

by Walter B. Emery
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Before the kings of Egypt made pyramids, they were buried in great brick-lined pits topped by rectangular buildings. These structures provide clues as to how civilization came to the Valley of the Nile

When the famous British archaeologist Flinders Petrie published his *History of Egypt* in 1894, he devoted only 10 pages of it to the period before 2680 B.C. Yet by that time there had already been three dynasties of Egyptian kings. Egyptologists had learned much about the succeeding 27 dynasties by archaeological excavation, but their knowledge of the first pharaohs was based only on the lists of kings compiled by later Egyptians and on the writings of Greek and Roman historians. Indeed, some authorities believed that these kings were figures of myth and legend rather than men who really lived. But at the turn of the century the pick of the excavator revealed many monuments of the First Dynasty, and the shadowy figures of the first pharaohs stepped forth onto the stage of history to tell their story of the rise of civilization in the valley of the Nile.

The most important of these discoveries was made in 1895 at Abydos, a site on the Nile 300 miles south of Cairo. Here the French Egyptologist Emile-Clément Amélineau discovered a group of graves consisting of great pits lined with brick. In 1899 Petrie began to work at Abydos, and in two years of brilliant research he established its tombs as monuments of the kings of the First and Second Dynasties. He was also able to identify the royal owner of each tomb and to establish the order of his succession. Originally each brick-lined pit was roofed with timber and surmounted with a superstructure. In all cases this part of the building has disappeared, and no indication of its precise form exists. We do know, however, that because the tombs are so close to one another the superstructures cannot have covered an area

much larger than the pits themselves. Each tomb was surrounded by numerous graves which contained the bodies of slaves sacrificed to continue their service to the king in the afterworld.

Petrie believed that the kings of the First Dynasty were actually buried at Abydos, and until recently there was no reason to doubt this conclusion. Later excavations strongly suggest, however, that the kings were buried not at Abydos but at Sakkara, far down the Nile [see map on page 220]. Sakkara, the vast cemetery of ancient Memphis, is best known as the site of a great stepped pyramid of the Third Dynasty. At its north end are the remains of tombs which had long been recognized as perhaps even older than this pyramid. But it was not until 1912 that any really serious research was undertaken at North Sakkara. The late J. E. Quibell, then Chief Inspector of the Egyptian Department of Antiquities, excavated for two seasons and proved the existence of First Dynasty tombs far better preserved than those at Abydos.

The site was still not considered especially promising because it had been systematically ravaged by tomb-robbers for more than 5,000 years, and so after the interruption of Quibell's work by World War I the site lay untouched until 1930. Then his successor, the late C. M. Firth, resumed the excavations. Firth cleared several more First Dynasty tombs, the most notable of which was known as 3035. The paneled exterior and burial pit of this great structure were excavated, but its interior was left untouched. This was because it was believed that the interior of the superstructures of such monuments was a solid network of brick walls filled with rubble. The excavation of Tomb 3035

was not very productive, for the burial chamber had been plundered and replundered in ancient times. Nonetheless Firth was able to establish that the tomb had been built during the reign of Udimu, fifth king of the First Dynasty. Firth



EXCAVATED TOMBS of the pharaohs of the First Dynasty are on the right side of

died suddenly in 1932, and once again the exploration of North Sakkara was interrupted.

In 1935, when the Director General of the Department of Antiquities instructed me to reclear the tombs, I also turned my attention to Tomb 3035. In order to determine certain details of its construction I cut rather ruthlessly into the big brick superstructure and found that it was not just a solid mass of brickwork and rubble but was divided up into a series of 45 storerooms, many of which had escaped the attention of the ancient tomb-robbers. In these storerooms we found a great collection of funerary equipment—food, tools, weapons, games and drinking vessels—lying where they had been placed 5,000 years before. Inscriptions on the clay seals of jars led us to believe that the tomb belonged to a great noble named Hemaka, vizier of the pharaoh Udimu. This was the greatest single discovery of First Dynasty material that had been made up

to that time. Its importance was at once appreciated by the Egyptian Government and I was given permission to explore the whole area systematically.

