

Egypt through Naqada II

© Copyright Bruce Owen 2009

- Egypt: The setting
 - The Nile
 - Flows NORTH, into the Mediterranean Sea (up on the map)
 - so the UPPER Nile is to the SOUTH (down on the map)
 - and the LOWER Nile is to the NORTH (up on the map)
 - The Upper Nile:
 - a narrow valley some 600 miles long (plus much more that we won't look at)
 - Sharp valley walls limit agriculture to the valley floor, typically just 5-10 miles wide
 - settlements tend to be small, since not much farmland is available at any given point
 - The Lower Nile:
 - the wide, triangular, green Nile Delta, plus a little of the adjacent narrow valley
 - criss-crossed by shallow waterways
 - geographically, ecologically, and culturally distinct from the Upper Nile
 - Nile provides easy transportation
 - the current runs from south to north, into the Mediterranean Sea
 - the prevailing wind blows from north to south
 - so travel along the Nile is easy
 - you drift downriver (north) with the current
 - and sail upriver (south) with the wind
 - since the valley is so narrow, everyone in the Upper Nile lives right on the freeway
 - facilitates cultural uniformity
 - and political unity
 - compare to Mesopotamia, with towns scattered over a plain
 - The same is true of people in the Delta, but to a lesser extent
 - Because everyone is surrounded by a network of navigable streams, canals, and lakes
 - settlement sizes and locations suggest that Nile population overall was well below the valley's carrying capacity until recent times
 - suggesting that population pressure probably was not an important factor
 - although concentrations of population in larger towns or cities might have put a strain on resources in the that particular part of the valley
 - Temperatures
 - in the Delta: temperate year 'round
 - in Upper Egypt (Hierakonpolis): comfortable in winter, very hot in summer
 - Almost no rainfall
 - 1.5" per year in Cairo (the Delta, or Lower Nile)
 - virtually 0 at Aswan in the south (Upper Nile)
 - Floods
 - the Nile floods regularly, every year
 - or did, until first Aswan dam was built

- but the flood was somewhat variable in date and height
- the floods were convenient for farmers
 - they covered the farmland with fertile silt
 - farmers planted in the mud as the water recedes
 - kept the fields wet with small-scale systems of ditches, levees, and retaining ponds
- but the flood level was unpredictable, so sometimes big floods wiped out the levees
- so there was no point in building big canal or levee systems
 - any expensive canal or levee project would just be destroyed
 - natural flooding plus simple irrigation systems run by families or villages were adequate for the entire valley floor
- floods enforced several months of “free” time every year
 - good for craft production, pyramid building, etc.

- Sources of information:
 - Lots of archaeological evidence, but it is skewed towards cemeteries
 - due to incredible preservation of cool stuff in the dry desert environment
 - also because it is hard to miss grave markers like the pyramids!
 - also due to where cemeteries and towns are located
 - cemeteries are located in dry, elevated desert outside the valley floor
 - preservation is excellent, and they are easily accessible
 - towns were mostly in or near the floodplain
 - close to the river and farmland
 - now often buried under silt and below the water table
 - hard to find
 - poorly preserved
 - very expensive and difficult to study
 - this means we don’t know as much about towns, cities, administration as we would like
 - except indirectly from the graves of rulers and nobles
 - We have some written sources on early Egyptian history (there are *lots* for later periods):
 - Several later monuments had king lists carved on them, listing past kings of Egypt and a few details about their achievements
 - Other king lists are on papyrus
 - a few go back to the first few dynasties
 - These lists include kings who reigned up to 1500 years before the lists were made!
 - Manetho, an Egyptian historian of the 3rd century BC (2,200 years ago!), used documents like these to compile a history of kings and events
 - but with many errors due to being almost 3000 years after the fact
 - Yet, an amazing amount stands up to excavated evidence
 - These records provide a chronological framework starting very early
 - but don’t say much about life and society until later periods
 - unlike Mesopotamia, where early documents are accounting records
 - which initially don’t help much with chronology or history
 - but do shed some light on economic activities and occasionally other aspects of life

