Reflections of Osiris
Lives from Ancient Egypt

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## Contents

Maps viii
A Note on Chronology and Names x
Introduction 1

1 Egypt's Leonardo (Imhotep, c. 2650 BC) 5
2 A Farmer's Problems (Heqanakhte, c. 1950 BC) 23
3 Gloriana (Queen Hatshepsut, reigned c. 1473–1458 BC) 40
4 Justice and the Moon King (Horemheb, reigned c. 1323–1295 BC) 60
5 The First Egyptologist (Khaemwese, c. 1285–1225 BC) 78
6 The Temple Scribe's Petition (Petiese, c. 583–511 BC) 97
7 The Magician Pharaoh (Nectanebo II, reigned 359/8–343/2 BC) 113
8 People of the Serapeum (Hor of Sebennytos and his companions, c. 200–150 BC) 130

Epilogue: 'Such is Osiris' 153
Notes to the Text 157
Picture Credits 158
Suggestions for Further Reading 160
Acknowledgement 165
Index 166
A Note on Chronology and Names

The history of ancient Egypt is long, and authorities do not agree on precise dates. After 500 BC the chronology is as good as fixed. Before this, there is a margin of error of some fifty years for dates going back to 1500 BC, and a likelihood of up to a hundred years for periods earlier than this. The conventional division into dynasties is convenient, if oversimplified, and it is followed here. Similarly for convenience, I have followed the dating given in The Oxford Illustrated History of Ancient Egypt (ed. Ian Shaw, Oxford, 2000). However, the dates given here for the Eighteenth Dynasty may need to be raised, partly for reasons connected with astronomy, partly because of the uncertainty affecting the Amarna period and the reign of Horemheb.

Archaic Period (Dynasties 'O', I and II)  c. 3200–2686 BC
This period saw the emergence of the Egyptian centralised state, and the foundations of Pharaonic government. Egyptian art took on many of its characteristic forms during the first two dynasties. The royal burials were mostly at the site of Abydos in Upper Egypt.

Old Kingdom (Dynasties III–VI)  c. 2686–2160
The Old Kingdom is often referred to as the Pyramid Age. During this period Egyptian art reached a peak of its development, and monumental architecture proliferated. The first literary and religious texts made their appearance. Memphis was the seat of government, and kings and courtiers were buried in the necropolis of Giza and Saqqara.

Imhotep  c. 2650

First Intermediate Period (Dynasties VII–X)  c. 2160–2055
The collapse of central authority led to fragmentation, civil war and political disruption. This was brought to an end by the rise of a princely family at Thebes (modern Luxor), which succeeded in reuniting the country.

Middle Kingdom (Dynasties XI–XIII)  c. 2055–1650
The Middle Kingdom saw a flowering of literature and the arts, and was regarded by the Egyptians of later periods as a classic age. The Fayyum oasis was developed for agriculture, and the seat of government moved to a new capital, Itj-tawy, which lay south of Memphis on the way to the entrance to the Fayyum. The area of Lower Nubia, between the First and Second Cataracts, became an Egyptian colony.

Heqanakhte  c. 1950

Twelfth Dynasty  c. 1985–1773

Second Intermediate Period (Dynasties XIV–XVII)  c. 1650–1550
Central government collapsed again, and settlers from the Near
East took advantage of this weakness to occupy much of Lower Egypt, ruling from the city of Avaris in the Delta. These are known to later tradition as the Hyksos. A family from Thebes, conventionally listed as Dynasty XVII, succeeded in driving out the invaders and reunifying the country.

**New Kingdom (Dynasties XVIII–XX)**

The expulsion of the Hyksos led to a new militarism, and the establishment of something resembling an empire in Syria and Palestine. Upper Nubia (the area along the Nile in the northern Sudan) was occupied and Egyptianised. Wealth and exotic splendour increased, and influenced both literature and the visual arts. Royal burials moved from the north of the country to the Valley of the Kings on the west bank at Thebes.

**Eighteenth Dynasty**

c. 1550–1295

**Hatshepsut**

reigned c. 1473–1458

**Horemheb**

reigned c. 1323–1295 (?)

**Nineteenth Dynasty**

c. 1295–1186

**Ramesses II**

reigned c. 1279–1213

**Khaemwese**

lived c. 1285–1225

**Late New Kingdom or Third Intermediate Period (Dynasties XXI–XXV)**

c. 1089–664

The New Kingdom declined slowly, and the collapse of the Twentieth Dynasty led to a political division of the country, with a series of dynasties ruling Lower Egypt from the newly founded city of Tanis, while an overlapping series ruled Upper Egypt from Thebes. The interlude was one of straightened circumstances, but not of the anarchy which characterised the first two Intermediate Periods.

