

## **Egypt: Naqada III and Early Dynastic**

© Copyright Bruce Owen 2009

- Naqada III (roughly 3200 - 3050 BC): the last century of the Predynastic period
  - Contemporary with the last century of the Late Uruk period (3400-3100 BC)
  - Naqada III was a brief, eventful transitional period during which Upper and Lower Egypt became culturally and politically unified
    - Hence sometimes called the “unification era”
- Naqada III in Upper Egypt
  - accelerating trends of Naqada II
  - the highest-status graves continued to get more elaborate
  - Cemetery at Abydos
    - rectangular tombs, mud walled
    - one to several rooms
    - roofed with wood and reed matting
    - example: the most elaborate Predynastic tomb at Abydos
      - 12 rooms
      - 9.10 X 7.30 m (27 x 21 feet)
      - despite looting, contained hundreds of pots, sorted by type
  - craft goods continued to get even more elaborate and expensive
    - such as palettes with elaborate carved decoration, many (but not all) with scenes of war
  - implications
    - these burials imply increasingly rich and powerful elites
      - emerging at just one or a few places in all of Upper Egypt
    - which probably implies the consolidation of regional Upper Egyptian chiefdoms into fewer, larger polities
      - since building and filling the more expensive burials would have required access to more surplus and laborers
    - this was probably at least in part based on military domination
    - which probably culminated with a single Upper Egyptian chiefdom, centered at Hierakonpolis, with its high status cemetery at Abydos
- The macehead of Scorpion hints at the nature of Upper Egyptian kings in Naqada III
  - first, the object itself is a highly decorated weapon
    - probably symbolic, not for use, but indicating the military overtones of kingship
  - Scorpion is identified by a symbol next to him - incipient writing? (more on this later)
  - he wears a hat shaped like a bowling pin, which in later times clearly symbolized rule of Upper Egypt
    - called the white crown of Upper Egypt
  - Scorpion is using a digging tool, apparently to open an irrigation canal
    - some interpret this as a repeated (annual?) ritual that linked the king to agricultural success - a religious role
    - others see it as commemorating Scorpion's role in building a canal system - an economic, administrative role

- Naqada III in Lower Egypt
  - Historical sources claim that by just before the unification of Egypt, there was a single Upper Egyptian realm and a separate, single Lower Egyptian realm, with its capital at Buto
  - This was long thought to be a mythologized, simplified account to go with a simple story of conquest by Upper Egypt
  - but increasing evidence suggests it might be at least partially true
    - the very extensive trading in Lower Egypt might indicate that regional conflicts were controlled, maybe by political unity
    - large towns might imply complex political organization
    - wall cones found only at Buto suggest that this place might have been more important than any other Lower Egyptian city: a capital?
- Unification of Upper and Lower Egypt
  - Cultural unification, accelerating a trend started in Naqada II
    - Lower Egypt was increasingly influenced by Upper Egypt
      - excavations at Buto:
        - bottom levels had only 2% Naqada pottery
        - by late Naqada II (3300 BC), 40% Upper Egyptian pottery
        - by Naqada III (3200 BC), 99% Upper Egyptian pottery
        - by the end of Naqada III, Buto is thought to have been thoroughly “Naqada-ized”
    - Along with this “Naqada-ization” of material culture came the rise of pronounced social status differences in Lower Egypt
      - evidence: wide variation in grave goods at Minshat Abu Omar
        - in sample of 370 terminal Predynastic/Early Dynastic tombs
        - but no rich burials of juveniles
        - suggests that in the Delta, status was earned during life, NOT largely hereditary, in contrast to the pattern in Upper Egypt
  - Political unification
    - The cultural “Naqada-ization” of Lower Egypt was accompanied by a lot of warfare
      - at least, there is a lot of warfare depicted on palettes
        - these are basically Upper Egyptian artifacts
        - they are decorative, probably not really used (or only used ritually), kept in temples
        - Battlefield palette
        - Towns palette - animals breaking into walled towns with agricultural digging tools
      - other fancy artifacts also suggest warfare
        - decorated maceheads
    - The Egyptian historian Manetho, writing around 300 BC, said that just before the beginning of the First Dynasty of Egyptian kings, a king of Upper Egypt named Menes conquered Lower Egypt and founded the united kingdom of Egypt
      - We don't know if either region was really that formally organized
        - Hierakonpolis was certainly an important center
        - Buto was too, although it is still not well known
      - Menes supposedly established a new city, Memphis, to be its capital

