THE PLACE OF HIERAKONPOLIS IN THE EGYPTIAN PREDYNASTIC

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The ancient city of Hierakonpolis, also known as Nekhen, its more proper Egyptian name, played a very important role in the origins of the ancient Egyptian unified state.

Situated in southern Upper Egypt, it covers a vast area that stretches over three kilometres. Within this site a large early temple dedicated to the god Horus of Nekhen was found, as well as the remains of a great walled town and more recently, cemeteries of both its élite and commoners.

Although several partial publications have appeared since the early pioneer work at the beginning of the XX century[1], we still lack a detailed and comprehensive account of the evidence that has been brought to light in the past and in more recent work carried out there[2].

It would seem therefore premature to attempt to establish the place of such a site in the process that led to the birth of ancient Egyptian civilization.

Nevertheless, and since some scholars have ventured estimations that I consider debatable, I would like to discuss some of such views and comment on them, as

[1] J. Quibell and F. Green, Hierakonpolis I and II, London, 1900-1902; J. Garstang, Excavation at Hierakonpolis, at Esna and Nubia, ASAE 8, 1907, 132-148; B. Adams, Ancient Hierakonpolis, Warminster, 1974.

[2] M. Hoffman, The Predynastic of Hierakonpolis: An Interim Report, Cairo, 1982; B. Adams, The Fort Cemetery at Hierakonpolis, London, 1987; R. Friedman and B. Adams (eds.), The Followers of Horus, Oxford, 1992; J. Spencer (ed.), Aspects of Early Egypt, London, 1996.

well as advance some ideas of my own, as a contribution to a reappraisal of the role played by Hierakonpolis in state formation in Egypt, that will be confirmed or corrected in the future as the necessary more detailed evidence becomes widely available.

The facts as we know them indicate that Hierakonpolis was a very important town in early times, so much so that in later pharaonic traditions the so called Souls of Nekhen were prominent in the ancient religion[3], kings of the beginning of Egyptian history built structures there and made offerings to the local god in his temple[4], objects that reveal some of the events and circumstances at the time.

However, it was not Hierakonpolis, the capital of an early regional kingdom, which prevailed in the process of the unification of the country, this accomplishment should be credited to Abydos, the capital of another Upper Egyptian polity, where those rulers were buried and which remained an important religious centre even after the new and more conveniently situated capital of Memphis was founded[5].

The reason for this situation in the absence of relevant and clear-cut archaeological or written evidence, is still unclear.

By its strategic location, it is reasonable to assume that Hierakonpolis effectively controlled the early Egyptian trade with the Sudan and sub-Saharan Africa, as well as the mineral resources of the eastern desert[6], which most probably led to its growth and development as a powerful city, in which its élite could display and use to its advantage the prestige goods that flowed into it from the south, such as ivory, gold, incense, some kinds of animal skins, precious woods like ebony and many other desirable imports.

Abydos, on the other hand, was well situated to control the perhaps even more profitable trade with the north and western Asia, from where timber, oils, resins, wine, several kinds of pottery, semiprecious stones like lapis lazuli, turquoise and many other items came into Upper Egypt[7].

Early craft specialization also added to the process of increasing social stratification and provided large quantities of desirable, high quality goods for consumption by the local élites and for export[8].

If, as some suggested, the regional kingdom of Naqada was absorbed by Abydos at the beginning of the Naqada III period of the Egyptian predynastic[9], then we

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[3] PT §§ 904, 942, 1253, 1549. R. Faulkner, The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts, Oxford, 1969.

[4] The so-called Main Deposit at Hierakonpolis and its immediate neighbourhood, excavated by J. Quibell.

[5] The importance of this site, already established by the early work of Amélineau and Petrie, then enhanced by the discoveries of the large funerary enclosures there in the fifties of the XX century, was further underlined by the more recent excavations carried out by D. O'Connor, W. Kaiser and G. Dreyer.

[6] T. Wilkinson, Early Dynastic Egypt, London, 2001, 38-39.

[7] S. Mark, From Egypt to Mesopotamia, a Study of Predynastic Trade Routes, London, 1997, 103-104.

[8] K. Bard, From Farmers to Pharaohs, Sheffield, 1994, 113.

should add to the above the gold from the eastern desert mines, all of which gave the Abydos kings the economic clout to further their ambition to unify the country as rulers of all Egypt.

