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Symposium: Emergence of social complexity and its evidence in the archaeological record

Defining social complexity in early Egypt: levels of patterning in the evidence

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Introduction: characteristics of the representation of order

The "Cities Palette", one of the key artifacts from the Egyptian formative period (c. 3000 BCE), comes from near the end of the development and elaboration of complex symbolic forms and exemplifies several issues I address in this paper. I begin by exploring implications of the palette and then move back to set the scene for developments toward the formation of the dynastic state of Egypt, perhaps around the time when the palette was made.

This object is one of a number of relief-decorated schist palettes that were probably royal offerings dedicated in major temples, presenting a king's achievements in creating and sustaining order for and through the agency of the recipient deity. The function of the object, as a monumental version of a piece of stone used for grinding eye-paint, appears to have lost much of its original significance by the date when these pieces were made. Instead, the form with its decorated field was elaborated into an elongated oval that created a partly cosmological representation.

Only the bottom third of the Cities Palette survives. If we interpret the surviving part according to the rules of slightly later artistic compositions—and there are good reasons for doing this—this is the area that presents the "foundations" of the "order" that would have been proclaimed, perhaps both heraldically and through an image of triumph in combat, in the upper part. Since in this session we concentrate on the founding phases of social complexity, it may help us to focus on essential issues if we look carefully at a particular example.

One cannot be sure which side of the palette was to be viewed before the other; since it is relatively easy to turn a palette around, it may not be useful to spend time on this issue. All one need assume is that there is some equivalence in a vertical hierarchy between the material shown at the same level on the two sides, and that the composition of each side was coherent in itself in addition to being probably complementary with the other side. I choose a particular order of reading on the assumption that there was something like a "narrative" between the two, but the narrative could be reversed quite easily.

The first side shows in “plan” seven enclosures, within which are signs that resemble writing but cannot be read, as well as square shapes that may signify blocks of buildings according to a map-like convention. The enclosures are roughly square with rounded corners and have projections that probably represent mudbrick fortification walls with salients. Each enclosure has perched on its top an aggressive animal, or standards, juxtaposed with a hoe; the four preserved figures are all emblematic of kingship and its violent power. Parallels show that the animals or standards are hacking the enclosures destructively. Above the enclosures, which are laid out in two rows on a neutral pictorial surface, is a register line, on the right end of which are overlapped human feet at two different scales, probably to be reconstructed as one of the victors in a conflict leading a captive.

At the bottom of the other side of the palette is a neutral space with eight trees and one hieroglyph probably reading *tjehenu* “Libya” (I discuss possible locations of this ahead). The trees may perhaps represent a “Mediterranean”, non-Egyptian type (olives have been suggested). Above are three registers of domestic animals, from bottom to top five sheep of a north-east African subspecies, four donkeys, and four cattle.

The most likely reading of the overall message of these areas of the palette is that they assert the defeat of a people or peoples who inhabit fortified settlements, together with the resulting booty of the main species of domesticated animals that were of interest to the Egyptians. The trees may be tokens of tree crops, but they could also relate to the idea, which is documented by a variety of later evidence, that raiding was accompanied by destruction of the enemy’s trees.

For the present session, two essential statements can be read with some confidence off the composition: *a*) the enemy live in walled settlements that we might term “cities”; and *b*) order requires the demarcation, depredation, and incorporation of an “other”. The animals are similar to those one would see in the Egyptian environment, so that the “other” does not retain alien features once it is incorporated. While the demarcation of incorporated and unincorporated might appear arbitrary, representations of comparable “cities” are not preserved from later Egypt until the fifth and sixth dynasties (c. 2350–2150 BCE), when they are again images of places that are being attacked.

The motifs on the two sides of the Cities Palette appear to have had successors in two different domains, with the display of booty becoming part of the decoration of royal temples that celebrated the assertion of order and prosperity over disorder, while the attack on the walled enclosure moved into a tradition that was exploited by the nonroyal elite to show participation in events that still pointed beyond their own roles because the king ultimately controlled them.

The palette also suggests that there existed modes of cultural transmission that were later very significant. The set of seven “city” enclosures could be excerpted from a listing of foreign localities, with the number of entities chosen perhaps relating to the compositional space available, which may in turn be connected with the aspects or manifestations of kingship symbolized by the animals hacking at the walls. Comparable selections are probably documented on the fragmentary Bull and Battlefield palettes. In later times lists of conquered people that were evidently derived from documentary sources were represented on the monuments as ellipses with vestigial salients containing the names of the peoples, with an ethnically characterized upper torso protruding on top of the ellipse to provide a vivid human element that was normally bound by a rope to signify subjection of a whole set of figures. The Battlefield Palette is likely to be the first example of this convention and to embody bureaucratically maintained lists of places or peoples comparable with those of later times.

