

ON THE WAY TO THE BIRTH OF THE PHARAONIC STATE, THE PREDYNASTIC FUNERARY DATA AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF EARLY EGYPT

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(Full text version)

I'll start by quoting from the Book of Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep".

We can hardly conceive a better description for the state of our knowledge at the end of the XIX century about ancient Egypt before the time of the great pyramids.

Besides the sketchy and superficial notions transmitted to us by the classical authors, like for instance that the first king of Egypt, Menes, after living for a number of years had been killed by a hippopotamus¹, there was little else to say except that a great darkness had descended over the millennia before the Old Kingdom.

It was a time that belonged to the realm of myth, when the gods had ruled over mankind, perhaps to hide the fact that Egypt had no settled population and was still waiting for the dynastic race that would bring permanent human occupation and civilization to the fertile Nile Valley.

This was the widespread notion that found its way into the academic books² and when at the end of the XIX century the remains of the missing early population of Egypt started to emerge from the ground, a whole world of new information became available, although unfortunately, it was not at first correctly understood.

¹ W. Waddel and F. Robbins, *Manetho, Aegyptiaca*, Cambridge, Mass., 1971, 27-29.

² G. Maspéro, *Histoire ancienne des peuples de l'Orient*, Paris, 1876, 13, 54-60.

Petrie, for instance, thought that the prehistoric cemeteries he discovered belonged to a New Race that had invaded Egypt at the time between the VI and XI dynasties³, a concept that De Morgan had already shown to be wrong⁴, something that Petrie had to concede a few years later.

In the first half of the XX century the concept that foreigners had invaded Egypt at the end of the 4th millennium BC and civilized the backward native population was widely accepted. It made sense in a world where big colonial empires still ruled vast areas of the globe and in which pushing this situation far into the past justified such a reality. The most likely origin for these invaders was Mesopotamia and as Winkler, a German archaeologist working in Egypt at the time between the two great wars suggested, the Wadi Hammamat was the most likely route to reach the Nile Valley from the Red Sea.

To what an extent ideology shaped these approaches to the study of early Egypt is exemplified by the discovery by Winkler, while he was recording rock art in the western and eastern deserts, of swastikas, perhaps left behind by those Aryans who long ago had, riding their horses, brought civilization to this region of Africa.

Winkler ended his publication of the desert rock art telling us that it was riders who carried out this great work, destroying kingdoms and founding empires⁵.

³ W. Petrie, *Naqada and Ballas*, London, 1896, 61.

⁴ De Morgan, *Recherches sur les origines de l'Égypte*, Paris, 1896.

⁵ H. Winkler, *Rock Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt*, London, 2 Vols., 1938-1939.



We see that the great civilizations of the world are not based on one of these three conquerors, but that the union of the plant-cultivator and the cattle-breeder was everywhere a powerful impetus to a permanent civilization. And we see further that the third conqueror, the rider, brings into these static earlier civilizations the strongest vein of life and movement; he makes history, destroying kingdoms and creating empires.



Although Winkler has been described as not having been supportive of the nazi regime in Germany, the basic facts are that as an archaeologist he had a choice of what to publish of the vast collection of rock art he had assembled. If he had been critical of the current regime in his country, he could have omitted those irrelevant swastikas from his academic publication. He held views on the origin of civilization not very different from what national socialist archaeology was publishing at the time and also, when the Second World War began, he decided to return to his country, while many other Germans remained abroad, fought in the Wehrmacht and died in action in 1945⁶.

⁶ T. Wilkinson, *Genesis of the Pharaohs*, London, 2003, 25.

Another example of inaccurate conclusions drawn by the pioneers of Egyptian archaeology when they were dealing with the earliest settled communities in the Nile Valley is supplied by Junker, a German scholar who worked at Merimde, situated near the point where the two main branches that go into the Nile Delta meet⁷.

According to his results, the bodies of mainly small children had been buried within the neolithic village, an uncommon practice in the rest of Egypt, as if their loved ones had tried to keep them in close proximity to where they lived. This idea was quoted in the literature for many years and surprisingly, even in some contemporary publications⁸, when it had already been pointed out long ago⁹ that Junker's stratigraphy was incorrect and the burials had taken place after the village had been abandoned and then the location was used as a cemetery. Those who still mention Junker's views on this as valid fail to realize that in no case such graves were in close proximity to dwellings, thus defeating the very meaning assigned to these burials.

