

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57377-1 - The Ancient Egyptian State: The Origins of Egyptian Culture  
(c. 8000-2000 BC)

Robert J. Wenke

Excerpt

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# 1 The Significance and Character of Ancient Egyptian Civilization

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Concerning Egypt I shall extend my remarks to a great length, because there is no country that possesses so many wonders, nor any that has such a number of works that defy description.

Herodotus (c. 440 BC)

## *Introduction*

King Pepy II, or *Neferkare*, to use one of the several names by which his subjects knew him, died in what was probably the year we designate as 2181 BC. As his embalmers laid his cold corpse out on the mortuary slab, they were likely looking at the wizened remains of the only king they – or, for that matter, most of their parents – had ever known. Ancient texts suggest that Pepy ruled for ninety-four years. His reign was probably shorter (the texts are ambiguous), but lying there in front of the embalmers would have been the mortal remains of the man who for decades had embodied everything that it meant to be “Egyptian.”

Yet Pepy’s embalmers no doubt methodically proceeded with their work. The precise details of the mummification process as it was practiced at the time of Pepy’s death remain obscure, but we know something about them from tombs and remains from Pepy’s Old Kingdom ancestors (Taylor 2001) and his successors. If later texts describing Egyptian mortuary arts accurately reflect Old Kingdom practices (and they may not), the mummification process and its associated rituals lasted about seventy days. The embalmers would have begun by scooping his brain out through his nose with a metal spoon and eviscerating him through an incision in his abdomen. After his organs were removed, dried, and placed in separate containers, they desiccated his body by packing it in salts for forty (or perhaps seventy) days. Then they coated the corpse with various unguents and wrapped it in linen strips, individually wrapping each finger and toe and his penis. Once Pepy had been mummified, various rites were performed. His mouth was ritually opened, for example, so that he could eat and chat with other dead

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people and perhaps communicate with his gods (the “opening of the mouth” ceremony remains a matter of much dispute). Following these rituals, his body was placed in a wooden coffin. The priests then carried the corpse in its coffin, along with the rich store of the things Pepy hoped to enjoy in eternal life, into his tomb, which had been carved into the limestone bedrock of the Saqqara plateau, a few kilometers south of modern Cairo, on the west side of the Nile (Figure 1.1). Once they placed his coffin in his granite sarcophagus, they sealed the tomb and no doubt returned to their quarters at nearby Memphis, Pepy’s erstwhile earthly home, serene in their conviction that he already had ecstatically rejoined his fellow gods, high in the starry nights.

Unlike modern morticians, Pepy’s embalmers were not engaged in some pathetic effort to make his corpse presentable for public display. Instead, they worked diligently to transport him safely into eternity and furnish him with all the provisions he would need there, including a reasonably intact physical body. His embalmers were trying to make Pepy’s corpse resemble Pepy as he was in life, so that one form of his “soul” could recognize the corpse when this soul returned to take up residence in his tomb.

But these embalmers and priests were also trying to do something with an importance that went far beyond Pepy’s personal fate: They were attempting, with the earnestly entreated aid of all the great and ancient gods of Egypt, to perpetuate in good order not only Pepy but also the entire universe. They strove mightily in mummifying and entombing him, and performing the last rites and rituals, in hopes of counteracting the forces of death, decay, and disorder, and of reasserting good order in the cosmos.

They were not entirely successful. The universe continues, it is widely hypothesized, but Pepy’s body has long since disappeared, his empty sarcophagus a sad witness to his fate. His tomb was probably looted within a few decades or centuries of his death, thereby abruptly wrenching him out of the vehicle he had hoped would – and, we can hope, nonetheless did – carry him into an eternal pleasant afterlife.