In its wider context, the palette suggests that, whether or not cities were a major feature of early Egyptian settlement, Egyptian rulers of the formative period and 3rd millennium did not

focus their display of dominant values around urbanism, but rather on relations with the world around, as well as its incorporation within Egypt and depredation of its moveable wealth. They typecast their enemies as living in “cities”, which no neighbours are likely to have done any nearer than Syria-Palestine; the city seems particularly inappropriate for Libya, which is represented by the other side of the palette. Although the palette’s two sides could relate to different themes, other palettes suggest that this is unlikely, so that the treatment of Libya should be seen as a paradox or as purely arbitrary.

A single composition cannot make the case for such a non-urban vision, but in this respect the Cities Palette is compatible with other sources of its period. So the question arises of how the archaeological record of sites, of their distribution across the country, and of artifact types, compares with the reflexive, ideological statements of the palettes and other monuments, most of which focus on foreign relations, aggression, and the assertion of order.

The emergence of a unified complex society

The period in which the Cities Palette was produced was one of uniformity of material culture throughout Egypt. The palette is a witness to a complex society that possessed a limited writing system, highly ordered and articulated artistic compositions, and a strong classification of “self and other” that clustered around the institution of kingship. Rather than attempt a formal definition of complexity in relation to Egyptian material—one that would be bound to fit badly with other cases discussed in this session—I approach the theme indirectly by exploring implications of the range of finds for the evolution and nature of the early Egyptian unified polity.

While a precise dating of an unprovenanced and unique object like the Cities Palette is impossible, the object cannot be earlier than Naqada IIIb, probably around two centuries after the cultural homogenization of Egypt in Naqada IId2. Because production of these objects ceased at the beginning of the 1st Dynasty, it also can hardly be later than Naqada IIIb. What was the background out of which the strong symbolic statements of the palettes emerged, and how far do they correspond to real changes in the culture’s location in space and its social and symbolic configuration?

Table 1. Predynastic Egypt: Periods and approximate dates

Merimda (Delta)	
Badari (Nile Valley)	
Naqada I (“Amratian”, Nile Valley)	c. 4000
Early Buto (Delta)	
Ma‘adi (Delta)	c. 3800
Naqada II (“Gerzean”, Nile Valley, later all Egypt)	c. 3500
IIc (Hierakonpolis Tomb 100)	
IId2 (cultural uniformity of Egypt; end of Ma‘adi culture)	
Naqada III (late predynastic and Dynasty 0)	c. 3250
IIIa2 (Tomb U-j at Abydos)	
IIIb (Dynasty 0)	
IIIb2 or IIIc (= 1st Dynasty)	c. 2950

Palestinian Early Bronze I corresponds roughly to late Naqada II/Naqada III

Periods and the state

In Egypt around 4000 BCE there were several different cultures (see Table 1), the most important being the Badarian, later Naqada I, in the southern Nile Valley, the Ma‘adi (or Buto–Ma‘adi) from the Fayyum north into the Delta, and a newly discovered group in the northern Delta that had strong connections with Palestine. There were less sedentary cultures in the deserts on either side of the Nile Valley, as well as distinct Neolithic cultures in the Valley from the natural barrier of Gebel el-Silsila southward into Lower Nubia and beyond. While none of these displays more than slight indications of social differentiation, structural inequality, and other measures of social complexity, Badarian and Naqada I sites show a focus on elaborate artifacts and on burial as a locus of display that both sets them apart from the others and points toward much later developments, including those of the Egyptian state. In this, they contrast with the Buto–Ma‘adi culture, which shows a generally lower orientation toward display in any context including the funerary. From around 4000, the sedentarization of Egypt as a whole and developments in material culture progressively separated the Nile Valley and Delta from the surrounding desert with its largely nomadic population, although commonalities with cultures on the Middle Nile (as far south as the confluence of the Blue and the White Nile) diminished rather slowly. Until the later 4th millennium there was not a sharp separation and delineation of boundaries of the sort found later.

Nucleated settlement was associated with insecurity, as is attested by a model enclosure wall with sentries looking over the top found in a Naqada I period grave (the same idea occurs in texts of the late 3rd millennium). Thus, from the beginning, negative associations are attested for what was, relatively speaking, “urbanism”. They may have taken precedence for long periods over the positive ideas and ideals of city life common in other civilizations and in Egypt in the 2nd millennium and later.

The Naqada II period, from c. 3500 BCE, is the crucial time of transition, when social complexity becomes clearly discernible and the distribution of sites over the country changes markedly. While town sites are inaccessible, the development of large centres, notably at Hierakonpolis and Naqada, and of mass production and large-scale distribution, suggests that some measure of urbanism was present. In the north, the Ma‘adi culture gave way to Naqada II just before that culture’s transition to Naqada III, which is an internal transformation—and for nonluxury materials an impoverishment—rather than a change in direction. Throughout its duration and especially in its latest phase, Ma‘adi shows important connections with

Syria-Palestine, and with Mesopotamian culture through the presence of “cone mosaic”; these changed markedly in character in Naqada III.

