

Foundations of World Civilization: Notes 16
From farming to civilization in Egypt

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- Egypt is located not far from the Fertile Crescent and Mesopotamia, but isolated enough to have a very different history
 - to reach the Nile from Mesopotamia, you must go up the Euphrates river, across the Levant, down the coast of the Levant, to the mouth of the Nile – then up the Nile
 - or sail down the Persian Gulf, around Saudi Arabia, up the Red Sea, then across the desert mountains to the Upper Nile
- a narrow strip of rich farmland, surrounded on either side by vast expanses of barren desert
 - almost no rain: agriculture depends entirely on river water
- two distinct regions of Egypt
 - geographically and culturally different until they were unified around 3100 BC
 - Lower Nile
 - wide delta with vast expanse of rich, well-watered farmland
 - Upper Nile
 - upstream (the Nile flows northwards, down into the Mediterranean sea)
 - just a few tens of miles across in most places, but 600 miles long (eventually, even more was incorporated into Egypt)
 - deeply entrenched, with bluffs on either side
 - effectively preventing irrigation outside the valley floor
 - annual flooding at convenient time for farming (prior to building modern dams)
 - brought fresh rich silt each year
 - farmers would plant in the mud, build berms to retain the water, then short, simple canals to irrigate a few more times after the flood receded
 - extremely productive with only small-scale technology
 - no need to organize for big canals, because all the farmland is close to the river
 - and any large constructions would be wiped out by the occasional extra-high flood
 - so one of the big reasons to develop a hierarchical society was not present in Egypt
 - although leaders might have been necessary to peacefully re-establish field boundaries every year after the flood had wiped out many surface markers
 - extremely rich farmland and relatively low population density meant that the population never approached the maximum that the land could produce until recent times
 - so competition for land would not have been an issue
 - but limited amount of land at any one point discouraged forming large towns
 - Egypt remained mostly rural until recent times
 - when towns DID form, they had to control longer stretches of the Nile upriver and downriver from the settlement
 - this apparently encouraged conquest warfare to get distant people to produce surplus for a few larger towns
 - so conquest warfare picked up much earlier in Egypt than in Mesopotamia
 - maybe encouraging military leadership before large temple institutions could form

- like Diamond’s “preemptive domestication” argument
- The Nile provides easy transportation
 - 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 and control
- Written sources of information are different from those in Mesopotamia
 - lots of information from cemeteries
 - since the Upper Nile tradition was to locate cemeteries outside the valley, in the bone-dry desert where preservation is extremely good
 - relatively little information from settlements
 - which tend to be under where people have been living for thousands of years
 - and the early layers are often below the water table, which has been rising as the Nile gradually fills the valley with silt
 - lots of written information about the chronology of kings
 - due to tradition of making king lists with names, exploits, and years of rule in order to legitimize current kings, who claimed descent from earlier ones
 - relatively little written information about economics and administration
 - writing was initially used mostly for royal court matters
 - but from later times, there are many written documents
 - letters, propaganda, advice, biographical claims in tombs, etc.
 - plus a history written in the 200’s BCE by a Greek-speaking Egyptian historian named Manetho
 - he wrote 2,200 years ago
 - about events as much as 3,000 years before him
 - based on papyrus documents, monuments, etc. – a true historian
 - his history has stood up quite well to modern archaeological confirmation
- Chronology chart
 - 5000-3050 BCE: The Predynastic period, during which Egyptian society initially developed from early farmers to a state that controlled the entire Nile
 - Divided into
 - Badarian: Neolithic farmers in small villages
 - Naqada I: minor changes only
 - Naqada II, when Egyptian society began to become quite complex
 - Naqada III, the “Unification era” in which one kingdom fully united the Upper Nile, then conquered most of the Lower Nile, creating a single huge state under one king
 - 3050-2686 BCE: Egyptian Early Dynastic period (also called the Archaic period)
 - the start of 31 generally recognized dynasties, a sequence of hundreds of kings, covering about 3000 years of history!

