Early state formation in anthropological perspective

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The author summarizes the main problems presented by the available documentation on the formation period of the Egyptian state while denying the validity of the model based on "events" which in turn produced concepts such as "unification of Egypt". In this scenario, documentation traditionally considered as significant is interpreted within parameters no longer compatibles with information produced by new archaeological methods and with different theoretical models in mind. Finally, the author proposes the application to the Nile valley of the Epigenetic Model of Evolution of Civilisation proposed by Friedman and Rowlands.

El trabajo resume los problemas más importantes que plantea la documentación disponible sobre el periodo de formación del estado egipcio al tiempo que niega que el modelo basado en "acontecimientos" y que dio lugar a los planteamientos de "unificación de Egipto" sea válido. El autor sostiene que la documentación que se ha considerado tradicionalmente más significativa se interpreta desde unos parámetros que no son ya compatibles con la información obtenida mediante la aplicación de nuevos métodos arqueológicos y a la luz de modelos teóricos diferentes. Finalmente, se defiende la aplicación al valle del Nilo del "modelo epigenético de evolución de la civilización" desarrollado por Friedman y Rowlands.

> " I have always been more attracted by the higher levels of abstraction and theoretical speculation since it is only by progress here that the overall possibility of interpretation moves closer. Keeping one's eyes firmly fixed to the ground is the surest way of ensuring an uninteresting and partial view."
>
> Nigel Barley, *The Innocent Anthropologist* (1986: 20)

TRADITIONALLY the formation of the Egyptian State is explained by means of what may be called the "unification-by-conquering" model in which the unification of Egypt is depicted as a historical event or resulting from a series of events. In recent years there is a growing amount of literature from which it is clear that this explanatory model is facing an increasing amount of anomalies, both from archaeological data and interpretational problems. The six most important problems will be resumed here:

1. The identification of Menes with Narmer or Aha is problematic. We are dealing with a name from Egyptian tradition rather than a historical person.[1] The sources that name Menes as the unificator of Egypt are coloured by the dualistic world view of the Egyptians.[2]

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1. J.P. Allen, "Menes the Memphite", *GM* 126, 19-22.

2. B.J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt. Anatomy of a Civilisation* (1989), 20 ff.

2. There appears to be a sudden cultural change, perceivable from the archaeological database of the Nile delta. This change is usually explained by migrating Naqadans in the wake of the conquest. Such a large scale migration, necessary to explain this cultural change would cause major demographic problems. The nature, extend and archaeological visibility of these problems have never been investigated to the knowledge of the author. Recent research suggests that there is not a break in cultural change, but that there is a continuum in the development.[3]

3. The traditional unification model has been severely discredited by the recent Naqada IIb and IIc finds by Thomas von der Way in Buto[4] and of Karla Kroeper in Minschat Abu Omar.[5] The traditional model cannot explain that, while conquering, large areas are skipped for several generations and that certain cultural elements, such as beer brewery in Buto,[6] are introduced only in Naqada IIc or IId.

4. The archaeological support for the presupposed conquest is mainly apparent in an ever growing region in which Naqada pottery is encountered.[7] With the interpretation of the material the assumption is made that this type of pottery, defined by Egyptologists and archaeologists as 'Naqada' has a one to one association with a people in ancient Egypt. This is, however, an outdated and no longer acceptable assumption.[8] A shift in pottery tradition may never be used *a priori* as an indication of a shift in people. The use of 'Naqada culture' in this sense is misleading, bearing in mind the anthropological use of this term. The author suggests to introduce 'Naqada tradition', meaning this tradition in pottery manufacture.[9]

5. Following from points 3 and 4 it may be noted that it is mainly burial customs from the south which are introduced in the north, together with its associated pottery. It seems to be the case that in the earlier transitional phase (Naqada IIb-c) the adaption is limited to the more elaborate tombs, in the later transitional phase (Naqada IId-IIIa) Upper Egyptian burial costums are practised more widely. This point needs more elaboration and a lot of research in this area has still to be carried out.

6. The current interpretation of the known primary sources is under pressure. The four major arguments being as follows:

a. On the basis of one fragment of a single macehead one may not conclude that the Scorpion king only wore the white crown. Also, it is clear that the white and the red crown cannot be evaluated in this period as an indication for kingship of Upper and Lower Egypt respectively. As most elements from the later royal ideology which have predynastic origins, the red crown is Upper Egyptian in origin.[10]

b. The interpretation of the *verso* of the "Libyan" palette as an overview of founded