Finally, the famous sequence date system of relative dating developed at the beginning of the XX century and used for 50 years¹⁰, a brilliant accomplishment, suffered nevertheless of various shortcomings which led to its replacement by a better conceived system¹¹ which is the one currently used by egyptologists.

Over the last one hundred and twenty years almost ten thousand predynastic tombs excavated in Egypt throw light on the origins of ancient Egyptian civilization. This work not only filled a vacuum that had forced authors at the time to start their books on the beginning of ancient Egypt with the pyramid age but also helped correct views that although popular at the beginning of the twentieth century, were in fact a prejudiced distortion of the way in which the Egyptians had started to advance on the path that would create one of the earliest and greatest civilizations.

Just as the funerary practices of the dynastic period offer insights into the lives, expectations and beliefs of the living, the funerary predynastic data provides even more important information at a time in which no written sources can enlighten us as to the hopes, beliefs and living conditions of the people who lived in Egypt between six thousand and five thousand years ago¹².

⁷ H. Junker, *Vorläufiger Bericht ... Merimde Benisalame (Westdelta)*, Vienna, 1929.

⁸ D. Wengrow, *The Archaeology of Early Egypt*, Cambridge, 2006, 30.

⁹ B.Kemp, *Merimda and the theory of house burial in prehistoric Egypt*, *Chronique d'Égypte* 85, 1968, 22-33.

¹⁰ W. Petrie, *Diospolis Parva*, London, 1901.

¹¹ W. Kaiser, *Stand und Probleme der ägyptischen Vorgeschichtsforschung*, *ZÄS* 81, 1956, 87-109; S. Hendrickx, *The relative chronology of the Naqada culture: problems and possibilities*, in A. Spencer (ed.), *Aspects of Early Egypt*, London, 1996, 36-69.

¹² J. J. Castillos, *A reappraisal of the published evidence on Egyptian Predynastic and Early Dynastic cemeteries*, Toronto, 1982.

A problem that has plagued egyptology for over a century in the study of early Egypt is the excessive emphasis on mortuary data. It is perhaps understandable that at a time when scientific archaeology was in its infancy, the very complex excavation of villages and towns was generally avoided with the result that our understanding of the earliest communities in the Nile Valley was largely based on conclusions drawn from the realm of the dead.

From this point of view, the results obtained after the excavation of almost ten thousand early graves, both in Upper and Lower Egypt, have provided a picture of constant development, which through one thousand years led to increasing social stratification, the appearance of hereditary chiefdoms, then of regional kings and finally of a unified Egypt under the rule of the first pharaoh.

The last three decades of the XX century saw a very welcome change in the study of the beginning of ancient Egyptian civilization. The work of the pioneers had considerably increased our knowledge but by the middle of that century a kind of stagnation had brought to a halt such advances, not for lack of archaeological work but rather of interpretative models that could satisfactorily explain the evidence that had been brought to light.

Part of the blame for this situation lies on the divorce that for many years existed between egyptology and other social sciences such as anthropology and sociology¹³. The attempts by some scholars in the first half of the XX century to introduce elements of those sciences into egyptology¹⁴ had failed to gain acceptance and the approach had continued to be an antiquarian, particularist and elitist one, in which the museological interests prevailed, ancient Egypt had to be understood on its own terms, without bringing in examples from other cultures, which were seen as irrelevant and inapplicable to the Nile Valley and also with a heavy emphasis on the most elaborate and refined objects belonging to members of the elite, rather than on the more abundant but less valuable artefacts belonging to the lower classes.

The appearance of what was then called the New Archaeology, changes within the other social sciences and a desire to break the stagnation brought about a most welcome renewal in egyptology, and especially in the quest for the origins of this civilization that inaugurated the current period of growth and diversification.

Since the subject of this Symposium is Death along the Nile, Uncovering the Secrets of Egypt's Lost Tombs, I would like to give two examples of early graves that for one or other reason have stood out from the many thousands I have studied over the years.

The first one is a frequent type in most early cemeteries and the occupants were a young woman and a very small baby. When you deal extensively with mortuary

¹³ J. Lustig (ed.), *Anthropology and Egyptology, A Developing Dialogue*, Sheffield, 1997.

¹⁴ A. Moret and G. Davy, *Des clans aux empires*, Paris, 1923.

evidence in search of patterns and regularities you tend to become jaded and in spite of being aware that each tomb contains a human tragedy, the end of a life, it all becomes a pit, bones, artefacts and their peculiar arrangement which you proceed to register and interpret following a scientific methodology in order to try to understand the intentions of the ancient people you are studying.