**Late Period (Dynasties XXVI–XXX)**

664–323

Reunification of the country was once more achieved, but at the price of employing foreign mercenaries and expertise. Immigration from the eastern Mediterranean gained pace, and this needed to be counterbalanced by emphasising the traditional aspects of Egyptian culture. This is particularly evident in the visual art of the period. The Persian conquest of the country (525–404 BC) did nothing to diminish these tendencies. This was followed by a short period of renewed independence in the fourth century BC.

**Twenty-Sixth Dynasty**

664–525

**Persian Conquest**

525

**Petiese**

lived c. 583–511

**Departure of Persians**

404

**Nectanebo II**

reigned 359/8–343/2
made increasing progress. The Coptic language gradually became extinct, probably in the early modern period, although it is still used liturgically. Some 5 per cent of the modern population are Coptic Christian; most of the rest are Sunni Muslims.

I have tried to give proper names in the forms that are familiar from accessible textbooks, but with some compromises, and without any of the diacritical marks favoured by Egyptologists. It is not possible to be consistent in this, which is in the nature of things Egyptian.
Introduction

This is a book about ancient Egypt, intended for those who know a little about an intriguing civilisation and would like to know more. It is also written for those who are curious to find out why people spend their time studying a world that has long passed from history, and a language which has not been heard for centuries. Part of the fascination felt by those who know the subject comes from the tension between those aspects of Egyptology which seem familiar to us, and those which are alien. To frame this contrast within the time and space of individual lives is one way of bringing it home.

The framework I have adopted is a series of semi-biographical chapters, which are intended to throw light on aspects of the society in which these characters lived. As far as the sources permit, I have tried to enter into the thoughts of these characters, and to use this technique to illustrate the civilisation which produced them. Strictly speaking, this will never be possible. Too little is known about any of these persons for us to be certain that we have got the picture right. The characters of the Serapeum, who appear in the final chapter, are something of an exception, because their documents survive in quantity and allow us to see into their thoughts, in a way that is rare in any period. But even here, there is much that the sources take for granted, about which a twenty-first-century student has to guess. The truth is that
we cannot write a biography, in the modern sense, of any character in the ancient world, not even Alexander the Great; we have to wait until Julian the Apostate or St Augustine for that. But in a sense this is a benefit, since it is easier to hang themes on individuals if not too much needs to be said about them. Lack of biographical attention may prevent them turning into prima donnas and upstaging the narrative.

Another problem about most history (and ancient history in particular) is that the written sources are biased in favour of those who were in a position to produce them. Most of the time, this means the rich and powerful, who left records inscribed on stone or metal. Egypt is more fortunate than some ancient cultures in that the conditions of survival can help us to fill out the picture. We are in a position to know about a character such as the farmer Heqanakht, because some letters sent by him survived in the dryness of a tomb, whereas most texts written on a flimsy material such as papyrus have perished. Nevertheless, the fact remains that most of Heqanakht's contemporaries will never be known to us. A similar chance accounts for the petition of the old man Petiese. Many towns of ancient Egypt would have had their Petiese, but we know only one of them. We must use such informants to compensate for what has not survived, but we can never be sure how typical of their society they were. The most detailed account of all is reserved for the five characters of the Serapeum, whose papers are some of the most informative texts to survive from the ancient world. These are fortunate exceptions; otherwise we must resort to the more privileged kings, queens, princes and priests to tell us about the world in which they spent their lives. Even for ancient Egypt, the sources are top-heavy, and this must be faced. For the same reason, we know more about ancient Egyptian men than ancient Egyptian women, but the latter are not all absent from the record, and at least three of them have found their way into these pages.

Those who like their history glamorous can be assured that there are two kings in this volume, as well as one queen who decided that she was a king, and one king's son, albeit an unusual one. After some agonising, but not much, I decided to leave out Akhenaten. The heretic Pharaoh, as he is known, has a habit of unbalancing books on Egyptology, and he needs a study of his own, although there are more than enough works about him in circulation already. However he is handled, there is no way that Akhenaten can fail to dominate a narrative. Instead, he has been smuggled into Chapter 4, and some of his influence will be found lingering in Chapter 5. The same is true of Tutankhamun, who does not need the publicity, and about whose life surprisingly little is known.