3. K. Kroeper & D. Wildung, *Minschat Abu Omar* (1985), 97; Von der Way, "Die Grabungen in Buto und die Reichseinigung", *MDAIK* 47, 419-424.
4. T. von der Way, "Tell Farac in-Buto. 4. Bericht", *MDAIK* 45, note 8.
5. Kroeper & Wildung, *op. cit.*
6. T. von der Way, *op. cit.*, *MDAIK* 47, 419 ff. differentiates between cultural and political unification.
7. W. Kaiser, "Zur Südausdehnung der vorgeschichtlichen Deltakulturen und zur frühe Entwicklung Oberägyptens", *MDAIK* 41, 61-87.
8. D.L Clarke, *Analytical Archaeology* (1978² rev. by R. Chapman), 12: "An archaeological culture is not a racial group, nor a historical tribe, nor a linguistic unit, it is simply an archaeological culture"; Kemp, *op. cit*, 14: "Predynastic Cultures are, however, phases of culture, defined by pottery and so on".
9. See also Haanen, *Abu Roash - South Cemetery: Catalogue of tombs and tentative interpretation.* MA-thesis Leiden University, on the subject how archaeological practice and the history of Egyptology shape our present-day perceptions on the rise of the Egyptian state.
10. G.A. Wainwright, "The Red Crown in Early Prehistoric Times", *JEA* 9 (1923), 26-33; H. Asselbergh, *Chaos en Beheersing* (1961), afb. 12.

places is at least as valid as the interpretation of the subduction of cities, because of the use of *mr*, the hoe. The location of the places involved is unknown.[11]

c. The interpretation of the fable animals with long necks that appear on the Narmer palette as a representation of the unification is invalid in the light of the iconography of the other slate palettes from the immediately preceding period: a fair number of these objects bear a circle as a central element. The interpretation as a remainder of the original function of the slate palette surrounded by decorative elements such as the fable animals or snakes appear more often. As an example the "two dogs" palette may be mentioned.[12] The meaning of the decoration remains obscure.

d. On the Narmer palette the defeated enemies are indicated with a hieroglyph which is known from later period as a representation of the seventh nome of Lower Egypt. Like similar contemporaneous as well as later sources this may be a representation of defeating the enemies outside Egypt, or in this case, Egypt's periphery; thus being a representation of kingship ideology.[13]

The point raised is the following: none of the interpretations is clear-cut and the available primary sources are generally interpreted in the light of the traditional model, a model no longer tenable on the basis of archaeological evidence. From a methodological point of view it is false to conclude that the current model follows from the interpretation of the primary sources. Facts exist only by the grace of theories. Our perception is necessarily coloured and shaped by our preconceptions. This view on interpreting material culture, extraordinary well expressed by Henry Claessen, is appropriate here:

> It is not without reason that I stressed the word **our**, for this paper discussing some aspects of the interpretation of material remains gives **my** interpretation. What we do is no more, but also no less, than presenting a construction -**our construction**- of the past. It is a construction, not a reconstruction, how hard we may try to come that far. Inevitably we colour any interpretation with our views, our theories, our hopes, our prejudices. ... . we also know how heavily the way of writing, of presenting data, shapes our image of... of what? Reality? Or, of the constructed reality?[14]

According to Karl Popper[15] a falsified model needs to be abandoned and replaced by a more appropriate theory. According to Imre Lakatos[16] it is only allowed to attack an existing theory if there is an alternative theory available, partly because of ethical reasons. According to Paul Feyerabend[17] an alternative theory is always desirable, no matter the status of the currently accepted theory. Feyerabend adds that any theory is falsified *a priori*, since every theory is by its nature an empirical generalisation and therefore cannot explain all phenomena in its domain. By means of confronting two opposing models it is possible to eliminate flaws in both and from such a thesis and opposing antithesis a synthesis may

11. B.G. Trigger, "The rise of Egyptian Civilisation". In: B.G. Trigger et al. *Ancient Egypt A Social History* (1983), 45; B.G. Trigger, "Egypt, a Fledging Nation", *JSSEA* 17, 1/2: 58-66.
12. Asselbergh, *op. cit*, 531. See also *ibid.* 339.
13. E. Endesfelder, "Die Formierung der altägyptischen Klassengesellschafft. Probleme und Beobachtungen". In: E. Endesfelder (ed.), *Probleme der frühen gesellschaftsentwicklung im alten Ägypten* (1991), 5-61.
14. H.M.J. Claessen, "The interpretation of material remains: problems and paradoxes", *Profiel. Contactorgaan Historische Archeologieen Rijksuniversiteit* Leiden 3/l, 17 (Emphasis by the author). Consult any introduction to Philosophy of Science for the concept of "theory-ladenness of observation, but before all T.S Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970²).
15. K. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (1965).
16. I. Lakatos, "Falsification and the methodology of scientific research programmes". In: I. Lakatos & A.E. Musgrave, *Criticism and the growth of knowledge* (1970), 91-196.
17. P. Feyerabend, *Against Method* (1989).