The majority of scholars outside Germany suppose that the change from Ma‘adi and late Naqada II and thence to Naqada III was cultural rather than political and that political unity did not emerge until perhaps Naqada IIIb (around 3000 BCE). The hypothesis of late political unification is problematic, but seems to arise from two basic considerations: Naqada III continues to show regional centres such as Hierakonpolis, so that political unity cannot be traced on the ground; and a unified late Naqada II or early Naqada III would be earlier than any large unified polity anywhere else in the region, or perhaps in the world, and so may appear anomalous in comparative perspective. Yet while it is difficult to establish what was the political structure of the period, the dissemination of Naqada II must have had a driving motivation—presumably including a vision of the lower Nile as a single entity at some level—and it seems unlikely that a valid material culture like that of Ma‘adi would have been eliminated completely peaceably. A model of conflict and of domination from the south is therefore plausible, while it is difficult to see how southern groups that were in competition with one another could have achieved domination, since only the most northerly of the southern regions would have had direct access to Ma‘adi and the Delta.

Be that as it may, Egypt at the transition from Naqada II to Naqada III gives the appearance of a very large and quite rapidly formed cultural, and perhaps political, unity. In early Naqada III there emerged writing, monumental architecture (which probably had earlier roots), and highly evolved representational and symbolic forms, leading to such later examples as the Cities Palette, while other extravagant vehicles of display, such as stone vases, moved toward a peak of development. By no later than the 1st Dynasty, in late Naqada III, Egypt was a coherently governed, large-scale complex society whose social coherence was not simply that of kinship—in short, it was a state. It is largely a matter of definition where the transition to “state” forms is placed, but the institutions just mentioned exhibit the specialization and differentiation of a complex society, and this is confirmed negatively by the impoverishment that can be seen in unprestigious domains of material culture. Representational display did not focus upon the depiction of explicitly “complex” matters, but that signifies little because there is no particular reason why art should have such a focus.

Relations with areas outside Egypt

Connections to the north with Syria-Palestine and beyond, which were evident in the Ma‘adi culture, continued in a different form in the first phase of Naqada III. They are often seen as decisive in the emergence of Egyptian civilization. Yet while elements such as cone mosaic and cylinder seals, and conceivably the idea of writing, are of ultimately Mesopotamian and/or Iranian derivation, they would not by themselves have transformed the recipient society, which must itself have been in a state of evolution that could have accepted them and give them its own meanings. Be that as it may, that group of stimuli could be suggestive of high-level trade in prestige goods, since the only sign of import in quantity from Asia is of materials from Palestine. On a more mundane level, Tomb U-j at Abydos, the burial of a ruler of Naqada IIIa2, contained more than a hundred Palestinian jars of a form not known from Palestinian Early Bronze sites that was evidently an export ware. This material demonstrates that Egypt had a significant economic impact within the nearest region to the north-east, turning it into something like a periphery of the emergent state. By contrast, the influential foreign motifs and practices came from further afield, through Syria rather than Palestine.

Later in Naqada III, around the beginning of the 1st Dynasty, Egypt seems to have expanded briefly into southern Palestine, where locally made pottery of Egyptian types has

been found, as well as the names of some kings, notably Narmer. Unlike material from Egypt itself, these finds come from settlements, showing interaction with the local Early Bronze Age culture. This phase of expansion, which may have involved some degree of conquest and "colonization", ended around the middle of the 1st Dynasty.

To the south, Egyptian material culture had overlaid that of the Nubian A-Group in the Aswan area probably before by the end of Naqada II. South of the First Cataract of the Nile, distinct A-Group polities emerged in northern and southern Lower Nubia. The latter, which had a "royal" cemetery at Qustul, exhibits a high level of social differentiation, with symbols of royalty comparable to those of Egypt, as well as very large royal tombs. The royal cemetery, which may have been contemporaneous with early and mid Naqada III, was thoroughly vandalized and never reused. At roughly the same date an Egyptian victory relief was carved at Gebel Sheikh Suleiman, at the northern end of the Second Cataract. Thereafter, Lower Nubia is an archaeological blank for more than five hundred years, a phase during which the local population was presumably not in a position to create lasting burials (village settlements are in any case unlikely to be found), while an Egyptian fortress town of the mid 3rd millennium has been discovered at Buhen near Gebel Sheikh Suleiman. Thus, the elimination of the A-Group, which was surely due to Egyptian military activity, created a power vacuum to the south of Egypt, rather like a vastly extended frontier zone.

The Egyptian treatment of Libya, to its west, is likely to have been comparable to that of Nubia, but in detail it is hypothetical. The later centre of Libyan population was Cyrenaica, hundreds of kilometres west of the Nile Delta. A number of scholars have suggested that the word for Libya (*tjehenu*) referred originally to areas immediately west of the Delta or even within it, but nothing specific points to this identification, while in the late 2nd millennium, for which evidence is better, Libya was clearly Cyrenaica—a region that has not been explored for its prehistoric archaeology—and its population still largely nomadic. It is thus most economical to assume that early Libya was in the same area, and this interpretation fits well with the generally high mobility of prehistoric non-agricultural populations. A people living at such a distance could have traded animals with Egypt but would seldom have constituted a significant political threat to a settled state of the type Egypt became.

