

# anthro notes

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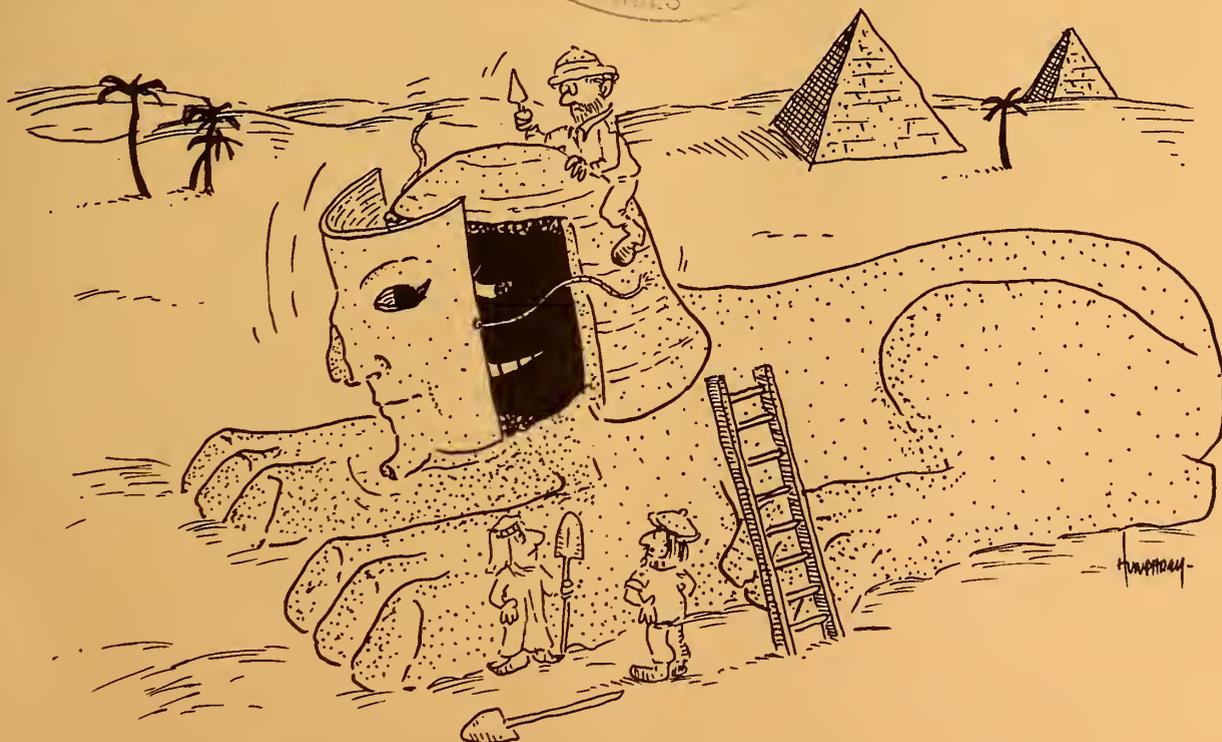
## THE ROOTS OF ANCIENT EGYPT

Who were the ancient Egyptians? Should the origins of their magnificent achievement be sought in the Middle East or in Africa? Were they themselves "White" or "Black"? These questions have been disputed by scholars since the beginnings of written history. Most recently, anthropological studies of human remains from northeast Africa, together with new archaeological evidence from Egypt and Nubia, offer us a new understanding of Egyptian origins in which Africa played the major role.

### Africa and Egypt: Pre-1945 Views

Early writers described the Egyptians as dark-skinned and woolly-haired (Herodotus) with origins in or close ties to the ancient peoples and cultures of Ethiopia (Diodorus of Sicily, Strabo). In the 18th

