

EARLY DYNASTIC EGYPT



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CHAPTER TWO

BIRTH OF A NATION STATE

INEQUALITY IN LIFE AND DEATH

Ancient Egypt gives the impression of having been obsessed with status. From the **hierarchical scaling** seen in relief decoration to the sentiments expressed in 'wisdom literature', Egyptian civilisation made constant reference to rank, and the inhabitants of the Nile valley seem to have been acutely conscious of their relative position within the pyramidal structure of society. The formation of the Egyptian state at the end of the fourth millennium BC crystallised social distinctions in a particularly marked way, placing the king at the apex of the pyramid, almost removed from the human sphere. Beneath him the ruling élite, minor officials and peasant farmers occupied progressively lower and larger tiers. Above all, therefore, it was the socio-economic dynamic within Predynastic Egyptian society which led ultimately to the birth of Egypt as a nation state. The structure of Egyptian society in the historic period may be seen as an extreme manifestation of inequality, but the roots of the phenomenon go back to the earliest settled cultures of the Nile valley.

For most of the Predynastic period, society in Lower Egypt seems to have been relatively egalitarian. There is little mortuary evidence for status differentiation (Rizkana and Seeher 1989: 80) so if social hierarchies did exist they were not reflected in burial practices. An exception to this general picture is a grave (A35) from the site of el-Omari, dated by radiocarbon to c. 4600–4400 BC (Debono and Mortensen 1990: 81), but perhaps somewhat later, closer to c. 4100 BC (F.A. Hassan 1995: 674). The burial of an adult male contained a carved wooden staff (Debono and Mortensen 1990: 67, pls 28.1 and 43.2) which is generally interpreted as a symbol of office (Hoffman 1980: 196; F.A. Hassan 1995: 674; for a more cautious view see Debono and Mortensen 1990: 75), although the other grave goods do not seem to indicate particular wealth or status. However, despite the greater propensity for display at el-Omari than in other Lower Egyptian communities (reflected in the frequency of imported ornaments), the settlement material indicates an egalitarian social structure based on the family unit (Hoffman 1980: 195). It is likely that the man buried with a staff was someone with special power and prestige, though not necessarily of a political or economic nature.

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In contrast to Lower Egypt, Upper Egyptian society seems to have been characterised by hierarchies as far back as the Badarian period (c. 4500–c. 3800 BC). Badarian graves show variation in their size and wealth, indicating that different levels of status were accorded to the deceased (Anderson 1992). Mortuary practices generally reflect aspects of living society (but note the reservations expressed by R. Friedman 1994: 2), and we may assume that within Badarian communities certain individuals enjoyed greater status and the preferential access to resources which went with it. The presence of local élites is even more apparent in the mortuary record of the Naqada I period. The differentiation of graves in terms of size and number of grave goods is marked, and some graves were furnished with luxury or imported items. For example, a Naqada I grave at Matmar (number 3075) contained no less than 18 pottery vessels, the largest number of any contemporary burial in the local cemetery (Wilkinson 1996b: 75). In addition, the contents included an ivory tag, bracelets and an ostrich eggshell (Brunton 1948: pl. X). At several sites in Upper Egypt, particular graves were furnished with distinctive artefacts which may be termed 'badges of status'. Most common are maceheads, found in five Naqada I graves at Mahasna (numbers 6, 23, 29, 39 and 41) and one at el-Amra (number 144); but a grave of the same date at Matmar (number 3131) contained a fine axe, one of the earliest examples of advanced metalworking from Egypt (Brunton 1948: pl. XVI.47). Such a rare object would undoubtedly have conferred great prestige and reflects the status of its owner within the local Predynastic community. The stratified nature of Upper Egyptian society in the Naqada I period is also highlighted by the presence, in certain graves, of objects which seem to indicate a special role for the tomb owner, though not necessarily a position of political power. Two burials at Mahasna (numbers 33 and 42) each contained a female figurine made from clay (Ayrton and Loat 1911: 13–14). These almost certainly possessed some magical or religious significance, and their inclusion amongst a deceased person's grave goods probably indicates special status. Significantly, one of the graves (number 33) also yielded a vessel of Petrie's black-incised ware, a rare class of pottery probably imported from Nubia (Needler 1984: 224; but cf. Bourriau 1981: 23).

