

# EGYPTIAN HISTORY AND ART

## CHAPTER I

### *EARLIEST EGYPT*

(3500 B.C.)

THE earliest history of European nations, the history we learned in our childhood, lies enveloped in a mist of legend to which the poetry of later ages has lent form and substance. A glory is shed about the life of a hero or the founding of a city, and when the drier annals of recorded events take the place of the ancient tales, they in turn are gradually clothed by literature with the character in which they live for us. When, for instance, we see or read of the discoveries of the oldest Rome in the Forum or the Palatine, or when we go to see Westminster Abbey or Windsor Castle, it is not so much the beauty of what we see that impresses us, but that we remember what we learned about the beginnings of Rome, the legends of Romulus and the early kings; and that in Windsor and Westminster we have treasure houses full of memorials of our own English past—in other words, we are interested in these things chiefly because we know the stories about them.

It is otherwise with Egypt. Very few tales or legends of ancient Egypt have been preserved and such as there are have no associations for us, so our interest in Egyptian history must come from another side altogether; we must work back from the things to the people, from the

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art to the artists. And this is a somewhat difficult and discouraging task, for where there is very little literature and an enormous amount of things, the human interest is apt to be overwhelmed under masses of museum specimens. Some Egyptian monuments, however, are so impressive from their very vastness and magnificence that they have taken great hold of the imagination of mankind, while on the other hand if, by a rare chance, we can look into an undisturbed tomb and see the offerings lying as they were placed there thousands of years ago, even the humblest of offerings and the poorest of burials has power to send a thrill through the beholder. That, it may be said, is quite true: most people can appreciate the splendour of the Pyramids or Karnak and most would have enough imagination to like to be the first to look into an ancient tomb “and in a corner find the toys of the old Egyptian boys”—but as looking at these same toys shut up in a museum case out of their surroundings, away from anything that makes them intelligible, can this be anything but a dreary waste of time for modern men and women?

It is indeed difficult and needs sustained effort to keep the human side of “antiquities” before our minds; and to many people the appeal is not strong, but to many others these Egyptian objects, in themselves so curious, often so beautiful and undoubtedly so old, have a great power to compel and retain attention, all the more perhaps that there is an element of uncertainty about many of them, that they are continually setting problems, the answers to which may be found any day or may even already be lying before us undetected. From another point of view also the history and archaeology of Egypt have an importance for modern life, for there we find the first steps in human civilisation. Egypt not only has by far the oldest art in the world, but possesses the earliest specimens of almost every handicraft, such as writing, weaving, ceramics, and every student of ancient culture must turn to Egypt for the beginnings of his subject. But it is all fragmentary and very remote, and

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has to be pieced together like a puzzle from the scanty remains that have escaped destruction.

For the early periods the case is worst of all, for not only, as is natural, must we reconstruct as best we may from the objects without any literature at all to help us, but there is a further and most serious limitation in the fact that practically everything that has come down to us comes from graves, and so, though we may be tolerably well informed about the funeral customs of the most ancient inhabitants, we may be very much astray about their everyday lives. The reason for this is inevitable from the character of the country. Men always lived on the narrow strip of cultivated land, built their houses of its mud as they do to-day, and the next generation built after them on the crumbling brick ruins or ran the plough over them and built somewhere else. In either case, furniture, written scrolls, almost all that was used by the living, has perished.

The sites of many of the towns are marked by mounds of mud brick which are dotted about over the whole country: that of Memphis in particular, is crossed by everyone who goes to Sakkara from Bedrashein station. These mounds used to be much higher than they now are, as was to be expected from the practice of building one house on the ruins of another, but, unluckily for the antiquities, the organic refuse known as *sebakh* which they contain has valuable fertilising properties and the peasants are allowed to remove it—under some slight restriction—to use as manure. In such mounds and in this way many things are found, usually objects of pottery or metal which have escaped destruction from damp, and the collections of small antiquities to be seen in dealers' shops generally come from this source; but such things, even when valuable in themselves, rarely give any historical information, as no one is ever sure how or exactly where they were found.

But in towns there were not only the perishable houses of men; there were temples to the gods, built of massive blocks of stone and filled with every sort of treasure;

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there, if anywhere, one might think we should look for historical records. For the most ancient times, however, these are totally lacking. The oldest temples, such as that of Ra of Heliopolis and Ptah of Memphis, have entirely disappeared, and though there are very important inscriptions at Karnak and in some of the mortuary temples at Thebes, these come from a comparatively late period of the history, while the best preserved of the temples, Edfu, Dendera, and others, date from the times of the Ptolemaic and Roman rulers. All the temples were, of course, plundered long ages ago, but by one or two rare strokes of good fortune, some of the treasures hidden in ancient times have come to light in recent years. These will be noticed in due course, but in the meantime it must be repeated that the sources for early Egyptian history and for knowledge of old Egyptian life come almost exclusively from the graves; for from time immemorial the graves were on the high, dry desert, where the land cost nothing and where, if thieves did not break through and steal, moth and rust and other corruption were not much to be feared. Right along the whole Nile Valley from the Sudan to the sea, there stretches a line of cemetery, irregular on the east side but on the west almost unbroken, for the dead followed the setting sun to rest on the western horizon.