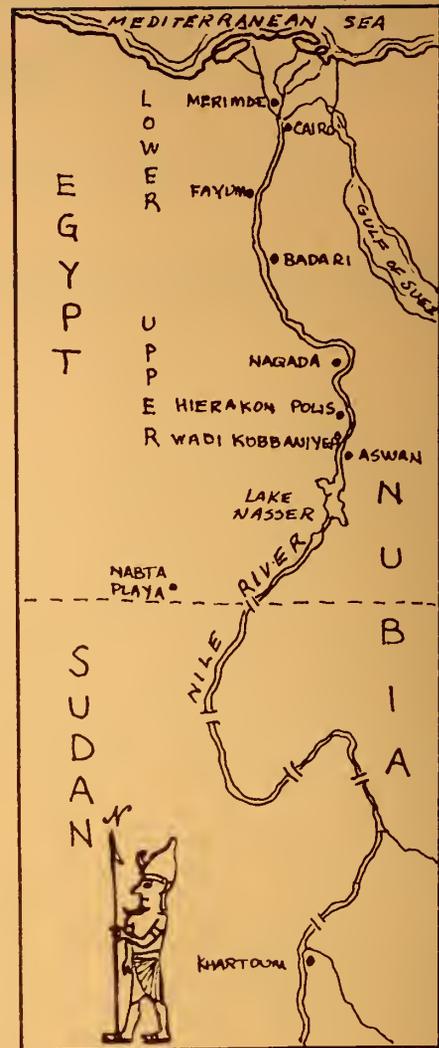
century ancient Egyptian civilization was "rediscovered" by travellers (and plunderers) from Europe, whose view of the ancient Egyptians was drawn largely from Egyptian art, in the absence of scientific archaeology or a code for deciphering hieroglyphic writing. After viewing the undamaged profile of the Sphinx, which the French author de Volney described as "Negro in all its features," he wrote: "Just think that this race of black men, today our slave and the object of our scorn, is the very race to which we owe our arts, sciences and even the use of speech! Just imagine, finally, that it is in the midst of peoples who call themselves the greatest friends of liberty and humanity that one has approved the most barbarous slavery and questioned whether black men have the same kind of intelligence as whites" (de Volney 1787:



74-77). As late as 1829, de Champollion, the decipherer of hieroglyphic writing, described a bas-relief in which the most "primitive" figure is a light-skinned, tattooed European barbarian wearing skin clothing, in contrast to the dark-skinned white-clad Egyptian described in the accompanying hieroglyphic legend as "the race of men par excellence."

In the 19th and 20th centuries, scholars attempted to exclude African cultures and Africans themselves from the origins of Egyptian civilization. Within ten years of 1829, de Champollion's own brother attributed the achievements of ancient Egypt to a separate "race" of reddish-brown-skinned Moors, whom he considered a variant of the "White" race due to their straight hair. In the absence of any in-depth study of skeletal remains or mummies, this quickly became the dominant view. While Elliot Smith and the diffusionists of the early 20th century were attributing all "civilization," and indeed all invention to an original center in Egypt, the leading American Egyptologist J. H. Breasted argued that Egypt was racially and culturally part of the same sphere as the adjacent region of western Asia. To Breasted, Egypt was separated from "the teeming black world of Africa...by an impassable desert barrier...Thus isolated and at the same time unfitted by ages of tropical life for any effective intrusion among the White Race, the negro and negroid peoples remained without any influence on the development of early civilization" (1926:113).

The idea that ancient Egyptians owed nothing to Africa was reinforced by the view that the ancestors of most present-day populations of eastern and central Africa arrived in these regions within the last 2000 years. Their predecessors in the Nile headwaters area were ancestral primarily to Caucasians (L.S.B. Leakey 1935) or Kalahari bushmen (Woodward 1938). As a result, even if archaeology could show that the Egyptians had migrated down the Nile from its headwaters area, any "Black" contribution to their culture, or link to most of the present inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa, could be discounted.



**First Settlers and Farmers: 7000 - 5000 BC**

From Khartoum in the Sudan, the Nile flows northward through increasingly arid desert hinterlands. Nubia, with its rocky landscape of gorges and cataracts gives way north of Aswan to the flatter floodplains of Upper Egypt, and, near modern Cairo, to Lower Egypt and the Nile delta region. The agricultural economy of ancient Egypt was based on wheat, barley, flax, date palms, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and donkeys. Only the latter was considered an indigenous African domesticate; the others, together with the idea of domestication itself, were thought to be Near Eastern imports, particularly since the earliest agricultural settlements in Lower Egypt appeared much later than their Near Eastern counterparts.

