

## The formative period of Pharaonic Egypt (1.1)

In Egyptology, there is quite a lot of interest in the earliest phases of Egypt's history. This fascination with the roots of Pharaonic Egypt reveals a special character trait of our own culture: we tend to stress the importance of origins. We have a strong conviction that knowing the origins of a matter will give us a better understanding of it. So we search for the beginnings of the universe, for the microbes that cause a disease, for the incentives that stimulate the economy, the causes of WW II, and the things that change our climate.

This "beginnings hang-up" provides a link between ourselves and the ancient Egyptians, since they too were fascinated with beginnings. A substantial portion of their myths was concerned with the period of the creation of the world. In their religious texts this is referred to as "the first occasion": Sep Tepy (sp tpy). On the other hand, where we are looking consistently for all sorts of beginnings, the AE were only interested in Sep Tepy.

In their particular part of the world, it was the *first* important civilisation. Every step they took, from small scale village farming to the complexities of a well organised bureaucratic state, was a step into uncharted territory. And what's more: their ascent to power and glory, being (in their part of the world) the first ever, did not yet take place under the shadow of earlier declines. The very concept of a downfall was still unknown to these people. Their confidence was really the kind that can move mountains.

In the beginning, the pace was still very slow. It took – in Upper Egypt – a thousand years before villages had grown into units that could compete over large areas of land. But then, around 3.500 BC, things picked up more speed. From this period (known as Naqada II) until the beginning of the Early Dynastic Period (in total about 500 or 600 years), important changes took place. Out of the battles of medium sized kingdoms, the Pharaonic state was born, together with the beginnings of an ideology to support it, and a culture to proclaim it.

Whereas later generations of Egyptians looked back on what they believed to be a history without any significant changes, right from the moment of creation, these earlier Egyptians must have had a completely different outlook. Theirs was a time of profound change.

So now let's look back into time as far as we can, searching for the beginnings of this culture. First of all, we should be looking for the emergence of elements that set the local cultures in the Nile Valley apart from those of contemporaries around them. As we start picking up differences, we can start looking for precursors of the Pharaonic culture.

The first sign of difference with neighbouring cultures is somewhat paradoxical. "Radiocarbon dating has shown that cultigens and livestock first appeared in Egypt several millennia after they did elsewhere in the Near East (...)"<sup>1</sup>. In Lower Egypt, agriculture does not emerge before 5500 – 5000 BC. In Upper Egypt, it is not even attested before the beginning of the Badarian, approx. 4400 BC. The reason for this is probably the unusual richness of the natural environment. In the Nile Valley and the neighbouring savannahs the opportunities for hunting, gathering and fishing were so good, that the needs of a growing population could for a long time still be catered for without resorting to the laborious methods of agriculture, with their far lower output per working hour<sup>2</sup>.

So the Neolithicum (“new stone age”), characterised by agriculture, pottery and a sedentary way of life, arrived firstly in Lower Egypt. It seems perfectly possible that it came from Palestine, but there is also some material that suggests the western savannahs as the place of its origin<sup>3</sup>. The Mesolithic (“middle stone age”) cultures from before this time show no signs that set them in any way apart from other Mesolithic cultures elsewhere, but since hunter-gatherers leave very few traces of their passing, we really do not have enough material for the deduction of their beliefs and practices. That is why the beginning of the Neolithicum, for lack of an alternative, is generally accepted as the beginning of the formative period for dynastic Egypt. And that is why this period is referred to as the Predynastic Period.

Now that we are ready to search the Predynastic Period for the beginnings of Pharaonic culture, we should start with defining what the characteristics of that culture exactly are. For this we may look upon the Fourth and Fifth dynasties as the first period of full bloom and clear recognisability of all aspects of true, matured Egyptian culture. In part, this is again the result of insufficient sources (especially written sources) from older periods. The oldest religious texts of any length for instance are the Pyramid Texts. These appear for the first time in the pyramid of king Unas, last king of the Fifth dynasty. It is generally presumed that at least part of the Pyramid Texts is older than this date, but exactly how much older is impossible to determine. Also, the first “Instructions” that allow us to investigate the philosophy of AE, date from the Fifth, and even Sixth dynasty<sup>4</sup>.

What then, can we – looking at the Fourth and Fifth dynasty – define as the main characteristics of Pharaonic civilisation? I would like to suggest the following.

1. A highly centralised, yet enlightened state. The king rules as an absolute monarch, but his godly status is embedded in a generally accepted belief of the importance of fairness and justness, known as Maat (mAat). Thanks to this concept, that both king and people accept as their guideline, the Egyptian kingship does not deteriorate into despotism.