Digging continued from 1935 until the beginning of World War II; one great tomb after another was cleared, each showing that civilization during the period of the First Dynasty was far more advanced than we had supposed. Tombs contemporaneous with the kings Hor-Aha, Zer, Udimu, Enezib and Ka-a were discovered—all much larger and more elaborate in design than their counterparts at Abydos. We knew that these kings originated at This near Abydos, but that they conquered the lower Nile Valley and established their capital at Memphis. Thus it seemed possible and even probable that the tombs at Sakkara were their actual burial places, and that the structures at Abydos were empty monuments. Only further excavation could confirm this theory, but at the outbreak of the war the work was shut down. With the exception of

a short season in 1946, nothing further was done at North Sakkara until 1952. In that year an arrangement was made whereby the Egypt Exploration Society reopened the excavations on behalf of the Department of Antiquities. The clearance is still in progress.

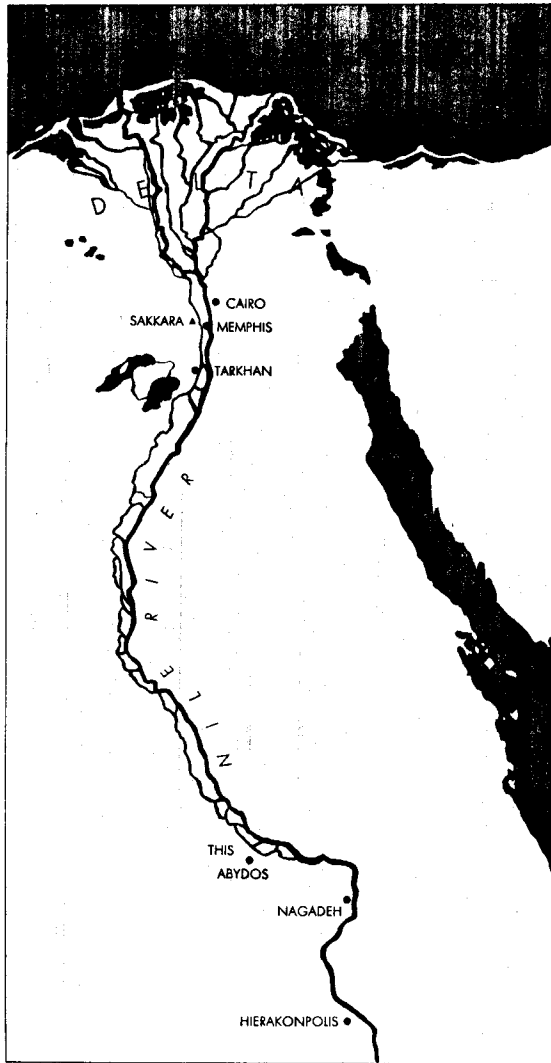
In 1952 we discovered a tomb which probably belonged to Uadj, the third pharaoh of the First Dynasty; in the following year we excavated another which we ascribed to Ka-a, the last king of the dynasty. A third large tomb was cleared in 1955, and although its ownership could not be established it supplies conclusive evidence that all the burials almost certainly belonged to the kings, queens and princes of the First Dynasty.

These big tombs of the First Dynasty have the same fundamental design: a large pit cut in the ground, within which were built the burial chamber and subsidiary rooms [see drawings on pages 222 and 223]. Here were stored the owner's most precious possessions. This



this photograph of the area around North Sakkara, 15 miles from Cairo. In the distance at the far left are three pyramids of the Fifth

Dynasty. Beyond them are the three famous pyramids built by the Fourth Dynasty kings Khufu (Cheops), Khafra and Menkaure.