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Recent archaeological work in Upper Egypt, the Sudanese Nile Valley, and Egypt's western desert has presented a different picture of Egyptian origins. Except for a few intermittently-occupied sites in the Nile Valley (e.g. Wadi Kubbaniyeh), northeast Africa was deserted during the severe drought corresponding to the last ice age, about 18,000 years ago.

The climate became much wetter as the ice age ended, beginning about 13,000 years ago and continuing to about 6,000 years ago (ca. 4,000 B.C.). While nomadic hunters and gatherers continued to exploit the wild resources of the Egyptian Nile Valley, signs of increasing sedentism appear in the Sudanese Nile Valley. The first African experiments with domestication may have occurred in the western desert. In Sudanese Nubia towards the beginnings of this period, around 9000 years ago (7000 BC), the dead were buried in collective cemeteries, suggesting a more sedentary existence. Many of the skeletons at one such cemetery (Jebel Sahaba) appear to have been killed with stone tools, implying a degree of organized violence or warfare not characteristic of sparse populations of nomadic hunter-gatherers (Wendorf 1968). At Khartoum and other sites in the Sudan, hunters of buffalo and a variety of other game built mud-plastered structures, fished with bone harpoons, and made pottery decorated with wavy lines, all suggesting some degree of sedentism.

Although no domesticated plants or animals are associated with the Nile Valley settlements during this time, domesticated cattle, presumably descended from local wild ancestors, have been identified at several sites in the oases and playa lakes of the western desert as early as 9000 years ago. That is about the same date as the earliest domesticated cattle in Europe or the Near East. Evidence of domesticated cattle at the Egyptian sites is based not only on minor differences in size and shape with the wild forms but also on the fact that the rest of the animal bones all come from animals smaller than a gazelle. If large animals such as cattle were present in their wild state, reason the authors, there would be more than one large species. This finding has been disputed by other scholars (see Clark and

Brandt 1984). By 8000 years ago, the large permanent village of Nabta Playa, with its stone-lined houses and storage pits, well-made pottery decorated in the Khartoum style, domesticated (six-row) barley grains and date palms, and a few bones of unquestionably domesticated cattle attest to the full development of a food-producing economy based on indigenous African domesticates.

Around 7500 to 6400 years ago, the desert climate was particularly humid and favorable to pastoral production. To the north, by 7000 years ago (ca. 5000 B.C.), domesticated sheep and goats, pigs, and emmer-wheat, none of which are native to Africa, together with domesticated cattle, dogs, cultivated barley, and flax formed the economic basis at the first villages north of Cairo in the Nile delta. The easternmost of these villages may have been in contact with Near Eastern early farmers, providing a route for the transmission of Near Eastern domesticates, which appear in the final stages of desert cultures to the South. Toward the end of this period, increasing drought may have forced the western desert pastoralists back to the Nile Valley, still occupied by hunting and gathering groups. This crowding and mingling of cultures may have precipitated the first settlements in the area of the Nile Valley south of Cairo, where Egyptian civilization actually arose.

### Predynastic Egypt

During the predynastic period before the beginning of the First Dynasty (ca. 3100 B.C.), some of the most distinctive characteristics of Egyptian culture appeared in the area of Upper Egypt. These included hieroglyphs, an extraordinary emphasis on mortuary ritual including human and animal mummification, animal deification, maceheads as symbols of royal power, precious stone jars and cosmetics, and pharaonic kingship, in which the ruler as deity not only controls but also personifies the nation. Increasing cultural complexity is reflected in the emergence of differential access to wealth (social stratification); specialized manufacture of pottery, metals, and luxury goods; organized trade between regions; monumental architecture; irrigation

agriculture requiring centralized control; greater population densities; and regional conquest or political integration.

