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The Molding Power of Ideology:
Political Transformations of Predynastic Egypt[*]

Abstract: Ideological "patterns of continuity", archaeologically perceivable as early as Naqada I, that constitute the most distinctive hallmarks of nascent Egyptian civilization, are, to a great extent, defined by the concept of Divine Ruler, as a charismatic amalgam of sacral authority, ideological values, economic and military power. Divine Kingship, "presiding over everything", seems to be a key ideological issue in the rapid political transformation of Predynastic Egypt. A cyclic "sense of order" promulgated by annual Nile flooding, and underlying conceptualized "cosmological relations", joined with the might of a victorious ruler and his brandished mace, molded the Naqadian social tissue of relationships, obligations and behavior, that in their turn justified warfare to obtain any valued resource, enhanced territorial expansion, and eventually enabled full political consolidation. A complex, multi-layered social construct of display-oriented and power-concerned relations and set of values clearly distinguished Naqada culture practices and traditions – both in Upper and from Naqada IIC onwards Lower Egypt – from the Delta communities with their vanishing lifestyle. The constant expansion of Naqada culture and its collective identity irreversibly transformed the political landscape of Predynastic Egypt.

Keywords: Predynastic Egypt, Naqada Culture, Divine Kingship, identity-focusing point, Fourth Millennium B. C., paleopolitics

Most of the factors comprising the natural setting of the Nilotic environment[1] are to a greater or lesser degree present all along the river, making the inhabitants of its banks potentially privileged with numerous favorable conditions

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[1] Approximately 3,000 kilometers long.

such as an annual fertilizing inundation, plenty of inorganic energy sources, an abundance of food resources – due to climate, biodiversity and combined ecosystems of the river, floodplain and low desert –along with rich mineral resources, and the inexhaustible possibilities of low-cost riverine transport (Anđelković 2011a). But why did such an enormous resource concentration (see Carneiro in press) fail to produce any sustainable state-forming Predynastic culture other than Naqada which, in its turn, conceived one of the earliest and longest lived world empires? The answer should probably be sought in some specific features of the Naqada culture itself: namely the active social factors "encrypted in the cultural codes and concepts of the Naqada culture, specifically in the domain of an ideological, political, religious, social, symbolic and mythological set of values, and in how this value system was organized, with sacred leadership as a stable axis of social configuration" (Anđelković 2011b, 27). We presume that the Naqada social setting was dominated by the ideology of sacred power, fully blended with the concentration of economic, political and military power, since "without the king as defender of order, chaos would triumph and everything would be lost" (Wilkinson 2003, 194). Ideology is part of culture, "an integral component of human interactions and the power strategies that configure sociopolitical systems (...) an important source of social power", and it can be traced by the process of materialisation that makes it possible "to control, manipulate, and extend ideology beyond the local group" (DeMarrais, Castillo and Earle 1996, 15). Judging from the set of scenes and motifs of Pharaonic imagery (see Williams and Logan 1987), the ideological power that transformed Predynastic Egypt obviously worked from the "top downwards and from the centre outwards" (Kemp 1989, 7).

Ideology, as one of the most crucial shaping processes of all times, is "the distinctive filter through which a society sees itself and the rest of the world, a body of thought and symbol which explains the nature of society, defines its ideal form, and justifies *action* [emphasis added] to achieve that ideal" (Kemp 1989, 20). Such action, as far as Predynastic Upper Egypt is concerned, is to be traced to its very beginnings. The Amratian, Gerzean and Semainean of F. Petrie (1939), were renamed Naqada I-III by W. Kaiser (1957), to emphasise the continuity between the three main Naqada phases – the continuity that reveals and defines them as the successive developmental stages of one and the same political phenomenon. Moreover, that phenomenon did not cease at the end of the Protodynastic period, but continued for the next three millennia. That is to say, at the end of Naqada II[2] Predynastic Naqada culture is simply renamed Dynastic culture (Anđelković 2011b, 30). In other words, the "Dynastic culture evolved without interruption from the Naqada culture" (Hendrickx 1995, 8),

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[2] Matching with the transformation of the Upper Egyptian proto-state into an All-Egyptian early state (Anđelković 2008, 1051–1052).

retaining the main ideological aspects "as a central element of a cultural system" (DeMarrais, Castillo and Earle 1996, 15).

