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CHAPTER 3

The Early Dynastic Period

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1 Introduction and Definition

The Early Dynastic Period is a relatively recent designation in the history of Egyptology. Just four decades ago, Egypt's formative phase languished in scholarly obscurity, little known, little studied, and barely acknowledged. Alan Gardiner, for instance, in his otherwise magisterial history *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (Gardiner 1961), included the period as something of an afterthought, appended to the main text as an epilogue for the sake of completeness but clearly not thought fit to occupy pole position at the beginning of the great dynastic story. Writing at the same time, even the most devoted archaeologist of early Egypt, Bryan Emery, labeled the period – somewhat dismissively and with more than a hint of embarrassment – “Archaic Egypt” (Emery 1961). For Gardiner, Emery, and other Egyptologists of their generation, ancient Egypt proper, in all its majesty and glory, began with the pyramids. What came before could be skipped over as a dark age, meagrely attested in the archaeological and textual records and of no great consequence.

If, today, Egypt before the pyramids is studied as an important subject in its own right – as an era which saw the cornerstones of pharaonic civilization crafted, perfected, and firmly embedded – it is due to the fieldwork and scholarship of a new generation of Egyptologists who, from the late 1960s onwards, set about uncovering Egypt's early civilization. Through the survey and excavation of new sites (notably Elephantine at the First Cataract, Buto in the Delta, and a clutch of sites in modern Israel), the re-examination of areas previously dug (especially Abydos and Hierakonpolis in Upper Egypt, Saqqara and Helwan in the Memphite area), and the re-assessment of existing data, Early Dynastic Egypt – as it has been appropriately re-designated (Wilkinson 1999) – has emerged from the shadows and into the spotlight of Egyptological enquiry. It now enjoys, if not equal significance with such great cultural milestones as the Old Kingdom or Eighteenth Dynasty, then at least parity of esteem in scholarly circles. It is recognized as a key period during which the mechanisms of rule, the ideology of divine kingship, and the artistic and architectural

canons of court culture were successfully formulated and promulgated, laying the foundations for the succeeding two and a half thousand years of pharaonic civilization. Early Dynastic Egypt is the subject of specialist journals (notably *Archéo-Nil*) and the focus of specialist international conferences (e.g. Hendrickx et al. (eds.) 2004). Moreover, archaeologists schooled in anthropological approaches to material culture, where a lack of inscriptions is no bar to analysis, have transformed the study of early Egypt (e.g. Wengrow 2006) and, thereby, of pharaonic civilization as a whole. In a very real sense, the study of Early Dynastic Egypt, the johnny-come-lately of Egyptology, is making its presence felt in the discipline at large.

Yet the period itself still defies precise demarcation. It is conventional to define the Early Dynastic Period as the era between the unification of Egypt and the beginning of the Pyramid Age. The difficulty is that neither phenomenon can be pinned down precisely to the satisfaction and agreement of all scholars. Some Egyptologists take a traditional view, dating political unification and the emergence of Egypt as the world's first nation-state to the beginning of the First Dynasty (be that the reign of Narmer or his successor, another long-running debate). Others interpret the archaeological evidence from places like Abydos and Hierakonpolis as indicating that Egypt was unified and governed as a single country several centuries before the traditional starting-point of the dynastic sequence. Recently discovered impressions of necropolis seals from the Early Dynastic royal cemetery at Abydos (Wilkinson 1999: 62 and fig. 3.1) suggest that, while the process of political unification certainly began before the First Dynasty (Wilkinson 2000a), the early Egyptians themselves regarded Narmer as something of a founder figure. Hence it is more than a scholarly convenience to regard him as the first king of the Early Dynastic sequence.

Similar difficulties attend the end of the Early Dynastic Period. It is true that the stepped monument of Netjerikhet-Djoser (the first king of the Third Dynasty) marks the beginning of the pyramid-building tradition and the final abandonment of the ancestral royal cemetery at Abydos in favor of the Memphite necropolis. Yet, at the same time, the Step Pyramid perhaps has more in common with its First and Second Dynasty predecessors than with the true pyramids of the Fourth Dynasty. In cultural and political terms, the transition from the Third to the Fourth Dynasty certainly represents a major break, whereas there is considerable continuity between the Second and Third Dynasties – even if Manetho was correct in asserting that the first two dynasties hailed from This while the Third had its roots in the Memphite region. For this reason, many scholars place the Third Dynasty within the Early Dynastic Period, while others restrict discussion to the first two dynasties. Of course, such debates are entirely academic. While neat chronological divisions may be useful for historians, they mean nothing – or very little, at most – when studying a civilization at the human level.

2 Historical Questions

The basic historical outline of the Early Dynastic Period is much more soundly established than even a generation ago (Wilkinson 1999: 60–105), yet major difficulties and gaps in our knowledge remain. Ironically, the First Dynasty – the most

remote period of ancient Egyptian history – is better known than the Second and Third Dynasties, but even its parameters are open to debate. One of the most contentious areas of disagreement has been the identity of Egypt's first ruler, known to posterity as Menes (Emery 1961: 32–7; Wilkinson 1999: 68). Some scholars equate Menes with Narmer, some with Aha, while others see Menes as a mythical conflation of several early rulers. Such disagreements arise, principally, because of the difficulty in correlating the names preserved in later king lists and in the Manethonian tradition (usually the *nebty* or *nesu-bity* names) with the Horus names attested on contemporary Early Dynastic monuments. Some pairings, especially in the latter half of the First Dynasty, are generally accepted, but for the earliest rulers the evidence is either capable of differing interpretation or entirely lacking.

