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B. G. Trigger, B. J. Kemp, D. O'Connor and A. B. Lloyd

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CHAPTER 1

THE RISE OF EGYPTIAN CIVILIZATION

ORIENTATION

Through Pharaonic Egypt, Africa lays claim to being the cradle of one of the earliest and most spectacular civilizations of antiquity. The aim of this chapter is to trace the development of this civilization from the introduction of a south-west Asian-style subsistence economy into the Nile Valley to its florescence at the beginning of the Old Kingdom, conventionally dated about 2700 BC. Egyptologists conventionally divide this span into a Predynastic Period, prior to the traditional First Dynasty of the Egyptian chronicler Manetho, and a subsequent Early Dynastic Period, which corresponds with Manetho's first two dynasties. This division has been justified by assuming that the beginning of the First Dynasty corresponded with the political unification of Egypt and marked a critical break in Egyptian history. While it is evident that political unification played a major long-term role in shaping the cultural patterns of ancient Egypt, this achievement was part of a continuum of social and cultural change that was well advanced in late Predynastic times and reached its culmination in the Old Kingdom. Because of this, it is profitable to view the entire formative period of Egyptian civilization as a single unit.

Although the Egyptian script was developed during the Early Dynastic Period, written sources for this period are extremely limited and present numerous epigraphic difficulties. Even the succession of kings and the identifications of the royal Horus-names appearing on the monuments of this period with the *nebty*- or *insibya*-names given in the later king-lists are far from certain in many cases (see appendix, p. 69).¹ For both the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods the archaeological evidence tends to be largely restricted to cemeteries in Upper (southern) Egypt, while in the north the Predynastic Period is mainly represented by habitation sites that have been found in marginal locations and are often poorly reported. Few stratified sites have been carefully excavated and there is a dearth of reliable palaeobotanical or palaeozoological data. These shortcomings of the archaeological data have recently been

¹ For an outline of what is known about the dynastic history of the first two dynasties, see Edwards (1971, pp. 1–35).

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discussed in detail by a number of scholars, so that there is no need to repeat their strictures here (see Arkell and Ucko 1965). Because of this, I have chosen to focus on the positive, rather than the negative, aspects of the work that has been accomplished to date.

This synthesis differs from many earlier ones in two important respects. Firstly, all inferences about Egyptian prehistory that are based principally on myths, religious texts and the distribution of religious cults at a later period have been rejected. By treating this material as an accurate reflection of political events in prehistoric times, Sethe (1930) was able to postulate the existence of a Deltaic kingdom the power of which spread over the whole of Egypt long prior to the First Dynasty; however, many alternative and mutually exclusive historical interpretations of the myths he used have been offered (Griffiths 1960, pp. 119–48), while other scholars, notably Frankfort, have rejected the proposition that there is any historical basis to these myths (Frankfort 1948, pp. 15–23). Whatever historical events may have influenced Egyptian religious traditions, they can only be interpreted in the light of what we know about the development of Egyptian culture from other sources. The present study therefore limits itself to archaeological and contemporary epigraphic data.

Secondly, those once-fashionable interpretations that automatically assumed that in antiquity all cultural changes resulted from the intrusion of new groups of settlers into an area have been eschewed. Petrie argued that the Fayum A culture represented a 'Solutrean migration from the Caucasus', which he stated was also the homeland of the Badarian people. The Amratian white-lined pottery was introduced into Egypt by 'Libyan invasions', while the Gerzean culture was brought there by the 'Eastern Desert Folk', who overran and dominated Egypt. Finally, Egypt was unified by the 'Falcon Tribe' or 'Dynastic Race', that 'certainly had originated in Elam' and came to Egypt by way of Ethiopia and the Red Sea (Petrie 1939, pp. 3, 7, 77). In each case, Petrie's arguments were based on alleged connections between a limited number of traits found in Egypt and elsewhere, while the continuities in the Egyptian cultural pattern as a whole were ignored.