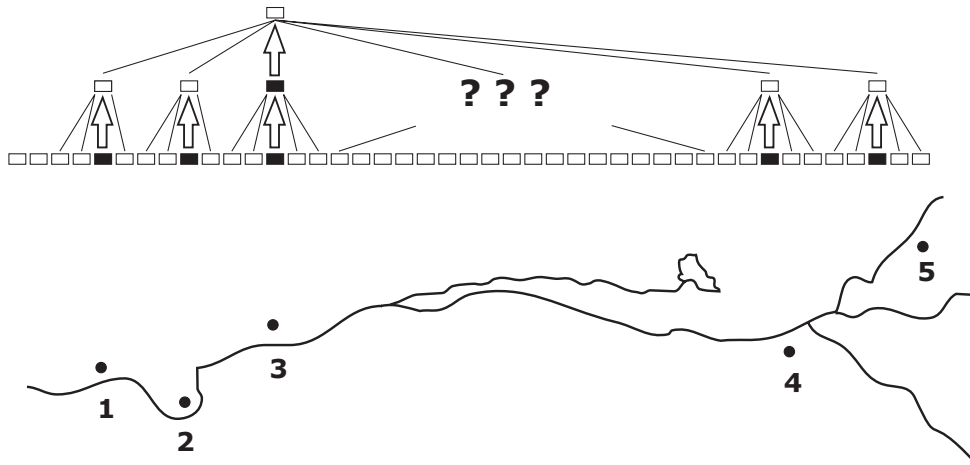## Epigenetic Model for Cultural Change

Figure 1: Graphical representation of the Epigenetic Model.
1 = Hierakonpolis   2 = Naqada   3 = Abydos   4 = Ma'adi   5 = Buto
? ? ? = gap in the archaeological data base

be created. This synthesis has to be regarded as a new thesis, which necessarily has to be confronted with yet another antithesis: the dialectic method.

Following Lakatos and Feyerabend an attempt is made to give an outline of a alternative model in which the principle of a conquest is absent. According to the author the **Epigenetic Model of the Evolution of 'Civilisation',** developed principally by the anthropologists Jonathan Friedman and Mike Rowlands in the seventies[18] is appropriate for the Egyptian archaeological data base. As noted before, the presentation will give an outline only, according which the Egyptian data may be interpreted.

The epigenetic model is based on a more or less isolated society with accumulating complexity, stressing the internal factors responsible for this accumulation. In the case of formative Egypt these factors may be defined as follows:

(1)   accumulating complexity within the society has a dialectic relationship with:

(2)   the exchange of commodities,

(3)   prestige based on luxury items and/or exotic items,

(4)   limitation in access to luxury items and exotica,

(5)   increasing prestige based on the extraction of the luxury items and exotica in the burial practices and

(6)   the religious necessity of consuming burial customs.

The application of this model involves the rephrasing of the ideas, assumptions and

18. J. Friedman, "Tribes, States and Transformations". In: M. Bloch (ed.), *Marxist Analyses and Social Anthropology*, ASA 2 (1975), 161-202; J. Friedman & M.J. Rowlands, "Notes towards an Epigenetic Model of the Evolution of 'Civilisation'". In: I Friedman & M.J. Rowlands (eds.), *The Evolution of Social Systems* (1977), 201-276.

empirical generalizations on which it is based. They are mainly stated by Bruce Trigger,[19] Barry Kemp[20], Michael Hoffman,[21] Christian Guksch[22] and Erika Endesfelder.[23] These authors state their views (partially) from an anthropological approach of the archaeological remains.

An excursus of the to-be-built model may be split up in an archaeological and an anthropological component. It is stressed that this does not necessarily mean that the processes involved in the state formation were peaceful only. Conflicts may have arisen, but were of minor importance and have to be regarded as a result of the involved processes rather than the cause of the emergence of the Early State.

In the middle neolithic, during the period which is characterized by Badari pottery there are indications in burial customs which are indicative for social inequality. A limited number of tombs is distinguished by extra imputation. The deceased is wrapped in a reed mat.[24] A similar development is visible in the north, for example in Sedment-Mayana and Es-Saff. From the second half of the middle neolithic onwards social inequality as discernible from the burial customs increases: Larger differences occur with regard to number of grave goods and exotica. Also one tomb in El-Omari yielded a staff as part of the funerary equipment.[25] This development continues, but at the same time is restricted to the few well-known centres of Hierakonpolis, Naqada and Abydos and smaller ones at

Diospolis Parva, Armant, Kom Ombo and Edfu.[26] From the major centres large, rich tombs from the local elite are known from late neolithic-early chalcolithic period, eg. tomb 100 from Hierakonpolis[27] and the so-called "Tomb of Menes" from Naqada.[28] These tombs continue to be in use as tombs of the local elite in Early Dynastic period, now also in cemeteries like Saqqara, Helwan, Abu Roash, Tell Ibrahim Awad and others, while in Abydos another level in the hierarchy comes into existence: the tombs of the royalty. Whether the Egyptian society may be defined at this stage as a "chiefdom" or as a "state" is a subject for at least two other papers.[29] It is only noted here that the present discussion deals with the mechanisms and long term developments of socio-cultural change, rather than the labels.

