Tomb 100, Tomb U-J and Maadi South: Themes of Kingship, Religion, and Order versus Chaos during Egypt’s Predynastic Period

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Hypothesis

I hypothesise that the Egyptian civilisation, as characterised by the themes of kingship, religion, and order versus chaos, arose from Predynastic regional centres such as Maadi, Nekhen (Hierakonpolis) or Abdju (Abydos).

Test Implications

The origins of ancient Egypt date from the Predynastic period until the Unification of Upper and Lower Egypt (5000-3035BC). Scattered Predynastic chiefdoms became a civilisation through the imposition of order from chaos, derived from divinely conferred kingly power. Early powerful cities were found in Lower Egypt at Maadi (Maadi-Buto culture), and in Upper Egypt at Nekhen (Nekhen culture) and Abdju (This culture) (Scarre & Fagan 2008, p. 113-115; Maps 1-2). I will test my hypothesis by investigating these themes at each of the sites, as evidence for the themes should be represented in the archaeological record.

If none of these themes are found at these important Predynastic cities, then the rise of the ancient Egyptian civilisation, as seen from the First Dynasty onwards, may have occurred at a time period closer to Unification. Alternatively, it may have occurred at a location other than these cities, despite their importance during the Predynastic period. However, as the processes of taphonomy, looting, and later building projects have impacted archaeological Predynastic evidence, it may be that the required evidence has been destroyed (Hoffman and Mills 1993).

Should one or more of these themes be discovered in this early period, the period during which the ancient Egyptian civilisation was believed to be formed, this hypothesis will be confirmed. The extent to which it will be confirmed is dependent upon the amount of evidence discovered
relating to these themes. If these themes do not appear in a city, it is unlikely that this form of Egyptian kingship, religion, or the belief in order versus chaos originated with that culture.

The Predynastic period in Egypt was a time when small cities and villages vied for power within the Nile Valley. Some of them, such as Nekhen and Abdju, could be considered to be city-states, due to their centralised government and professional ruling class (Kelly & Thomas 2012, p. 315). Maadi, however, did not exhibit such, and was an egalitarian trading settlement (Savage 2001, p. 130). Egypt became a civilisation, a state level society exerting control over numerous homogenous cities, at the beginning of the Dynastic Period, when Upper and Lower Egypt were unified under a single ruler (Lewis, Jurmain and Kilgore 2012, p. 374; Scarre & Fagan 2008, pp. 6-7).

I have chosen to use both city-state and egalitarian societies to test my hypothesis. Unfortunately, I have been unable to acquire any data regarding powerful egalitarian settlements in Upper Egypt, nor city-states in Lower Egypt, during the time preceding Unification, that of the Naqada I-III Periods. As such, I have selected the egalitarian Maadi South (Wadi Digla) cemetery (Naqada I-IIC period, 3731-3367BC) in Lower Egypt, alongside Tomb 100 at Nekhen (Naqada IIB/IIC period, 3562-3367BC) and Tomb U-J at Abdju (Naqada IID/III period, 3377-3238BC) in Upper Egypt, to test my hypothesis.
Map 1: Map showing the Lower Egyptian city of Maadi and its nearby cemetery (Hendrickx & van den Brink 2002, p. 366)
Map 2: Map showing the Upper Egyptian cities of Nekhen (Hierakonpolis) and Abdju (Abydos) (Hendrickx & Friedman 2003b, p. 105)
Maadi South Cemetery

The cemetery at Maadi South is a well preserved complex that contains 471 tombs (Hendrickx & van den Brink 2002, p. 350). The largest concentration of Maadi tombs are found in this area, although it is possible that many tombs have been lost due to flooding or changes in the course of the Nile (Stevenson 2009, p. 2). The tombs which have been discovered are oval pits with few grave goods (Stevenson 2009, p. 6).

Kingship

The grave goods within the tombs were typically composed of simple clay vessels, although a few graves also included shells, flint blades, grey ore, malachite pigment, one rhomboid-shaped palette, one ivory comb, and one stone vessel (Stevenson 2009, p. 6; Tristant & Midant-Reynes 2011, p. 50). The graves were egalitarian in nature, showing no evidence for kingship (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Maadi burial number 44 (Stevenson 2009, p. 5)
Religion

Thirteen individually buried goats and one dog were found within the human cemetery, each with their own ceramic vessels (Flores 1999, pp. 130-132; Stevenson 2009, p. 6; Figure 2). These animals were deliberately sacrificed prior to burial (Flores 1999, p. 23). Flores (1999, pp. 99-100) suggests that this is a local custom for honouring or protecting the dead, unrelated to dynastic animal burials.

