

The emergence of civilization in Egypt: Background and through Naqada I

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- Egypt: The setting
 - The Nile
 - Flows NORTH (up on the map)
 - Water flows downhill, towards the Mediterranean Sea
 - so the UPPER Nile is to the SOUTH (down on the map)
 - and the LOWER Nile is to the NORTH (up on the map)
 - The Nile starts far south of the areas we will study
 - In general, the Nile flows through a very long, very narrow valley
 - only 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) wide in many areas
 - 3 kilometers (1.8 miles) wide is typical
 - maximum 22 km (13 miles) wide
 - but some 1,500 km (900 miles) long!
 - although we will look at “only” the lower 2/3 of the Nile valley (1000 km, or 600 miles long)
 - this long, narrow strip is the Upper Nile
 - In the Upper Nile, virtually all the habitable land is in the narrow floodplain of the river
 - settlements tend to be small, since not much land is available at any given point
 - the valley is entrenched, that is, the river and floodplain are significantly below the surrounding desert
 - this makes it difficult to get water out of the valley to irrigate additional land
 - so farming was restricted to the narrow valley floor for the entire time period that we will consider here
 - north of Cairo, the valley opens up into a wide, triangular, green delta: the Nile Delta
 - criss-crossed by shallow waterways
 - the Delta plus a little of the narrow valley adjacent to it are called the Lower Nile
 - geographically, ecologically, and culturally distinct from the Upper Nile
 - In general, the natural resources along the Nile are plentiful and redundant
 - settlements along the Nile didn’t lack basic materials like stone for building and carving, the way Mesopotamian sites did (although wood would have been somewhat scarce)
 - most of the Nile valley has about the same agricultural, mineral, etc. resources
 - so there was little ecological need for internal trade up and down the Nile in agricultural products or locally available materials
 - exception in the Upper Nile
 - some places, like Hierakonpolis, have easier access by overland routes along “wadis” (dry ravines or streambeds) to mineral sources well away from the Nile valley itself
 - such as silver and gold ores in the hills between the Nile and the Red Sea
 - these wadis would also have been routes followed by nomadic herders, who may have been long-distance traders from early times
 - they would not necessarily have to be “civilized” to do this...

- so places near these wadis may have been favored once long-distance trade and use of metals became important
- eventually, some places specialized in making certain kinds of goods that were traded up and down the Nile
 - but this must have been based on social factors, rather than better access to resources
 - maybe some places had more specialists or larger workshops
 - and/or some places developed reputations for certain goods ("brand name" sources)
- Nile provides easy transportation
 - the sections we are looking at are relatively flat and navigable
 - the current runs from south to north, into the Mediterranean Sea
 - the prevailing wind blows from north to south
 - so travel along the Nile is easy
 - you drift downriver (north) with the current
 - and sail upriver (south) with the wind
 - since the valley is so narrow, everyone in the Upper Nile lives right on the freeway
 - facilitates cultural uniformity
 - and political unity
 - compared to Mesopotamia, with towns scattered over a plain
 - The same is true of people in the Delta, but to a lesser extent
 - Because everyone is surrounded by a network of navigable streams, canals, and lakes
- archaeological evidence suggests that Nile population overall was well below the valley's carrying capacity until recent times
 - suggesting that population pressure probably was not an important factor
 - although concentrations of population in larger towns or cities might have put a strain on resources in the that particular part of the valley
- Temperatures
 - in the Delta: temperate year 'round
 - in middle part of Upper Egypt (Hierakonpolis): comfortable in winter, very hot in summer
- Almost no rainfall
 - 1.5" per year in Cairo (the Delta, or Lower Nile)
 - virtually 0 at Aswan in the south (Upper Nile)
- Floods
 - the Nile floods regularly, every year
 - or did, until first Aswan dam was built
 - but the flood was somewhat variable in date and height
 - July through October (that is, summer)
 - the floods were convenient for farmers
 - they cover the farmland with fertile silt
 - farmers plant in the mud as the water recedes
 - and keep the fields wet with small-scale systems of ditches, retaining ponds, and shadufs (a counterweighted pole arrangement for lifting potfuls of water a few feet)

