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## UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology

### Title

Estates (Old Kingdom)

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1b3342c2>

### Journal

UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology, 1(1)

### Author

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### Publication Date

2008-11-06

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*Juan Carlos Moreno García*

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Short Citation:

Moreno García 2008, Estates (Old Kingdom). *UEE*.

Full Citation:

Moreno García, Juan Carlos, 2008, Estates (Old Kingdom). In Elizabeth Frood and Willeke Wendrich (eds.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, Los Angeles.

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1012 Version 1, November 2008

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## ESTATES (OLD KINGDOM) الضياع / الإقطاعات (الدولة القديمة)

Juan Carlos Moreno García

Domänen (Altes Reich)  
Les domaines sous l'Ancien Empire

*Estates (also referred to as "domains") formed the basis of institutional agriculture in Old Kingdom Egypt. Estates were primarily administered by the temples or by state agricultural centers scattered throughout the country, but were also granted to high officials as remuneration for their services. Sources from the third millennium BCE show that estates constituted production networks where agricultural goods were produced, stored, and kept available for agents of the king who were traveling on state business.*

الضياع/ الإقطاعات كانت أساس الزراعة المركزية بمصر في الدولة القديمة و غالباً ما كانت تديرها المعابد أو المراكز الزراعية للدولة والتي كانت متناثرة بكافة أنحاء البلاد و أحياناً ما كانت تمنح هذه الضياع/ الإقطاعات لكبار المسؤولين كمكافأة لخدماتهم. هناك مصادر من القرن الثالث قبل الميلاد توضح ان الضياع/ الإقطاعات كونت شبكات إنتاجية حيث تم إنتاج المنتجات الزراعية و تخزينها وجعلها متوفرة لوكلاء الملك المسافرين في أعمال رسمية للدولة.

**E**states (also referred to as "domains") were one of the main sources of income for the Egyptian state during the Old Kingdom. Most preserved sources concern the estates of institutions such as temples or the administrative centers known as *hwt* (plural: *hwwt*), or of certain state officials, including some members of the royal family. As estates were scattered all over the country, they constituted the links in a network of royal warehouses, production centers, and agricultural holdings that facilitated the production and storage of agricultural goods that were kept at the disposal of institutions or of the royal administration when needed (Moreno García 1999, 2001, 2007).

There is an important difference between Old Kingdom estates and their counterparts in later, better-documented periods: whereas

texts like the Ramesside Wilbour Papyrus evoke thousands of estates directly controlled by the temples (the most important economic centers of the country from the New Kingdom on), third-millennium inscriptions show that royal centers founded by the king and administered by state-appointed officials controlled many estates and were, along with the temples, prominent places of institutional agricultural production.

The most ancient sources concerning estates and their integration into the economic structure of the Egyptian state date from as early as the pre-unification period. Labels from the tombs of the late-Predynastic kings at Abydos appear to mention localities and estates that produced goods for, or sent goods to, the royal mortuary complexes (Dreyer 1998). Hundreds of inscribed vessels from the 3<sup>rd</sup>-Dynasty pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara

contain brief references to the officials and centers responsible for delivering offerings to Djoser's funerary monuments and to those of his predecessors (Lacau and Lauer 1959, 1965). These texts inform us that the *ḥwt* (administrative center) and especially the *ḥwt-ꜥꜣt* (literally "great *ḥwt*"—administrative center, probably larger than the *ḥwt*), were the most important royal production units in the country. The existence of networks of this sort, in which royal estates produced goods collected at administrative centers and subsequently redistributed to other localities or officials, has recently come to light at Elephantine: hundreds of seal inscriptions, mainly dating to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty, record the delivery of goods from Abydos, the most important supra-regional administrative center in southern Egypt, to the local representatives and officials of the king in service at Elephantine (Pätznick 2005). Slightly later sources, from the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, also evoke an economic and production geography in which royal administrative centers like the *ḥwt* and *ḥwt-ꜥꜣt* governed smaller localities, estates, and fields, as was the case according to Metjen's inscriptions: many titles borne by this official show that the *ḥwt* and *ḥwt-ꜥꜣt* were the heads of territorial and economic units, sometimes referred to as *pr* (houses/estates; plural: *prw*), that encompassed many localities (*njwꜣt*; plural: *njwꜣwt*) located mainly in Lower Egypt (Sethe 1933: Urk. I: 1 - 7; Strudwick 2005: 192 - 194). Therefore estates seem to have been firmly controlled by royal institutions and appear to have constituted the basic production units of the royal economy. The taxation and conscription of village inhabitants probably formed the other main source of income for the Pharaonic treasury, as the Gebelein papyri, from the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, show (Posener-Kriéger and Demichelis 2004).

