

Egyptian History: Definitely! Myth as the Link between Event and History

DAVID A. WARBURTON¹

Introduction

The unification of Egypt and the foundation of the First Dynasty by King Menes is probably the first major historical event recorded and celebrated in contemporary records in the entire history of humanity. And the memory of the achievement has never really been eclipsed in the last five thousand years. Thus *Ereignisgeschichte* quite literally begins in Egypt.²

However, rather than celebrating a miracle of preservation and the accomplishments of two centuries of scholarship which allow us to trace events which literally take us back to the very Dawn of History, some Egyptologists deny not only Menes but also history itself. In his *Grundzüge der Ägyptischen Geschichte*, Hornung (1965: 9-10) suggested that – as far as the Egyptians were concerned – the earliest history belonged to myth, and in his classic *Geschichte als Fest*, Hornung (1966) stressed that the Egyptian historical sources cannot be viewed as history in our sense of the term. Eyre (1996) has reasonably and logically argued that the Egyptian historical texts are literary, and for Baines (1996, 1999) the problem is distinguishing “myth” from “fiction”. Thus, one has a number of very different positions from which to approach Egyptian history – none of which is particularly promising and most erode any hope. Taken at face value, this situation should drive an historian to despair.

In a sense, however, Hornung’s stance also implies a distinction between myth and history

indicating that the Egyptian understanding of history in historical times was not quite as distant from our own as in Hornung’s implicitly more drastic position in *Geschichte als Fest*. In this sense, he distinguished between the earlier mythical origins which were not recorded, and the later historical ritual repetition of the tasks established at the outset, which were nevertheless recorded in a more historical fashion. Understood thus, Eyre’s position can be interpreted optimistically as simply meaning that using the available sources is the only conceivable basis for any attempt to write Egyptian history. However, there are a number of obstacles of various different kinds, and none of the authorities would really allow us to recognize Narmer as historically viable.

Yet in this contribution it is my aim to see if we can take this positive view of our sources and actually gain some understanding of both history and ideology by exploring what we have. And to return to the very beginning. I do not dispute that the only means of understanding the origins is to view them as being closer to “myth”. Nevertheless, I want to concentrate on the importance of the historical sources for the origins of Egypt, in (a) the sense of history, but also in (b) the sense of their impact on Egyptian history and in (c) the sense of their impact on the Egyptian understanding of history. Finally, I will also touch on some relevant (d) Egyptological myths to illustrate the complexity of the problem, before ending on (e) a more optimistic note about history.

Although this era is indisputably shrouded in myth, this strikes me as less of a problem than understanding the reality of “myth” and “history”. I would contend that Baines’s understanding of myth as closer to fiction has been clouded by its usage in the traditional Study of Religion, rather than by the reality of myth in ordinary usage and the Egyptian sources.³ In fact however, after dismissing most

1 I thank all of those with whom I had the pleasure of exchanging views during the conference. I also thank Gerald Moers for having taken the time to respond to a question about history and fiction. Most of all, however, I thank Martin Fitzenreiter once again for the invitation, as it was this that made it all possible.

2 The sources have been conveniently published in Wengrow (2006: passim, but particularly 42-43; 139; 132; 205) and we will refer to these repeatedly. Capagno (2004) has made the argument about war, which is also crucial, and Wilkinson (2000a) about politics.

3 I would argue that Schenkel (2006) probably exaggerates the degree of confidence one can have in his demonstration that the Egyptian word *mdw* does not lie at the origin of the Greek

definitions of myth as inadequate, the historian of religion, McCutcheon, concludes that

myths are the product and the means of creating authority by removing a claim, behaviour, artefact or institution from human history and hence from the realm of human doings.⁴

And, obviously, this is by far the best approach to the understanding of Egyptian religious myths of the Bronze Age, where the centrepieces are the tale of Osiris and the Tale of the Destruction of Humanity (or Celestial Cow). Obviously, the one justified the legitimacy of the kingship and the other provided an explanation of just why the Sun-god did not attend to the job himself. This ideology was then codified in the *König als Sonnenpriester*.⁵