From an anthropological point of view one may state that a process of hierarchization is at work at two different levels. At the one hand within the community, interred in one cemetery, at the other hand between these communities. Extended families or clans[30] interact in alliance networks with their neighbours, based on maintenance and the exchange of goods and marriage partners.[31] In this mechanism differences in richness, access to luxury items and status become apparent, which are eventually confirmed, formalized and stressed in the burial rites. As the differences in *status* and prestige become larger, it becomes increasingly more inte-resting for the local elite to establish similar

19. Trigger, *op. cit.*
20. Kemp, *op. cit.*
21. M.A Hoffman, *Egypt before the Pharaohs* (1979); MA. Hoffman, H. Hamroush & R. Allen, "A Model of Urban Development for the Hierakonpolis Region from Predynastic through Old Kingdom times", *JARCE* 23, 175-188.
22. C.E. Guksch, "Ethnological Models and Processes of State Formation - Chiefdom Survivals in the Old Kingdom", *GM* 125, 37-50.
23. Endesfelder, *op. cit.*
24. G. Brunton, *Qau and Badari* (1927); G. Brunton & G. Caton-Thompson, *The Badarian Civilisation* (1928).

25. Hoffman (1979), *op. cit.* 196; F. Debono & B. Mortensen, *El Omari*, AV 82 (1990), 57.
26. Trigger (1987) *op. cit.* 60.
27. J. E. Quibell & F.W. Green, *Hierakonpolis II*, ERA 5 (1902).
28. J. de Morgan, *Recherches sur les origines de l'Égypte* (1897).
29. See Guksch, *op. cit.*
30. The term is meant here as a generic. The exact nature and organisation of these communities remains yet obscure.
31. M.D. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (1985); Assmann, *Ma'at* (1990), 240.

networks with the elites of neighbouring communities, and the same mechanisms act once again, but one step higher at the social ladder. In due time a hierarchy arises in which the elites of Hierakonpolis, Naqada and Abydos play a major role. According to the author the elites of Maadi and Buto play an important role in the alliance networks, in which certain types of luxury pottery and their content is exchanged as archaeologically visible component. It is interesting to raise once more the question which in 1957 rose in a discussion between Werner Kaiser and Adolf Klasens and deserves scrutiny rather than dismissal: Why shouldn't the so-called "Palestian" ware have a larger area of occurrence, which includes (part of) the Nile delta?[32]

During Naqada IIIb-c some of the luxury items, mainly pottery, are found through all social strata. In the Nile delta it appears to have replaced local pottery completely, possibly by means of redistribution, also lower in the hierarchy. Whether we are dealing with a phenomenon well-known from dynastic Egypt, viz. the inflation of symbolism used by the top of the social pyramid as a means of distinguishing, or that pottery lost (part of its) meaning in the burial customs has to be a scope of future research. It may be added that at a certain moment a little earlier in this development, in the tomb of a ruler from Hierakonpolis the symbolism or information, previously present in the tombs as decorated ware is shifted from that pottery to the walls of the tomb: Tomb 100.[33] The highest elite buried in Abydos distinguishes itself more and more from the elites in the other major towns in Egypt by a symbolism and iconography that, from dynasty "0" onwards, may be characterised as "pharaonic". She rules the Nile valley; the result of over one and a half millennium establishing and maintaining social networks, in behalf of status and prestige, and expressed in the burial customs.[34]

32. Field diary of Prof. A Klasens, entry of march 17, 1958. The notebooks from the excavations by Klasens in Abu Roash are kept in the archives of the State Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. The author is currently preparing a final publication of these excavations.
33. Kaiser (1990), "Zur Entstehung des gesamtägyptischen Staates". *MDAIK* 46, 289, dates Tomb 100 to Naqada IIc.
34. This paper has been read at the annual Dutch-Flemish day of Egyptologists at Utrecht University in may 1992. ft must be noted that the very important work conducted by Kathryn Bard (K. Bard, "A Quantative Analysis of the Predynastic burials in Armant Cemetery 1400-1500", *JEA* 74, 39-55; "The Evolution of Social Complexity in Predynastic Egypt: An Analysis of the Naqada Cemeteries", *Journ. Mediterr. Arch.* 2. 223-248) was not available to the author at that moment. Apart from the translation into English, no additions were made to the text.

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