2. A markedly uneven distribution of wealth. Throughout Egyptian history, the large majority of the people were simple peasants, who lived their lives without the benefits of any riches. (The fact that this society could nonetheless remain a very stable one is evidence for the effectiveness of Maat. Every member of this society, from the king down to the humblest craftsman, soldier or farmer, deeply believed in their common destiny, governed by a just, God-given system.)

3. A conspicuous consumption of wealth, and display of pomp. Those Egyptians that did have riches, did not bother to save them for the future, nor did they invest them into new undertakings for more profit. They were neither merchants nor entrepreneurs.

I think they would have made excellent citizens of our time: they firmly believed in the benefits of immediate consumption.

4. A highly developed interest in providing for the afterlife. The building of graves, furnishing them with all sorts of goods, and founding estates that should produce offerings for all time was a pillar of the economy.

5. An inclination towards the prosaic and the pragmatic – as demonstrated by the flourishing of tomb robbery side by side with tomb building. This too was a pillar of the economy. But their preference for the pragmatic was also very apparent in the intellectual domain. Theorising, debating or speculating were never very popular with the AE's. Their interest in mathematics e.g. was limited to catering for the needs of accountants and architects. They never tried to formulate universally valid theories.

6. Stylised and standardised art forms. Once a given type of rendering was found to be effective, they would use it cheerfully ever after. Avantgardism was wholly un-Egyptian (with the Amarna period as a well know exception to the rule). The limited freedom to choose forms of expression reflects the influence of government officials on all major building works. Nevertheless, the margins still proved to be sufficient for major works of true art to be made. (Artistic freedom is a relatively recent development).

7. A related, but independent characteristic: a genuine passion for good craftsmanship. In most periods of their civilisation, the Egyptians demonstrated the will to excel in several – although not all – crafts.

8. A very robust type of ethnocentrism, underpinned by a very authentic self confidence and self reliance. For the Egyptians of the Pharaonic period, foreign peoples were part of the Chaos that threatened the very fabric of creation. It was one of Pharaoh's main duties to smite all Nubians, Libyans, Syrians and Sand Dwellers.

9. A remarkable reverence for the past. This does include the "near past", but the more distant past is the real favourite. Sep Tepy, the time of the gods, the time of Osiris: time immemorial itself is a hallowed shrine. To speak of "archais-ing tendencies" is selling the AE's short. Their awe for history comes from very real admiration and deep respect.

10. And last but certainly not least: a very special kind of religion, dedicated to an amazing variety of gods.

Having summed these characteristics up, we should now look for the earliest traces of these, either in history or prehistory. For the latter, we will concentrate on Upper Egypt, since that part of the country is the cradle of AE culture. (Proof of this is abundant, but falls outside the scope of this article).

### **1. A centralised state**

First we need evidence for a state, then for this state to be centralised, and finally for the concept of Maat to moderate the absoluteness of power.

A true state, covering all or most of Egypt, is not in clear evidence before the First dynasty. But the tendency to centralise power is already visible in the earliest Neolithic villages of Upper Egypt, those of the Badari culture (approx. 4400 – 3800 BC). In these villages, the storage facilities for grain were not associated with individual dwellings. This suggests that the surpluses of the community were common property, under the control of a chief<sup>5</sup>. This is in contrast with contemporary villages in Lower Egypt, where grain storage occurred on an individual basis<sup>6</sup>.

The first clear sign of centralisation on a national level comes shortly after the beginning of the First dynasty. Large, impressive graves vanish from all provincial graveyards, only to survive at Memphis and Abydos<sup>7</sup>. The pinnacle of this trend comes in the Fourth dynasty, when the graves of the courtiers are neatly laid out in rows around the pyramid of the king.

For the presence of the concept of Maat, we depend on the evidence of texts. The first treatise on Maat that we know is the Instruction of Ptahhotep. Mrs. Lichtheim assumed that this is a text from the Sixth dynasty. This seems to be the key sentence: "Great is justice (Maat), lasting in effect: unchallenged since the time of Osiris."<sup>8</sup>.

But there is evidence for an earlier existence of the notion of Maat: in the names of some kings and nobility. The oldest seems to be the name of King Sechemib, from the Second dynasty. Both his Horus name and his Nebty name include as an epithet /pr n mAat/<sup>9</sup>. King Sneferu (First king of the Fourth dynasty) calls himself /nb mAat/: "Lord of Maat", both in his Horus name and his Nebty name<sup>10</sup>. And his vizier is Nefermaat: "Beautiful is Maat".

Clear evidence of the influence of Maat though is limited to the Instructions, as mentioned.