- the floods were controlled prehistorically by building levees between areas of fields and breaking them as needed
 - but the flood level was unpredictable, so sometimes big floods wiped out the levees
- so there was no point in building big canal or levee systems
 - natural flooding plus simple systems were adequate for the entire valley floor
 - but irrigating outside the valley was effectively impossible
 - any big canal or levee project would run frequent risks of being destroyed, anyway
 - so, they did have to do some irrigation, and they did have to coordinate levee layouts and breaching within any given area, but these projects were relatively small-scale works that often had to be rebuilt after high Nile floods
- floods enforced several months of “free” time every year
 - good for craft production, pyramid building, etc.
- Sources of information:
 - Lots of archaeological evidence, but it is skewed towards cemeteries
 - due to incredible preservation of cool stuff
 - also because it is hard to miss grave markers like the pyramids!
 - also because archaeology developed out of a tradition of looting and collecting
 - leading to huge museum collections of nice artifacts that were mostly from burials of nobles and rulers
 - also due to where cemeteries and towns are located
 - cemeteries are located in dry, elevated desert outside the valley floor
 - preservation is excellent
 - towns were mostly in or near the floodplain
 - close to the river and farmland
 - now often buried under silt and below the water table
 - people have lived at many of these places from ancient times up to today
 - so remains were disturbed by constant rebuilding, digging, etc.
 - and are now under modern towns
 - hard to find
 - poorly preserved
 - very expensive and difficult to study
 - this means we don’t know as much about towns, cities, administration as we would like
 - except indirectly from the graves of rulers and nobles
 - We have some written sources on early Egyptian history (there are *lots* for later periods):
 - During the New Kingdom (1552-1070 BC), monuments were decorated with lists of past kings and a few words about their achievements, going back to the Old Kingdom (2686-2250 BC)
 - Which is near the end of what we are interested in, like the Early Dynastic in Mesopotamia
 - These lists include kings who reigned up to 1500 years before the lists were made!
 - A similar list on papyrus (the Turin papyrus) is fragmentary, but gives durations of reigns in the Old Kingdom
 - Palermo stone: a much earlier king list, made late in the Old Kingdom (in the 5th Dynasty)

- briefly records the principal achievements of the kings of the first 5 dynasties
- Largest piece is at Palermo, thus the name
- some additional pieces in other collections (Cairo, Petrie museum in London)
- but most of the stone is missing
- we happen to have portions about the kings of the 1st and 2nd dynasties
- Manetho, an Egyptian historian of the 3rd century BC (2,200 years ago!), used documents like these to compile a history of kings and events
 - but with many errors due to being almost 3000 years after the fact!
 - Yet, an amazing amount stands up to excavated evidence.
 - He must have had access to documents and monuments that are now lost, while we may have some that were buried or unknown to Manetho
- These records provide a chronological framework starting very early
 - but don't say much about life and society until later periods
 - unlike Mesopotamia, where early documents are accounting records
 - which initially don't help much with chronology or history
 - but do shed some light on economic activities and occasionally other aspects of life
- Chronology chart
 - The early time periods on the chart are known only from archaeology
 - they are largely based on changes in pottery styles
 - Starting with the Early Dynastic (also called the Archaic period), they are based on historical lists of kings, verified and adjusted by archaeological evidence, some of which can be pinpointed in time by references to astronomical events
 - Note: the Early Dynastic period in Egypt is completely different from the Early Dynastic period in Sumer.
 - These dynasties are supposed to be literally family lines of kings
 - when the family line was broken (no heir, palace coup, etc.), a new dynasty started
 - there was probably a lot of fudging for political expedience
 - 31 generally recognized dynasties, covering about 3000 years of history.
 - That is a LONG TIME
 - compare to the USA, now just 231 years old; or England, just under 1000 years old...
 - historians have lumped these dynasties into a sequence of “Kingdoms” (periods of political unity) and “Intermediate Periods” (periods of political fragmentation)
 - this is for convenience only; people at the time would not have recognized these periods
 - Predynastic period: from the adoption of farming around 5000 BC up to the start of *Egypt's* Early Dynastic Period (starting around 3050 BC)
 - Predynastic is a general term that includes the Badarian period and Naqada I, II, and III
 - Naqada II and III, and their culmination in the 1st Dynasty, are when complex society really developed and established itself
 - so we will focus on this stretch of time and what led up to it
 - Early Dynastic (or Archaic) period (3050-2686 BC) (Dynasties 1 - 2)
 - The first dynasties of kings who ruled a unified Egypt
 - Old Kingdom (2686-2250 BC) (Dynasties 3 - 6)
 - Building of the great pyramids

- Our coverage ends here, but you should know that Egyptian history continued...
- First Intermediate period (Dynasties 7 - 10)
 - Dynastic kingship broke down, local rulers fought each other
- Middle Kingdom (2035-1668 BC) (Dynasties 11 - 13)
 - A vigorous vizier seized power and rebuilt the strength of the Egyptian kingship
 - trade and influence expanded out to the Levant, south up the Nile, and to Crete
 - revived the tradition of pyramids (but much smaller than in the Old Kingdom)
- Second Intermediate period (Dynasties 14 - 18)
 - A second collapse of centralized rule
- New Kingdom (1552-1070 BC) (Dynasties 18 - 20)
 - the Egyptians drove out invaders and reunited Egypt
 - for the first time, Egypt expanded out along the Mediterranean coast and the Levant to conquer and control a larger empire
 - royal and noble burials were in deep, rock-cut tombs, rather than under pyramids
 - King Tutankhamun's is the only one of these known that wasn't looted in antiquity
- Late periods (lumped together here) were marked by conflict and decline (Dynasties 21 - 31)
- Ptolemaic (Greek) period (332-30 BC)
 - Alexander the Great conquered Egypt, bringing it into the Greek (and later, Roman) world
- we will focus on just the early part of this sequence