It is no coincidence that eight of the twelve characters in this book have links with the site of Saqqara. It is the part of Egypt which is best known to me, and it is one which has produced rich documentation for almost all periods of ancient Egypt. To revisit this place is a pleasure, if only in one's thoughts. Similarly, there is some bias in the book towards the later periods. This too is a personal preference, but one that I hope is justified by the nature of the sources which survive.

The sources which do survive are haphazard. Much of the history of ancient Egypt is pieced together from hieroglyphic inscriptions from tombs or temple sites. These are mostly found on stone surfaces: temple walls, free-standing monumental texts known as stelae, or the obelisks, statues, sarcophagi, and other manifestations of Egyptian religion. The palaces of the Egyptian kings, which were the temples' secular counterparts, are largely lost. Many of the inscriptions are fragmentary, and some contain obscure words or phrases which continue to defy translators. We do not have Nefertiti's diaries or the day-books of the architect who built the Great Pyramid. The chapters on Hatshepsut, Horemheb, Khaemwese, and to some extent Imhotep and Nectanebo, are
pieced together from sources which are limited and which, to the modern mind, concentrate excessively on theology. On other occasions documents survive on papyrus, a state of affairs which is made possible by the dry conditions of the Egyptian deserts. Here we are more fortunate, since the subject matter of texts such as these is immediate: it has not been censored by political authorities or by the prejudices of later tradition. The chapters on Hegnakhte the farmer and Petiese the disgruntled scribe are based on documents of this sort. We are fortunate to have them, since so much else has been lost, either to moist conditions, fire, or the appetites of insects. Most remarkable of all are the documents, written either on papyrus or on potsherds, which illustrate the inner lives of the five characters in the final chapter. These are truly remarkable, but here too we can only speculate on what we will never know.

Estimates of the rate of literacy in ancient Egypt vary, but the prevailing ones argue that only 2 per cent of the population were able to write fully. The texts covered in this book suggest that the true rate was higher than this, but here too we are at the mercy of the evidence, since the illiterate can have left few signs of their existence. However, the availability of a class of professional scribes will have enabled some of these to find their voice.

In addition to twelve accounts of the living, I have allowed a thirteenth character to recur throughout the book. This is the god Osiris, the ancient judge of the netherworld, who created the land of Egypt, and before whom the characters in this book believed that they would appear at the end of their lives. It is for this reason that he features in the title of the book, and he also receives a short epilogue at the end.

CHAPTER ONE

Egypt's Leonardo

Imhotep, c. 2650 BC

The French architect Jean-Philippe Lauer is the doyen of archaeologists in Egypt, and his career as an Egyptologist covers more than seven decades. In his autobiographical memoir, Saqqarah, Une Vie, published in 1988, he records an anecdote which he attributes to one of his English friends and colleagues, Cecil Firth. One day in the 1920s or thereabouts, Firth had been taking an important tourist around the sights of Saqqara, one of the more visited areas of Egypt. Their tour took in the main feature of Saqqara, the Step Pyramid. Firth explained to the lady that this monument, the earliest of all the pyramids and in many ways the most interesting, had been built in around 2800. 'Excuse me,' said the curious visitor, 'Would that be BC or AD?' 'Well,' came the reply, improvising on all cylinders, 'it's so long ago it's difficult to be sure.'

Archaeologists enjoy stories about tourists and their sometimes shaky grasp on the culture they have come distances to gaze at, but there is a basis to the story. The scale of ancient Egyptian history can come as a surprise, even to the best informed. Classical sources tell us that Cleopatra went on a cruise along the Nile in 47 BC with Julius Caesar. Caesar and Cleopatra were tourists, in an expansive kind of way, and they may have taken time off from the
The rediscovery even of the remains of the Asklepieion would be of prime importance, but it is not essential in order to appreciate the achievement of the man to whom it was dedicated. For this it is only necessary to walk over the plateau and enter the compound of the Step Pyramid. It is not so much the size of the monument, although books about pyramids tend to emphasise this sort of thing. The point is that Imhotep was aware of the setting, which is nothing less than the backdrop of the Sahara desert. In such a context, anything small runs the risk of appearing trivial or irrelevant. It is essentially a question of proportion, and the way in which even this mighty staircase to the sky has been made to look naturally sited. In addition, there is the complex which the architect designed to surround the pyramid, and to which it serves as a focus. Empty space is as much a factor in the design as solid stone. The way that light permeates the entrance colonnade, the recreation in the limestone ceiling of the original wooden logs which would have roofed a palace, the reed-columns translated into the new medium, all are part of an ambitious and meticulous design. This is not building, an activity which had already been done in Egypt for centuries; it is architecture. The designer is unsure how much stress stone can take, so he keeps the blocks small, and decides to bolster some of his columns with buttresses, but one can almost sense his confidence growing as the visitor steps beyond the entrance corridor into the main courtyard. The architect incorporates heraldic elements into his chapels: column-capitals of lotus or papyrus, the emblems of the two halves of the country, and a frieze of cobra heads. But it is remarkable how understated these decorative elements are. After this modesty, the strength of the pyramid, with its chapel on the north side from which a statue of Djoser looks confidently into the heaven, comes as the perfect finale to the entire work. The 'inventor of stone' – who is Imhotep, rather than his royal patron – was an artist of genius.