## **2. Uneven distribution of wealth**

In Badarian times, there was not yet much differentiation in the riches of grave-goods<sup>11</sup>. But from Naqada I onwards (approx. 4000 – 3500 BC: this period slightly overlaps with Badari) it is a constant factor in Egyptian history.

## **3. Consumption of wealth & 4. Providing for the afterlife**

In Upper Egypt, both elements are clearly visible from the Badarian period onward. The contrast with Lower Egypt is striking. Whereas in Lower Egypt a few simple pots and maybe some beads would be all that a dead person would take with him into the afterlife, in Upper Egypt one apparently took all one's wealth along. Up to dozens of large, well made pots, filled with food; ivory spoons and combs, necklaces, weapons, tools and cosmetics: it's all there (provided the grave has not been looted).

This tendency to take as much as possible into the afterlife reached its peak during the First dynasty, as kings even took some of their servants along in their graves. Starting under the Fourth dynasty, symbolic gravegoods (either models, or paintings on the walls of mortuary chapels) replaced to some extent the actual gravegoods.

## **5. Tomb robbery**

Again, this element has been attested as early as the Badarian<sup>12</sup>. Some graves were robbed through a very small opening, that was dug exactly on the right spot. This suggests that the tomb robbers were in fact the same as the tomb builders - as was not uncommon during Pharaonic times.

## **6. Stylised and standardised art forms**

This point is not nearly as clear-cut as the others. Mrs. Christiane Ziegler, head conservator of the Egyptian antiquities dept. of the Louvre, Paris, writes about the art of the Naqada period: "What is extraordinary is that their style was completely different to that of later Pharaonic art, hardly anticipating it in any way"<sup>13</sup>. My own views in this matter are less extreme, but I think she has a point in resisting the all too common approach that simply looks for precursors of later forms, and glosses over the differences that still occur during these for-

mative years. The paintings on the so called Decorated Ware from Naqada II for instance mostly resemble the later Egyptian art in the fact that they are stylised and standardised. There is not really a lot of resemblance with respect to content.

The first major work of art that can be labelled truly Egyptian is the Narmer Palette. Nevertheless, one of the main elements in the iconography of this work (the long necked beasts) will disappear from the canon of Egyptian art very soon after this. Many more experiments will still follow, until in the Fourth dynasty the classical forms are finally settled.

### **7. Passion for good craftsmanship**

An interesting feature of Egyptian culture is the way some crafts evolved. In some cases, one began with the best, and then slowly let the standards slide. In pottery e.g.: the thinnest, hardest pottery of all stems right from the start: the Badarian. The same with vessels of stone: the level of perfection reached during the Naqadan period was never surpassed. And when, after a lot of experimenting, the art of pyramid building reached its summit (in more than one sense of the word) under Cheops, it started declining almost immediately after this. Apparently, once the art was truly mastered, pragmatism took over, stressing just the outward appearances.

However, in many cases standards remained high during long stretches of Egypt's history. Good examples are the building of temples, the carving of statues in stone and wood, and the making of furniture and household implements such as mirrors, containers and spoons for cosmetics, games, writing palettes and the like.

### **8. Ethnocentrism**

In Principles of Egyptian Art, by Heinrich Schäfer, a cylinder seal is reproduced showing king Narmer striking down Libyans – with their hands tied behind their backs (page 150). This is the oldest example known to me of the king smiting an enemy that is clearly identified as a "foreigner". A famous, somewhat later example is on an ivory label from king Den (Fourth king of the First dynasty). The king is shown as he is about to kill a Bedouin from the eastern desert. The accompanying text reads: First time of smiting the East (reproduced a/o in A.J. Spencer, Early Egypt, page 87).

This ethnocentric trait is of course fairly common in many cultures – including our own. Yet I see two reasons for counting it among the defining character traits of ancient Egypt. Firstly, the Egyptians seem to have been rather more afflicted by this virus than most cultures. If you look at reliefs from the New Kingdom in which both Egyptians and foreigners are depicted, the difference between the calm, orderly, handsome and confident Egyptians on the one hand and the grubby, disorderly, panic-stricken or apathetic foreigners on the other is always striking. I have never seen such a contrast between "us" and "them" in the depictions of any other culture.

Secondly, it was an important factor in their later downfall. If you firmly believe that all foreigners are inferior to you, you will have a hard time coping with foreign invaders. In the case of the Hyksos, it explains the fanatic zeal with which the AE's pursued them right into their homeland. But after the year 1.000 BC, when first Libyans, then Nubians, Assyrians, Greeks, Persians, Macedonians and Romans invaded their country, their spirit slowly crumbled under the impossibility to further uphold one of their most basic beliefs: that of their superiority.