Although the matter of ideology can be approached differently, reflecting various theoretical or political backgrounds, it usually stays in the technical explanatory domain of the organization of production, labor management within a society, and the like (see DeMarrais, Castillo and Earle 1996, 15, with references). In regard to some ancient cultures, we should keep in mind that different social aspects were rarely separated, if at all, but rather intertwined. With power defined as "the ability to pursue and attain goals through mastery of one's environment", with the case study of Naqada culture in mind, we shall not "treat separately four power sources, economic, ideological, military, and political" (Mann 2003, 6, 11), but instead perceive them as aspects of a single power source – the Divine Ruler, who was the embodiment of both divine and earthly power, a charismatic amalgam of sacral authority, ideological values, economic and military power. The concentration of political and economic power is, among other things, implied by the bone labels from the Dynasty 0 ruler's tomb U-j at Abydos that "emphasise the link between economic activity (...) and bureaucratic sophistication" (Wilkinson 1999, 44), both within the official context of ideology and power display.

Ideological "patterns of continuity", archaeologically perceivable as early as Naqada I (see Anđelković 2011b, fig. 3.2), that constitute the most distinctive hallmarks of nascent Egyptian civilization, are to a great extent defined by the concept of Divine Ruler, "presiding over everything", acting as an eternal promise to nullify chaos, enemies and death, that seems to be a key ideological issue in the rapid political transformation of Predynastic Egypt. Such a concept fully fits the description of "religion with a decidedly coercive edge" (Carneiro 2012, 10, *cf.* Perry 2011).

We will keep seeing the visual image of the ruler smiting his enemies, "a central symbol of kingship, conquest and domination" (Baines 1995, 97), as an elaborate icon of Divine Kingship and constantly repeated ideological element throughout Egyptian ancient history: from the Naqada IC jar from Abydos and Naqada IIC wall painting from Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis,[3] the Narmer palette, label and Hierakonpolis ivories, via the label of the 1st Dynasty king Den, and Old Kingdom Wadi Maghara reliefs, to the famous representation of Thutmose III at Karnak, Ramesses III at Medinet Habu and Ptolemy XII at Philae, to mention but a few (see Hall 1983, with references).

The Divine Ruler's power – represented in the aspect of defender of both the earthly realm, but also celestial order and the realm of ideas and associated world view – was at the same time a symbol of Naqadian supremacy, and a

[3] As noted by Baines (1995, 97) in Tomb 100 smiting scene, the number of three enemies "may indicate simple plurality".

powerful universal statement about the way in which Naqadians perceived their immediate social environment, their world, and their universe. Such a statement was equally significant either as an actual record of historical events, or a magical victory over the enemies, because the might of the victorious ruler – including both his brandished mace and his access to the supernatural – molded the Naqadian social fabric of relationships, obligations and behavior, that in their turn justified warfare over any valued resource, enhanced territorial expansion, and eventually enabled full political consolidation. In other words, the "strategic control of ideology contributes to the centralization and consolidation of political power" (DeMarrais, Castillo and Earle 1996, 16). Naqada I "was rather uniform throughout the Nile Valley south of Asyut" (Baines 1995, 96). The consolidation was also manifested in the realm of mortuary centralization "rooted in the powerful 'ideology of afterlife' as early as Naqada I" (Anđelković 2004, 542), namely the choice of grave goods, so-called "mortuary kits"[4] (Hoffman 1988, 40), construction of graves, body treatment, orientation (Bard 1992, 12) and the like. Eternal life, regeneration and rebirth, as "the primary ideological motivator" of mortuary cult elaboration were, inter alia, associated with the Hammamat mudstone palettes that seem to be an active component employed in Naqada culture[5] and the funerary ritual, and whose limited distribution factors may be related to the consolidation [probably not the first] of the early state (Stevenson 2007). The religious, organizational, geographical and political structuring of the society is also suggested by the so-called standards, comprising poles surmounted by cult images (Anđelković 2008, 1045–1046).

Among the basic elements of states are: ideology, images of earthly power, and the enabling force of bureaucracy (Kemp 1989, 19). Ideology and power that depends on coercion would be effective only in the short run, whereas the concept of Divine Ruler was "to prove so powerful an ideology that Egyptian kingship would survive as the sole model of government for 3,000 years" (Wilkinson 2003, 194). In contrast to the highly competitive elite, the role of the Predynastic and Early Dynastic population, popular beliefs, national and religious sentiment among the "silent majority" is usually given little attention. Without the supporting majority bound together by shared values – the great body of the people who worshipped their Gods and Divine Ruler, and were true believers in this doctrine – Predynastic political transformation would hardly have been possible. Namely, the Divine King was a central identity-focusing point for their common cultural, religious and even "afterlife" identity affiliation.[6]

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[4] Including a common market for mortuary goods.

[5] For instance, ceremonial palettes materialise "certain concepts central to kingship" (Stevenson 2007, 159).

[6] Including a cyclic "sense of order" promoted by annual Nile flooding, and underlying conceptualized "cosmological relations".