We know little about the specifics of Pepy’s life. He may have been homosexual (Parkinson 1995), a fault in the Egyptian view, for how could such a king maintain the universe in good order while he himself was so at odds with good order? Yet he *was* the king and thus deserved all the rituals and rights of newly dead kings. Pepy’s pyramid, tomb, and temple, nonetheless, were small and cheap compared to those of his illustrious ancestors, and he is remarkable among kings chiefly for the supposed length of his reign. But his life and death are a good place to begin a study of the origins of ancient Egyptian civilization, because Pepy II was among the last rulers of the illustrious Old Kingdom Period

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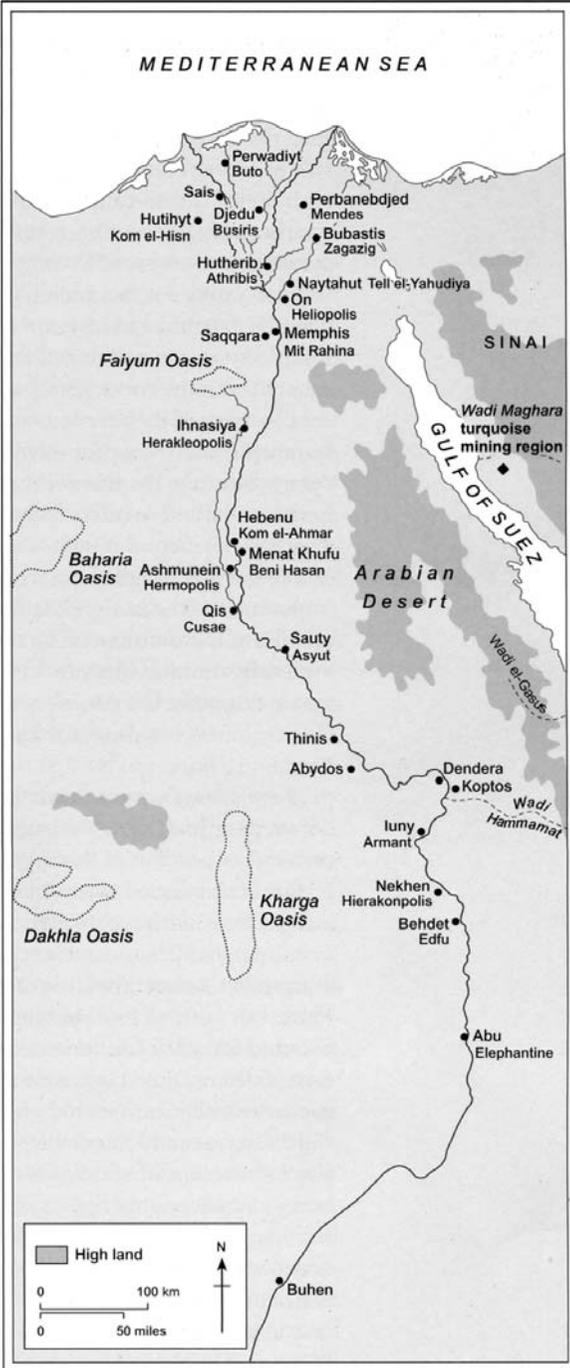


Figure 1.1. General topography of Egypt and the locations of some important ancient settlements. *Source:* Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press from Shaw 2000, p. 22. © Oxford University Press 2000.

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[More information](#)4 *The Significance and Character of Ancient Egypt*Table 1.1. Major Periods in Ancient Egypt's  
Chronology

Paleolithic	c. 700,000–8800 BP*
Saharan Neolithic	c. 8800–4700 BC
Lower Egyptian Neolithic	c. 5300–4500 BC
Predynastic	c. 4500–3000 BC
Early Dynastic	c. 3000–2686 BC
Old Kingdom	2686–2160 BC
First Intermediate	2160–2055 BC
Middle Kingdom	2055–1650 BC
Second Intermediate	1650–1550 BC
New Kingdom	1550–1069 BC
Ramessid	1295–1069 BC
Third Intermediate	1069–664 BC
Late	664–352 BC
Ptolemaic	332–30 BC
Roman	30 BC–AD 395

\*BP = Before the Present.

After Shaw 2000: 479–483.

(c. 2686–2160 BC), the “Pyramids Age,” and his death is thought to have ushered in a century of chaos and economic and political retraction in Egypt. In later periods, the Egyptian state reconstituted itself and produced works and ideas that make the Old Kingdom seem primitive, but Pepy II’s death is significant. Table 1.1 shows his place in the chronology of ancient Egypt.