Thus, this is a more balanced understanding of “myth” than merely presenting “myth” as fictional narratives about gods, as Baines attempts to argue.⁶ However, Baines also suggests that the Egyptian kingship was virtually born with all the accoutrements of mythical legitimacy, disputing the argument that the attributes accumulated over time.⁷ My argument would be that the myths – and above all the Osiris cycle and the Tale of the Destruction of Humanity (Celestial Cow) – which contributed to the power and legitimacy of the kingship developed with that kingship. Neither Osiris nor the Celestial Cow, nor the ideology of the *König als Sonnenpriester* can be projected back to early in the third millennium, let alone Prehistory – at least not based on any available evidence. Thus, the fundamental myths in the religious sense postdated the appearance of the all-powerful kingship we see in Dyns. III and IV. Significantly, these are obviously “myths” in

μῦθος. According to Liddel-Scott (*A Greek-English Lexicon*), Greek μῦθος (q.v.) means “word, speech, thing said, tale”, and this corresponds pretty precisely to the meaning of Egyptian *mdw* (“Rede, Wort, Text”, according to Hannig, *Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch-Deutsch*, q.v.). In any case, Liddel-Scott also add “fiction”, and thus the modern usage in Western European languages corresponds to the meaning of the Greek.

4 McCutcheon 2000: 207.

5 Assmann 1970. I am persuaded that this text dates to the epoch of Hatshepsut, and assume that it need not be projected back any further in time. It thus appears at an historical point in time and reflects the progressive changes in the understanding of the kingship. A highly conservative approach would place it even later – but there is no evidence that it came earlier.

6 Baines 1996, 1999.

7 Baines 2008: 842.

the sense of the Study of Religion: removed from empirical understanding. But we can locate their historical beginnings, and the political context in which they became useful.

By contrast, what Kemp (2006: 6-69) describes as the “myth of the state” can not only be traced back to the origins of the state, but also seems to embody some real history. The question is whether one can actually investigate the origins and get to the bottom of developments “historically”. My major concern here will be the Egyptian historical sources, but I draw theoretical support from a series of volumes on European myths which draws our attention to an utterly different meaning of myth from that used in the Study of Religion. This is an understanding of “myth” as being the tales around historical or pseudo-historical personages.⁸ I would argue that – given the character of the Egyptian sources – this allows us to come closer to Hornung’s conception – but at the same time perhaps also closer to history in the sense of *wie es gewesen*. History – rather than fiction – is fundamental in this other sense of “myth”. But it is history of a different kind to what we naïvely imagine.

History

To understand this, we must take a look at the nature of history. Among naïve historians like myself, there are two concepts of “history”. One (1) is that the events are (or rather, were) “out there”, i.e., they were “what happened”. The other (2) is what remains of an ideal image of “writing history” as somehow coming close to Ranke’s *wie es gewesen*. Thus, history (1) is “what happened”. But history (2) is made in the workshop of the historian, by linking disparate events and persons into a coherent narrative. The historian’s narrative becomes “history” by analyzing what happened. We naïvely assume that a good historian comes close to reproducing history (1). However, the good historian himself knows that the history he is writing is literature [i.e., = history (2)]

8 Neumann, Hartmann & Neumann, Milfull & Neumann, all 2004. In case it is not clear, the existence of these volumes demonstrates that the definitions of myth as used in the Study of Religion do not demonstrate a monopoly on the actual usage of the concept and the word in scholarly circles.

– as both Thucydides and Gibbon knew full well (but is frequently forgotten by those who criticise their methodology while failing to recognize that they wrote literature and are still read today because of their command of language). William McNeill, one of the greatest historians of recent times, went even further, appreciating that writing history is myth-making.⁹

Thus, in reality, following Collingwood, we know that the events are just incidents in which various actors play their parts: there is no “history” until the “historian” arrives. Thus part of the act of being Thutmose III or Ramesses II is engaging in battles, and part of the act is writing it down (or having it recorded). In such cases, the written version is part of the event, not the work of an analytical historian. Using the sources and his own interpretation, the “historian” transforms these sources into drama or literature, which we term “history”. The historian cannot work without texts – but this is no reason to criticise the texts, as these are the sources used by the historian to “make history”. And obviously, creating the narrative demands invention.

In our minds, however, “history is made” in a very different sense. We think of some individual who takes a leap “into the unknown”, and somehow manages to get a firm footing “on the other side” in a fashion which is later interpreted as “changing the course of history”. Alexander the Great or Bismarck spring to mind. Dealing with such cases, the work of the historian is to analyze how this happened, to debunk it, or to celebrate it.