- That is a LONG TIME
- 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
- we will cover only the first part of this sequence
- Predynastic period up through Naqada I: about 5000-3600 BCE
 - as we have seen, food production first arose in the Fertile Crescent
 - wheat, barley, sheep, and goats were adopted as an already domesticated package in Egypt starting around 5000 BCE
 - then spread fairly quickly; common along the Nile by 4500 or 4000 BCE
 - in the rich Lower Nile,
 - farming settlements grew up to 1300-2000 people
 - in the narrow Upper Nile,
 - settlements stayed smaller, rarely over 250 people
 - but they developed a burial tradition of cemeteries in the desert
 - some people were buried with fancy goods
 - fine, thin-walled pottery evidently made by specialists
 - female figurines
 - shell and bone beads, pins, needles awls, combs, stone palettes for grinding and mixing pigments, especially green probably eye makeup
 - some males buried with finely made stone maceheads
 - some with holes so small that the handles would break if used
 - or with handles of ivory or horn, also fragile
 - evidently just symbolic weapons
 - suggesting that status was connected to real or theoretical military power
 - probably small village chiefdoms with considerable variation in wealth
- Naqada II: 3600-3200 BCE
 - significant changes in Upper Egypt
 - very different pottery, depicting boats with “standards” or emblems on a pole, apparently identifying the place or family that owned the boat
 - even fancier wealth items, like “ripple-flaked” knives that were purely for show
 - a few Upper Egyptian towns began to grow, especially Hierakonpolis
 - reaching 5,000-10,000 people
 - with burials of wealthy probable chiefs
 - a big platform that would have had some unknown monumental building on it
 - a mudbrick wall around part of the town suggests fear of attack
 - produced pottery that was traded far up and down the Nile
 - Hierakonpolis, Naqada, and This (a town named “This”) each probably controlled a long strip of Nile farmland, probably in part by force
 - suggested both by the number of residents that had to be supported
 - and by the wealth of some of the burials, presumably reflecting part of the surplus production of a large number of farmers
 - example: the painted tomb at Hierakonpolis

- a rectangular mud-brick underground room
- looted in 1899
- wall paintings show boats like those on Naqada II pots
- probably scene of a battle
- a figure holding two lions (?) might be Enkidu from the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh story, since he was often depicted in this pose
- hints at both a military aspect to high status, and connections to Mesopotamia, which was much more urban and complex at the time
- another sign of contact with Mesopotamia: a typical Naqada II knife handle showing
 - an apparent battle with Egyptian and Mesopotamian style boats
 - a very Sumerian-looking figure posing like Enkidu
 - indicating an actual battle? how is that possible? or myth? or...?
- Naqada III (3200-3050 BCE)
 - “Unification era”
 - Naqada III in Upper Egypt
 - the highest-status graves continued to get more elaborate, filled with more goods
 - early Naqada III or end of Naqada II: the first known Egyptian writing
 - clay tags in a royal burial at Abydos
 - apparently attached to burial goods, showing the place or estate that provided each item
 - slightly later, royal names inked in hieroglyphs on pots placed in tombs
 - note the timing:
 - shortly after writing was invented in Mesopotamia
 - shortly after signs of contact with Mesopotamia
 - and right as powerful leaders were controlling large areas, and would want to keep track of contributions from their subjects
 - but Egyptian hieroglyphs are very different from precuneiform
 - clearly not a modification of precuneiform (for many reasons we won't cover)
 - while there is a long sequence of development leading up to Sumerian writing, Egyptian writing appears suddenly, with no earlier stages
 - all this fits nicely with Diamond's discussion of diffusion
 - Egyptian writing might have been inspired by simply knowing about Sumerian writing (Diamond's “idea diffusion”)
 - early Egyptian hieroglyphic writing was used for completely different purposes: royal and ritual activities
 - royal names and propaganda, activities of the royal court, royal burial inventory labels
 - 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, nobles, and state officials
 - 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
- 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
- these burials imply increasingly rich and powerful elites
 - emerging at just one or a few places in all of Upper Egypt
 - which probably implies that Upper Egyptian chiefdoms were merging together
 - since building and filling the more expensive burials would have required access to more surplus and laborers
 - 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, but indicating the military overtones of kingship
 - Scorpion is identified by two symbols next to him: a scorpion (his name) and a rosette associated with gods
 - 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
 - “standards” being carried by people may indicate soldiers from different places, or led by different landowners
 - standards with dead birds hanging from them may indicate conquered towns
 - Scorpion is using a digging tool, apparently to open an irrigation canal
 - a repeated (annual?) ritual that linked the king to agricultural success?
