Monumental Walls, Sovereign Power and Value(s) in Pharaonic Egypt

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Large walling projects are among the most visible features in the archaeological record. However, enclosure walls remain relatively under-theorized relative to other monumental buildings. In an attempt to move beyond simple explanations that analyse walls solely as defensive features or symbols, I link monumental walls to notions of sovereign power and action-oriented theories of value(s). Using examples from Pharaonic Egypt, I argue that monumental enclosure walls were attempts to define and realize particular social totalities, whether these were a temple complex, a royal tomb or an urban centre. If all efforts at border-making are also an exercise in power, walls have the potential to illuminate some of the goals and values of those ordering their construction. By analysing changes and continuities related to which structures required the protection of a monumental enclosure wall over time, it is possible to shed light on the fluid priorities of the most important political actors in Pharaonic society. Yet the very presence of a wall implies potential dissent and alternative practices—otherwise a wall's construction would not have been necessary.

Monumental walls remain a prominent feature of public life, and due to their sheer size are often (partially) preserved with some frequency in the archaeological record. Given this outsized presence among preserved archaeological remains, more rigorous approaches to understanding monumental walling projects have the potential to offer insights to scholars working in a wide variety of geographic and temporal settings. Though contemporary border walls (Brown 2010; Gasparini 2017; Jones 2012) and gated communities (Blakely & Snyder 1997) are a locus of intense political debate and copious anthropological theorizing, approaches to monumental enclosure walls in the distant past have generally been less nuanced. Many excellent specialist studies evaluate their defensive efficacy from a military perspective (for Pharaonic examples, see Monnier 2010; Vogel 2004; 2010; 2013), but other recent efforts have uncritically situated monumental walls as a dividing line between civilization and barbarism (Frye 2019), or project current practices into antiquity (Haller 2017). Rather than evaluate their defensive utility, I approach walls as fundamentally political, territorializing structures that can be linked productively with anthropological theories of sovereignty and value. Using evidence from Pharaonic Egypt (Figs 1 & 2), I will argue that monumental walls encode efforts to create, reify and secure specific social groups/entities in physical, territorial space. Their construction necessitates a brutal reimagination of the existing social and physical landscape, while their continuing effectiveness rests upon the use of coercive force to enforce the boundaries encompassed by monumental enclosures. An analysis of when monumental enclosure walls were needed (or not) can help to identify the fluid priorities of the political actors responsible for ordering such constructions. In this way, walls can help not only to elucidate 'value(s)' of important persons or classes, but also to clarify instances when these actors felt like such values were at risk of being contested—otherwise a wall's presence would not have been necessary in the first place!

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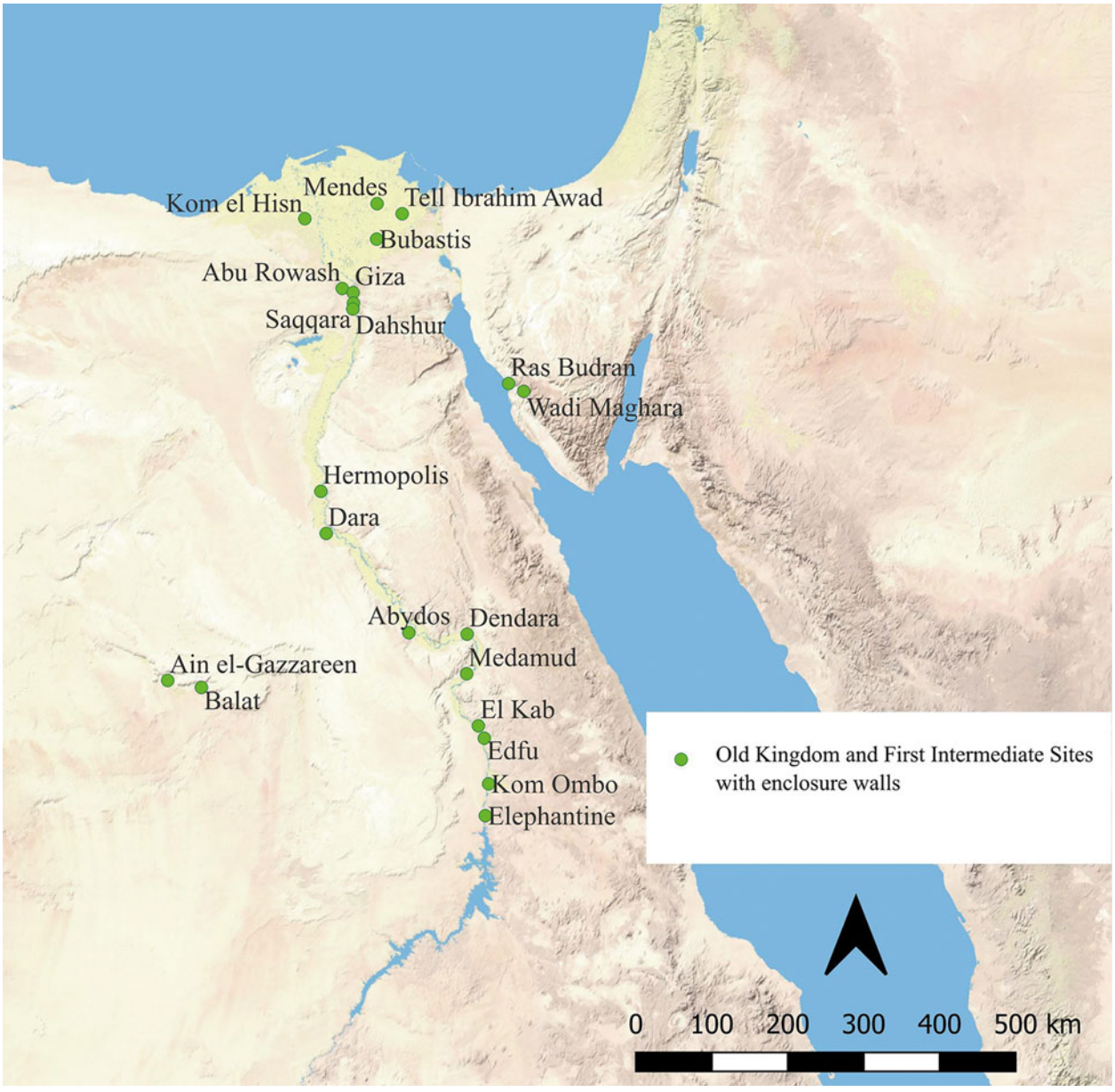

