The development and nature of inequality in early Egypt

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In previous articles (Castillos 2006; 2007) I have suggested that the beginning of class stratification in the Predynastic period in Upper Egypt was probably due to the actions of aggrandizers as the most significant among a series of phenomena. These aggrandizers seized opportunities presented to them by: 1) a certain degree of population density; 2) a relaxation in the conditions that rejected accumulation of resources by certain members of those early communities; 3) their resulting increase in productivity and wealth, which they could use to achieve their goals of social, political and economic power in various ways; as well as 4) an uneven distribution of prosperous and less prosperous groups within reasonable distance from one another, all of which led to the birth of new and essentially different polities.

This process allowed the appearance of powerful local chiefs who changed the nature of their original communities with new forms of social organization, in which one individual and his enlarged family—transformed into a ruling elite—received the benefits of the labour of a large number of serfs belonging to less-favoured communities in neighbouring areas.

According to some authors (e.g., Harris 1977), this process was not a deliberate attempt by ambitious individuals to obtain power on a long-term basis over others, but should be seen instead as redistributor war chiefs evolving into permanent rulers through an unconscious transition, in which the participants “seem not to have known what they were creating.”

I find it very hard to accept such a view because the aggrandizers had to overcome multiple sources of resistance to their ambitions and had to use many different tactics to address the challenges that stood in the way of achieving their goals. This makes it unlikely that such a process was set in motion without deliberation towards unplanned and unexpected results, somewhat like Dukas’ sorcerer’s apprentice. We should perhaps bear in mind that similar situations have arisen more recently in places like Eastern Europe, where the individuals placed in positions of power, availing themselves of the new political climate, can hardly be described as naive but are powerful persons, as some would like to describe those achieving the same success in the distant past.

It has also been pointed out that this model does not seem to apply to many regions of Sub-Saharan Africa where the activities of aggrandizers were apparently not favoured by the social and perhaps ecological conditions, and therefore the presence of rich and powerful chiefs cannot be detected. Let us bear in mind that these observations come largely from ethnographic studies using sources collected at the time of contact with the Europeans or later, and not from archaeological contexts. In view of aggrandizers’ policies elsewhere to

1 S. Keech McIntosh (2005) wrote: “I suggest that Africa challenges deeply embedded evolutionary notions of complexity as differentiation by political hierarchization and provides an instructive counterpoint to formulations that locate power centrally in individuals and focus analysis primarily on the economic strategies used by these individuals to maintain and expand operational power ... The distribution of power among several corporate entities (e.g., lineages, secret societies, cults, age grades) can be regarded as a strategy that has successfully resisted in a variety of ways the consolidation of power by individuals.”
downplay their new economic status and to pay lip service to equality in some areas of social life, it is not certain that Sub-Saharan Africa was excluded from this process towards complexity which has been detected in many other parts of the world.²

I also find similarly unacceptable the views which assign the major role in this process to demographic pressure (Carniero 2000), because they ignore or minimize other important variables in the development of complexity like favourable ecological niches that relax restrictions placed by communities on the accumulation of resources by some of their members, as well as the role played by increased productivity in this process. Recent studies (Barnes 2007) carried out in places like Japan have also underlined the importance of the trade in prestige goods and the existence of more and less prosperous groups within a region must be considered as well. All of these requirements are apparently not less important than a certain degree of population density: if it is low, it prevents the growth of inequality, as in Lower Egypt in the early stages of the Predynastic period; and if population density is too high, it can be a deterrent and an obstacle to complexity rather than an advantage.³

Another much abused interpretation concerns increasing aridity (Brooks 2006). It began with the doubtful assertion that aridity explains the end of the Old Kingdom in Egypt (Hassan 1997), a historical phenomenon that was due to a host of other political and social causes besides environmental changes. Applied to the growth and development of social complexity, it has at best a marginal significance. People are more resilient to adverse climatic change than some scholars think. This is shown by the fluctuations in the Sahara between arid and more