- Chronology chart
 - The early time periods on the chart are based on pottery and stone artifact styles
 - Starting with the Early Dynastic (also called the Archaic period), they are based on king lists and other historical data
 - Note: the Early Dynastic period in Egypt is completely different from the Early Dynastic period in Sumer.
 - 31 generally recognized dynasties, covering about 3000 years of history
 - That is a LONG TIME: compare to England with 1000 years of history...
 - These dynasties are supposed to be literally family lines of kings
 - when the family line was broken (no heir, palace coup, etc.), a new dynasty started
 - there was probably a lot of fudging for political expedience
 - historians have lumped these dynasties into a sequence of “Kingdoms” (periods of political unity) and “Intermediate Periods” (periods of political fragmentation)
 - this is for convenience only; people at the time would not have recognized these periods
 - we will cover only the Predynastic period and Early Dynastic period
 - at that point, civilization was definitely present
 - The pyramids were not built until later, in the Old Kingdom
- The Predynastic period
 - Neolithic period
 - Neolithic in Lower Egypt started around 5,000 BC
 - long after farming began in the Levant and Mesopotamia
 - by this time in Mesopotamia, ‘Ubaid people had settled towns and small temples
 - At Merimda and elsewhere in the western delta, roughly 5000 BC to 4100 BC
 - simple, perishable pole and thatch houses
 - some changes late in the sequence (maybe 4300 BC):
 - some houses were dug partially into the ground
 - storage “granaries” associated with individual houses
 - grinding stones
 - sites up to 20 ha (8 acres)
 - site populations up to 1,300 to 2,000 people
 - suggests heavy dependence on cereals
 - broadly similar to late Natufian and PPNA settlements in the Levant, but much later
 - simple graves within villages, without goods, unlike in upper Egypt
 - social stratification: no evidence; burials at Merimda all roughly equivalent in wealth
 - Neolithic in Upper Egypt: Badarian culture, also started around 5000 BC
 - very different from Lower Egypt
 - as in Lower Egypt, small farming villages, maybe only semi-sedentary
 - settlements:
 - perishable pole-and-thatch houses, hearths
 - basketry-lined “silo” pits
 - subsistence:
 - lots of sheep/goat droppings suggest herding

- wheat, barley, lentils
- hunting, fishing
- material culture
 - more technologically sophisticated than lower Egypt
 - pottery much finer, better made than in lower Egypt: thin-walled, shiny, elegant red vessels with blackened rims
- burial tradition was quite different from lower Egypt
 - burials were in the desert, in cemeteries separated from the areas where people lived
 - burials in shallow pits, roofed with branches, probably covered with a pile of gravel
 - bodies dressed in skins or linen cloth
 - with varied grave goods
 - stone tools
 - strings of shell and steatite (stone) beads as anklets, bracelets, necklaces
 - ivory and bone beads, pins, needles, awls, combs; needle cases; animal figurines
 - female figurines made of bone
 - stone palettes for preparing eye paint (especially malachite green)
 - some stained green from use
 - beginning of a long Upper Egyptian tradition of palettes
- Naqada I (also called Amratian) period 4000-3600 BC (400 years long)
 - contemporary with Early Uruk (3900-3600 BC)
 - Naqada I in Lower Egypt: no great changes
 - Naqada I in Upper Egypt: no clear break, just gradual evolutionary changes
 - villages of 50 to 250 people in pole and thatch houses (around Naqada)
 - gradually changing styles of pottery, palettes, stone vessels, ceramic female figurines
 - continued and expanded customs of burying in cemeteries with extensive grave goods
 - disk-shaped stone mace heads in burials
 - many are too small, or have holes too small, to have been functional
 - several known with impractical ivory or horn handles
 - could have been models specifically for funerary use
 - an idea that became common later in Egypt
 - apparently were symbols of status or power based on the idea of force
 - but not necessarily the actual use of it?
- Upper Egypt at this point seemed to be relatively isolated from Mediterranean and Near Eastern traditions
- Naqada II (also called Gerzean) period 3600-3200 BC (400 years long)
 - This is when things really started to change
 - Contemporary with Middle Uruk (3600-3400 BC) and Late Uruk (3400-3100 BC)
 - interesting that this is just when urbanism, technology, the power of the temple, etc. really picked up in Sumer, too
 - Naqada II in Upper Egypt (3600-3200 BC)
 - significant changes in material culture
 - in general: the development of elaborate, specialized crafts