Whether "Libya" was Cyrenaica or the arid western littoral of present-day Egypt, the absence of evidence for settled populations in either region suggests that the depiction on the Cities Palette and other comparable monuments characterized a generalized "other" and did not aim even at a schematic rendering of a particular area (other monuments appear not to mix localities, so that it would be unwise to posit mixing to explain this case). The assertion of dominance over Libya thus implied that there might be a formidable, settled enemy far distant from Egypt, whom the Egyptians could easily control. In pointing to a very distant place, it will also have implied that the large space between the two regions was a void that could be traversed but held no threat. The "ethnographic" characterization of Libya was as a contrasting polity and was not realistic either in what it said about Libya itself or in what it implied about Egypt.

Finally, to the east of the Nile Valley and Delta was the mountainous Eastern Desert, which the Egyptians exploited for its mineral resources from a very early period but never settled even where it could have been habitable. Graffiti of the reign of Narmer, the latest king of Dynasty 0 (Naqada IIIb), show a marking of territory for Egyptian exploitation, but essentially the area was another void, rather like the region to the west leading toward Libya.

Thus, early Egypt demarcated itself from its neighbours by creating or asserting a void in three directions out of four. The fourth direction, toward Syria-Palestine in the north-east, which is the only one that is not attested in explicit ideological statements from the Naqada III period, is the only one to show significant trade and exchange (relations with the area

changed no later than the late 1st dynasty). It is also the only one where a pattern of sedentary living in walled settlements, as presented on the Cities Palette and some other monuments, may have corresponded to any reality. It could be a matter of chance that there is this double contrast between the various foreign regions and the ways in which they were depicted on the one hand, and the patterning of relations between them and Egypt on the other. Be that as it may, the resulting disjunction between different categories of evidence brings out the preponderance of ideological presentation over specific realities.

Ideology was probably also vital to the process of cultural and political unification. Explicit texts containing words for Egypt and its component parts are not known from as early as this, so that it is difficult to compare the ideology with that attested from later. Whether or not there was a concept of "Egypt" as an entity at the beginning of the unification, this must have emerged by the end for there to have been such a strong drive to reach the limits of the land and to suppress regional differences. The terminology of "Two Lands", which characterizes dynastic Egypt, has often been seen as deriving from two "kingdoms", perhaps of the Naqada II period, but the archaeological record offers no support for such an interpretation. Rather, unity arose from a single driving force from the Nile Valley that came to dominate a number of polities. The dualities of Egyptian ideology are more part of a vision of how the cosmos as a whole was constituted than a reflection of political subdivisions. The identification of country and cosmos was the fundamental element in that vision.

Forms of display

The enrichment and elaboration of forms of display and of rule during Naqada III accompanied major changes in material culture that originated rather earlier. The inventory of ceramic forms of Naqada III is more restricted than that of Naqada II, showing an impoverishment in styles and to some extent in execution, together with an increase in the average size of containers. The fine black-topped red ware of earlier phases died out by the end of Naqada II, while D-Ware, the major Naqada II style of marl clay containers with mainly representational decoration in red paint, disappeared at the same time or slightly earlier, leaving little fine or decorated pottery in production.

D-Ware was made of a desert clay found especially in the wadis across the river east of Naqada (there has been no study of clay types to establish how many sources were in use). The vessels, which have been found from the town site at Elephantine north to the Fayyum region, were therefore probably made and perhaps decorated near the clay sources and then transported by ship through much of the country. This broad distribution of a display ware is striking testimony to cultural homogenization from early Naqada II on and may point to the presence of some kind of market for distribution. The same clay was used in Naqada III for a wide range of vessel types, but with minimal decoration and no human or animal figures.

Thus, the achievement of cultural uniformity through the country in late Naqada II and Naqada III was concomitant with a restriction on certain forms of display and wealth. Some graves of Naqada III were nonetheless rich in grave goods, including very important categories, notably stone vases and "ripple-flaked" knives with elaborately carved bone or ivory handles. There may also have been an increase in the use of metals among the elite, but these are hardly attested until the 1st Dynasty, probably in part because they were easily robbed from burials and recycled. The disappearance of decorated and high-quality pottery is therefore part of a polarization of wealth that concentrated expressive resources while salient aspects of material culture ceased to be potent expressions of local political identities. Decorative themes of the knife-handles and temple votive offerings focus on order and on the

“other”, represented more often through animals than through human figures, and combat scenes, most of which are on clearly royal objects. This tendency to restrict subject matter may have begun in mid Naqada II. The wall paintings of Hierakonpolis Tomb 100, which is generally dated to Naqada IIc or IId and may have belonged to a local ruler, have a full range of motifs including human figures, scenes of ritual slaughter of enemies, hunting, and forms of boats that are otherwise rarely attested. While gaps in evidence make it difficult to contextualize this composition in relation to later ones, all of these motifs are subsequently known only on objects of the highest prestige; the most economical explanation of this pattern of distribution is that they became the privilege of central royalty during the country’s political unification. They are unlikely to derive directly from compositions like those of Tomb 100, which were significantly earlier in date.

