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The Near Eastern connection II: cultural contacts with the Nile Delta and the Sahara

Abstract

The differences in burial patterns between Upper Egypt and the Nile Delta in early pre-dynastic times have been noted from the earliest work done in the region. This has been interpreted as indicating completely different religious and ceremonial beliefs. It is suggested here that this is an indication of the structural differences between non-hierarchical and ranked societies, and what we can see in the 4th millennium B.C. are important distinctions in social organisation between the two areas. This has ramifications for political and cultural associations between the Levant and North Africa during the crucial period of introduction of domestic animals into Africa.

In my earlier paper on the connections between southwest Asia and North Africa (Smith 1989), I looked at the ecological possibilities for the transfer of domestic stock from one region to the other. The model I used was based on environmental conditions around 7000 B.P. being favourable for adequate pastures to facilitate stock movement. Specifically this period was chosen in contrast to the earlier period when ceramic microlithic industries were to be found in the Sahara, ca. 9000 B.P. The earlier period is rejected as a food-producing era on several grounds, but most importantly because small stock were not introduced into North Africa until ca. 7000 B.P., presumably from the Near East. Similarities in burial patterns and material culture between the Levant, the Nile Delta and the Sahara are described and interpreted as segmentary pastoral societies. Added evidence of ameliorated environmental conditions are suggested as facilitating entry of domestic stock into North Africa when a grassland niche was opening up.

Introduction

In the development of hierarchical societies "there is not a continuum of complexity from the least to the most complex society. Instead there are major

discontinuities between various societies arranged along the scale. That is, there are observable, measurable differences between the structure, organisation, and behavioural repertoire of states, ranked societies, and egalitarian societies" (Peebles & Kus 1977: 427). What this means is that a threshold is crossed once a society is structured hierarchically which has implications about how people see the world. For Godelier (1978: 767), "The monopoly of the means ... of reproduction of the universe and of life must have preceded the monopoly of the visible means of production". If this is true, then the conditions of social complexity would tend to be in place before they could be seen visually, therefore, archaeologically.

One of the easiest ways to identify ranking in societies is through mortuary practices (Peebles & Kus 1977: 431). A principle stated by Saxe (1970) and elaborated upon by Goldstein (1981) is that "to the degree that corporate group rights to use and/or control crucial but restricted resources are attained and/or legitimized by means of lineal descent from the dead (i.e. lineal ties to ancestors), such groups will maintain formal disposal areas for the exclusive disposal of their dead, and conversely" (Saxe 1970: 119). Thus cemeteries, or recognisable burial areas separate from other functions, can be seen. Since individuals within these societies exercise regulation and control, there is ranking within the social groups, which is potentially recognisable where energy expenditure in mortuary practices is not primarily ordered on the basis of age and sex, but on the genealogy of individuals (Peebles & Kus 1977: 431). Both young and old with status will be buried with symbols of their position within the society, although not necessarily with the same kinds of goods.

Formal disposal of the dead is often part of ritual behaviour where propitiation ceremonies are necessary to ask the dead to intervene on the behalf of the living. Hierarchically structured societies, like the Nuba, use burial rites to prevent mishap to the community (Nadel 1947: 190). While ancestral shrines might have taken precedence over graves in Alur society (Southall 1953), nonetheless the elaborate burials of chiefs (including the burial alive of a member of a subordinate clan with the body) underscore the visual symbols of this chiefdom.

In contrast to hierarchical societies, segmentary structures of pastoral societies rely on communal use of resources and there is no attachment to small parcels of land, therefore there is less reliance on ancestral claims to land, or to ask them to intervene on behalf of the living. The visible signs of this, is a lack of formal disposal of the dead. Among East African pastoralists the range of variation in treating the body after death extends from leaving the corpse in the bush for hyenas to eat, to actual burial. Among the Maasai, traditionally a body was laid in the bush to be eaten, but today, under missionary influence, the body is laid on a hide on its right side with the head pointing north or south (Spencer 1988: 240). The Nandi practise both systems: for young babies and old people a grave is dug, but for older children and adults their corpses are laid out in the bush (Huntingford 1953: 146-7). The Samburu take their dead out into the bush,

laying the corpse on its right side with arms and legs slightly bent on top of a hide (Spencer 1973: 107). In contrast, the Rendille dig a grave a metre deep and lay the corpse fully flexed on its right side (Huntingford 1953: 59). The Nuer also bury their dead, again fully flexed on the right side and laid on a hide with no grave goods (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 145). Information on the Turkana suggests there are different burials depending on where a person dies. The head of a nuclear family should be buried in the central kraal of his homestead, but if he is far away from it when he dies he will be buried in the bush. A wife who is a mother will be buried under her day hut, which is then pulled down. All others are either buried outside the homestead, or just left in the bush (Gulliver 1951: 227).

