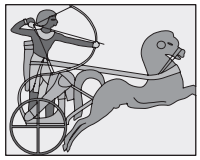

1
Introductory Concerns

> Rather make my country's high pyramides my gibbet and hang me up in chains. (Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* Act 5, scene 2)

The tourist to Egypt who sails up the Nile from Cairo to Aswan gazes upon an abundance of grandiose monuments, often remarkably well preserved despite their enormous antiquity. Many of them are icons of ancient Egypt and have been so for centuries. Shakespeare's audience recognized the image Cleopatra conjured up when she called the pyramids her gallows. Modern guided tours always include these same pyramids, as well as the great Amun temple at Luxor with the royal tombs across the river, and the much smaller temple of Isis at Philae between the Low and the High Aswan dams. These monuments, spread over hundreds of miles, are all different from what surrounds the traveler at home, alien in their function, their form, and their use of images and writing. They share so many characteristics that it is easy to forget that their builders lived countless years apart. More time passed between the construction of the pyramids at Giza and the building of the Philae temple we now see, than between the latter temple's inauguration and us.

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1.1 What is Ancient Egypt?

Chronological boundaries

It may seem easy to look at something – a monument, coffin, statue, or inscription – and call it ancient Egyptian, but it is not so simple to draw the boundaries of ancient Egypt both in time and space. In the late 4th century AD, the Roman emperor Theodosius issued an edict closing all Egyptian temples and dispersing the priesthood. His act ended the knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphs, which could no longer

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be taught. Can we take the withdrawal of official support for ancient Egyptian cults and writing systems as the end of ancient Egypt? Theodosius's edict only affected a small minority of people that had long been under threat. Ancient Egyptian cultural characteristics had been immersed in a world inspired by Hellenistic, Roman, and Christian ideas for centuries. Certainly in political terms Egypt had lost its separate identity hundreds of years earlier. From the Persian conquest in 525 BC onward, but for brief spells of independence, the land had been subjected to outside control. In native traditions the Persian rulers were still considered part of the long line of Egyptian pharaohs, but their successors were different. Modern historians do not call the Greek and Roman rulers of Egypt pharaohs, although their Egyptian subjects continued to represent them with full pharaonic regalia. Is "Egypt after the pharaohs" no longer part of ancient Egyptian history then? Individual scholars and institutions use different approaches. Some histories of ancient Egypt end with Alexander of Macedon's conquest in 332 BC, others at the death of Cleopatra in 30 BC, yet others run into the Roman Period up to 395 AD and Theodosius's reign.

It is always difficult to draw a line after an era in history, as all aspects of life rarely changed simultaneously. More often the change in the sources that modern scholars use determines where they end historical periods. In Egypt's case the gradual replacement of the traditional Egyptian language and writing systems by the Greek language and script necessitates a different type of scholarship. Most specialists of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing do not easily read Greek sources and vice versa. Although the ancient Egyptian scripts survived after the Greek conquest of the country, there was a constant increase in the use of Greek writing, which turns the modern study of Egypt into a different discipline. Yet, Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt in many respects preserved ancient Egyptian traditions and customs, so I will include a discussion of that period in this survey.

If the disappearance of ancient Egyptian writing in the late 4th century AD heralds the end of the civilization, does its invention around 3000 BC indicate the beginning? No single event announced a new era, but from around 3400 to 3000 BC radical changes that were clearly interrelated took place in Egypt and forged a new society. Those innovations included the invention of writing, a process that lasted many centuries from the earliest experiments around 3250 to the first entire sentence written out around 2750. In the last centuries of the 4th millennium BC the unified Egyptian state arose, and that period can serve as the beginning of Egyptian history despite its vague boundaries. Naturally, what preceded unification – Egyptian prehistory – was not unimportant and contained the germs of many elements of the country's historical culture. Hence, I will sketch some of the prehistoric developments in this chapter to make the influences clear, but the creation of the state with the coincident invention of writing and other aspects of culture will indicate the start of Egypt's history here.

Geographical boundaries

Where are the borders of ancient Egypt? Arabic speakers today use the same name for the modern country of Egypt as did the people of the Near East in the millennia BC, Misr. Other people employ a form of the Greek term Aegyptos, which may derive from Hikuptah, the name of a temple and neighborhood in the city Memphis.

It is easy to equate the ancient and modern countries, but today's remarkably straight borders, which imperial powers drew in modern times, do not mark the limits of ancient Egypt. We can better envision those by using as a starting point what is and always was the lifeline of the country, the Nile. Running through a narrow valley south of modern Cairo and fanning out into a wide alluvial plain north of the city, the river enables people to farm, live in villages and cities, and build and create the monuments and other remains we use to reconstruct the country's history. From the 1st cataract at Aswan to the Mediterranean Sea it forms the core of Egypt, today as in the past. The people who lived in this core reached beyond it into the western and eastern deserts and upriver south of the 1st cataract. At times their reach was extensive, affecting distant places in the west, areas along the Mediterranean coast in the east and north, and parts of the Nile Valley deep into modern Sudan.

It is not always obvious how far ancient Egypt extended, and our ability to determine that often depends on research priorities and modern events. As tourists still do today, the earliest explorers of ancient Egypt focused their attention almost exclusively on the Nile Valley, where monuments and ancient sites are visible and in easy reach. It requires a different effort to venture into the deserts beyond the valley, very inhospitable and so vast that ancient remains are not always easy to find. Yet the ancient Egyptians traveled through this hinterland and settled in oases. In recent years, archaeologists have spent much more time investigating these zones than they did before, a deliberate shift of research strategies. Sometimes the move is less voluntary. When the modern Egyptian state decided to construct the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s, it was clear that the artificial lake behind it would submerge a vast zone with ancient Egyptian remains. Thus archaeologists rushed to the region, producing in a short time span many more data than had been collected in a hundred years of earlier research.

Despite the greater attention that archaeologists now devote to the areas of Egypt outside the Nile Valley, they still spend most of their time in the core area, and conditions in the valley dictate to a great extent how we view the ancient country. It is easy to think that Egypt was a place of tombs and temples only, as those so dominate the remains visible today. Built of stone or carved in the rocks, they are well preserved, a preservation aided by the fact that they are often located at the desert's edge, out of the reach of Nile floods and of farmers who need land for fields. Compared to tombs and temples, the remnants of ancient cities and villages, built in mud brick in a valley that was annually flooded before the construction of the Aswan dams, are paltry. Mostly buried underneath thick layers of later deposit, only small areas of them have been excavated, and we rely often on a number of settlements connected to funerary complexes in the desert to reconstruct urban and village life. Ancient Egypt was an urban society, albeit with smaller cities than elsewhere in the Near East, yet information about the conditions of the people when alive often is obscured by the mass of evidence we have on the dead.

What is ancient Egyptian history?

The question "what is history" is much too wide-ranging and thorny to address here, but before embarking on reading a book-long history of ancient Egypt it may be useful to see how it applies to that ancient culture. Less than 200 years ago many

would have said that ancient Egypt does not have history. In the early 19th century, the influential philosopher of history Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) proclaimed that cultures without accounts of the past resembling historical writings in the western tradition had no history. But the discipline has moved on enormously, and most historians today consider all literate cultures – including ancient Egypt – worthy of study. The field of "world history" goes further and includes the world's non-literate societies in its purview. This attitude erases the distinction between history and prehistory, a step whose consequences are not yet fully appreciated. It has the benefit for students of ancient Egypt that it removes the awkward problem of what sources they use in their research. Historians mostly consider textual sources to be the basis of their work, but in the case of Egypt we have to wait until the 2nd millennium BC for a written record that is rich and informative about multiple aspects of life. Archaeological and visual remains are often the sole sources for earlier periods, and they stay very important throughout the study of ancient Egyptian history. Writing Egypt's history thus requires a somewhat different approach than for other periods and places where narrative and documentary sources provide a firm outline.