Or the historian can render the human actor – no matter how heroic – a mere pawn in “historical” developments, by stressing Braudel’s *longue durée*, and insisting that economic and social developments rendered the human actors irrelevant. In this sense, Alexander becomes a mere cipher in a series of imperial rulers stretching from the predecessors of Assurbanipal to the successors of Diocletian; Bismarck cannot be understood without the Reformation and Prussian state with its specific kingship and economy, etc. And the veracity of such statements is obviously beyond dispute. However, it fundamentally undermines the whole concept of critical history by suggesting that there is another larger narrative which renders the details less

9 McNeill 1986: 164.

significant. In this fashion, it is not only the details of the battle of Gaugamela which are unimportant, but Alexander himself who is irrelevant. In the worst case, Alexander is reduced to being a mere tool of historical forces of which he was unconscious. However, one could argue the *longue durée* and contend that Alexander consciously exploited an understanding of the long term developments for his own advantage.¹⁰

Superficially, the popular idea of history populated by heroes (Gandhi, Churchill, Rommel, Napoléon, Caesar, etc.) is as incompatible with the *longue durée* as it is incompatible with analytical history. However, this popular conception of history is in reality compatible with both the *longue durée* and with “myth”. On the one hand, in the *longue durée* the heroes become “icons” symbolizing an *époque* or a world (as did Phillip II for Braudel), and on the other, in “myth”, the events are simplified by assigning signal significance to events and persons, and thus creating epoch-making historical figures. The relevant figures are either rendered mythical or enshrouded in myth (and sometimes of their own making, as in the cases of Rommel and Patton). Obviously, following this approach, the task of the historian is at least partially to dismantle the myth. And this implies somehow that history is about “finding the truth”.

Obviously, given the sources available, any history of ancient Egypt is going to be either threadbare or it is going to rely on invention, ancient and modern. In this sense, “history” involves an “oversimplification”, and is not really far from “myth” in this other historical sense. Yet “myth” is obviously something as different from “history”, as “history” is from “fiction”.

Thus, in this sense, writing history is different from fiction, for the object of the historical procedure is to find some version of the truth in events or patterns of events. Yet it is also literature in the sense that there is always some invention. Fiction

10 In the opposite sense – of an exceptional historical figure combating the *longue durée* – one can take a look at the Emperor Julian. He was a true military hero, and yet doomed to failure as Christianity and Islam would subsequently eclipse not only his conquests, but also his faith. That this tragic hero was a living anachronism is a fact – and one which is only comprehensible in terms of the *longue durée*. Peculiarly, however, this is a cognitive *longue durée* and not an economic *longue durée*.

implies deliberate invention of a different kind. By contrast, history implies a far more modest degree of invention – in the service of analytical simplicity. Yet there is some confusion about the nature of this invention.

Moers uses the insertion of dialogue into stories as an indication of fiction to argue that Wenamun and Sinuhe are fiction (or rather, he assumes that these works are fiction and uses the dialogues to support his case).¹¹ Similarly, Moers uses Wenamun's thoughts about another individual's thoughts (which are empirically speaking unknowable) to argue fiction.¹² Yet Thucydides uses exactly the same devices and no one would accuse Thucydides of having deliberately written fiction. Thucydides was writing history as literature, and such devices are known in literature. Thus, the use of literary devices is proof of the literary character of a work, but not necessarily a proof of fiction, and one must be careful about the criteria.

Thus, to come to grips with the real issue of "history", one must face that of "literature". In contrast to philological certainty, the writing of history is very much an issue of literature. One of the truly central problems with the Egyptological discussion of "literature" is that in many cases the interpretation of the "literary" character of a text (in the sense that "literature" = "fiction") is founded on assumptions about both history and literature which are not necessarily as clear as the premise about the fictional nature of literature. In fact, however, history is a kind of literature, and thus assigning literature globally to the domain of fiction is as erroneous as linking "myth" with "fiction". Thus our discussion of the historical texts must accept that these too are literary, as Eyre (1996) observes. And, I stress that modern historical texts are also literary – and they are at least not intended to be fiction.

Myth, Literature, Fiction

Assmann (1996) has noted that there are quite divergent interpretations of Sinuhe, Wenamun and other such texts, some of these texts having once been viewed as historical, whereas they are

now generally assumed to be fictive. Eyre (1996: 416) fundamentally agrees, suggesting that "the audience" was expected to "suspend disbelief" when faced with the genre of literature. Obviously, this is a fundamental issue which has an impact on one's understanding of the nature of history and the history of literature, aside from the nature of Egyptian thought.

