

**EGYPT I: PREDYNASTIC THROUGH MIDDLE KINGDOM**

(4100-1785 BCE)

[main sources: de Montmollin lecture notes; Trigger et al. 1983:44-69; Baines and Malek 1990; Wenke 1997, 1999; Wenke and Olzsewski 2006; Price and Feinman 2010; Van de Mieroop 2011; Morris 2019]

**IMPORTANCE OF EGYPTIAN CIVILIZATION**

1. early evidence for a transition: after ca. 3100 BCE
  - a. from early complex societies
  - b. to state-based empires (cyclically)
2. like nearby Mesopotamia
  - a. studied by archaeologists and historians for long time
  - b. Egyptian history: strong influence on classical general schemes for the origins of complex society
    1. Childe, Frankfort, Steward, Toynbee, Wittfogel
3. key conventional concepts
  - a. model of ancient theocracy
    1. god-king
    2. transformation of religion: polytheism to pseudo-monotheism and back
  - b. importance of irrigation
    1. local management
    2. political dynamics may be tied to fluctuations of Nile
4. reasons for high impact
  - a. best known and renowned among scholars and the general public
  - b. remarkable material culture: long history of looting
    1. mortuary items
    2. stone monuments: e.g., obelisks, statues
  - c. early writing

1. decipherment: exciting intellectual story
  - d. tied to events in Old Testament: Ramesses (mistakenly) as the villain
  - e. early interest for Mediterranean peoples
    1. e.g., Herodotus: description of the late Egyptian civilization of his time (440 BCE)
    2. became part of Macedonian and Roman empires
    3. breadbasket for Rome
  - f. Napoleon's conquest
    1. archaeological looting
  - g. rival collectors of antiquities
    1. British Museum
    2. Louvre
    3. Metropolitan Museum of Art
  - h. strong world-wide interest in ancient Egypt
    1. e.g., UNESCO effort for Aswan dam salvage: 1950-60s
  - i. preservation of organic artifacts
    1. arid climate
      - a. paper, basketry, ropes, cereal remains, etc.
    2. ancient Egyptian interest in mummification
      - a. well-preserved human remains
      - b. preoccupation with afterlife: left many grave goods
5. unusual features in the way that society worked
- a. political centralization combined with low degree of urbanism
    1. civilization without cities (Wilson)
    2. but absence of strong cities (city-states) made it easier to unite the whole of Egypt
    3. environmental redundancy curtailed development of localized craft specialization
    4. easy river transport precluded need to concentrate activities in one place
    5. both factors that promoted urbanism elsewhere
  - b. bureaucratic complexity combined with most of population living in self-sufficient villages and towns
  - c. ecological determinant sometimes tied to political cycles of political centralization and decentralization: Nile flood levels
  - d. but sociopolitical history is complex

### GEOGRAPHIC SETTING

1. Nile River
  - a. key element in Egyptian civilization's geography: past and present
  - b. flows south to north
    1. headwaters in east-central Africa
  - c. surrounded on both sides by deserts: often hilly
2. Nile Valley
  - a. elongated oasis:  $\sim 1000 \times 6$  (max) km
  - b. from Sudan border to Cairo: narrow strip of arable land
    1. only 3 km wide in most places
  - c. N of Cairo: river branches out
    1. wide well-watered delta
3. Upper and Lower Egypt
  - a. Lower Egypt
    1. northern part of Nile
    2. from head of delta (around Memphis) to coast
  - b. Upper Egypt
    1. southern part of Nile
    2. from first cataract to Memphis
  - c. Nubia
    1. beyond first cataract: at Aswan
4. neighboring deserts
  - a. a few oases
    1. otherwise no agricultural resources
  - b. raw materials
    1. limestone, granite, and other building stone
    2. copper in the Sinai desert
    3. gold and silver in Eastern Desert
5. agriculture
  - a. Nile: crucial for agriculture
    1. Egyptian civilization: sometimes called "gift of the Nile" (Herodotus)
  - b. intense spring rains in highland areas: at source of Nile