- many changes in pottery style
 - especially the appearance of pots with painted designs, usually showing boats
 - the boats often have features thought to be a “standard” or “emblem” similar to the standards that later identified regions
- many changes in the styles of other artifacts, often well made and decorated
 - like cosmetic palettes, often finely made in animal shapes
- the “signature” objects of Naqada II: incredibly well-made flint knives
 - blade was first ground to shape
 - then long, parallel flakes chipped off of one face only (“ripple flaking”)
 - small flakes, also chipped off the same side (“retouch” flakes), perfected the shape
 - sometimes with carved ivory handles
 - must be the work of highly skilled specialists
 - clearly for show, not use
- increasing (but still rare) use of copper, very rare silver and gold
- social implications:
 - rise of highly skilled specialists making elaborate display goods
 - rise of a high-status clientele able to support this work
 - many of these objects were apparently destined for show and/or burial, not use
- House style changed from round, semisubterranean, with pole and thatch superstructure, to rectangular, aboveground, mudbrick with walled courtyard as in Mesopotamia
 - Late Naqada II clay house model illustrates this
 - rectangular, with door at one end and two windows at the other
 - half roofed, half an open courtyard
 - similar to houses still used today
- a few large towns or small cities developed
 - possibly just two or three in Upper Egypt
 - not nearly as widespread a phenomenon as in Mesopotamia
 - the vast majority of Egyptians were still rural, as they remained throughout Egyptian history
 - there was never any hyper-urbanism in Egypt
 - These few large towns were probably the centers of chiefdoms that each controlled a nearby stretch of the Nile farmland and its population
- Hierakonpolis (also called Nekhen)
 - became a major urban center
 - a “population explosion” at this site around the beginning of Naqada II
 - at 3800 BC (middle of Naqada I), it was a village of several hundred people
 - by 3400 BC (middle of Naqada II), it had 5,000 to 10,000 residents
 - this *could* reflect population increasing in the area
 - but it more likely reflects people moving from the countryside into the town
 - that is, people concentrating into one place, rather than a big increase in numbers of people in the region
 - this would have put pressure on the food production capacity right near the town

- may have encouraged taxation or other control of production from the surrounding hinterland
- densely packed rectangular mudbrick houses, similar to Mesopotamia
 - with a range of sizes, suggesting differences in wealth or status
- apparently was the residence of important chiefs or kings
- probably much smaller than Uruk at this time, but at least in the same league
- economy:
 - subsistence based on wheat and barley, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs
 - apparently already a major pottery production center for Upper Egypt
 - because ceramics from Hierakonpolis were widespread in Upper Egypt
 - implies specialization, organization of workshops, concentration of capital, probably specialized traders
 - probably some people getting wealthy while others worked for ceramic workshops or merchants
 - Hierakonpolis also produced stone vases, maceheads, palettes, other stone goods
 - suggests considerable specialization, differentiation, complex division of labor...
- big constructions were built at Hierakonpolis between 3400 BC and 3200 BC
 - second half of Naqada II
 - an oval retaining wall almost 50 m across, of sandstone blocks, maybe a platform for a monumental building
 - dating is rough, but probably in Naqada II
 - a thick mudbrick wall around part of the town, presumably for defense
- with an extensive cemetery
 - including some rich burials that suggest wealthy, powerful leaders
- Naqada (a settlement; where Naqada I, II, III pottery styles were identified)
 - similar layout of rectangular mud-brick buildings
 - by the beginning of Naqada II, the town was enclosed by a mudbrick wall
 - presumably for defense
 - very important cemetery
 - containing some large, rich burials comparable to the richest at Hierakonpolis
- This (a site called “This”), near Abydos
 - a poorly known town that was probably the center of another regional chiefdom
- pottery from just a few clay sources was traded up and down the Nile, suggesting specialized mass production
- gold, malachite, other minerals were probably collected or mined from the desert highlands east of Hierakonpolis and Naqada
 - this may have involved organization that could reinforce status differences
 - that is, leaders in these places may have been able to use their access to mines, trading routes, and manpower to exploit them to further build their wealth and power
- burial practices for the highest-status people got increasingly elaborate, suggesting increasing status differences
 - moderate-status burials were still in oval pits, with a modest quantity of goods