It is all like the very common complaint today about medical doctors not having enough empathy with the plight of their patients and treating them almost like with an assembly line mentality. Although in many cases this reflects a reality, we seldom realize that when doctors have to deal almost every working hour of their day with disease, pain and death, a way to survive and keep helping people overcome their illnesses is to detach ourselves of the misery surrounding us and do our job as well as we can but without getting too emotionally involved.

In archaeology a similar situation arises and if we want to do our job efficiently we cannot dwell too much on the misadventures of people long gone which we happen to be studying, something we can and perhaps also we must indulge in after the work is done as part of the general picture we are conveying.

But I must confess that every time I was confronted in my research with these graves containing the bodies of a young woman and her small child, I have not been able to avoid a moment of reflection and grief for two young lives cut so short perhaps because of the dangers of childbirth thousands of years ago,

In this case and in spite of the tomb having been robbed in antiquity, there was evidence that both bodies had been wrapped in matting, it was a large elite tomb that had been originally endowed with many objects for the afterlife.



AYRTON AND LOAT, MAHASNA, LONDON, 1911

BURIAL H 49.

I would also like to add that a very common dictum in the sense that prostitution is the oldest profession is quite wrong. In fact, tomb robbing was and there is evidence of this practice in Egypt as early as six thousand years ago. Graves were robbed very shortly after the burial took place and those responsible for the deed seemed to know exactly where to dig to get to the most valuable items¹⁵. Although there must have been terrible penalties for such a crime, greed being such a powerful human drive, nothing could prevent that most of the predynastic tombs in Egypt have come to us in such a condition.

The second example I would like to bring to your attention has to do with the affection we feel today for the small animals we share our life with. In my case my wife and I live with eight cats, a family we decided not to separate and who has grown old surrounded by comfort and safety. As those of you who share a similar experience with cats as pets know very well, they are the ones who run the house, I am merely their butler and my wife their maid.

Most people think that this special kind of relationship with our pets is something belonging to modern times, when an increased sensitivity and compassion, besides other characteristics of modern life, have made such kind of close relationship possible.

But in fact we can find examples of this thousands of years ago in early Egypt. For instance in a Naqada II tomb at Matmar, number 3128¹⁶, a large elite burial still containing 40 pots and many other objects was found to contain the body of a man and that of a dog, probably his favourite pet or hunting companion. The unusual detail was that the body of the man was found inside the remains of a wickerwork coffin but the dog was buried inside a wooden box made of thick boards, in the case of human occupants an infrequent mark of high status at the time.

Beyond the cultural differences between those ancient people and us, cases such as these two remind us of how in certain aspects we feel closer to them than it would seem possible given the many other circumstances that place them in another kind of world far away from our own today.

Now I would like to briefly discuss some examples of recent discoveries in the archaeology of early Egypt.

At Adaïma in Upper Egypt both predynastic dwelling areas and cemeteries have been properly excavated and published which allows us to compare the results from those different contexts and validate or modify previous conclusions based mostly on funerary data¹⁷.

¹⁵ W. Petrie, *Naqada and Ballas*, London, 1896, 9.