Pepy’s reign completed a great developmental cycle that began about 4000 BC. At that time most Egyptians lived in small villages and subsisted on simple farming of wheat, barley, and a few other crops, supplemented by domesticated sheep, goats, pigs, and cattle, as well as the proceeds of hunting, fishing, and foraging. There were no glorious temples, tombs, or pyramids. Each tiny village was largely a world unto itself, with few economic, social, or political connections to the outside world. Every community, in fact, performed nearly all the economic and social activities of every other community: They were “functionally redundant,” in the terms of modern economic theory. Most people’s lives were largely encompassed within the extent of their farm fields and livestock pastures and the circumference of their village’s walls.

Yet by the time of Pepy II’s death, Egypt was a great nation-state, with a written language, a diversified and productive economy, a complex bureaucratic hierarchy, a powerful army, lavish temples and tombs, and

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substantial towns. Indeed, by the time of Pepy's demise, Egypt had already been a great *civilization* and a powerful *state* for nearly a millennium. In his dotage Pepy could – and probably did – count among his royal ancestors more than thirty-five kings who had ruled before him. And he probably died with the consoling thought that many kings would come after him, as indeed they did.

The primary focus of this book is this *first Dynastic cycle*, from about 4000 to 2055 BC, when Egypt first became a great state and civilization and then, after many centuries of stability and prosperity, apparently devolved abruptly into a century of anarchy and poverty. As we shall see, this developmental cycle, like similar cycles in other ancient civilizations, has engaged the attention of scholars for millennia. Attempts to “explain,” or in some larger sense understand, these cycles range from appeals to such “authorities” as God's will to the elaborate interpretations of twentieth-century French social anthropology. None, as noted in Chapter 7, has been entirely successful.

It must be admitted from the outset that defining the terms “state” and “civilization” remains a matter of inconclusive and largely unifying debate. Indeed, legions of scholars have dismissed these terms as sterile typologies based on untenable assumptions about historical and cultural transformations (Shanks and Tilley 1987a, 1987b; McGuire 1983; Yoffee 2005). Some of the scholars whose focus is ancient Egypt also reject these terms and the analytical perspective from which they derive, for similar reasons (e.g., Wengrow 2006). These critical appraisals are considered in detail in subsequent chapters, but the concept of the state and civilization used here are intended as simple descriptive summaries of complex patterns of cultural change, and they are used in the same sense that many scholars have applied them, not just to Egypt but to other early polities as well (e.g., Trigger 2003; R. McC. Adams 1966; Butzer 1976; Bard 2000; Maisels 2001; R. Wright in press).

In the sense in which the concepts of state and civilization are used in this book, they can be thought of in terms of several salient features. The ancient Egyptian state was, for example, *functionally differentiated* and *integrated*. After about 2700 BC, Egypt's economy was based on the integrated labors of scores of occupational specialists – farmers, fishermen, herdsmen, potters, porters, bakers, brewers, masons, metalsmiths, tax agents, generals, priests, painters, sculptors, provincial governors, judges, and many others. And like all other early states, the ancient Egyptian state was a complex system in which everyone depended on these specialists for at least some goods and services. If the military forces weakened, for example, the “barbarians” could soon be at the national gates, and several times, in fact, foreign armies did overrun

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Egypt. If administrators did not tax, store, and redistribute part of the harvests, the many artisans, politicians, soldiers, and other professionals who did not produce their own food could not be supported, and too many years of poor harvests could, and occasionally did, result in misery and starvation. Thus, from the poorest farmer to the king himself, these people were linked in mutually dependent, hierarchically arranged, and complex socioeconomic and political relationships.

All Egyptian kings, including Pepy, no doubt led a life of wealth and privilege, but like everyone in the society, they too had a job to do. “Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown,” as Shakespeare said of Henry IV. Pepy was considered by his people to be both a man and a god – but a god who could intercede on behalf of Egyptians with other gods, and who had the responsibility to do so effectively. A king whose reign was cursed by lost wars or poor harvests could be blamed for such obvious signs of the gods’ displeasure. In some sculptures, the king is portrayed with a falcon (Figure 1.2), a representation of the great god, sitting on his shoulders, ready to offer advice. The implication was that although the king was considered a deity of sorts, he was a god who needed the help and protection of other gods on occasion.