The point of all this detail is to show that burial among pastoralists (when it occurs) is not an elaborate affair, and few, if any, grave goods accompany the dead. If the body is buried it happens in or close to the settlement.

The archaeology of death in North Africa and the Levant

Applying these principles to the Upper Nile Valley, we find at Badari the dead were located in cemeteries with graves up to 160 cm deep, wrapped in either mats or skins. More important, perhaps, was the "beginnings of marked differences in wealth as evidenced by the quality and number of exotic prestige goods found in Badarian graves" (Hoffman 1980: 143-4). These grave goods included not only finely made pottery, but bead necklaces, human figurines, amulets, copper tools and armaments. We can suggest that such symbolism reflected the world view of the Badarians as a ranked society that looked towards enabling the dead to exist in an extension of this world. This would have meant ranked societies existed in the Upper Nile region before El-Omari times, as suggested by Hassan (1988: 159), probably by the beginning of the 4th millennium B.C., even before Badarian times (Fekri Hassan, pers. comm.). The problem, of course, is that we know little about the immediate precursors of the Badarian (assuming Brunton's Tasian industry did not exist). The only site in the valley filling the hiatus of 6000-5200 B.C. is that of El Tarif which has a ceramic industry, but with no indication of food production, underlying Naqada levels dated to ca. 5300 B.C. The excavators suggest that the Tarifian cultural material is similar to the lower levels at Badari (Hemamieh) but stress the differences between the Tarifian and Naqada materials (Ginter & Kozlowski 1984: 255, 256). It is interesting to note that the Tarifian ceramics were made on a moving base, which can be interpreted as meaning contact with relatively sophisticated pottery makers. If Hassan (1988: 142-3) is correct any occupation in the hiatus lies under Nile silts from inundation when rains up-river increased 5400-3800 B.C. after a period of low flood waters.

Cemeteries continued to increase in formality during Predynastic times in Upper Egypt, resulting in the huge burial sites at places such as Naqada where Petrie worked out his famous seriation of pottery styles. Within later dynastic

times there are indications of an original belief that the ancestors lived in the cemetery on the edge of the desert where "they lived a carefree existence on the model of that on earth" (Rundle-Clark 1959: 31, 233; Breasted 1912: 51).

How did this occur in Predynastic Upper Egyptian society? The formulation of social ideas may be predicated partially on economics, but probably, in the case of the agricultural societies of Upper Egypt, on control over the limited resources of the Nile floodplain. Control over the resources would have meant inheritable rights transformed from ancestral benevolence. The world order would have to be structured accordingly. Cemeteries became structural elements in Badarian identity about who controlled the resources among the living, and appropriately 'sending off' the dead was presumably legitimizing the status of the family.

The Levant and the Nile Delta

In contrast to the Upper Nile Valley burials along the Israeli coast, although not plentiful, indicate the dead were interred within the settlement underneath floors, with no grave goods (Yeivin & Olami 1979). At Qatif, an infant was buried in a jar within the settlement (Epstein 1984). This is somewhat different from the general model of earlier Natufian burials which tended to be in cemeteries outside the settlement, although the pattern of the flexed skeleton in a shallow pit without grave goods or decoration (Belfer-Cohen & Hovers 1992) is what we see in North Africa. Simple graves were the norm for the settlement at Merimde (Junker 1933). As Debono & Mortensen (1990: 76) say about the Merimde phase IV and V burials (the majority recovered): "... the dead were buried separately or in pits with domestic debris as at El Omari" close to the living area. However, there are differences in the positions of the bodies. At Merimde "the orientation of the dead is mostly head to the southeast facing east, lying on the right side ... several had mats, but in general there were no grave goods". At El Omari many of the graves contained a single pot, and the bodies were laid on either right or left sides, sometimes with stones placed under the head, or against the back. El Omari is later in time than Merimde, so might be showing an increasing influence of the burial patterns found further south, although none of the graves indicated social inequalities.