This book is called "A History of Ancient Egypt," because it is clear that many other "histories" can be written, each with their own emphasis and intent. Historians can concentrate on political, social, economic, or cultural issues, each of which will provide a different picture of the society they discuss. Most basic surveys build their structure around political history and focus on the deeds of kings and their entourages. This will also be the case here, although it does not monopolize the account, and I will also address other concerns. The choices I made are personal but inspired by other treatments of the subject. Ideally, more attention would have been given to the ancient Egyptians who were not part of the elites, but this book is intended as an introduction only and hopes to inspire further reading and study.

Who are the ancient Egyptians?

When we think about peoples of the past, we intuitively try to imagine what they would have looked like in real life, to visualize their physical features, dress, and general appearance. Preconceptions very much inspire the resulting image, as is best demonstrated by how popular culture portrays ancient Egyptians and how this has changed over time. Take Queen Cleopatra, for example, the last ruler of the country at least partly of Egyptian descent. The numerous performances of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, on stage or as a movie illustrate how the picture of this woman has evolved. The 1963 Hollywood blockbuster featured the British-born Caucasian Elizabeth Taylor as the queen; in 2017, the Royal Shakespeare Company cast the English actress Josette Simon, of Antiguan descent, to play the part. The calendar an American beverage company issued in the late 20th century and entitled "Great Kings and Queens of Africa," included a depiction of Cleopatra as a black African woman. These changes in the queen's representation did not result from scholarly reconsiderations of ancient data, but from shifting perceptions in the popular mind about the context of ancient Egypt.

It was only recently that traditional scholarship started to acknowledge the African background of Egyptian culture, partly in response to world history's aim to replace dominant western-centered narratives with others that focused more on the contributions of other regions, including Africa. At the same time, primarily African diaspora communities wanted the continent's ancient history to be approached outside a Eurocentric context, and insisted, for example, on the use of the ancient Egyptian term *kemet* instead of the European one, Egypt. Initially, most Egyptologists bluntly dismissed these proposals, but in recent years a greater willingness to engage with them has developed. Museums now regularly present their Egyptian collections within an African setting, and the study on the interconnections between Egypt and the rest of Africa has intensified. This new attitude has not made it easier to visualize the ancient Egyptians, however, as their relationship with other African peoples is not obvious. While ancient Egypt was clearly "in Africa," it was not so clearly "of Africa." Archaeological and textual evidence for Egyptian contacts in the continent beyond its immediate neighbors is so far minimal and limited to the import of luxury items. The contributions of Egypt to other African cultures were at best ambiguous, and in general Egypt's interactions with Asiatic regions were closer and more evident. Was the same true for the population of the country, and did the ancient Egyptians leave any reliable data that could guide our imagination?

There exist countless pictures of humans from ancient Egypt, but it is clear that these were not intended as accurate portraits, except for some late examples from Ptolemaic and Roman times. Men and women appear in standardized depictions where physical features, hairdos, clothing, and even posture characterize them as Egyptians (Figure 1.1). The representations of foreigners are equally uniform: Nubians have dark skins and braided hair and wear earrings (Figure 1.2), while Syrians have lighter skins and pointed beards (Figure 1.3). The artists were intent upon showing the opposition between Egyptians and foreigners, not on making clear their individual appearances. The perception of who was Egyptian could change according to the intended audience. For example, a prince from Upper Nubia in the 14th century, Hekanefer, appears in two different guises. In the tomb of the Egyptian viceroy at Thebes, Hekanefer has typical Nubian features and dress, while in his own burial in Nubia he looks fully Egyptian (Figure 1.4). He wanted his own people to see him as a member of the Egyptian ruling class, whereas to the Egyptian viceroy of his country he was a Nubian subject, clearly distinct from Egyptians.

The homogeneity of Egyptians in ancient depictions is deceptive. Over the millennia, Egyptian society constantly integrated newcomers with various origins, physical features, and customs. But unless there was a reason to make the difference explicit, they all appeared alike in stereotypical depictions. They were all Egyptians, not people with Nubian, Libyan, Syrian, Greek, or other backgrounds. Some scholars have tried to determine what Egyptians could have looked like by comparing their skeletal remains with those of recent populations, but the samples are so limited and the interpretations so fraught with uncertainties that this is an unreliable approach.

Can we articulate any idea of what type of people we would encounter were we able to visit ancient Egypt? I think we should stress the diversity of the people. The country's location at the edge of northeast Africa and its geography as a corridor between that continent and Asia opened it up to influences from all directions, in terms both of culture and of demography. The processes of acculturation, intermarriage, and so

Figure 1.1 Egyptian archetypes. This pair of painted limestone statues, 120 cm high, shows a husband and wife in typical Egyptian fashion. His skin is darker than hers because he works outside, while she, as an upper-class lady, can stay indoors. She wears a tight-fitting long dress, while he has only a short skirt. Both of them are represented without wrinkles or other signs of aging and hold their hands in traditional postures. While they are clearly identified by name in the hieroglyphic inscriptions, the images are not to be understood as naturalistic portraits. Source: Scala/Art Resource

on probably differed according to community and over time. People must have preserved some of their ancestors' physique and lifestyles, and the degree to which they merged with neighbors with different backgrounds must have been variable. We cannot imagine an Egyptian population that was of uniform appearance, and the inhabitants of the north probably looked different from those of the south of the country. But somehow all these people at times saw themselves as Egyptians, distinct from people from the neighboring countries, and it is their common history we will explore.

1.2 Egypt's Geography

There is no substitute to visiting the country of Egypt to get a sense of the natural environment in ancient times, but it is important to keep in mind that what we see today is a much manipulated landscape altered over many centuries. In recent times, the building of the Aswan dams has turned the Nile into a human-controlled river,

Figure 1.2 Nubian archetype. On this 10-cm-high limestone trial piece for a relief sculpture the 14th-century artist represented a Nubian with the characteristics that were always used for a man from that region. He has specific physical features, braided hair, and an earring. Such images were produced throughout the ancient history of Egypt, although they started to show a greater variety of types when Egypt became an empire in the mid-2nd millennium. Metropolitan Museum of Art 22.2.10. Source: Rogers Fund, 1922

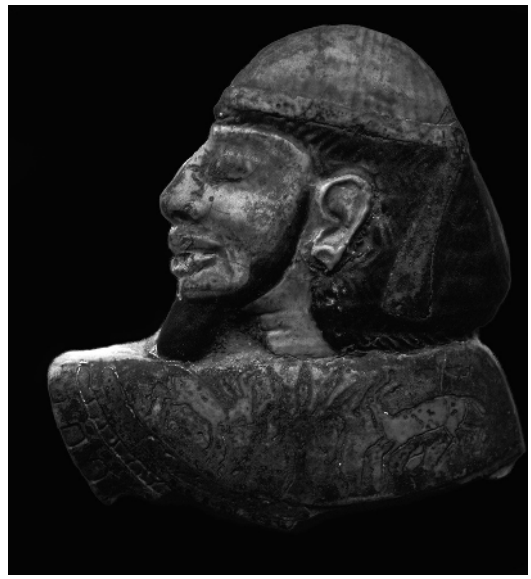

Figure 1.3 Syrian archetype. This 13-cm-high glazed tile, originally used as wall decoration for the palace of Rameses III at Tell el-Yahudiyya, shows a captive from Syria with the typical characteristics always used for the representation of such a foreigner. His facial features, beard, and headdress make him immediately recognizable as someone from that area to an Egyptian viewer. The detail of his clothing shows two gazelles facing a tree, a common Near Eastern artistic motif. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Ägyptisch-Orientalische Sammlung. Source: Art Resource