Figure 1. *Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period sites with enclosure walls.*

I begin by discussing the relationship between monumental walls and political power, arguing that their monumentality and simple functionality allow them to spectacularize political authority. Walls reorganize their socio-spatial environment according to the whims of authorities, but also require ongoing enforcement in order to remain effective—in short, they embody two key elements of sovereignty: the capacity to reimagine and remake the landscape, and the power to enforce this new vision. In the case of Pharaonic Egypt, this likely facilitated their use as an important symbol of Pharaonic royalty. Secondly, I will argue that connecting wall construction with action-oriented approaches to value helps to emphasize the dynamic nature of monumental walls and push scholarship beyond functionalist analyses.

Essentially, I argue that when and where walls were constructed in Pharaonic Egypt illuminates some (though by no means all) of the people, communities, qualities, assets and entities that the individual(s) responsible for the walls' construction valued. More specifically, it provides some insight into when they felt that such entities were at risk of

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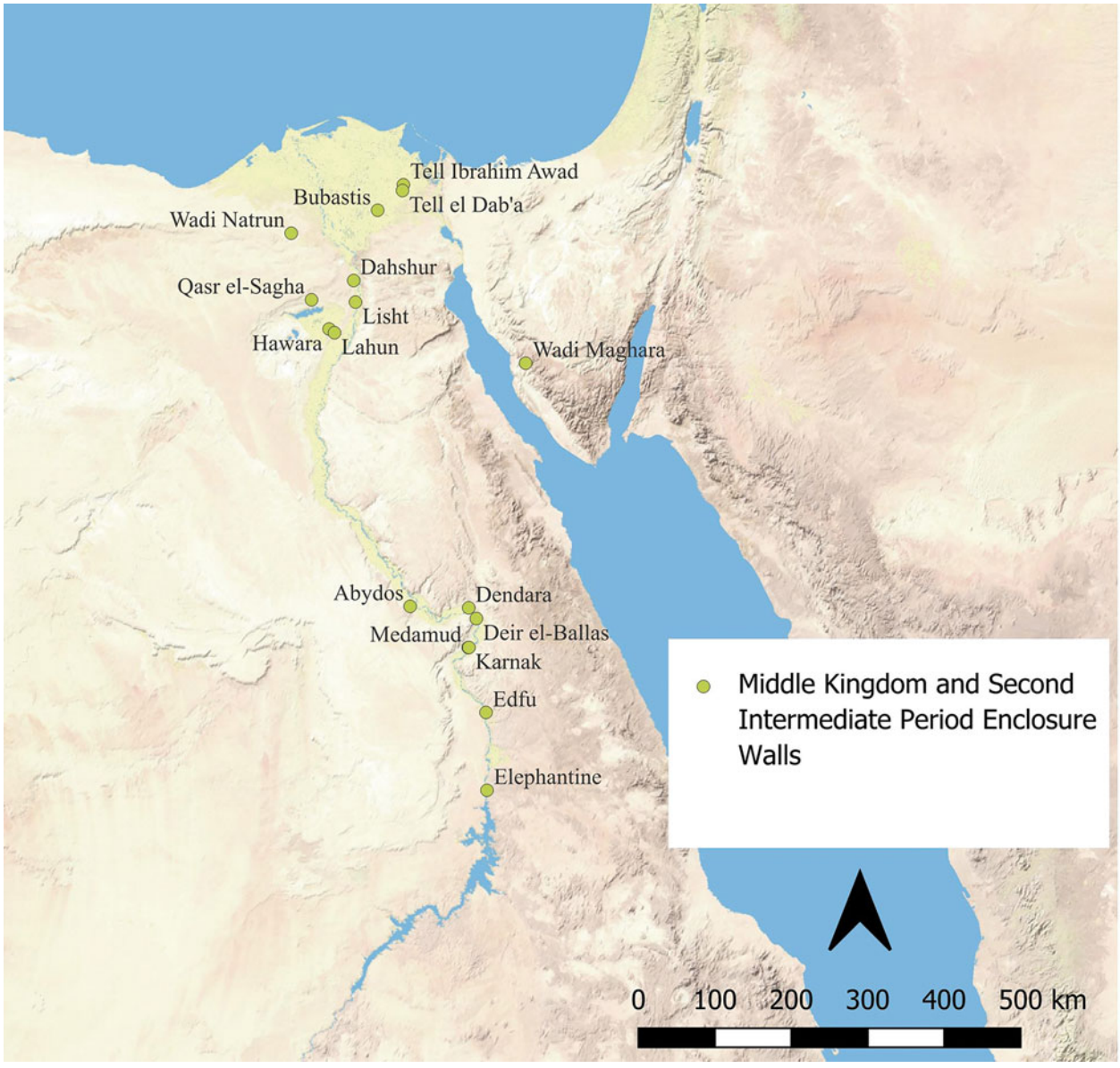