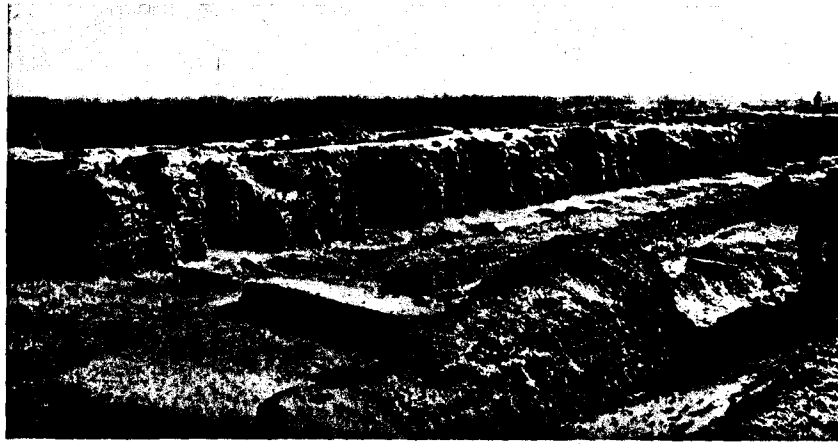


SITES mentioned in this article are located on a map of the Nile Valley. The pharaohs of the First Dynasty originated at This but later established their capital at Memphis. It was once thought that they were buried at Abydos, but it now appears that their graves are at Sakkara. Tarkhan, Nagadeh and Hierakonpolis are other sites of the First Dynasty.

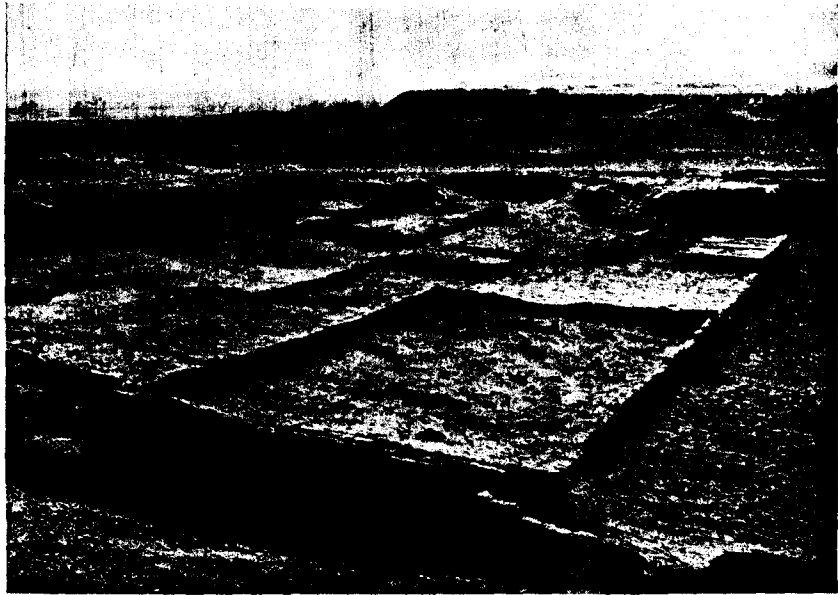
substructure was covered by a large rectangular superstructure of brick, enclosing chambers in which were stored reserve supplies for the use of the deceased in afterlife. This was only the general scheme of the funerary edifice; refinements and developments occurred in rapid succession throughout the 250-odd years of the dynasty. The developments were confined principally to the substructure; the superstructure increased in size but remained largely unchanged. These great buildings, made only of unbaked brick, were undoubtedly dummy copies of the actual palaces of the kings. Although they now stand only five feet above their foundations, there is evidence that they originally rose to a height of not less than 30 feet. The elaborate recess-paneling of their exteriors was gaily painted with geometrical designs simulating the colored matting which adorned the interior walls of buildings at that time.

Although the burial chambers were ravaged and, in many cases, set afire by plunderers, we can reconstruct them with considerable certainty. The deceased lay slightly bent on his right side within a great wooden sarcophagus measuring about 10 by six feet. Outside the sarcophagus were furniture, games for the amusement of the deceased, and his last meal, served in vessels of alabaster, diorite, schist and pottery. These meals were of an elaborate character, consisting of soup, ribs of beef, pigeon, quail, fish, fruit, bread and cake. We found such a meal remarkably preserved in a tomb of the early Second Dynasty, and from fragments found with burials of the First Dynasty we have every reason to suppose that the same rich repast was left during the earlier period. Other rooms in the substructure were devoted to the storage of wine and food, furniture, clothing, games, tools and weapons of flint and copper. Similar objects were stored in the chambers of the superstructure: hundreds of great wine jars, furniture inlaid with ivory, toilet implements, agricultural equipment—all the appurtenances of a well-organized and highly developed civilization.