The excavation of eight kingly tombs in the First Dynasty royal necropolis at Abydos (plus one queenly burial, belonging to the king's mother Meri(t)-neith) seems to confirm the king-list tradition of a line of eight rulers beginning with Menes; equating the names attested archaeologically (Narmer, Aha, Djer, Djet, Den, Adjib, Semerkhet, and Qaa) with this historic First Dynasty thus seems relatively certain, despite the protestations of a few scholars (e.g. Dreyer 1987: 39; 1990: 67–71). Yet, even this fundamental building block of Early Dynastic history may be shakier than supposed. Fragmentary inscriptions from the Early Dynastic necropolis at North Saqqara name a king Sneferka who is otherwise unattested in the archaeological record (Ryholt 2008). Epigraphic and contextual evidence points to Sneferka having reigned close in time to Qaa, traditionally regarded as the last ruler of the First Dynasty, although a date for Sneferka in the Second Dynasty cannot be ruled out. The recent discovery of a large mastaba at North Saqqara with, it is reported, inscriptions naming Sneferka (Hawass n.d.) may force Egyptologists to reconsider the extent and composition of the First Dynasty, previously thought to be fairly secure.

The challenges are even greater for the Second Dynasty, perhaps the most poorly known period of ancient Egyptian history. Indeed, most of the Second Dynasty royal tombs have yet to be fully excavated (Munro 1993b; Dodson 1996; van Wetering 2004). The numerous Second Dynasty elite tombs excavated by Emery during his later seasons at North Saqqara remain entirely unpublished. Without securely dated monuments, the Second Dynasty is a serious lacuna in our knowledge of Early Dynastic history and culture. The absence of an agreed pottery corpus for the period – although the re-analysis of the Early Dynastic necropolis at Helwan, with restoration of original tomb groups, holds much promise in this area (Köhler *et al.* 2005) – combines with an extreme paucity of inscriptions to produce almost total ignorance about economic, political, and social trends during this key phase of Egypt's early development. While the order of the first three rulers (Hotepsekhemwy, Nebre, Ninetjer) is established with reasonable certainty, many of the remaining kings conventionally allocated to the Second Dynasty – Ba, Nubnefer, Weneg, and Senedj – are little more than names, some known only from secondary contexts (Wilkinson 1999: 82, 87–9).

As a substitute for contemporary accounts, the Palermo Stone, a compilation of royal annals inscribed centuries after the Early Dynastic Period, is used to flesh out the history of the Second Dynasty, but there must be doubts about the reliability of such an approach (Wilkinson 2000). Apparent indications of unrest during the reign

of Ninetjer are often adduced to provide a backdrop for the sequence of (seemingly) ephemeral kings that followed his reign, but, in reality, all such reconstructions are highly speculative. The sobering fact is that the evidence is simply too meagre to allow firm conclusions to be drawn. It is scarcely surprising, perhaps, that different generations of Egyptologists have seen in the royal names Sekhemib and Peribsen, from the latter part of the Second Dynasty, either two separate kings or one ruler with two radically different titularies (Wilkinson 1999: 89–91); the same holds true of Khasekhem and Khasekhemwy from the very end of the dynasty, although here the evidence is rather weightier and seems to point to a single ruler. Throughout Egyptian history, the choice of royal name was loaded with political and religious significance, and we assume the same to have been the case in the Early Dynastic Period; yet we are at a complete loss to explain why the kings of the late Second Dynasty practiced such strange habits of nomenclature.

The fog begins to clear with the reign of Khasekhem(wy), if for no other reason than that he left behind an unprecedented number of monuments (cf. Hoffman 1984: chapter 21). His “Fort” at Hierakonpolis and equally imposing Shunet ez-Zebib at Abydos are the two oldest mud-brick structures in the world, but why a king should have built two massive funerary enclosures in Upper Egypt remains a mystery (plate 1). The answer may (or may not) be connected with his change of name. If the even larger, stone-built, enclosure at Saqqara, the Gisir el-Mudir (Mathieson and Tavares 1993; Bettles *et al.* 1995; Tavares 1998: 1136–7), is to be attributed to Khasekhem(wy) as well – future excavation should be able to provide a definitive answer to this question, at least – then the puzzle becomes even more complex. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, the history of the Second Dynasty is “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.”

Frustrated by the lack of textual data, Egyptologists studying the Early Dynastic Period have, perhaps understandably, concentrated on questions of social change and the dynamics of culture (Kemp 2006: chapter 3), conveniently ignoring the glaring gaps in the underlying chronological framework (although Helck 1987b is a notable exception). It is surely time that these basic historical questions were addressed before firm and lasting progress can be made on other fronts.

3 The Exercise of Power

For all that the political history of the Early Dynastic Period remains sketchy, it is clear that the first three dynasties were a period of great innovation and creativity, not least in the spheres of monarchical authority and national administration. Arguably the most significant achievement of Egypt’s early rulers was to establish a model of government so well attuned to the Egyptian environment and world-view that it would remain unchallenged until the very end of pharaonic history.