There are two fundamentally different issues involved here. One is about the very nature of "fiction" and the other is about the relevance of "fiction" to ancient Egypt. When demanding that we should believe that Egyptian literary and historical texts necessarily involved a "suspension of disbelief", we might find that we are anachronistically projecting something into Egyptian thought which was not present.

It is a very unpleasant fact that in the 21st century AD, we must accept that fully 40% of the American population claims to believe that the Seven-day-creation account of the Hebrew Bible is most "likely to be the correct explanation for the origin of the earth"; a further 19% allegedly believing in "intelligent design" should be added to this, producing almost 60% of the population of the world's wealthiest country with easy access via libraries and the internet to scientific publications in the *lingua franca* of science.¹³ If some percentage of these people are in fact lying to the pollsters – rather than giving their actual views – it merely demonstrates the utter irrelevance of "truth" in any analytical or scientific sense of the term to the greater part of the American population. This self-condemnation of the intelligence of the American people is a testimony to the human mind. Scholars neglect such facts at their peril: it impairs their capacity to make judgements about the interest of ordinary people in understanding "myth", "belief" and "fiction" in a scholarly fashion. This in turn substantially reduces the credibility of academic arguments about the interest of ordinary people in recognizing "fiction" when packaged as propaganda.

Obviously, regardless of its catastrophic record, the American educational system must be viewed as superior to that of Ancient Egypt. I cannot tell exactly what proportion of the population of New Kingdom Egypt would have been literate according

11 Moers 2001: 82ff.

12 Moers 2001: 88.

13 <http://www.economist.com/media/pdf/FullPollData.pdf>.

to Baines,¹⁴ but let us assume that literacy was not exactly widespread. However, regardless of how widespread literacy was, there is very little evidence of a sufficient volume of literature representing a spectrum of easily recognizable choices which is the essential prerequisite for the creation of the critical faculties required for the recognition and distinction of reliable sources from those which should lead to the “suspension of disbelief” which Eyre (1996: 416) demands. This point becomes increasingly relevant when realizing that Thucydides represented a watershed in human thought. Thus, from a methodological standpoint, the legitimacy of the entire concept of even thinking about these issues in these terms is open to doubt as being highly anachronistic.

Furthermore, there is a methodological problem in dating and classifying texts. Like Quack, I have argued that there are sound historical and chronological reasons for assigning the teaching of Ptahhotep to the third millennium (Warburton 2004). And in the same fashion, I would argue that the story of Sinuhe has an historical basis, as Posener and others once assumed. Obviously, if Assmann states that it is generally agreed that Sinuhe is fictive and Junge (2003) likewise assumes that it is generally agreed that Ptahhotep should be assigned to the Middle Kingdom, it follows that Sinuhe is fictive and Ptahhotep likewise. And it likewise follows that those who think otherwise have to justify their cases. However, it is apparently not generally recognized that the logic in supporting either argument is roughly circular, with the result that our understanding of literature is determined by our understanding of the literature. Fortunately, Assmann (1999: 14-15) has noted that while both Baines and Eyre consider Wenamun to be fictive, their interpretations of the text are diametrically opposed. It follows that the spectrum of legitimate debate is reduced to different types of fiction – but that this has by no means led to unity.

14 Baines & Eyre (in Baines 2007: 67) seem to suggest a maximum of 1% literacy for the Old Kingdom and an increase thereafter. Yet in their interpretation of their calculation for Deir el-Medineh (in Baines 2007: 94) they nevertheless seem to maintain the same figure for the New Kingdom as that proposed for the Old Kingdom.

History, Myth, Propaganda

However, my goal here is not to debate details but rather to find the absolute greatest possible degree of certainty, and to take that at face value. Yet the realities of the sources and our means of dealing with them are an indication about the nature of history, since history is literature in the service of analytical simplicity. In this vein, “myth” also reflects “analytical simplicity”, and the types of myths with which we are familiar – Jeanne d’Arc, Dracula – imply an historical kernel (or at least some core which can be accepted as a kind of truth) with more fiction than history. Thus, analytical history – which always involves some invention – is not that far from “myth”: it is the historian who decides which sources and events are relevant and which events are related to which. And also how to present them.