Ideas of this sort have continued to exert a strong influence on interpretations of early Egyptian development. On the basis of limited similarities between the Badarian culture and the Khartoum Neolithic, Arkell (Arkell and Ucko 1965) and Baumgartel (1970, p. 471) have proposed a southern origin for the former. Vandier has suggested that an invasion is necessary to account for the development of the Gerzean

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culture (Vandier 1952, pp. 330–2) and Emery (1961, pp. 38–42) has recently maintained that the Early Dynastic culture was introduced by a 'master race' coming from the east. Each of these suggestions has been specifically denied by other Egyptologists (see Arkell and Ucko 1965). Today, however, a growing number of Egyptologists follow the lead of Frankfort and Kantor in emphasizing the continuities rather than the discontinuities in Egyptian prehistory (see again Arkell and Ucko 1965). While foreign cultural traits can be shown to have diffused into Egypt and become part of the Egyptian cultural pattern during the period we are considering, there is no convincing archaeological or physical-anthropological evidence of large-scale migrations into Egypt at this time. It also now is recognized that cultural diffusion did not necessarily involve large-scale migrations and that in order to understand why traits were accepted at any particular period a thorough knowledge of the recipient culture is essential. The latter point justifies concentrating on the developmental continuities in Egyptian culture in the absence of any clear-cut breaks in the archaeological record.

Prior to the last decade of the nineteenth century, no archaeological finds were known that dated prior to the Third Dynasty. It was in 1894, after a season at Koptos, that Petrie and Quibell began clearing the large cemeteries at Naqada and El-Ballas (Petrie and Quibell 1895). These produced the first clear evidence of the Amratian (or Naqada I) and Gerzean (or Naqada II) cultures. Further excavations revealed these cultures to be widely distributed in Upper Egypt. It was not, however, until Brunton and Caton Thompson had worked in the vicinity of El-Qāw, between 1922 and 1925, that the still earlier Badarian culture was identified (Brunton and Caton Thompson 1928). The village sites of the Northern Egyptian Predynastic Sequence were discovered still later. The Fayum A sites, the only ones for which final reports are available, were excavated by Caton-Thompson and Gardner between 1924 and 1926 (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934); Merimda, in the western Delta, by Junker between 1928 and 1939; Ma'adi by Menghin and Amer after 1930; and El-Omari by Debono between 1943 and 1952 (for references to this literature see Hayes (1965, pp. 139–46)). The conviction that Egypt was not an important centre of plant and animal domestication and a consequent shift of interest to south-western Asia are, in part, responsible for the dearth of fieldwork on Predynastic sites in recent years. Since 1952, the most important work on this period has been restudies of earlier data by Baumgartel (1955, 1960), Kaiser (1956, 1957) and Kantor (1965).

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Studies of Early Dynastic Egypt began with Amélineau's rough-shod excavations of the royal cemetery of the First and Second Dynasties at Abydos, which began in 1895 (Amélineau 1889–1905). This was followed by the systematic re-excavation and publishing of this site by Petrie between 1899 and 1901 (Petrie 1900, 1901a). In 1896–7, de Morgan excavated a large First Dynasty tomb at Naqada and, in 1897–8, Quibell and Green carried out excavations at Hierakonpolis which yielded, among other treasures, the famous slate palette of King Narmer (B. Adams 1974, Quibell 1900, Quibell and Green 1902). Further discoveries were made by Petrie at Tarkhan and other sites and, in 1912, Quibell found traces of large Early Dynastic tombs near the Step Pyramid at Saqqara. Firth began to excavate these tombs in 1932 and, after his death, this work was carried on by Emery between 1936 and 1956 (Emery 1949–58). From 1942 to 1954, Saad cleared a vast Early Dynastic cemetery, containing many graves of less important officials, at Helwan, on the east bank of the Nile opposite Saqqara (Saad 1969).

