

## Social and economic development towards the end of the Predynastic period in Egypt

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Presently available information clearly indicates that the emergence of early class-stratified societies was a process with its own marked peculiarities in every country and, therefore, did not follow an exact course everywhere, not even within one main region<sup>1</sup>. Thus, definite and striking differences between the course of development in Egypt and in the other countries of the Middle East, and above all in Mesopotamia, are evident. Whereas in Mesopotamia the social and economic differentiation led relatively quickly to the development of independent handicraft, trade, private ownership of land and the emergence of city states, in Egypt such processes took not only a far slower course, but occurred in quite a peculiar and characteristic way.

Judging by the available evidence, it does not seem likely that strong city states ever existed in Egypt. But already during the first centuries of the third millennium B.C. a large empire uniting Upper and Lower Egypt had formed under a central authority, whereas independent handicraft and private ownership of land emerged in their first beginnings only during the last centuries of the 2nd millennium B.C., *i.e.* in the final phase of the New Kingdom. Trade had remained in Egypt, over a long period, mainly a local retail trade. Foreign trade had been a state monopoly. Even during the New Kingdom, when for the first time documents speak about merchants, they were not independent dealers who worked on their own account, but dependants of state or temple institutions. Trading in Ancient Egypt was exclusively an exchange of surplus products. Commodity production, *i.e.*, production only for sale, remained largely unknown.

Until recently, the peculiar features in origin and development of the classes and the state in Ancient Egypt seemed sufficiently explained by the need for central

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is partly based on a dissertation „Beobachtungen zur Entstehung des altägyptischen Staates“, Berlin: Humboldt University 1980 (forthcoming).

administration of irrigation works. Since recent investigations have shown that large-scale irrigation was not in existence in Egypt at the time of state emergence, and the management of irrigation works had not played an important part in the origin of the Ancient Egyptian state (Schenkel, 1978; Endesfelder, 1979), the actual reason for the particularly characteristic formation of that society has become, once again, an open question. It seems likely that instead of irrigation some aspects of the ecological factor played a much more important role in this respect than has hitherto been assumed.

One of these aspects is the fact that in Ancient Egypt already from the time when Neolithic agricultural communities in Upper and Lower Egypt are documented, a relatively high and stable agricultural surplus product could have been produced at a relatively low expense of time, compared with other regions of the world. Since the Middle Pleistocene, when the Nile had found connexion with the water systems of the East African chain of lakes and the Abissinian mountain region, wide areas of the Egyptian Nile Valley were regularly, once a year, irrigated, fertilized and desolated without human interference. During a few weeks immediately after the running-off of the floodwaters, the soil was relatively easy to till. Wooden hoes and, later on, wooden ploughs were entirely sufficient for this tilling, since deep ploughing would have speeded up the undesirable drying out of the soil. The forms of wheat and barley which have been found in the oldest Neolithic cultures of Upper and Lower Egypt required only shallow planting and no additional irrigation. The single, but radical moistening of the soil by the yearly highwater was, as a rule, sufficient for an average crop, provided the tilling was done immediately after floodwater receded from the fields. Moreover, during the predynastic times, and probably still at the beginning of the Old Kingdom, the rains of the Neolithic sub-pluvial could have born a positive influence on the agricultural yields. For the simple subsistence economy of the predynastic communities in Egypt large-scale and labour-intensive irrigations works were, thus, unnecessary, but, according to the local topographic conditions, the existence of smaller channels and barrages constructed by the local communities can be assumed. It is likely that they were primarily for draining-off the floodwaters from the higher fields and not for the influx of water.

While the time of sowing was limited to the few weeks during which the topsoil layers were not yet parched into stony clods, the harvesting period, too, was limited, since the dry and scorching winds could promote the premature fall of the grains, thus causing heavy losses in the agricultural yield.

In all Neolithic agricultural villages of the Egyptian Nile Valley apart from field-work the peasants engaged also in cattle-breeding. The big wadis and the highland areas, especially the fringes of the desert which were not used for agricultural purposes, offered good pastures the whole year round. This rendered unnecessary the labour-consuming accumulation of a large fodder store. The sometimes expressed view that the early predynastic cultures of Upper Egypt had been, to a greater ex-

tent, communities of nomadic cattle-breeders does not seem to be confirmed, insofar as the combination of agriculture and complicated ceramics, already documented in the sites of Badari and Nagada I, definitely relate to settled communities in which agriculture as well as animal husbandry were evident.

All this indicates that a stable and sufficiently high agricultural surplus product at a relatively low and time limited expenditure of labour could have been reached already by the early predynastic people of the Nile valley. That is one of the peculiarities caused by the ecological factor, which formed the social conditions in Ancient Egypt.

Exploiting these exceptional, in relation to other parts of the world, advantageous ecological conditions which confined to relatively narrow limits the expenditure or working time necessary for agricultural activities, the members of the predynastic village communities in Egypt had sufficient leisure at their disposal. They made use of it not only by performing the traditional means of acquiring additional provisions like hunting, fishing and collecting food but also by gradually developing specialized crafts like plaiting, weaving, carving, pottery, stoneworking and, particularly in Upper Egypt, metal-working. In this way, within the predynastic village communities, specialists in different handicrafts were able to develop; they were not entirely free from agricultural production but had, nevertheless, ample time to acquire outstanding capabilities and skills.