## **9. Reverence for the past**

Before one can revere a past, one must have a past. A “near past” is something everyone has: we all have ancestors. Although there is ample evidence that in AE the deceased were still important to the living (one might say: “still part of the family”), there was no real ancestor worship such as in China and other countries in the Far East. In AE it was antiquity itself that was holy. It was the time of the gods, so anything from that period – customs, institutions or books – was automatically sanctified.

Now this kind of reverence for age-old customs will not work if you can vividly remember having done things differently yesterday, or even last year. So it seems logical that this feature emerged in a stable, settled society. This would mean that it can not have developed before the beginning of the First dynasty.

## **10. Religion**

This again is a difficult matter, largely because of our dependence on texts. Without texts, all we can do is see if the pictorial evidence, such as figurines and drawings, resembles symbols or the like from the later AE religion.

During the periods of Badari and Naqada I, this comparison comes up with nothing. During Naqada II, the so called Decorated Ware shows a variety of “ensigns” or “emblems”. They immediately remind one of the later nome standards, and of the symbols of several gods (e.g. Min and Ha) – but their meaning on these pots is not evident.

At the beginning of the First dynasty, we reach firmer ground. With the appearance of hieroglyphs, we start recognising the names of several gods. On ivory labels we see the shape of some temples. And the people can be seen using personal names that include the names of gods, such as (Queen) Neith-hotep. Kings have already been using a Horus name for some time, but now we can also see the Nebty name or “Two Ladies name”, that is written with the names of the goddesses Nechbet and Wadjet.

Although our material is still not really abundant, this certainly feels like AE religion. We should be careful though not to overstate the weight of our evidence. It mostly consists of the names of individual gods, in varying contexts. And what short sentences there are, are very difficult to interpret. Further, the period of the first three dynasties stretches for at least 345 years (in the conservative estimation of Baines & Malek in their Atlas of Ancient Egypt). And that is definitely long enough for some serious evolution to take place in religious beliefs and practices.

## **Conclusion**

A culture consists of several layers, one on top of the other: the economy, the ordering of society in different classes, common beliefs and practices, art, philosophy and religion. To faithfully recreate the picture of any culture of the past, we must know the forms and shapes of every layer. For this, we depend on physical evidence.

As man’s economy changes from hunting and gathering to agriculture, he makes a much deeper impact on his environment. He starts leaving much more artefacts – both deliberate and in the form of waste – from which we can learn. We can consider this to be the first “threshold” of improved understanding (in Upper Egypt: approx. 4400 BC).

When man becomes literate, we reach a second threshold. In AE this happens around 3000 BC. Unfortunately, we do not have much written sources for the first 4 or 5 centuries after this point.

The scarcity of texts from these earliest times seems to indicate that the script was not yet widely used. This is in concord with the appearance of the first statues of scribes during the Fourth dynasty. The men that proudly chose to have themselves portrayed in this manner were high nobles. In the Louvre in Paris is a fine example from prince Setka, son of King Djedefre. These statues seem to indicate that the ability to write was at that time still something for the very few – and therefore that the vast stratum of scribes that later formed a real class in Egyptian society did not yet exist.

Mrs. Lichtheim, in her admirable anthology, does not quote a single line of text from before the beginning of the Fifth dynasty (approx. 2450 BC). Therefore, we must for AE take a third threshold into account: that of more abundant texts. If we put this threshold somewhat arbitrarily at 2500 BC, we look down on a period of almost 2000 years (4400 – 2500), in which we can gradually see the picture of this culture solidify.

We can be fairly certain that some of the “lower layers” of this culture, such as the economy and some elements of the organisation of society, were already in place at the very start: 4400 BC. But one of the top layers that we can follow pretty well during all of this period – art – shows us that it took 1400 years (4400 – 3000) before it came even close to being truly Egyptian, and another 450 years before it had settled completely (at the beginning of the Fourth dynasty). It is my belief that this should make us careful not to assume too much about this culture as a whole, before approx. 2500 BC.

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### Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Butzer, 4  
<sup>2</sup> Butzer, 9  
<sup>3</sup> Hoffman, 140  
<sup>4</sup> Lichtheim I, 58  
<sup>5</sup> Trigger, 27  
<sup>6</sup> Hoffman 176  
<sup>7</sup> Trigger 58

<sup>8</sup> Lichtheim I, 64

<sup>9</sup> J. v. Beckerath, 45 (Von Beckerath transliterates /prj-n-mAat/).

<sup>10</sup> J.v. Beckerath 53

<sup>11</sup> Trigger 27-30. For a different view: Hoffman 143

<sup>12</sup> Hoffman 143

<sup>13</sup> Ziegler 13