CHAPTER TWO

A Farmer’s Problems

Heqanakhte, c. 1950 BC

We know something about Imhotep, because he was able and successful, and because a rich vein of tradition grew up about him. We would like to know more, but there is no doubting that he was famous, in life and after it. No traditions formed themselves around our second character. He was uneducated, and lived a life that was not exactly plentiful, although he may have been better off than some of his contemporaries. When he died he left a memory of himself with the members of his family, and some of the neighbours, though we will see that this memory was mixed. There are no statues of him, and no tomb, as far as we know. Even if there were, it would tell us very little. When those who remembered him went to Osiris, all knowledge of him faded. But the written word, which allowed our harpist to recall the discourses of the wise men of the past, has enabled us to learn something about this obscure and in some ways unwise character, and what there is to know is revealing. He was a peasant-farmer, whose name was Heqanakhte, and he lived his years towards the end of the Eleventh Dynasty, some 600 years after Imhotep.

One day, around the year 1950 BC, a man was sitting in the corner of the courtyard of a tomb overlooking the west bank of Thebes, the southern Egyptian city which corresponds to modern
Luxor. His name was Merisu, and he was reading a letter from his father. His feelings on reading letters from this source can be reconstructed from their contents, and it may have been at this point that he gathered several of the letters he had received, screwed them into a ball, and threw them away. One of these letters was never opened. It was addressed to a third party, but Merisu never sent it on. The letters became sealed in the filling of one of the shafts of the tomb, and there they were discovered by an American expedition in 1921–2. They are now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The tomb belonged to an official named Ipi, and this man was the vizier of the ruler Mentuhotpe II. Since the tomb was found sealed and intact, it follows that the letters date to this time. Recently, an attempt has been made to re-date them to the middle of the following dynasty, about a century later, on the grounds of the pottery with which they were associated. However, datings based merely on ceramics should be taken with a pinch of salt, and it seems easier to stay with the conventional dating. This has the advantage of keeping the spotlight on Mentuhotpe, who is an unusually interesting figure. At the beginning of this man's reign, he was more of a princeling than a king, since Egypt was still in the state of divided semi-anarchy which had enveloped it after the fall of the Old Kingdom more than a century before. The north of the country was under the control of princes from the state of Hareopolis in Middle Egypt, and it may have seemed to contemporaries that unity would never return. However, in a decisive battle in or around the thirty-ninth year of his rule (c. 2015 BC), Prince Mentuhotpe succeeded in defeating his northern rivals and reuniting the country. He is essentially the first king of the Middle Kingdom, and was honoured as such in later tradition. During the battle, sixty of Mentuhotpe's choicest soldiers were killed, and they were given the equivalent of a state funeral high in the cliffs of Deir el-Bahri, on the west bank overlooking the town of Thebes.
Here they too were found by the American archaeologists, in March 1923. The soldiers died either as a result of arrow-shots or of heavy objects such as stones, thrown from above. This suggests that they had been taking part in a siege. One skull showed the marks of damage by vultures, so that it must have been some time before the bodies could be recovered.

At the foot of the same cliffs, not far from the tomb of Ipi where our letters were found, arose Mentuhotpe's own monument, a terraced temple of unprecedented design, richly decorated, which incorporated the tomb of several of his consorts, and presumably that of the king himself. There was also an underground cenotaph containing a statue of the ruler, which is another strange feature of this mortuary temple. Heqanakht's name means 'The ruler is mighty', and this may be a nod in the direction of Mentuhotpe, or one of his colleagues in the dynasty.