This polarization of wealth and display was contemporaneous both with the spread of the Naqada culture outlined above and with a marked increase of population in the area between the Fayyum lake and the Delta apex, which was in most later periods the location of the country’s capital city. This area had probably also been the population centre of the Ma‘adi culture, but its important grew as it became the point of contact of the two main regions of settlement. The area does not seem to have had a single main site or city, as Memphis was in the 1st Dynasty and later, but even Memphis seems not to have been large by the standards of such Near Eastern cities as Uruk. The distribution of cemeteries suggests where the population became more concentrated as well as larger. While living patterns cannot be reconstructed with any precision from cemeteries, I suggest that the lack of a single predominant cemetery points to a rather dispersed mode of settlement. When Memphis emerged in the 1st Dynasty, the nearby prestige burial ground of Saqqara should be seen in conjunction with the very large mid-ranking cemetery of Helwan on the other side of the Nile, which appears to have been separated and given a subordinate status, because it was on the less symbolically favoured east side of the river and much distant from the city. This distribution of cemeteries gave the greatest prominence to Memphis, but not in the unified fashion of some later cemeteries of capital cities such as that of mid 2nd millennium Thebes. Older centres in the Nile Valley that had probably been the capitals of regional polities continued to be important, although all of them lost their prominence during the 1st–3rd dynasties. The most evident of these are, from south to north, Hierakonpolis, Naqada, and Abydos; other possible centres, for example in the area around Asyut, may have been obliterated beneath later developments. Abydos retained a unique status as the historical and current burial place of the 1st Dynasty kings and continued to be a regional centre until the 4th Dynasty, but its importance was probably more symbolic than administrative.

Patterns of settlement in the Nile Delta are less clear. Crucial sites such as Buto show a replacement of the Ma‘adi culture by Naqada IId2 and III, while textual and symbolic allusions suggest that places like Sais, which were major cities in much later periods, were significant at an early date. It is likely that from early the Delta was rather more urban than much of the Nile Valley, perhaps in part because of its very different topography. The wealthy cemetery of Minshat Abu Omar in the eastern Delta probably belonged to a trading settlement near the frontier and routes leading toward Palestine. The location of this site, which appears to have been a foundation of the rulers of the unified country, fits with a centralized settlement policy.

The pattern of settlement in a country is hardly ever close to an ideal type and these regional distributions are no exception. They suggest a rather even spread of population in most regions, together with a strong but un-nucleated focus on the area of the later capital. This pattern is far from those found in civilizations based on city states.

Summary of late predynastic developments

Developments of later Naqada II and Naqada III that are relevant to the present discussion can be summarized as the homogenization of material culture outlined above, together with a restriction in vehicles of display and a privileging of certain royal and elite media and contexts. The cultural and political unification of Egypt brought with it a great economic expansion, one indication of which is the maintenance of the population's general physical health through a period of likely conflict and rapid change, in contrast with patterns generally found with rapid social change and differentiation. Despite this expansion, there was a progressive impoverishment of the non-elite that led in the long term to the extreme wealth differentials of the time of the great pyramids in the mid 3rd millennium.

These developments were contemporaneous with the creation of an image of the other that separated Egypt radically from the world around, ostensibly leaving only the north-east, where it had ambitions to expand and incorporate territory and specialized agricultural resources, as a direction with which it had normal relations of contact and economic exchange. The country and civilization presented itself as a single, homogeneous entity that encountered diversity beyond rather than within its frontiers and projected a vision of itself as something akin to a vast estate rather than a network of urban centres, even though such centres must have existed in a number of places. This merging of polity and civilization is perhaps the most distinctive overriding feature of Egypt in many periods. In the next section I review how this pattern, which can be observed through the archaeological typology of artifacts and distribution of sites, can be compared with the representational legacy, of which the Cities Palette discussed at the beginning is a vital late example.

The specialization of idioms of display

The spread of the Naqada culture through Egypt brought with it the typically Upper Egyptian focus on funerary display and, it seems, a higher general level of display than Lower Egypt had previously possessed. Architecture was probably a major focus of display, together with elaborate elite lifestyles and perishable accoutrements such as fine cloth and jewellery. Nonetheless, the permanence of the world of the dead, the increasing expenditure on grave goods and tomb structures, and the salience of the low desert as an environment and a landscape in which display had an almost self-contained meaning, gave unusual salience to the world of the dead. We should probably look to the world of the living and perishable materials as the original contexts of many artistic forms. The oldest surviving pictorial composition is on linen from a late Naqada I or early Naqada II tomb at Gebelein, while the imperfect execution of the wall painting in Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis contrasts with its compositional sophistication, suggesting more expert archetypes in other, lost media. Thus, while preserved material seems thematically coherent, it will have sat in a broader context of artistic production.