And, of course, recent decades have witnessed a transformation in our understanding of history. For some time, it was hoped that we could get the real story by just trying to be more accurate. Today, it is assumed that standards were different at different times and that we are gradually beginning to sharpen our own understanding about critical use of sources. However, many contemporary historians are increasingly consciously recognizing that their own accounts cannot be objective, being influenced by both the spirit of the times and the sources available. And among the spirits of the times is the concept of “critical theory” which actually allows one to disregard historical and scientific facts in the interest of building a theory which is socially useful – and has the appearance of being founded on historical givens (but is not).¹⁵

Of course this has a double significance. Firstly, it corresponds to the contemporary dogma, that “All history is contemporary”, and means that

15 This is usually associated with radical thinkers of the left or right, but I would argue that it also dominates mainstream thinkers dealing with even such simple issues as democracy and economics, where empirical facts and history are disregarded in formulating a programme which appears to be superficially reasonable, but actually lacks empirical support. Thus it is argued that the “laws of economics” must be respected, even though no one has ever identified them in a scientifically satisfying fashion. Likewise it is urged that democracy must be respected even where it leads to results that are fundamentally unjust according to the standards of its supporters.

contemporary history of the current age and of past ages is even less "objective" than it strived to be even half a century ago. The imperfections of earlier history which strived for – but failed to achieve – Ranke's ideal obviously contributed to this line. However, secondly – and for us far more importantly – it is clear that this sense of history is one that would have appealed to Hatshepsut and Ramesses II.

Yet, in the *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* (II: 566), Beckerath remarks, "Im alten Ägypten gab es ebensowenig wie in den übrigen Hochkulturen eine Geschichtsschreibung im abendländischen Sinn." And, using Moers's criteria – designed to support the claim that the Egyptians had fictional literature – one would inevitably find that Thucydides would be recognized as an imaginative writer, but disqualified as an historian. The same would inevitably apply to Plutarch, Tacitus, Gibbon, Niebuhr, Droysen and all those figures who created the Western concept of history. Thus, modern analysis of Western historians would discredit those historians, and the most advanced contemporary historians would even reject the methods used by more conservative thinkers.

And yet it is this concept which allegedly separates us from the Egyptians. Thus, there is a problem with history. However, I would argue that the problem lies on another level. It is not merely that there were no Western historians in Ancient Egypt. This is a fact which must be accepted. However, the far graver problem is rather that there are so few Western historians interested in Ancient Egypt. One of the problems is that struggling with philological problems is not the best preparation for writing history.

Writing history was the concept behind the first hundred pages of Warburton (2001) where I tried to write an account of what happened in Western Syria over the two millennia of the Bronze Age. The philologist Rainey (2004) criticised details of my treatment of the Megiddo campaign of Thutmose III, the northern campaign of Amenhotep II, the campaigns of Seti I, Ramesses II and Merneptah. However, even if Rainey is absolutely correct in his interpretation of each engagement (both in terms of the course of events, and in terms of judging that I was wrong and that the error was as grave he suggests), in no case does this actually change the geographical or political context of the events. It was

this political argument which was the purpose of the book,¹⁶ as the first half was written as a preface to the second half where I tried to argue that warfare had a purpose related to the state (and again, Warburton 2006a).

My goal as historian and social scientist was to demonstrate that there were military campaigns which had political results, and Rainey can hardly demonstrate that this was not the case. In fact Rainey suggests in the case of Amarna that I misunderstood the political context: meaning that there was a political context to understand. He then argues that my lack of understanding of events means that one "must be leery of Warburton's deductions"¹⁷ – which are centred exclusively on the claim that warfare and politics went hand in hand in the ancient world.

Thus, the book was not written to solve the conundrums of individual Egyptian campaigns in Western Asia, but rather to counter the wide-spread assumption among historians and social scientists that politics in the sense of states and warfare did not play a role until after Westphalia. Certainly Rainey could hardly claim that his philological criticism did anything except confirm my basic thesis (although admittedly he did not notice this).

By contrast, following the mood of social scientists, the Egyptologist Spalinger (2004) attempts to persuade us that warfare had no purpose in Ancient Egypt, and dealing with philological detail has very different premises, but treats the same period as Warburton (2001). Thus, from my standpoint the book has significant structural weaknesses in terms of history and warfare (Warburton 2006b), yet the book seems to have had a positive reception among philologists.