Order and Chaos

The homes of the Maadi were oval or rectangular structures, but are quite distinct from the small Maadi graves (Tristant & Midant-Reynes 2011, pp. 48-50). Their grave goods were simple, and did not reflect the variety of goods used in daily life (Savage 2001, p. 130). Whilst there is evidence of a belief in the afterlife, there is little current artefactual evidence to suggest that the Dynastic theme of order versus chaos was upheld by the Maadi people.
**Tomb 100**

Tomb 100 ("Painted Tomb") is one of the most important early tombs at the royal Nekhen cemetery (Dee et al. 2013, p. 5; Friedman 2005, p. 11). It was a rectangular brick-lined pit, which had been plastered and painted to symbolically depict the ruler and his place in the universe (Case & Crowfoot-Payne 1962, p. 5; Figure 3).

**Figure 3:** Plan of Tomb 100 (Quibell & Green 1902)

**Kingship**

The artwork displays links to later themes of kingship (Figures 4-9). The painting shows common symbolic elements such as the smiting of bound prisoners, the royal *heb-sed* ritual, and the seated white *sed*-cloaked figure with a flail (Case & Crowfoot-Payne 1962, pp. 11-15; Kemp 2007, p. 81; Quibell & Green 1902, p. 21; Williams, Logan & Murnane 1987, pp. 254-255).
Figure 4: From Tomb 100 (Hendrickx 2011, p. 76)

Figure 5: The Narmer Palette, Old Kingdom (Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology n.d.)

Figure 6: From Tomb 100 (Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology, n.d.(a))

Figure 7: Hatshepsut’s Heb-sed festival, New Kingdom (Rothenflug 2011)

Figure 8: From Tomb 100 (Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology, n.d. (a))

Figure 9: Amenemhat I, Middle Kingdom (Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology n.d.(b))
Religion

The artwork also depicts religious activities, the basis for much of the power of Egypt’s god-kings (Figures 10-13). Religious-related iconography includes depicting the king in a heb-sed naos (shrine), and priests in leopard skins (Case & Crowfoot-Payne 1962, pp. 12-16; Kemp 2007, p. 81; Quibell & Green 1902, p. 21; Williams, Logan & Murnane 1987, p. 254).

**Figure 10:** From Tomb 100 (Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology, n.d(a))  
**Figure 11:** Senusret III, Middle Kingdom (Kairoinfo4u 2008)

**Figure 12:** From Tomb 100 (Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology, n.d(a))

**Figure 13:** Ay wearing a leopard skin to perform the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony, New Kingdom (Incredible Egypt 2012)
Order and Chaos

The painting also exhibits a common ancient Egyptian motif, that of order versus chaos (Scarre & Fagan 2008, p. 113; Figures 14-18). Chaos (isfet) was often represented as wild animals, or as the enemies of Egypt in warfare scenes. Order (ma’at), on the other hand, was revealed in the form of the ruler subduing them (O’Connor 2011, p. 148).

![Figure 14](image1.png)  ![Figure 16](image2.png)

**Figure 14:** From Tomb 100 (Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology, n.d. (a))

**Figure 16:** From Tomb 100 (Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology, n.d. (a))

![Figure 15](image3.png)  ![Figure 17](image4.png)

**Figure 15:** War relief, Middle Kingdom (Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology, n.d.(c))

**Figure 17:** Pharaoh spearing a lion, New Kingdom (Metropolitan Museum of Art 2013)

![Figure 18](image5.png)

**Figure 18:** War chest of Tutankhamen, New Kingdom depicting order and chaos (Braverman 2007)
Tomb U-J

The tomb of King Scorpion I, Tomb U-J, is located in Cemetery U at Umm el-Qaab, Abdju (Braun 2001, p. 1283; Dee et al. 2013, p. 5; Savage 2001, p. 117; Figures 19-20). This rectangular brick tomb was subdivided into twelve rooms originally filled with richly appointed grave goods, and it represented a royal residence for the deceased (Dryer 2011, pp. 128-132).