Themes and motifs of representational display in Naqada III incorporate this salience almost reflexively. Many objects are decorated with animal scenes, some showing hunting and some having more the appearance of inventories of animals. The most complex compositions, notably the Two Dog Palette, create a whole environment with partly supernatural characteristics, framed by two high relief wild hunting dogs, which were animals of the low desert—the realm of hunting as well as of the dead. Some of these objects were placed in tombs, but the majority of the palettes seem to have been dedicated in temples of the gods, notably at Hierakonpolis and Abydos (many of them are unprovenanced). Objects of ivory with representational decoration, which form the largest single category of these finds and also mostly come from temples, have broadly similar decoration, with a rather

larger proportion of human figures, mainly in scenes of aggression. The iconography of the figures is not strongly distinctive, but their kilts and headdresses suggest rulers, while their ritual smiting of enemies with a mace probably became a royal prerogative. An example of the symbolic equivalence of human aggression and animal scenes is given by the Gebel el-Araq knife handle, one side of which shows human figures in combat and the other a hunting scene that mixes human and animal protagonists, the latter part domestic and part wild.

There are evident similarities in the symbolism of hunting, battle, and the ritual slaughter of enemies. Hunting and battle were shown with human participants but the only representations of kings were in indirect forms, such as emblematic animals. Here, the essential creation of the end of the formative period was a distinctive iconographic repertory for the king that made him absolutely salient among human figures; this culminated at the end of the period with the Narmer and Scorpion maceheads and palette. An iconography for figures of deities was probably designed at the same time to fit with figures of the king but not with other human figures; but this is not attested until rather later. Later material suggests that the rituals centred around the king that are represented on the largest late compositions may point to other, more stereotyped scenes of ritual between the king and deities that are not found on preserved materials and could have adorned temple sanctuaries or have decorated lost, perishable materials.

While these hypothetical central iconographies were being developed, battle and defeat of enemies were depicted in the context of the hunt or were symbolized through it. Hunting was an activity of the low desert, the border zone between Egypt and the world outside, between the settled and the wild or unsettled, and between the realms of the living and of the dead. The Hunters' Palette, which shows a lion hunt conducted by a group of men with at the top a small image of a building and an emblematic double bull, probably signifies a hunt under royal auspices where the king is not shown as a human figure because he is a different order of being. In other cases, the king himself is shown as a lion or a bull goring enemies. These compositions are rather freely arranged over the compositional surface, but the painting of Hierakonpolis Tomb 100 shows that the rigid ordering device of the base line existed from earlier and that the neutral compositional space stands in deliberate contrast to compositions with such lines. The lines appear to have been introduced piecemeal to the palettes and maceheads, dominating compositions through arrangement into multiple registers by the end of Dynasty 0 with the Scorpion and Narmer maceheads and the Narmer Palette. They are likely to have developed in some of the same lost contexts where representations of the king with deities evolved; the decoration of religious structures was probably the core of the system.

The adoption of the rigid manner of register decoration offers a neat analogy for developments in social hierarchies, the emergence of a separate inner elite, together with an administrative sub-elite, contrasting with the mass of the population outside whom the monuments evoke indirectly and symbolically. The people do not play a major part in compositions, essentially because the focus is on the central actors; paradoxically, enemies are more widely attested, because they are more significant for the depicted themes, which propound the king's mission.

The world of hunters and of defeat of enemies is therefore a specialist elite world, in which preoccupations such as dog-breeding were important enough to be incorporated in significant ways; some related iconography is playful and appropriate to an in-group. The only major object that includes representations of significant areas within the settled and watered land is the fragmentary Scorpion Macehead, the central sections of which seem to show an agricultural ritual and one sited in the marshes, a favoured internally liminal location

of later times. Otherwise, hunting takes place in the low desert and, as discussed in the previous section, the defeat of enemies is envisaged as creating a vast distance from Egypt, past no-man's-lands that render the ordered world ideologically self-contained and discrete.

A striking feature of all the preserved decoration, and of the objects on which it was created, is the focus on aggression. The warlike and ceremonial weapon of the macehead is known in all sizes, while the knife-handles and knives, although not in themselves functional, are evidently talismans of the hunt and hence of another form of aggression. Some decorated vases show the same theme in royal guise. Numerous relatively small ivory cylinders are decorated almost exclusively with repeated motifs of a figure who is probably the king ritually clubbing enemies with a mace; these seem to be sections from small votive mace-handles. Aggression symbolically rejects other modes of contact with the world outside, while carrying bleak implications for subjects within Egypt, as is shown by the throttling of the lapwing emblem for "subject" on the Scorpion Macehead. It negates the rules of reciprocity that are structurally essential to noncomplex societies and their relations with the world outside them, focusing the new configuration of the state around a single centre of value, which is the king, through whom cosmological meanings relating to the world of the gods are mediated. In the definition of the newly formed civilization—and a fortiori of the single society which makes up the civilization—anything that lies outside is an "other" and ideologically inferior, so that reciprocity would be symbolically meaningless (this is not to say that Egyptian–foreign relations were as brutal and asymmetrical in fact as in ideology: the archaeological record of the Lower Nubian A-Group, for example, shows ample evidence of Egyptian exports). The elite partake in the ruler's position by extension but can derive symbolic status only through him, as is shown, for example, by the transfer of power through physical proximity to the king or by the nonroyal use of originally royal motifs, such as the niche-panelled brick facade, which was an elite form by the 1st Dynasty after being only royal in early Naqada III.