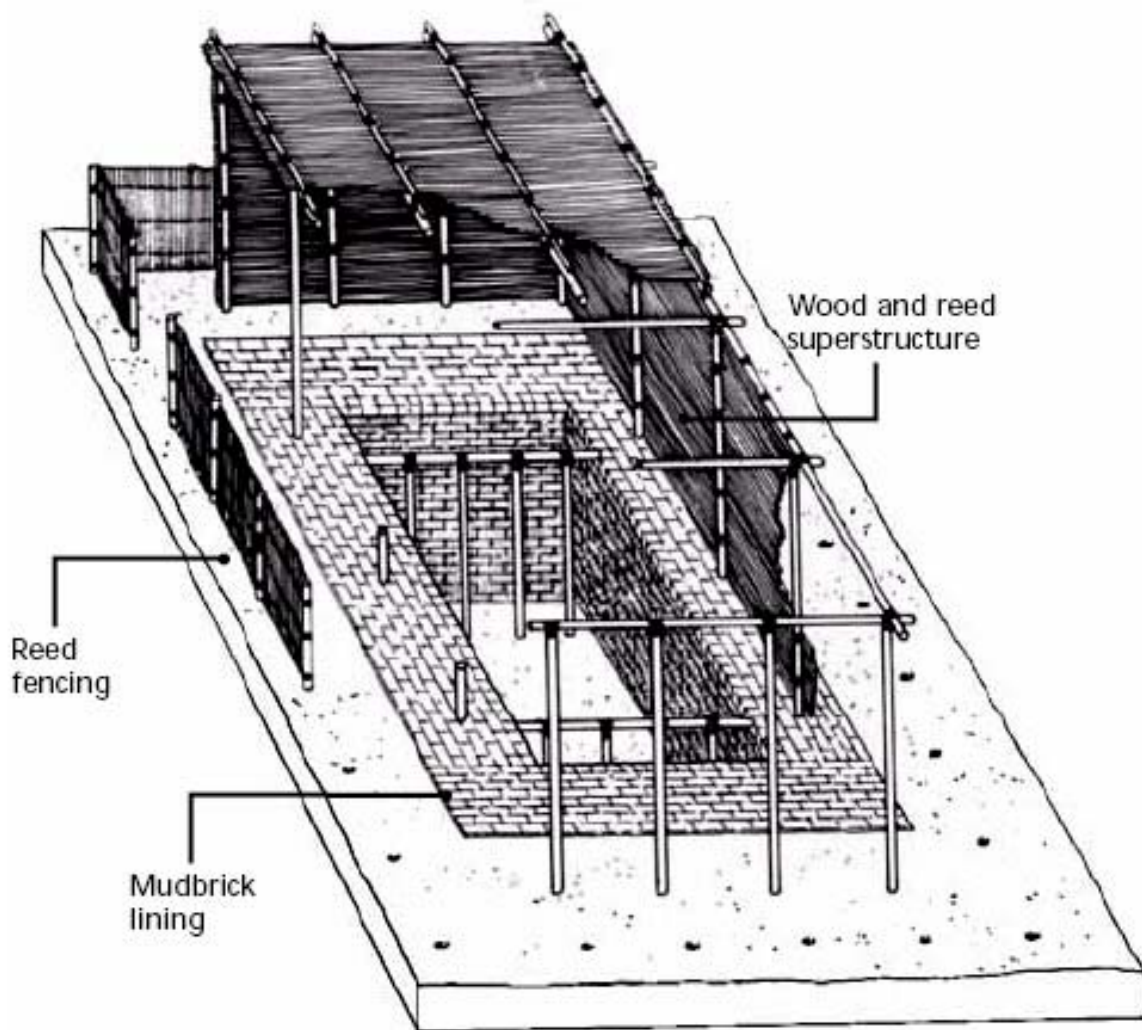
¹⁶ G. Brunton, *Matmar*, London, 1948, 16.

¹⁷ B. Midant-Reynes and N. Buechez, *Adaïma*, 2 Vols., Cairo, 2002.

At Hierakonpolis¹⁸ a team of scholars has made significant discoveries that throw important new light on the place that was one of the centres of political and economic power in predynastic Egypt.

The discovery, among many others, of the earliest brewery in Egypt dating back to Naqada II times, of the graves of two elephants, as well as that of other animals, perhaps an expression of the control exercised by the local regional rulers over the chaotic world of nature, the discovery of evidence for the superstructure of an elite predynastic tomb, a poorly known aspect of funerary data and many other bits of extremely interesting information together with the valuable conservation work they are doing to preserve the ancient local funerary palace of king Khasekhemuy of the Second Dynasty (the so-called Fort), speak of the results this work has already brought about to improve our understanding of ancient Hierakonpolis.

¹⁸ R. Friedman, *Excavating Egypt's early kings*, in B. Midant-Reynes and Y. Tristant (eds.), *Egypt at its Origins 2*, Leuven, 2008, 1157-1194.



In the Delta the work in many sites provides evidence to show that Lower Egypt was far from being the backwater at this time that many previously thought it was and Tell el Farkha is a good example¹⁹.

What was perhaps the second oldest brewery in Egypt was found there as well as remains of a settlement, cultic buildings, dwellings, tombs of which the elite ones exhibit a degree of wealth that rival the richest found in Upper Egypt, gold plated images of local rulers who enjoyed the benefits of the trade with Western Asia.

¹⁹ K. Cialowicz, The nature of the relation between Lower and Upper Egypt in the Predynastic Period, A View from Tell el-Farkha, in B. Midant-Reynes and Y. Tristant (eds.), *Egypt at its Origins* 2, Leuven, 2008, 501-513.





As you can see from what I have been saying here, I am confident that every year, every decade will bring about dramatic new discoveries that will help fill many of the gaps we still have in our knowledge of the origins of ancient Egyptian civilization.

We live indeed in exciting times.