Alongside the estates of the crown, temples too possessed important estates that provided the agricultural produce needed for offerings or for the support of personnel in charge of the cult. The Royal Annals mention estates granted by the king to cults and temples scattered throughout the country (Wilkinson

2000; Sethe 1933: Urk. 1: 235 - 249). The beneficiaries of these donations usually included the workers who cultivated the fields, as well as the storage and processing centers (*pr-šnꜥ*) linked to the fields. The early-5<sup>th</sup>-Dynasty inscriptions in the tomb of Nykaankh at Tihna el-Gebel provide insight into the organization of the economic activities of a provincial temple. The local sanctuary, dedicated to Hathor, had been granted a field of 0.5 hectares by 4<sup>th</sup>-Dynasty king Menkaura, a donation that was confirmed by Sahura at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (Sethe 1933: Urk. I: 24 - 32; Strudwick 2005: 95 - 199). Nykaankh and his family performed the required rituals and were accordingly paid with the produce of that field.

Sources from the 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty show that temples were important economic centers and that their estates were usually exploited by the local elite, who thus became integrated into the economic, social, and political networks controlled by the palace (Moreno García 2005). Royal donations to local temples continued throughout the Old Kingdom, as is recorded in the recently discovered Royal Annals of the 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (Baud and Dobrev 1995). At the same time, the pharaohs built royal chapels (*ḥwt-kꜣ*; plural: *ḥwꜣwt-kꜣ*) in the local sanctuaries and provided them with the economic means necessary for their construction: Iy-Mery of el-Hawawish in Upper Egypt, for example, proclaimed in his autobiographical inscription that he never took away the grain that was in his charge, except for that which constituted the payments relating to the works on the *ḥwt-kꜣ* chapel of Pepy at Akhmim (Sethe 1933: Urk. I: 264; Strudwick 2005: 360). Titles and inscriptions concerning the royal *ḥwt-kꜣ*, and even their architectural remains at Tell Basta, reveal that they were present in many provinces of both Upper and Lower Egypt, very often inside the enclosure of an existing temple. Their construction suggests that the king intervened in the internal affairs of the temples and could control their economic activities, as is further evidenced by the decrees from Coptos.

The most detailed sources concerning the foundation, organization, and exploitation of a temple domain are the royal decrees from the temple of Min at Coptos, dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Two of these decrees (Coptos D and G) refer to the organization of a new domain granted to the local god: first, the location was chosen from a piece of land comprising some fields that were inundated on an annual basis; then, a storage and processing center (*pr-šn*) was created in order to administer the domain, organize its work force, and raise taxes; finally, the domain was divided into plots and placed under the supervision of an administrative council comprising local governors, the high priest of the temple, and some officials (Sethe 1933: Urk. I: 288 - 295; Strudwick 2005: 112 - 115). The role of the local governors consisted of assembling the work force necessary to cultivate the fields. Other clauses of decrees D and G specified that the estates enjoyed temporary tax exemptions. Such estates formed the economic basis of the provincial temples, and the recent discovery of 6<sup>th</sup>-Dynasty clay tablets at Balat, in Dakhla Oasis, shows that this kind of economic organization existed even at a remote locality in the Western Desert, hundreds of kilometers from the Nile Valley (Soukiassian et al. 2002).