From the very start, the king stood at the apex of Egyptian society, head of government as well as head of state. Both the institution of monarchy and the ideology of divine kingship pre-date the foundation of the Egyptian state, their roots stretching back into the Predynastic Period (Baines 1995b; Wilkinson 1999:

36–41, 183; Goebis 2007). The challenge for Narmer and his successors was to adjust these ancient models to the new and unprecedented task of governing an entire country, moreover one that was geographically extensive and, perhaps, culturally diverse (cf. Friedman 1994; Köhler 1995). Clues about the nature of early kingship are provided by royal names and titles. The most ancient and pre-eminent title associated the king with the falcon-god Horus and proclaimed the ruler as the deity's earthly incarnation. The Horus-names of the first two kings, Narmer (the reading is conventional but almost certainly erroneous) and Aha, emphasize the coercive power of kingship and may suggest a monarchy that had achieved political hegemony by force (Wilkinson 2000b). Once firmly entrenched, the royal government was able to change the philosophical basis for its authority from military might to divine sanction, reflected in the Horus-names of the mid-First Dynasty and later (Wilkinson 1999: 201–03).

A similar trend may be observed in the form of the royal burial at Abydos (Wilkinson 1999: 230–46). The tombs of the early First Dynasty kings, especially Aha, Djer and Djet, were accompanied by numerous graves of retainers; analysis of the skeletons points to these most loyal of servants having been sacrificed (willingly or unwillingly) at the time of their master's death, so that they might accompany him into the afterlife (plate 2). Hence the king's power of life and death was given very visible expression in the royal mortuary complex. Later in the First Dynasty, by contrast, the number of subsidiary burials was sharply reduced – although the practice of retainer sacrifice did not die out entirely until the beginning of the Second Dynasty – and the cosmic, rather than temporal, aspects of the king's power and ultimate destiny were given greater emphasis. Whereas royal tombs from the very beginning of history suggest an essentially earthly pattern for the king's afterlife – in one case, the tomb was equipped with a wine cellar and modeled on the royal palace (Dreyer 1998b; Hartung 2001), in another the king was interred with his pet lions alongside him (Dreyer 1990: 67, 86–7) – burials of kings in the mature First Dynasty made provision for a transcendent afterlife (Wilkinson 2004). From the reign of Den onwards, one part of the royal tomb (containing a chamber for the king's *ka*) was oriented towards a cleft in the cliffs, believed to be an entrance to the underworld, while the main staircase giving access to the burial chamber itself pointed northwards, towards the circumpolar stars. At least one Early Dynastic king went one stage further, and had a fleet of boats interred next to his funerary enclosure to ferry him to the next world (O'Connor 1991a, 2003).

Egypt's early kings recognized the inherent tension at the heart of monarchy – particularly acute in matters of mortuary provision – between privacy and publicity, between security and display. They solved the problem by dividing the royal funerary complex into two discrete elements: a tomb in the ancestral royal necropolis, removed from the world of the living; and a huge cult enclosure, modeled on the royal palace compound, situated within full view of the local town. The former offered protection for the king's body and sustenance for all eternity through the provision of copious quantities of food, drink, and other commodities; the latter provided a public arena for the celebration of the king's posthumous cult and a very visible monument to the institution of kingship itself. Architecture, like art, offered a powerful medium for royal propaganda, and Egypt's early kings exploited the potential of both to the full.

Statuary and relief carving were harnessed to project an omnipotent and omniscient image of kingship; royal iconography made full use of the symbolic resonance of regalia, with various crowns, sceptres, and other accoutrements deployed to convey the monarch's divine authority (Wilkinson 1999: 186–99).

Interestingly, the quintessential emblems of kingship, the shepherd's crook and the flail or goad, both derive from the sphere of animal husbandry and seem to hark back to a prehistoric, semi-nomadic way of life, not altogether forgotten in the ceremonial of the early royal court (cf. Wilkinson 2003). These distant echoes are heard, too, in the temporary buildings erected inside the cult enclosures at Abydos: the same reed-and-matting structures that were later rendered in stone in Netjerikhet-Djoser's Step Pyramid complex (which thus recombined burial-place and cult enclosure in a single edifice). Long after the adoption of a settled lifestyle in the Nile Valley, the ruler continued to live a peripatetic existence. As in Tudor England, so in ancient Egypt the king did not reside permanently in the capital but traveled regularly and extensively throughout his realm, moving from palace to palace; the First Dynasty royal compound partially excavated at Hierakonpolis (Weeks 1972; Kemp 2006: fig. 26) and the Second Dynasty ceremonial building recently uncovered at Buto (von der Way 1996) were probably two such provincial residences. The sovereign also took part in a regular, biennial royal progress called "the Following of Horus." Such visits allowed the king and his court to see, and be seen by, people throughout the country. They also served, no doubt, to reinforce central authority over distant provinces and put down any signs of discontent or dissent at an early stage.

