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W. M. Flinders Petrie

Excerpt

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A HISTORY OF EGYPT



CHAPTER I

PREHISTORIC EGYPT

WITHIN the period of human records Egypt has changed but little, if at all, in its conditions of the surface and the climate. The statements of writers show this for the last two thousand years, and the subjects and state of the monuments show the same for other periods, back to the fourth dynasty. But, as in Europe, the remains of man before letters reach into very different conditions of land and of climate. Prehistoric man having been so far but little noticed in Egypt, there is a great field for additional research; and we cannot yet say to what geological period his advent must be assigned. This leads us to sketch briefly what has been observed as to the surface history of the Nile Valley, subsequent to the geological deposits of the rocks which form the basis of the land.

The floor of Egypt is the Eocene limestone, which is found at many points around the Mediterranean; but the uniformity of the gaunt grey masses of the Tertiary or Jurassic limestones, which are doubtless familiar to most travellers in the moister climates of Gibraltar, Marseilles, Malta, Athens, and in Palestine, is replaced

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by a warm brown in Egypt, where lichens cannot hide the surface, and where weathering is so slight. This limestone extends inward about five hundred miles from the coast. South of that is the Nubian sandstone, interrupted by the granite hills of Aswan.

At the close of the Eocene period this limestone deposit was elevated, and formed a wide, low tableland, over which ran the drainage of north-east Africa; hemmed in, as it is, by the mountains of the eastern desert, from obtaining any discharge into the Red Sea. Of this period there are remains in the thick beds of coarse gravel and boulders, river-rolled, which crown the present hills between the Fayum and the Nile, and which must have been deposited before the present valleys were worn in the tableland.



FIG. 1.—Diagram of great fault forming Nile valley, looking north.

The next stage was a difference of level during the Miocene period, caused by further elevation of the eastern desert. This must have risen in all about a thousand feet above sea level, and mostly opposite the peninsula of Sinai. Then occurred the usual result of such a change: a grand fracture took place (Fig. 1), at least two hundred miles long, from the old coast line up to Asyut. Not only may this be seen by the geologist in comparing the strata on opposite sides of the Nile, which show a difference of 250 ft., but it is obvious to every traveller that still the eastern desert is far higher than the western, that while on the east the ground rises into high mountains, on the west it falls

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into deep hollows of the Oases and the Fayum, even as much as two hundred feet below the Nile. The river, which was already in this region, as the high gravels show, fell into the cleft of this great fault (Fig. 2); and it seems probable that the surface basalts of Khankah, north of Cairo, are the result of the water reaching the heated strata below, thus causing both a volcanic

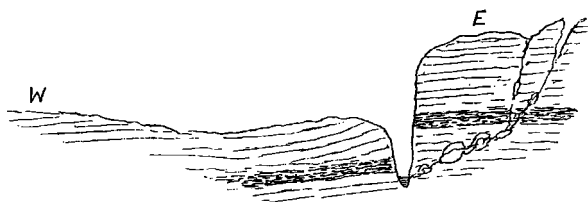


FIG. 2.—Diagram of great fault, eroded into a gorge, fed by water-tunnelled caverns in the cliffs.

eruption, and also the hot springs which silicified the sandstone of Jebel Ahmar, and the trees of the petrified forests, all in this same region. For the geological periods of the great changes see Professor Hull (in *Journal of Victoria Institute*, 1890).

Some sinking of the land seems to have occurred, by which the bottom of this gorge was brought under sea level, and so became choked with *débris* (Fig. 3). There

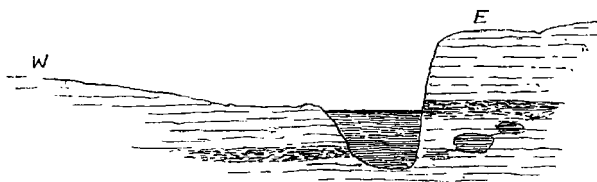


FIG. 3.—Diagram of gorge filled with *débris*, forming present Nile bed.

is evidence that the gorge was two or three hundred feet deeper than the present valley, as large caverns have collapsed at some hundreds of feet below the present

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Nile (Fig. 4), but it became choked before the side valleys were cut very far. Then for a long period the land was

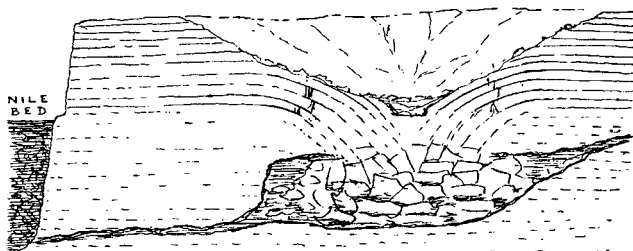


FIG. 4.—Diagram of a collapsed cavern, showing features actually observed above Nile level, and inferred below Nile level. Scale 1 inch to 800 feet.

denuded, and the present side valleys were entirely cut out, almost as we now see them. The climate was during all these ages quite as moist as that of the