Chronology

Unlike in south-western Asia, few stratified sites have been discovered in the Nile Valley that could serve as a basis for working out a cultural chronology for Predynastic Egypt. Merimda appears to have been such a site, but, for the most part, its stratigraphy has gone unrecorded. This leaves the tiny site at El-Hammamiya, which was inhabited intermittently from Badarian into Gerzean times, as the only stratified Predynastic site with any chronological significance.

In an effort to work out a chronology for the graves of the Amratan and Gerzean cultures, Petrie developed his system of 'Sequence Dating', which constituted the first substantial application of the principles of seriation in archaeology (Petrie 1901b, pp. 4–8: for recent appreciations of Petrie's seriation see Kendall 1969, 1971). This system was based on fluctuations in the popularity of different types of pottery from some 900 graves, each containing not less than five different types. On the basis of these fluctuations, Petrie assigned each grave to one of fifty successive temporal divisions, numbered 30 to 80. The time-scale is uncertain, so that it can only be said, for example, that S.D. (Sequence Date) 40 is theoretically earlier than S.D. 41; further, there is no reason to believe that the interval between S.D. 49 and 50 is necessarily the same as between S.D. 60 and 61. It appears that the nearer Petrie's divisions are to the historic period, the shorter periods of time they

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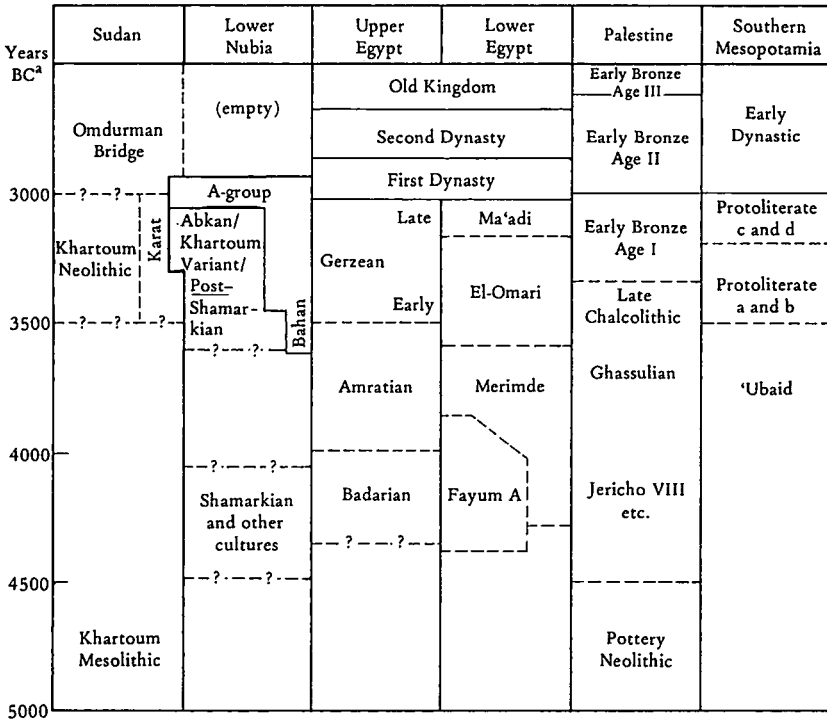
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represent. Petrie placed the transition between the Amratian and Gerzean cultures at about S.D. 40 and saw the transition between the Gerzean and Early Dynastic Period (his Semainean Period) starting about S.D. 65. The beginning of the Early Dynastic Period is now placed at about this stage. In terms of cultural development, the most important feature of Petrie's system is its assumption of enough stylistic continuity and uninterrupted change to permit the construction of a single developmental sequence from Amratian through into Early Dynastic times. This continuity harmonizes very poorly with the importance that Petrie attached to migrations as a principal source of cultural change.