Scholars dispute the extent to which each of these features developed indigenously or was imported (or at least strongly influenced) through contacts with the Near East. Aside from the Near Eastern domesticates, which probably spread into Africa through intermediaries in the Nile delta region, there is very little evidence for direct contact between predynastic Upper Egypt and the Near East before the latter part of the predynastic period, ca. 3500 B.C., or even later. What is the evidence for the local development of cultural complexity before this date?

Four main stages of predynastic development have been recognized: Badarian (ca. 4400 to ca. 3800 B.C.), Amratian or Naqada I (ca. 3800 to 3500), Gerzean or Naqada II (ca. 3500 to ca. 3200), and protodynastic or Naqada III (ca. 3200 to 3100 B.C.). Even in the first stage, elaborate burials containing luxury goods from other African regions presage the cult of the dead and attest to differential wealth. Specialized manufacture of pottery, stone jars, and cosmetic palettes is also evident. While hammered copper could have come from the Near East, its absence in Lower Egypt suggests that both raw materials and techniques of manufacture may derive from African sources.

By the second stage (Amratian), incised marks foreshadowing hieroglyphic writing appear on some of the pots, and a few especially rich graves contained distinctive maceheads, later symbols of kingly power. As in the Badarian, Near Eastern origin is a possibility, but the lack of intervening links in Lower Egypt suggests local development.

The development of cultural complexity accelerates during Gerzean times, when a wall-painting in one of the largest brick-lined tombs depicts a ruler with a mace preparing to kill several bound captives (Hoffman 1988: 42). The earliest-known temple complexes also date from this time. On the pottery, painted red boats are often shown with standards on poles bearing

different signs, some identical with later hieroglyphic names of gods. Copper was cast into daggers and other tools, stone bowls and jewelry were made in a range of precious materials--alabaster, amethyst, gold, silver, ivory, lapis lazuli, and turquoise. Throughout early Egyptian history and prehistory most of these precious materials, except for lapis lazuli, came from the south, the Sudan, and, later, Ethiopia.

By the end of the Gerzean, Mesopotamian-type cylinder seals, wavy-handled pottery imported (or copied) from Palestine, and some artistic motifs such as a man holding the necks of two leaping animals suggest more direct or at least more extensive contact with the Near East. The final predynastic stage (Naqada III) was marked by the emergence of hieroglyphic writing; mummification, particularly of animals placed around royal burials; stone or brick tombs in a "Near Eastern" style; the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt; and the emergence of pharaonic rule. Although some scholars have emphasized the role of the Near East in the emergence of the Egyptian state, others have noted that the evidence for direct contact is still tenuous; manufactured objects from Upper Egypt have not been found in the Near East. Instead, the evidence points to indirect contact through an intermediary people in the Nile delta who traded their own pottery as far as the coast of Canaan, but who were independent both politically and culturally from the Gerzeans.

Direct relationships between predynastic Egypt and regions to the south are somewhat better documented. In Nubia, the "A-Group" peoples were closely linked to late predynastic and early dynastic Egyptians, as reflected in similar burial customs; imported pottery, copper objects, and stone palettes; linen clothing; and the economic base of cattle, sheep, goats, wheat, and barley. At one series of tombs in Nubia, representations of kings with captives and hieroglyphic signs suggest the conquest of Upper Egypt and possibly Libya by Nubia. Does this indicate that the concept of kingship that underlies pharaonic rule actually originated in Nubia (Williams

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("Egypt," continued from p.4)

1980)? Or, did Egyptian influence and, eventually, their rule travel south, along with their carved and painted objects (Adams 1985)?

On the basis of the archaeological evidence from the Egyptian predynastic period, no case can be made for large-scale invasion from the Near East. Even the evidence for direct contact could also be interpreted as indirect trade through intermediaries in the Delta. The main elements of the Egyptian state appear to have developed locally and to have involved extensive contact with other African peoples.

