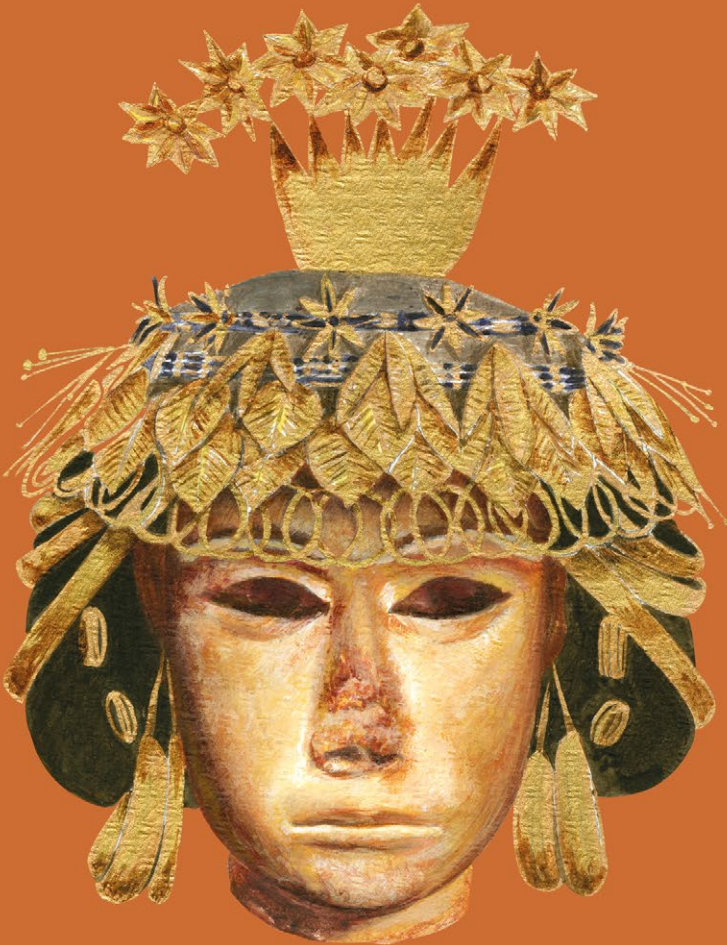


Petr Charvát

The Birth of the State: Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and China



Karolinum

The Birth of the State

Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and China

Petr Charvát

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CONTENTS

Preface	11
Acknowledgements.....	14

ANCIENT EGYPT

The Natural Environment	17
The Roots and Origin of All Things: The Productive Economy In Egypt (Neolithic Age, ca. 5500–4500 BC)	19
The Chalcolithic Age or Building Inequality: The Badari Culture (4500–3800 BC)	25
Embryonic Signs of the State: Naqada I, II and III (4 th millenium BC)	27
Economy	27
The embryos of cities	29
Social differentiation: the elite and the others	31
Egyptian society of the pre-state period in burial rituals.	38
Lower Egypt: Between the Pharaoh and the Red Sea.....	41
Economy	41
Settlements.....	43
Burials	44
Beyond everyday borders: contact with Asia.....	46
Confronting the Enemy: Nubia	49
The Burial of the Famous and Powerful in the Northern Part of Upper Egypt: Abydos	50
Burial Grounds Of The Southern Kingdom of Upper Egypt: An Elite Burial Site In Hieraconpolis	53
“Simple” Egyptians.....	56
The Dawn Of The Egyptian Writing System	59

The Birth of the Egyptian State	63
Stabilization of the Early Egyptian State	68
Characteristics of the Early Egyptian State	69

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

The Natural Environment	73
The Dawn of a More Advanced Social Structure (the Halaf culture, 6000–5000 BC)	77
Early Historiography: Susa at the Close of the 5th Millenium BC	85
Mausoleum of Susa	85
Painted pottery of Susa: the people and their communities	87
Painted pottery of Susa: the people and their work	90
Painted pottery of Susa: deities	93
Painted pottery of Susa: Why?	95
Susa at the Dawn of the Uruk Period:First Reports from the Creation of the State (early 4 th millenium BC)	97
The sacral face of the age: activating fertility powers	100
The secular face of the age: building, protection, tradition	102
Sumer, the Southern Part of Mesopotamia: While This Was Happening	106
Activating the potential of fertility powers	106
Writing! Writing?	107
The enchantment of cylinder seals	109
“You will not be like gods”	110
Behold, Civilization: the Greater Community of the Late Periodof Uruk Culture (3500–3200 Bc) -	
En, Nin, Nameshda	112
Economy: redistribution prevails	116
Spiritual and political leaders: EN, NIN, NAMESHDA	118
Innovations at the dawn of the 3 rd millenium BC: LUGAL, NIN, NAMESHDA	122
The wise Owl of Minerva flies at dusk: the crisis of the 27 th century BC and what came of it - LUGAL, ENSI ₂ , EN	125

