

The emergence of civilization in Egypt: Early Dynastic Period

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- Egyptian Early Dynastic Period (First and Second Dynasties) 3050 - 2686 BC
 - Also called “Archaic Period” in some sources
 - Contemporary with Jemdet Nasr (3100-2900 BC) and first half of Sumerian Early Dynastic (2900-2373 BC)
 - *not* the same period as the Mesopotamian Early Dynastic, but partially overlapping
 - in Sumer, this was the period of
 - hyper-urbanism
 - competing city-states and increasing warfare
 - powerful temples and maybe the first hints of the palace and kings
 - note that while Sumer was more urbanized, it was not regionally unified at this point
 - Egypt was much less urban, and possibly economically and socially less complex, but unlike Sumer, it was already an enormous region united under one military leader
 - the *Egyptian* Early Dynastic began with the political unification of Upper and Lower Egypt
 - the population of unified Egypt at beginning of Early Dynastic was probably many 100,000s, perhaps up to two million people
 - Sequence of Early Dynastic rulers
 - Narmer (Menes) is usually said to be the first king (pharaoh) of the First Dynasty
 - At least two known Upper Egyptian kings preceded him, possibly his father and grandfather
 - Scorpion (probably Narmer's immediate predecessor in Naqada III)
 - Ka (probably prior to Scorpion)
 - Narmer was followed by (probably) seven successors in his line
 - Manetho lumped them together as being from the same place, presumably the same ethnicity; we can only suppose that they were actually a family line like later dynasties
 - Then a series of nine kings formed the Second Dynasty
 - Manetho said that these were from a different place, presumably a different family line
 - Early Dynastic material culture
 - as usual, the style of pottery and other artifacts changed over time
 - copper continued to become more common, but was still mostly limited to royal tombs and high-status ones associated with them
 - yet it was made into apparently utilitarian items such as chisels, axes, adzes
 - another use was to cut shapes out of sheet copper that represented other objects, apparently to be used as burial offerings
 - bronze (copper alloyed with arsenic) first appeared in the Second dynasty
 - the first items known are a hand-washing set (spouted pitcher and bowl) made by lost-wax casting - a luxury item
 - Foreign influences from Mesopotamia continued from the earlier Naqada III period, but faded away by late in the Egyptian Early Dynastic (3050-2686 BC)
 - cylinder seals continued to be used, both rare Mesopotamian imports and local versions

- important buildings and tombs were decorated with paneled “palace-facade” architecture, essentially the same as the ornamental buttressing on Sumerian temples and palaces
- writing came into wider use for royal purposes (more on this later)
 - the first examples of writing had begun to appear in Naqada III, all in royal tombs or royal inscriptions
- Cities in Early Dynastic Egypt
 - Egypt is often said to have been a civilization without cities
 - Partially true: the great bulk of the population was rural
 - Probably due to narrowness of the Nile valley, which means that a large town cannot have a large ring of farmland around it
 - But the lack of cities was NOT complete: there clearly were some major cities, too, even if not as gigantic as the Mesopotamian ones
 - Lower Egypt:
 - Memphis (at the boundary between Lower and Upper Egypt)
 - Capital of the unified Egypt established by Narmer (Menes) at start of First Dynasty
 - indicated both by written records and archaeology
 - but First Dynasty levels are deep below silt and water table
 - may have been very large, based on size of area in which slightly later Old Kingdom ceramics are found
 - Buto
 - Second and Third Dynasty mud-brick buildings known
 - Upper Egypt:
 - Hierakonpolis
 - many important First Dynasty finds suggest that it was important
 - Elephantine
 - Second dynasty walled town
- there are also indications of numerous other *Old Kingdom* (that is, slightly later) large towns or cities
 - their sizes during the Old Kingdom are still unknown
 - some were probably already large in the Early Dynastic, or even before
- Warfare
 - probably continued from earlier times
 - the newly consolidated kingdom would probably have had to use or threaten force at times to keep provinces from breaking away, refusing to pay tribute, etc.
 - Lots of war imagery in Early Dynastic art
 - Early Dynastic kings are often shown clubbing victims
 - this could reflect real, frequent military activity
 - it could also have been propaganda
 - reminding the viewer of the king's power to use force, even if it rarely happened
 - or a metaphor for other ways of exercising power, through politics, a police force, use of labor and wealth, or even ritual
 - or a historical or mythological legitimation of the king's high status
 - most likely, warlike motifs in art had both real historical and metaphorical meanings