Although the assumption of the absorption of the Naqada polity by the Abydos regional kingdom is reasonable, due to its proximity and to later political events, the flights of imagination by some scholars postulating some sort of understanding between Abydos and Hierakonpolis to share the spoils or for the latter to accept the expansion of the former, perhaps in exchange for some other benefit, seems to be as unjustified as the details based mainly on geographical features of a king Scorpion's campaign to conquer Naqada and even a predynastic version of a Maginot line defended by the latter as unsuccessfully as it was in modern times[10].

Perhaps it would have been more acceptable to stress the relatively unimportant position of the scorpion that might represent the name of a predynastic king in the relevant rock inscription[11], rather than indulging in unwarranted reconstructions of a military campaign led by such a ruler.

To the best of my knowledge, the archaeological record at Naqada shows a decline of its élite at this time, reflected in the evidence mainly from cemetery data[12], but nowhere so far the consequences of a military defeat that would have marked its demise as an independent polity and its absorption by the Abydos regional kingdom as a single act of conquest.

As to the role played by Hierakonpolis in this probable expansion of the Abydos kingdom, we should perhaps avoid seeing too much in what would probably have been considered an extension of the latter's influence to a neighbouring area.

What has been published of the Hierakonpolis archaeological record shows no decline all through this period of the Egyptian predynastic but instead an unbroken development towards a powerful élite and increasing social differentiation and prosperity[13].

Perhaps the Hierakonpolis rulers had their hands full with the area they controlled, which looked mostly to the south of Upper Egypt rather than to the north[14].

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[9] K. Bard, The Emergence of the Egyptian State, in I. Shaw (ed.), The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt, Oxford, 2000, 64.

[10] J. and D. Darnell, R. Friedman and S. Hendrickx, Theban Desert Road Survey in the Egyptian Western Desert, Vol. 1, Chicago, 2002, 18-19.

[11] J. Darnell et al., 10.

[12] K. Bard, From Farmers to Pharaohs, 103; J. J. Castillos, The Predynastic Cemeteries at Naqada, GM 196, 2003, 7-18.

[13] T. Wilkinson, State Formation in Egypt, Oxford, 1996, 83.

[14] T. Wilkinson, Early Dynastic Egypt, 176-177.

If there was in fact an understanding between Abydos and Hierakonpolis, it would have been much more to their mutual benefit to keep the peace and stimulate the exchanges of goods that would enhance the position and power of their élites.

Since current trends in the interpretation of state formation in Egypt agree that the political unification of the country by the Abydos rulers did not mean an immediate centralized organization but rather the beginning of a long process that would take at least to the early Old Kingdom, then there is no reason to suppose that the Hierakonpolis rulers should have felt threatened by the increasing prosperity and expansion of Abydos to its immediate south and to the north.

But others have felt confident to assume that Hierakonpolis expanded its territory in late predynastic times to absorb the Naqada and Abydos polities and then politically unify Egypt in a powerful northward military drive[15].

If so, it remains to be explained why the kings of the First Dynasty chose to be buried at Abydos instead of at Hierakonpolis, why the archaeological record does not exhibit at Abydos about that time the drop in the fortunes of its local élite, that can on the other hand be detected at Naqada, and what gave Hierakonpolis the clout to undertake such a large enterprise.

It would perhaps be more realistic to see these local rulers more concerned with events in their immediate neighbourhood to the south, where A-Group chiefs had to be kept at bay and made to satisfy the needs of the Hierakonpolis élite for a wide variety of goods[16].

It seems to me that this other perspective is more reasonable, in which the Abydos rulers after politically unifying the country to its immediate south and to the north, carried out a policy of entente cordiale with Hierakonpolis, formally incorporating it into their newly founded unified state but respecting the acquired rights of its élite, honouring the local great god in many ways and thus being able to proceed to expand their presence and influence in Nubia and northern Sudan without any major obstacle in their path.

This would also explain the prestige of Hierakonpolis that would endure until well into the Old Kingdom[17], a situation that seems unlikely if the Abydos rulers had imposed their authority over the Hierakonpolis élite by force, as a form of military conquest, rather than by more diplomatic means.

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[15] The extreme view was given for instance, by B. Kemp, Ancient Egypt, Anatomy of a Civilization, London, 1994, 34, and a more restrained one by B. Adams and K. Cialowicz, Protodynastic Egypt, Princes Risborough, 1997, 16.

[16] B. Adams and K. Cialowicz, Protodynastic Egypt, 52; K. Bard, The Emergence of the Egyptian State, 67.

[17] B. Kemp, Ancient Egypt, Anatomy of a Civilization, 39.