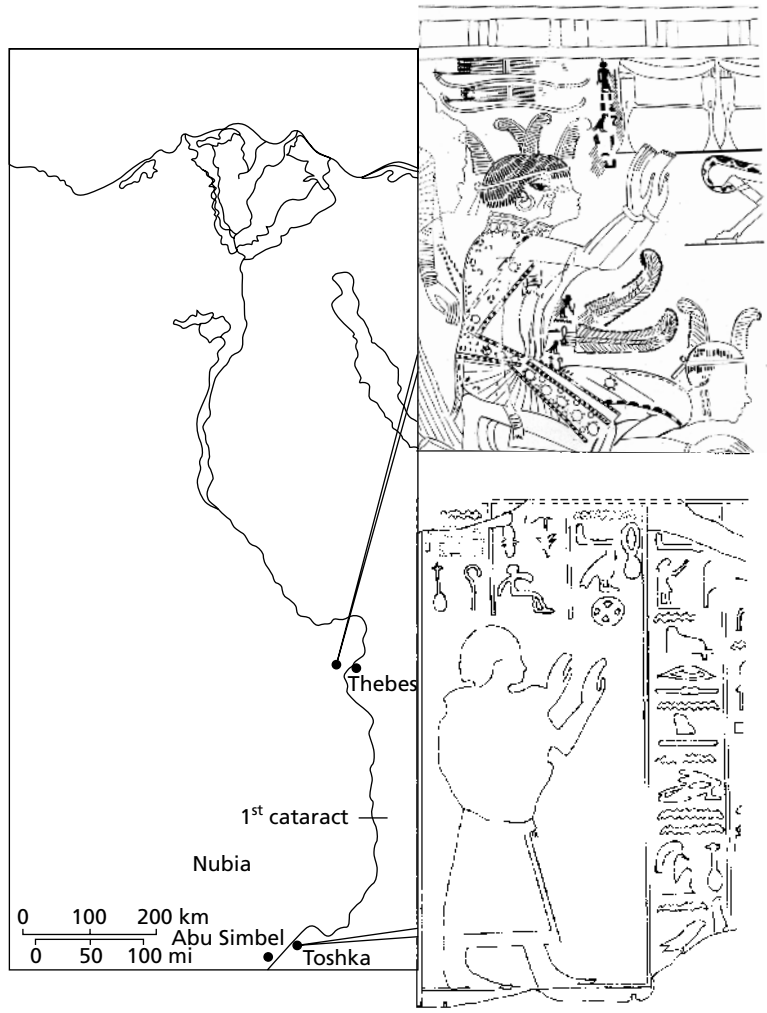

Figure 1.4 A matter of presentation. In the 14th century, images of the Nubian prince Hekanefer appear in two tombs depicting him very differently. In his own tomb in Lower Nubia at Toshka he is represented fully as an Egyptian and the hieroglyphic text states that he gives praise to the god Osiris. In contrast, in the Theban tomb of an official of Tutankhamun he is depicted as an archetypal Nubian in a prostrate posture of submission and identified as "Hekanefer, the Prince of Miam" in the accompanying text. Source: Marc Van De Mieroop

and also many other features seen today are artificial. Still, the basic features of the environment – the contrast between the fertile areas, where the vast majority of the population lives, and the deserts, which restrict access to Egypt – remain the same.

The Nile River

The Nile dictates how we can study the ancient Egyptians, and in many other respects the river shapes Egypt. Running through the eastern end of the Sahara desert, it essentially forms a long oasis. Wherever its water reaches the soil can be

farmed, where it does not reach the earth is parched and it is impossible to grow anything on it. The contrast is so stark that one can stand with one foot in lush greenery and with the other in lifeless desert. The ancient Egyptians called the fertile area "the black land" (*kemet*), the desert "the red land" (*deshret*).

The Nile is the longest river on earth: some of its sources are located south of the Equator and it runs for more than 4000 miles (6500 kilometers) northward to empty into the Mediterranean Sea. In Egypt it has two distinct parts. The upstream part in the south, Upper Egypt, flows through a valley between 5 and 10 miles wide that is lined by cliffs restricting its course. Upper Egypt stretches for some 600 miles from modern Aswan, located at a natural obstruction in the river that we call the 1st cataract, to Cairo. There are six numbered cataracts on the Nile, one in modern Egypt and five in modern Sudan. Cataracts are where the river is very shallow and rocky islands and boulders obstruct the water flow. These zones of narrow channels and rapids make navigation difficult and dangerous, and consequently they constitute clear natural boundaries. Throughout ancient history the northernmost 1st cataract made up the southern border of Egypt's heartland, and anything south of it was usually considered a different country. South of Aswan the Nile Valley is very narrow and it is only upstream of the 3rd cataract that it is broad enough to include fields that allow sufficient farming to support substantial settled communities.

North of Cairo, the river's course is radically different. No longer enclosed by cliffs, it spreads out into a huge triangle, which we call the Delta, with multiple branches. Because of its location downstream, the region is called Lower Egypt, bordering the Mediterranean Sea. The eastern- and western-most points of the Delta are 150 miles (250 kilometers) apart, and the shortest distance between Cairo and the sea is 100 miles (160 kilometers).

All agricultural land in Egypt is made up of silt that the river annually deposited during its flood, before the building of the High Aswan Dam. The river's water derives from three main sources. The White Nile, which originates in Central Africa, is most constant in its flow and does not carry much silt. But two tributary rivers, the Blue Nile and the Atbara that stem from the Ethiopian highlands, bring a sudden influx of water from heavy summer rains and both carry lots of silt. In Egypt the Nile is at its lowest level in the months of May and June and starts to rise in July because of rain in Ethiopia. It reaches its highest point in mid-September and recedes by mid-October (Figure 1.5). Its timing is in perfect harmony with the agricultural cycle, which makes farming in Egypt much less complex than in nearby regions and almost always guarantees that the population's needs are satisfied.

At one point in Upper Egypt the river water escapes the valley to flow into a large natural depression to its west, the Fayyum. From early prehistory on, the accumulated water allowed for farming along the edges, and starting in the early 2nd millennium BC, state initiatives tried to extend the agricultural zone by diverting the water into canals and controlling its flow. In the Ptolemaic and Roman periods these projects were very successful, and the Fayyum became the breadbasket for Egypt and beyond.

The desert

The areas outside the reach of the Nile flood are arid desert. West of the Nile stretches out the Sahara, mostly uninhabitable but for its northern fringe along the

Figure 1.5 Before the building of the Aswan dams the height of the Nile River's flooding was of great importance as it determined how much agricultural land received water. At times the flood was so high, however, that its inundation caused destruction. The photograph here shows the Nile in flood near the Giza pyramids on October 31, 1927. Photograph by Mohammedani Ibrahim, Harvard University – Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition. Photograph © 2010 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Source: Giza Archives

Mediterranean Sea. In the vast desert plateau are some depressions where underground water surfaces to form oases (through Greek and Latin the English term probably derives from the ancient Egyptian word *ouhat*). Up to 250 miles (400 kilometers) west of the valley they constitute places that the Egyptians controlled and settled, sometimes with penal colonies. Routes between the oases made it possible to travel from north to south avoiding the Nile Valley. The eastern desert is much less extensive as it borders the Red Sea some 60 to 200 miles (95 to 320 kilometers) east of the Nile. In Egypt its northern part is a hilly plateau, while the southern part contains high mountains that are difficult to cross. Dry riverbeds, *wadis* in Arabic, cut through these mountains, however, and make travel from the Nile to the Red Sea possible, although water is in short supply from wells only.

Under current climatic conditions, the eastern and western deserts cannot support any farming and even the nomadic herding of animals is difficult. The eastern desert was a source of metals, including gold, and hard stones, however, and thus of great interest to the Egyptians. East of the Delta the eastern desert leads into Asia, across the modern Suez Canal. The Sinai desert to its east is mostly very inhospitable, and some parts of it contain high desolate mountains. Travel through Sinai is limited to routes along the Mediterranean coast. The region contains some very desirable resources, such as copper and the semi-precious turquoise stone. Although Sinai formed a buffer between Egypt and Asiatic states, it was always in Egypt's orbit.

Climate

With its location just north of the Tropic of Cancer, Egypt is hot, especially in the summer, when average temperatures in Aswan easily reach 40° Celsius. The country

also receives very little rain and none of it in the summer. The current conditions did not always exist, however. Before the late 3rd millennium BC, the climate was wetter and enabled people to live outside the valley collecting wild resources and doing some farming. The environment of Egypt in prehistory and early history was thus different from that in the later historical period, and for the earliest developments scholars have to look beyond the valley to understand what went on.