 - this would be a religious role
 - or commemorating Scorpion's role in building a canal system, or restoring it after an annual flood?
 - this would be an economic, administrative role
- Naqada III in Lower Egypt
 - Historical sources claim that by the end of Naqada III, Lower Egypt had also consolidated under a single leader, at the city of Buto
 - Maybe later propaganda, to emphasize Upper Egypt's conquest of Lower Egypt
 - but increasing evidence of the size and wealth of Buto suggests it might be at least partially true
- Unification of Upper and Lower Egypt
 - Cultural unification, accelerating a trend started in Naqada II
 - By late Naqada III, urban Lower Egyptians used almost entirely pottery and other craft goods from Upper Egypt
 - Political unification
 - lots of warfare depicted on Upper Egyptian artifacts like palettes and maceheads
 - 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
- The Egyptian historian Manetho said that
 - a king of Upper Egypt named Menes conquered Lower Egypt
 - founding the united kingdom of Upper and Lower Egypt
 - 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
- It probably did not really happen as a single, dramatic military campaign
- but the Naqada III period did end with the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt under a single king (pharaoh)
 - Palette of Narmer commemorates this unification
 - 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 would be 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
 - others suggest that the palette shows Narmer ritually honoring a conquest that was actually done by his father or grandfather
- Early Dynastic Period (also called Archaic Period; dynasties 1 and 2) (3050-2686 BCE)
 - The first several centuries of dynastic rule of unified Egypt
 - 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 there were some major cities, too, even if not as gigantic as the Mesopotamian ones
 - Memphis, Capital of the unified Egypt established by Narmer (Menes,)at the boundary between Lower and Upper Egypt
 - Buto, probably a major port for sea trade, possibly capital of Lower Egypt
 - Hierakonpolis, original capital of Upper Egypt; and others
- Warfare
 - apparently 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
- inscriptions mention First Dynasty expeditions or campaigns to the south and east
- A wall was built around the Upper Egyptian town of Elephantine in the Second Dynasty, suggesting a continuing threat of attack, probably from Nubians further up the Nile
- still no spectacular temples, ziggurats, etc. in the Egyptian Early Dynastic
- there was no obvious, separate religious institution as in Mesopotamia
- instead, the king had a clear religious aspect
- Burial customs got ever more elaborate for the highest classes
- for kings and 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
- high status burials increasingly had a solid building-like “mastaba” built on top
 - marked the grave and created a place for rituals to honor the deceased
 - also covered the main chamber, making it harder for looters to dig into it
- the tomb and associated structures were flanked by 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; officials, artisans, dwarfs
 - apparently high-status people, buried with copper tools, stone vessels, ivory carvings
- retainer burials started with the first king of the first dynasty, increased rapidly, and 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 then retainer burials tapered off
 - by the end of the First dynasty, kings were buried with just a few retainers
 - so maybe this kind of conspicuous consumption was needed to establish Dynastic rule
 - once people got accustomed to powerful kings, retainer burials were less necessary?