The principal evolution in the design of the substructure was the introduction of a stairway entrance which enabled the architect to build the whole funerary edifice before the burial. Before this innovation had been introduced the superstructure was built after the burial—obviously an unsatisfactory arrangement. At the end of the First Dynasty a small funerary temple was built at the north side of the tomb; both tomb and temple



SUPERSTRUCTURE of a First Dynasty tomb is exposed by excavation. The recessed walls of the superstructure originally stood at least 30 feet high and were painted with geometrical designs. This is probably the tomb of Queen Meryt-Nit of the First Dynasty.



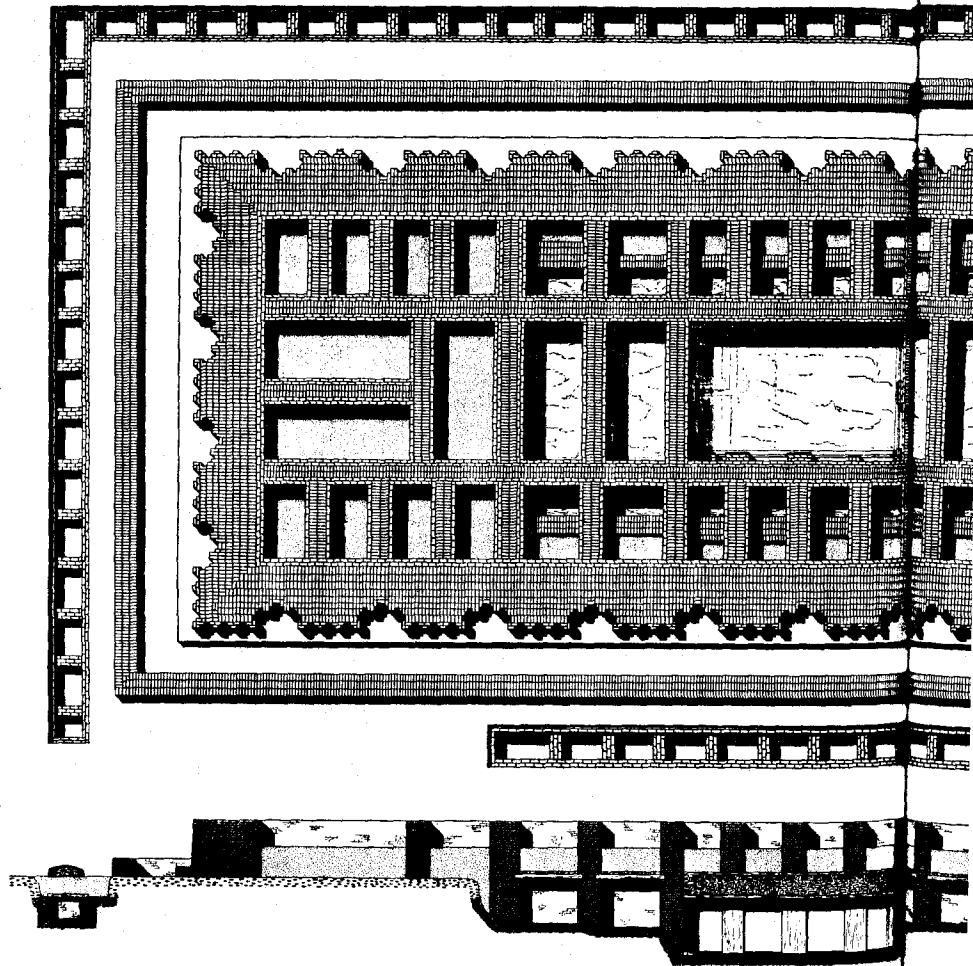
CLAY MODEL of an ancient Egyptian estate is excavated beside the tomb of Hor-Aha, the first king of the First Dynasty. Such models may have been small-scale copies of the royal estates, presumably to be re-created for the use of their owners in the afterlife.

were enclosed by walls with an entrance to the east. In this final evolution of the First Dynasty tomb we have the prototype of the pyramid complex of later dynasties.