Climate change and its effect on people all over the world is a very prominent concern today, and, not surprisingly, climatologists and historians are exploring evidence of it in the past. Because Egypt is fully dependent on the Nile River for its agriculture, decreases in the amount of rainfall in Africa have great consequences there, and historians have started to use climate change as an explanation for the ups and downs of the ancient Egyptian state. Others remain skeptical, not denying that there were variations in the climate, but questioning the impact on the political situation. Did the Old Kingdom end because of a decrease of Nile floods, for example (Key Debate 4.1)? Obviously, natural conditions were very important to the ancient Egyptians, and the climate was a major factor in those. Using climate change as the sole explanation seems to be a mistake, but we should indeed take it into account.

Frontiers and links

Hemmed in by deserts and the sea, Egypt has a degree of isolation many other countries lack. In the west, access is mainly restricted to a narrow strip along the coast; in the east, the high desert separates it from the Red Sea coast. The Mediterranean coast was also a frontier, and no harbor is known on it before the 1st millennium BC. Previously, boats had to sail inland before they could anchor. The 1st cataract delineated Egypt's southern border on the Nile. Traffic in and out of the country was thus easy to control, and from early on kings established border posts at the 1st cataract and on the eastern and western points of the Delta to monitor it.

On the other hand, by its very location, Egypt was at a crossroads. Any overland movement between Africa and Asia had to pass through it. Thus early hominids from Africa crossed Egypt during their migration across the globe, while in the Middle Ages and later Egypt was the bridge between the heartland of the Middle Eastern empires and their North African possessions. Through the Mediterranean, Egypt was connected by sea to Southern Europe. In the late 2nd millennium BC, ships sailing along the eastern Mediterranean coast went from Egypt to Greece and the Aegean islands passing by the Syrian coast. In later times, overseas traffic between Egypt and Europe was intense, with huge cargo ships securing Rome's grain supply. The Red Sea, reached through valleys in the eastern desert, gave access to regions of east Africa, the Middle East, and farther east. Such contacts are especially well attested in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, but recent explorations of harbors on the Red Sea coast have shown that they did not start then. The ancient Egyptians liked to portray themselves as separate from the rest of the world, with a long local pedigree and immune from outside interference, but that was a false image. Throughout its history Egypt was exposed to external influences as foreigners were drawn to the country. The longevity of ancient Egyptian culture was partly due to the readiness of others to absorb it.

1.3 The Makeup of Egyptian Historical Sources

Anyone with an interest in ancient Egypt is aware of the vast quantity of material that is available to a student of the culture. Many museums have an abundance of objects on display, numerous TV documentaries show a seemingly unlimited array of tombs, wall paintings, statues, and the like, and whoever travels to Egypt itself sees ancient remains almost everywhere. Writing is very prominent in all this material: the ancient Egyptians liked to carve and paint texts onto their monuments. A major temple was incomplete if it did not have texts and images on every surface. There are multiple ongoing projects with scholars copying all the inscriptions and relief scenes of particular temples and tombs. The University of Chicago has been doing so in the area of Luxor since 1924! This embarrassment of riches does not mean that every aspect of life is well documented, however, or that the sources are easy to use in historical research. Nor are they evenly spread over the millennia of Egyptian history. As I take writing as the historian's primary source, I will focus my remarks here on the written record.

Papyri and ostraca

The papyrus is almost as iconic of ancient Egypt as is the pyramid. The paper-like – the words are obviously related – sheets of plant fibers hammered together are fragile and would not have survived were it not for Egypt's dry climate. The survival of papyri depends on where they ended up after use. Undoubtedly, the ancient Egyptians kept business records and accounts in their houses and offices in towns and villages. Those were situated in the floodplain and consequently are now submerged underneath Nile deposit. Even if one could excavate the buildings where the papyri were stored, the humidity would have destroyed them. Likewise, there are few papyri from the Delta. The large majority of finds derives from the desert areas, where people included papyri in tombs, or, more rarely, from administrative offices near burial complexes. In the Ptolemaic Period, large amounts papyri were also used to enclose mummies in what we call cartonnage. The artisans bought them up in bulk to make a kind of papier-mâché coffin surrounding human and animal corpses, and mixed all sorts of writings together. These have survived because they were buried in the desert.

Papyrus was expensive. People regularly reused rolls, writing on the reverse and in spaces left blank in the midst of a text. They thus combined writings with very different content. We find, for example, magical spells written on the back of a papyrus with administrative records. This repeated use can lead to confusion; when various documents appear side by side but written over several decades, do they relate to each other or are they fully independent? For daily purposes the Egyptians also used other materials that were cheap and abundant. Those included primarily the shards of broken pots and flat chippings of limestone on whose surfaces one could write in ink. Scholars refer to them as ostraca, from the Greek word for potshard, ostracon (Figure 1.6). Most often they contain brief business or legal documents, but can have much more elaborate writing on them. For example, someone copied most of the literary *Tale of Sinuhe* on a limestone flake, 35 inches (88.5 centimeters)

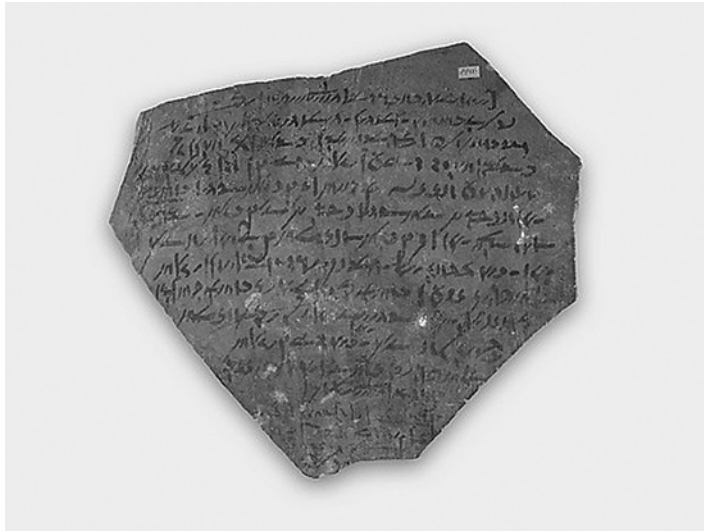

Figure 1.6 As papyrus was expensive, potshards and flakes of limestone provided a cheap alternative for writing down texts, mostly for everyday concerns, or making sketches. An innumerable amount of such objects, called ostraca after the Greek word for potshards, have survived. This example, dated December 6, 127 BC and written in Demotic script, records an oath sworn by a man named Patasetat that he did not steal a piece of cloth. It measures 17 by 19 cm and the scribe used a piece of broken pottery to write on. Metropolitan Museum of Art 21.2.122. Source: Rogers Fund, 1921

high with 130 lines of text on it. Many ostraca contain sketches that often reveal an artistic spontaneity that is absent in official monuments.

Because of the problems of conservation over time, the record of papyri and ostraca available today is not an accurate reflection of what was written in antiquity. Only the materials that were kept in the desert survive, and those deal primarily with issues concerning the dead. If they are administrative, they often record the mortuary cult. Some archives recording the private affairs of people survived by accident by being discarded in desert tombs.

Literary works likewise survived when they were deposited in burials. Funerary compilations such as *The Book of the Dead* are thus more likely still to exist than other literature. An exceptional community of artists and workmen who built the tombs in the Valley of the Kings lived in the desert at modern Deir el-Medina. For those people, we have the remains of their everyday writings, and they are extensive and wide-ranging. Beside papyri, more than 10,000 ostraca were excavated in the village. The writings include letters, business contracts and accounts, but also a good number of excerpts of literary texts. Although this was an unusual community, with especially literate members, the documents probably reveal what would have been available elsewhere in Egypt. Some towns and villages from the Greek and Roman periods are the source of papyri, but these were almost all excavated unscientifically in the early days of Egyptian archaeology. Together with the official state records that make up the mass of papyri used in mummy cartonnage, they give a more complete picture of ancient writings than for earlier periods.