Figure 2. *Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period sites with enclosure walls.*

being challenged and where such contests might occur. A perception of insecurity on the part of those ordering wall construction is perhaps the closest thing to a universal law that one might propose related to rationales for wall building. Wendy Brown goes as far as to link the motivations for wall construction to Sigmund and Anna Freud's psychoanalysis of defence (and the mechanisms which the ego employs to defend itself): Brown 2010, 123–31. Crucially, this does not mean that walls are always built as a result of fear of military attack, but rather as an answer to some sort of imagined (or concrete) challenge—such challenges might reflect distinctions between the pure and impure, the desire to separate specific religious, ethnic, or professional groups into specific neighbourhoods, or to emphasize the dissimilarities between the ordered, constructed space of the urban world and the natural environment (Arnold 2022, 1, 9–21, 65–6, 79–83 touches on many of these possibilities). Given the connection of such walls to political power, this allows them in turn to shed light on some of the priorities and insecurities of the most influential political actors in Pharaonic society. Investigating transformations in what people, structures, and objects required an enclosure wall can

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clarify how certain priorities or values changed over time, and at times illuminates particular fissures or fault lines within Dynastic Egyptian society.

Before addressing the relationship between monumental walls, sovereignty and broader notions of value, it is critical to foreground that I am focusing almost exclusively on archaeological evidence and only drawing on the robust Pharaonic corpus of textual and art-historical sources to supplement specific points. This is because my aim is to develop an approach that might prove relevant for scholars investigating a wide variety of societies rather than only those who have the luxury of studying cultures that produced copious numbers of preserved documents. Additionally, though Pharaonic sources discuss the role of idealized temples, towns, or palaces, exceedingly few consider the role of walls specifically: even in those rare instances, walls are mentioned in passing as part of a wider building complex, and archaeological evidence must be used to fill in these lacunae.[1]

Monumental enclosure walls and political power

Many approaches to contemporary monumental walling projects centre links between walls and political power (Brown 2010; Díaz-Barriga & Dorsey 2020; Jones 2012; Longo 2018; Quétel 2012). Over the past several decades, the proliferation of border walls has been cited as a response to the waning sovereignty of the nation-state in an increasingly globalized, neoliberal economy (Brown 2010) and an assertion of power by an international security order still founded upon the principle of nation-state sovereignty over the mobility of people rather than capital (Jones 2012). Though these are extremely helpful approaches to understanding contemporary border walls, such approaches are less effective when considering ancient societies, whose understanding of territoriality, citizenship, political boundaries and sovereignty at times do not neatly correspond to modern definitions of such terms (Siegel 2022). Thus, when political authority and sovereignty are discussed in the following pages, I am referring principally to the capacity to exercise violence with legal impunity rather than Weberian understandings of statehood contingent upon a monopoly on the use of legitimate force or territorial integrity (Hansen & Stepputat 2006, 297).

Recent studies have highlighted how ancient states struggled to impose themselves over long distances, and often relied upon decentralized or alternative modalities of political power in tandem with brute force (Ando 2017; Richardson 2017). In a world where sovereignty is nodal and potentially even heterogeneous, a polity is defined in part by the borders that it chooses to delineate and how it maintains them. These boundaries can be conceived of as locations where the state or political core instantiates itself at what it perceives to be its limits. That is to say, a marked border is not simply two peripheral regions adjacent to one another—the very fact that it was marked by fortresses, walls, patrols, boundary stela or monumental art should instead be interpreted as an effort to recreate an authority from which sovereignty emanates, however thinly, at a peripheral location (Longo 2018, 50–51). Monumental wall construction is inevitably an exercise in boundary-making, and understandably has been linked with strict, linear border-making—a feature that is all the more notable in Pharaonic Egypt where boundaries were not always viewed in such rigid terms (Siegel 2022). In such a tumultuous landscape, it is all the more notable when seemingly rigid borders were drawn, whether by state actors or grass-roots coalitions.

The specific links between enclosure walls and political power are worth defining more precisely. Monumental enclosure walls divide space into the intramural and extramural, but they can in no sense be construed as 'natural' divisions. Fundamentally, they are the consequence of deliberate political choices to materialize a very particular mental and social boundary in the physical world, and to remake and reorder the social and natural landscape according to this distinct vision. The boundary that such a wall materializes will inevitably transgress or cut across other social relations (Massey 1995, 67–9). There is thus a kind of implicit violence to the decision to construct a monumental wall: it is the material product of a decision to privilege a specific social and political vision over all others. Moreover, numerous other elements of a monumental enclosure wall's existence are tinged with the threat of even more explicit violence: most obviously, the often deadly consequences that result from trespassing or transgressing a wall, the coercive measures that were often necessary to obtain labour for such a wall's construction, or the final dismantling or collapse of a wall that signalled the end of its functional usage.