1. send floods down river: normally beginning in August
  - c. floods reach Mediterranean by fall
    1. flooding season: mid-August to late September
  - d. crop season
    1. sowing: Oct.-Nov.
    2. harvest: Jan.-April
6. importance of floods
- a. irrigation crucial annually
    1. relatively simple small flood basin irrigation system
      - a. without extensive canals or dams
    2. banks highest adjacent to river
      - a. overflow is through channels
      - b. not directly over main banks
    3. river floods small basins
      - a. then waters recede
      - b. farmers plant fields: grade downward away from river levees
      - c. fish harvested in pools
  - b. sediment: tons of rich soil
    1. fertility renewed annually
    2. salt removed in process
    3. recent dam construction around Aswan: disrupted hydrological system
      - a. stopping silt, increasing salinity
      - b. ecological disaster
7. subsistence production: simple technologies
- a. basic crops
    1. wheat, barley, lentils, beans, onions, cucumbers, melons, figs
    2. alcoholic drinks
      - a. basic: barley beer
      - b. wine: luxury beverage
  - b. animal husbandry
    1. sheep, goats, pigs, cattle, and fowl (basic Near Eastern complex)
    2. beef: most prestigious meat
  - c. foraging
    1. river animals: fish, ducks, geese, turtles, crocodiles, hippos
    2. plants

- a. rushes and reeds for baskets
    - b. flax for linen and canvas
    - c. papyrus for cordage and paper
  - d. sequence
    - 1. by 6000-5000 BCE: domesticated wheat, barley, sheep, goats, and cattle introduced from outside Egypt
      - a. some from SW Asia: where they had been in use for 2000 years
    - 2. by 4000 BCE: agriculture in full and widespread use
      - a. even with emergence of farming villages: hunter-gatherers remain in some places
8. Nile variations
- a. floodplain exists in more or less present form since ca. 3800 BCE
    - 1. spans history of Egyptian civilization
    - 2. but only part of Predynastic period
  - b. historical variation in annual flood volume of the river
    - 1. highland rains not entirely reliable
    - 2. very low levels in some years: between 2250 and 1950 BCE
      - a. around the 1st Intermediate Period
  - c. if floods are too high
    - 1. water stays on land too long
    - 2. prevents planting in time to avoid summer heat
  - d. if floods are too low
    - 1. not enough sediment or water for good harvests
    - 2. solutions
      - a. tripods to lift up water directly from river
      - b. dams to trap water for later use
  - e. grain storage: solution to both kinds of shortfalls
    - 1. factors related to emergence of Egyptian state as intermittent large-scale manager of crop storage
9. Nile and transportation
- a. eased transportation, communication, and unification in ancient times
  - b. Upper Egypt: 6 cataracts
    - 1. steep rapids
    - 2. barriers to navigation
    - 3. sets southern limits of consistent control for ancient Egyptian state

- c. political control depended heavily on water transport system
- d. conversely: topography partially isolated Egypt from foreign influences and invasions

### **THE CHRONOLOGICAL SEQUENCE**

1. main phases
  - a. Predynastic: 4100-3100 BCE
    1. rise of sociopolitical complexity
    2. possibly earliest states
    3. earliest emergence of features characteristic of Egyptian civilization
  - b. Archaic: 3100-2650
    1. first clearly definable states
    2. establishment of what we generally recognize as the main features of Egyptian "civilization"
  - c. Old Kingdom: 2650-2200 BCE [1st Intermediate: 2200-2050 BCE]
    1. emergence of full blown Egyptian civilization
    2. first expansionism (maybe proto-imperialism)
  - d. Middle Kingdom: 2050-1800 BCE [2nd Intermediate: 1800-1570 BCE]
    1. recentralization of political power
    2. first real imperialism
  - d. New Kingdom: 1570-1070 BCE
    1. high era of Egyptian imperialism
2. note on periodization and chronology
  - a. chronologies and period divisions produced from king lists and other texts
    1. written after 1900 BCE
    2. thus at least several centuries removed from actual events
  - b. exact-sounding dates
    1. still some uncertainty in system