² B. Hayden and S. Villeneuve (2003) wrote: “Although some ethnographers maintain that chiefs do not benefit significantly from their positions, we have found ample evidence that they (or more accurately, their supporting kindred) do benefit today just as they have in the past … It is particularly interesting to observe that prior to conversion, the gods were said to reside in the bodies of the chief.” Also B. Hayden and R. Maneprasert (1996) state: “As Leach (1954, 203, 206–207) has astutely observed, where resources can support hierarchical systems, egalitarian systems are unstable and hard to maintain … As with ancestor cults elsewhere … ancestors are used to legitimize the authority of lineage, clan, or family heads, to legitimize claims to land, and to sanction behavior that deviates from the support of those authorities … Some form of hierarchy relating feasts to the acquisition of high political/religious office is also frequent although masked by a requisite lip service to equality in all things among supporters … Rich households without kin may be able to buy influence and security, and poor households with good lineage connections may be able to achieve security by supporting lineage leaders and indebted themselves to those leaders, but poor families without kin connections are usually in dire straits … While most of the observations on the disposal of animal parts from curing or dispute resolution or other ritual contexts seem too particularistic to be of general use in interpreting prehistoric remains, one pattern does seem to be consistent and widespread. That is, the display of teeth or horns or skulls of the highest prestige animals consumed in feasts. While such displays appear very common in many places in the world, it is much more difficult to document the ultimate disposal patterns of such prestige displays. In the only case documented to date (in Vietnam) the buffalo horns accumulated by a headman from successive village sacrifices were simply left in the debris of his old house when he moved the village to a new location”. This last comment provides interesting perspectives on similar finds of bucrania in several parts of the world like in Predynastic Egypt at Hemamieh (see Brunton and Caton Thompson 1928, pl. 68) and also in funerary contexts at Kerma in the Sudan (see Chaix and Hansen 2000, 269–81). The presence of these animal remains in cemeteries in Predynastic Egypt does not seem to have had any religious connotations according to Flores (2003).

³ "Demographic increase does not and cannot force people to invent and adopt non-egalitarian social formations … [but] … population must reach a certain size and density before the complex social interactions that lead to the emergence of rank can occur" (Clark and Blake 1996, 262).
humid phases in the Holocene, during which people found refuge around the few remaining lakes and oases, where they survived until more favourable conditions arrived so they could flourish again and spread all over the land (Wendorf and Said 1996).

The hereditary chiefs, who could transfer to their descendants their exalted new status, achieved their power by various means including reciprocity debts, bribes, coercion, persuasion, and alliances. Thus they aggrandized not only themselves and their enlarged families, but also the new group of communities under their authority through the judicious and skilful use of their wealth.

It is unlikely that all these ambitious individuals succeeded in their efforts to secure personal social, economic and political power, but those who did inaugurated new polities that would prosper and expand their influence to larger areas of Upper Egypt on the way to creating regional kingdoms, and later on unifying Egypt under the rule of a single king.

The very special position these people and their families had in their communities is shown, among other items of archaeological evidence, for instance by a tomb (S55) recently discovered at Adaïma and dated to the end of Naqada I. This tomb was located in a privileged spot, safe from the floods, which was not used by others for centuries. Only in Naqada III were some tombs dug nearby, but they did not intrude into its immediate proximity (Crubezy et al. 2002, 488, 561).

Kinship played a very important role in early communities everywhere and no doubt in Predynastic Egypt as well. Even in later pharaonic times it was a force that shaped to a considerable extent social, economic and political life, and this was reflected in ancient Egyptian literature and religious beliefs. But to the emerging Predynastic Upper Egyptian chiefs on their way to becoming regional kings and then pharaohs, kinship was also a hindrance that made securing wider allegiances difficult, as their power, the communities and the territory under their control increased.

In this context the chiefs had to reconcile the expectations of their immediate and extended families as well as those of the members of the original community to which they belonged (most of whom naturally wished to share the benefits of the new situation), with those of key members of the other communities they now ruled whose loyalty was equally necessary to them. As others have reported from several parts of the world (Barnes 2007; Deflem 1999; Gailey 1985; Gose 1993; 1996; Gullette 2006; Klein 1998; Patterson 1985), chiefs strived to create other links between themselves and the people they ruled (as well as among the people themselves) by various means, which contributed to make their claims to their new position in society valid in the eyes of a majority of subjects who were not related to them in any way.