Monumental inscriptions

The most visible remains of Egyptian writing are on monuments, the buildings, statues, steles, and coffins that are so numerous and evident in museums and in the Egyptian countryside. These are most often official statements, honoring the donor of the monument or celebrating a military adventure, the construction of a building, or similar public accomplishments. The integration of text and image, jointly proclaiming a message, is greater in Egypt than in most other cultures. A statue, for example, is almost incomplete without the written name of who it represents. Conversely, the statue itself can serve as a hieroglyph of writing. The inscribed name is carved in such a way that the figure of the statue appears at the end. In the Egyptian writing system, a person's name needs to be followed by the determinative signifying a man or a woman. With male statues the sculpture itself often performs that function.

Historical criticism

Official statements require a skeptical reading. One of the hardest tasks for the scholar of ancient Egypt is to subject the textual record to historical criticism. Often, a single source, or a set that presents the same point of view, provides the only information on an event or a practice. It is thus difficult to ascertain whether the outcome of a military campaign was as glorious as the author proclaims or even whether the campaign took place. In other fields of historical research, the rule that a single testimony is no testimony is often invoked, but this attitude would leave ancient Egyptian history in tatters, as often we have to rely on one source only. Historians need to use great caution. They cannot just accumulate individual statements about a king's reign and present them as a reconstruction of the period.

A particular challenge arises with the use in historical reconstructions of what are clearly literary compositions. The Egyptians did not produce accounts that professed to be accurate investigations of the past. They did write stories, however, portraying historical figures. For example, in a Middle Kingdom piece of wisdom literature, *The Instruction Addressed to King Merykara* (see Chapter 4), Merykara, a known ruler of the preceding First Intermediate Period, hears a description of troubles and military action against internal Egyptian and foreign enemies. It is tempting to accept this narrative as fact and use it to explain the decline of royal power in the First Intermediate Period that other sources also imply. But the literary source was not written in order to explain history to a later audience. Its purpose was to inspire royal and elite conduct that could deal with adversity, and the challenges described may have been purely fictional. In earlier years of Egyptian scholarship the narrative was taken at face value, but today scholars use the *Instruction* as a source of information on the period of its composition, rather than on the period it depicts. The study of the First Intermediate Period needs to be based on other evidence.

1.4 The Egyptians and Their Past

Stories like *The Instruction Addressed to King Merykara* show that the Egyptians had knowledge about their past and that they knew who had ruled the country in earlier times. This is not surprising, of course, as they could see ancient monuments and writings as we do today. But especially in the Late Period, in the 1st millennium BC, the past also had a special status, giving authority and prestige. King Shabaqo of the 8th century, for example, had a narrative about creation carved on a stone slab claiming that it was a copy made from a worm-eaten papyrus. The author of the text, *The Memphite Theology*, used a language modeled on that of the Old Kingdom, but it is most likely that the text was of a much later date and was presented as ancient to give it greater clout. In the 1st millennium BC as well, people had their tombs decorated with imitations of scenes from 3rd-millennium tombs, carefully copying the ancient styles.

King lists

The prestige of antiquity especially applied to the office of kingship. All the kings of Egypt were part of a lengthy sequence of universal rulers that went back to the start of history and even before. The Egyptians expressed this concept clearly in what we call king lists, a set of documents from the entirety of Egyptian history, which did not all have the same function in antiquity. The group of documents that survived is small and includes mostly fragmentary records. More material is bound to appear; very recently a scholar recognized a piece of a list written in Demotic during the late Ptolemaic Period in a collection of papyrus scraps.

Around 1290, King Sety I of the 19th dynasty had himself depicted with crown prince Rameses, to become Rameses II, on the walls of the temple at Abydos (Figure 9.1). The scene shows them giving offerings to a long line of 75 predecessors, each one represented by a cartouche, arranged in correct chronological order. The list is not complete, but edits history to remove discredited rulers, such as the foreign Hyksos and four or five kings of the 18th dynasty, which had ended in Sety's youth. The 18th-dynasty rulers omitted were Queen Hatshepsut, whose joint reign with Thutmose III was anathema to the idea of exclusive rule, and the kings associated with the so-called Amarna revolution. A list comparable to Sety's, now damaged, stood in Rameses II's temple at Abydos (Figure 1.7), and a somewhat earlier representation at Karnak shows King Thutmose III making offerings to the statues of 61 predecessors, not in chronological order.

Non-royal people could also honor past kings. In his tomb decoration at Saqqara, an official of Rameses II depicted the cartouches of 57 kings from the first to the 19th dynasty in correct order, but for the inversion of the 11th and 12th dynasties. A tomb in Thebes shows the priest Amenmose making offerings to the statues of 12 kings, including all those then considered legitimate kings of the 18th dynasty (as well as the queen of the dynasty's founder) and one of the Middle Kingdom. These lists are all evidence of a cult for royal ancestors, and they show knowledge of the names of past rulers and their correct sequence, although there was no attempt to depict them all.

Figure 1.7 This image shows a detail of a fragmentary king list carved on a slab of limestone that was found in the temple of Rameses II at Abydos. The preserved part of the list, 135 cm high and 370 cm long, contains 34 royal names in cartouches. The upper row lists rulers of the First Intermediate Period; the lower row kings of the 18th and early 19th dynasties, omitting Queen Hatshepsut and the Amarna kings. British Museum, London EA 117. Source: Werner Forman / Art Resource, NY

Sety's list at Abydos starts with Menes, then considered the original unifier of Egypt, but kingship did not begin with Menes in Egyptian opinion. The Palermo Stone, a monument whose fragments are spread over several museums, lists predecessors of the kings of unified Egypt: first men wearing a crown later associated with Lower Egypt, then men wearing a crown later associated with Upper Egypt. For what we call the historical period, the stone provides year-by-year annals, giving rulers' names and short entries on a special event for each year, as well as a measurement of the Nile's inundation height that year. The list ends in the 5th dynasty, which may have been when the stone was carved, although some scholars suggest that it dates much later.

The two longest and most complete king lists from Egypt take the concept of kingship even further back in time. The Turin King List and Manetho's *History of Egypt* start their lists with gods, who ruled for thousands of years. The sequence they provide reflects ideas of creation and the struggles between Horus and Seth that appear in other sources. After the great gods came lesser gods and assorted creatures, such as spirits, until Menes emerged as the first historic ruler. These lists thus assert that kingship arose at the time of creation.

Both the Turin King List and Manetho's *History of Egypt* attempt to give a full chronicle of Egyptian kingship including the names of all rulers and the length of their reigns. The list now in the museum of Turin, Italy, is a lengthy papyrus from the 13th century BC, which scholars often call the Turin Royal Canon. It allegedly was complete when discovered in the early 19th century, but is now in many pieces. It

lists some 300 names of kings, from Menes to the end of the 17th dynasty, sometimes giving the time they ruled to the day. The list does not sanitize history and includes the despised Hyksos kings. At times it sums up, for example, 955 years and 10 days from Menes to the end of the 8th dynasty, which shows a concern to subdivide the long sequence of rulers.

The idea of subdivision is fully developed in the final, and today most influential, king list of Egypt. In the 3rd century BC, an Egyptian priest, Manetho, wrote a history of his country in the Greek language, the *Aegyptiaca* or *History of Egypt* (see Chapter 13). Preserved only in quotations and paraphrases of later authors, it attempted to account for Egypt's history with a king list into which Manetho inserted narratives. The latter often recall earlier stories about Egyptian rulers and show that Manetho had access to writings now lost. The long king list was a massive reconstruction of the names of rulers and the length of their reigns. For periods when power in Egypt was centralized, Manetho lists individual royal names; when it was diffuse, he regularly mentions only the number of kings, their capital, and the total number of years they ruled. His list includes all rulers from Menes to the last king, whom Alexander defeated in 332 BC, the Persian Darius III Codoman.

Special Topic 1.1 *The five names of the kings of Egypt*

Although Manetho gives a full list of the kings of Egypt, we cannot always equate the names he provides with those we find in other king lists and in monuments. That is due to the fact that Egyptian royal names, at least from the Middle Kingdom on, contained five elements (there are some variations over time). For example, for a ruler of the 18th dynasty we call Thutmose IV the names were:

1. as the god Horus: Mighty Bull, perfect of glorious appearance (= Horus name);
2. as the Two Ladies, that is, the vulture and the cobra representing Upper and Lower Egypt: Enduring of kingship like the god Atum (= *nebty*-name);
3. as the Golden Horus: Strong of arm, oppressor of the nine bows.