Figure 19: Photograph of Tomb U-J, facing north (Dryer 2011, p. 128)

Figure 20: Plan of the layout of Tomb U-J (Dryer 2011, pp. 129)
Kingship

One of the grave goods was an ivory crook, known as a *heqa*-sceptre, which represented sovereignty (Wilkinson 2002, p. 160). According to Gardiner (1988, pp. 508-509, 583) the *heqa* hieroglyph (𓀓) meant ‘to rule’, ‘the ruler’ and ‘chieftain’. Being made of ivory, this artefact was not a peasant’s crook for shepherding; it was a symbol of authority and rulership (Figures 21-23).

*Figure 21: Heqa*-sceptre from Tomb U-J (Dryer 2011, p. 132)

*Figure 22: Montuhotep, Middle Kingdom, holding a *heqa*-sceptre (Blanchard 2004)*

*Figure 23: Heqa*-sceptre (and flail) on the coffin of Tutankhamen, New Kingdom (Terrett 2011)
Religion

Offerings were left inside the tomb itself, including personal possessions, crockery, and imported and local wine jars (Figures 25-26). An offering cache to the south of the tomb was discovered, filled with hundreds of ceramic vessels, some large plates, and an alabaster basin inscribed with the name of King Narmer (Dryer 2011, p. 129; Figure 24). These mortuary offerings were dated between the last Naqada Period and the First Dynasty (Wengrow 2011, p. 99). This practice of leaving goods for the deceased continued throughout Egyptian history.

Figure 24: Plan of Cemetery U, showing Tomb U-J and its offering place (Terrett 2011)

Figure 25: Imported sealed wine jars still in situ within Tomb U-J (Terrett 2011)

Figure 26: Sealed wine jars left as offerings in the tomb of Tutankhamen, New Kingdom (Burton 1923)
Order and Chaos

The ruler created order by controlling the natural world (Hendrickx & Friedman 2003, pp. 8-9). The layout of the Tomb U-J was a reflection of a royal residence, a tradition that early Dynastic tombs also followed (Wilkinson 2002, p. 221; Figures 27-30). This demonstrates that the Egyptians sought to control the chaos of death by giving the tomb a familiar-looking, harmonious appearance that was a link to the world of the living (Dryer 2011, p. 131).

**Figure 27:** Reconstruction of an early royal palace, the roof shape similar to that of the original roof of Tomb U-J (Dryer 2011, p. 130)

**Figure 28:** How the interior of the tomb might have originally looked, based on the restoration of the tomb of Den, First Dynasty (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut n.d.)

**Figure 29:** Funerary palace of King Djoser, Old Kingdom (McCready 2012)

**Figure 30:** Mortuary temple of Hatshepsut, New Kingdom (Svarc 2009)
Conclusion

By examining the evidence, it can be confirmed that themes of kingship, religion, and order versus chaos, as found throughout later ancient Egyptian history, are represented at Predynastic seats of authority. However, due to its egalitarian nature, evidence of kingship was not evident at Maadi South, nor was the theme of order versus chaos. The Upper and Lower Egyptian cultures were quite separate during the early Naqada period, with the Maadi-Buto culture evolving independently of their Upper Egyptian counterparts (Tristant & Midant-Reynes 2011, p. 53). Evidence of the three themes only appears in Lower Egypt after the Maadi-Buto culture was subsumed by the Upper Egyptian city-states during the late Naqada II period (Tristant & Midant-Reynes 2011, p. 54; Wilkinson 2002, p. 309).

From Predynastic beginnings, rulers evolved from petty chiefs vying for power to Dynastic god-kings ruling over a unified Egypt. While the Maadi-Buto culture did not display all three key pieces of evidence, the owner of Tomb 100 is likely to have been one of the very first Predynastic kings, who helped establish a pattern for future rulers. The king who owned Tomb U-J continued the pattern, and was venerated by succeeding rulers well into Unification and the First Dynasty.

This supports my hypothesis: that early evidence of religion and the establishment of order are represented by material evidence at Egyptian Predynastic regional centres. However, whilst evidence for kingship is found at the Upper Egyptian cities of Nekhen and Abdju, this is not the case for Maadi. As such, the likeliest scenario is that the ancient Egyptian civilisation originated with the Predynastic Upper Egyptian rulers, such as those at Nekhen and Abdju, rather than with the egalitarian Maadi-Buto people of Lower Egypt.
References