- 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
- not surprising: they were exploiting the entire Nile valley for their personal gain, compared to just the land around a single city-state in Sumer
- Old Kingdom: the age of the great pyramids (dynasties 3-6) (2687-2250 BCE)
 - By this time, a unified state with fantastically wealthy and powerful king had been in place for almost 400 years
 - Some Early Dynastic mastabas were built around stepped mounds over the burial chamber – all was still made of mud brick
 - Djoser, the first king of the 3rd dynasty, built a gigantic version of the same thing
 - but with the stepped mound over the burial hugely expanded
 - the mastaba converted from a solid block to a walled space
 - and all built of cut stone, rather than mud brick
 - original design was a standard mastaba, but then expanded, then converted to a stepped pyramid, then that expanded again...
 - Djoser tore down and covered up the large burial monuments of one or a few kings immediately before him
 - looted their tombs (and also older tombs of other nobles) and used their goods as offerings in his tomb
 - apparently erasing them from history and very forcefully starting his own, new dynasty
 - Djoser's son, grandson, and so on started similar monuments, but were unable to finish them
 - his great-grandson got closest, but did not quite finish
 - Sneferu, first king of the 4th dynasty, established a new dynasty and outdid even Djoser (~2600 BCE)
 - was the first to build a true, smooth pyramid
 - Sneferu built two large pyramids, maybe a small one, and maybe refinished an older one
 - he moved more stone for pyramid building than anyone who ever lived, before or since
 - his first attempt, the “Bent pyramid” at Dahshur, had engineering problems, cracked, and could only be completed by finishing the top part at a lower angle
 - his next try, the “Northern pyramid” at Dahshur, was built with the low angle from the start
 - the first successful true pyramid
 - this is the same Sneferu in the story from the Westcar papyrus
 - All the pyramids have been looted
 - Sneferu's wife Hetepheres was buried in a hidden, unmarked tomb, found mostly intact
 - the incredible jewelry, gold-plated furniture, etc. in her tomb give us an idea of the wealth that the royal court lived with
 - Sneferu's son, Khufu (also in the Westcar papyrus stories) went on to build just one pyramid, but the biggest ever built
 - at Giza, around 2580 BC

- estimated 84,000 laborers working for 80 days/year for 20 years (about 370,000 person-years!)
 - mostly while the fields were flooded and laborers had no farm work to do
 - 2.3 million cut sandstone interior blocks, 2.5 tons each, quarried nearby
 - over 1400 of these 2.5 ton blocks were placed every day!
 - one 2.5 ton block was set in place every 30 seconds
 - or, if they were working at several places at the same time, maybe up to several minutes per block
 - an incredible logistical feat to get this done!
 - implies extreme organization and control
- Khufu's son, Kheper, built a much smaller pyramid at Giza
- the next king, Khafre, built another pyramid almost as big as Khufu's, plus the famous sphinx
- from then on, the later kings built pyramids similar in size to Djoser's
 - still huge, but nothing like the first few
- just as with retainer burials, the first few kings in a dynasty went to great excess
 - and the following ones scaled back
 - the first kings may have clearly established their power
 - leaving the later ones free to use those resources for other things
 - or maybe the later kings were just not as effective as the ones who first established the dynasty
- Egypt was far more centralized, with far more concentration of wealth and power at the top, than Sumer ever was
 - Compare the power of institutions as shown by monumental architecture
 - The biggest Sumerian temple, the ziggurat at Ur (Neo-Sumerian, or Ur III, empire)
 - base of 64 x 46 meters, maybe 25 meters tall
 - made of mud brick
 - Khufu's pyramid at Giza
 - base of 230 x 230 meters (about 4 times the long side of the ziggurat at Ur), about 105 meters tall (about 4 times as high)
 - about 23 times the volume
 - built not of mud brick, but of solid cut stone
 - written records indicate lots of specialized administrators and extremely centralized, hierarchical organization
 - corroborated by tombs not only of royalty, but also of many high-status nobles with specific administrative duties, indicated by their titles
 - one individual man, the Pharaoh, directed all of this for his own ends
 - burials indicate a single leader with extremely high status
 - who was both religious and secular head from the beginning
 - this contrasts with the Mesopotamian pattern
 - in which power was divided between temple and palace
- For the rest of Egyptian history, which was long and complex... see the time chart in the slides, and the textbook