Tentative outline of basic steps in social and political development in Predynastic Egypt:

- **Badarian**
  - Temporary leaders, village economy loosely attached to the land, limited inequality based on temporary achieved rank.
  - Kinship ties strong and basic to social structure.


5 Rich or large sub-adult burials—evidence of assigned rather then acquired rank—have not been identified in the Badarian, and start only in Naqada I.
Naqada I and early Naqada II
- Permanent chiefs, inequality based on hereditary rule.
- Kinship ties evolving into formation of ruling elite over heterogeneous groups in relatively small territory.

Late Naqada II and early Naqada III
- Regional kings and state formation.
- Kinship ties played down and largely replaced by other types of allegiance to semi-divine king ruling over a large territory.

If we accept this interpretation for the beginning of class differentiation in early Upper Egypt, a reasonable and pertinent question would be: What changed between the Badarian and Naqada I periods to make it possible for these people to rise in their communities to positions of political and economic power? It has been pointed out that the Badarians were rather loosely attached to the land, combining agriculture with other activities, including seasonal migrations (Hendrickx et al. 2001, 103–104). This situation changed in time as people settled down, which—given the fertility of the Nile Valley—enabled Naqada I and later communities to increase resources and intensify and diversify trade. This brought about an easier lifestyle, one of the conditions that have been identified elsewhere as leading to a certain relaxation of restraints on the accumulation of resources by community members (Hayden 1995).

Beyond the various considerations I have already outlined within this interpretative frame, I will now discuss several aspects of this process in other parts of the world and their relevance for Predynastic Upper Egypt, at least as far as the still very limited evidence provided by some of the contemporary settlements allows us to infer social change and the birth of social complexity.

For instance, the transition from shared, community-owned resources to privately-owned ones was probably one of the first steps in this direction. Some studies, such as those recently made in the Northwestern United States of America in Owens Valley, California, reveal changes that are remarkably similar to those discussed a few years ago for Central America and the Near East (Flannery 2002, 417–433). In a first stage of this work in California, a study of the villages of the late Holocene (Eerkens 2003) did not seem to support social models such as the activity of aggrandizers or long-distance exchange networks in the developments observed through time. People there seemed to have slowly changed their hunting preferences from large to smaller game and, although an intensification in the use of small seeds took place, storage was carried out in the open in community areas. However, more recent work in this region has drastically changed these perceptions (Eerkens 2004). Apparently, about 600 years ago, there was a shift in the economic organization of the villages, with small seeds increasingly processed and stored in private dwelling areas, out of the reach of freeloaders and other community members. The processing of the seeds to make them easily digestible and capable of being stored as a sort of mush was done by boiling them for a long time in coarse, undecorated pots. Since the presence of these pots was consistently much higher within the dwelling places than outside, this work was done privately and not in plain view of other community members. Those who practiced these resource accumulation activities
benefited in the face of seasonal fluctuations in the availability of food.

Thus, aggrandizers could—by means of the privatization and hoarding—use it for the acquisition of status, to maintain and expand long-distance exchange networks to acquire exotic prestige items, and to establish alliances with like-minded individuals in other communities, as well as for the creation of reciprocity debts at the local level.

A similar trend could also be observed in hunting which also became largely privatized by the use of the bow and arrow and a shift to targeting smaller animals. Large game required a community effort, or at least the activity of several members, and the proceeds had to be shared. This changed when hunting became an individual effort that could be practiced with more emphasis by those seeking the accumulation of resources.

The situation in the more ancient phases of the Owens Valley resembles that of the Badarian and earlier Upper Egyptian people, while later developments could perhaps be compared with those that took place in Egypt starting with Naqada I. For instance, grain storage pits in the Fayum (Caton Thompson and Gardner 1934, 41–54) were not linked to dwellings and were community-owned. In the Badarian period, as far as we can tell from the limited evidence available, storage pits were located in areas without any private connotations (Brunton and Caton Thompson 1928, 82–83, pl. 63). In later periods, however, in settlements such as Adaïma (Midant-Reynes et al. 2002, 73) or Armant (Ginter and Kozlowski 1994, 38–45), what appear to be storage pits are not only usually larger in size, but are often placed near hearths or the remains of large structures that have been interpreted as dwellings.