If sovereignty can be conceptualized as the right to command, or more fully, as 'the recognition of the right to exercise violence with impunity' in tandem with the legitimacy to suspend (and remake) the existing social and legal order (Graeber 2011, 7, drawing upon Hansen & Stepputat 2005 and 2006. See also Graeber 2011 on sovereignty amongst the Shilluk), walls have the potential to serve as a potent

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metaphor for such power: not only do they inherently reorganize their social and physical environment according to a particular ideal, but their efficacy is predicated on the assumption that (generally violent) consequences will accrue to any who violate such a border. Walls aid efforts to delineate and police a given boundary, but require active enforcement and maintenance in order to be effective barriers. In sum, constructing and maintaining walls inherently demands what I believe are two complementary, constitutive elements of sovereign power: 1) at their foundation, walls require the capability to arbitrarily and violently reimagine, remake and reorder the existing social landscape, and 2) while walls remain in use, they require the ongoing capacity to enforce such a vision, whether through coercive, violent measures or persuasive enticements.

Enclosure walls were aggressively unsubtle metaphors for political power, both in terms of the intellectual exercise of planning them and the force required to build them and maintain their efficacy. They were appealing projects for polities in the ancient world desperately struggling to assert political control in the absence of the distance-demolishing technologies (i.e. asphalt roads, aircraft, motor vehicles) and information-age surveillance programmes that undergird modern state power (Scott 2009, xii, 324–5). For Pharaonic political authorities, monumental walls doubtless helped to control and channel the movements of people, animals and commercial goods across space. Just as crucially, however, monumental walls served as an easily legible metaphor for political power in a world where projecting authority over long distances was extremely challenging. Monumental walls were spectacular, inspiring awe in viewers ancient and modern alike, and their simple functionality encouraged their appropriation as a symbol of political authority independent of their actual efficacy in curtailing movement. As Brown (2010, 74) has noted with respect to modern border walls, 'Walls are consummately functional, and walls are potent organizers of human psychic landscapes generative of cultural and political identities'.

Put another way, monumental walls are one method through which authorities could very ostentatiously exercise multiple modalities of political power. As monuments designed to overawe any subjects who viewed them, they are an excellent example of Foucault's notion that 'feudal' power was constituted by 'what was seen'—the power of display, pageantry, and spectacle (Foucault 1995, 187). As monuments that towered over, encompassed and controlled movement through settlements, temples, palaces, tombs, fortresses, or even the wider landscape, however, they also served an instrumental function, contributing to the capacity of ruling authorities to surveil and coerce their subjects—the essence of a kind of nascent 'disciplinary system' of power, albeit in a far more overt manner than the anonymous, totalizing bureaucracies of eighteenth- to twentieth-century Western Europe (Foucault 1995, 187–94). Walls were an immediately visible consequence of the exertion of political power to reshape the surrounding environment: simply due to their size, they often required political authorities to persuade or coerce others to underwrite their construction. Their very physicality attests to the reality of political power being deployed to alter local landscapes.

It is this capacity of monumental walls to exist at the nexus of regimes of spectacular/visible/charismatic and disciplinary/coercive power that allows them to serve as such a powerful metaphor for ruling elites or the state. Just as the monumentality of a wall aims to persuade viewers to abide by the physical and social divisions created by the authorities who ordered its construction, a wall's continuing existence (and thus the implicit or explicit threats of violence to any who would transgress this boundary) also contributed to the capacity and potential of political authorities to mete out punishment, surveil their surroundings and dominate the local social and physical environment in ways that extend far beyond the edifices themselves. As constructions that simultaneously require the deployment of political power in their very creation and structures that facilitate its continued operation, it is unsurprising that walls were frequently and relatively swiftly adopted as emblems, metonyms or metaphors for some of the most important political actors within Pharaonic Egypt. These emblems take a variety of forms: the *serekh* or palace façade that enclosed the earliest Pharaohs' names (O'Brien 1996, 135–6); royal rituals like 'circumambulating the walls' that were to some degree paralleled in private religious practice (Gardiner 1903; Ritner 1987, 72–4); religious epithets like 'Ptah, South of his Wall' (Zibelius 1978, 40–41), or the prominent metonym 'White Wall(s)' (Petrie 1901, pl. 23(193) shows this toponym was already in use by the late 2nd Dynasty); Zibelius (1978, 39–42) for the royal capital at Memphis—even the most well-known marker of Pharaonic royalty, the cartouche, which trades on similar notions of encompassing and encirclement (Lightbody 2020, 67; Ritner 1987, 66–82 covers encompassment and encirclement in Pharaonic ritual in considerable detail). Similarly, breaching or transgressing enclosure

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walls is a theme of royal power in many Predynastic and Early Dynastic slate palettes.[2]

Action-oriented approaches to value: moving beyond structural-functionalist analyses

