

# A Short History of Egypt

## *Part I: From the Predynastic Period to the Old Kingdom*

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Spring 2009

(This document last revised December 2, 2008)

### 1 The Predynastic Period

Two broad phases of history in Predynastic Egypt are observed, and they are named after the town of Naqada, in Upper Egypt between Abydos and Thebes, where artifacts from both phases were found in distinct excavations. Naqada I culture has small-scale village agriculture and not a very complex large-scale social system. This culture had developed well-made stone tools and fine earthenware pottery, but no evidence indicates relations with people outside the Nile valley.<sup>1</sup>

Naqada II culture, on the other hand, shows signs of relations and “cultural boundaries” with the Nubians to the south, and it is during this phase that the Two Lands developed as aggregates of the smaller nomes. There is also much evidence of trade, both between the Two Lands and with the inhabitants of Sinai, Palestine, and even Mesopotamia. It is in late Naqada II culture that we find the invention of the *serekh*, the first formal way of writing the name of the king. A cemetery at Abydos is believed to contain the tombs of late Naqada II rulers, which may explain the prominence of Abydos in later Egyptian religion.<sup>2</sup>

During the predynastic period, the “pit-burial” developed for the common people of Egypt, and it remained in vogue for much of pharaonic history. The deceased was curled up in fetal position and buried in a simple pit dug in the sand in the desert to the west of civilization. Some very simple goods—generally some pots and rudimentary toiletries—were interred along with the person. Some planks of wood were put over the pit when they could be spared (wood was always a valuable commodity in Egypt), the pit was covered with a mound of sand and loose stones, and that was that. This simple mode of burial was elaborated over time for the royalty, as we shall see.

The limestone head of a ceremonial mace (a hammer-like weapon consisting of a heavy weight at the end of a stout handle) was found in 1894 at Nekhen. This object depicts a Naqada II king of Upper Egypt labeled as “Scorpion” (*Serk*) inaugurating the construction of a canal. This object is the primary inspiration for the very different Hollywood character of “The Scorpion King”.

The Two Lands each had patron deities. Lower Egypt paid homage to Set, originally seen as a fierce storm god, but largely benevolent; he used his might to keep the forces of chaos at bay and to guard the frontiers of Egypt. Upper Egypt’s chief god was Horus, a falcon god, whose domain included the sun and the sky. While there is evidence of rivalry between the two states, they did use a common written language and were culturally very similar.

### 2 The Unification and First Dynasty

The Two Lands were finally united by a pharaoh whom Manetho calls Menes. Two archaeologically attested pharaohs have been considered likely candidates for Menes: Horus Narmer and his son,

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<sup>1</sup>Baines, John, and Málek, Jaromír. *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*. Facts on File, 1989, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 30.

Horus Aha. Early Egyptologists felt Narmer was the unifier; then for some time the evidence pointed more strongly at Aha. In recent years, the balance of the evidence seems to be swinging back to Narmer.<sup>3</sup>

The excavations at Nekhen yielded an object made of green schist, usually described as a “palette”, inscribed for Narmer. The palette depicts the king, wearing the White Crown of Upper Egypt, striking down a foe, and then wearing the Red Crown of Lower Egypt in a parade, reviewing the captives and booty taken in his conquest. A mace-head of Narmer’s was also found with hieroglyphs indicating that 120,000 men and 400,000 oxen were captured. Furthermore, a mysterious figure near Narmer might represent the princess of Lower Egypt, Neithhotep, whom Narmer married to solidify his position, though this identification is uncertain.

The rulers of the First Dynasty moved the capital to the city of Memphis, near the border of the Two Lands. Their burials are primarily at Saqqara, near Memphis, though they continued to build *cenotaphs*, or “false tombs”, at Abydos, to be symbolically close to the predynastic rulers buried there, and in turn, close to the gods.

The royal tombs of the Archaic period are in general of a type called *mastabas*,<sup>4</sup> owing to their long rectangular shape. Little remains of many mastabas today, because they were largely composed of mud-brick, which has not endured. Smaller tombs were built in the immediate vicinity of the mastaba to house the immediate servants, family members, and sometimes even pets<sup>5</sup> of the deceased. The bulk of the populace continued to use pit-burials.