The king's entourage, which accompanied him on his "Followings" and at all public appearances, included the leading members of the administration. In the Early Dynastic Period, power was the exclusive preserve of a circle of royal kinsmen, the *pat*, who formed an inner circle at court. Although certain offices of state were already clearly defined, notably that of Chancellor at the head of the royal treasury, it seems that other responsibilities were shared out among the members of the *pat* based upon their closeness to the king. There was little or no tradition of career specialization. A high official might thus hold a combination of courtly, civil, judicial, and religious offices (Wilkinson 1999: 144–9). In practice, day-to-day responsibility must have been exercised through proxies further down the hierarchy. The men at the head of government derived their status and power from their close relationship with the sovereign, and the monarchy's overriding influence was displayed in the elite tombs at North Saqqara (Emery 1949–58). Overlooking the Early Dynastic capital city of Memphis, each tomb had a massive mud brick superstructure designed to resemble the wall of the royal compound. Visible from afar, it proclaimed the owner's royal connections and powerfully reinforced the dominance of royal authority. Officials and king were part of the same, self-interested system of government; the populace, by contrast (*rekhyt* in Egyptian terminology), were subjects in every sense of the word, their lives and livelihoods controlled by a small, distant coterie. Nowhere is this despotic mode of rule more eloquently expressed than on the ceremonial mace head (itself a symbol of coercive power) of King "Scorpion," a ruler from the period of state formation: while the king performs an elaborate ritual, attended by his officials, the lapwings which symbolize the *rekhyt* hang pathetically from royal standards, ropes around their necks.

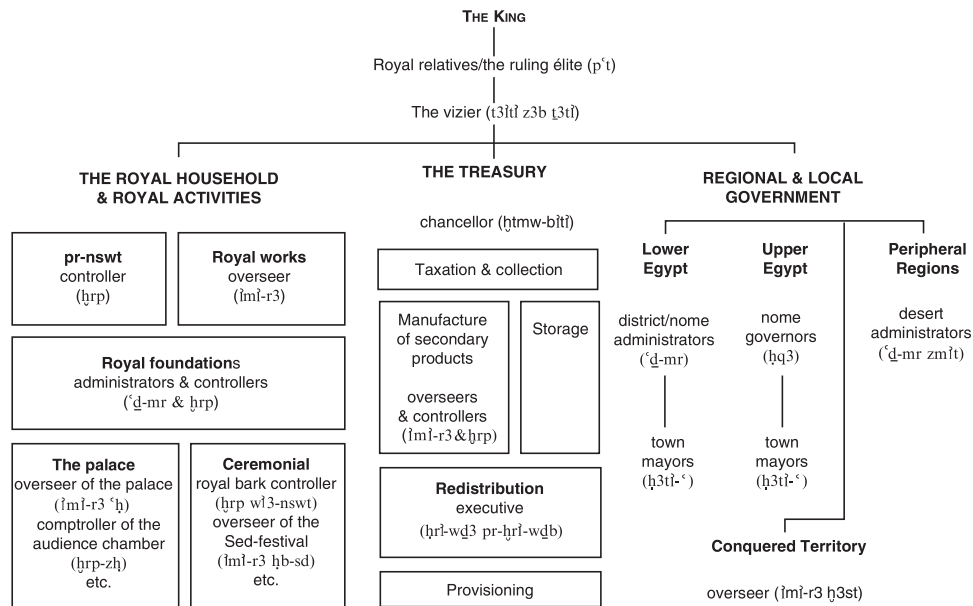


Figure 3.1 The structure of Early Dynastic administration © Toby Wilkinson.

The top-down autocratic system of government developed in the Early Dynastic Period set the pattern for successive dynasties. It institutionalized a concentration of power at the center which subsequently projected itself in the pyramid-building of the Third Dynasty and Old Kingdom. But royal building projects on so massive a scale required more than ideological justification and political dominance: they also demanded control of the economy and the colossal mobilization of resources. These were equally important achievements of the Early Dynastic state. As in Mesopotamia, so in Egypt writing seems to have been developed for utilitarian purposes, as an aid to accounting and economic management (Postgate *et al.* 1995). The earliest hieroglyphic inscriptions yet discovered, which pre-date the First Dynasty by a century or more, record the provenance, ownership, and contents of commodities that entered the royal treasury (Dreyer 1998b; Wilkinson 2007).

The central role played by this department of state is reflected in the titles of First Dynasty officials, the prevalence of inscriptions concerned with tax collection, and the fact that the most prominent government offices are all connected in some way with production, storage, processing, or distribution. The Treasury not only collected taxes in the form of agricultural produce but also manufactured secondary products for trade and to supply the court, stored surplus grain as buffer stocks against lean harvests, and redistributed grain to state employees (Wilkinson 1999: 125–33). If the Palermo Stone is to be believed, from early in the First Dynasty the court diligently recorded the height of the annual inundation in order to calculate the likely agricultural yield and hence the appropriate level of taxation. The main concern of the royal court seems thus to have been its own material aggrandisement. Royal estates were established throughout the country (Wilkinson 1999: 117–24; 2004) but especially in the Delta (which not only had extensive tracts of irrigated land but may also have been seen by the Upper

Egyptian kings of the First Dynasty as “conquered” territory, ripe for appropriation as their personal property). The fields themselves, their livestock, and human populations were all transferred to royal ownership, providing the court and the kings’ mortuary endowments with a regular and substantial income in the form of agricultural and secondary products. The prosperity enjoyed by the ruling class is reflected in the opulence and sophistication of grave goods from royal and elite tombs of the Early Dynastic Period: intricately carved stone vessels from the Abydos tomb of Den (Amélineau 1899: 200–15, pl. XLIII), an inlaid wooden box and decorated stone gaming discs from the Saqqara burial of his Chancellor Hemaka (Emery 1938), gold ornaments from contemporary burials at Abu Rawash in the north of the Memphite necropolis (Klasens 1961: 128).