This particular kind of social centralization that was immensely influential in the rapid political transformation of Upper Egypt seems to be lacking in the Delta area before Naqada IIC. There are views that the so-called "unification of Egypt in 2950 [B.C.] created the world's first nation-state" (Wilkinson 2010, 38). With the former chronologically erroneous Egyptological concepts on the first Pharaohs, the first mummification, or the first hieroglyphic writings in mind – let us mention but a few – one can't help but conclude that in the present view of the first nation-state we are also at least 200–300 years late. The "concept of a nation-state – a political territory whose population shares a common identity – *was* [emphasis added] the invention of the ancient Egyptians" (Wilkinson 2010, 38), only we should rather more precisely address them as Naqada culture Egyptians. Naqadians were the first truly organized and politically centralized society in ancient Egypt, responsible for the increasing homogeneity throughout Egypt from the Naqada IIC stage on.

The majority wasn't, in a way, as opposed with the elite as it might seem at first sight, since the roots of the elite members of the society, for a greater or lesser number of generations back, were in their respective home villages. The tendency to imitate the elite, probably with certain hopes of "social climbing", is probably evidenced by some of the grave goods as well: Burial 209 of an older woman interred with a variety of grave goods – some of which showed extensive evidence of use – at the so-called working-class Naqada II cemetery HK43 at Hierakonpolis, suggests that "although the people who buried this woman had access to a wide variety of objects, they were *still* [emphasis added] not wealthy enough to provide new items specifically for the grave" (Friedman 2002, 10), as did the elite. Moreover, at the same Naqada II cemetery there are traces of a treatment that "is to be associated with either the real or ritual dismemberment and then re-articulation or 'recreation' of the body, a concept embodied later in the myth of Osiris" (Friedman 2002, 10). Let us agree that the "creation of a distinctive sense of Egyptianness" (Wilkinson 2010, 38) was one of the top achievements of the early rulers.

A complex, multi-layered social construct of display-oriented and power-concerned relations and set of values, including certain goods, representations, meanings and symbols, clearly distinguished Naqada culture practices and traditions, both in Upper and from Naqada IIC onwards Lower Egypt, from the Lower Egyptian slow-motion communities with their vanishing, not far from Neolithic-managed and minded, way of life and cultural expression. It is rather clear that the heartland of the "social, ideological, economic and political changes that led Egypt to statehood was the southern part of the Nile valley" (Wilkinson 1999, 36–37). There are hardly any "power artifacts" that imply how politically advanced the Delta set of communities was before the spread of Naqada culture. The "romantic suggestion" (Wilkinson 1999, 49) of a Lower

Egyptian kingdom or dynasty contemporary with the late Predynastic sequence of kings of Upper Egypt seems, for the time being, to rest in the domain of the "Egyptian love of symmetry" (Kemp 1989, 27). The permanent expansion of Naqada culture and its collective identity – rather than some "unification" hybrid – irreversibly transformed the political landscape of Predynastic Egypt.

Military campaigns, raids and trading expeditions, perhaps involving a certain degree of the prospecting and mining operations too, were sent to Nubia and the Southern Levant at relatively regular intervals, in order to obtain and sustain a stable supply of slaves, copper, gold, wine, cattle and exotic or otherwise needed goods. There is a strong indication of formation of the earliest known (Naqada IIIA1–C1) Egyptian Dynasty 0 province in the Southern Levant (Anđelković 2012), with the Yarkon River as its northern border (see Anđelković 2011b, fig. 3.3). Egyptians always considered themselves different and "better", a separate people from their close neighbors. The perpetual reconquest of Nubia and the Southern Levant would remain a constant of the ancient Egyptian geopolitical pattern, including the period of the New Kingdom (Anđelković 2011b, 31).

Confirmation of the view of 4th century B.C. Greek philosopher Aristotle that "man is by nature a political animal" (2009, 10, I.1253a²) is no less to be sought in well documented 14th century B.C. Amarna diplomacy (Cohen and Westbrook 2000) than in Predynastic political transformations. However, in an early period, such as the Predynastic, the symbolic form messages, the correct context of artifacts, along with rituals, ideological and political ideas and beliefs are rarely preserved in the archaeological records, and may prove difficult for archaeologists to reconstruct (DeMarrais, Castillo and Earle 1996, 16). Nonetheless, it is absolutely "necessary to move beyond a typological and chronological emphasis" (Stevenson 2007, 148) since so-called "hard" archaeological evidence will be equally hard to understand properly without its "software", so to speak. As if we had an archaeologically reconstructed TV screen, but not what was broadcast over it. Without a doubt, along with the new finds, there are few more crucial aspects which should be most thoroughly explored in search of a better understanding of Predynastic and Protodynastic Egypt, than the domain of ideology and paleopolitics.