The façade of the mastaba was built in imitation of that of palaces at the time, with rectangular “arches” or colonnades. Under the superstructure of the mastaba was a shaft leading to a simple subterranean burial chamber. The superstructure itself contained a number of chambers used for storing burial goods, including some storehouses for grain.

### 3 The Second Dynasty: Civil and religious discord

The Second Dynasty saw continued development of the necropoleis at Saqqara and Abydos, but much confusion prevails about the other events of the dynasty. The founder of the dynasty was Horus Hotepsekhemwy (“the two powers are at peace”), whose name suggests that he hoped to put an end to strife between the people of Upper Egypt, who worshiped Horus, and those of Lower Egypt, who worshiped Set.

He may not have been very successful. Later in the dynasty, a king took the throne as Horus Sekhemib (“powerful in heart”), but later changed his name to Set Peribsen (“hope of hearts”), replacing the image of Horus atop his *serekh* with one of Set. It would seem that internal unrest in Egypt had divided the nation once more between Set-worshippers and Horus-worshippers, that is, Lower and Upper Egypt.

We should not overlook the most obvious possibility: that Sekhemib and Peribsen were two different kings. However, the fact that separate tombs have not been found, combined with the stronger evidence that pottery and other artifacts during “both reigns” are indistinguishable in style, and the presence of the word *ib* in both names drives the more common view that they were one man.

The Second Dynasty ends with another name change. Peribsen was followed by Horus Khasekhem (“appearance of power”), who changed his name to Horus-and-Set Khasekhemwy (“appearance of two powers”), the only pharaoh to use both deities in his title. It appears that Khasekhem undertook military action: one of his monuments claims that 47,209 northerners were killed in his campaigns, which is a staggering number, especially considering that pharaonic Egypt never had more than a handful of millions of people. After this, he married a Northern princess named Nimaatpeh, and changed his name, with both gods depicted atop his *serekh*. Finally, he took the extra title Nebwyhotepemef, “the two ladies are at peace in him”, referring to the patron goddesses of the Two Lands.

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<sup>3</sup>See Jacques Kinnaer, “Which Was Menes?”, *KMT* 12:3 (fall, 2001), p. 74.

<sup>4</sup>From the Arabic word for “bench”.

<sup>5</sup>Aldred, Cyril. *The Egyptians*. Thames and Hudson, 1984, p. 88.

## 4 The Third Dynasty: Dawn of the Old Kingdom

Typical of the late Second Dynasty, there is confusion and conflicting evidence regarding how it ended and who succeeded it. The first certain king of the Third Dynasty was Horus Netjerykhet, called Djoser by later dynasties of Egyptians. During his reign, the still-living queen Nimaathep held the title of “Mother of the King”, making it likely that he was the son of the last ruler of the Second Dynasty, Khasekhemwy.

Djoser’s reign saw the prominence of the most famous non-royal person in pharaonic history: Imhotep (“who comes in peace”), the king’s *vizier*, or “prime minister” or “chancellor”. He is recognized as the architect who designed and supervised the construction of the Step Pyramid for Djoser. He is also credited as being a doctor, priest, scribe, sage, poet, and astrologer. One of Djoser’s inscriptions calls him “the first one under the king, the administrator of the great mansion, the high priest of Heliopolis, the chief sculptor, and the chief carpenter”. Most outstandingly, Djoser permitted (perhaps even ordered) that Imhotep’s names and titles be carved next to his own, and in lettering of the same size. It was said that he could diagnose and treat over 200 diseases, perform surgery and dentistry, and manufacture medicines from plants. Not long after his death, he was worshipped as a minor deity. By around 500 BCE, he had actually replaced Nefertum as the son of Ptah, the patron god of Memphis, and his worship continued in Roman times. Even the early Christians and Arabs paid respects to his memory.

Imhotep’s great achievement, the Step Pyramid, was the “next step” in the evolution of the royal burial from the mastaba. By using stone as the primary material, Imhotep was able to create a series of mastabas, one atop the other, creating a monument like nothing the world had seen before. But Imhotep went beyond the pyramid itself, creating an entire complex of subsidiary temples, storehouses, and tombs to “support” the pyramid. The pyramid complex includes a *serdab*,<sup>6</sup> a chamber which contained a statue of the king and had holes in the north side angled just right so the statue could “see” the circumpolar stars, which were likened to the immortal gods, because they never set.