Beyond the management of the economy, the state’s main concerns were the running of the court itself, with its emphasis on protocol, royal ceremonial, and cult activity, and the government of the provinces, through a system of district administrators, rulers of nomes, and town mayors (Wilkinson 1999: fig. 4.6). During the course of the Early Dynastic Period, the system of provincial government became both more formalized and more complex, probably in response to the logistical and economic demands of state building projects. The origins of the nome system may be seen in this context (Wilkinson 1999: 141–2), each nome or province being based upon a natural flood basin along the Nile Valley (Jeffreys 2007), and hence reflecting the underlying economic imperative behind a more developed provincial administration.

4 The Center and the Provinces

The complex and evolving relationship between the center and the provinces is a key theme in the study of the Early Dynastic Period. Archaeological evidence from the period of state formation indicates a series of competing territorial units in Upper Egypt, based around the early urban centers of This (near Abydos), Naqada, and Hierakonpolis, together with a more diffuse pattern of prominent trading centers in Lower Egypt, including Buto, Mendes, and Minshat Abu Omar, plus sites as yet unexcavated such as Sais and Choïs (Wilkinson 1999: 36–41; 2000a; Kemp 2006: fig. 22). After the political unification of Egypt, the victorious kings, probably from This, had to find ways of keeping their disparate realm together. This was no easy task: the periodic fragmentation of Egypt along regional lines during the Intermediate Periods demonstrates the deep-seated nature of local identities and the precariousness of centralized authority, whatever the artistic and written records might suggest. To assert and sustain their supra-regional authority Egypt’s early rulers used a variety of means, psychological as well as physical, symbolic as well as economic.

First, there was a naked display of power. The early Egyptian state seems to have erected imposing architectural symbols of its supreme authority the length and breadth of the country, akin to the Norman castles in England. In many places these monuments took the form of impressive mud-brick tombs for new, centrally appointed governors. They were decorated in the palace-façade style that was both exotic and inextricably associated with royal power (Wilkinson 1999: 224–9). We can

imagine the impact on the local population, at places like Armant and Gebelein in Upper Egypt and Tarkhan near the apex of the Delta, of seeing such strange and looming edifices built in their traditional burial-grounds. In any settled community the local cemetery links the current inhabitants with their ancestors and hence underpins the population's territorial claim. For a new regime to appropriate such sensitive and symbolically laden pieces of ground must have delivered a powerful message. A new authority in the land had not only taken charge of peoples' lives and livelihoods but also, it must have seemed, of their very identities.

At Buto in the Delta and Hierakonpolis in Upper Egypt – not coincidentally two of the most important and prosperous communities from Predynastic times, and flourishing centers of political and economic activity that were symbolic of the two halves of the newly united realm – the state erected colossal palace compounds to serve the king on his frequent travels, but also, just as importantly, to announce his subjugation of the Two Lands. To the same end, the theologians of the royal court set about forging a national ideology, centered on kingship and the person of the ruler, that absorbed diverse local cults and religious emblems (especially those connected with places that were important politically, economically, or symbolically). Hence Horus of Hierakonpolis became the god of kingship *par excellence*, while the goddesses Nekhbet of Elkab and Wadjet of Buto became guardians of the king and symbols of his authority over Upper and Lower Egypt respectively. Min of Coptos was adopted as the patron deity of virile and fecund kingship, while Neith of Sais seems to have been given the role of protectress of royal women, to judge from the frequency of First Dynasty theophorous names compounded with Neith (Neithhotep was the mother of Aha, Herneith the wife of Djer, and Meri(t)neith the mother of Den). The red crown, associated in Predynastic times with Naqada, and the white crown, whose origins lay in deepest Upper Egypt or even Lower Nubia, were appropriated to stand for the two halves of the king's new territory, the Delta and the Nile Valley, respectively (Wilkinson 1999: 192–5). In such a way, the populations of Egypt's most influential towns and cities could feel themselves integral parts of the new national power-structure; each community could bask in the reflected glory of kingship, proud that its patron deity or ancient symbol of rule enjoyed a special relationship with the monarchy. It was a quite brilliant display of psychological conquest, the equal of any military victory that may have brought the First Dynasty to power in the first place.

However, not all communities shared in this royal embrace. A broad stretch of the Nile Valley in Middle Egypt, which had always been somewhat distant from the centers of political and economic power, remained relatively impoverished and largely immune from state interference (Wilkinson 1999: 356–7). By contrast, the island of Elephantine on Egypt's southern border felt the rougher side of central control. Here, the government's principal concern was economic: the regulation and control of goods and people across the border with Nubia. To that end, one of the first actions of the state, shortly after unification, was to order the construction of a massive fortress on the eastern side of Elephantine, overlooking the main shipping channel (Ziermann 1993; Seidlmayer 1996a). Later in the Early Dynastic Period the curtain wall of the fortress was further enlarged and strengthened, to make this symbol of royal power impregnable. The fact that these extensions effectively barred access to the local village shrine does not seem to have concerned

the national authorities; their mastery of the economy was apparently more important than local sensibilities.