- example moderate-status grave lot: a necklace of gold, turquoise, garnet, and malachite beads, some common ceramics, two small decorated pots, and a crude flint knife
- highest-status burials began to be placed in rectangular chambers with mudbrick walls
 - maybe echoed the shift to rectangular houses
- highest-status burials started to have “mastabas”, or bench-like rectangular mounds built over them
- the “painted tomb” at Hierakonpolis
 - the largest, most elaborate Naqada II tomb known
 - presumably the tomb of an Upper Egyptian chief or ruler
 - unfortunately looted before excavation in 1899, only a few artifacts remained
 - walls and floor of brick
 - the walls are painted (the only known example from this period) and show:
 - boats similar to the ones on the Naqada II pots
 - men thought to be hunting animals and/or fighting each other
 - one seems to hold three captives tied by a rope
 - another seems to hold a figure upside down, ready to hit it with a long stick
 - but these are ambiguous, since some of the “victims” are clearly animals
 - also, one seems to hold two animals, much like the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh
 - suggests two things
 - first, Mesopotamian influence
 - second, maybe the painting does not describe real Egyptian events at all...
 - this is evidence for an emerging elite or ruling class
 - albeit not nearly as marked as in the following periods
 - it might be evidence for the elites’ connection to warfare – or it might not...
 - it might be evidence for the elites’ having some sort of connection to Mesopotamia, maybe ethnic, trade, religious, or...?
- Naqada II in Lower Egypt (3600-3200 BC)
 - again: contemporary with Middle and Late Uruk
 - Unfortunately, it is more difficult to tell what happened in Lower Egypt, due to sites being located in the Nile delta, where early evidence is mostly deeply buried under silt
 - As in Upper Egypt, a few large towns developed
 - extensive trade with the Levant, maybe Mesopotamia
 - But lower Egyptian culture evolved gradually, without the fairly abrupt changes seen in Upper Egypt at the start of Naqada II
 - town of Ma’adi (3650 BC - ~2700 [through Early Dynastic])
 - up to 18 ha (about 1 and 1/2 Çatal Hüyük)
 - continued Lower Egyptian traditions
 - plain pottery
 - oval houses, some semi-subterranean, pole and thatch roofs
 - relatively simple burials, both in the town and in cemeteries, with some variation in richness