## 5 The Fourth Dynasty: The Great Pyramids

Sneferu, the founder of the Fourth Dynasty, is best known to us today for his prodigious building program. The so-called “Collapsed Pyramid” or “Ruined Pyramid” at Meidum is thought by many Egyptologists to be his first building project. Originally, the Meidum pyramid was a step pyramid, but it appears that Sneferu later ordered the steps to be “filled”, an attempt at building a *true pyramid*.

A somewhat disputed theory is that the pyramid actually collapsed catastrophically and the mound of rubble around the base is what remains, but no bodies, scaffolding, tools, or the like have ever been found in the mound. The more widely accepted theory is that the pyramid was “quarried” for stone in later times; indeed, the Arabic writers of the 1100s CE report that the pyramid had five steps, while today it has only three.

Sneferu also built two pyramids at Dahshur, not far from Meidum, and these were planned as true pyramids from the start. The first is known as the “Bent Pyramid” owing to the way its slope angle changes partway up from 55° to about 43°. This change is believed to be due to subsidence that was noticed while the pyramid was still being built; the accurate cutting and laying of the blocks was not yet what would be seen at Giza. The second, and the first successful true pyramid, is the North Dahshur Pyramid or “Red Pyramid”, so called for the red color of its sandstone blocks in the sun, and built entirely at the “safer” reduced slope.

Sneferu’s son Khufu is even more famous; the Great Pyramid at Giza was built for him. The largest pyramid ever built, it contains millions (estimates vary from two to four million) blocks of sandstone,<sup>7</sup> most of them weighing more than two tons apiece. Several smaller “satellite” pyramids were built in its shadow, most likely for Khufu’s wives. Two large boats were also buried in pits

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<sup>6</sup>From the Arabic word for “cellar.”

<sup>7</sup>Considered in detail by A. P. Sakovich, “Counting the Stones”, *KMT* 13:3 (fall, 2002), p. 53.

adjacent to the pyramid, and were discovered in the 20th Century. The boats are believed to have been used to transport the royal mummy and funeral goods up the Nile at the time of the burial.

While there is much controversy regarding the purpose and technique of pyramid construction, no more satisfactory hypotheses have been proposed than the traditional ones: that the pyramids were built as monuments and tombs for the pharaohs, and were accomplished using systems of ramps, levers, and rollers which were simple in principle but sophisticated in planning and execution.

Khufu's successors added to the monumental complex on the Giza plateau. Khafre built the second-largest pyramid, an associated funerary temple, and (according to most Egyptologists) the Great Sphinx. Khafre's pyramid is the central of the three great ones at Giza, and appears in most photographs to be larger than Khufu's because it stands on bedrock some ten meters higher than Khufu's, while the pyramid itself is less than three meters shorter. Khafre is perhaps even better known, however, as the builder of the Great Sphinx. The Sphinx's head is carved to a scale of 30:1—unprecedented in Egyptian art, and not to be repeated until the New Kingdom.<sup>8</sup>

Menkaure added the third pyramid at Giza, and a number of larger than life size statues of Menkaure, his wife, and various goddesses, of surpassing quality, were found at the pyramid. The remaining pharaohs of the Old Kingdom continued building pyramids in Lower and Middle Egypt, and presiding over the solar religion which characterized the period. However, for unknown reasons, Menkaure's immediate successor Shepseskaf returned to Saqqara for his tomb and built a gigantic mastaba, known today as the Mastaba el-Fara'un, instead of a pyramid.

The last ruler of the Fourth Dynasty was Khentkawes, probably the widow of Shepseskaf, the first woman believed to have ruled Egypt alone. Khentkawes's tomb at Giza is carved into an outcropping of bedrock that remained when the rock around it was quarried for the construction of the pyramids. The presence of a "town" of maintenance settlements and tombs in its vicinity suggests that the queen was indeed regarded as a ruler in her own right and that the Egyptians did not see anything particularly amiss about the arrangement. The queen's titles are listed in the tomb as "The King of Upper and Lower Egypt, and Mother of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt". This suggests that the founder of Fifth Dynasty, Userkaf, was actually her son, a fact lost in the ancient lists of rulers.