“The End of the Beginning”: The Sumerian State at the Close Of The Early Dynastic Period (ca. 2500–2334 BC)	130
The king and his court	130
The powerful and revered	134
Careful and resourceful	138
“He who shackles slaves...”	141
Conclusion	143

ANCIENT INDIA

The Natural Environment	147
Prehistoric Beginnings	150
The Preparatory Period	160
The Proto-Indian Culture (2500–1900 BC)	163
Economy	163
City life	167
Mohenjo-daro	169
Harappa	175
Towns and cities	178
Rural life	180
A state organism?	181
The spiritual culture	186
The Demise of Proto-Indian Culture	198

ANCIENT CHINA

The Natural Environment	203
Prehistoric Beginnings: “Mesolithic-Neolithic” – Hunters, Gatherers And Farmers	206
The Neolithic Period in southern China	213
The Chalcolithic Period (We Are No Longer All Equal)	217
China’s Northern Regions during the Chalcolithic Period	224
The Beginnings of the State	227
The Traditional Interpretation of Chinese History	227
The Erlitou Culture	228

In the cities and peripheral areas of the first state	230
Zhengzhou	233
Anyang	234
Western Zhou	237
The Economy of the First Chinese State	243
Society	244
Characteristics of the Oldest Chinese State	244
A state arises from kinship	247
What followed?	249
What the elite took with them on their journey to the next world	252
The spiritual world	253

HOW THEN IS A STATE BORN?

First, a Brief Review	267
Subsistence	270
Agriculture	270
Craft	274
Trading	276
Settlements	278
Burials	281
Society	288
Organizational centers of the Chalcolithic societies and their facilities	290
Courtiers of the first rulers: clever, resolute and foresighted . . .	291
Courtiers of the first rulers: those who speak with the gods . . .	295
<i>Egypt</i>	295
<i>Sumer and Akkad</i>	296
<i>What was the deification of the Mesopotamian rulers like?</i>	297
<i>India and China</i>	300
Three social estates and the birth of the state	301
Metaphysics	305
The human world, space, time and their nature	305
The non-human world	308
Is the world around us composed of the elements?	310

Powers of the overworld.	311
Art	313
Conclusion	315
Appendix: the State in Trouble	317
Egypt	317
Mesopotamia	322
India	327
China	332
Bibliography	341
Index	347

PREFACE

This book features much of my research on the state and on statehood in the ancient Near East. Although I focused mainly on prehistoric and ancient Near East, I always made sure that my findings and observations also took into consideration the development of all other early state centers.

I gradually amassed considerable findings on the creation and development of early statehood in Egypt – for which I still feel an affection, as it was in this area that I had commenced my career as a researcher – in the Near East, in India and in China. This body of knowledge helped me in preparing introductory university courses on the history and culture of civilizations predating antiquity that I have taught since 1993 at universities in Prague and Plzeň.

I was also given the chance by the LIBRI publishing house to write on earlier periods of the ancient development of the centers of civilization in an encyclopedia-type series. All those readers understanding Czech are therefore welcome to delve into these books as well.¹

The creation of the book that lies before you was not, however, that easy. Following the publication of my previous book² by the Karolinum publishing house, its director, Jaroslav Jirsa, invited me to present the results of my more broadly focused research to the public and kindly showed interest in publishing this work. I am sincerely grateful to him for this. In time, I realized that it really would be beneficial for my students and other readers to be presented with this kind of treatise, so I decided to begin writing it.

¹ Petr Charvát, Václav Marek, Pavel Oliva: *Encyklopedie dijin staroviku* (Encyclopaedia of ancient history, in Czech), Prague: LIBRI 2008.