### **PREDYNASTIC PERIOD**

1. contrasts in development: between Upper and Lower Egypt
  - a. Upper Egypt
    1. earlier moves towards sociocultural complexity in Upper Egypt: beginning

around 4000 BCE

2. flood basins in Upper Egypt (from Abydos southward) were smaller and more easily controllable
3. concentration of largest and earliest Predynastic communities
- b. Lower Egypt: larger flood basins of the northern Nile and the delta
  1. later emergence of sociocultural complexity
  2. developmental focus shifts: Archaic capital at Memphis
  3. possibly greater overall agricultural potential
  4. growing importance of trade routes overseas
    - a. and overland to Palestine

## 2. settlement and population

### a. Upper Egypt

1. Hierakonpolis (City of the Hawk): key site
  - a. large and complex cluster of settlement
  - b. population: 5,000-10,000 (ca. 3800-3400 BCE)
  - c. possible capital of a state in southern Egypt by end of Predynastic: ca. 3200 BCE
  - d. may be place where unified Egypt was forged
2. Naqqada: also large settlement
  - a. famous for excavated cemeteries
3. most other settlements: fairly small, scattered around the valley
  1. early example of slightly urbanized pattern associated with Egyptian civilization

### b. Lower Egypt

1. probably small scattered villages
2. at least one comparatively large (wealthy) community
  - a. Maadi, near Cairo: ca. 3650 BCE
  - b. also Buto: port on Nile delta
    1. said to have been capital of Predynastic Lower Egypt in later legendary accounts (dubious authenticity)
3. other sites: Tell Ibrahim Awad; also, from Cairo area, Heliopolis, Tarkhan, el-Omari, Helwan
  - a. all similar to Maadi, but smaller

## 3. society and politics

- a. burial evidence: key element for understanding sociopolitical patterns

1. differentiation in graves: in both Upper and Lower Egypt
    - a. contents
    - b. tomb construction
  2. suggests society moving toward social ranking and stratification
  - b. Upper Egypt
    1. contents: differential distribution among graves at Naqqada, Abydos, el-Badari
      - a. pottery in different styles
      - b. slate palettes: for grinding makeup
      - c. flint tools
      - d. jewelry: bone, beads, figurines, etc.
    2. differences in tomb construction
      - a. simple pits
      - b. more elaborate rock and mud brick constructions
        1. early **mastabas**: large mudbrick tombs
    3. public buildings at Hierakonpolis: 3400-3200 BCE
      - a. public building: cobblestone foundation
      - b. mud-brick wall around part of settlement
  - c. Lower Egypt
    1. Maadi burials: are differentiated enough to suggest social ranking
    2. Minshat Abu Omar: in the delta
      - a. many graves: poor to rich in their contents and construction
      - b. very end of Predynastic
    3. fancy items
      - a. alabaster jars, palettes, flint knives, copper artifacts
      - b. jewelry: carnelian, amethyst, gold
    4. no evidence in terms of public buildings
    5. politics: probably some form of kingship
4. ideology
- a. evidence indirect: no clear writing identified from before 3250 BCE
    1. beginning of Archaic
  - b. Upper Egypt
    1. tombs: suggest emerging importance of burial cult
    2. divine kingship
  - c. Lower Egypt
    1. Buto: has clay cones
      - a. like those of Uruk temples, but locally made



2. temples: maybe contacts with Mesopotamia
  - a. but evolution and appearance of Egyptian public buildings, temples, tombs, pyramids is distinct from known Mesopotamian patterns
  - c. except for mastabas
5. Predynastic summary
  - a. different Predynastic cultures in Upper vs Lower Egypt
  - b. earlier complexity in Upper Egypt, 4000 BCE
    1. smaller more easily controllable floodbasins, circumscription
  - c. cutting edge of complexity later shifts to Lower Egypt
    1. because of greater overall agricultural potential in larger floodbasins and because of trade routes
  - d. by 3100 BCE, Egypt had the following [Wenke 1997:33-34]
    1. written language already in use for commodity control (e.g., inscribed mud-sealings on wine jars) and many other purposes
    2. uniform pottery styles that could be found in thousands of communities stretching from Palestine to Nubia
    3. craft production of a wide variety of artifacts
      - a. from metal needles to multi-ton architectural blocks of granite
      - b. circulated throughout the Delta and Valley
    4. exchange networks
      - a. capable of moving many commodities to and from Syro-Palestine and other foreign areas
    5. emerging socioeconomic class stratification
      - a. already hierarchically arranged below the pharaoh
    6. national ideology
      - a. incorporated most of the ideas that facilitated the functioning of the Egyptian state for 3,000 years thereafter