Enclosure walls delineate a privileged (or in the case of prisons, deliberately disadvantaged) intramural space from the outside world. Given the close bonds between political authority and monumental walling, some of the political priorities of the agents responsible for ordering a wall's construction can be understood through evaluating what tangible and intangible assets necessitated an enclosure wall, and how these requirements developed and changed over time. Anthropological approaches to value provide a number of useful methods for exploring the meaning of these architectural features, but before exploring theoretical approaches debating how value is constructed or specific Pharaonic examples, two important caveats must be noted. First, any discussion of notions of value informed by monumental enclosure-wall construction in Pharaonic Egypt nearly always privileges an elite perspective. As noted in the previous section, the fundamental connection between monumental enclosure walls and sovereignty, or at least the brutal wielding of political power, all but guarantees this. To choose a contemporary example, many Americans find the existence of a wall along stretches of the US–Mexico border to be abhorrent,[3] and a researcher evaluating constructions of value solely based on the presence or absence of such a wall would miss this important perspective if they evaluated the border-wall solely from a functionalist standpoint. However, they might still draw reasonable conclusions about the priorities of certain powerful policy-makers to 'secure the border'. Recognizing a multiplicity of perspectives reinforces the notion that walls frequently appear in contested landscapes, or at least locations where those responsible for a wall's construction anticipate a possible challenge. Second, whatever the problem may be (i.e. ritual impurity, wild animals, malevolent spirits, an invading army, peasants fleeing calls for corvée labour, a thief, etc.), and regardless of whether it is real or imagined, the danger can be mitigated through the presence of an enclosure wall—that is to say, an intervention into the landscape that encompasses the threatened space and whatever people, objects, entities, or qualities reside therein.

Within recent anthropological and sociological thought, most theorists investigating value have tended to fall into two broad camps: those who believe that value is constituted, reproduced and modified through human action, and structuralists who believe that value arises from culturally embedded customs, institutions and mores. Both theoretical stances utilize vocabulary related to notions of enclosure, and in the following paragraphs, I will explore how the structuralist concept of *encompassment* relates to the kinds of hierarchies delineated by enclosure walls, but also why I feel this methodology ultimately struggles to explain the central meaning and purpose of these architectural features. Following this, I will discuss how the social *totalities* that inform the action-oriented approach help to clarify what exactly was being walled in by monumental enclosures in Pharaonic Egypt.

Encompassing walls

An important theme of various efforts to theorize value, and particularly those of the structuralist anthropologist Louis Dumont, is that of 'encompassment'.[4] This seems a logical starting point for the study of how enclosure walls relate to notions of value, since they by definition serve to encompass something. Dumont began from a classic Levi-Straussian understanding of culture in terms of binary opposites (i.e. pure/impure, hot/cold, raw/cooked, man/woman) (Dumont 1982, 220–25). Such dualities are easily identifiable in an ancient Egyptian context: to choose but a few obvious examples, consider Ma'at/Order *versus* Isfet/Chaos (Smith 1994), Red/Desert Land *versus* Black/Arable Land (Mertz 1978, 22–3; Shaw 1993, 13) and Upper *versus* Lower Egypt. Dumont realized that often these terms were hierarchical, with the higher-ranking term *encompassing* the lower one in some contexts (Dumont 1980, 239–45. Thus, in English, for example, 'man' or 'mankind' can in certain situations stand in for all of humanity—and reveals a considerable degree of latent misogyny. Though this is certainly true in a number of well-publicized cases from Dumont's research, the Egyptian evidence for such encompassing lexemes is less inspiring. Certainly, Ma'at was preferred to Isfet, but it never subsumes Isfet. If the cultivable 'black land' was viewed more positively than the desert 'red land', the former certainly did not encompass the latter. Upper Egypt does not appear to have been specially favoured relative to Lower Egypt, or *vice versa*. And whatever their hierarchical status, the very meaning of these terms can only be understood in relation to their opposite.

Dumont's research emphasizes how hierarchies of these 'idea-values' affect and structure society (Dumont 1982, 224). His framework is considerably

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more nuanced than many of his critics suggest, allowing for emic variations, reversals, or inversions of these hierarchies based on changing contexts. For instance, he notes that the pure/impure spectrum dominates the Hindu caste system, with Brahmins at the top and even outranking kings in many circumstances; however, there are purely political arenas where the power and charisma of the ruler subordinates the Brahmin (Dumont 1982, 225). Nevertheless, at its core, the Dumontian project and its descendants have aimed to isolate higher and higher levels of objective 'values' that encompass, structure and inform human actions. This notion that a consistent system cannot explain its internal logic without recourse to a higher, more encompassing system echoes Gödel's second incompleteness theorem, albeit applied to human societies, actions and values rather than mathematical fields (Graeber 2001, 61–2).

In this instance, the role of the monumental wall would be to mark the formal boundaries of some of these systems. Within the confines of the wall, inside the temple, palace, fortress, or administrative building, reside the 'higher' logics of secular or religious power that define and order the surrounding landscape. Walls delineate a privileged interior and disadvantaged exterior (or *vice versa*); this interior serves a highly ordered, rigorously controlled, utopian space that in the case of some palaces or temples is even designed to serve as an idealized microcosm of the wider world (or in the case of a prison, must be constrained so that it does not threaten the established order beyond its walls). In essence, it is the failure of efforts by authorities to assert their power across the broader landscape that generates the original impetus to establish a self-contained, walled order that both models the sacral-political ideal and protects and separates this ideal from a profane outer realm. Thus, beyond the obvious point that monumental enclosure walls literally *encompass* space, they also demarcate a hierarchical relationship between normative values operating within their limits and the exterior world. Moreover, the concept of encompassment would seem to have added resonance, since walls, façades, or enclosures figured prominently as metonyms or metaphors in Egyptian society that stand in for or encompass larger entities—including the palace,[5] the king,[6] the capital city[7] and possibly even Egypt itself.[8]

Deducing specific values from the presence of perimeter walls in specific settings is an altogether different challenge, and constrained by the limited functionality of a monumental enclosure wall. Monumental enclosure walls in Egypt served to separate the sacred from the profane, define communities, control the movement of people, animals and objects, and enforce socio-political hierarchies. Walls unsurprisingly highlight that the centres of political power, sacred knowledge, military force and wealth were highly valued assets that at times demanded the protection of monumental enclosures. Certainly, their ubiquitous presence reflects the high priority that decision-makers in Pharaonic society accorded the maintenance of order, control and security, and this value was often expressed through architecture on a monumental scale.