² Petr Charvát, *The Iconography of Pristine Statehood – Painted Pottery and Seal Impressions from Susa, Southwestern Iran*, Prague: Karolinum Press 2005.

Those leafing through this book might feel that the writing is dry and tedious, full of archaeological information, descriptions of objects and excavations. I am afraid that this is how it works with modern historical sciences and archaeology in particular. Yet my interpretation has two objectives: Above all, I hope to present a summarized account of present-day knowledge and understanding of the oldest statehood of the Old World, but also of that which preceded it. Achieving this requires nothing less than a laborious analysis of the pages and “strange volumes of this age-old and precious science,” of the folios of archeological reports. On the other hand, there is clearly a need for a comprehensive assessment of the finds presented and for a review of the social process that led to the creation of the state in all its complexities. I attempt this in the fifth chapter, where I include passages from ancient texts, whose authors attested to everything that afflicted them and their nations in times of trouble.

I cannot conceal the fact that, especially in those areas that are not found within my own expertise as a cuneiformist and archaeologist, I relied on the advice and assistance of treasured friends, who provided me with significant help at various points in my research. I am extremely indebted to them for this.

Until now, most of my professional work has been conducted in two institutions of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, which later became the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic: the Institute of Archaeology and the Oriental Institute. The Institute of Archaeology provided me with a position at the very beginning of my research career, and I am grateful for the many suggestions and role models in the creative and friendly atmosphere that prevailed there. I also benefited from advice, information, assistance and support from many people at the Oriental Institute.

I should also mention my *alma mater*, which prepared me for my research work – Charles University in Prague. My research career began in the university’s Institute of Egyptology and the memories from these years will never fade.

I would often travel to Brno University for guidance, assistance and friendly advice. I am indebted to its staff, especially to my colleague Inna Mateciucová.

A great deal of gratitude is owed to my colleagues and friends from various foreign institutions. Worthy of special recognition are Jean-Louis Huot and his dear wife, Serge Cleuziou, Jean-Marie Durand, Béatrice André-Salvini and Françoise Demange, Jean-Daniel Forest, Régis Vallet, Jean-Jacques Glassner and his kind wife, my long-time friend Erle Leichty, Barry Eichler, Steve Tinney and Philip Jones, Holly Pittman, Gregory Possehl, Mitchell Rothman, Shannon White, Richard Zettler, Charles Maisels, Dieter Schlingloff and especially Walther Sallaberger.

I acknowledge my debt of gratitude to my learned colleagues Svetoslav Kostič, Jiří Prosecký and Břetislav Vachala for help with English-language editions of the ancient texts.

This book would certainly never have been written without the full support and help of my family. My wife, Kateřina Charvátová, deserves my utmost gratitude for her understanding and support, and a special thanks goes to Jan, Lenka, Ondřej and Eva. Little Toniček Charvát has brought great joy into my life. If it were not for all of you, my dear family, this book would not have been written.

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Prague, 20th of July 2013

Petr Charvát

ANCIENT EGYPT

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

A key geographic factor contributing to the historical complexion of Egypt is the Nile River, which over the millions of years of its existence has carved out its riverbed in the North African bedrock. Totalling 6,695 km in length, its upper part consists of two tributaries – the Blue Nile and White Nile. While the Blue Nile's source is Lake Tana in Ethiopia, the White Nile originates with Lake Victoria and Lake Albert in Uganda. The Nile Valley cuts south to north through Egypt, stretching 1,360 km from the first cataract (cascades, rapids) near the city of Aswan. There are six cataracts in the Nile riverbed: the first near Aswan and, moving southward, the last near the Sudanese city of Khartoum. From Aswan to the mouth at the sea, the Nile Valley's gradient is 85 meters. The river runs to the Mediterranean Sea through a vast delta now demarcated by two main distributaries, the Rosetta (west) and Damietta (east). In ancient times, the Nile Delta had one more main distributary, meaning that there were three distributaries at the time.

The Nile Valley possesses a surprisingly diverse topography. Ten kilometers wide on average, it spans a maximum width of 17 kilometers at the segment south of the Faiyum Oasis. Including its delta, the Nile Valley covers a total area of 37,540 km². The river's bottom is composed of sand and rock sediment covered by layers of clay deposits.