ARCHAIC/EARLY DYNASTIC/FIRST PHARAONIC STATE PERIOD  
[3100-2650 BCE]

State Formation: Early Dynastic/Old Kingdom

1. historical arguments: conventionally defined as first polity in Egypt to encompass both Upper and Lower Egypt
  - a. based in part on ancient Egyptian view of things
  - b. clear concepts about the **pharaoh**
    1. god-king
    2. ruler of Upper and Lower Egypt
    3. personification of state
  - c. from this perspective: Egyptian state emerges with its first king/pharaoh
2. archaeological/written data: suggest that first state formed under Scorpion King(s)
  - a. but note king Horus Crocodile in late Naqqada period
  - b. Dynasty 0: Scorpion King
    1. tomb at Abydos
    2. inscriptions on grave pottery indicate receipt of tribute from both Upper and Lower Egypt
    3. tributary relationship may imply some degree of unification
    4. although not necessarily political unity
3. later written traditions
  - a. Menes: named as first king in lists written after ca. 1900 BCE
    1. may have been Scorpion King
  - b. Narmer: rose to power and conquered Lower Egypt: ca. 3100 BCE
    1. had been minor official in Upper Egypt
    2. immortalized on stone palette
    3. he and successors: established a theocratic political system over entire navigable length of the Nile
      - a. Upper and Lower Egypt
      - b. either last king of Dynasty 0 or first of Dynasty 1
  - b. rule by god-king
    1. different from early theocratic rule in Mesopotamia
      - a. rule by a corporation of priests
      - b. without named kings

4. anthropological explanations: shaky evidence and arguments
  - a. look at evidence: settlement, economics, society, politics/ideology
5. settlement and population: total population estimate: 1-2 million by Old Kingdom
  - a. spread of horizon styles: pottery and architectural
    1. after earlier period of regional differences between Upper and Lower Egypt
    2. suggests closer contacts among people: possibly membership in single polity
  - b. major population and political sites
    1. Hierakonpolis: Upper Egypt
    2. Memphis: national capital in Lower Egypt
      - a. at juncture of Nile Valley and delta
      - b. capital of first pharaoh: in later accounts
  - c. overall regional settlement pattern: still not urbanized
    1. apart from Memphis: few towns or cities
    2. most Egyptians live in unwallled, largely self-sufficient villages
    3. towns: cult centers (e.g., Abydos, Saqqara)
6. politics and ideology
  - a. images of early rulers
    1. crown of Upper Egypt: **white and conical**
    2. Lower Egypt: **red crown**
    3. united Egypt: two crowns merged
  - b. fragmentary beginnings of dynastic written record
  - c. political history: still unclear
  - d. warfare
    1. no standing army through most of Old Kingdom
    2. no need for walled cities to protect rural population
    3. maybe ritualized contention among rulers
  - e. origins of idea of sacred kingship
    1. appears with pharaonic control over Upper and Lower Egypt
    2. inferred from inscribed artifacts
    3. esp. Narmer Palette: found at Hierakonpolis
      - a. apparent reference to or commemoration of unification of Upper and Lower Egypt by Narmer
      - b. front side: wearing red crown of Lower Egypt and military scene
      - c. reverse side: wearing cone crown of Upper Egypt and taking prisoner

- f. unification likely took some time
    - 1. not single event
  - g. overall pattern
    - 1. divine kingship
    - 2. pharaoh as earthly embodiment of Hawk God: Horus
7. society
- a. social system
    - 1. king
    - 2. great nobles or courtiers
    - 3. lesser officials
    - 4. craftsmen
    - 5. peasant farmers
  - b. constructions
    - 1. Great Pyramid Age: large, lavish royal tombs
    - 2. monumental buildings: funeral palaces
  - c. Abydos: subterranean royal tombs
  - d. Sagqara, near Memphis: tombs of important officials
  - e. constructions: indicate large labor investment
    - 1. corvée system
    - 2. related to centralized rulership
    - 3. no economically significant slavery