Yet here the structuralist approach to value founders as a result of the same deficiencies that have compromised other structuralist attempts to explain social phenomena. First, it tends to assume that the structures that influence human action and the social groups that humans create are neatly bounded and stable, when much of the work of social science over the preceding decades has suggested precisely the opposite (Graeber 2001, 20). Moreover, this seems particularly dangerous when speculating about the values encompassed or defined by enclosure walls, since one risks speciously reifying a particular perspective on the very entity that was being contested—otherwise a wall would not have been required to secure it. Second, structuralist approaches often render it all but impossible to identify how and why socio-cultural change occurs, even allowing for the sophisticated inversions described by Dumont.[9] To return to enclosure walls in Pharaonic Egypt, how does this get us anywhere closer to understanding why towns were walled in some periods and not others, or why temples were fortified in the New Kingdom and Late Period but not during the Old Kingdom?[10] Despite these reservations, the Dumontian understanding of hierarchy maps nicely onto the functionality of enclosure walls that so neatly differentiate interior and exterior poles. This notion of encompassment helps to explain the utopian character of enclosures as they attempt to separate and elevate particular political, sacred, or administrative logics over the entirety of Pharaonic society. The problems lie with how one could ever arrive at identifying precisely what the bounds of Pharaonic society were and accounting for the reality that monumental walls represent the actions of specific individuals grounded in a particular time and space rather than the distillation of ahistorical values like 'maintaining order in the face of chaos' or 'separating the sacred from the profane'. In the following section, I will argue that action-oriented constructions of value offer an alternative, potentially more comprehensive explanation for the purpose and meaning of monumental walls.

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Totalizing walls

Action-oriented theories of value centre the individual together with their choices and potentially changing motivations under the assumption that the importance of an object, idea, or event is proportional to the relative time, labour and creative energy a person invests in it. Rather than focusing on ahistorical cultural structures, it is a theory of value centred upon individual motivation (Graeber 2001, 20). For David Graeber and Terrence Turner, the act of political struggle is the contest to determine what *value* is —that is to say, what matters and how to pursue it (Graeber 2013, 228; see also Turner 1984; 2008). Because of their size and political import, there is a degree of intentionality that one can ascribe to all monumental enclosures, and the action-oriented approach seems particularly relevant to exploring the motivations underlying wall construction.

A fundamental point that Graeber and Turner emphasize is that meaning and value are constructed socially, through comparison: as such, they can only be realized through the eyes of other people. Individual actors weigh the relative importance of various people, concepts, objects, or actions, and inevitably, these comparisons imply an audience, an imagined 'totality' that exists in the individual's mind even if it may or may not be empirically verifiable (Graeber 2001, 86–9; 2013, 226–37). Such totalities may be conceptualized at various scales and in unique ways by each individual: think, for example, of concepts like 'society', 'nation', 'province', 'town', 'kin-group', 'a single ritual event', etc. In fact, there might well be very little in common between the imagined features of such totalities in an individual's mind and observable reality. Indeed, in any social situation, each actor might imagine different totalities, each 'organized around different conceptions of value', with these totalities inevitably refusing to mesh together neatly with one another (Graeber 2001, 88). To choose one example, most people have an idea about what southern California is, but there are many plausible interpretations of what the geographic, cultural and economic boundaries of this imagined entity actually are.

Graeber specifically identifies such social totalities with Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of *chronotopes*: 'little universes of time and space constructed in the imagination' as opposed to the 'infinitely complex reality in which meaning is in fact established through open-ended dialog' (Graeber 2001, 86–7). In this sense, and not entirely dissimilar to their *encompassing* nature discussed above, monumental enclosure walls can also be understood as *totalizing* structures—they form the boundaries of attempts to realize physically the kinds of idealized totalities evoked in chronotopes. Whether through defining the hallowed enclave of a temple, the administrative fulcrum of a palace, the urban core within a town wall, or a horizon of military control as demarcated by a fortification wall, monumental enclosures serve to separate neatly the messiness of the exterior world from an idealized sphere of political, religious, or military authority within the wall. This social totality, whatever its form, need not be real beyond the imagination of the authors of the wall's construction. Certainly, walls do not immaculately or objectively delimit social reality; on the contrary, they almost invariably cut across existing social relations because they correspond to the exclusive vision of those ordering their construction and not necessarily the wider community. Walls in this sense are almost hopelessly utopian, totalizing structures, efforts to flatten the complexities of the world violently into a simple interior/exterior dichotomy.

