INTRODUCTION: THE IDEA OF PREHISTORY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH-EAST AFRICA

Evidence is only evidence when someone contemplates it historically. Otherwise, it is merely perceived fact, historically dumb.

The Idea of History, R. G. Collingwood

Unlike Egyptologists, prehistorians of Egypt do not now and never have possessed a conscious unity of purpose.

Egypt before the Pharaohs, M. A. Hoffman

Echoing Gandhi's famous judgement on European civilisation, we might begin by observing that the prehistory of Egypt 'would be a good idea'. This may seem a very odd statement. The past century has seen virtually continuous field research into the cultures that preceded kingship in the valley and delta of the Nile. Syntheses have been written, site reports published, chronologies refined, museum collections established and expanded, analytical bibliographies compiled and websites created. In Michael Hoffman's (1991) *Egypt before the Pharaohs* we even have an engaging, if now slightly dated, history of research. So I will try to explain what I mean.

In western Europe a continuous development can be traced from the antiquarianism of the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, often pursued within the field of jurisprudence, to the emergence of prehistoric archaeology. A direct line of thought and emotion links the literary resurrection of ancient Gaul and the 'republic of the Druids' to the reconstitution of prehistoric monuments as archives of national identity and social memory, and this recourse to a remote past echoes still earlier developments in Mediterranean humanism. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when archaeologists began to provide an independent account of their tribal origins, the vision of a time before kingship and written records—a time of freedom, equality and community—had already been woven into the political constitutions and historical imaginations of many European societies (Pocock 1957; Schnapp 1996).

By contrast, archaeological research was introduced to the Middle East and North-East Africa on the coat-tails of imperial conquest. At much the same time that the antiquaries of northern Europe were piecing together local evidence for the Three Age system of human prehistory (Stone, Bronze, Iron; Daniel 1950), the birth of Egyptology and Assyriology was heralded by the

decipherment of royal proclamations such as the Rosetta Stone, found by French military engineers in 1799 and subsequently surrendered to the British (Pope 1975). Growing acceptance during the early and mid-nineteenth century of a long, secular chronology for human history initially made little impact upon the development of archaeology in these regions, fuelled as it was by an overriding sense that 'archaeologists were hunting for the very beginnings of human history, as perceived in the light of sacred writings' (Larsen 1996: xii). The primary concerns were to reveal, appropriate and study the cultural remnants of ancient and exotic forms of sacred kingship, and the civilisations where they first rose and fell, as described in biblical and Graeco-Roman sources. Nobody, in those early days of exploration, was looking for or thinking about a prehistory of the Middle East or North-East Africa.

When the visible, ancient remains of the Oriental landscape did inspire Europeans to contemplate the past on a broader philosophical canvas, it tended to be as a series of cycles rather than a linear development. Among the most influential and widely translated of these meditations was the Comte de Volney's *Les ruines, ou, Méditation sur les révolutions des empires* ('The Ruins, or, Meditation on the Revolutions of Empires'), published in 1791, in the wake of the French Revolution. The wreckage of the ancient Orient—its 'extravagant tombs, mausoleums, and pyramids', built 'for vain skeletons' under 'the cloak of religion'—appears there as an allegory for the fall of European monarchy. Less than a decade later, Napoleon Bonaparte, who had read and been inspired by Volney's works, stood triumphant before the people of Alexandria. In his victory speech he appealed, not to a pharaonic legacy, but to an idealised Islamic past of flourishing cities and trade, free from the yoke of Mameluke rule. And it was with French citizens, rather than the people of Egypt, in mind that Napoleon's *savants* were set to the task of documenting and removing the ancient monuments (Said 1995: 81–3; Bret 1999).

By the early twentieth century ancient Egypt served as a familiar *topos* (in Frances Yates's sense of a real or imaginary space in which memory can be anchored) where the discontents of Judeo-Christian, democratic, capitalist society could be explored. Then, as today, these discontents and contradictions extend far beyond the sphere of political experience. Among them we find the repressed desire to abdicate responsibility for life to a higher authority, which satisfies both spiritual and physical needs; the desire for material rather than simply spiritual continuity after death; and the closely related desire to root the life of living institutions in some form of direct commerce with the dead (cf. Baudrillard 1993). This modern need for ancient Egypt as symbol and metaphor has accorded it a privileged place in western cultural memory, but has hardly been conducive to seeing it as a product of historical development.