## 6 The Fifth and Sixth Dynasties: Feudalism and Decline

Sneferu and Khufu had large families, with numerous brothers and nephews who were installed by the pharaohs as ministers and regional governors. In the Fifth Dynasty, however, the officials came from non-royal families and had greater familiarity with the pharaoh. Cyril Aldred<sup>9</sup> mentions that officials could now boast of kissing the pharaoh's foot, not just the ground he walked upon. Private tombs became more and more elaborate, including not merely lists of names and titles and funerary provisions, but expanded religious texts and biographical notes.

While the entirety of Egypt had nominally been the pharaoh's property from the Unification onwards, with all of its produce taxable for the royal coffers, the increasingly important courtiers were given gifts of land grants, exempted from taxation for all time. Furthermore, a growing proportion of the royal treasury was devoted to maintenance of the pharaonic funerary complexes—lots of "money" spent on feeding, housing, and clothing priests just to offer sacrifices to the deceased kings and to recite prayers both to them and for them, to say nothing of giving the priests themselves a worthy burial.

To reduce the pharaoh's spiritual reliance on priesthods, the Pyramid Texts began to appear at the end of the Fifth Dynasty, first showing up in the pyramid of Unas.<sup>10</sup> These were texts (often described as "magical spells") which ensured that the king would have eternal life and all that he might need to live it to the fullest: food, wine, refreshing cool breezes, the ability to assume the form of a falcon and soar through the heavens, and so forth. These are the precursor of the funerary texts found in later periods of Egyptian history, which we shall consider later in the course.

<sup>8</sup>Lehner, Mark. *The Complete Pyramids: Solving the Ancient Mysteries*. Thames and Hudson, 1997, p. 127.

<sup>9</sup>Aldred, op. cit., p. 118.

<sup>10</sup>Also spelled "Wenis"; these are alternate transliterations of the Egyptian.

The regional governorships became hereditary rather than appointed, and instead of seeking burial near the pharaoh's pyramid, the governors had tombs cut for themselves in their own capitals. They even paid craftsmen from Memphis to come and execute the art and architecture when those craftsmen were not immediately occupied by the king.

Late in the Sixth Dynasty, the pharaoh Pepi I<sup>11</sup> married two sisters, daughters of a nomarch, rather than one of his own cousins or sisters, and made their brother the vizier. His successors Merenre and Pepi II were the sisters' sons. This further increased the importance of the growing noble class.

The final straw in the collapse of the Old Kingdom was perhaps the tremendous longevity of Pepi II and the difficulties that occurred when he was succeeded. His was the longest reign in human history; he ruled Egypt for ninety-four years. The growing complexity of administration caused him to split the vizierate into two offices, one vizier for each of the Two Lands. The lack of taxation on regional nobles, and the drain on the royal treasury by religious officials, continued to take their toll on Pepi's authority, and foreign relations, particularly his campaigns into Nubia and later policies of pacifying that country, made matters even worse. It appears that by the end of his reign, the power of the central government was coming apart altogether.

According to the Turin King-List Papyrus, Pepi II was succeeded by Merenre II, possibly his son, who reigned for only one year. Merenre II may have been married to the queen Nitokerti, whom the Turin Papyrus calls the last ruler of the dynasty. Manetho ends the dynasty with a queen "Nitocris" and credits her with building the "Third Pyramid", but Jacques Kinnaer<sup>12</sup> has suggested that this is due to confusion of her throne name *Menkare* with the name of the known builder of the third Giza pyramid, Menkaure. Whatever the case may be with these two rulers, the death of Pepi II was the breaking of the dam which led to the flood of confusion known today as the First Intermediate Period.

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<sup>11</sup>I omitted Pepi's name from the list of Greek/Egyptian names in the introductory lecture. The Greek version of the name "Pepi" is *Phiops*.

<sup>12</sup>Kinnaer, Jacques. *The Ancient Egypt Site*. On the Internet: <http://www.ancient-egypt.org/>, 1997 ff.