As for temples in proximity to the capital, two important archives found at the Abusir funerary complexes of 5<sup>th</sup>-Dynasty pharaohs Neferirkara and Raneferef cast some light on temple resources (Posener-Kriéger 1976; Posener-Kriéger et al. 2006). It seems that the temples' main sources of income were other temples, especially that of Ptah at Memphis, as well as several royal institutions. Some fragmentary papyri suggest that these temples also possessed their own estates, but the role played by the royal residence (*hnmw*) and the royal house (*pr-nzwt*) appears far more important in the provisioning of temples near Memphis. In fact, the Royal Annals and the administrative papyri from the Old Kingdom show that the transfer of resources from the royal sphere to the temples was a well-established practice during the Old Kingdom. The titles borne by the officials of el-

Hawawish also suggest that the crown transferred some estates to the local temple of Min (Kanawati 1980 - 1992; Moreno García 2005). These measures do not imply, however, that the crown was losing resources and power for the benefit of the temples. The occasional tax exemptions granted to temples were temporary and revocable, and inscriptions like that of 6<sup>th</sup>-Dynasty official Harkhuf of Elephantine proclaim that both the temples and the royal estates formed networks where food and products were stored and kept at the disposal of the royal agents (Sethe 1933: Urk. I: 131; Strudwick 2005: 333). The decrees of Coptos also enumerate the officials and the royal departments that usually requisitioned workers and taxes from the temples.

A third kind of domain was formed by the landed possessions held by royal officials as remuneration for their services. Little is known about the standard estates allotted to each category of official (the categories having been based on an individual's rank, function, and status). Some agents of the king boasted in their autobiographical inscriptions of the (presumably exceptional) estates granted to them by the king to reward them for their outstanding services: Metjen (4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty) was rewarded with fields of variable dimensions for his activities as governor of several royal administrative centers (*hwt* and *hwt-št*) in Lower Egypt (Sethe 1933: Urk. I: 1 - 5; Strudwick 2005: 192 - 194); Sabni of Elephantine (6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty) was nominated as *hntj-š* (an honorific court title) of a royal pyramid and was granted a field of about eleven hectares after a successful mission in Nubia (Sethe 1933: Urk. I: 140; Strudwick 2005: 338); and Ibi of Deir el-Gabrawy (6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty) received a field of about fifty hectares linked to a *hwt* (Sethe 1933: Urk. I: 145; Strudwick 2005: 364 - 365). It seems doubtful whether the descendants of an official could have inherited the estates granted in this way. Members of the royal family (especially the royal sons) were possibly an exception, as their property was administered by a special administrative branch: the Overseer of the Provinces of

Upper Egypt Kapuptah (5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty), for example, was also Overseer of the Property of the Royal Sons in the Provinces of Upper Egypt (*jmj-r jht msw nzwt m zp3wt šm'w*), whereas Ankhshepseskaf (5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty) was Overseer of the Estates of the Royal Sons (*jmj-r prw msw nzwt*), a title also borne by his contemporary, the vizier Senedjemib-Inti; and prince Nykaura, a son of pharaoh Khafra, distributed his many estates among his wife and children while he was alive, although it is not certain that his instructions were also valid after his death (Sethe 1933: Urk. I: 16 - 17; Strudwick 2005: 200). Some royal decrees, as well as the papyri from the royal funerary complexes of Neferirkara and Raneferef, show that the nomination of an official as *hntj-š* of a royal pyramid was an important source of income that included both offerings and agricultural estates. But access to these coveted honors was restricted, as the decrees in the Raneferef archive proclaim (Posener-Kriéger 1985; Strudwick 2005: 101 - 102).

The granting of estates as remuneration or reward to the officials of the kingdom was so widespread that an iconographic motif arose in private tombs depicting processions of offering bearers accompanied by place-names that supposedly represented the estates

possessed by the tomb owner. However, these place-names seem to have been for the most part fictitious, used mainly as a decorative device emulating the ideal landscape governed by the king, a landscape represented in the funerary monuments of the king himself: the precisely symmetrical depiction of estates on the walls of the tombs (even in cases where the offering bearers bore no name), the absence of any information about virtually all these alleged place-names (even in the tombs of the heirs of the original owners), and the representation of exactly the same number of estates in both Upper and Lower Egypt suggest that this iconographic motif was not intended to depict the estates actually granted to an official.

Thus, estates composed a vital element in the economic and fiscal organization of the Egyptian state during the Old Kingdom. It should be emphasized that most estates depended on a network of royal centers (mainly *hwt*) directly administered by royal officials—a feature that characterizes the Old Kingdom—whereas in later periods of Egyptian history the temples became the main holders of estates, which were therefore subject to a more indirect and fragile control by the king.

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