When significant quantities of prehistoric remains were eventually excavated in the Nile valley, at the close of the nineteenth century, it was more by accident than design, and at first the finds were not unanimously recognised as

dating to a time before kingship. It was with a polite dismissal that W. M. F. Petrie, who subsequently went on to demonstrate almost single-handedly the existence of a 'predynastic' cultural sequence in Egypt, responded to the first volume of J. de Morgan's *Recherches sur les origines de l'Egypte*, published in 1896 (see Drower 1985: 225). It is a further irony that a number of Petrie's own early Egyptian discoveries, including the famous colossal statues found at Coptos (fig. 9.10), were subsequently rejected by the British Museum on grounds that they were 'unhistoric rather than prehistoric', a fit of pique for which Oxford's Ashmolean Museum and University College London—where Petrie, by way of retaliation, sent much of his predynastic material—have been grateful ever since (Petrie 1931: 153–7).

For some early twentieth-century scholars, notably the founding father of Sudanese anthropology C. G. Seligman, investigating ancient Egypt's prehistoric foundations was less a matter of excavating downwards than travelling southwards, beyond the perceived boundaries of the Oriental landscape. 'Africa', went the imperial slogan, 'begins at Malakal', in today's Southern Sudan. During the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899–1956), Malakal also marked the point at which archaeological activity, focused upon the visible monuments of ancient kingdoms and empires to the north, came to an end, and ethnographic fieldwork—often oriented as much towards the past as the present—began in earnest (Wengrow 2003b). Seligman was particularly interested in the pastoral tribes of the Upper Nile Province, in whom he perceived a racially corrupted remnant of prehistoric Caucasian immigrants, whose arrival on the African continent—in his view, and that of some others—had precipitated the rise of dynastic civilisation in ancient Egypt (Seligman 1913; 1934).[1] By the late twentieth century such views had been rightly dismissed as malign fantasies (Sanders 1969). Nevertheless, the geographical division of labour between archaeology and anthropology that sustained them has persisted, and still delineates real boundaries and profound discrepancies in the depth of historical knowledge along the Nile. These boundaries have continued to influence the pattern of scholarship in North-East Africa to the present day. I discuss these issues further in chapters 3 and 5.

Prior to becoming a historical idea, Egypt 'before the pharaohs' therefore existed both as a largely unordered assemblage of prehistoric objects and unloved human remains excavated within Egypt itself, and in the ethnographic imagination of a wider African present. By 'a historical idea' I mean something more than just a subject of study for professional archaeologists or another gap filled along the chronological spectrum of human development. I mean something which, although rooted in the knowable past, resonates with the present, and is understood to have been a formative, or at least distinctly meaningful, episode in the making of the contemporary world.

[1] MacGaffey (1966) places Seligman's ideas within the wider setting of contemporary racial theory.

A recent survey of textbooks used to teach American college courses on Western Civilisation provides a useful indication of how far the prehistory of the Middle East and North-East Africa still is from becoming an idea, in that sense (Segal 2000). Daniel Segal, who conducted the survey, suggests that the 'Near East', including both ancient Iraq (Mesopotamia) and Egypt, still tends to be represented not so much as a place (or series of places), but as a stage of global history. Specifically, it is made to stand for 'early civilisation': a transitional phase between the simple life of Stone Age peoples and modern civilisation in its western, secular form. During that phase, so the story goes, human societies achieved some important technological advances (e.g. the invention of writing and monumental architecture), but at the expense of submission to exploitative, religiously motivated and economically dysfunctional regimes. The prehistories of Egypt and Iraq are not presented as histories of what happened to societies there before the appearance of kingship, cities and writing systems. Rather, they are absorbed into a generic prehistory of all humankind, during which 'people' achieved the transition from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to early farming societies. The Neolithic, in particular, is conceived as a crucial episode of economic development, which of course it was, but like all human transformations it was many other things as well, and these tend to be excluded. In this established narrative, a change in *economic* conditions precipitates a change in *political* relations, such that the overall transformation of coherent life-worlds (always simultaneously economic, political and ideological) is obscured from view, and a genuine long-term history of social power in the Middle East and North-East Africa is rendered inconceivable.[2]