Figure 1.2. King Khafre (c. 2558–2532 BC) rules under the tutelage of the god Horus, represented by the falcon. Sculpted in black basalt. Though considered a god, the king was believed to be guided by other gods. *Source:* Delimont, Herbig & Assoc.

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The ancient Egyptian state, like all early states, operated through a *bureaucratic hierarchy*. Dynastic Egypt saw the emergence of *Homo hierarchicus*, in the place of *Homo aequalis*, to use Louis Dumont's terms (1980). Like all kings before and after him, Pepy II had numerous aides and advisers, and much of the daily operation of the Egyptian state was administered by officials many levels below him in the bureaucratic hierarchy. Yet one of the vital lies of Egyptian political theory was that the king personally directed these thousands of officials who collected taxes, adjudicated legal disputes, interceded with the gods through rituals, and in a thousand other ways managed the state's business. In fact, such complexly differentiated and highly integrated states could operate only by means of an administrative hierarchy that was itself highly differentiated and complexly integrated. Thus, even the poorest Egyptian farmer bore the weight in his daily life of many levels of bureaucrats above him, from the village headman, through provincial tax collectors and governors, to state administrators, and ultimately to the king himself. Ancient Egyptians probably found bureaucracies of all kinds as oppressive in their profusion and inefficiencies as we do, but they, too, seem to have had a sense that such hierarchies were fundamental to a well-ordered state and universe, and they believed that they were established by the gods to further that goal.

Any attempt to analyze the pharaonic past in general terms must consider the evolution of these administrative institutions.

Like all other early states, Egyptian society was also based on *institutionalized inequalities*, in the sense that some people had disproportionate access to wealth, power, and prestige – and, moreover, this unequal access either was inherited or was dictated by elites. Marxists and some others (e.g., Crone 1989: 101–102) restrict the use of the term “class” to industrial societies with specific kinds of economic and social relations that did not appear in developed form in ancient Egypt. But Egyptian society was sharply defined in terms of various inequalities, ranging from simple distinctions based on age and gender to precise calculations of one's familial proximity, if any, to the ruling elites. Thus, Pepy and other kings and nobles were at the apex of Egypt's social pyramid, and below them were many other groups, ranging from leisured elites to enslaved war captives. Social “mobility” – moving up the socioeconomic ladder – was possible, with luck and pluck. Becoming a scribe (Figure 1.3), for example, allowed a person to join a privileged meritocracy. Most people, however, inherited their class status and bore it for life. Probably 90 percent or more of ancient Egyptians existed at the bottom of social, wealth, and power hierarchies, where they labored as farmers, fishermen, potters, bakers, or other tiny cogs in the state apparatus. Yet they, like the

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Figure 1.3. Seated scribe statue. Numerous figurines of scribes have been found, such as this individual from the Fifth Dynasty (painted limestone). Many early Egyptian representations of people have a static formalized quality, but they could represent ordinary individuals in what we consider a “naturalistic” fashion, with such things as rolls of belly fat faithfully illustrated. *Source:* The Louvre Museum, Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.

lowest classes in most ancient societies, apparently accepted these inequalities as their fate and the will of the gods: There is no clear evidence that proletarian revolutions ever occurred in ancient Egypt, nor did the ancient Egyptians unite in powerful groups that tried to advance their groups’ interests through strikes and revolts. Egyptian menials knew they were at the bottom of society; they just did not see anything they could do about it that would not violate their religious and political beliefs, or would have any chance of improving their lot.

At this point it is worth considering how restrictive such social hierarchies can be. The United States of America, for example, was founded by some elites, but the vast majority of immigrants were small-time European farmers and tradesmen. Out of that genetic mix has come one of the most powerful and creative societies in history, approaching even fifth-century BC Greece and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Great Britain.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Egypt’s ancient specialized occupational system, as well as its hierarchically arranged bureaucratic administrative structures and its institutionalized forms of economic and social inequalities, is that very similar cultural forms appeared in many areas of the ancient world, from China to Peru. Moreover, most of these early states and civilizations developed largely independently, and at about the same time – 4000 BC–AD 1000.

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A fundamental issue considered here is how we are to understand and explain these parallel culture histories. But that is not the only issue. This book is also concerned with questions about how we are to understand and appreciate Egyptian civilization, and what – in the largest possible sense – we can learn from it.