Within any community, élite status may be conferred on an individual in one of two ways. It may either be achieved – that is, gained by an individual as a result of his or her actions – or inherited, that is ascribed from birth as a result of descent (Renfrew and Bahn 1991: 176). In general, inherited status is considered to be a characteristic of more complex societies in which the heredity principle operates to the benefit of a restricted élite (Bard 1988: 52). The change from achieved to inherited status as the primary means of distinguishing a privileged class marks an important stage in socio-economic development. In the Egyptian case,

kingship – that hallmark of Egyptian civilisation – would not have existed without the heredity principle. If the Predynastic period is seen as a precursor to dynastic Egypt, a long trajectory with the end-point being the codification of certain cultural traits, then the earliest evidence of inherited status is an important milestone. Burials of the Badarian period show no signs of inherited status, in marked contrast to the mortuary record of the following Naqada I period. A grave at Mahasna (number 41) belonged to a family group, consisting of a man, a woman and a child. The whole family obviously enjoyed a privileged position in the local community, since the grave goods included a female figurine, several ivory objects, gold and silver beads, and a **diorite** macehead (Ayrton and Loat 1911: 16). Elaborate child burials are the clearest evidence of inherited status, since for there to be greater expenditure of time and resources on the burial of a child than of an adult must indicate that the child occupied an exalted position within the local community, and this could only have come about through descent. The largest Naqada I grave at Armant (number 1461) was identified as belonging to a child (Mond and Myers 1937: 28), and the status of the deceased is also reflected in the grave goods, which included two ivory wands. The Predynastic community buried at Armant seems to have been a small, undistinguished farming village, removed from the growing centres of political power at sites like Hierakonpolis and This/Abydos. None the less, status was clearly inherited by some members of the community, as early as the Naqada I period.

In the following Naqada II period (c. 3500–c. 3200 BC), social differentiation becomes even more apparent in the mortuary record of Upper Egypt. Badges of status continued to be buried with important individuals. For example, a large grave of Naqada IIb (c. 3500–c. 3400 BC) at Matmar (number 3129) contained a macehead made from **travertine** as well as two stone vessels (Brunton 1948: pls X, XIII.31–2), rare at such an early date. A contemporary burial at Armant (number 1466) was furnished with a number of unusual artefacts, including a gazelle skull, three painted objects made of plaster and a bed. A second grave in the same cemetery also contained a bed and it has been suggested that both burials may have belonged to leaders of the local village (Bard 1988: 52). Country-wide, the wealth of burials increases in the Naqada II period, both in terms of the number of objects interred with the deceased and their costliness (Bard 1988; Seidlmayer 1988; Wilkinson 1996b). Thus, in the Predynastic cemetery at el-Amra south of Abydos (Randall-MacIver and Mace 1902), graves of Naqada II were commonly furnished with palettes, jewellery and items made from prestige materials such as ivory, lapis lazuli, copper, silver and gold (Wilkinson 1993a: 183). Again, elaborate child burials point to a ranked society with inherited status. The wealthiest early grave (number 66) in the 'Fort' cemetery at Hierakonpolis – a cemetery representing the local population from which the élite had already been

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separated, to be buried in discrete areas – was identified as belonging to a child. The artefacts in the grave included 24 pottery vessels, palettes and copper objects (B. Adams 1987: 67–8). As Egypt progressed on the path to statehood, social distinctions became greater and these became increasingly explicit in the mortuary record. By the end of the Predynastic period, local élites – now royal families in every sense – had successfully monopolised the economic resources in their territories to such an extent that they were able to command sufficient labour to construct monumental tombs. Moreover, they could call upon the services of professional administrators to obtain prestige goods from abroad by long-distance trade, and employed skilled craftsmen to manufacture further elaborate grave goods. The birth of the Egyptian state with its rigid hierarchies can therefore be charted in the growing differentiation and elaboration of mortuary provision.

THE ICONOGRAPHY AND IDEOLOGY OF RULE

Power can be expressed in many ways, both explicit and subtle. One of the most effective ways of appealing to people's deeper feelings is through art. A repertoire of distinctive symbols, employed in a consistent and highly symbolic way (iconography) was a feature of Egyptian kingship from the earliest times. The series of carved stone palettes and ivory knife handles from the late Predynastic period are well known examples of royal iconography (Williams and Logan 1987; Davis 1989, esp. 141–9, figs 6.9–14; Cialowicz 1991). Some motifs are borrowed from contemporary Mesopotamian iconography (Boehmer 1974; Teissier 1987; H.S. Smith 1992 plus references), but the total compositions reflect a peculiarly Egyptian view of rule. The king is presented in animal form, emphasising both his coercive power and the concentration of the powers of nature in his person. By the end of the Predynastic period, many of the characteristics of Egyptian art had already been canonised, including the conventions of representation, the hierarchical scaling of figures, the use of registers to order the composition, and the attributes of kingship. However, the roots of royal iconography – and of the ideology it expresses – go back much further.