- The Predynastic period
 - Early settlement in the Paleolithic
 - many sites of Paleolithic foragers known in Egypt back to 100,000 BC
 - Around 7,000 BC, the climate changed a bit, allowing plants and animals to flourish in what is now the Sahara desert
 - presumably attracting human foragers, too
 - The Sahara apparently dried out again around 5,550 BC, pushing foragers into the Nile valley, where they started cultivating in order to support their higher population density
 - Note that this is much later than in the Levant
 - Neolithic period
 - Neolithic in Lower Egypt:
 - In the Fayum depression, by 5,000 BC: the Fayum culture (also Fayyum, Fayuun)
 - mobile or semi-sedentary foragers who came to certain areas to do some farming on occasion, maybe seasonally
 - sites seem to be temporary camps
 - mixed agricultural, hunting, and fishing subsistence
 - cultivated emmer wheat and barley
 - stored it in pits or "silos" made by setting baskets about 1 m diameter and 30 to 100 cm deep into the ground
 - harvested with sickle blades set into wooden handles, with sickle gloss
 - made fine baskets and crude ceramics
 - In Mesopotamia, the 'Ubaid period had started 600 years earlier, around 5600 BC
 - by this time, 'Ubaid people had settled towns and small temples

- At Merimda and elsewhere in the western delta, a related but different Neolithic culture
 - also around 5000 BC or maybe a little later, to maybe 4100 BC
 - simple, perishable pole and thatch houses
 - some changes late in the sequence (maybe 4300 BC):
 - some houses were dug partially into the ground
 - storage “granaries” associated with individual houses
 - grinding stones
 - sites up to 20 ha (8 acres)
 - site populations up to 1,300 to 2,000 people
 - suggests heavy dependence on cereals
 - broadly similar to late Natufian and PPNA settlements in the Levant, but much later
 - simple graves within villages, without goods, unlike in upper Egypt
 - social stratification: no evidence; burials at Merimde all roughly equivalent in wealth
- Neolithic in Upper Egypt:
 - very different from the Neolithic in Lower Egypt
 - Badarian culture, also started around 5000 BC
 - that is, during the Mesopotamian ‘Ubaid period (5600-3900 BC)
 - as in Lower Egypt, small farming villages, maybe only semi-sedentary
 - settlements:
 - perishable pole-and-thatch houses, hearths
 - basketry-lined “silo” pits
 - subsistence:
 - lots of sheep/goat droppings suggest herding
 - wheat, barley, lentils
 - hunting, fishing
 - material culture
 - more technologically sophisticated than lower Egypt
 - pottery much finer, better made than in lower Egypt
 - burial tradition was quite different from lower Egypt
 - burials were located at the edge of the desert, in cemeteries separated from the areas where people lived
 - bodies dressed in skins or linen cloth
 - with varied grave goods
 - stone tools
 - strings of shell beads as anklets, bracelets, necklaces
 - blue-glazed steatite beads
 - steatite is a stone that can be made to develop a glassy glazed surface by heating
 - ivory and bone beads, pins, needles, awls, combs; needle cases; animal figurines
 - female figurines made of bone
 - stone palettes for preparing eye paint (especially malachite green)
 - some stained green from use
 - beginning of a long Upper Egyptian tradition of palettes
- General patterns in adoption of agriculture

- Egyptian agricultural settlements started later than in Mesopotamia and remained much more ephemeral
 - compare to Eridu in the ‘Ubaid period, roughly the same time
 - definitely a town, if not a city; maybe 5,000 people by 4500 BC
 - suggests that in Neolithic Egypt, accumulation of wealth was limited and society was less stratified
 - large-scale irrigation was not necessary until *much* later
- Naqada I (also called Amratian) period 4000-3600 BC (400 years long)
 - contemporary with Early Uruk (3900-3600 BC)
 - Naqada I in general:
 - small settlements, probably with chiefs and some social status differences, but not much
- Naqada I in Upper Egypt
 - no clear break from Badarian, rather a gradual evolutionary change
 - villages of 50 to 250 people in pole and thatch houses (around Naqada)
 - continued and expanded customs of burying in cemeteries with extensive grave goods
 - shallow pits, roofed with branches, probably covered with a pile of gravel
 - material culture gradually changed in minor ways
 - in style of pottery, palettes, stone vessels, ceramic female figurines
 - minor use of copper (probably native copper?)
 - disk-shaped stone mace heads in burials
 - many are too small, or have holes too small, to have been functional
 - several known with impractical ivory or horn handles
 - could have been models specifically for funerary use
 - an idea that became common later in Egypt
 - apparently were symbols of status or power based on the idea of force
 - but not necessarily the actual use of it?
 - Upper Egypt at this point seemed to be relatively isolated from Mediterranean and Near Eastern traditions
- Naqada I in Lower Egypt: no great changes
 - Town of Merimde continued
 - Town of El-Omari, similar, contemporary with late Merimde