#### FIRST INTERMEDIATE

- 1. 2160-1991 BC
  - a. Dynasty 9-11
  - b. duration: 171 years
- 2. causes of collapse of Old Kingdom
  - a. economic/ecological
    - 1. references to times of economic hardships
    - 2. frequent crop failures in 1st Intermediate
    - 3. possible dramatic climate change: Bell
      - a. consistently low Nile floods
      - b. tied to 1st great famine: 2180-2130 BC
        - 1. toward beginning of 1st Intermediate

4. catastrophes: may have weakened the legitimacy of the pharaoh
  5. weaken material base for political economy
  - b. religious change
    1. king-centered state religion: Sun God "Re"
    2. challenged by a non-royal cult: Osiris
  - c. political ferment
    1. succession crises: constant problem
  - d. some unrest in relations with Asia Minor
    1. not as severe as 2nd Intermediate
3. character of First Intermediate
- a. period of disunity
    1. new dynasties started by nomarchs
    2. frequent changes of ruler: none outstanding
  - b. 11th dynasty: ruled from Thebes
    1. Mentuhotpe I or II (2061-2010): reunited country
    2. successive names: maybe reflecting slow joining of Egypt
      - a. "Who gives heart to the Two Lands"
      - b. "Divine of the White Crown" (of Upper Egypt)
      - c. "Uniter of the Two Lands"
  - e. frequent clashes between Upper and Lower Egypt
  - f. economic hardships: much famine
  - g. reduction in public buildings and state art
  - h. literature pessimistic
    1. Egyptian civilization perceived itself to be in trouble
4. major political changes in 1st Intermediate
- a. shift of power
    1. away from center
    2. toward provinces
  - b. underlying problem
    1. increased bureaucracy
    2. no longer possible to staff with royal kin
    3. reduction in loyalty to royalty
  - c. material manifestations
    1. reduction in royal pyramid size
    2. greater size and elaboration of tombs for provincial nobles

- a. in home provinces
  - b. not near pharaohs' pyramids: which were at Memphis
- 5. historical consequences: succession crises
  - a. battles for throne
  - b. ergo: 5 dynasties in 150 years
    - 1. 30-40 kings

### MIDDLE KINGDOM

- 1. 1991-1785 BCE
  - a. Dynasty 12
  - b. duration: about 206 years
- 2. period of political reunification for Upper and Lower Egypt
  - a. started with Mentuhotpe I or II
    - 1. ca. 2040 BCE
    - 2. Dynasty 12
  - b. continuing tension between
    - 1. center: pharaoh
    - 2. provincial rulers
  - c. inscriptions also suggest much stronger allegiance of provincial (nome) nobles to central pharaoh
    - 1. position of hereditary rulers for nomes endures from late Old Kingdom-First Intermediate times
    - 2. Egyptian state is no longer as centralized as it was in the Old Kingdom
- 3. causes of reunification
  - a. ecological conditions
    - 1. climatic improvement: after 2130 BCE, Nile floods may have become more reliable (Bell)
    - 2. eased pressures on agricultural production
  - b. dynamic leaders: 11/12 Dynasty
  - c. lull in the outside threats
  - d. reunification coupled with expansion
    - 1. north and south

4. major changes: political
  - a. shift of capital back to Memphis
    1. under Amenemhet I: 1991-1962 BCE
      - a. had been vizier
    2. continuing emergence of Thebes as important center
  - b. co-regency
    1. son Senwosret I: 1971-1926 BCE
    2. i.e., 10-yr overlap in rule
  - c. Amenemhet I murdered: while son in Nubia
    1. co-regency permitted smooth transition
  - d. building major fort series in lower Nubia
    1. garrisons
    2. governors
    3. possibly colonists from Egypt itself
  - e. Senwosret III: most prominent king of 12th dynasty
    1. major expansion into Nubia: to 2nd cataract
      - a. forts now under Lake Nasser
    2. expansion into Palestine: but not incorporation
    3. formation of standing army: innovation
    4. country divided into 4 regions
    5. great legacy in sculpture
      - a. more realism in art: aging, careworn face of pharaoh
      - b. more realism: also mirrored in literature
5. social formation
  - a. papyrus sources: suggest very complex society
    1. as in Old Kingdom
    2. and First Intermediate
  - b. tomb patterns: continue to reflect social divisions
    1. occasional small pyramids: Middle Kingdom rulers
    2. more general shift: rock-cut tombs
      - a. rulers
      - b. nobles
  - c. shift of focus to Thebes-Karnak-Luxor
    1. royal and major noble tombs
    2. related to Theban origins of Dynasty 11 & 12