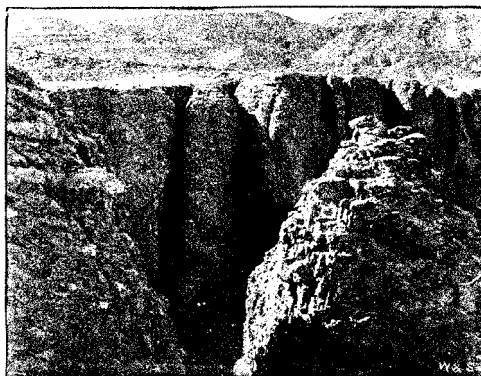


FIG. 5.—Cliffs channelled by rainfall, looking through the mouth of a channel, Valley of Tombs of Kings, Thebes.

Mediterranean at present. The rainfall was heavy and continuous, as shown by the severe denudation (Fig. 5); and there can be no doubt that the country was wooded,

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as in all other wet climates. The cause of the present dryness of Egypt is that it is surrounded by higher lands on all sides but the north, and the north wind must become heated in blowing south, and cannot lose any moisture. The only rain now precipitated is that brought over the low land west of Egypt by cyclonic action from the Mediterranean, and hence the curious sight of heavy rains from the south-west, which is entirely desert. On the south and east the higher mountains drain the air of all the moisture it can part with. From the full rainfall, which extended down almost to historic times, it may be concluded that the western desert was largely a bay of the Mediterranean until the final elevation of the land to its present level.

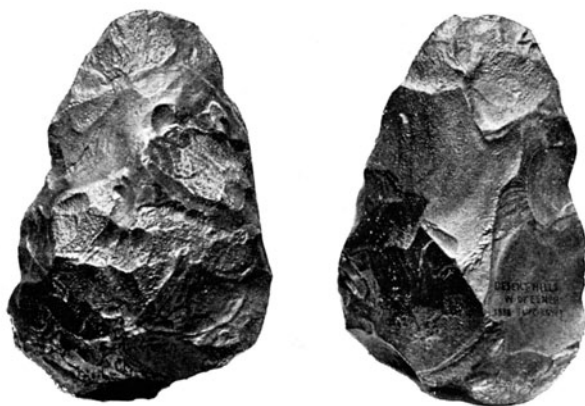


FIG. 6.—Palæolithic flint, water-worn. Esneh. (Brit. Mus.)

The earliest trace of man yet known in Egypt is of the period of a great submersion of the land in the Pliocene or Pleistocene period, which followed on the carving of its present surface. Deposits on the hills show that the sea extended to at least five hundred feet above the present level; and to this age must be attributed the river-worn flint of the usual palæolithic type, found high up on the hills behind Esneh (Fig. 6).

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That this is really river-worn, and not polished by sand action, is shown by the wear being no more on the top surface—as it lay on the ground—than below. On the contrary, the under side was the more worn, owing to its being rather softer; and it is impossible that the wear occurred in the position where it was found.

The prominent sign of this submergence may be seen in the great foot-hills of débris which lie at the lower side of the mouth of each valley; from their forms, their material, and their height, they must have been deposited in fairly deep water. Worked flints have also been found in the bedded detritus washed out of the Valley of the Tombs of the Kings at Thebes. This material must have been deposited under water; but as it is coarse, and not uniform, the water level had probably receded from the full height, and was about fifty or a hundred feet above the present, so that the stream would have enough velocity in the shallow water to bear forward this gravel. Since the river fell still lower, the occasional torrents have cut a bed through the old detritus, and so exposed the flints.

As beds of Nile mud exist twenty or thirty feet above the present high Nile, we learn that a dry climate had set in (owing to the elevation and drying of the Libyan Desert) before the land had quite risen to the present extent. The deposit of mud by the Nile is the sign of the flatter gradient of the lower part of its course, and of the reduction of the volume of the stream (and its consequent carrying power), owing to its evaporation and absence of affluents.

The lowest level of the Nile appears to have been shortly before the historical period. It was still falling when the mud began to be deposited, and it continued to fall until it was at least twenty feet lower than at present. Since then it has gradually risen by the silting up of the bed. From various concordant data this appears to proceed at the rate of four inches a century, or a metre in a thousand years. Hence in six thousand years, which is about the historical period in Egypt, the rise by deposits must have been twenty feet.

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The Delta was very different in appearance in the early times. There are still many sandy rises in it; but these must have been far larger and more numerous, before they were buried in twenty feet of deposits, and before they were ploughed down by the wind, which has removed probably an equal amount of their height. The Nile then ran between desert hills of sand, in valleys more or less wide; now every part is nearly reduced to a dead level. There has been some upheaval of land at the Suez region, cutting off the sea communication with the Bitter Lakes; and, on the contrary, some depression north of this, on the coast, flooding Lake Menzaleh, which was a most fertile district at the Arab conquest.