In Pharaonic Egypt, the social totalities defined by walls were quite varied: enclosures surrounded a multitude of different features, including but not limited to fortresses, temples, palaces, pyramid complexes, towns, particular paths across the wider landscape, etc. At various times and places in Pharaonic Egypt, walls were employed in efforts to create a kind of unified social totality within these spaces. A horizon of military authority was neatly defined by the walls of fortresses like Buhen or Uronarti (Emery *et al.* 1979 detail the archaeological excavation of this fortress); the sacred and profane are sharply delineated by the *temenos* walls at Karnak (Lauffray 1980, 44–52, fig. 16),[11] or indeed the walls surrounding any number of mortuary monuments from the Early Dynastic, Old Kingdom and Middle Kingdom; they also demarcated administrative entities, whether in the form of the intracommunity divide between the neighbourhoods of Sekhem-Senwosret and Hotep-Senwosret at Lahun (Moeller 2017, 192–6) or the boundaries of a royal palace at Deir el-Ballas (Lacovara 1993, 14–17, 23–5); still others aspired to encompass larger entities, as with the town walls encompassing nearly the entirety of settlement at Edfu (Fig. 3; Moeller 2004; Moeller & Marouard 2018, 33–42) and Elephantine (Ziermann 1993; Von Pilgrim 2011; 2016), with notable episodes of construction during the late Old Kingdom/First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom. The constellations of walled frontier fortresses established along the southern, western and northeastern frontiers doubtless played a role in imperfectly defining and totalizing the notion of a

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Figure 3. *Section showing a series of late Old Kingdom and Middle Kingdom town walls at Edfu. Note the layers of accretion walls showing multiple renovations over time. (Photograph: author.)*

territorial state of Egypt itself,[12] albeit one conceptualized in rather different terms than modern states (Siegel 2022). Urban centres in Pharaonic Egypt generally lacked public squares or plazas (Moreno Garcia & Feinman 2022, 71), so monumental walls and gate complexes were ideal settings for awe-inspiring spectacles or conspicuous display, as evidenced by temple pylons,[13] elaborate enclosure walls surrounding royal funerary complexes,[14] and the so-called palace façade-style architecture (Emery 2018). It must be emphasized, of course, that monumental walls are just a single, rather blunt instrument (used in tandem with countless other methods) through which commanding authorities attempted to actualize and fix such social totalities in Pharaonic Egypt, though they were one that was particularly conspicuous in the lived experience of the ancient Egyptians themselves and remain so in the surviving archaeological record.

A crucial advantage of the action-oriented approach to value is that it does not reify these social totalities as ahistorical constants—towns, temples, palaces and fortresses are always in the course of 'becoming' and never completed entities, to borrow terminology from process archaeological approaches (Leadbetter 2021; Malafouris *et al.* 2021). Nor does it assume that subjective social totalities are always objectively identifiable, as the structuralist approach does with its hierarchies of overarching, encompassing values. Thus, action-oriented approaches remind us that monumental walls were attempts to fix specific visions of social totalities, not objective absolutes. This dovetails nicely with the reality that often walls are deployed at particularly controversial social fault-lines rather than at locations of consensus. In contemporary times, for instance, 'border walls' have proliferated across the globe in the context of heated, unresolved debates over who gets to belong to the nation-state and receive the privileges conferred by membership (Jones 2012, 170–81). Indeed, far from uncritically accepting their imposition by state authorities, the US–Mexico Border Wall or the Berlin Wall have often been sites of pointed political dissent—as any number of murals, tunnels, or even partially dismantled portions of walling might attest. There is no reason to expect

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that the imposition of walls in the distant past was any less controversial. Carefully tracing when and how enclosure walls were deployed together with when they were destroyed or abandoned helps to illuminate some of these social flashpoints as well as the intentions of political authorities who imposed them. When combined with an action-oriented approach, it also allows for the possibility that walls can be multi-vocal spaces—that is to say, sites of negotiation, subversion and disagreement, not merely stages for the uncritical acceptance of the legitimating ideologies of the elites who ordered their construction.

Conclusions: enclosure walls and values

Because enclosure wall construction demands two core elements of political power—the ability to reimagine and reshape the existing social landscape into the intra- and extramural space, and the capacity to enforce this vision—investigating when, where, and how monumental enclosure walls were built can offer insights into changing economic, political and cultural values. Though often ostensibly constructed for defensive purposes, such concerns may mask other political motivations, as the authors of wall construction attempt to fix particular visions of various social entities—whether a temple, a palace, an entire town, or even a nation. Monumental enclosure walls inevitably appear as value-laden architecture because of their inextricable link with boundaries. Both the neo-structuralist and action-oriented approaches to value allocate a crucially important role to borders and border-making. For Dumont and the neo-structuralists, firm boundaries are assumed, since they are necessary to delimit the margins of where 'idea-values' may be ranked, inverted, or somehow compared to one another. For Turner and Graeber, such social arenas are amorphous, shifting, dependent on each individual's perspective, and perhaps not even verifiably real beyond the patterns of actions that each agent is capable of observing; nonetheless, at least some kind of imagined, defined (and thus implicitly limited) social totality is required in the mind of an individual actor in order to construct value at all, since value can only be realized in the eyes of an imagined audience: a town, kin-group, or even 'society' itself.