- archaeological evidence does suggest that Memphis either was founded or grew dramatically at about the end of the predynastic period
- Whether or not it happened as a single, dramatic military campaign, the Naqada III period did end with the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt under a single king (pharaoh)
  - evidently in part through military actions during the preceding decades or century
  - archaeological support for the story of political unification by military force is based mostly on a few decorated palettes and maceheads
    - these may reflect propaganda as much as literal history
- Palette of Narmer
  - complex iconography that we don't have time to discuss
  - hieroglyphs identify Narmer
  - one side shows Narmer with the
    - white crown of Upper Egypt (“bowling pin”)
  - and the other shows him with the
    - red crown of Lower Egypt (“chair and spiral”)
  - the identification of the crowns is based on later, better documented use of them
  - Lots of imagery of warfare, decapitated victims, etc.
  - All this seems to suggest a military victory by Narmer of Upper Egypt over part or all of Lower Egypt
  - so Narmer was probably the same person that Manetho called Menes, a military leader who unified Egypt
  - if so, though, this would have been just the last step in a process that probably took up to 200 years during Naqada II and Naqada III
- Macehead of Narmer
  - shows Narmer wearing the crown of Lower Egypt
  - but the serekh surrounding his name is surmounted by Horus, the hawk who symbolized Upper Egypt
  - again suggesting that Narmer ruled both Upper and Lower Egypt
- So Naqada III saw
  - the culmination of the process of formation of larger and larger political units
  - ending with the cultural and political unification of Upper and Lower Egypt into a single polity under a single king
- 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
- unlike Sumer, Egypt was already an enormous region united under one military leader
- the *Egyptian* Early Dynastic began with the political unification of Upper and Lower Egypt
- Foreign influences from Mesopotamia faded away by late in the Egyptian Early Dynastic (3050-2686 BC)
- 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
    - 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
      - 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
  - Upper Egypt:
    - Hierakonpolis
    - Elephantine
    - hints of others
- 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 or a metaphor for the king's power
  - the 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 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
    - maybe a royal palace

- great increase in use of seals suggests increasing management of goods that might indicate a royal bureaucracy
- 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 stood for 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, but
      - increasingly large, more rooms, wood floors and paneling
      - 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
  - both the tomb and the enclosure were surrounded by (or adjacent to) rows of subsidiary graves (“retainer burials”)
    - apparently contained 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 with King Djer, the third king of the first dynasty
  - less than a century after the unification of Egypt
  - this was centuries before the pyramids were built
  - King Djer's tomb at Abydos was surrounded by 338 subsidiary tombs
    - estimates from 317 to over 580 retainers total
    - (the higher estimate may include others from his cenotaph at Saqqara)
  - but the practice of retainer burials tapered off quickly
    - 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?
- 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
- compare King Djer's burial with 317 to 580 retainers to the 50-odd people buried in each of the Royal Tombs at Ur
  - and consider the much, much bigger structure and greater volume of rooms filled with goods in Egyptian royal tombs
  - by these standards, the Egyptian Early Dynastic kings were 5 to 10 times wealthier and more powerful than the greatest known Early Dynastic kings in Sumer
  - maybe not surprising, given that they were exploiting essentially the entire Nile valley for their personal gain, compared to just the land around a single city-state in Sumer
- 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 the immediate predecessors of 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 the head 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
- palette of Narmer has many individuals named by symbols adjacent to them
- 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
- was Egyptian writing caused by Mesopotamian influence?
  - the timing is awfully close to be just coincidental
    - Egyptian hieroglyphics appeared only a century or two after pre-cuneiform appeared in Sumer
      - with the dates are this close, it is possible that future finds could prove that both appeared at the same time, or even that Egyptian writing was earlier
    - coincided with known Mesopotamian influence in art styles, architecture, cylinder sealing, etc.
- but the Egyptian writing system is so different that it cannot have developed from precuneiform
  - hieroglyphs normally read right to left, opposite of precuneiform
    - 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 precuneiform ones
  - Egyptian writing recorded only consonants, not vowels, unlike precuneiform
  - Egyptian writing had a very different context of use from precuneiform
    - hieroglyphs were initially and principally used together with pictures, as labels that identified pictures of people or places, or as explanations of a scene
      - as on the macehead of Scorpion or the palette of Narmer
      - Precuneiform 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
    - initially used by the temple, but for secular, not 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 had no inked version
  - 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
- 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
    - Sequoia (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
- 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
  
- 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?
  
- The pyramids were built in the Third and Fourth Dynasties
  - well after a complex, hierarchical, bureaucratic state ruled by a divine king was already established
  - for those, you will need to take a different class...