In those three epithets he was shown as a god or as a pair of goddesses, while the final two names were written in cartouches, a symbol that a king was involved.

4. the first name preceded with two signs that indicate Upper and Lower Egypt, the sedge plant and the bee: Menkheprura, which means "The enduring one of the manifestations of Ra" (= Prenomen, given when he ascended the throne);
5. the second name, the king's birth name with the indication "son of Ra": Thutmose, greatly appearing one; beloved of Amun-Ra (= Nomen).

Manetho could use any of the five names, often in abbreviated form, as the basis of his designations of kings; other king lists mostly used the prenomen, while early monuments mostly gave the Horus name. Especially for the Early Dynastic Period, it is often unknown what the correspondence is between Manetho's names and those on monuments.

Because Manetho wrote in Greek, he reproduced Egyptian names in a manner not fully true to the original. Some of his names are better known in wide circles than the more

accurate renderings. For example, he calls the builder of the Great Pyramid at Giza Cheops, while anglophone Egyptologists prefer to render the ancient Egyptian name as Khufu.

The modern rendering of Egyptian names – royal and non-royal – is a problem. Ancient Egyptian writing does not indicate vowels (see Chapter 2), so we do not know with certainty where to insert vowels between consonants and what vowels to use. Moreover, we do not know what some consonants would have sounded like. Opinions have changed over time and there has never been full agreement, while scholars writing in various modern languages follow distinct systems. Many different spellings of names appear: for example in English scholarship, Thutmose, Thutmosis, Tuthmosis, and Thothmes; Rameses, Ramesses, and Ramses. These inconsistencies may confuse especially newcomers to Egyptology, but quite soon they cease to annoy.[1]

Modern practice also often uses a distinctive term to refer to the kings of Egypt up to the Greek period: Pharaoh, often without the definite article. This habit derives from Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible, where the king of Egypt is called Pharaoh. The Greek term rendered the ancient Egyptian *per'aa*, which meant "great house" or "palace." In the 18th dynasty, "palace" became a common way to designate the king, who was at the center of the institution, and in the 22nd dynasty it became an epithet of respect. Before the Graeco-Roman Period ancient Egyptians hardly ever gave their kings the title pharaoh, but in modern studies pharaoh and king are synonyms. It is only because the special term is so broadly known that scholars continue to use it.

The most influential feature of Manetho's organization was his division of the list of kings into "dynasties." He was the first to use this Greek term for a group of rulers in order to designate a succession of kings who shared common attributes, mostly that they represented several generations of a family. He broke the long sequence of rulers up into 31 dynasties.[2] His sections for each dynasty start with the number of kings and the capital city. Then he lists the names of individual rulers and numbers of years, and at the end he sums up the total number of years. For example:

Dynasty 23, 3 kings from Tanis
Petoubates: 25 years
Osorkho: 9 years
Psammous: 10 years
Total: 44 years[3]

The subdivisions are mostly obvious as they acknowledge when a new family seized power or when the capital moved. But the reasons for Manetho's changes of dynasties can be unclear to us. He sometimes starts a new dynasty although the first king was the son of the preceding king in the list. Manetho or his sources must have noted breaks that are not evident to us.

Today's scholarship adheres closely to Manetho's organization of Egyptian history into dynasties. All people, events, monuments, and so on are provided a chronological context by stating to what dynasty they belonged. Subjects such as imperial policy or administrative structure are regularly studied as they are attested in a specific dynasty. The notion of dynasty is so strong that scholars now speak of a dynasty

0 to group together rulers who preceded Manetho's Menes. While dynasties provide a handy means to subdivide Egypt's long history, the rigorous adherence to Manetho's list can impose a restricted and misleading framework on historical analysis. Many surveys move from one dynasty to the next (sometimes giving each dynasty a separate chapter) and enumerate events reign by reign as if Egypt's history could only be an annotated king list, as it was in Manetho's work.

Egyptian concepts of kingship

All Egyptian king lists, including Manetho's, reflect an ideology of kingship that is not historically accurate to our way of thinking: there can only be one king at a time because his rule is universal. That was indeed true in times of centralized power, but in other periods multiple political centers and regional dynasties coexisted. For example, in the mid-2nd millennium the 13th through 17th dynasties overlapped. The 13th and 17th dynasties ruled the south, while the 14th shared power in the Delta with the 15th and 16th dynasties, which were both made up of foreigners. Manetho provides only six names of kings, those of the 15th dynasty, for the entire period, but he lists the five dynasties in succession with numbers of kings and regnal years. His totals come to 260 kings, who would have ruled for 1590 years. Manetho presented these kings as if they lived one after the other, because Egyptian tradition did not acknowledge the existence of parallel kings.

The Egyptians saw each reign as a complete era. When a king came to the throne, it was as if the world was created anew and would go through a full cycle of existence. All the king's deeds in the new era were in essence performances of royal duties, which were like ritual acts that all his predecessors had already performed. This attitude led to assertions that can mislead the modern historian. Kings could claim accomplishments of a past reign as their own. King Pepy II of the 23rd century, for example, portrayed himself as defeating Libyan enemies, presenting a scene also attested from the reign of King Sahura who lived two centuries earlier. The 7th-century King Taharqo likewise duplicated Sahura's representation. While we see this as a falsification of history, the Egyptians considered each representation a ritual re-enactment of feats that were part of normal royal behavior. Kings like Rameses II started their reigns with massive building projects because they wanted to show that creation was repeated when they took power.

The modern concept of history is very different from the ancient Egyptian; we do not see the accession of each king as a new era that repeats earlier reigns. Moreover, although dynastic divisions provide a handy means to organize a millennia-long history, they do not always reflect the historical changes that interest us most. We try to see continuities and patterns over longer periods of time, and hope to determine how people built upon the work of their predecessors. One of the hardest challenges to a modern writer of Egypt's history is how to take documentary evidence that is as a rule organized on the basis of who reigned and to mold it into a narrative that seeks to identify long-term trends in diverse aspects of life. A listing of events reign by reign may have a clear structure, but it provides a skewed image of history.

1.5 The Chronology of Egyptian History

The dynastic lists do provide a great help in the reconstruction of the relative chronology of Egypt's history. We can almost always establish the sequence of rulers within a dynasty and of successive dynasties, if they did not overlap. Thus we know in what order the pyramids near Cairo were constructed, for example, something that would be much harder to find out from other evidence. The parallel dynasties are obviously a problem, but our understanding of Egyptian history is now secure enough to determine when these occurred, although we do not always know how long they coexisted.

Modern subdivisions of Egyptian history

Manetho's king list presents Egypt's political history as a millennia-long succession of dynasties that all functioned under the same circumstances. In the mid-19th-century, a German scholar, Karl Josias von Bunsen, decided to break up this sequence into distinctive cycles of sequential and of parallel dynasties and created the modern system of subdividing Egypt's ancient history into Kingdoms and Intermediate Periods. Today all Egyptologists use his terms Old, Middle, and New Kingdom to indicate when the state was unified, that is, when there was a single ruler for Upper and Lower Egypt, and they see a similar situation later on in the Late Period, when foreigners regularly ruled Egypt as a unified kingdom. In between those periods of centralized power, scholars recognize Intermediate Periods, when various kings ruled simultaneously in multiple centers. The Early Dynastic Period precedes the entire sequence. Although the principle underlying these modern subdivisions is clear – centralized or decentralized power – there is less agreement on their chronological boundaries. Certain elements are standard: the 4th to 6th dynasties are part of the Old Kingdom, the post-reunification 11th and 12th of the Middle Kingdom, and the 18th through 20th of the New Kingdom. But some scholars, for example, include the 7th and 8th dynasties in the Old Kingdom, while others see that phase as part of the First Intermediate Period.