The rock terraces over the Nile Valley previously provided quality types of building stone, lime, sandstone, granite and basalt. To both the west and the east of the river, these terraces gradually turn into a plain now covered by desert. In ancient times, the edges of the valley consisted of a grassy steppe that contained metal deposits (including copper and gold) as well as gemstones – agate, amethyst, carnelian, chalcedony, almandine, jasper, onyx, crystal and the legendary turquoise from the Sinai Peninsula.

Yet there is more to Egypt than just the Nile. Vast oases, of which the Faiyum basin is the largest, extend west of the river. This low ground covers a total area of 12,000 km² with an altitude of -44 m with Lake Birket Qarun (in ancient times it was called Moeris) forming its center. We also find the Siwa, Bahariya, Farafra, Dakhla and Kharga oases in the western desert. Furthest west by the Libyan border lies the Kufra Oasis. With its annual flooding, the Nile ensured the fertility of Egyptian fields up until the first Aswan Dam was built in 1907. The floods usually began in early June and culminated in mid August. The optimum rise in the Nile's water level was considered 16 cubits (8.36 m). With the water level beginning to drop in September, field work could be commenced in October.

The Egyptian climate is characterized by four seasons: winter (December–February), spring (March–May), summer (June–August) and autumn (September–November). It usually rains in Egypt from November to April with most of the precipitation coming in December and January. Plowing and cereal sowing usually began in October after the Nile stopped flooding. We do not know for sure to what extent, if at all, Egyptian farmers cultivated spring cereals.

The original flora and fauna were much more abundant than they are today. Various species of palm, sycamore, fig and willow trees, as well as acacia and tamarisk grew in the river valley, whose banks were covered with reeds. The Nile's banks were once frequented by elephants, rhinoceros, giraffes, lions, leopards, hippos and crocodiles. Herds of antelopes and gazelles grazed in the steppe above the river valley. The waters of the Nile were brimming with fish and various species of birds nested there.

THE ROOTS AND ORIGIN OF ALL THINGS:
THE PRODUCTIVE ECONOMY IN EGYPT
(Neolithic Age, ca. 5500–4500 BC)³

The people of prehistoric Egypt farmed arable soil whose total area is estimated at 34,440 km² [1].⁴

The onset of a productive economy and the people's own food production came about in quite specific terms in prehistoric Egypt. Archeologists have always admired two unique traits of Egypt during the Neolithic Age: First and foremost, the Neolithic Age in the land above the Nile is relatively recent, probably not dating back earlier than 5500 BC. This differs significantly from the Near East, whose Neolithic dawn is thought to have occurred around 10,000 BC. Secondly, the "Black Land" has produced a surprisingly low number of sites yielding Neolithic findings. These essentially consist of Faiyum, Merimda Beni Salama, El Omari and Maadi in the northern part of the country, predominantly in the Nile Delta region.

What is the reason for this? We probably need to seek the cause in Egypt's distinctive natural conditions. Over the last ten thousand years of human history, the Sahara Desert was far more hospitable than it is today. It was teeming with springs, enjoyed a favorable precipitation cycle and featured abundant flora and, consequently, bountiful fauna. It therefore can be assumed that its human inhabitants, who left behind monuments of ancient art (recently brought to the general

³ Unless otherwise mentioned, my main source of information in further interpretation is the publication *Dossiers d'Archéologie* No. 307, octobre 2005: *L'Égypte pré-dynastique*, Dijon, Editions Faton S. A. S. 2005, with contributions by Béatrix Midant-Reynes, Yann Tristrant, Krzysztof Ciałowicz, Sylvie Duchesne, Luc Staniaszek, Eric Crubézy, Nathalie Bauduel, Dominique Farout, Renée Friedman, Marcell Campagn and Stan Hendricks. Another source is David Wengrow's *The Archaeology of Early Egypt – Social Transformations in North-East Africa, 10,000 to 2650 BC*, Cambridge – New York – Melbourne – Madrid – Cape Town – Singapore – Sao Paulo, Cambridge University Press 2006. I am grateful to my colleagues Petra Maříková and Jana Mynářová for the helpful passages from this book.

⁴ Charles K. Maisels, *Early Civilizations of the Old World*, London and New York, Routledge – Taylor and Francis Group 2001, p. 186.



Fig. 1 Primary historical and archeological locations of prehistoric and early ancient Egypt.