Thus in the current state of affairs, there is little place for an understanding of history in Ancient Egypt. Above, we noted that most of the authorities are sceptical about the way we can use the documents, and here we have an example which suggests that in fact philologists are unwilling to recognize the possibility of history, either because warfare had no purpose (Spalinger), or because the individual details overwhelm the capacity to get a larger picture (Rainey). Thus, the problem is not that there were no historians in Ancient Egypt, but rather that there

16 Warburton 2001: XI-XII, 207.

17 Rainey 2004: 557.

are few modern historians of Ancient Egypt, and one of the reasons is doubtless the difficulty of combining philology and history. Obviously, the philologist Rainey would be horrified at the idea of myth-making, which is what the historian McNeill suggests is a part of writing history. (In Rainey's case, the idea of myth-making would probably be doubly or triply sacrilegious in terms of piety and philology, and thus he can be excused – but this does not let off the others who assume that myth must be religious fiction rather than analytical history).

Having myself made a go at it, and suffered the consequences, I am convinced that the true essence of Western historical writing is ultimately distinguished by a synthetic view: Thucydides may have been unreliable, but he provided an image of what he thought happened. He sought out the sources, drew his conclusions about the nature of events, and composed a coherent account. To some degree – with the addition of footnotes – this has been the ideal of Western historians ever since.

By contrast – being intent on recording every story – the Chinese historian Sima Qian did not attempt a synthesis. Thucydides, however, was intent on his synthesis, and only interested in collecting the stories to provide the basis for that. Yet, obviously, one could suggest that Thutmosis III, Seti I, Ramesses II and Ramesses III thought that they were providing a synthesis. Yet they were hardly relying on an extensive examination of the sources. Their narratives were not only intended to be self-serving, but also part of their performances as historical individuals. By contrast, at least slightly disinterested analytical history with the object of a synthesis based upon critical use of the sources would be the hallmark of the West. Thus, in this sense, historical “myths” are actually far closer to history in our Western sense than might be superficially apparent. For in fact, in Ancient Egypt we have two different versions: that of the actors, and that of those who came later. The ruthlessness with which the unqualified were weeded out (Hatshepsut and Akhenaten come to mind) means that the myth was a form of synthetic history.

Thus, in trying to weigh the literary character of our historical texts, Eyre (1996) presents a far more balanced view than Baines, for a good deal of our history is based on myths of various kinds. Thus, in Egyptology, the problem is actually quite the

opposite of that proposed by Baines. Our problem is distinguishing myth from history, since most of the Egyptian historical texts seem to include some fiction, and the Egyptian myths are widely assumed to reflect political history. The fact that the Egyptians did not endeavour to master Western historical methods and objectives does not hinder Egyptologists from nevertheless trying to write history. But for the most part, it is difficult to write history with our sources, firstly because of the inadequate source material and secondly because of the constraints of the philological method (cf. supra).

However, rather than despair, one can also view the situation from the opposite angle, of trying to see what myth did and can do: how myths could make history. In this paper we have two separate approaches to a single goal. The object is to explore the invention of history. The method relies on (a) discussing the concept of history as against fiction in Egyptology, and (b) exploring just how “history” works. These are in fact two completely different issues, but issues which are intimately related in understanding how history is made.

Of course, it is clear that there were no impartial historians – at least to our knowledge – recording Egyptian history in the Bronze Age in the fashion begun in the Greek world by Thucydides. However, we must frankly admit that if the propaganda statements of the American governments on the successes of their wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan are not complete fiction, then Ramesses II would at least have recognized the genre (especially about conveniently blaming catastrophic strategic errors on intelligence failures).

Obviously, it would be difficult to claim that US government bureaucrats do not live in a world without a different understanding of history. After all, Thucydides died more than two millennia ago, and historical studies have made enormous strides since then. Instead of stressing that the Egyptians did not have an understanding of history, it would be far more relevant to pose the question of what American bureaucrats actually think when they write their fictional accounts of the episodes of the “War on Terror”. One could enquire, “who do they think they are fooling?”. And unfortunately, the answer would be “An awful lot of people.”.