These designations impose a mental framework on Egypt's history that is largely erroneous. The alternation between Kingdoms and Intermediate Periods suggests that there were only two modes of political structure, and that all Kingdoms and all Intermediate Periods were alike. Perhaps this was to an extent true for the Kingdoms, which the Egyptians themselves saw as repetitions of the same conditions, but there were great differences between the various Intermediate Periods. Hence, in recent years scholars have suggested renaming the First Intermediate Period as the Period of the Regions, for example. The designation Late Period also suggests that it was an epilogue and that Egypt's true history ended with the New Kingdom, an outlook no longer accepted. This universally accepted periodization should thus be used as a handy tool, but not uncritically.

Absolute chronology

Although the relative chronology of Egypt's history is secure, the absolute dates are not and remain a subject of much research and debate. Theoretically, Manetho could have allowed us to build a secure timeline counting back from Alexander's conquest

of Egypt, but his disregard of overlapping dynasties, as well as the numerous variants in the lengths of reigns in the different excerpts of his work, make this impossible. The chronological information from the other king lists is too fragmentary to provide reliable figures. So, the absolute chronology needs to be reconstructed with other sources. From the mid-2nd millennium BC on, it is sometimes possible to associate events in Egypt with neighboring cultures in the Near East (whose absolute chronology is firmer), especially in the 1st millennium when various Near Eastern powers invaded the country. In the second half of the 2nd millennium, dated evidence of diplomatic contacts with the Near East helps, but the occasions are few.

Another source for dating Egypt's history in absolute term derives from ancient astronomical observations of when the Sothis (Sirius or Dog Star) re-emerged on the eastern horizon just before sunrise after 70 days of invisibility, around July 19 in the modern calendar. Egypt's administrative calendar counted only 365 days in a year – rather than the 365¼ days of a full astronomical year – and thus the moment Sothis appeared shifted over time. Scholars used to take the very few recorded observations as firm anchors for dating periods, but now they are more skeptical of their value. Also, the technique of measuring the decay of C14 in wooden and other objects can be of help, and very recently a major restudy of that evidence appeared. There are thus multiple systems in use in various publications appearing today; each one has its defenders but none is absolutely certain.[4]

1.6 Prehistoric Developments

Because of Egypt's location at the junction of Africa and Eurasia, many hominid migrations out of Africa passed through the country. It is no surprise then that early human stone tools were found there. The evidence of human activity in the Nile Valley from 700,000 BC to the beginning of Egyptian history around 3000 BC is scarce, however, and at many times nonexistent, and we cannot see a continuous development from these early times. The growth of an Egyptian culture only becomes clear in the last millennia of prehistory, from the mid-6th millennium on. From 5400 to 3000 is a very long time, but developments in Egypt were rapid when compared to other prehistoric societies. They include a shift in subsistence from hunting and gathering to farming, and the evolution of a social and political structure with a clear hierarchy of power and wealth that culminated in the Egyptian state. Throughout these two-and-a-half millennia we do not see abrupt cultural changes or the sudden appearance of populations that brought new practices with them, so the evolution must have been indigenous, albeit with influences from the outside. The processes of formation of the Egyptian state accelerated around 3400, and we will look at them in the next chapter. Here we will focus on earlier events.

The beginning of agriculture

By 6000 BC the Egyptian climate and the Nile River had settled in patterns similar to the modern, although until 2200 it was more humid than today. It is only in the mid-6th millennium that agriculture emerged in the country, substantially later than

in the neighboring Levant, where people started to live in permanent farming communities by 7000 BC. The relative richness of wild natural resources may explain why the Egyptians adopted the new technology later than people in other areas surrounding the Levant. The Nile provided fish and waterfowl, and in the desert lived game, while wild sorghum and other plants could be harvested. The technology of farming was clearly an import into Egypt as it involved plants and animals not available in the wild there: the primary domesticated animals were sheep and goats, and the first cereals cultivated were emmer wheat and barley, foreign to Egypt and imported from the Near East. The domestication of cattle may have been inspired by practices farther west in Africa. The adoption of agriculture had different consequences in Upper and Lower Egypt.

In the Delta and the Fayyum, people started to live a sedentary lifestyle like their neighbors in the Levant in the 6th millennium. They built villages and obtained most of their food from the cereals they grew. Few settlements are known, and they are small when compared to those in the Levant, but they show that from around 5400 the northern Egyptians practiced farming. In Upper Egypt and Nubia people primarily engaged in pastoralism, the herding of cattle, sheep, and goats. This made them more mobile, and we do not find village settlements near the Nile Valley. The people spent much time in the desert – more fertile than it is now – and most of the permanent remains we have of them are tombs which they dug near the Nile Valley. The graves show that people produced nicely polished pottery and the first representations of humans in figurines, and that they chose to place valuable mineral and metal objects with the dead. Similar burial practices appear from Middle Egypt to Khartoum in Sudan, which suggests that the people over this large area shared common beliefs. We call the material culture Badarian after the archaeological site of el-Badari in Upper Egypt where it was first excavated. One enigmatic monument of this early period which these pastoralists constructed – now the source of various cosmological theories – is the stone circle at Nabta Playa in Lower Nubia. Today it stands it the middle of a desolate desert some 60 miles (100 kilometers) west of the Nile, but when built in the early 5th millennium the natural environment provided seasonal pasturage to herders. The placement of the stones, up to 2 meters high, required communal organization, and the entire construction shows a common belief system, probably associated with cattle, many of which were buried there.

In the Nile Valley, the extensive use of agriculture with permanent settlements nearby only arose after 4000 BC. It was the result of the Upper Egyptian pastoralists moving close to the river because of the drying of the climate. This development only occurred north of the 1st cataract, distinguishing Egypt from Nubia, where the economy remained focused on pastoralism. In Egypt, urban centers appeared and people went to live near the zones that the Nile flooded annually to work in the fields. Until the building of the Aswan dams, agricultural practices in Egypt were very different from those in the neighboring Near East and Europe. The country received too little rain to rely on its water to feed the crops, and the Nile was the farmer's lifeline. That river's cycle provided everything needed, however, and the Egyptians relied on natural irrigation. The water rose in the summer, washing away salts that impede plant growth and leaving a very fertile layer of silt on the fields bordering it. The water receded in time for the crops – all grown in winter – to be sown and it left the fields so moist that they did not require additional water while

the plants grew. Farmers harvested crops in the late spring and the fields were ready for a new inundation by July. The cycles of the river and the crops were in perfect harmony. The only concern was the height of the flood, which dictated how much land received water. The ideal flood was somewhat more than 8 meters above the lowest river level. If the river rose too much, villages and farms would be submerged; if it rose too little, not enough land would be irrigated.

People could help the river by leading water in canals and building dykes around fields in order to regulate when the water reached the crops. Some of the earliest representations of kings from around 3000 may show such work (Figure 1.8), but they do not constitute major projects to extend agricultural zones substantially. Artificial irrigation that used canals and basins to store and guide the water into areas that the river could not reach only appeared later in Egyptian history, and scholars debate when exactly it started. Probably the increased aridity in the later 3rd millennium pushed people into controlling the water more. Most important was the management of water in the Fayyum depression; during the Middle Kingdom and especially in Greek and