Continuities in varied categories of artifacts suggest that the Badarian culture is earlier than the Amratian one and ancestral to it. The site at El-Hammamiya provides stratigraphic evidence that the Badarian culture came to an end before the end of the Amratian. Kaiser suggests, however, that, since certain types of Amratian pottery are found in some Badarian sites, the two are likely to have been contemporary with each other and represent parallel cultures, or ethnic groups, inhabiting different parts of Upper Egypt (Kaiser 1956, pp. 96–7; see also Hays 1976). Arkell and Ucko (1965) have pointed out that the mixture of pottery could have come about as a result of the contamination of an early site with later sherds and Kantor has argued that the similarities between the two cultures can better be interpreted as evidence that Badarian developed into Amratian (Kantor 1965, pp. 3–4). Brunton also defined a Tasian culture which he claimed represented an earlier phase of the Badarian. It is now generally agreed that the graves which are assigned to this culture, and which have never been found in isolation from Badarian and Old Kingdom ones, do not constitute a valid assemblage (Arkell and Ucko 1965, Kantor 1965, p. 4). This leaves the Badarian as the earliest known Predynastic culture in Upper Egypt.

Petrie's pottery classification has been described as 'the paraphernalia of the Dark Ages' and the cultural chronology derived from his system of Sequence Dating is now highly suspect in some of its details (Lucas and Harris 1962, p. 385, n. 3; Ucko 1967). On the basis of a re-analysis of the Predynastic cemetery at Armant, Kaiser (1957) has worked out an alternative system which differs in many small respects from that of Petrie and in which the Amratian–Gerzean sequence is divided into three stages and eleven sub-stages. On the whole, however, the general cultural sequence that Petrie worked out has stood the test of time remarkably well (Vandier 1952, p. 233).

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^aDates before 3000 BC based on ¹⁴C dates using 5568-year half-life

Fig. 1.1 Relative chronology of Egypt and neighbouring regions.

Not enough material has been published so far to permit a seriation of artifacts from the habitation sites which belong to the distinctive Northern Egyptian Predynastic Sequence. On the basis of similarities in specific types of artifacts, the Fayum A culture has been roughly correlated with the Badarian, the apparently long-inhabited site of Merimda with the Amratian, and El-Omari and Ma'adi with successive stages of the Gerzean (Kantor 1965, pp. 4-6). The main reason for suggesting that Fayum A was earlier than Badarian was the total absence of metal in Fayum A. Metal is also lacking at Merimda and El-Omari, however, which clearly are coeval with the Upper Egyptian Sequence. Although Baumgartel has argued that the Northern Sequence is culturally retarded and that hence all of these sites date much later, radiocarbon datings support the generally-accepted sequence and proposed correlations with the south (Baumgartel 1955, pp. 14-17, 120-2). These dates also provide possible support for the priority of Fayum within the Northern Sequence, since the dates for Fayum A overlap only

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with the earlier ones from Merimda. The later Merimda dates correlate with the two available for Amratian, while the one date for El-Omari correlates with those for the Gerzean culture (fig. 1.1).

Since the first radiocarbon dates became available, it has been observed that dates for earlier Egyptian historic material are consistently younger than the calendar dates established on the basis of dynastic chronologies. This led some Egyptologists to doubt the applicability of this dating technique to their region or to use it only as a means of establishing relative dates, while others became concerned that the historical chronology might be too long (Hayes 1970, pp. 192–3; H. S. Smith 1964; Trigger 1968, p. 64). Recent calibrations of dated tree-rings of bristlecone pine with the radiocarbon dates that these tree-rings have yielded have indicated major fluctuations in the formation of ^{14}C , which have now been studied as far back as 5200 BC. These studies indicate that radiocarbon dates are approximately 200 years too recent by the end of the mid second millennium BC and some 800 or 900 years too recent by the beginning of the sixth millennium. While these calibrations remain at the experimental stage, they would place the majority of radiocarbon dates for the Early Dynastic Period between the calendar dates 3400 and 2650 BC. Traditionally, Egyptologists have dated the beginning of this period between 3100 and 2900 BC and the end of the Second Dynasty about 2686 BC (Derricourt 1971, Suess 1970).