- Palermo stone and other inscriptions record a variety of First Dynasty expeditions or campaigns to the south and east, but without details
- A wall was built around the Upper Egyptian town of Elephantine in the Second Dynasty, suggesting a continuing real threat of attack
 - but Elephantine was close to the southern border of the Egyptian state, so it may have been subject to raids from the Nubian people to the south
- Royal palaces came into use
 - they may have existed earlier, but we don't have evidence of them
 - the existence and appearance of early palaces is suggested by the practice of writing the king's name inside a symbol (serekh) that apparently represented a "palace-facade" building
 - one paneled wall with a monumental doorway is known from a First Dynasty context at Hierakonpolis; this may be part of an early palace
 - increasing administrative activities on behalf of the king must have been managed from some appropriately impressive setting
 - that is, a royal palace
 - great increase in use of seals suggests increasing management that might indicate a royal bureaucracy
 - the establishment of Memphis as the administrative capital implies that there must have been some central, royal buildings there
- But notice: no spectacular temples, ziggurats, etc. in the Early Dynastic
 - there was no obvious, separate religious institution as in Mesopotamia
 - instead, there was a clear religious aspect to the king
 - even Early Dynastic kings were associated in art with animals that later were definitely used to indicate gods
 - The palette of Narmer and other expensive objects with royal imagery were found in a temple at Hierakonpolis
 - this was a modest structure compared to the Mesopotamian ones
 - and from very early, the king was a central figure in religious art
- Burial customs got ever more stratified, and much more elaborate for the highest classes
 - for the top nobility, there were now two places to be buried: Abydos in Upper Egypt, and Saqqara in Lower Egypt
 - many kings and nobles had burial structures in both places
 - one was a "cenotaph", or empty tomb
- Royal tombs at Abydos
 - the First dynasty royal cemetery in Upper Egypt
 - each king had a royal tomb, plus a royal enclosure for associated rites some distance away
 - tombs continued to be basically brick-lined holes in the surface of the desert, but
 - increasingly large, more masonry dividing walls forming more rooms, wood floors and paneling
 - largest had up to 40 rooms, with a wood-lined central chamber for the body
 - rooms reserved for specific kinds of goods, like jars of wine, ivory, grain, meat, etc.
 - roofed with wooden beams and reeds

- filled with tremendous wealth of grave goods
- many objects in the tombs were labeled with ivory tags
 - indicating things like the number of beads in a necklace, or identifying them as “the royal sandals”, etc.
 - usually showed where the object came from
 - this may have been a way of assuring credit for the nobles who provided the offerings
- high status burials increasingly had a “palace-façade mastaba” built on top
 - first the tomb was built, filled with goods, and roofed over
 - then they built a low, rectangular, solid mound ("mastaba") over the tomb that was faced with brick to look like a building or a platform
 - sometimes with rooms around the outer edges
 - initially, all this had to be built after filling the tomb and building the roof over it
 - later tombs had a stairway to enter the tomb after the roofing was put on
 - presumably so the king could oversee the completion of his monument before he died
- both the tomb and the enclosure were surrounded by (or adjacent to) rows of subsidiary graves (“retainer burials”), apparently of servants or members of the court who were sacrificed for the burial of the king
 - example: tomb of King Aha (Narmer’s successor, second ruler of the 1st dynasty)
 - 34 subsidiary burial pits
 - all were looted in antiquity, so we don't know whether all contained human bodies, or how many were in each
 - human bones scattered by the looters were all of people 25 years old and younger
 - that is, at least some of these people did not die of natural causes
 - both men and women
 - the subsidiary burials were furnished with copper tools, stone vessels, ivory carvings
 - some were identified with inscribed limestone stelae with the name of the occupant
 - officials, dwarfs, artisans
- retainer burials peaked early in the First dynasty
 - this was long before the pyramids were built!
 - Retainer burials peaked with the burial of King Djer
 - 3rd of the 8 first dynasty kings
 - 1st Dynasty: Narmer, Aha, Djer, (Merneith?), Djet, Den, Anedjib, Semerkhet, Ka'a
 - Djer's burial was probably less than a century after the unification of Egypt!
 - King Djer’s tomb at Abydos was surrounded by 338 subsidiary tombs
 - estimates from 317 to over 580 retainers total
 - (the high estimate may include others from his cenotaph at Saqqara)
- but the practice of retainer burials tapered off quickly, and by the end of the First dynasty, kings were buried with just a few retainers
 - so maybe this kind of conspicuous consumption had something to do with the earliest functioning or legitimization of Dynastic rule
 - once people got accustomed to powerful kings, retainer burials were less necessary?
- “the enigmatic Merneith”, possibly a queen regent, had a tomb at Abydos