In the preserved record, these developments ceased at the beginning of the 1st Dynasty, when display came to focus on monumental tomb complexes, with palaces and temples probably having similar importance. These architectural creations, however, cannot have been equivalent to the representational compositions I have been discussing, whose only successors appear to have been strongly formalized and in different domains, because large-scale or undecorated material cannot convey the detailed messages of captioned pictorial compositions. This shift in domain is an indicator of major change and of the ruling group's progressive arrogation of control of complex symbolic resources, which became almost wholly focused on the king and the world of the gods, where what was most important—principally the cult materials themselves and representations of interaction between the king and the gods—was not displayed publicly. Other ways in which these developments were expressed, such as the patterning of cemeteries destined for people of different levels of wealth, or of wealth within single cemeteries, would require separate study.

The establishment and material expression of hierarchies

The ideology of the representational and iconographic forms which crystallized at the beginning of the Egyptian "dynastic period" expressed a high level of social inequality. That inequality continued to increase in the early dynasties, restricting the content available for public monuments, while large-scale architectural forms, some of them used by the elite in addition to the king, perhaps increased the range of media that could convey relevant messages.

This development of ideology and its representation toward increased restriction was hierarchical and excluded most of society from access to central concerns and values—values in which many people might have had little interest, but which nevertheless motivated the society as a whole. This restriction can be seen in the monuments, their style of decoration, and the distribution of cemeteries across the country. A comparison of the relative freedom and uniformity of Naqada II, when D-Ware pottery was deposited in quite a wide range of tombs (and may have been used in other contexts), with the general plainness of even the highest ranking grave goods of the 1st Dynasty shows a striking withdrawal of symbolic resources, even if it was partially compensated in precious materials that are lost through looting.

Thus, the elite of the 3rd millennium were in a sense prisoners of the elaborate symbolic structures that royalty had created together with them. With hindsight, the path of development that led to the centralization and expenditure on the great pyramids of the mid 3rd millennium began with the emergence of this exclusive focus on the king royalty during the state's formative period.

The social and material forms created in this period were expressed through such notions as the "estate"—a royal land grant either for central purposes or for the income and funerary foundations of elite officials—and the province or "nome", both of which are clearly attested in the 1st Dynasty and later but whose roots probably went back to Naqada III. These are administrative forms that proceed from the centre and assign areas for agricultural exploitation and for control respectively. Estates are agricultural, while nomes divide the country into sections. The nomes presumably had administrative centres, but only some of them are known as archaeological sites—generally of much later times—and one must assume that the majority of nomes did not focus around large urban centres. Here again, we see the country demarcated as far as its boundaries and in theory evenly settled in the administrative interests of the centre, for which it produced resources. This centralization, which intensified into the mid 3rd millennium, was no doubt favoured by the ease of river transport, while urban centres were not very much needed for transport because the river bank offered fairly uniform scope for mooring and shipping throughout its length. Outside the newly dominant capital area of Memphis, the only provincial centres to retain great ideological importance were the older capital and royal burial ground of Abydos and the major site of Hierakonpolis. Other important places, such as the frontier post of Elephantine (Aswan), seem not to have become significant, at least for elite display, until the later 3rd millennium. Here, however, evidence is very sparse and institutions such as provincial temples probably counterbalanced the overwhelming focus on the area of the capital. Here, the small dummy pyramids of the 3rd–4th dynasties (c. 2600 BCE), which are spread across much of the country, could be seen either as a uniform marking of the whole in the service of the centre or as offering an alternative to that dominance.

During the early centuries of the Egyptian state, the creation of estates led to a great increase in the amount of land developed for agriculture and, it seems, a bipartition of residential patterns with the new, estate-based forms complementing older nucleated settlements. At least in ideology, development was away from the urban toward more dispersed and rural forms. It is difficult to assess the accuracy of this picture, which is essentially read off textual and pictorial material, and almost impossible to test by fieldwork, but its ideological significance is great.