If the calibrations that have been suggested for dates prior to 3000 BC are accepted, they would extend the duration of the known Predynastic sequences over a much longer period. Known radiocarbon dates for Fayum A would fall roughly between the calendar years 4700 and 5200 BC; Merimda between 3500 and 5200 BC (and, rejecting one date, between 4600 and 5200 BC); and the single date for El-Omari between 4000 and 4200 BC. Only two dates are available for the Amratian culture, but these fall about 4500 to 4700 BC, while the three Gerzean dates range between 3500 and 4600 BC. Two potsherds from the lowest Badarian level (below the breccia) at El-Hammamiya recently have yielded thermoluminescent dates of 5580 ± 420 and 5495 ± 405 BC. Five other presumably Badarian sherds from higher levels in the site date, according to depth in the deposit, to between 4360 ± 355 and 4690 ± 365 BC; while a Gerzean sherd from the still higher 2.5-foot level is dated 3775 ± 330 BC.¹ More thermoluminescent dates must be obtained before their implications can be considered.

¹ For details of these determinations see Derricourt (1971). For correct attributions of dates to the Amratian and Gerzean cultures see Arkell and Ucko (1965) and Kantor (1965, p. 5). For

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The radiocarbon dates suggest a longer duration for the Gerzean culture than the archaeological evidence indicates is at all likely. The radiocarbon calibrations prior to 3000 BC may be too early. Alternatively, the Gerzean sample is small and the dates were obtained early in the development of the radiocarbon method, using specimens whose radiocarbon content may have been altered by contamination with fossil fuels during long periods of unprotected storage in museums. It may be significant in this respect that the date for a sample collected recently from the Fayum Kom K site is several hundred years more recent than for two samples collected by Caton-Thompson. More determinations will be needed from Egypt, and the proposed calibrations carefully tested, before an acceptable radiocarbon chronology is worked out prior to 3000 BC.

Environment

The Nile floodplain was formerly believed to have been a vast swampland, unfit for permanent settlements. It was believed that, at first, human beings lived only along the edges of the valley, locating their camp-sites at the foot of cliffs or on rocky promontories. Only as the highlands turned into desert was man forced to settle in the jungle-like valley bottom and to begin the arduous process of clearing it. Passarge and Butzer have come to the conclusion that the topography of the valley is such that swamps were always a minor feature of the landscape, except in the northern Delta. Most of the plain consisted of seasonally flooded natural basins which supported various grasses and brush vegetation during the dry season. The higher levees along the river were covered with trees, such as acacia, tamarisk and sycamore, and the ones that remained permanently out of the water were ideal sites for year-round habitation. Butzer has also obtained evidence which indicates that the Delta has not extended seaward in recent millennia and that physical conditions there in Predynastic times were little different from what they are today. Raised sand deposits would have provided ideal loci for settlement within the inner Delta, immediately adjacent to the rich soils of this area (Butzer 1959, Passarge 1940). These observations run completely counter to Baumgartel's argument that the Delta was the thermoluminescent datings see Caton-Thompson and Whittle (1975) and Whittle (1975). It should also be noted that the currently accepted, but admittedly somewhat speculative, chronology of early Egyptian history has recently been called into question by Mellaart (1979). On the basis of radiocarbon determinations, Mellaart proposes to date the beginning of the First Dynasty at about 3400 BC and the end of the Second Dynasty at about 2950 BC. Mesopotamian periods are moved correspondingly back in time.

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unfit for human settlement much before the Early Dynastic Period (Baumgartel 1955, p. 3).