The tombs were always robbed; in old times for jewellery and fine carved stones, in modern times for anything that can be sold to collectors, and it is from the scanty leavings of the former robbers that the last of the race, the archaeologist, the scientific robber in search of facts, has to piece together his bits of evidence. He alone, at least, feels his responsibility to the future for what he is doing; he knows that when things have once been moved out of place the testimony they can give is lost unless it has been noted with the utmost care. His clear duty is to record everything he sees, however insignificant it may seem; his unpardonable sin is omission or neglect.

It is by such faithful following out of the testimony

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of things that a considerable amount of knowledge has been arrived at about the earliest civilisation of the Nile Valley, as disclosed by the oldest graves and the offerings that were placed in them, but before beginning a review of these it is well to try to realise their enormous antiquity and also the fact that they lie far beyond any other known remains, so that there is no collateral history by which their age can be checked. The civilisation of Mesopotamia may be as old, but it is not till many ages have passed that there is any sureness of contemporary dating. Long and lonely, like its river, the story of Egypt flows on, a narrow strip of civilised life among boundless wastes of desert, and it is only far on in its course that it mingles with the tides of changing peoples that surround the Mediterranean shores. At the very dawn of our English history, when the Roman legions first set foot in Britain, Egypt's independence was gone for ever, and we must go back beyond Rome, beyond the great ages of Greece and even of Mycenæ to get level with a time when Egypt was really a queen among the nations; while before that there had been nearly two thousand years of glory and decay, and yet again of rise and fall of her power, since the time when Menes joined the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt under one rule and founded his town of Memphis. It should be said, too, that this leaves out of account the far more ancient remains of palæolithic man, which belong, in all probability, to an epoch when the geologic condition and climate of the country were different from what they became in historic times. The Cairo Museum contains a good collection of these flint implements, which are found in large numbers on the high desert plateau in Upper Egypt.

Beginning then with Egypt, the gift of the Nile, as Herodotus called it—as it was at the dawn of history, and as it is to-day, an abundantly fertile strip drenched yearly by the life-giving flood and bounded by vast solitudes of rock and sand—at the earliest dim past we can discern the rule held good that men lived on the

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good ground and were buried on the desert. They made very simple graves, just a small shallow pit in which the body was laid, not at full length but crouching, with knees bent and hands before the face. But even these little graves can give us answers to some of the questions we want to ask. If we go round the archaic room, or the cases containing archaic objects, in any museum, we shall see the things which were put into the graves along with the bodies—pottery and stone jars, flint tools, beads, slate palettes, scraps of ivory. These jars were to hold food and drink, the flint knives were to cut up meat, the palette with a lump of green paint beside it was to mix face paint, the beads were for ornament; but the real significance of all these things for the use of the dead is that it shows that these people believed that the dead had needs, that the death of the body was not the end, but that some part, at least, of a man's personality went on into a future life.

Reconstructions of such graves are to be seen in a good many museums.

In the British Museum the prehistoric burial is placed as the earliest of the series of coffins, which are, as far as possible, chronologically arranged, but the objects found in such graves are mostly in wall cases in the Sixth Room. In American museums, where more space is available, a special room has generally been arranged, so that the prehistoric burial is placed along with the other objects of the period.

The things in themselves are well worthy of notice, for the flints are among the finest ever made. They and the very decorative shapes and designs of the pottery will prepare us for the great skill in artistic handiwork that came later. The pottery is all hand-made; the invention of the potter's wheel only came in about the beginning of the historic period, but later pottery is seldom so attractive as these very early products. The slate palettes, which are very often found, point to a practice of outlining the eyes with green or black paint, traces of which are to be noted in later times. The large

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number of ceremonial flints, knives, etc., indicates a scarcity of metal, or ignorance of how to use it, but it is somewhat surprising to find that gold and copper do occur in minute quantities, even in the oldest tombs.

A good deal that is interesting has been found out from careful examination of the bodies, some of which are preserved in the College of Surgeons, London, and other anatomical museums. There is no sign of mummification, but the preservation of some of these bodies is remarkable, skin, hair, and all the internal organs having been found, dried up indeed, but perfectly recognisable after 6,000 or 7,000 years. It has often been said that the Egyptian race was a blend of several different stocks and influenced by invaders from east, south, and west. It may be so, but the anatomical evidence shows that the oldest peasant inhabitant of the Nile Valley was, in build and stature, very much like the fellah of to-day. Probably the race had always a capacity for absorbing foreign elements.

