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

Robert J. Wenke

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## The Ancient Egyptian State

This book focuses on the development of Egypt in its formative phase, from c. 5200 BC, when Egyptians first began farming wheat and barley, until 2055 BC, as Egypt's central government weakened and appears to have fallen into disorder. During these millennia, which coincide with the Predynastic, early Dynastic, and Old Kingdom Periods, Egyptian civilization became increasingly complex, and many of its greatest pyramids and other monuments were built. Robert J. Wenke examines this cycle of ancient Egypt's development by analyzing Egyptological, anthropological, and other forms of evidence, which are set into the larger context of early civilizations that developed in various areas of the world. Written in an accessible style, with many anecdotes, quotations, and personal reflections, this book is intended for use in undergraduate and graduate courses on early civilizations and states.

Robert J. Wenke, a scholar of ancient Egyptian civilization, taught at the University of Washington before he retired. A former director of the American Research Center in Egypt, he has conducted fieldwork throughout the world and is the author of *Patterns in Prehistory*, now in its fifth edition.

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University of Washington



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For Chris and Anna Wenke, *Requiescat in Pace*

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## Preface

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Novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald said that the “test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.”

This book requires something similar. On the one hand, the reader is asked to use the book to *analyze* the origins of the Egyptian state and civilization. To do this one must use the analytical methods of anthropology, history, ecology, Egyptology, and other disciplines to try to understand the dynamics of a remarkable process of cultural evolution that occurred in Egypt between about 6000 and 2000 BC. During this period the small groups of hunter-foragers whose ancestors had lived in North Africa for many hundreds of millennia were succeeded by farmers who lived in small villages and towns; and then, within just a few centuries, these unprepossessing peasant farming communities were transformed into elements of a glorious civilization. In this book the reader is invited to join generations of scholars who have attempted to analyze Egypt’s development, to explain how and why this state and civilization evolved, and to account for both its similarities to, and its differences from, other early civilizations.

At the same time, the reader is invited to use the book simply to experience and enjoy early Egyptian civilization as a unique and fascinating culture. Ancient Egypt’s brilliance in art, architecture, literature, philosophy, and other fields can instruct us and enrich our lives; the study of Egypt in this sense needs no justification in terms of an analytical science of history.

These two views of the Egyptian past are not, of course, contradictory: One can marvel at the Egyptian pyramids, for example, and at the same time try to analyze the fact that several other ancient states, such as Mexico, Mesopotamia, and North America, also built massive pyramids, and to consider what role such structures played in these evolutionary histories.

The reader is forewarned that this book is neither a comprehensive anthropological analysis nor a detailed Egyptological description of the

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early Egyptian state. Space limitations necessitated a highly selective treatment of the subject, and I have concentrated on anthropological analyses to the exclusion of many important Egyptological topics. Also, I have had to focus on only the first part of pharaonic history, from about 5000 to 2055 BC. Nonetheless, I have used examples from Egyptian culture after 2000 BC to illustrate certain points.

This book is intended for use in college courses; it is in no sense a sourcebook for professionals, as space limitations precluded an in-depth review of the many topics considered. I've included many quotations from lyric poets and archaeologists and other scholars, and I've tried to set the book in the context of world literature, philosophy, politics, and other disciplines – all in the hope of making it more readable and contributing to the reader's liberal education. This book contains many of the clichés concerning Egypt, from Herodotus's observations of Egyptian life to debates about how the pyramids may have been built. Although these are overly familiar to professional Egyptologists and archaeologists, long experience has taught me that they are not to many students – the target audience of this book. For similar reasons, the book contains many references to popular accounts of Egyptian archaeology and commonly available reference books. The book is also partly a personal account of my experiences. It may strike the professional reader as overly self-referential, but here too my goal is readability.

I greatly appreciate the saintly patience of my editors (Rita Wright, Beatrice Rehl) in waiting for the finished manuscript. I am particularly grateful to Janis Bolster, the production editor; Phyllis Berk, the copy editor; and Lin Maria Riggio, who indexed the book. Their combined contributions verge on coauthorship. I especially thank Emily Teeter, Douglas Brewer, John Nolan, Wilma Wetterstrom, Bruce Smith, Paul Johnson, Donald Redford, Matthew P. Adams, Mike Brass, Richard Redding, and Mark Lehner for answering many questions. John and Deborah Darnell graciously provided a photograph of their discovery at Gebel Tjauti. The anonymous reviewer for Cambridge made many useful suggestions. Elizabeth Saluk organized the illustrations and permissions with great efficiency; I thank her for her invaluable work, and Deborah Rosenzweig as well. Danette Newcomb did an able job on the bibliography.

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I also thank the American Research Center in Egypt for facilitating my research in Egypt, particularly Amira and Amir Khattab, Mai Trad, Albert, and also Ibrahim, Hassan, and Salah – all loyal comrades-in-arms at the old American Research Center in Egypt. I am also sincerely and deeply grateful to Zahi Hawass and other members of the Egyptian antiquities services for facilitating my field research.

Most of all, I thank Ilene VanZandt, David Wenke, Lorence Wenke, Dennis Wenke, Judy Joling, and Joy McCorriston for their support and encouragement. Geoffrey Wenke was a continuing inspiration.