We still have much to learn about the earliest First Dynasty tombs, which are

perhaps the oldest examples of monumental architecture in the world. They are not entirely what they seem. In the course of our excavations we have often been puzzled to discover stairways and passages which lead nowhere. For a time we were inclined to dismiss these

mysterious features as the result of alterations in the architect's plans. Now we know that the tombs were built in two distinct stages. First they were raised to serve some unknown purpose; then, after this purpose was fulfilled, they were altered so that they could serve



TOMB IS RECONSTRUCTED in plan and elevation by these drawings. This is Tomb 3504 at Sakkara. It is dated to the reign of Uadji,

third king of the First Dynasty. The tomb is roughly 200 feet long and 100 feet wide. In the center is the burial chamber. Around

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their final function as a house of the dead. We are still entirely ignorant as to the purpose of the original structure, and we can only hope that further excavation will give us the answer to this fascinating question.

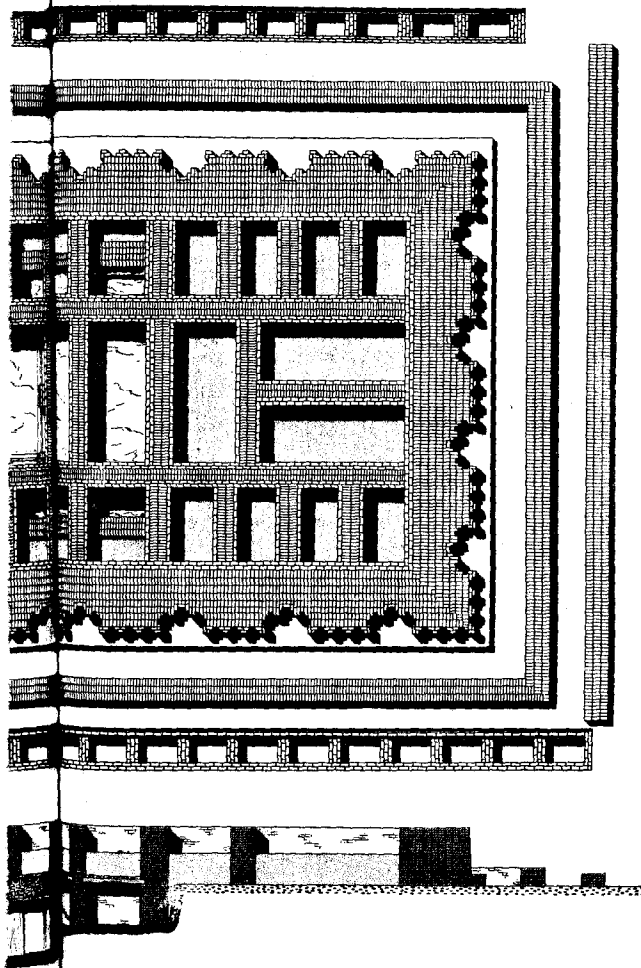
The complete funerary installation

consisted not only of the tomb, but also of surrounding graves of retainers sacrificed to accompany the king in death as in life. These small graves are of great interest, for we often find objects buried with the dead retainer which indicate his occupation: paint pots with the art-

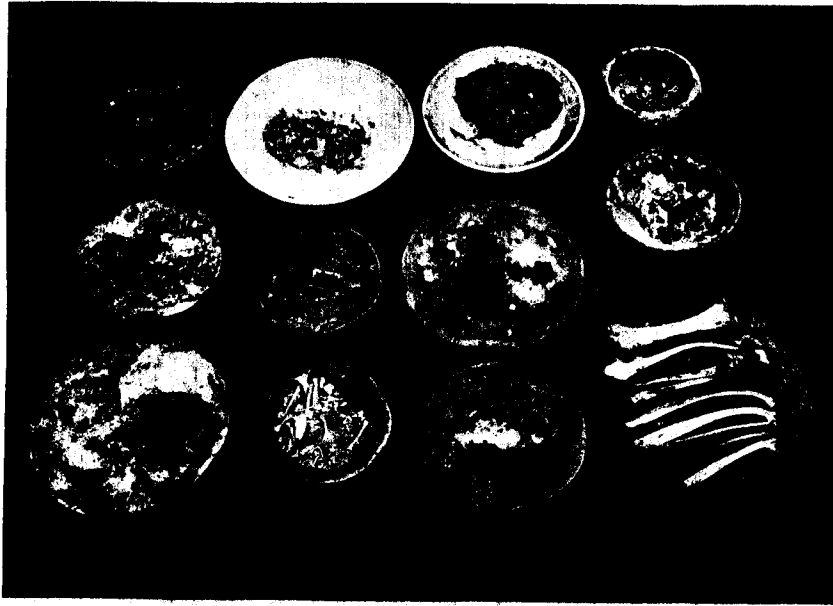
ist, model ships with the shipmaster, varieties of pottery with the potter, and so on. Around the tombs we frequently find the remains of gardens with rows of trees and plants. Near one tomb is a clay model of an estate with houses, granaries and fields. It is tempting to see in this model an exact copy of the royal estate, to be re-created in the next world for the service of its dead owner. Beside the tomb of Udimu are the remains of a wooden ship to carry the pharaoh with the celestial gods in their voyage across the heavens. This vessel, which was 50 feet long, was built 400 years before the recently discovered ship of Cheops.