At the end of the Naqada I period (c. 3500 BC) we have the first indications that an ideology of power was being formulated by the ruling lineages of Upper Egypt. Iconography is the articulation of beliefs through the medium of art, and the earliest example of royal iconography – recognisable as such from later parallels – marks the beginning of a phase of rapid social change which, with accelerating speed, led to the emergence of classic kingship ideology within the space of some two hundred years. Recent excavations in the earliest part of the Predynastic Cemetery U at

Abydos have revealed some astonishing examples of Naqada I craftsmanship, in graves which clearly belonged to persons of high status. The burial of a premature baby (U-502) was furnished with an elaborate pottery vessel of unique appearance: eight female figurines, modelled in clay, are arranged around the rim of the bowl, holding hands; each figure is distinctive, and traces of bitumen wigs survived. Three larger, male figurines found in the same grave may once have decorated a similar bowl (Dreyer 1996). Most striking of all, however, was a vessel from another, contemporary grave. On a red background, the decoration in off-white paint included a scene of pregnant women, and a male figure wearing a tail and with a feather on his head, holding a mace in the classic smiting pose of later royal iconography (Dreyer 1995a). It is hard to interpret this latter motif as anything other than the depiction of a ruler, so close are the parallels with royal scenes on monuments from the period of state formation. To date, the Abydos vessel is the earliest example of the ruler figure in Egyptian art. It highlights not only the high standard of craftsmanship available to Upper Egyptian rulers, but also the ideological sophistication of the miniature courts that must have surrounded such individuals.

The most extensive example of early royal iconography is the series of scenes painted on the internal walls of an élite tomb at Hierakonpolis, numbered by its excavators tomb 100 and dubbed 'the painted tomb' (Quibell and Green 1902: pls LXXV–LXXIX; Case and Payne 1962; Payne 1973; Kemp 1973). Situated in a Naqada II cemetery south of the prehistoric town of Hierakonpolis and close to the cultivation, the painted tomb was one of a number of high-status burials in the cemetery, but was apparently unique in having painted decoration. The scenes covered one long wall and a cross wall half the width of the tomb. The scenes have been illustrated and reproduced many times since their discovery (for example, W.S. Smith 1949: 124, fig. 43; 1981: 31, fig. 9; Spencer 1993: 36–7, fig. 20), and their importance lies not only in the royal nature of much of the iconography but also in the Mesopotamian influence apparent in some of the motifs. The Predynastic rulers of Upper Egypt, when formulating a distinctive iconography of rule, seem to have borrowed various elements from contemporary Mesopotamian culture. Motifs such as the 'master of the beasts' – a hero figure standing between and reconciling two opposing wild animals, usually lions – are found on other royal artefacts from late Predynastic Egypt, but this particular motif makes its first appearance in Egyptian art in the Hierakonpolis painted tomb, which has been dated by its pottery to Naqada IIc (c. 3400 BC) (Case and Payne 1962). The main scene on the long wall shows a procession of boats, one of which is provided with an awning amidships, sheltering a figure who is probably the ruler and the person for whom the tomb was built. A more explicit indication of royalty is the motif of the ruler smiting a group of bound

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captives, clearly already established in Egyptian iconography as the expression of kingship *par excellence*. The Hierakonpolis painted tomb illustrates the extent of socio-political development in Upper Egypt since the end of the Naqada I period (when the Abydos painted vessel was made for a local ruler of This). Different artistic motifs depicting the ruler engaged in various activities – including a ritual water-borne procession, perhaps an ancestor of some of the later festivals of kingship – were being woven into a more highly developed iconographic repertoire which sought to express the multiple roles of the king in relation to his people and the supernatural realm. What is striking about the scenes in the Hierakonpolis painted tomb is the number of features characteristic of classic Egyptian art in the historic period that are already present some three hundred years before the beginning of the First Dynasty.