The social division of labour between peasants and craftsmen, in the course of which there developed a stratum of independent craftsmen who worked with their own materials and on their own account in producing commodities for exchange, thereby stimulating domestic trade and promoting the economic differentiation of the society, had, at least up to the end of the New Kingdom, not been consistent in Egypt. During the dynastic times, there were highly specialized artisans and craftsmen at the royal residences, the various administrative institutions and centres as well as at the temples and even in private households of some high officials who most probably were completely exempted from any agricultural work. But these artisans and craftsmen neither worked on their own account nor with their own raw materials. Their tasks were allotted to them by the institutions to which they belonged and from which they received the main part of their income, even if they sometimes carried out, as a sideline, minor works for private people who paid them. The existence of such a stratum of craftsmen did not, therefore, bear a strong effect on the process of economic differentiation within the Pharaonic society.

■ A second peculiarity of the Egyptian development is manifested by the fact that during the predynastic period agricultural production, hence the possibility of producing agricultural surpluses, does not seem to have been exhausted to the extreme limits. The predynastic cultures were gradually able to extend in the still thinly populated Nile valley towards its southern and northern ends (Kaiser, 1957). Even

far into dynastic times considerable land reserves appear to have existed. The occurrence of serious conflicts over arable land during the late predynastic or the early dynastic time seems, therefore, to be most unlikely. This absence of conflicts over arable land among the members of the village communities seems to be at least partly responsible for the non-development of individual private landownership. And when, at the beginning of the Old Kingdom (second to fourth dynasty), the till then existing village communities were forced out of their collective ownership of land, not individual but institutional ownership of land had originated. Within the limits of this institutional ownership of land there had developed, during the dynastic times, a rather complicated system of the ownership relations under the supreme ownership of the Pharaoh, which can at best be compared with tenancy or feudality — meaning that the land was given to someone for sometime under certain conditions, such as administration, services, dues, performance of work. However, this system complicated and delayed the emergence of individual and private ownership of land.

At the beginning of dynastic times, the village communities seem to have been largely intact, judging from the preserved materials. This means that the exploitation had not yet fully developed as the determining socio-economic relations within society. Therefore, hard pressure to increase agricultural surplus production did not exist. It seems that only the gradually strengthening central authority, by the middle of the first dynasty, started to make exploitation, through absorption of agricultural surplus products, a serious and heavy burden to the village communities. This might also explain the cessation of large and richly equipped private tombs in early dynastic cemeteries in Upper Egypt.

One of the reasons which made the increase of agricultural production a real necessity already at a considerable earlier time is, however, documented by the early predynastic cemeteries in Upper Egypt. Already in the Badarian times it was customary to provide the dead with an amount of burial offerings. Especially in Upper Egypt, the expenditure for the equipment of the dead had increased to a striking extent, above all during the Nagada II period. The surplus produce used for this purpose had to be at the actual disposal of the community concerned and it was difficult to receive it back, owing to the peculiarity of its use. Nevertheless, the rather frequent cases of tomb robbery which, according to excavation reports, often took place almost immediately after the burial demonstrate that at least part of these goods were reclaimed by the social groups.

Since the Badari times we can distinguish, according to size and equipment, richer and poorer graves in the Upper Egyptian cemeteries. These differences are undoubtedly indications of the social differentiation within the predynastic communities. The attempts to classify them, as criteria of already existing economic differentiation, seem to be premature as it is still completely unknown who was responsible for the construction and the equipment of the grave: the owner, his family, his friends or the whole community concerned. Only if it could be ascertained that

the owner of the tomb himself, out of his personal property covered the expenditure of his burial, and the construction and equipment of the grave, could the tomb be regarded as indication of his economic position. Unfortunately, the available, older publications of predynastic cemeteries are often very cursory as to the distribution of poorer and richer graves within a given cemetery. But in the case of the well-published cemetery of Armant (Mond and Myers, 1937), this distribution can easily be explained by ascribing the groupings to families within the generation, so that the social status of the dead within his family might have been decisive for the size and the amount of equipment of his grave. Later on, during the dynastic times, the position, structure as well as the kind and amount of equipment of a tomb provide reliable indications of the social as well as the economic status of its owner. As a rule, the Pharaohs dedicated a complete tomb only to their close relatives and, in the Old Kingdom, to very high officials. Everybody else was responsible for his own burial for which he was, however, partly entitled to use official property. Occasionally, some of the offerings and even building materials were provided by friends, acquaintances and subordinates. The allocation of special parts of the tomb-equipment by the Pharaoh was regarded as a special favour. However, the construction and equipment of tombs for the Pharaoh's might have been always a task for the whole society, for which the economic resources of the whole country were made available.

The actual reasons why only in Upper Egyptian Neolithic cultures the idea of the need for well-arranged and equipped graves was able to achieve such great importance, and the precise time of the origin of these rites, cannot yet be ascertained. It is, however, very possible that in this respect the environmental factor played a certain role too, since in favourable positions the dead became mummified by natural means — in the warm, dry sand. The accidental find of such mummies and grave furnishings might have led to the assumption that humans required material care to secure their existence after death.

The focal point of social development towards the end of the predynastic times was undoubtedly in Upper Egypt. Its cultural unity, which is recognizable since the Nagada I, is not essentially an expression of this early, already existing political unity, but common traditions and ideological views cementing the social groups of this area. There are also indications that towards the end of the predynastic times an authority was in existence by the name of "Horus", who was recognized by the village communities of at least the greater part of Upper Egypt. The development of this authority into the representation of the state, and the formation of a ruling class, were processes of which the final and decisive stage apparently took place in the course of the first three dynasties. The special character of the social structure, which was typical for Ancient Egypt and which came into being during this process, has been influenced by the effects of environmental conditions more strongly than has hitherto been assumed.

**References**

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