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Uobličavajuća moć ideologije:
politička trasformacija predinastičkog Egipta

Ideološki „obrasci kontinuiteta", arheološki uočljivi već od Nakade I, koji su među najistaknutijim obeležjima nastajuće staroegipatske civilizacije, bili su, u velikoj meri, definisani idejom božanskog vladara, odnosno harizmatičnim amalgamom sakralnog autoriteta, ideoloških vrednosti, ekonomske i vojne moći. Koncept božanskog kralja, sveobuhvatnog upravljača nad svim postojećim, bio je, po svemu sudeći, ključni ideološki aspekt u relativno brzoj političkoj transformaciji predinastičkog Egipta. Ciklična „percepcija reda", promovisana ustaljenim i očekivanim, godišnjim plavljenjima Nila, i prateća dimenzija „kosmološkog poretka", sinergijski saobrazna moći vladara koji pobedonosno zamahuje svojim buzdovanom (ikonografski motiv upečatljivo prikazan, pored ostalog, i na Narmerovoj paleti), oblikovali su nakadsko socijalno tkivo međuodnosa i ponašajnih obrazaca. Doživljeni kao obavezujuća brana nasuprot haosu, ovi aspekti su, na svojevrstan način, objašnjavali, opravdavali i, donekle,

činili nužnim neprestano ratovanje, koje je, sa svoje strane, omogućavalo sticanje novih resursa i teritorijalnu ekspanziju, doprinoseći, ujedno, punoj političkoj konsolidaciji (time i na taj način definisanog) društva. Složeni, višeslojni, ideološki i socijalni vrednosni konstrukt, izrazito okrenut manifestnoj demonstraciji statusa i moći, jasno razlikuje i razdvaja praksu Nakada kulture – kako u Gornjem, tako od faze Nakade IIC i u Donjem Egiptu – u odnosu na heterogene zajednice u Delti, čiji način života, dobrim delom i dalje naslonjen na prevaziđeni model neolita, ubrzo nestaje. Ekspanzija Nakada kulture (koju smo od kraja Nakade II jednostavno preimenovali u dinastičku kulturu) i njen specifični kolektivni identitet, bespovratno su transformisali politički pejzaž predinastičkog Egipta, bojeći ga svojim odjecima i tokom naredna tri milenijuma trajanja staroegipatske civilizacije.

Ključne reči: Predinastički Egipat, Nakada kultura, božanski vladar, IV milenijum p. n. e., fokusiranje identiteta, paleopolitika

Le pouvoir formateur de l' idéologie:
Transformation politique de l'Égypte prédynastique

Les «modèles de continuité» idéologiques, archéologiquement perceptibles depuis Nagada I, qui sont parmi les marques les plus significatives de la civilisation de l'ancienne Égypte alors en cours de gestation, étaient dans une grande mesure définis par l'idée du prince divin, c'est-à-dire par l'amalgame charismatique de l'autorité sacrale, des valeurs idéologiques, du pouvoir économique et militaire. Le concept du roi divin, dirigeant global de tout ce qui existe, était, selon toute ressemblance, l'aspect idéologique décisif dans la transformation politique relativement rapide de l'Égypte prédynastique. La «perception de l'ordre» cyclique, promue par des crues annuelles du Nil, régulières et attendues, accompagnée de la dimension «de l'ordre cosmologique», synergiquement conforme au pouvoir du prince qui brandit victorieusement sa masse d'armes (motif iconographique représenté de manière frappante, sur la palette de Narmer entre autres), ont façonné le tissu social de nagada des interrelations et des modèles comportementaux. Vécus comme une digue contraignante devant le chaos, ces aspects ont, d'une certaine manière, expliqué, justifié et, jusqu'à un certain point rendu nécessaire la guerre incessante, qui à son tour permettait l'acquisition de nouvelles ressources et l'expansion territoriale, contribuant en même temps, à la pleine consolidation politique de la société (définie de cette manière). La construction idéologique et sociale complexe, explicitement tournée vers la démonstration manifeste du statut et du pouvoir, distingue et sépare clairement la pratique de la culture Nagada – aussi bien dans la Haute-Égypte, que depuis la phase de Nagada II dans la Basse-Égypte – de celle des communa-

utés hétérogènes dans le delta, dont le mode de vie, pour une bonne part toujours appuyé sur le modèle dépassé du néolithique, disparaît bientôt. L'expansion de la culture Nagada (que nous avons depuis la fin de la Nagada II simplement rebaptisé en culture dynastique) et son identité collective spécifique, ont irréversiblement transformé le paysage politique de l'Égypte prédynastique, le colorant par leurs échos durant les trois millénaires que la civilisation de l'Egypte ancienne a continué à durer.