In any case, the religion of ordinary provincial communities had little, if anything, in common with the cult of kingship being promulgated by the state. The small, informal shrines at Elephantine, Abydos, and Tell Ibrahim Awad reflect a very different set of beliefs and practices (Kemp 2006: 112–35), focused on fertility, childbirth, and protection from harmful forces, the stuff of everyday concerns far removed from the cosmic ambitions of the king. One of the towering achievements of the Early Dynastic state was to raise the artificial construct of state religion to a position of pre-eminence, while local religious traditions gradually faded away through lack of support (or deliberate neglect). The complete absence of state-sponsored temples to local cults (except those closely associated with kingship) is a notable feature of Early Dynastic society. The only “temples” worthy of the name built during the first three dynasties were monuments to kingship. In many ways the king *was* god. Ancient Egyptian religion, as we know and recognize it today, with its emphasis on a divine monarchy, was the brilliant and lasting creation of Egypt’s early rulers and their willing priests.

Yet, in case we should think of the Early Dynastic Period as the epitome of authoritarian rule and centralized control, there are indications that the state did not have things all its own way. The very fact that the king and his entourage felt it necessary to travel the country on the biennial Followings of Horus suggests that national cohesion could not be taken for granted. The appearance of palace-façade monuments in key provincial cemeteries demonstrates the continued importance of those same communities, and it is noticeable that many of the traditional burial-grounds remained in use from Predynastic to Early Dynastic times (Bard 1994; Wilkinson 1996). Naga ed-Deir and Mahasna in northern Upper Egypt, Matmar in Middle Egypt, Tura and Helwan at the apex of the Delta, Kafr Hassan Dawood and Minshat Abu Omar in Lower Egypt: all display considerable continuity in use and burial practices during the period of state formation and into the Early Dynastic Period. Material culture did not change markedly following political unification, even if the country as a whole grew more prosperous and society became increasingly polarized between rich and poor. The location of Neithhotep’s tomb at Naqada and an even more impressive mud brick tomb at Beit Khallaf (perhaps belonging to Netjerikhet-Djoser’s mother, Nimaathap (Wilkinson 1999: 97)) may suggest continuing royal connections with the provinces throughout the Early Dynastic Period. It is possible that strong local families merely cemented their influence by marrying into the main royal line, and that the monarchy was dependent upon the backing of local dynasts to keep it in power. This was certainly the pattern of domestic politics in later periods of Egyptian history, and it may just be possible to glimpse it in the meagre archaeological evidence surviving from the earliest dynasties.

5 Egypt and the Outside World

An equally enduring mode of rule was devised by Egypt’s first kings, and finds expression on that most iconic of all Early Dynastic artefacts, the Narmer Palette (Quibell 1898; for the subsequent, extensive literature, see, e.g., Goldwasser 1992;

Shaw 2004: *passim*). Here the victorious king is shown grasping the head of a defeated enemy while holding a mace in his upraised arm, poised ready to smite his pathetic captive. By the time Narmer commissioned his palette this motif was already a centuries-old icon of royal power (Wilkinson 1999: 31–4); it would remain the quintessential symbol of kingship until the very end of the institution itself (Hall 1986). Narmer’s adversary is identified by the rebus behind him as a Lower Egyptian ruler, perhaps a real opponent in the prolonged struggle for unification, perhaps a symbol of the Eastern Delta that the First Dynasty kings regarded as a “foreign land” to be conquered and subdued (Köhler 2002). The palette’s other imagery certainly emphasizes the “containment of unruly” (Kemp 2006: figs. 31–2), the defeat of chaos (represented by Egypt’s enemies) by the forces of order (represented by the king).

During the course of the Early Dynastic Period, the fundamental, unending struggle between the opposing forces of order and chaos (*maat* and *isfet* in Egyptian terminology) was identified as the principal duty and the defining activity of kingship. In so doing the propagandists of the Early Dynastic court achieved two aims simultaneously. First, they elevated the king beyond mere head of state to guardian and defender of creation. This made any opposition to the king’s rule or the institution of kingship not merely unwise but unthinkable, not just treasonable but blasphemous and nihilistic. In such an atmosphere any lingering opposition to First Dynasty rule could be ruthlessly suppressed as a danger both to Egypt and to the cosmos. Second, the characterization of Egypt’s neighbors as the forces of chaos, combined with an emphasis on the king’s duty to subdue them, served to generate a strong sense of national identity where none had existed before. The Egyptian “collective self” was defined by its opposition to a “collective other” (Köhler 2002). Despots throughout history have recognized and manipulated the raw power of xenophobia to unite a people. Perhaps the earliest manifestation of this particular psychological tactic can be attributed to the court of Narmer. Other artefacts from his reign besides his famous palette show similar scenes of foreign domination with various foes: on an ivory cylinder, the hieroglyphs that write the king’s name take a big stick to lines of Libyan captives (Köhler 2002: fig. 31.3), and on a small ivory label, a Palestinian chieftain, olive branch in hand, is shown stooping in abject homage before the Egyptian king (Wilkinson 2002: fig. 32.1).