- Saqqara
 - the other high-status cemetery for royalty and nobles, located in Lower Egypt
 - Saqqara was the cemetery (“necropolis”) for the capital city of Memphis
 - 1st through 3rd Dynasties
 - slightly different architectural style, with more Mesopotamian influence
 - royal enclosures and mastabas were faced with palace-facade paneling
 - some included “funerary chapels” with statues of the deceased, presumably to be maintained after their death
 - As at Abydos, they started incorporating stairway entrances late in the First dynasty
 - entrances blocked by “portcullis-blocks” in a vain attempt to prevent looting
 - gradually, more of the rooms were sunk deeper underground, until by the end of the First Dynasty, the visible mastaba was completely solid.
 - some mastabas at Saqqara had a limited number of subsidiary tombs around them
- Social hierarchy during Early Dynastic (3050-2686 BC)
 - Wide variation in burial richness, from huge, rich mastaba tombs of kings and nobles to simple pit burials with nothing but a basketwork coffin
 - incredible wealth of officials’ tombs at Saqqara suggests their importance and status
 - Craft specialization, esoteric burial practices, labor and military mobilization, scribes, royal burials all suggest many statuses in life
- Egyptian writing: hieroglyphics
 - “cracked” using the Rosetta stone, which recorded a decree by Ptolemy V (196 BC), written in Greek (which could be read), hieroglyphic, and demotic (a late, vernacular form of Egyptian writing used for daily, secular purposes)
 - First writing in Egypt appeared in Upper Egypt, shortly before the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt
 - earliest, very simple examples around 3200 BC, maybe as early as 3300 BC
 - vs. about 3400 BC in Uruk period Sumer
 - that is, around beginning of Naqada III
 - Very early examples
 - The names of various kings thought to be one or two before Narmer were inked on offering jars in their tombs
 - some are labeled as produce from Upper or Lower Egypt
 - Scorpion’s name on a mace head (Scorpion was probably the predecessor of Narmer)
 - but is it a hieroglyph or a picture of a standard?
 - A German team re-excavating the tomb of a different, earlier king also named Scorpion in 1998 found lots of very early Egyptian writing
 - some 300 items with very simple hieroglyphs, including:
 - jars with hieroglyphs written in ink
 - postage-stamp sized clay tablets with holes (labels) with scratched-on hieroglyphs
 - 2/3 identified offerings of oil and linen, sometimes including numbers
 - almost all seem to identify the source of the offering, either as a geographic region, an institution, or an official
 - radiocarbon dates fall from 3300 to 3200 BC, that is, end of Naqada II
 - or should Naqada III be dated maybe a century earlier than shown in these notes?