When considering enclosure walls, an approach derived from individual action and imagination seems to comport better with both the function of enclosure walls and the dissenting voices that their presence implies. As architecture that was intended to realize physically the bounds of social totalities and arenas of political struggle, enclosure walls (and their subsequent maintenance, renovation, or collapse) played an important role in negotiating what was valued in Pharaonic society. Because they define and separate the world into interior and exterior space, monumental enclosures are structures that fundamentally reflect a kind of value judgement translated into the division of territorial space. Their study illuminates the values and social totalities that were prioritized by those with the political power to build on a monumental scale, and highlights how walls seemed to proliferate in moments when such social totalities and values were viewed as especially vulnerable, dangerous and contestable. As Barry Kemp eloquently stated, enclosure walls became a kind of 'habit of the mind' that, once developed, became another instrument that Pharaonic authorities could employ to define the physical and mental boundaries of various social units—albeit a more physical tool than papyrus records (Kemp 2004b, 284).

Following walling trends illuminates when political authorities identified particular social totalities that they believed required sharp, ostentatious demarcation. In future studies, tracing when such walls were built, dismantled, renovated, or destroyed may pinpoint instances when very particular visions of social totalities were reimagined or altered, either by the existing authorities or new individuals or groups attempting to assert their own sovereign visions with respect to these monumental enclosures. Walls are not static structures, and mud-brick walls especially require regular refurbishment and re-plastering (Williams 1999, 448, especially n. 46). Monumental walls are produced and reproduced through the actions of numerous people involved in their planning, construction and maintenance. The entities that authorities believed required enclosure walls changed over time, and future studies tracing these changes may illuminate some of the social totalities and values that the authorities responsible for wall construction deemed most at risk of being contested, subverted, or challenged, and how these totalities shifted across various periods of Egyptian history. In this sense, enclosure walls surrounding temples are more than just markers separating the sacred from the profane, but structures that reflect the political struggle to define what is sacred in the first place! As architectural features that seek to realize physically certain social totalities in the service of a particular sovereign vision, enclosure walls are emblematic of Graeber and Turner's contention that the 'ultimate stakes of politics … is not even the struggle to appropriate

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value; it is the struggle to establish what value *is*' and thus to determine 'what makes life worth living' (Graeber 2001, 88).

Notes

1. Quack 2000 discusses *The Book of the Temple*, a papyrus discussing the ideal dimensions and meaning of Pharaonic temples in the Ptolemaic Period. Walls appear briefly in texts like the Kamose Stela as protective elements, and various temple enclosures figure prominently in the earliest Pharaonic religious corpora like the *Pyramid Texts*. Generally, these texts tend to emphasize a pure/impure dynamic in relation to sacred or royal space (Quack 2013 provides a nice overview). See also Monnier 2014 for an overview of ancient Egyptian approaches to representing defensive architecture in paintings, reliefs and sculptures. On Pharaonic urbanism more generally, see Moeller 2016.
2. For the Libyan Palette (Cairo CG 14238), see images in Petrie 1953, pl. G17–18. For interpretations of the Libyan Palette, see Bestock 2018, 47–9 and Etienne 1999. For a photograph of the Narmer Palette (JE 32169), see Petrie 1953, pls J25, K26. For recent interpretations, see Bestock 2018, 65–9; Luiselli 2011; O'Connor 2011.
3. Polls conducted by the Gallup organization regularly find over 60 per cent of Americans oppose such constructions: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1660/immigration.aspx>.
4. For some of Dumont's most important work on value, see Dumont 1980; 1982. Dumont 1980, 224–5 treats encompassment specifically.
5. For the *Serekh* palace-façade in royal names, see O'Brien 1996, 135–6.
6. On the encircling symbolism of the cartouche, see Lightbody 2020.
7. An early epithet of Memphis was 'White Wall(s)'. See Tallet and Laisney 2012, 385–7 on an example as early as the reign of Iry-Hor. See also Zibelius 1978, 39–42.
8. For a succinct overview of 'White Walls' and '*ḥwt-kꜣ-Ptḥ*' and their etymology, see Zivie 1982, 26–7.
9. This is of course drastically oversimplifying the position of many of the scholars who consider themselves structuralists or descendants of the Dumontian tradition today. But even if one takes the sophisticated approach of Knut Rio and Olaf Smedal (Rio & Smedal 2008), that hierarchies within society are always changing and procedurally reproducing themselves through the tendency of core values to attach themselves to various objects, institutions, or social groups, the implicit assumption remains that both 'societies' and 'core values' are bounded entities that can be objectively defined remains.
10. On fortified temples, see Spence 2004 and Kemp 2004a.
11. Redford also mentions a 6 m wide enclosure wall in East Karnak that he compares with the town walls from Old Kingdom Elephantine that perhaps should be tentatively dated to the Middle Kingdom (Redford 1984, 98; Redford *et al.* 1991, 98;). For New Kingdom renovations like the massive bastioned Thutmoside enclosure wall, see Lauffray 1980, 46.
12. On frontier fortresses more generally, see Morris 2005 for the New Kingdom, Vogel 2004 for the Middle Kingdom, and Monnier 2010 for an overview.
13. For a brief discussion of temple pylons and their symbolism, see Shafer 1997, 5. See also Vogel 2010 on the importance of gates at Middle Kingdom fortresses in Nubia.
14. For example, see the enclosure wall of the Shunet el Zebib, discussed in Arnold 2022, 9–17; Djoser's step pyramid enclosure, detailed in Lauer 1936, 82–4, 86–92; and the elaborate panelling of Senwosret I's pyramid at Lisht noted in Arnold 1988, 58–63.

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