There are still other sites of the First Dynasty awaiting excavation. It is thus a little early to come to any conclusion regarding the origin of civilization in the Nile Valley. Enough has been disclosed, however, to show that a highly developed culture existed in Egypt by 3000 B.C. In assessing this culture we must remember that we do so on evidence which has survived 5,000 years of destruction by nature and man. But even in their ruined state the magnificent monuments of Sakkara, Abydos and other sites show that they were built by a people with an advanced knowledge of architecture and a mastery of construction in both brick and stone. The scattered contents of their tombs show that they had a well-developed written language, a knowledge of the preparation of papyrus and a great talent for the manufacture of stone vessels, to which they brought a beauty of design that is not excelled today. They also made an almost unlimited range of stone and copper tools, from saws to the finest needles. Their decorative objects of wood, ivory and gold are masterly, and their manufacture of leather, textiles and rope was of a high standard. Above all they had great artistic ability: the motifs of painting and sculpture that were characteristic of Egypt for 3,000 years had already appeared.

This advanced civilization appears suddenly in the early years of the third millennium B.C.; it seems to have little or no background in the Nile Valley. Yet the Valley had been inhabited for a long period before the First Dynasty. Excavation has indicated that during this period burial customs developed little; the passage of time is marked only by changes in the design of pottery and other objects. The people of the period had an advanced neolithic culture which certainly made a contribution to the later Egyptian civilization. In my opinion, however, their culture does not pro-



it are many rooms for the storage of food and other goods. The long rows of small chambers on three sides of the tomb are the graves of retainers sacrificed to accompany the king.



FUNERARY MEAL found in a tomb of the early Second Dynasty is in a remarkable state of preservation, considering that it was set out some 5,000 years ago. Fragments found in tombs of the First Dynasty indicate that similar meals were buried with its pharaohs.

vide a complete foundation for the Egypt of the pharaohs. It is of course possible that the architecture of the First Dynasty was the product of a superior people inhabiting the delta of the Nile, where constant flooding and agriculture has destroyed all remains of the period before the pharaohs. Since there is no evidence for or against this theory, it must remain speculative. In any case I feel it is unlikely that such a civilization could develop independently in the marshlands of the delta and suddenly impose itself on the upper Nile Valley. It is significant that during the First Dynasty only the nobles and officials were buried in monumental tombs. The mass of the people were buried in graves consisting of shallow

pits with no superstructure beyond a circular mound of earth. The body lay in a huddled position on its left side; except for the objects in it such a grave had little to distinguish it from those of the period before the First Dynasty. By the end of the Second Dynasty we find the mass of the people had adopted the burial customs of their betters: the design of their tombs was the same in almost every detail except size. All this plainly suggests the existence of a superior culture which gradually imposed its burial customs on the conquered indigenes.

If we accept the theory that the civilization of the pharaohs was brought to the Nile Valley by a new people, we must ask: Who were they and where

did they come from? The British historian Reginald Engelbach suggested a horde invasion, and there is evidence to suggest something of the sort. We must not overlook, however, the possibility of gradual infiltration over a long period. The monumental architecture of the First Dynasty has been compared to that of the Jemdet Nasr period in Mesopotamia, and I think the similarity is beyond dispute. But there are also great differences, so a direct connection between the Euphrates and the Nile at that time is still a matter of doubt. Thus the problem of how the civilization of the pharaohs originated remains unsolved. It is to be hoped that the further work of the Egypt Exploration Society will contribute to its solution.

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