The ideology and iconography of xenophobia are constant themes in the court culture of the Early Dynastic Period, and they retained a place at the heart of Egyptian state religion until the very end of pharaonic history: another example of the longevity of Early Dynastic cultural innovations. Yet the outward show of hostility towards Egypt’s neighbors masked a more complex, underlying reality (Wilkinson 2002). As we have seen, the government of the early dynasties was primarily concerned with economic questions, and these included foreign trade in exotic, high-value items. Preserving national unity and security might be served by belittling foreigners, but the court badly needed the fruits of foreign trade to maintain its wealth and prestige. Behind the propaganda practical politics demanded a different set of relationships between Egypt and its neighbors.

Even before the political unification of the country, Egyptian rulers had engaged in long-distance trade and launched expeditions beyond Egypt’s traditional borders to

seek exotic materials or win control over trade routes. There is growing evidence for Predynastic activity in the Eastern (e.g. Wilkinson 2003) and Western Deserts (Darnell 2002), along ancient track-ways and at important mining sites. Likewise Egypt enjoyed close relations with the Levant from at least the early fourth millennium BC (Hartung 2001). In Nubia, towards the end of the Predynastic period, the extirpation of the indigenous A-Group – culturally as sophisticated as its Upper Egyptian counterparts, and an active trading partner with the area around Hierakonpolis (Takamiya 2004b) – can be attributed to Egyptian foreign policy, specifically a series of military campaigns to protect Egypt's commercial interests. Two Predynastic inscriptions at Gebel Sheikh Suleiman probably record Egyptian conquests in the Second Cataract region (Wilkinson 1999: fig. 5.3, nos. 1 and 2). Actions such as these seem to have brought to an end the kingdoms of Qustul (Williams 1986) and Seyala (O'Connor 1993: 23) which must have threatened Upper Egyptian control over the lucrative sub-Saharan trade routes. Although evidence for a permanent Egyptian presence in Lower Nubia is extremely slight – mud bricks from the lowest courses of the town at Buhen, again in the Second Cataract region, were dated by their excavator to the Second Dynasty (Emery 1963: 117) and may therefore indicate at least a token garrison at this period – the great increase in wealth of the Egyptian ruling elite during the early dynasties may well be attributable, in part, to the abundant gold reserves of conquered Nubia. The loss of archaeological sites throughout Lower Nubia under the waters of Lake Nasser may make it impossible ever to augment our scant knowledge of Egypt's early relations with the lands to the south (cf. Wilkinson 1999: 176–82).

The nature of contacts between early Egypt and Libya is likewise obscured by an extreme paucity of evidence (Wilkinson 1999: 162). There are hints of conflict, such as the aforementioned ivory cylinder of Narmer and the “Cities Palette” from the period of state formation, but these may reflect nothing more than ritualized aggression against foreigners. Here, the potential for future archaeological discoveries is far greater.

The one arena of early Egyptian foreign relations that *is* relatively well attested, and increasingly so, is the Levant, especially southern Palestine (van den Brink and Levy (eds.) 2002). From the very beginning of the First Dynasty, the Egyptian state projected its power beyond Egypt's north-eastern border, establishing trading posts and even “colonies” along the northern Sinai coastal route and throughout the fertile lands of southern Palestine. Its interest in the area was access to the high-value commodities lacking in Egypt itself, notably copper, olive oil, wine, precious gums and resins, and perhaps materials such as lapis lazuli, silver, and timber brought from further afield and traded by middlemen. At the fresh water springs of En Besor near modern Gaza, which lay along the main coastal route between Egypt and southern Palestine, the Egyptian state built a government outpost atop a natural hill. The rectilinear building, carefully aligned to the points of the compass (the Egyptian state liked to assert its mastery of the natural world, even beyond its own borders), yielded numerous sherds from bread-moulds and beer-jars, together with clay sealings naming First Dynasty kings (Kaplony 2002). The material assemblage shows that the purpose of the En Besor building was to re-supply and re-victual Egyptian trade caravans as they traveled to and from the Delta (Gophna and Gazit 1985; Gophna 1990, 1992).

At the site of Nahal Tillah, inside modern Israel, hieroglyphic sealings and a jar fragment stamped with the serekh of Narmer show the functioning of the Egyptian administration far from home (Levy *et al.* 1995; Kansa and Levy 2002). Not only has the site yielded imported, Egyptian-made pottery, brought from the Nile Valley by traders, but also locally made wares in an Egyptian style. This suggests that there was a more-or-less permanent Egyptian population at Nahal Tillah which maintained Egyptian cultural traditions using the materials available locally.

Sites throughout southern Palestine, such as Tell Arad (Amiran 1974, 1976), Tell Erani (Weinstein 1984) and el-Lod (van den Brink 2002), tell a similar story. The Egyptian presence in the Levant was evidently significant and widespread (Brandl 1992; Hartung 1994, 2001). Some of the fruits of this intensive trading activity can be found in the royal and elite tombs of the First Dynasty, in the cemeteries of Abydos and Memphis respectively. In addition to large quantities of copper objects, numerous vessels of Syro-Palestinian pottery (probably used as containers for valuable oils) have been found among the grave goods of kings and their high officials (Wilkinson 1999: 158–9).