The conclusion seems, on the face of it, to be a depressing one. Instead of a prehistory rooted in temporal development, and encompassing multiple trajectories of social and cultural change, students and the public at large are still, for the most part, being offered a pastiche: a symbolic prehistory of humankind, which also acts as a repository—or rather graveyard—for aspects of the present deemed 'pre-modern'. In the present climate, with 'civilisation' firmly back on the political and intellectual agenda of the West, the retention of this topography of values has particularly strong implications for the regions concerned, which hardly need to be spelt out in detail. On a more positive note, accepting the reality of this status quo may provide archaeologists working in those regions with something approaching a 'conscious unity of purpose'; the purpose being to change or at least question it. The idea of prehistory in the Middle East and North-East Africa remains, in more senses than one, a subversive and 'disorienting' one.

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[2] For a more wide-ranging critique of 'periodisation by stereotype' in archaeological and evolutionary thought, see Sherratt 1995.

Aims, scope and method of this book

Most scholars today would probably accept that hierarchy is a socially constructed, rather than a natural, feature of the Middle East's historical landscape (although views to the contrary can still be found in some surprisingly prominent places). There is, however, a considerable difference between accepting a viewpoint on political or philosophical grounds and demonstrating its validity through the available evidence. In this book I will be aiming towards the latter goal by providing a sustained interpretation of social and cultural change in Egypt and neighbouring parts of Africa and Asia, spanning a period of more than seven millennia between the onset of the Holocene and the early centuries of dynastic rule that preceded the Old Kingdom (c.10,000–2650 BC).

In writing it I have repeatedly asked myself what contribution a 'world archaeology' perspective should make to the study of early Egypt. World archaeology of course means different things to different people. To me it implies an approach that is comparative in scope, although not to the exclusion of inter-regional relationships and historical contingency. It also implies a commitment to address questions of general anthropological significance, including the variety of ways in which human groups and societies have engaged with what Abner Cohen (1974: 60) termed 'perennial problems of human existence', such as 'the meaning of life and death, fortune and misfortune, good and evil, growth and decay'. In contrast to some other recent studies (notably, Trigger 2003), I do not attempt an initial definition of ancient Egypt as an example of some wider phenomenon, for instance: 'early civilisation', 'the archaic state' or 'complex society'. Categories of this kind impose constraints and assumptions upon the analysis of social change that are unwarranted in a study like the present one, where we have the luxury of 'thick description'. Some of these conventions, and in particular the use of 'complexity' as a metaphor for processes of early state formation, will be unpacked and questioned in the chapters that follow.

What, then, of method? Here I define only some broad historical issues and parameters of investigation, which are expanded upon in individual chapters.

During the early twentieth century the archaeological record of early Egypt, with its well-preserved cemeteries, was the envy of excavators working in other parts of the Old World. Rich assemblages of objects recovered from burials were well suited to the intellectual concerns of the day: seriation, typology, chronology, culture-groups, and the diffusion of peoples and traits (see Trigger 1989: 148–206). All was to change during the mid-twentieth century. While older theories of social evolution, such as those of Lewis Henry Morgan (1877), had placed considerable explanatory emphasis upon mobility and migration, the work of V. Gordon Childe during the 1930s and 1940s recast the 'birth of civilisation' in the mould of an 'urban revolution'—an epiphany of the settled form of life, giving priority to those aspects of prehistoric development

associated with the establishment and growth of sedentary villages (e.g.
Childe 1936). Robert Braidwood's expedition to the 'hilly flanks' of the Iraqi
Zagros during the 1950s demonstrated the possibility of substantiating this
account with empirical data derived from habitation zones, including animal
and plant remains that shed light on the beginnings of Neolithic food
production (Braidwood and Howe 1960). In Egypt, where agrarian life was
mainly restricted to the Nile alluvium, much of the raw material for what
had become a conventional study of social evolution (habitation sites, re-
gional settlement patterns, faunal and plant assemblages) now suddenly
appeared beyond reach, owing to the modern reuse of land and the build-
up of fluvial silts over ancient living sites. As will become clear in the
chapters that follow, and as has been apparent now for some time, this
initial prognosis was over-pessimistic. It nevertheless remains the case that,
for the periods covered in this book (and much of the dynastic period that
follows), Egyptian cemeteries, rather than settlements, provide the bulk of
information concerning material culture, patterns of trade, practices of pro-
duction and consumption and, of course, the ritual structuring of the human
lifecycle.

