

# EGYPT AND MESOPOTAMIA

*In the Light of Recent Excavation and Research*

## CHAPTER I

### THE DISCOVERY OF PREHISTORIC EGYPT

**D**URING the last ten years our conception of the beginnings of Egyptian antiquity has profoundly altered. When Prof. Maspero published the first volume of his great *Histoire Ancienne des Peuples de l'Orient Classique*, in 1895, Egyptian history, properly so called, still began with the Pyramid-builders, Sneferu, Khufu, and Khafra (Cheops and Chephren), and the legendary lists of earlier kings preserved at Abydos and Sakkâra were still quoted as the only source of knowledge of the time before the IVth Dynasty. Of a prehistoric Egypt nothing was known, beyond a few flint flakes gathered here and there upon the desert plateaus, which might or might not tell of an age when the ancestors of the Pyramid-builders knew only the stone tools and weapons of the primeval savage.

Now, however, the veil which has hidden the beginnings of Egyptian civilization from us has been lifted, and we see things, more or less, as they actually were, unobscured by the traditions of a later day. Until the

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last few years nothing of the real beginnings of history in either Egypt or Mesopotamia had been found; legend supplied the only material for the reconstruction of the earliest history of the oldest civilized nations of the globe. Nor was it seriously supposed that any relics of prehistoric Egypt or Mesopotamia ever would be found. The antiquity of the known history of these countries already appeared so great that nobody took into consideration the possibility of our discovering a prehistoric Egypt or Mesopotamia; the idea was too remote from practical work. And further, civilization in these countries had lasted so long that it seemed more than probable that all traces of their prehistoric age had long since been swept away. Yet the possibility, which seemed hardly worth a moment's consideration in 1895, is in 1905 an assured reality, at least as far as Egypt is concerned. Prehistoric Babylonia has yet to be discovered. It is true, for example, that at Mukayyar, the site of ancient Ur of the Chaldees, burials in earthenware coffins, in which the skeletons lie in the doubled-up position characteristic of Neolithic interments, have been found; but there is no doubt whatever that these are burials of a much later date, belonging, quite possibly, to the Parthian period. Nothing that may rightfully be termed prehistoric has yet been found in the Euphrates valley, whereas in Egypt prehistoric antiquities are now almost as well known and as well represented in our museums as are the prehistoric antiquities of Europe and America.

With the exception of a few palæoliths from the sur-

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face of the Syrian desert, near the Euphrates valley, not a single implement of the Age of Stone has yet been found in Southern Mesopotamia, whereas Egypt has yielded to us the most perfect examples of the flint-knapper's art known, flint tools and weapons more beautiful than the finest that Europe and America can show. The reason is not far to seek. Southern Mesopotamia is an alluvial country, and the ancient cities, which doubtless mark the sites of the oldest settlements in the land, are situated in the alluvial marshy plain between the Tigris and the Euphrates; so that all traces of the Neolithic culture of the country would seem to have disappeared, buried deep beneath city-mounds, clay and marsh. It is the same in the Egyptian Delta, a similar country; and here no traces of the prehistoric culture of Egypt have been found. The attempt to find them was made last year at Buto, which is known to be one of the most antique centres of civilization, and probably was one of the earliest settlements in Egypt, but without success. The infiltration of water had made excavation impossible and had no doubt destroyed everything belonging to the most ancient settlement. It is not going too far to predict that exactly the same thing will be found by any explorer who tries to discover a Neolithic stratum beneath a city-mound of Babylonia. There is little hope that prehistoric Chaldæa will ever be known to us. But in Egypt the conditions are different. The Delta is like Babylonia, it is true; but in the Upper Nile valley the river flows down with but a thin border of alluvial land on either side, through

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the rocky and hilly desert, the dry Sahara, where rain falls but once in two or three years. Antiquities buried in this soil in the most remote ages are preserved intact as they were first interred, until the modern investigator comes along to look for them. And it is on the desert margin of the valley that the remains of prehistoric Egypt have been found. That is the reason for their perfect preservation till our own day, and why we know prehistoric Egypt so well.

The chief work of Egyptian civilization was the proper irrigation of the alluvial soil, the turning of marsh into cultivated fields, and the reclamation of land from the desert for the purposes of agriculture. Owing to the rainless character of the country, the only means of obtaining water for the crops is by irrigation, and where the fertilizing Nile water cannot be taken by means of canals, there cultivation ends and the desert begins. Before Egyptian civilization, properly so called, began, the valley was a great marsh through which the Nile found its way north to the sea. The half-savage, stone-using ancestors of the civilized Egyptians hunted wild fowl, crocodiles, and hippopotami in the marshy valley; but except in a few isolated settlements on convenient mounds here and there (the fore-runners of the later villages), they did not live there. Their settlements were on the dry desert margin, and it was here, upon low tongues of desert hill jutting out into the plain, that they buried their dead. Their simple shallow graves were safe from the flood, and, but for the depredations of jackals and hyenas, here

## ANCIENT BURIAL-PLACES

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they have remained intact till our own day, and have yielded up to us the facts from which we have derived our knowledge of prehistoric Egypt. Thus it is that we know so much of the Egyptians of the Stone Age, while of their contemporaries in Mesopotamia we know nothing, nor is anything further likely to be discovered.