### "White" or "Black"

The physical appearance of the ancient Egyptians is based on two types of evidence: 1) indirect evidence from Egyptian art and contemporary accounts of ancient Greek or Roman authors, and 2) direct evidence from skeletal remains and mummies. The indirect evidence, summarized by the Senegalese scholar Cheik Anta Diop (1974), suggests that ancient Egyptians were darker-skinned (often depicting themselves in dark red) than Europeans, and that some of them had projecting lower faces, thick lips, broad noses, and woolly hair often styled in ways still in use south of the Sahara. Diop's examination of a mummy revealed a considerable degree of melanin, within the range of peoples considered "Black" today, particularly those living in and on the edges of the Sahara. Other mummies examined have shown a range of hair-colors and textures--blond to dark brown and straight to woolly.

Most of the direct evidence, however, is in the form of skeletal remains, particularly those from predynastic times. While some authors point to alveolar prognathism (projecting lower face), short broad faces, long narrow skulls, broad nasal apertures, and long gracile limbs as "Negroid" characteristics, most physical anthropologists agree that there are no skeletal characteristics that unequivocally diagnose "Negroid" ancestry. One author

argued that if the above characteristics were applied to ancient English skeletons, a third of them would be designated as "Negroid." A further factor underlying the lack of diagnostic skeletal features is the difficulty in assigning living individuals to one and only one "race," particularly in the very area we are discussing. While people differ in appearance around the globe as a result of historic migrations and adaptation to prevailing climates, the very mobility of humans from their remotest beginnings and their propensity to intermarry has resulted in considerable overlap in characteristics between even distant populations, to say nothing of adjoining ones. There is no line on the map where everybody on one side belongs to a relatively homogenous "Black" race, and everyone on the other to a homogenous "White" group. In living peoples, such designations are often underlaid by cultural or ethnic identity rather than physical characteristics.

Another factor that has confused the issue in the past is the evolution of the human face, which has taken place since the invention of agriculture. With less stress on the chewing muscles, teeth are smaller, lower faces smaller and less projecting, and brow ridges and muscle attachments less prominent. Since many contemporary Europeans have relatively large brow ridges and faces, ancient skeletal populations of Africa were considered "White" ancestors, and modern east Africans were seen as recent immigrants from a very restricted area of west Africa. G. P. Rightmire (in Clark and Brandt 1984) and L. Schepartz (1987 Ph.D thesis) have demonstrated conclusively that the east African populations of the final ice age shared most anatomical features with such modern East African groups as the Maasai, Turkana, Nuer and other tall linear peoples.

A study by G. Armelagos and others (in Clark and Brandt, 1984) asks a more interesting question. Were the people who lived in Nubia during predynastic and dynastic Egyptian times different from the people who live there now? Based on a comparison of different Nubian populations through time, the authors conclude that the apparent "intrusion" of individuals with smaller, less projecting faces and brows, and more gracile skeletons is due to a

combination of reduced chewing stress and greater nutritional stress. The latter resulted from a lack of some important human nutrients, particularly iron, in the diets of early agriculturalists and led to dietary deficiency diseases such as anemias. In addition, through examining features such as dental cusp patterns, which more truly reflect genetic inheritance and are little affected by diet or chewing stress, Armelagos and others have shown that the ancient Nubians were the ancestors of the modern Nubians. A similar conclusion applies to the skeletal remains from Upper Egypt (Greene 1972). Although movement up and down the Nile created a varied population, the intensity of this movement was not greater in the past, nor did it overwhelm the genetic "signature" of the indigenous Nile Valley peoples. The ancient Egyptians, who varied considerably in appearance both within single cemeteries and over the long reach of their civilization, did not resemble the Senegalese or Ghanaians as much as they resemble their own descendants particularly in their heartland south of Cairo in Upper Egypt.

Ancient Egyptians were then neither "Black" nor "White" but highly varied from north to south and physically intermediate between the geographically adjacent peoples of the Near East and their sub-Saharan neighbors to the south. As Africans, they were certainly in contact with emerging states to the east, first adopting from them some of their domesticates and later other inventions such as bronze metallurgy. But the basic achievements of ancient Egypt--the initial domestication of cattle and barley; the manufacture of fine pottery, jewelry and precious stone vessels; the special emphasis on mortuary rituals; and the invention of hieroglyphic writing--developed from African roots. If Williams is correct, even pharaonic kingship may have originated in Nubia and spread north, rather than the reverse.

Alison S. Brooks

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