***The Nature and Significance of Ancient States  
(Part 1): Aesthetic and Philosophical Appreciations  
of Egypt as a Unique Civilization***

Earth has not anything to show more fair;  
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
A sight so touching in its majesty. . . .

(William Wordsworth [1770–1850], “Lines Composed  
upon Westminster Bridge”)

It is difficult to resist the temptation to become morbidly sentimental about ancient Egypt. Many people find Egypt’s past and its remains profoundly affecting. This book includes enough “purple prose” to fit the definition of sentimentality about ancient Egypt. Wordsworth’s paean was to London, but his musings are equally applicable to the relics of ancient Egypt. Dull, indeed, too would be the soul who could view these pyramids, temples, and tombs without a profound sense of awe, pleasure, and curiosity.

We need not consider grand questions about the meaning of the past and the “science” of history in order to benefit from the contemplation of Egypt’s wonders. Nor do we have to choose between *analyses* of the Egyptian past and an aesthetic *appreciation* of that past; these are complementary perspectives. The book allots more space to analyses of the socioeconomic dynamics of the Egyptian past than to appreciation of it, but both are necessary for a comprehensive understanding of this culture.

Ancient Egypt’s potent cultural themes, like those of ancient Greece and Rome, have reverberated throughout history, in such diverse forms as the Bible, Plato’s *Dialogues*, William Shakespeare’s plays, and Giuseppe Verdi’s masterful opera *Aida*. And Egyptian architectural and aesthetic forms have inspired artists for millennia, from ancient Rome to the oddities of contemporary Las Vegas in the United States. A trivial but more tangible example of ancient Egypt’s lingering cultural influence can be found on the reverse side of the U.S. dollar bill. On the left side is a pyramid, with an eye below the capstone, and the inscription “ANNUIT COEPTIS” (Latin shorthand for “God has favored our

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undertaking”) above it. Below the pyramid is written “NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM,” Latin for “a new order of the secular ages [is created].” There are thirteen levels to the pyramid, representing the original states, and it is left unfinished in anticipation of great things to come. Many believe that these symbols and ideas were incorporated in American currency because mystical ideas about ancient Egypt influenced some secret societies, such as Freemasonry, to which many politically important Americans of the nineteenth century belonged (including most of the signers of the Constitution). At least thirteen presidents have been members, from George Washington to George W. Bush.

*Think* about it. The people who built the pyramids and other wonders of Egypt’s first civilization have been *pulvis et umbra*, dust and shadows, for 4500 years and more. Why do their works and eschatology captivate people of so many diverse epochs and cultures? The answer in part is that the remains of Egyptian civilization constitute a multifaceted work of art that, like all great art, enriches and resonates through many people’s lives. One can argue that there are no aesthetic absolutes, but only the most cloddish are unmoved, for example, when they first see the Sphinx and the Great Pyramids at Giza (Figure 1.4). Viewed early in the morning they are a spectacular sight, as the warm red sun rolls up over the horizon, sparkles the Nile, accents the vivid greens of the floodplain farms, and then slowly reveals the pyramids and Sphinx in honey-colored tones.

Or consider ancient Egyptian texts, arguably the most beautiful written language in human history. Formal Old Kingdom hieroglyphic inscriptions (Figure 1.5) have knife-edge clarity and engaging symmetry unequalled by any other script. There is a “certain slant of light,” as Emily Dickinson observed in another context, that imbues objects with profound meanings, and Egypt’s raking evening and morning sunlight gives monumental hieroglyphic inscriptions remarkable depth and presence. Even the ordinary Egyptian texts – the bills, contracts, deeds, graffiti, and so forth – were written in the appealing “hieratic” script, for Egyptian scribes did not “write” as we do; they literally painted their texts with brushes and colored inks, and they did so in many media and with considerable grace (Figure 1.6).

Even in the small and common Egyptian relics, such as the stone statues of husband and wife (Figure 1.7), we find poignant expressions of individual lives and loves. In none of the world’s other earliest civilizations do we find so many celebrations in art of the simple domestic felicity of husband and wife and their pairing even into the afterlife.

Such contemplations of ancient Egypt need no ultimate justification. We need not denature them by analyzing them into their components and relating them to ponderous theories of history.