But these desert cemeteries, with their crowds of oval shallow graves, covered by only a few inches of surface soil, in which the Neolithic Egyptians lie crouched up with their flint implements and polished pottery beside them, are but monuments of the later age of prehistoric Egypt. Long before the Neolithic Egyptian hunted his game in the marshes, and here and there essayed the work of reclamation for the purposes of an incipient agriculture, a far older race inhabited the valley of the Nile. The written records of Egyptian civilization go back four thousand years before Christ, or earlier, and the Neolithic Age of Egypt must go back to a period several thousand years before that. But we can now go back much further still, to the Palæolithic Age of Egypt. At a time when Europe was still covered by the ice and snows of the Glacial Period, and man fought as an equal, hardly yet as a superior, with cave-bear and mammoth, the Palæolithic Egyptians lived on the banks of the Nile. Their habitat was doubtless the desert slopes, often, too, the plateaus themselves; but that they lived entirely upon the plateaus, high up above the Nile marsh, is improbable. There, it is true, we find their flint implements, the

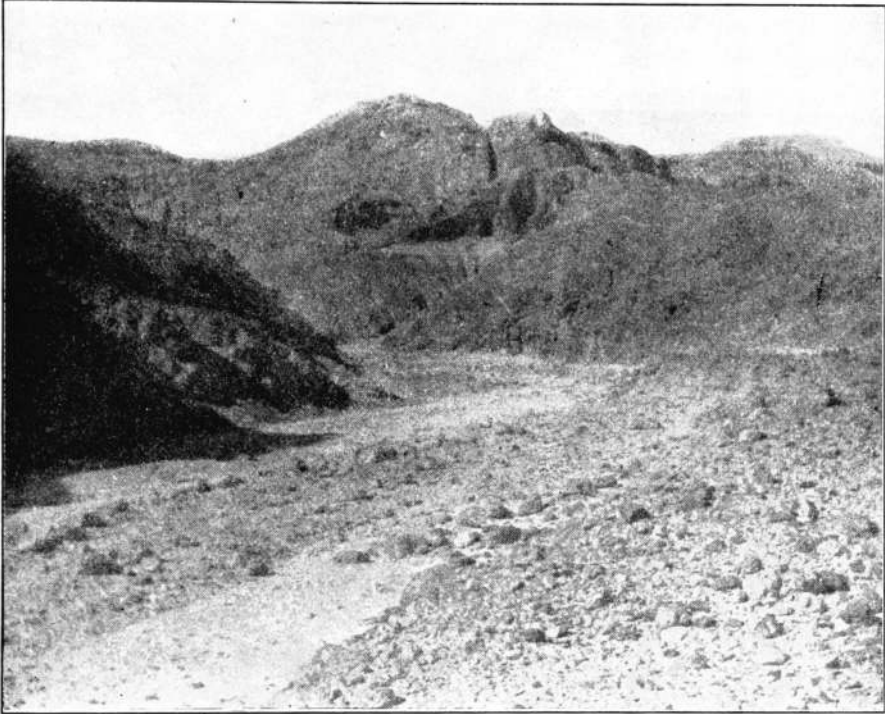
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great pear-shaped weapons of the types of Chelles, St. Acheul, and Le Moustier, types well known to all who are acquainted with the flint implements of the “Drift” in Europe. And it is there that the theory, generally accepted hitherto, has placed the habitat of the makers and users of these implements.

The idea was that in Palæolithic days, contemporary with the Glacial Age of Northern Europe and America, the climate of Egypt was entirely different from that of later times and of to-day. Instead of dry desert, the mountain plateaus bordering the Nile valley were supposed to have been then covered with forest, through which flowed countless streams to feed the river below. It was suggested that remains of these streams were to be seen in the side ravines, or *wadis*, of the Nile valley, which run up from the low desert on the river level into the hills on either hand. These *wadis* undoubtedly show extensive traces of strong water action; they curve and twist as the streams found their easiest way to the level through the softer strata, they are heaped up with great water-worn boulders, they are hollowed out where waterfalls once fell. They have the appearance of dry watercourses, exactly what any mountain burns would be were the water-supply suddenly cut off for ever, the climate altered from rainy to eternal sun-glare, and every plant and tree blasted, never to grow again. Acting on the supposition that this idea was a correct one, most observers have concluded that the climate of Egypt in remote periods was very different from the dry, rainless one now obtaining. To

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provide the water for the *wadi* streams, heavy rainfall and forests are desiderated. They were easily supplied, on the hypothesis. Forests clothed the mountain plateaus, heavy rains fell, and the water rushed down to the Nile, carving out the great watercourses which



THE BED OF AN ANCIENT WATERCOURSE IN THE WADIYÊN, THEBES.

remain to this day, bearing testimony to the truth. And the flints, which the Palæolithic inhabitants of the plateau-forests made and used, still lie on the now treeless and sun-baked desert surface.

