The Beginnings of Egyptian Civilization

For the first few hundred-thousand years of human occupation, Egypt was home to stone-age – or palaeolithic – hunting, fishing and food-gathering communities that lived along the river terraces of the Nile Valley. Then, from c.5500 BC, the earliest agricultural communities emerged. Over the next 2,400 years, the country came to be divided between separate, self-governing communities, which developed at different rates socially, economically, politically and culturally. These early developments can be traced mainly by examining the so-called Predynastic burials that have been excavated at various sites throughout Egypt. Ongoing excavations at Abydos have brought to light the graves of kings of the Predynastic Period, who are now referred to as Dynasty Zero. Signs scratched on labels once attached to the grave goods of these rulers also attest to the development of writing at an earlier period than was previously thought.

Material culture
As the local cultures developed, their craftsmanship increased in quality and sophistication. Pottery was painted and jewellery fashioned; stone-working became more elaborate, with the manufacture of palettes, mace heads, knives and vases; metal-working began with the production of copper tools; and the copper ore malachite was used in the glaze for beads.

A recognizably Egyptian style was already beginning to emerge in the items being produced, and it is clear that the markets for such goods became wider and more specialized. Desert resources, such as gold extracted from the Eastern Desert, were exploited and we know that contact was made with traders from outside Egypt, as lapis lazuli from Badakhshan in north-eastern Afghanistan has been found buried in Predynastic graves.

The evidence of such artefacts indicates that their makers would have been specialists in their craft, freed from the constraints of subsistence farming, and that society was becoming differentiated, with the emergence of an elite who could afford luxury goods and who presumably controlled the trade routes, local irrigation systems and more elaborate building projects (especially tombs). Luxury goods may have been specially made to place in graves with the dead, and it seems that funerary customs played a major part in the increasing division of labour and the development of greater social complexity and stratification.

The exchange of goods would inevitably have been coupled with the exchange of ideas. The contact with Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) appears to have been particularly significant in the early period of Egyptian civilization. It is

\[ Celestial and bovine themes figure in what appears to be the earliest recorded religious imagery surviving from Egypt, such as on this Predynastic greywacke (slate) cosmetic palette. \]

\[ The ceremonial limestone 'Scorpion Macehead' from Hierakonopolis, shows King Scorpion of the Protodynastic Period engaged in an activity that may be the ritual cutting of an irrigation channel, or perhaps a foundation trench for a temple.\]
likely that foreign traders would have been attracted to Egypt by the prospect of purchasing its gold.

A centralized state emerges
By c.3100 BC, Egypt was a highly efficient political state, with an administrative bureaucracy, precisely defined boundaries and elaborate kingship rites relating to a single ruler. So why did the Egyptian state emerge when it did? There have been a number of theories, reflecting various trends in thought. They relate to changes in the physical environment and climate, as well as external stimuli. It is most likely that a variety of factors coincided to create the major changes. Environmental changes are likely to have been tied in with a growth in the population, increased production, and the freeing of specialists from subsistence farming, resulting in the domination of the poor by an elite. It has been suggested that the growth in population caused the need for increasingly sophisticated technology to meet the rising demand, which in turn resulted in the need for central organization. Other theories involve population growth leading to conflict between communities.

The increasing aridity of the desert over the millennia would have led to the narrowing of the area of habitable land, thus concentrating the population. Egypt is known to have experienced a relatively wet period, followed by a drier period, around 3300 BC. The movement of people as a result of climatic changes (especially northwards into the Delta region) may well have caused both alliances and conflicts between groups, resulting in the emergence of chiefdoms. Territorial competition and the merger of local chiefdoms no doubt led to increased power in the hands of fewer people.

Outside influences
Cultural transfer, especially from Mesopotamia and Elam, is often considered to have been the catalyst for Egypt's formation as a unified state, and the simultaneous emergence of a highly developed system of writing (hieroglyphs). But the direction and impact of any contact is still highly contested. Egypt's political superstructure was very likely well under way by the time western Asiatic motifs started to appear in Egyptian art. Examples show that the Egyptians made use of foreign ideas in a very Egyptian manner and soon chose to discard them.

While the development of writing helped to consolidate the unification of the state – aiding administrative efficiency and speeding up the processes of centralization of power – there is no evidence that Egyptian hieroglyphs had their origins in a foreign writing system. The beginnings of Egyptian civilization, often referred to as the Unification of Egypt, remain hazy and speculative.