It may be fruitful to explore in the near future to what extent this transition from community-owned resources to those owned by individuals detected elsewhere applies (or not) to early Egypt.

Social changes that took place in other parts of the world, for instance in southeast Spain between c. 5000 and 1500 BC, may also throw light on these kinds of developments and their context. In Neolithic Spain small-scale mobile communities, living on domesticated and wild animals and plants, engaged in domestic production and perhaps to some extent exhibited inequalities that do not seem to have been based on a lasting control of productive activities. The study of the areas devoted to these purposes suggests that they were for the use of the community as a whole.

The changes detected from Neolithic to Copper Age practices there seem to suggest a transition from community or lineage group to individual household control. Open access to all was replaced by inter-household differences based on hidden stores and possible increasing inequalities in the access to productive activities and consumption. There is evidence for hierarchical relations within Copper Age societies in southeast Spain, but both equal and unequal social relations appear to have co-existed.

In Argaric times (Early Bronze Age, c. 2250 BC) there seems to have been an inverse relationship between site size (i.e., population) and available land for dry and wet farming, which would indicate unequal access to agricultural production. The overall evidence is that social inequalities, coercion and exploitation appeared, or markedly increased, during the

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6 At Hemamieh the huts did not appear to be in the vicinity of any storage pits; also at Mostagedda the storage pits (granaries, according to Brunton 1937, 68–69, pl. 4) were not near any hut circles or hearths.

7 For an interesting and more detailed outline of a transition to complex chiefdoms in prehistoric Spain see Chapman 2003, 101–163.
Argaric. Agricultural surpluses may have been produced before, but now they were socially appropriated. The standardization of pottery, metal objects and burials seems to have been an ideological means by which power was legitimized and accepted in everyday life. Weapons appear associated with a small number of adult males symbolizing the coercive powers of the dominating group. The inequalities in everyday production suggest the existence of a class and chiefdom society, if not a State, at this time.

It has also been reported for ancient Peru that an increase in the size of what they call “domestic units” is linked to greater productivity and changes in the social organization of those communities involving a higher population density (Chu Barrera 2006, 5–13). In other places, like Ecuador, similar trends have been observed. For instance, the formative highland communities of Ecuador had hunting and gathering subsistence patterns in the 2nd and 3rd millennia BC and later evolved to a more or less sedentary lifestyle. There were no indications of social inequality or complexity in their settlements or their cemeteries. Individual dwellings were semicircular shelters. These people carried out long-distance trade with more developed communities on the coast and also with others far to the north and south. Some of their settlements that were abandoned showed evidence of the results of warfare (Bruhns 2003).

However, developments elsewhere in early Ecuador were more dramatic and significant for the appearance of complexity. In the Early and Middle Valdivia periods (c. 3000–2000 BC) there was a transition which saw a dramatic increase in the size of settlements and of individual dwellings. These grew to be up to three or four times larger than previously and capable of accommodating eight to ten individuals. Some of these were even larger than the rest and may represent the residence of early community leaders. There is also evidence of increased specialization in the work of some of these people which accompanied the increase in population density (Raymond 2003, 33–67).

It is a constant in human history that social and political change has been more often than not linked to violence. Although it is difficult to detect warfare in the archaeological record, in Predynastic Egypt its presence is indicated by iconographic and physical anthropological evidence (Gayubas 2006).

What role did violence and warfare play in this process? Warfare has been defined as an opportunistic or situational phenomenon. This contention appears supported by the study of similar communities with virtually identical hunting-gathering (and also similarly egalitarian) lifestyles, without highly differentiated gender roles, for instance in South America and in Southeast Asia (Robarchek and Robarchek 1992). The former exhibited persistently high levels of warfare while the latter were remarkably non-violent. However, after contact, the violent communities quickly abandoned warfare and became essentially peaceful in approximately a decade. This shows that violent behaviour among communities is often the result of people striving to achieve certain objectives within realities they themselves are constructing and reconstructing.

Another interesting thought emerging from these studies is that the structural features of the social, economic and political system are crucial in determining the people with whom one cooperates and with whom one fights, either within one’s society, in another society, or...
both. In other words, psycho-cultural factors are crucial in shaping the level of conflict and violence, while structural determinants are crucial in the selection of social targets.

Bibliography


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