Instead of there being unremitting desiccation in north-eastern Africa at the end of the last Ice Age, there is evidence of increased rainfall and runoff on the steppes adjacent to Egypt at several intervals thereafter. The first appears to have lasted from about 9200 to 6000 BC, while another began about 5000 BC and, after a dry interval, continued after 4000 BC. Fairly abundant vegetation persisted in the wadis of northern and eastern Egypt until as late as 2350 BC, by which time a level of aridity comparable to the present was established (Butzer 1971, p. 584). At the maxima of precipitation, the northern Red Sea Hills supported tree cover and grazing land, while trees and wild grasses also grew in the wadis on both sides of the Nile and fish lived in the pondings along these wadis (Murray 1951; W. A. Fairervis, personal communication). During such periods, these upland areas and wadi systems, as well as the Nile Valley itself, supported considerable numbers of elephant, giraffe, rhinoceros, ostrich, wild ass and cattle, as well as antelope, gazelle, ibex and deer. That the adjacent deserts had become far more habitable than they are today during the period that saw the rise of Egyptian civilization vitiates the suggestion that an increase in population, resulting from climatic deterioration on the neighbouring steppes, played a major role in encouraging the development of civilization in the Nile Valley (Butzer 1971, p. 594). The moister climate appears to have facilitated the movement of human populations into and through the desert and this, in turn, may have encouraged more communication and more rapid cultural change in the Sahara.

There is considerable evidence that both the river bed and floodplain of the Nile in Egypt have slowly aggraded throughout historic times, as the result of the annual deposit of a thin layer of silt. Although an average rise of 10 cm per century is frequently quoted, Butzer has shown that the rate of deposition has varied considerably from one period to another. Between about 4000 and 3000 BC, the Nile floodplain in Lower Nubia appears to have been six to seven metres higher than at present (Butzer 1959, Butzer and Hansen 1968, pp. 276–8). A review of annual flood heights recorded on the Palermo Stone later in the Old Kingdom indicates a decrease in the average height and volume of the Nile flood during the First Dynasty. Bell (1970) has estimated that the difference between the average flood height of the First Dynasty and that of the Second to Fifth Dynasties is not less than a decline of 0.7 m.

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It appears that throughout Egyptian history most settlements have been built on the floodplain, while, in Upper Egypt at least, cemeteries are frequently located in the desert, just beyond the edge of the cultivation. As a result, most living-sites, except those located on high ground or built, like the town of Kom Ombo, on tells formed by the debris of earlier villages, have either been buried under more recent deposits of silt or washed away by changes in the course of the river. This explains the low ratio of Predynastic, and later, living-sites to cemeteries that has been recovered in Upper Egypt (Butzer 1966). It also appears that between 8000 and 5000 BC the Egyptian floodplain was lower than it is today and the valley narrower; hence in most places even the cemeteries that were located along the margins of the flooded land at that time are now buried under more recent deposits of alluvium (Butzer 1971, p. 587; Wendorf, Said and Schild 1970). Butzer has shown that in Middle Egypt, which was hitherto often believed to be uninhabited in Predynastic times, cemeteries of this period are likely to have been either destroyed by shifts in the channel of the river or buried under substantial later deposits of sand and alluvium. Dunes have been particularly active on the west bank of the Nile in this part of Egypt, while, on the east bank, few landforms which would have been close to the edge of the valley in Predynastic times yet which remain unburied by later silts can be found north of Deir el-Gabrawi (Butzer 1961). The Predynastic habitation sites that have survived are all on scarps or embankments several metres above the present alluvium. According to Butzer, their preservation is fortuitous, since it was only sites at this height that have escaped the inundations and lateral expansion of irrigation in recent years.

This suggests that known distributions of Predynastic cultures may be determined more by geological than by cultural factors. For example, it is possible that both the Badarian and Amratian cultures extended almost as far north as did the Gerzean. Moreover, while all the people of Upper Egypt are assumed to have buried their dead on the margins of the Valley, it seems likely that most of the richest and culturally most advanced settlements were built on now-buried levees along the banks of the river and hence have never been discovered by archaeologists. This raises the possibility that the small Badarian settlements studied by Brunton, or the El-Hammamiya site, may be the encampments of simple pastoral groups, living both geographically and culturally on the fringes of a more advanced society. There is good evidence that an important part of the Predynastic settlement at Hierakonpolis extended