The physical and ideological manipulation of the settled space of Egypt accompanied the hierarchical demarcation of deities and king from elite and of elite from others. This hierarchy was both material—in that it is manifested in the patterning of cemeteries and in artifact typologies and distributions—and ideological. Ideological concerns seem to have

driven development at least as much as did material ones, if only because it is difficult to imagine that the elite would have accepted to be deprived of symbolic resources to the extent that they were unless this happened at the behest of dominating ideas. Evidence like that of the Naqada III palettes gives great weight to the definition of self and other and to the ideology's "boundarism". Such ideas happen to be very sparsely documented for some centuries in the early 3rd millennium, but mid 3rd millennium and slightly later royal monuments show a consistency of emphasis with the older material that allows one to posit a basic continuity in outlook. What is more clearly visible is the formulation during Naqada IIIb of a system of decorum governing the organization of monuments and their decoration. This system, which remained central to Egyptian civilization, had many functions and is manifest in many domains. Its ultimate focus was on the gods and the king, imparting a sacral core to the demarcations of human society. Those demarcations were spatial as well as socially hierarchical since they patterned the core display area of death, in addition to the less known context of temples. Decorum provides the context within which access to symbolic resources was limited even for members of the elite apart from the king.

Thus, I suggest that there was a coherent complex of symbolic and material institutions in early Egypt, encompassing the expression of a hierarchical central ideology, differential access to prestigious domains of material culture, attitudes toward the world outside together with action in relation to it, and the pattern of settlement within the country. These domains are not homologous but rather manifest different aspects of an ideology that drove Egypt in its formative period as a civilization.

Conclusion

I have viewed the early development of the Egyptian state primarily through its works of art and some artifact types, as well as through the message which the elite proclaimed to itself about the country's relations with the world outside. The works I have used have the advantage of being relatively well attested and preserved, as well as being highly complex and hence appropriate material for a study of social complexity. They may appear to be indirectly social, in that they say little about the people as a whole. That bias, however, reflects the focus of the central actors—chief among whom was the king—whose aim was not to create a generalized representation of society but to propound elite interests and concerns.

Broader measures of material culture and symbolic action across the society, which might flesh out the arguments from elite objects presented here, would be largely irrelevant to the actors' perspective, because their focus was upon their own elite domain. An essential strategy of elites, from ancient Egyptians to modern archaeologists, is to assert in deed and word that their own preoccupations and methods of addressing their concerns are uniquely meaningful, so that what lies outside can be ignored. To take one example, the resources invested in creating institutional support for writing enhanced the potential of administration, which may have been the initial stimulus to devising the writing system, but they were appropriated, either soon after writing's invention or at the same time, to create a representational and aesthetic system whose main purpose was to convey complex centripetal meanings to the group with access to the works that embodied it. That group consisted of the gods, the king, and the very small elite who possessed the requisite knowledge, saw the objects as they were created, and then often deposited them in temples or tombs rather than making them public.

Such exclusive high-cultural undertakings characterize ideologies and styles of social complexity that are, I argue, specific to civilizations. Their institutional underpinnings, such

as writing or the manufacture of vast numbers of stone vessels of extremely limited utility as containers, are costly and mobilize sub-elites to maintain and transmit the necessary skills. These are specialized instances of the differentiation of unequal sectors and roles in society that is integral to any definition of social complexity, and they go beyond what is generally found in nonstate societies, whether complex or not. Writing is a symbolic technology that has important implications for labour and administration as well as vital ideological manifestations, while stone vases and other artifacts are crucial expressions of wealth and significance in material form, monumentalizing societal values and, as it happens, providing tangible evidence to archaeologists. The boundarism and territoriality of Egyptian self-definition is incorporated in such forms and asserts, no doubt contrary to social facts on the ground, that Egypt was a self-contained and ethnically uniform society and that beyond its borders it only entertained normal relations with its cultural or civilizational “equals”, treating them as periphery rather than as separate both in fact and in ideology, and banishing all other neighbours to nonexistence or to a distant limbo.

This configuration is specific to Egyptian civilization and contrasts strongly with the roughly contemporaneous Mesopotamia. In Egypt, state and civilization were coterminous. The civilization's self-image was not urban and boundarism was part of the nonurban vision, in a country that seems also in fact to have been relatively little urbanized. Here, ideology is in agreement with intentional and random developments on the ground. Mesopotamia was a civilization of city states that was not unified and lacked sharp boundaries, both among the states and between one state and the next. Together, the two cases exemplify that there is no single trajectory to and type of civilization.

Archaeological evidence makes a vital contribution to this argument from sites and the distribution and typology of artifacts, but a number of other categories of material contribute to a fuller picture. That picture is incomplete because it has to omit the dimension of lived action, which is not presented directly in the representational or linguistic evidence, but works of art and writing provide a complex, reflexive commentary on social processes that can only be approached in limited ways through narrowly archaeological materials and methods. Later traditions of the same civilizations also offer a guide to interpretation and a comparative context for testing that can be of great value if used with proper methodological caution. Among complex societies civilizations produce complex legacies that require multidisciplinary approaches for proper study.

What I have not presented is any neat definition of social complexity, even as it might be applied to the case of Egypt. Rather, I argue that civilizations as societal types present features that are additional to any basic definition of social complexity and take ideological and social forms into new areas. From the complex society of Naqada II, Egypt moved to the civilization that defined itself during Naqada III.

Note. It is not possible to cite specific documentation within the confines of this paper or to discuss alternative interpretations more than occasionally. I plan to publish a documented and more fully nuanced version.

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