The cultural memory of Egypt is thus an elite practice, both in terms of what is remembered and who is remembering today. Discussions of cultural memory have opened up important lines of research, including on the relevance of the past for the contemporary world. However, a cultural memory of Egypt based on the monumental discourse runs the risk of forgetting social contexts in the past and presenting knowledge as a history of ideas devoid of the people who produced and consumed them. Seen from this angle, cultural memory almost emerges as a counter paradigm to an object biography, if the latter is understood as the history of changing social networks, structured around an object, and the various meanings assigned to an object by different people (Gosden/Marshall 1996).

Finally, the cultural memory of ancient Egypt has political implications. In Egypt, antiquity tourism, centered on monuments, plays an important role in the national economy (Hassan 2003). The flourishing antiquity market, with all its disastrous consequences, shows that authentic objects from the past have huge monetary value also outside Egypt. Interpretation and the administration of Pharaonic monuments has long been dominated and funded by Western institutions (Jeffreys 2003; Carruthers 2015). The process of the 'decolonization' of Egyptology, as the historian Donald Reid (1985) has called it, is still on its way. Afrocentrists emphasize the African nature of ancient Egypt, stressing the superiority of a 'black' civilization to enforce political rights (Diop 1955). Although these positions represent a selected and narrow range of motivations for engaging with ancient Egypt, the afterlife of Pharaonic monuments clearly is a history of power relationships up to the present day.

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