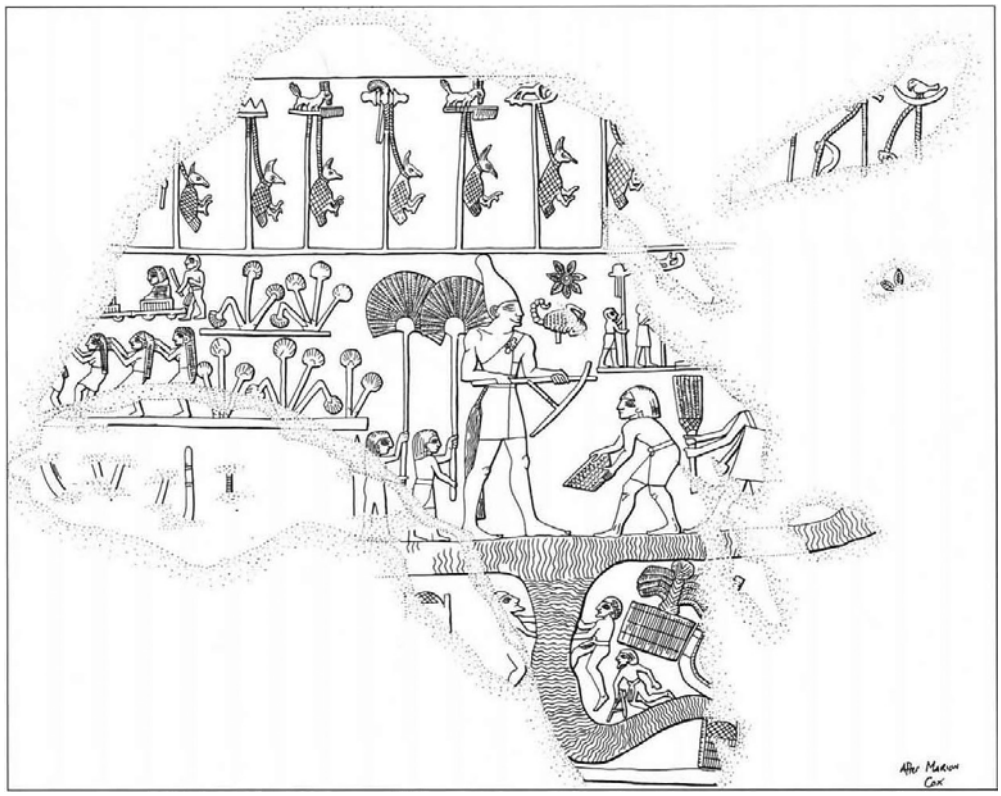

Figure 1.8 A 25-cm-high ceremonial mace head carved in limestone depicts a king, identified as Scorpion by the sign in front of his face, apparently digging an irrigation canal with a hoe, surrounded by attendants. On top of the image are standards that symbolize various regions of Egypt, with its inhabitants symbolized by birds dangling from a noose as a sign of subjection. The object dates to ca. 3000 BC and was excavated in Hierakonpolis. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Drawing by Richard Parkinson. Source: Almendron

Roman times, the state dug extensive canals to drain excess water and lead it to otherwise infertile sectors. Irrigation practices throughout Egypt basically remained the same for most of ancient history until the Romans introduced the waterwheel.

Naqada I and II periods

The most extensive remains of the 4th millennium are cemeteries, including a massive one with some 3000 tombs at the site of Naqada in Upper Egypt. This site gave its name to the archaeological culture that characterizes the last centuries of Egyptian prehistory. Scholars subdivide the Naqada period into I (3800–3550), II (3550–3200), and III (3200–2900), with further subdivisions (IIIA, IIIB, etc.) to acknowledge changes in the material culture. The changes were gradual and the period divisions do not necessarily reflect major cultural differences. The archaeological periodization is thus a chronological framework within which historical processes need to be situated, not a principle by which to understand the processes.

The earliest Naqada burials show the beginnings of later Egyptian practices. The dead are facing west and gifts are set beside them. The manner of burial and the quality and quantity of grave goods demonstrate the changes in Egyptian society best. At first corpses were just placed in shallow pits, but over time the treatment of some bodies became much more elaborate. In Naqada II the first evidence of wrapping them with linen appears, which would ultimately lead to full mummification by the 4th dynasty. Tomb structures came to signal social distinction. While the majority of people remained buried in simple pits, some tombs became large and complex and after 3200 would develop into major constructions with multiple chambers and, for some, a superstructure that marked them clearly in the landscape. The larger tombs were surrounded by smaller and simpler ones, probably in which to bury people who had served the central tomb's owner in life. The grave goods accompanying the dead most clearly show how people's wealth started to differ substantially. While the majority received a few pots, next to the bodies of some individuals were placed objects such as stone mace heads and palettes (flat slabs seemingly used to mix cosmetic paints) carved in the shapes of birds and animals. The distinctions between burials increased over time, which must reflect differences in wealth and status of the living. These processes of social differentiation would culminate in late prehistory and lead to the development of the Egyptian state.

While Naqada I was a regional culture, Naqada II remains appeared throughout Upper Egypt. It is clear that larger settlements existed near the cemeteries, and those at Naqada, Hierakonpolis, and Abydos were the most prominent. One tomb in Hierakonpolis, tomb 100, was especially impressive because of its painted wall decoration, which displayed boats, animals, and fighting men. A man is depicted holding two lions with his bare hands, an artistic motif that scholars interpret as a sign that the buried person was a leader of the community. Archaeological assemblages show that the inhabitants of the Delta still adhered to a different culture, which we call Ma'adi, although they exchanged goods with Upper Egypt. They had close contacts with Palestine and imported copper from there as well as highly prized goods from farther afield, such as lapis lazuli from Afghanistan. They traded some of these commodities on to Upper Egypt.

Special Topic 1.2 *Egyptian city names*

Thebes, Hierakonpolis, Memphis ... We do not refer to cities with their ancient Egyptian names, but mostly with Greek designations. The Greeks used several ways to formulate the names of places in Egypt. When a city was most famous as the center of worship of an Egyptian god, they regularly named it after a manifestation of that god, often the animal form. Hierakonpolis meant "the city of the falcon" because it was a cult center of the god Horus, who was represented as a falcon. The Egyptian name was Nekhen. Heliopolis was "the city of the sun," after the sun god; its Egyptian name was Iunu.

The Greeks could base their names on ancient Egyptian designations of an entire city or an important structure within it, and they tried to imitate the original sound. Such names sometimes replicated those of cities in Greece itself. Egyptian Abedju became Abydos, a city name also found in northern Greece. Memphis, the city near the pyramids in the north, derived its name from Mennufer, King Pepy I's pyramid at Saqqara (a modern Arabic name that derives from Sokar, the god of the necropolis). In late Egyptian language Mennufer became Memfe, which the Greeks rendered as Memphis. The Egyptians also referred to the city as Ankh-tawy, "The Life of the Two Lands," because of its location at the junction of Upper and Lower Egypt.

At times, we do not know why the Greeks choose a name. The Egyptians called the religious center of the Middle and New Kingdoms Waset. The Greeks referred to the place as Thebes, which is also the name of one of the most important cities in central Greece. Although some scholars suggest that the Egyptian name of a district of Waset inspired the Greeks, it is possible that the city's leading status was at the basis of the selection.

Sometimes we use the modern Arabic designation of a site as the primary name to refer to a place. Thus scholars most often speak of el-Kab and el-Amarna, which are the names of archaeological sites that contain the remains of the ancient cities of Nekheb and Akhetaten respectively. The modern Arabic name can contain traces of the ancient Egyptian one. For example, modern Qift derives its name from ancient Egyptian Gebtu, which became Kebto or Keft in Coptic. Other names show what impressed the later inhabitants in the ancient remains. The city Luxor derives its name from Arabic al-Uqsur, which means "the palaces."

Our modern designations are thus a mixed bag that we tend to use indiscriminately, and we mostly ignore their source. The ancient Egyptians often tried to indicate what they thought to be a city's most important characteristic. For example, Naqada was near the city Nubt, which means gold, and it was called so because of its location across the Nile from the entrance of a *wadi* leading to gold mines. That may explain the area's wealth in late prehistory, but our modern term conceals that fact.

By 3400 then, all of the elements of later Egyptian culture were in place. People knew how to farm relying on the Nile, they lived in settlements in the valley, and they buried the dead nearby. Their material remains show that Upper and Lower Egypt were distinct and that in Upper Egypt there was increased social differentiation, especially visible in the ways in which people were buried. Many other characteristics of later Egyptian ideology and world views probably also developed in these prehistoric times. In order to understand these ideas better we have to study the more elaborate information of historic times, however.

NOTES

1. In this book I use the spellings of royal names found in Shaw, ed. 2000: 479–483.
2. Many scholars believe that Manetho only listed 30 dynasties (a round number) and that the 31st dynasty, of the second Persian occupation, was added later by the ancient authors who excerpted his work.
3. Verbrugghe & Wickersham 1996: 201.
4. In this book I follow the dates for reigns provided by Shaw, ed. 2000: 479–483, with some minor changes.