As Bruce Trigger (1979) has perceived, the prominence of sacred kingship in
studies of early Egypt may have further contributed to its isolation from the
social sciences during the late twentieth century. Once a cornerstone of social
evolutionary thought, in the tradition developed by James Frazer (1911–15) and
Arthur Hocart (1927), the institution of kingship was marginalized from much
neo-evolutionary theory, which chose instead to ponder the transitions from
'tribe' to 'chiefdom' and from 'chiefdom' to 'archaic state'. Forms of status as
diverse as 'warrior chief' and 'ritual leader' were subsumed within a single
category; a common criticism of the 'chiefdom' has since been that it spans too
broad a range of social variation and types of power (Yoffee 1993; Kristiansen
1998). At around the same time, the anthropology of sacred kingship took a
semiological turn, inspired by Georges Dumézil's analyses of Indo-European
mythology and the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss (both ulti-
mately grounded in comparative linguistics), and exemplified in Luc de
Heusch's studies of Bantu myth and sacrifice, and Marshall Sahlins's work
on perceptions of time and sacred power in Oceania.[3] There is no inherent
reason why the study of ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia should have been
excluded from this theoretical enterprise, and many of its central concerns
were anticipated by Henri Frankfort (1948a), who attempted to discern con-
sistent patterns of mythical thought and symbolic practice underlying the
different forms of kingship in these two regions. More recent work (e.g. Hodder
1990; Rowlands 2003) suggests a belated, but nonetheless worthwhile engage-
ment with aspects of structuralist thought in the archaeology of the Middle

[3] E.g. Dumézil 1968–73; Lévi-Strauss 1963; de Heusch 1982; Sahlins 1985.

East and North-East Africa; an engagement to which the present study also
aspires.

One of the criticisms sometimes levelled at structuralism (although not all
studies are equally culpable) has been that of logocentrism: an over-reliance on
language as a model for understanding social organisation and cultural trans-
mission. Many studies have emphasised the importance for human relations
and their development of practices that are not language-like (e.g. Bourdieu
1977; Bloch 1998). Particular attention has been drawn to types of social
knowledge that are pre-discursive, infiltrating the person directly via what
Marcel Mauss (1979 [1935]) called *techniques du corps* and rarely, if ever,
articulated as formal, linguistic propositions. As Alfred Gell (1993: 3) observed,
the salience of Mauss's notion of 'body techniques' often 'stems from the fact
that it is through the body, the way in which the body is deployed, displayed,
and modified, that socially appropriate self-understandings are formed and
reproduced'. Such knowledge may range from routines of comportment, per-
sonal presentation, work and consumption to prescribed modes of ritual and
ceremonial activity. Practice-centred approaches to the analysis of social
change enforce no rigid dichotomy between 'sacred' and 'profane' experience
(or, for that matter, between 'art' and 'technology'), both of which are equally
rooted in the socially educated bodies of individuals and their repertoires of
behaviour and emotional response: part universal, part culturally learned.
'Gods', writes Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000: 78), 'are as real as ideology is—that
is to say, they are embedded in practices.'