And in this answer, we have the key to understanding the necessary procedures. It is not necessarily a

lack of critical capacities, but apathy and faith in leadership. The vast majority of Americans have as little interest in Iraq as the vast majority of Egyptians did in Qadesh. This indifference alone provides the state with a formidable weapon. Obviously, states have an interest in their propaganda machines because they serve some purpose, and reaching that goal is facilitated by lack of interest more than by a lack of scepticism. Furthermore, the resources of the states are such that they can actually not only dictate the events, but also decide about the course of the debates, forcing critics to respond to the states' versions rather than presenting a very different version. One reason for this is the incapacity of the ordinary member of the public to understand a lengthy and detailed argument which appears irrelevant to the question at hand. Thus, the well-informed sceptic finds that his resources may be sufficient, but the available attention span is not.¹⁸

18 A classic example of this is the stress on Sayyid Qutb in the 9/11 Commission Report (<http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>). By linking Osama bin Ladin to Sayyid Qutb (9/11 Commission Report, pp. 51-52) and Islamic fundamentalism, the authorities could argue a case for the 9/11 events being a reflection of Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, demonstrating that Islam and the West were on a collision course. This was used to stress this ideological aspect of the conflict.

And this also allowed the authors to direct attention away from another aspect. Significantly, the same report also notes that Khalid Shaykh Muhammad was motivated far more by the injustice of the loss of Palestine and American support of Israel (as was Atta; 9/11 Commission Report, pp. 147, 154, 162, 484 n.185) than by the conflict between Islam and the West. Since it was Muhammad who was the mastermind responsible for the execution of the 9/11 attacks and Atta who was the most important actor in their success, it follows that Palestine and American support for Israel should have figured more prominently in the report. However it does not – since the Commission followed the lead of linking the charismatic ideological leader Osama bin Ladin and the inspiration of Sayyid Qutb, rather than those who were actually responsible for the success of the attacks.

The report only touches on the history of Sayyid Qutb's thought, but not on the history of the Palestine problem. Thus, the roots of the Palestine problem are dismissed and the problem is merely described as reflecting an Arab impression of a possible pro-Israeli bias in American foreign policy. Obviously, this avoided the necessity of dealing with Palestine.

Thus, when in the closing days of the Bush administration, Israel waged war against the Palestinians in Gaza, the supine American congress announced its virtually unanimous support for Israel. Yet, it is forgotten that the condition of the Balfour Declaration – which was the basis for Jewish

immigration into Palestine and thus the existence of the state of Israel – was that “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine” (q.v. Balfour Declaration, *Wikipedia*). Obviously, the war against Hamas in Gaza cannot possibly be understood in any other fashion than deliberately menacing the indigenous population of Palestine. It is Israeli policy which violates the conditions which allowed the state to come into existence. Furthermore, it is known that the UN partition of Palestine was extremely unjust, assigning land to the Jewish state which leally belonged to the Palestinians, thus placing the Palestinians at a legal disadvantage from the outset (q.v. United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine, British Mandate in Palestine, *Wikipedia*).

However, this has been effectively forgotten, just as have been the decades during which Israel denied that there was a Palestinian people while inconsistently claiming that the refugees fled voluntarily (for obviously people who were not there could not have fled, either voluntarily or otherwise). It is now known that there was a Palestinian people and that the exodus was encouraged by both massacres and deliberate threats (for some views, cf., e.g., Ilan Pappé, *Wikipedia*). Doubts have been expressed about details of the work of the “New Historians”, but the willingness of Israel to wage war against Gaza should suffice to dispel any doubts. Thus one can confirm that the Israelis are quite willing to inflict significant casualties on the Palestinians, and it is superfluous to discuss the alleged atrocities of 1948 since the conduct of 2009 suffices to demonstrate the mindset.

And one can confirm that the actual masterminds of the 9/11 attacks were motivated by the injustice of the loss of Palestine and American support for Israel. Rather than arguing this, however, the 9/11 Commission report takes another line which avoids Palestine, and merely touches on American support for Israel. Thus – even though all of this is well known and freely available on the web – history and truth are neglected.

Thus – try explaining all the consequences and conditions of the Balfour Declaration and the UN partition of Palestine, and the actual planning and execution of the 9/11 attacks to explain the context of 9/11 to your average American who is convinced that Israel is an outpost of democracy in the Middle East (not to mention someone who believes that the land of Israel was awarded to the Jewish people by the same god whom the Christians worship and created the world in seven days). Obviously, explaining all of these details and their implications will be a complete waste of time far exceeding the patience of the ordinary person who has no interest in the matter. In fact, this is extremely complicated. But directing attention to Sayyid Qutb and the *Clash of Civilizations* is not the honest way out of the complications.