Beside the worked flints, whose position indicates their age, large quantities of flint flakes and scrapers are to be found lying about on the surface of the desert. These must not be supposed to be prehistoric in all cases, or perhaps in any case. Flints were used side by side with copper tools from the fourth to the twelfth dynasty (Medum and Kahun) (Fig. 7); they were still used for sickles in the eighteenth dynasty. (Tell el Amarna); and large quantities of flint flakes lie mingled with Roman pottery and glass around the tower south of El Heibi. Hence the undated sites of flint flakes must be of small historical value. Large quantities of worked flints, mostly small flakes, sometimes chipped at the edge, have been found at Helwan. Many occur at Gizeh, and at the back of the Birket Qurun (P.K. 21, xvi.) and Medinet Mahdi (B.A.G. 16 Nov. 1889) in the Fayum; at Tell el Amarna on the top of the desert plateau, where are rudely chipped pebbles, which from their extreme weathering may be even palæolithic; on various parts of the foot-hills along the Nile, at Abydos (B.A.G. 16 Nov. 1889), at Qurnah (J.A.I. iv. 215; A.Z. viii. 113), at the south of Medinet Habu, and at El Kab (B.A.G. 16 Nov. 1889) are places where the ground is strewn with flint flakes and imperfect tools. The finest examples of flint working are the magnificent knives,

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chipped with exquisite regularity, in a smooth horny flint (see Brit. Mus., Prehistoric, Ashmolean, and Anthropol. Mus. Oxford). These are found in tombs at Abydos; but all of them have been plundered by natives, and no record exists of their age. They are perhaps a priestly survival, for funeral purposes, of the flint working of the XIIth dynasty, lasting perhaps till the XVIIth. The most distinct use of flints was



FIG. 7.—Flint implements. Kahun. XIIth dynasty.

for sickles; particular forms were made to fit the curves of the sickle, and were notched to cut the straw. Such flints can be recognised by the polish on the saw edge, while the rest is dull, or even retains some of the cement by which it was fastened in the wooden sickle-back.

Of other remains of prehistoric man no trace has been found in Egypt. His dwellings would be upon,

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or close to, the Nile soil; and as now more than twenty feet of deposits overlies the level of that age, it is hopeless to search there for any traces of his works.

The Egyptians—like many other peoples—constructed a mythical period of gods to fill the blank of prehistoric times. The series of names in the lists was probably not arranged thus until a late age, perhaps the XIXth dynasty. In early times there is no sign of a definite and systematic chronology; and such a series of names and periods shows every sign of artificiality. The list given by the Memphite school, in the most complete form (L.K. I. Taf. iii.), is as follows, with slightly different reckonings:—

DIVINE DYNASTY I. 7 GODS.			
		Years.	Years.
Hephaistos=Ptah		9000	9000
Helios =Ra		992	1000
Sos =Shu		700	700
Kronos =Geb		501	500
Osiris =Asar		433	450
Typhon =Set		359	350
Horos =Har	(100)	300	300
		12,285	12,300
DIVINE DYNASTY II. 9 GODS.			
		Years.	Years.
Ares =Anhur	(92)	276	280
Anoubis =Anpu	(68)	204	200
Herakles =Khonsu	(60)	180	180
Apollo =Harbehdet		100	100
Ammon =Amen		120	120
Tithoes =Tahuti		108	100
Sosos =Shu		128	120
Zeus =Amen Ra		80	100
(Four other Gods)			370)
		1196	1570

MYTHICAL DYNASTY III. 30 DEMI-GODS.
(No names given, average 121'7) 3650 years.

MYTHICAL DYNASTY IV. 10 KINGS.

10 Kings of This, 350 years.

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Here the numbers have been arranged by the different authors who have transmitted these lists, so as to bear a relation to the Sothis period of 1460 years. Thus $12,300 + 1570 = 13,870 = 9\frac{1}{2}$ Sothis periods; or $12,285 + 858$ (another version of Dyn. II.) = $13,143 = 9$ Sothis periods; $3650 = 2\frac{1}{2}$ Sothis periods, or 30 Sothis months for 30 demi-gods: this evidently artificial arrangement shows nothing but the uncritical ingenuity of the



FIG. 8.—Aquiline type, upper part of diorite statue of Khafra, IVth dynasty.

writers. The Heliopolitan origin of the series of gods has been treated by Maspero (S.B.A. xii. 419), who regards the numbers as of months instead of years. The one point of importance, as a tradition, is that ten kings are said to reign at This (near Abydos) before the foundation of the regular monarchy. Another tradition which may have a basis is that of the followers of Horus (Har-se'ast), the *Shemsu-har*, and the followers of Har-behdet, the *Mesniu* (Maspero in A. 1891). These probably embody the same idea, that a ruler was accompanied by a body of servants or followers. But in the Turin papyrus the *Shemsu-har* are entered as ruling for 13,420 years (or a trifle more which is lost); and this shows that they are regarded there as a long successive series of rulers.