A notion of material practice as constituting and actively transforming the
parameters of social experience is integral to the interpretative approach fol-
lowed in this book. Archaeological data are studied, not through predeter-
mined categories such as 'technology', 'art', 'administration' and 'cult', but
as mutually constitutive elements within total, developing forms of social life.
For early Egypt, as I have indicated, the most fertile ground for such an
approach lies in funerary practices, which offer a continuous record of struc-
tured human activity, implicating both bodies and artefacts in the transforma-
tion of social experience. Instead of seeing this patterning of the record as a
bias to be corrected or minimised, I intend to turn it to my advantage by
placing activities surrounding death and the body at the core of my interpreta-
tion of long-term change. This does not mean treating funerary remains as if
they were snapshots of mundane life, rather than the outcome of purposeful
ritual transformations. Nor does it imply a denial of their distinctive qualities
as formalised expressions of loss, or a reduction of sentient human beings to
automata, playing out well-formulated ideological strategies in a fantasy world
free of emotion and contingency.

What I *would* assert is that relationships between the living and the dead—
sustained, negotiated and altered through ritual activity—were deeply inter-
woven, albeit in complex and indirect ways, with the material conditions of

existence and production: sufficiently interwoven to provide meaningful in-
sights into the political and economic developments covered in this book. Of
these, two episodes of change stand out. They are, respectively, associated
with the adoption of domesticated animals and plants during the fifth millen-
nium BC and the establishment, a millennium and a half later, of a unified
territorial state under the centralised rule of a sacred monarch. Over the long-
term, as I seek to show, both episodes involved fundamental transformations
in economy, ritual practice and the articulation of social power. I further argue,
notably in chapters 1 and 7, that neither development can be adequately
comprehended without considering Egypt's changing place within networks
of communication and trade that spanned large areas of the western Old
World, linking developments in North-East Africa to wider patterns of social
and technological change in South-West Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean.

In its totality, a record of ritual practices formed over thousands of years
constitutes a distinct kind of historical reality, which—however fragmentary
and disturbed—offers particular challenges and possibilities for interpretation.
It is a reality that cannot always be reduced to the conscious intentions of
particular actors. Neither, however, can it be attributed to forces beyond their
control, or consigned to a realm outside the strategic interests of predatory
groups within society. Social life leaves a material trace of its own develop-
ment that is not random, and yet can often be grasped only at a remove from
the rhythms of ordinary existence and decision-making: a pattern created in
time and space by the manifold, momentary actions of individual agents,
which is only partly perceptible to them as they contribute to its making,
but no less human, social or—with the benefit of distance—recognisable for
that. As I hope to demonstrate, there may be particularly good empirical
reasons for approaching the relationship between changes in ritual practice
and in the politico-economic sphere on an archaeological time-scale: in the
perspective of millennia and centuries, rather than decades and years. Here it
is instructive to compare the methodological conclusions of Maurice Bloch's
anthropological study of Merina circumcision rituals in Madagascar:

First, we have seen some change occur in the ritual, however slow it may be. This
is change brought about by the functional changes the ritual has undergone. These
are not to be understood as direct responses to circumstances; they often appear as
ad hoc abbreviations or expansions. These changes are, moreover, not as signif-
icant as they might appear at first sight. They do alter what is done in a way that in
the long run, must lead cumulatively to major changes. This, however, would be
over a long time, a longer time than the two hundred years of this study.

(Bloch 1986: 193)

One of the principal arguments that will emerge from this study is that
Neolithic social forms in North-East Africa and South-West Asia were more
diverse, distinctive and robust than previously thought, and exerted a lasting
influence upon the political development of those regions. There is a temporal

continuity, an inertia, between Neolithic modes of engagement with the social and material worlds, and the modes of self-presentation adopted by dynastic elites. Such continuities, persisting within change, are not adequately accounted for either by evolutionary models which stress the progressive growth of technological and organisational complexity, or by evoking the internal structural and symbolic coherence of 'high cultures' and 'great traditions'. Despite the characteristic appeals of dynastic elites to what Bloch (1987: 272) describes as 'an order which transcends mere human experience', their establishment and survival depended, to a significant degree, upon successful co-option and transfiguration of clearly defined domains of knowledge, rooted in the everyday lives and habits of their Neolithic antecedents. That process of co-option was not simple, rapid or total. Rather, it involved a succession of cultural strategies for appropriating and restricting access to mobile resources, land and sacred power. The material residues of those strategies, and their analysis, constitute a guiding strand in the archaeology of early Egypt.

PART I

TRANSFORMATIONS IN PREHISTORY