

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN EARLY EGYPT

Juan José Castillos

Uruguayan Institute of Egyptology

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In the last few decades an impressive advance has been made in our understanding of how predynastic Egypt evolved into becoming a unified country, ruled by a king and a powerful élite that could trace its origin to hundreds of years before, when the early communities started to produce a class of privileged individuals who could transmit to their descendants the wealth and the social prestige and power that they had acquired¹.

Through the study mainly of the cemeteries of early Egypt we have been able to discover evidence on the appearance and the changing fortunes of many such élites and the essential difference in the magnitude of their power and influence in Upper and Lower Egypt, which led to the success of the former in leading the process that would bring about the unification of the country².

However, some situations do remain to be explained that perhaps due to the complexity of the problems that they involve, and also to the still partial and uneven available evidence, are usually avoided in the literature covering this period of the Egyptian prehistory.

I refer first of all to why the predynastic communities in Lower Egypt exhibit less social inequality than the Upper Egyptian ones and in the case of the latter, why élites emerged and started the process that would eventually lead to the appearance of regional kingdoms and then of the unified state.

I think that although at this stage of our current knowledge of the Egyptian predynastic it would be unrealistic to strive for firm and detailed answers to the

¹ K. Bard, The emergence of the Egyptian state in I. Shaw (ed.), The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt, Oxford, 2000, 61-88.

² B. Midant-Reynes, Préhistoire de l'Égypte, Paris, 1992, 163-216.

above questions, it can be useful to start to discuss them and provide ideas based on what we know of early Egypt and of the development of similar communities elsewhere.

Others have noticed in recent years the lower inequality exhibited by Lower Egyptian predynastic cemeteries as compared with Upper Egypt at the time³ and I could provide more precise figures in each case to measure such differences⁴.

It is only in late predynastic and early dynastic times, in an already culturally and politically unified Egypt, that we find in Lower Egypt the presence of high social stratification and rich members of those élites displaying in the cemeteries their status and their wealth⁵.

My research showed that in every case the Lower Egyptian Naqada I/II cemeteries at Heliopolis, Maadi and Wadi Digla, exhibit lower inequality than any other contemporary Upper Egyptian ones. This picture becomes even more dramatically clear if we incorporate what I call the level of inequality (my AD index) that includes the actual values of the variables, using the size and then the wealth of the tombs for the purpose. In one and the other case, the result is basically the same, lower inequality for the Naqada I/II Lower Egyptian cemeteries.

For instance, at Wadi Digla and considering 175 tombs for which size could be adequately determined, the Naqada I/II cemetery yielded a Gini index of 0.26 and an AD of 0.31 (that is, the difference or gap between the upper and lower averages in the cemetery) for the size of the tombs and a Gini index of 0.66 and an AD of 3.32 for the wealth of, this time, 475 Naqada I/II graves.

Upper Egyptian contemporary figures are almost invariably much higher, for instance, at Naqada for Naqada I/II Gini is over 0.3 and the AD around 4 for size (131 tombs), with a Gini of about 0.5, slightly lower than Wadi Digla, but with an AD of about 12 for wealth (339 graves). We could say that the internal inequality (Gini) in both sites is not very different, but the level of that inequality, incorporating the values of the variables, shows a great difference in favour of Naqada.

Other Upper Egyptian contemporary cemeteries such as Mahasna or Diospolis Parva yield even higher figures for the size or the wealth of the tombs.

³ E. Van den Brink, Settlement patterns in the Northeastern Nile Delta during the 4th-2nd millennium BC in L. Krzyzaniak and M. Kobusiewicz (eds.), *Environmental change and human culture in the Nile basin and Northern Africa until the 2nd millennium BC*, Poznan, 1993, 298; T. Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt*, London, 2001, 28.

⁴ J. J. Castillos, *Inequality in Egyptian Predynastic cemeteries*, *RdE* 49, 1998, 25-36.

⁵ B. Adams and K. Cialowicz, *Protodynastic Egypt*, Princes Risborough, 1997, 21-22.

It has been pointed out that Lower Egypt at the time was probably not so densely populated as Upper Egypt and this may have contributed to shape the nature of the communities that lived there⁶.

They inhabited the higher land, safe from the annual flood, cultivated the fields nearby and led a relatively simple life in which innovation seems to have been discouraged and craft specialization does not seem to have been high, as compared with Upper Egypt at the time⁷.

The evidence of trade between these people and Western Asia and even the settling of some of those Asiatics among them does not appear to have stimulated social stratification, perhaps because the early establishment of Upper Egyptian trading posts in southern Palestine inhibited their chances of profiting from such exchanges by acting as middlemen⁸.

The occasional grave found so far in which the body of a leading member of those early predynastic Lower Egyptian communities might have been buried⁹, did not contain particularly high status objects or exhibited other characteristics that could differ from just a high ranking individual within the parameters of low social stratification that seem to have been the rule in this area before the northward expansion of the Upper Egyptian cultures.

The abundance of land, the low population density, the probable lack of a significant agricultural surplus and the simple lifestyle of these northern communities in the early stages of the Egyptian predynastic seem to have discouraged or offered little scope for the ambition of individuals which found more propitious economic and social conditions farther south.