- d. shift away from Memphis
  - 1. royal pyramids
  - 2. noble mastabas
- 6. ideological change
  - a. cult of Osiris
    - 1. supplanted Re cult
    - 2. the process had started in 1st Intermediate
  - b. Osiris worship: different focus
    - 1. allowed commoners access to afterlife
    - 2. Re: more elitist and king-centered
  - c. tombs related to afterlife
    - 1. used by a wider segment of the population
    - 2. still with great ranking distinctions
  - d. democratization?: not likely
    - 1. still paternal state
    - 2. still great social differences
    - 3. more likely: adoption of elite practices by common folk
- 7. arts
  - a. period of literary classics
  - b. great art work
- 8. major economic features
  - a. basic subsistence economy continued unchanged
  - b. decentralization of control over craft production
    - 1. tied to shift of power from center
    - 2. to regional nobility
  - c. still a large degree of state control over trade
    - 1. king: continued monopoly of foreign trade
    - 2. procurement of resources: Red Sea, Lebanon, Punt, Sinai, Byblos
    - 3. some exchange of valuable gifts between rulers
    - 4. military expeditions into the deserts: for raw materials
  - d. special relation with Byblos: port of trade
    - 1. otherwise: not known how much control Egypt exercised over Palestine



**SECOND INTERMEDIATE**

1. return to the historical development: 1785-1540 BCE
  - a. Dynasty 13-17
  - b. duration: 230 years
2. another period of political breakdown: different causes
  - a. external threat
    1. contrasts with internal breakup of 1st Intermediate
    2. threat from Asiatic people in the eastern delta
      - a. Hyksos: Semites
      - b. gloss: "ruler of foreign lands"
        1. Greek form
        2. from Egyptian phrase
  - b. period of relatively urban development in Palestine (MBA II)
3. 13th dynasty
  - a. 150 yrs: 70 kings
  - b. continued prosperity
    1. but lessening of gap between monuments of king and nobility
  - c. note: Queen Nefrusobk (1787-1783) took throne
    1. woman as ruler interpreted either as weakness of royal family
    2. or as increased stature of women
  - d. viziers seem to have been most important individuals in kingdom
    1. kings came and went
    2. viziers wielded power
4. Hyksos took control
  - a. [captured Memphis ca. 1674?]
  - b. set up 15th dynasty: ruled Lower Egypt
    1. adopted trappings of Egyptian pharaohs
    2. ruled ca. 100 years: ca. 1670-1570
  - c. competing Egyptian 17th dynasty in Upper Egypt
    1. capital in Thebes
    2. rival to the Hyksos rulers: in Memphis
  - d. loss of Egyptian control over Nubia
    1. emergence of a strong kingdom of Kush: upper Nubia

- e. thus: Egypt divided into three regions
  - 1. apparently relatively peaceful coexistence: for a century
- 5. technological novelties from Asia introduced
  - a. bronze working: replaced importation of
    - 1. alloyed bronze
    - 2. use of arsenical copper
  - b. improved potter's wheel
  - c. vertical loom
  - d. hump-back cattle
  - e. horse and chariot
    - 1. composite bow
    - 2. new shapes of scimitars and other weapons
  - f. new musical instruments and dances
- 6. efforts to evict Hyksos
  - a. Seqenenre': 17th Dynasty
    - 1. died violently: in battle?
  - b. extensive skirmishes under succeeding rulers
- 7. 1532: expulsion of Hyksos
  - a. by 'Ahmose: 1550-1525
  - b. continued thrust into Palestine
  - c. unified Egypt again: New Kingdom