This is certainly a very weak conclusion. In fact, it seriously damages the whole argument, the water-

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courses to the contrary notwithstanding. The palæoliths are there. They can be picked up by any visitor. There they lie, great flints of the Drift types, just like those found in the gravel-beds of England and Belgium, on the desert surface where they were made. Undoubtedly where they were made, for the places where they lie are the actual ancient flint workshops, where the flints were chipped. Everywhere around are innumerable flint chips and perfect weapons, burnt black and patinated by ages of sunlight. We are taking one particular spot in the hills of Western Thebes as an example, but there are plenty of others, such as the Wadi esh-Shêkh on the right bank of the Nile opposite Maghagha, whence Mr. H. Seton-Karr has brought back specimens of flint tools of all ages from the Palæolithic to the Neolithic periods.

The Palæolithic flint workshops on the Theban hills have been visited of late years by Mr. Seton-Karr, by Prof. Schweinfurth, Mr. Allen Sturge, and Dr. Blanckenhorn, by Mr. Portch, Mr. Ayrton, and Mr. Hall. The weapons illustrated here were found by Messrs. Hall and Ayrton, and are now preserved in the British Museum. Among these flints shown we notice two fine specimens of the pear-shaped type of St. Acheul, with curious adze-shaped implements of primitive type to left and right. Below, to the right, is a very primitive instrument of Chelléan type, being merely a sharpened pebble. Above, to left and right, are two specimens of the curious half-moon-shaped instruments which are characteristic of the Theban flint

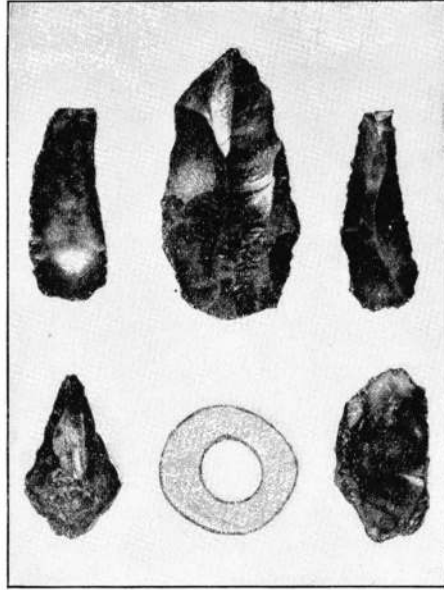


## PALÆOLITHIC RELICS

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field, and are hardly known elsewhere. All have the beautiful brown patina, which only ages of sunburn can give. The “poignard” type to the left, at the bottom of the plate, is broken off short.

In the smaller illustration we see some remarkable types: two scrapers or knives with strongly marked “bulb of percussion” (the spot where the flint-knapper struck and from which the flakes flew off), a very regular *coup-de-poing* which looks almost like a large arrow-head, and on the right a much weathered and patinated scraper which must be of immemorial age. This came from the top plateau, not



PALÆOLITHIC IMPLEMENTS.  
 From *Man*, March, 1905.

from the slopes (or subsidiary plateaus at the head of the *wadis*), as did the great St. Acheulian weapons. The circular object is very remarkable: it is the half of the ring of a “morpholith” (a round flinty accretion often found in the Theban limestone) which has been split, and the split (flat) side carefully bevelled. Several of these interesting objects have been found in conjunction with Palæolithic implements at Thebes. No doubt the flints lie on the actual surface where they were made.

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No later water action has swept them away and covered them with gravel, no later human habitation has hidden them with successive deposits of soil, no gradual deposit of dust and rubbish has buried them deep. They lie as they were left in the far-away Palæolithic Age, and they have lain there till taken away by the modern explorer.

But this is not the case with all the Palæolithic flints of Thebes. In the year 1882 Maj-Gen. Pitt-Rivers discovered Palæolithic flints in the deposit of diluvial detritus which lies between the cultivation and the mountains on the west bank of the Nile opposite Luxor. Many of these are of the same type as those found on the surface of the mountain plateau which lies at the head of the great *wadi* of the Tombs of the Kings, while the diluvial deposit is at its mouth. The stuff of which the detritus is composed evidently came originally from the high plateau, and was washed down, with the flints, in ancient times.

This is quite conceivable, but how is it that the flints left behind on the plateau remain on the original ancient surface? How is it conceivable that if (on the old theory) these plateaus were in Palæolithic days clothed with forest, the Palæolithic flints could even in a single instance remain undisturbed from Palæolithic times to the present day, when the forest in which they were made and the forest soil on which they reposed have entirely disappeared? If there were woods and forests on the heights, it would seem impossible that we should find, as we do, Palæolithic implements lying