For reasons that remain unclear but which are likely to have included social and political changes within the Levant, the focus of Egyptian trading activity with the Near East shifted during the course of the Second Dynasty to Byblos on the Lebanese coast. (The paucity of securely dated archaeological evidence from the Levant and Egypt during the century or so of the Second Dynasty makes it extremely difficult to trace the course of this shift.) By the reign of Khasekhem(wy), there is epigraphic evidence for Egyptian involvement in the local temple at Byblos and for active ship-building using Lebanese cedar. Archaeologically the timber trade is attested by the fleet of boats “moored” next to the cult enclosure of Khasekhemwy at Abydos while the king’s nearby tomb yielded the earliest known bronze vessels from Egypt, testifying to the introduction of tin into the Nile Valley, probably from sources in Anatolia. All the main commodities that the Egyptian state wished to procure – timber, tin, coniferous resins, and olive oil – were either available within the immediate hinterland of Byblos or could be obtained from further afield via the long-distance maritime trade routes in which Byblos was a crucial node. It is therefore not surprising that Early Dynastic Egypt developed a close relationship with Byblos, nor that the port continued to be Egypt’s main toe-hold on the Levantine coast for many centuries (Wilkinson 1999: 160–2). The abundant supplies of timber in the Lebanese mountains, together with the Byblites’ skills in ship-building, facilitated maritime trade with Egypt and boosted its intensity. A single ship’s cargo could transport as much as dozens of donkey caravans, and the growth of Egyptian contacts with Byblos may have been both cause and effect of the decline of the overland routes with southern Palestine.

From the Eastern and Western Deserts to the mountains of the Sinai, from Nubia to the coast of Lebanon, the early Egyptian state’s principal and motivating interest in foreign relations was always economic. It was concerned, above all, with identifying and securing sources of exotic materials and commodities for the royal court. Indeed, it is possible to see economic interests as the prime mover behind many of the major developments of Early Dynastic civilization: domestic and international policy, the origins of writing, the evolution of the nome system, and the ideology of divine kingship.

6 Summary

In the early twenty-first century the study of the Early Dynastic Period is one of the most vibrant and rewarding branches of Egyptology. Our knowledge of the first half-millennium of ancient Egyptian civilization has been transformed over the last four decades, and much more remains to be discovered. Far from being a primitive and uneventful prelude to the glories of the Old Kingdom, it is clear that the first three dynasties were a dynamic and pivotal phase of pharaonic history, a period which transformed the Nile Valley and Delta from a disparate collection of competing territories into a strong and centralized nation-state and, in the process, laid the foundations for the majesty and longevity of ancient Egyptian civilization. The pyramids of Giza are simply the ultimate expression of a social order laid down in the Early Dynastic Period.

In material culture, local Predynastic traditions, enhanced and enriched by borrowings from foreign cultures, were moulded into something distinctively and quintessentially Egyptian. What we recognize as “ancient Egyptian civilization” was undeniably the product of the Early Dynastic court. Under royal patronage, the powerful visual vocabularies of art and architecture were employed and directed in the service of the state to bolster and promote the institution of monarchy and secure its place at the apex of Egyptian society. Perhaps most remarkable of all, the rapid development and relentless promulgation of an ideology of divine kingship set Egypt apart from every other civilization of the ancient world and determined the future pattern of Egyptian society. Thanks to Narmer and his successors, kingship was to become the sole political philosophy and the only acceptable form of government in the Nile Valley for the next three thousand years, a stupendous achievement.

Yet, aside from its cultural and political significance, the Early Dynastic Period is important in another crucial respect. In the absence of extensive texts (inscriptions being both a blessing and a curse for later periods of Egyptian history) and with only a few major standing monuments, Early Dynastic Egypt forces us to engage even more closely with the archaeological evidence. In the process, it shows us the fabric of pharaonic society laid bare. The practical reality of Egypt’s foreign relations emerges from behind the barrage of official xenophobia. The self-interest of the ruling class shines through the propaganda. The role of economic management at the heart of policy-making becomes glaringly apparent. The Early Dynastic Period is a window on ancient Egypt as it really was, not as the Pharaohs wished it to be seen.

FURTHER READING

The specialist literature on the Early Dynastic Period is now extensive. The best starting-point is Wilkinson 1999 which combines original research with a digest of over forty years of international scholarship, arranged under thematic headings. Other useful introductions for a more general readership are Spencer 1993b and Brewer 2005. Kemp 2006 contains some of the most original scholarship on the Early Dynastic Period. Equally provocative is

Wengrow 2006 which follows a theoretical approach. The results of the German excavations at Elephantine, Abydos, and Buto are published in interim form in *MDAIK*, and as final excavation reports by von Zabern in the *AVDAIK* series. Important volumes of conference proceedings focusing on Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt include Spencer 1993b; Hendrickx et al. (eds.) 2004; and van den Brink and Levy (eds.) 2002. An invaluable tool for the scholar of early Egypt is Hendrickx 1995 with annual supplements in the journal *Archéo-Nil*.