- palette of Narmer with many individuals named
- these show that a writing system was established and in use in royal contexts right around the unification of Egypt
- but notice that all these early examples are simple identifications and counts of things, not anything like a spoken phrase or sentence, or even accounting, as in Mesopotamia
- Mesopotamian influence?
 - the timing is awfully close if it is just coincidental
 - Egyptian hieroglyphics appeared only a century or two after pre-cuneiform appeared in Sumer
 - and when the dates are this close, it is possible that future finds could prove that both appeared at the same time, or Egyptian writing was earlier
 - after thousands of years without writing, could it appear independently in two very different societies at virtually the same time just by chance?
 - coincided with known Mesopotamian influence
 - adoption of cylinder seals
 - importation of Sumerian goods
 - Mesopotamian-style “paneled” or buttressed architecture in royal buildings
 - motifs such as the two “serpo-felines” on the back of the palette of Narmer
- like pre-cuneiform, hieroglyphics also started with a mix of logograms and syllabic signs
 - logograms: symbols that stand for an entire word or concept
 - syllabic signs: symbols that stand for a syllable ("nar") or even two, like "hetep"). They are strung together to give the sound of a whole word
 - we use alphabetic signs: symbols that stand for the minimal sounds of the language (phonemes). They are strung together to make syllables first, then words
 - it takes several of our symbols to indicate the syllable written with a single Egyptian symbol (nar = three letters, vs. one hieroglyph)
 - but the Egyptian syllabic system needs some 400 signs to encode all the syllables of the language, while we encode all the sounds of our language with just 26 symbols
- Despite the similarities, the Egyptian system is so different that it cannot have derived from pre-cuneiform
 - hieroglyphs normally read right to left, opposite of pre-cuneiform
 - also can be read left to right, with signs reversed!
 - if the logic of design calls for it
 - precuneiform and cuneiform were never reversed in this way
 - Egyptian logograms are far more representational (picture-like) than pre-cuneiform ones
 - Egyptian writing recorded only consonants, not vowels, unlike pre-cuneiform
 - Egyptian writing had a very different context of use from precuneiform
 - hieroglyphs were immediately and principally used together with pictures, as labels that identified pictures of people or places, or as explanations of a scene
 - Pre-cuneiform was very rarely used with pictures
 - the other major context of early hieroglyphs was as labels for objects, like the tags in Scorpion's tomb

- again, this was rarely if ever done with precuneiform, which was usually written on tablets that were stored in archives
- the two systems were used for very different purposes
 - Sumerian pre-cuneiform was initially used for accounting or transaction records
 - crops, rations, contracts, exchanges, summaries totaling multiple transactions
 - records of countless transactions of mundane goods
 - initially used by the temple, but for secular, not inherently ritual or political purposes
 - while early Egyptian hieroglyphic writing was used for royal and ritual activities
 - royal names and propaganda, activities of the royal court, royal burial inventory labels
 - relatively few, special transactions (like providing offerings for a royal burial) that involved luxury goods and high-status people
 - inscriptions on pottery or stone vessels, usually identifying the owner and/or contents and/or place of origin
 - markers for the tombs of kings, queens, nobles, and their pet dogs (!)
 - personal identification seals of kings, queens, and nobles
 - or offices, like “the sealer of the shipyard” and “the sealing of everything of gold”
 - ceremonial objects like the palette of Narmer
 - recordkeeping, but of a royal or ritual nature:
 - lists of booty from war
 - lists of Nile flooding levels in successive years (which later kings could supposedly forecast and influence)
 - lists of royal activities by year: festivals, erecting statues of gods, founding and conquering towns
- Very fragmentary evidence of early writing in ink on papyrus, unlike Sumerian, which was apparently all on clay tablets
 - this also suggests that we have lost a great deal of the early content and development of Egyptian writing
 - maybe we would have a different impression if the early writing on papyrus were available
- From the very beginning, there were two different styles of writing
 - Hieroglyphs ("sacred signs")
 - cursive, inked handwriting that represented the same symbols (“hieratic”)
 - which changed relatively rapidly, while hieroglyphs did not
 - much later, an even more cursive writing system called “demotic” developed, still coding the same system
- little evidence of early development; even in the earliest examples, the basic symbol system was already pretty well developed
 - although the early uses were apparently just identifying a person or place
 - suggestion (by no means certain) that hieroglyphics may have been invented by a single individual, maybe after encountering Mesopotamian writing
 - there are historical examples of this happening in other languages

- Sequoyia (c. 1765-1843), invented a syllabic writing system for Cherokee, inspired by European writing systems, even though he never spoke or read any other language
 - King Njoya (reigned the kingdom of Bamum in Cameroon from 1895-1923) invented a series of writing systems for Bamum, based on his familiarity with written Arabic
 - the first known full sentence was written at the end of the 2nd Dynasty (around 2700 BC, 500 years after the first inscriptions)
 - the first sequence of sentences, still simple, by 2600 BC: a biographical inscription
 - Cuneiform was used to write many different languages and contributed to our own writing system, but hieroglyphic writing was only ever used for Egyptian, and had little effect on the rest of the world or other writing systems
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- Is this civilization yet?
 - try applying some of the different definitions
 - what would you like to know about to help out here?
 - What should future research efforts in Egypt try to figure out?

 - Next time we will look at the Third and Fourth Dynasties, when the pyramids were built
 - we will consider what they meant for Egypt
 - and their role - if any - in the emergence of civilization there...