Thebes in the Old Kingdom had been a one-donkey town, and it cannot have been any more impressive when Mentuhotpe became its prince. But ambition is a quality which cannot be measured in donkeys, and Thebes was destined for greatness. So too was its god, a deity called Amun. Amun's career was to take him to the head of the pantheon of an entire empire, but his origins, like that of his home town, are decidedly dim. His name, perhaps not inappropriately, means 'The Hidden One'. He is not mentioned in the religious literature of the Old Kingdom, and the original protector of Thebes, inasmuch as it can be said to have one, was a falcon-headed war god known as Montu. Some of Amun's iconography is borrowed from this god, but several of his other features are drafted in from another god of the region, the ithyphallic fertility deity known as Min. Later, keen theological minds got to work on the origins of Amun, and managed to insert him into a scheme known as the Ogdoad of Hermopolis. This theological system involved a creator god, and four dual aspects of the original void from which the universe was made; these are the male and female counterparts of timelessness, darkness, invisibility and something which can be translated 'firmament'. Amun was grafted on to this scheme, and the stage was set for him to become the lord of lords par excellence, incorporating the aspects of the principal gods of Egypt, most of whom had existed
long before this upstart from the provinces. Amun may well be the
first example of a god designed by a committee. (The later Graeco-
Egyptian composite, Serapis of Alexandria, is a similar creation,
which shows that such a thing could be done in the ancient
world.) Amun, in upwardly mobile style, got rid of his first wife, a
goddess named Wosret, who was the theological equivalent of the
girl next door. Instead, he contracted an alliance with one of the
most distinguished ladies in the land, the goddess Mut, the
embodiment of motherhood. Like her husband, this goddess was
somewhat bland in essence, and this made the pair ideal for
urging the roles of more defined, and therefore more limited,
rivals. A less cynical school of thought holds that there was no
divorce, and that Wosret and Mut are the same goddess going
under different names, but if so, we are still dealing with an
attempt to upgrade the original product.

Most of this lay in the future, and the first inklings of the cult
of Amun have a human touch to them. The deserts on either side
of the Nile valley have different characters. On the west, the
Sahara is sandy and mostly flat, whereas the Arabian range on the
east is rocky and at times mountainous. Somewhere south of
modern Luxor, the Nile takes a turn to the right, as if to head for
the Red Sea, departing from its normal channel, which is a dried-
up bed known nowadays as the Wadi Karnak. Finally the cliffs
of the Arabian desert prove too much for the river, which laboriously
winds its way back, sometimes heading due south in order to go
north, until it rejoins its main channel in the neighbourhood of
Nag Hammadi. The result of this waywardness, which is known
as the Qena Bend, is that, in the latitude of Luxor, the high cliffs
which are supposed to be part of the eastern desert appear on the
western side of the river. These are the famous Theban Hills, be-

hind which lies the Valley of the Kings.

The cliffs on the west bank are capped by a natural peak,
which happens to resemble a pyramid. Here, in later times, was

thought to be the home of a cobra goddess known as Mertseger,
‘She who loves the silence’. In the middle of summer in the clos-
ing years of the third millennium BC, the priests of the new-
fangled god Amun made their way up to this peak in order to look
out for their divine employer. There they left graffiti recording
their observations, and it is here for the first time that the name
Amun is found. Amun, or rather his cult-statue, had formed the
habit of sailing in his sacred bark across the river to visit the mor-
tuary temple of Prince Mentuhotpe, the founder of the thrones of
Thebes. This occasion, known as the Festival of the Valley after the
bay of Deir el-Bahri where Mentuhotpe’s temple is situated, was
celebrated down to the end of the New Kingdom, when the num-
ber of royal mortuary temples that the god needed to visit ex-
tended to something like thirty. The festival was still a feature of
Roman Egypt, and gave its name to the month in the summer
when it was held. This month, under the name Paoni or Baouneh,
is still part of the Coptic calendar used in Egypt.

The First Intermediate Period which Prince Mentuhotpe
brought to an end is sometimes described as a period of democ-
ratisation. This is an exaggeration, and not much of a clarifica-
tion either, but there is no doubt that the breakdown of the
centralised order which had been the mark of the Old Kingdom
had painful consequences. For much of the time there was civil
war, and increased suspicion throughout the land. Old hier-
archies could no longer command automatic respect. The litera-
ture of the Middle Kingdom which follows the period of
Mentuhotpe and Heqanakhte has an introverted and somewhat
sombre tone, compared with what has survived from the earlier
dynasties, and there are frequent references to a quality which
might be translated as eloquence, persuasiveness, or even propa-
ganda. The state, which had seemed divinely sanctioned, had
collapsed, and constant vigilance was necessary if it were not to
collapse again. In this less certain world, men needed to be won