The lack of cemeteries from the southern Levant suggest that there was less need to establish ancestral legitimacy ca. 6500-6000 B.P. The same pattern is to be found in the later Deltaic sites after 6000 B.P., suggesting that social organisation was much less hierarchical than in Predynastic Upper Egypt. In fact we may be dealing with non-hierarchical societies, e.g. nomadic segmentary lineages, and that the burial patterns we later see in the Sahara are an extension of this. At Adrar Bous in Niger, for example, flexed burials were isolated, with only a single bead around the neck, ca. 5000 B.P., a practise that continued once pastoralists moved south to the Sahel at Karkarichikat ca. 4000-3300 B.P. (Smith 1974).

Other cultural evidence for contact

An elaboration on some of the cultural evidence for contacts between the Levant and North Africa that were offered before (Smith 1984; 1989) will be given here. Several sites on the Israeli and Gaza coastal strip were occupied during the 6th millennium B.C. These include Nizzanim, Ashqelon, Ziqim and Giv'at Haparsa (Yeivin & Olami 1979) and Qatif (Epstein 1984). These are described as Pottery Neolithic sites (although Ashqelon did not produce any ceramics). The sites are large and have hearths, pits and a flaked stone industry. Even though a couple of the inland sites (Teluliot Batashi and Lod) produced pottery and stone tools similar to these coastal sites, the writers make a point that there are considerable differences with the sites in Upper Galilee. Further north, at Byblos, there are flaking similarities, but the authors are of the opinion that the most significant parallels are with the contemporary. This contention is based on the appearance of a 'fishtail' tool (Yeivin & Olami 1979: 131, fig. 13: 9; see also Caton-Thompson & Gardner 1934: Pls. XI, 25, XLVIII, 12-13), but this is probably from the later Merimde levels. I would suggest the flaked and polished axes from the Levantine sites (Yeivin & Olami 1979: fig 15: 3-4; Epstein 1984: fig. 4: 14) found at Merimde (Junker 1928: Tafel IV, 43-45, 47, 49; Eiwanger 1988: Tafel 37, 730-1, 749-50), as well as in the Sahara at Adrar Bous (Smith 1974) and in the Fezzan and Hamada el Homra (Smith 1974; 1984) are more important indicators of earlier contact. These are part of a large tool category which includes axes and adzes (or gouges) found at the confluence of the Blue and White Nile in the Sudan (Arkell 1949; 1953: plate 14). They show lateral polish found in the Fayum (Caton-Thompson & Gardner 1934), but not in the Egyptian oases, e.g. Dakhleh (McDonald 1982; in press) or Kharga (Caton-Thompson 1952).

Since the previous writing new environmental data have been produced that support ameliorated conditions in the period 7000-6500 B.P. in the eastern Mediterranean. Goodfriend (1991), from his analysis of snails from the Negev, has shown that during this period ^{18}O levels in the snails were significantly depleted. This is interpreted as reflecting large amounts of rainfall (Rindsberger et al. 1983), and supports the previous work (Goodfriend 1990) on ^{13}C values in snails which indicated a 20 km southward shift of rainfall isohyets ca. 6500-3000 B.P. The entire eastern Mediterranean would have been affected, offering conditions favourable to the expansion of pastoralist activities from the Levant into North Africa.

Conclusions

On the basis of available data, the cultural connection between the Levant and North Africa ca. 7000-6500 B.P. would be a tenable hypothesis. Material culture items, although by no means identical, are sufficiently similar to suggest contact. The main thrust was across the Delta to the Fayum, then on to Cyrenaica

and the Fezzan, and later across the Sahara taking advantage of the grassland niche which had opened up with ameliorating conditions.

More important from a sociological perspective is the contrast in burial patterns between the Upper Nile Valley and the Delta/Levant. These are suggested here as indicators of differences in social organisation, and the lack of cemeteries in the Levant, Delta and the Sahara are clues to the spread of non-hierarchical societies at a time when Upper Egypt was becoming hierarchically structured and had a different economic emphasis, probably based on sedentary agriculture. Early Merimde society reflected the non-hierarchical social structure already in place among the seasonal occupiers of the Fayum. Later contact between the central Sahara and the Nile Valley south of the Nubian Desert completed the occupation of the Sahara by pastoralists.

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