And now we come to the thorny subject of why élites emerged in Upper Egypt and also why and how they consolidated their power to the point of enabling some of these people to rule large territories and transmit to their descendants their wealth and their new position in society.

In ranked communities in which a leader emerged due to his prowess in hunting or in warfare or other abilities he might have possessed, that did not give him any assurance that he would retain his rank for a very long time or that it would procure

⁶ K. Butzer, *Early Hydraulic Civilization in Egypt*, Chicago, 1976, 94; R. Allen, *Agriculture and the Origins of the State in Ancient Egypt*, *Explorations in Economic History* 34, 1997, 146.

⁷ E. Köhler, *The State of Research on Late Predynastic Egypt: New Evidence for the Development of the Pharaonic State*, GM 147, 1995, 87; R. Layton, *An introduction to theory in anthropology*, Cambridge, 1997, 133.

⁸ B. Andelkovic, *The relations between Early Bronze Age I Canaanites and Upper Egyptians*, Belgrade, 1995, 16, 72; S. Mark, *From Egypt to Mesopotamia, A Study of Predynastic Trade Routes*, London, 1998, 19.

⁹ T. Wilkinson, *Early Dyanstic Egypt*, 28.

him any material benefits such as wealth or the right to transmit to his children his authority or his rank¹⁰.

As a matter of fact, the study of such groups has shown that communities at this stage of social development actually resented and prevented the accumulation of wealth by any of its members and specially the leaders based much of their authority and prestige in the constant giving others most of whatever they had acquired, thus impoverishing themselves in order to be popular and retain their status as chiefs¹¹.

In this way, all members of those communities shared equally the common prosperity or deprivation and nobody was allowed to unduly benefit through their ingenuity, thrift or by other means, of the bad times others were having.

There was nevertheless an exception to this rule and it involved communities that because of a favourable environment experienced fewer hardships and were assured abundance of food and other resources. In those cases, there was less resistance to the accumulation of wealth by some, who could use it in the long run to employ others in schemes that would enhance their prestige and eventually, give them the power to impose their authority over the group¹².

It was at this stage that most probably craft specialization, trade involving valuable commodities and objects many of which would become status symbols, over increasingly longer distances, as well as the recruitment of group members to wage war and impose their authority over other less favoured communities, whose manpower would generate more benefits for the original group, which by then would have become an élite or ruling class in the expanded community¹³.

This process allowed ambitious individuals who were gifted with the required ability to accumulate wealth and use it to change the old ways of their communities to emerge as leaders of a new type, wielding economic, military, political and perhaps already even religious power that they could this time transmit to their descendants¹⁴.

Far from breaking down the old kinship links among the members of the original community, the new situation strengthened them by making them all part of a privileged élite, with all the material gains that involved, in which one of them claimed authority over all, based on his economic and other powers, and most probably with the approval and support of the local god.

¹⁰ B. Hayden, Pathways to Power in T. Douglas Price and G. Feinman (eds.), *Foundations of Social Inequality*, New York, 1995, 66-70.

¹¹ J. Brown, The search for rank in prehistoric burials in R. Chapman, I. Kinnes and K. Randsborg (eds.), *The Archaeology of Death*, Cambridge, 1981, 27.

¹² B. Hayden, *Pathways to Power*, 22-23.

¹³ B. Hayden, *Pathways to Power*, 63; P. Wason, *The archaeology of rank*, Cambridge, 1996, 107-108; R. Allen, *Agriculture and the Origins of the State in Ancient Egypt*, 145.

¹⁴ K. Bard, *From Farmers to Pharaohs*, Sheffield, 1994, 4, 116-118.

Let us not forget that in later pharaonic history religion invariably struck a deal and gave its support to the legitimacy of even foreign conquerors, so it is not unreasonable to project this divine flexibility to earlier times in which an individual or a family had risen over their original humble status to one of hitherto unknown power over others, a situation that could only be explained as that person or persons enjoying the favour of the gods, someone endowed with special powers over men, animals and nature itself, enjoying the benefits of his exalted status but at the same time, burdened with the responsibility of imposing order over chaos, and thus bringing security and prosperity for all¹⁵.

The conditions in Upper Egypt of relatively high population density, abundance of resources in a land made fertile every year by the Nile floods, where precious metals like gold were readily available from the eastern desert mines or from other sources, in which cattle was plentiful and perhaps used as a valuable commodity rather than for consumption¹⁶, in which trade with Western Asia and the Sudan brought prosperity to those who engaged in such exchanges, were favourable for the appearance of class stratification as outlined above or by any other means that others may suggest.

From here to the predynastic regional kingdoms and to the unification of the country by a single god-like ruler there are only a few steps that are not too difficult to explain and understand.

¹⁵ M. Campagno, *Surgimiento del Estado en Egipto: Cambios y continuidades en lo ideológico*, Buenos Aires, 1998, 32, 47-51.

¹⁶ M. Hoffman, *Egypt before the pharaohs*, New York, 1979, 159.