A curious fact given to us by the anatomical observers is that the prehistoric people suffered dreadfully from rheumatism and rheumatoid arthritis, some of their bones being shapeless and distorted from this disease and the great majority were affected by it, a condition that is never known in later times, though occasional cases of arthritis occur at any period; and this agrees very well with what we might expect at a time when the inundation must have swept over all the country, with no regulation by sluices or dykes. People must have lived in damp mud and undrained marshes for a great part of the year—not much wonder they had rheumatism! Before leaving the question of the skeletons of the early Egyptians, another small point has been observed—namely, that in some cemeteries the women habitually have their left forearm broken. The only explanation as yet suggested for this is that they got them broken by endeavouring to protect their heads from the blows of their male relatives, and one hesitates to attribute such unpleasant conduct to people who could make such

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delightful pottery. The fact and the conjecture are merely stated as specimens of the unexpected difficulties which may confront the archæologist.

No date, even approximate, can be assigned to these graves. It is safe to consider them as before 4000 B.C., but many of them must be much older than that. Unfortunately the cemeteries have only been found in Upper Egypt, where the extreme dryness of the climate preserves everything, and it is much more difficult to know anything about the Delta, which is damp in comparison and where the people lived so far from the desert that they must needs bury their dead in the cultivated land, therefore all trace of their graves is irretrievably lost. But it is certain that civilisation developed there at least as early as in the south, for the few records which exist show that there were temples to the gods and dynasties of kings in Lower as well as Upper Egypt before Menes, and there is good reason to believe that the art of writing and the regulation of the calendar, both of which were probably introduced before 4000 B.C., were the work of the priests of Ra of Heliopolis. The great superiority of the Egyptian to all other ancient calendars lies in the fact that the Egyptians had a fixed and most important point by which to measure time, for the Nile flood and not the changes of the moon, was the phenomenon which must have influenced them the most. They observed that the appearance of Sirius above the horizon at sunrise closely corresponded with the beginning of the inundation. In the latitude of Heliopolis the rising of Sirius takes place, by our dating, on July 19, and this day was accordingly chosen as the Egyptian New Year's Day, the first of the month of Thoth. The year was divided into three seasons—the flood, the spring, and the harvest; each month had thirty days and there were five extra or "intercalary" days added at the end of the year, making a total of 365 days, a very good calculation for ordinary purposes and for one generation. But the want of a leap year gradually got the seasons very badly wrong, the inundation months slipped back to the



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harvest, and so on, losing one day in every four years, till after 1,460 years it came right once more and Sirius again rose on the first of Thoth. The Egyptians knew about this fault in their reckoning quite well, and the astronomical check which can be given to some dates in the history is most valuable, for if an inscription happens to mention the month and day of the month on which the rising of Sirius is due, the date can then be computed to within four years. Unluckily such mentions are very rare; the most important of them will be noted in due course.

The earliest indications which have come down to us regarding the state of the country show Egypt divided into two kingdoms, the north and the south, but it is highly probable that at a still more remote period there were numbers of local or tribal chiefs. The oldest chronicle of Egyptian history is a fragment of inscription on a block of black stone in the Palermo Museum, generally known as the Palermo Stone. Some chips from a duplicate copy exist in Cairo. This is a list of kings drawn up in the Fifth Dynasty (about 2700 B.C.), when there was a long line of unbroken tradition and doubtless many written records to go upon, and if it had only been a little more complete the names at least of the early kings would have been preserved. As it is, nine kings who reigned in Lower Egypt before Menes are recorded. Their capital was Buto in the Delta, of which town practically nothing remains, but the southern capital, Hieraconpolis or Nekhen, is in somewhat better preservation.

The centuries that preceded the union of the two kingdoms under Menes saw considerable changes in the burial customs from what has been noted in regard to the primitive graves. Rich men began to make more and more elaborate tombs, the shallow pit became a deep shaft, an inner chamber was hollowed out to contain the body, the walls were bricklined, the offerings were more abundant and costly. Altogether there is evidence of an increase in prosperity which must surely have been

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brought about by a regulation of the water supply, for that has always been the first necessity of Egypt, and there is every reason to believe that before the time of Menes an irrigation system, demanding a regular supply of labour on a large scale and considerable mechanical skill, was well established throughout the country. The effect of such a measure can hardly be over-estimated. Involving, as it would do, power vested in some one or more chiefs to call up disciplined labour when required to dig canals and raise dykes. This was a great stride towards a centralised government and a civilised community.

We cannot leave even this very brief account of the earliest state of Egypt without a reference to its religion. The study of all early religion is beset with difficulties and that of Egypt is no exception, although one or two leading ideas may be traced throughout its history. There were local gods in bewildering numbers, but, through the confusion of myths and the grotesqueness of some of the legends, there stand out even from the most remote antiquity two great powers of nature which were worshipped by all Egypt, at all times, in one form or another, and these were the two we should reasonably look for in such a land—the sun and the Nile. The earliest mythology shows us these as Ra and Osiris, the earliest sanctuaries at Heliopolis and Abydos, and through all changes, additions, and interfusions, we shall find some sort of guidance if we keep these two in mind—Ra, the heavenly king, source of all power and glory; and Osiris, the life-giving, recurring flood, god of the springing corn and the gathered harvest, lord of death and resurrection.