A similar set of scenes and motifs, with at least one important addition, is depicted on a painted cloth from a broadly contemporary elite grave at Gebelein (Galassi 1955: 5–42, pl. I; Aldred 1965: 39, fig. 28). The grave has never been published in detail, and only fragments of the painted cloth now survive (in the Egyptian Museum, Turin), but it is clear that it must have belonged to an individual of considerable status, probably a local ruler. A procession of boats and a ritual dance formed major parts of the original decorative scheme, while a detached fragment of cloth shows a hippopotamus being harpooned (Galassi 1955: 10, fig. 5, pl. I [top]; Behrmann 1989: Dok. 34). In historic times, the hunting of the hippopotamus was imbued with great religious significance, and there are several references to the activity from the reign of Den in the middle of the First Dynasty. It would appear that, in early times at least, hippopotamus hunting had a special connection with kingship. The Gebelein painted cloth is one of the earliest attested depictions of this event, and further emphasises the likely royal status of the object's original owner.

Both the Hierakonpolis painted tomb and the Gebelein painted cloth show close stylistic similarities to a contemporary class of Upper Egyptian pottery produced by specialist potters. This is Petrie's decorated ware, comprising closed vessels of marl clay, fired to a pale buff colour and decorated on the outside with scenes painted in red ochre (Bourriau 1981: 26–9; Needler 1984: 202–11). The earliest decorated ware appears in graves at the beginning of Naqada II (c. 3500 BC) and remains a distinctive feature of the Upper Egyptian funerary ceramic repertoire until early Naqada III (c. 3200 BC). Some examples are decorated with patterns of dots or spirals, in imitation of stone vessels. Others bear figurative decoration: flora, fauna (principally birds, but also animals such as crocodiles), and more complex ritual scenes involving human figures in distinctive postures and ships with many oars. This latter type of decoration – probably the output of a few specialist workshops – is rich in symbolism and must have conveyed some ideological meaning both to those who created

the vessels and those who received them. We cannot be certain of their precise significance, but they seem to hint at the relationship between the human, natural and supernatural spheres. This theme was also explored in the emergent ideology of divine kingship being formulated in Naqada II Upper Egypt.

TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

As well as illustrating developments in iconography and ideology, decorated ware is an important indicator of another sphere where profound changes were taking place in the courts of Upper Egypt: technology. The rise of local élites, attested from early Predynastic times, accompanied increasing **social stratification** and craft specialisation. Élites require prestige objects with which to display their social and economic status, which in turn requires dedicated, full-time specialists to make such objects. As the economic influence of certain individuals within a community increased, so did their power of patronage. A local ruler, with more agricultural produce at his disposal than was necessary for mere subsistence, could afford to employ craftsmen on a permanent basis, providing for them out of his surplus income. The release of a growing number of people from agricultural production and their engagement in specialist production brought with it major technological advances, as new skills were developed and old ones passed down from generation to generation. The development of early metalworking and the unsurpassed ability of the early Egyptians to fashion elaborate vessels from some of the hardest stones were the result of Predynastic socio-economic trends which facilitated craft specialisation.

Pottery is abundant in Predynastic contexts. Hence, the technological development which is the easiest to trace in the archaeological record is the one that occurred in the sphere of ceramic production. During the transition from Naqada I to Naqada II (c. 3550–c. 3450 BC), hand-made pottery with a high degree of variation was swiftly replaced in Upper Egyptian settlements by Petrie's rough ware, its greater uniformity and rapid domination of the ceramic repertoire being signs of mass production (R. Friedman 1992: 204, n. 8 and 1994; Adams and Friedman 1992: 327). This fundamental change marks the beginning of a process that was eventually to take hold throughout Egypt, bringing with it important socio-economic developments. Until the beginning of the Naqada II period, pottery in the Nile valley was made exclusively from alluvial clays. These have the advantage of being easy to work, shape and fire, requiring only primitive technology available at the household level. Most of the pottery from Badarian and Naqada I sites was probably made in this small-scale way. There is evidence from Hierakonpolis of specialist pottery production

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as early as the Naqada I period (R. Friedman 1994: 401), but this is unusual, reflecting the advanced state of social stratification and craft specialisation at Hierakonpolis. The output of the Hierakonpolis kilns seems to have been intended primarily for funerary consumption, probably grave goods for the local élite buried in large tombs at Locality 6 (Hoffman 1982; B. Adams 1996). This type of specialist workshop became much more common from the beginning of Naqada II, and was marked by the advent of a more complex ceramic technology, producing vessels of a new and distinctive type. Pots made from desert or marl clays require much more controlled firing conditions than vessels made from alluvial clays. The kiln must also reach a far higher temperature for the process to be successful. The appearance of decorated ware – made from marl clay – in the ceramic repertoire of Upper Egypt represents a major technological advance, one which seems to have been made possible by the increasing activity of specialist potters.