- but now added extensive trade with Levant and possibly Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr cities of Mesopotamia
- domesticated donkeys (*Equus asinus*: ass) present; used for trading expeditions?
- possible trade with Upper Egypt (debated)
- storage was not only in individual houses in town, but also in segregated areas around the edge of the town
 - one of these areas contained underground, roofed “cellars” for storage of goods
 - another had rows of large storage jars set into the ground
 - one jar contained stone vases and carnelian beads
 - others had ceramic vessels, grain, animal and fish bones, lumps of asphalt, flint tools, spindle whorls, etc.
 - such large quantities of goods must have been for exchange, rather than the use of any one family or group
 - this storage was NOT centralized, as at Mesopotamian temples, but dispersed
 - maybe controlled by various different families, “businesses”, or other institutions?
- considerable evidence of craft production
 - copper smelted and worked on site
 - ore possibly brought from Sinai
 - apparent workshop areas for stone production
 - specialized craft producers making goods for exchange?
- Buto
 - poorly known due to being deep under water table
 - but evidently a large town
 - its location suggests that it could have been a port for trade with the Mediterranean and the Levant
 - we’ll see more evidence for this in a moment...
- Some evidence suggests contact between Egypt and Mesopotamia during Naqada II and Naqada III
 - whether this contact involved a significant number of people, and whether it had any significant effect on Egyptian culture, is highly debated
 - while Egypt picked up many ideas from Mesopotamia, Mesopotamia does not seem to have picked up any from Egypt; the influence seems one-way
 - Mesopotamian influence in Lower Egypt
 - Lower Egypt was clearly part of the Uruk expansion
 - Mesopotamian Uruk period pottery, cylinder seals, and other items are found at Buto and elsewhere in Lower Egypt
 - at Buto, locally made “clay cones” for wall mosaics - a Mesopotamian style
 - implies at least one important building in Mesopotamian style, probably the presence of Sumerian people, some trade...
 - also goods from Syria, even Susa
 - Mesopotamian influence in Egypt in general
 - locally made cylinder seals may be imitations of Mesopotamian models
 - paneled “palace-façade” mudbrick architecture appeared in Egypt in Naqada II
 - no known local antecedents in Egypt

- very similar to buttressed architecture of Mesopotamia
- some artistic motifs (and myths or events that they represent) that appeared during Naqada II seem to have come from Mesopotamia
 - Ivory knife handle of Gebel-el-Arak
 - Mesopotamian Gilgamesh-like (or Enkidu-like) figure holding two lions
 - battle scene with Naqada II style boats and Mesopotamian style boat!
 - suggests that the “influence” may not always have been peaceful
 - The motif of a person holding two animals also appears in the Naqada II tomb painting in the Painted tomb at Hierakonpolis
 - you remember that this was a Sumerian motif
 - the figure might be dressed in Sumerian style
 - this motif is not likely to have been invented coincidentally by the Egyptians
 - Intertwined serpent-necked animals (“serpo-felines”) appear in Egyptian art by the end of Naqada II
 - slightly later example on the palette of Narmer (Naqada III period)
- Generalizations about Naqada II
 - Upper and Lower Egypt were still very different
 - Upper Egypt
 - Upper Egypt seems to have been organized into regional chiefdoms with a few capital cities and obvious rulers
 - who had to wall their towns for self-defense
 - most people still lived in small rural settlements
 - apparently militaristic chiefdoms
 - growing wealth of burials and towns suggest that these chiefdoms were extracting surplus production from increasingly large stretches of the Upper Nile valley
 - Lower Egypt
 - little sign of regional polities, obvious leaders, or militarism
 - although the absence of evidence might be due to poor preservation and little data
 - overall, much more trading activity than in Upper Egypt
 - possibly due to greater agricultural potential of the Delta
 - and easier access to trading partners in the Levant and beyond
 - many centers of wealth in each town, probably multiple important families or groups per town, rather than a single hierarchy
 - only minor variation between burials found so far
 - even so, specialized production, trade, and storage of lots of valuable goods at Ma’adi make it likely that some families had more wealth and status than others
 - some large towns or cities, maybe the centers of regional chiefdoms or small states, but this is still largely hypothetical
- Relationship between Upper and Lower Egypt in Naqada II
 - Upper Egyptian goods and styles began to appear in Lower Egypt late in Naqada II, getting to the Delta town of Buto
 - suggesting increasing contact, trade, and desire in Lower Egypt for Upper Egyptian goods (and ideas?)
- this relationship began to change towards the end of Naqada II, as we will see...