The production of pottery for a market by professional workshops had a profound impact upon methods of distribution and exchange in Predynastic Egypt. In the archaeological record, one of the most striking phenomena is the spread of Upper Egyptian ceramic technology northwards during the latter part of the Naqada II period (Kaiser 1956, 1990; Kemp 1995: 682). By Naqada IIc (c. 3400–c. 3300 BC), pottery made in classic Upper Egyptian fashion appears in graves at sites such as Haraga and Girza, near the entrance to the Fayum; whilst by Naqada IID2 (c. 3300–c. 3200 BC) it has spread to sites in the extremities of the Delta like Buto and Minshat Abu Omar. This phenomenon has been interpreted as a broader ‘cultural superposition’, reflecting a northward expansion of Upper Egyptian cultural characteristics, if not people (von der Way 1991). However, this may be an over-ambitious reading of the evidence, which merely attests the gradual displacement of indigenous, Lower Egyptian patterns of ceramic production, distribution and exchange by patterns developed in Upper Egypt (Köhler 1993: 253–4 and 1995; cf. Kemp 1995: 683). Three factors may be at work in this process. First, the technological superiority of Upper Egyptian pottery, which must have made it attractive to the inhabitants of Lower Egypt. Second, the marl clays used to make decorated ware and other specialist ceramics, such as the class of wavy-handled jars imitating imported Palestinian forms, were probably restricted to Upper Egypt where the advanced firing technology required to make marl pottery was first developed. Third, we may speculate that the specialist pottery workshops of Upper Egypt were keen to seek out new markets for their products, and the thriving communities of the Delta seem to have provided them. Certainly, the Predynastic graves at Minshat Abu Omar in the north-eastern Delta were furnished with pottery almost entirely in the Upper Egyptian style, giving rise to the theory that Minshat was an Upper Egyptian ‘colony site’ (Kemp 1995: 687; cf. Kaiser 1987),

perhaps established to conduct trade with Palestine. Vessels made from marl clay probably represent imports from Upper Egypt.

The spread of Upper Egyptian patterns of ceramic production, distribution and exchange northwards during late Naqada II accompanied other socio-economic developments which fundamentally changed the character of Lower Egyptian society. For the whole of the Predynastic period prior to late Naqada II, Lower Egypt seems to have been characterised by a generally egalitarian social structure. From the period before the advent of Upper Egyptian cultural characteristics, four substantial cemeteries have been excavated in Lower Egypt: at Heliopolis south (Debono and Mortensen 1988), Maadi and Wadi Digla (Rizkana and Seeher 1990), and es-Saff (Habachi and Kaiser 1985). The individual burials vary little in their size or wealth, and in general were furnished with few grave goods. There are certainly none of the prestige artefacts commonly found in contemporary Upper Egyptian graves. From the beginning of Naqada III (c. 3200 BC), however, this picture changes. At Minshat Abu Omar, the orientation of burials alters, bodies being laid on their left side rather than their right side (Kroeper 1988: 12–13). A simultaneous change in the pottery repertoire reinforces the division between earlier and later phases, indicating perhaps a change in the nature of funerary beliefs. Settlements excavated in the Delta also show a marked change, lightweight structures of timber and matting giving way to mudbrick architecture (van den Brink 1989). In Upper Egypt, the appearance of mudbrick architecture – in both domestic and funerary contexts – seems to be connected with the rise of élites, and it may indicate a similar process in Lower Egypt at the beginning of Naqada III (Wilkinson 1996b: 95). Several prestige artefacts, notably carved stone palettes, have been found at sites in the north-eastern Delta (Leclant 1952; Fischer 1958, 1963; Kroeper 1989), apparently confirming the existence of local élites in the area during the last phase of the Predynastic period. All the evidence seems to point towards the incorporation of the Delta into the socio-economic pattern characteristic of Predynastic Upper Egypt: local élites enjoying differential access to resources, expressing their status in the conspicuous consumption of prestige materials and in the wealth of their burials. In short, by the beginning of the Naqada III period, Upper and Lower Egypt shared the same material culture, and were increasingly characterised by the same social structure (von der Way 1993: 96). The stage was set for the process of state formation to begin in earnest.

EARLY CENTRES OF KINGSHIP

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