However, even the simpler version also deserves attention. In his final address, President Bush stressed that there had not been “another” attack on American soil since 9/11. This deserves at least two answers. (1) The 9/11 commission report revealed that information about the preparations for the attack was available and that the Bush administration refused to deal with it. Thus, the success of the attack was a confirmation of incompetence of the highest degree. The lack of a second attack is slightly more complicated: (2)

If, in our age, the sceptics are shoved to the wayside by a propaganda onslaught of the states, then it is hardly surprising that the propaganda machines of Antiquity will have even more powerful, and potentially overwhelmingly persuasive. It is, of course, possible that most people never paid any heed to what the rulers were doing and saying (and certainly the Egyptians will never have paid as much attention to the matter as modern philologists have), and thus they won more or less out of apathy. Nevertheless, their victory in the battle for the control of minds must be taken for granted, as indifference leads to the victory of the more powerful speaker.

As scholars we must examine the sources – just as modern historians will pore over the official documents of the modern age to reach their conclusions about the “real” course of events. However we should not be under any illusions about the nature of the narrative which actually prevails after the historians have made their efforts. It will still be determined by other non-intellectual forces, mainly those backed by power in political and economic form. This remains as true in our world as in antiquity. There is a difference in the intent of the various authors which must be recognized. Historians are aiming at something quite different from the bureaucrats trying to justify or conceal their blunders. Thus, obviously, it is not merely a question of a different psychological understanding of history, but rather the positions and interests of the authors.

Obviously, by sending Americans to Iraq and Afghanistan, the US made it quite simple for thousands of Americans to be killed (more than at the WTC) without having to make another strike on American soil – and it also created a hatred of the US in the Muslim world which will never be overcome. Thus, Bush’s claims are completely empty. And yet somehow they will be repeated more than any criticism.

This is where state propaganda is spectacularly successful. Even in a world full of competent historians and journalists, critics can never match the propaganda machines of the successful empires. Obviously, military force and success has a key role in deciding the terms of the debate, a point which is not irrelevant to those who view the Egyptian inscriptions critically. It should not be forgotten that Ramesses II assured Hattushili that his propaganda portrayed the correct version of the battle of Qadesh (Edel 1994, I: 59, 67) whereas Hattushili knew perfectly well what had happened, but due to the Assyrian pressure could not make war on Egypt avenge the untruths of Ramesses. Thus, the lies of Ramesses prevailed – and still dominate the discussion. However, the same goes in the modern world.

Yet ultimately, historical truth is overwhelmed and history simplified in a fashion whereby those who eventually gained the upper hand are able to trace their superiority back to historical antecedents. In this form, the “myths” of Abraham Lincoln and George Washington serve to buttress a “war on terror” which provides historical support, not because of the ancestors but because of their successors. This process necessarily involves twists and turns and oversimplifications – but it is actually erected on an historical kernel.

Thus, rather than trying to understand the motives of the various actors, we can turn to the matter at hand.

The State

The Egyptian state was the most important element in the lives of the Bronze Age Egyptians. The kings fought to extend the borders of the state, the bureaucrats owed their lives to the services required to maintain the state, and the individual Egyptians of the lowest classes probably had their most memorable (if unpleasant) experiences in paying taxes and performing involuntary services for that state. Regardless of the rhetoric, the state was a vast improvement on anything that had existed before it, and far superior to the areas beyond its frontiers. Aside from its very real geographical and bureaucratic form, the state was itself also an ideological entity. The security and organization of the Egyptian state separated the Egyptians from the barbarism of the outside world. A legendary unification of the lands dominated the Manichaean thought structures of the Egyptians: aside from the concepts of Upper & Lower Egypt, of Red Land & Black Land, there was also the defining concept of “Before & After (the unification)”.

Today, we know that for the Egyptians this conceptual unification was both an actual historical event (based on the label from Abydos)¹⁹ and also a transcendental one (as commemorated on the Narmer Palette).²⁰ Yet we have only the icons, and not the myth – or at least not myth in the sense that we

¹⁹ Wengrow 2006: 205.

²⁰ Wengrow 2006: 42-43.

prefer to understand it as a “traditional narrative”.²¹ Yet I would argue that we not only possess a great deal more than meets the eye, but also that the very form of the transmission can be viewed as fundamentally informative. If my results are to be understood largely in a sense foreseen by Hornung decades ago, I would merely argue that I see this in a positive rather than a negative light.

I assume that the essential features of the Egyptian religion in its formative phases were dominated by the ideology of the state, and not by a concern for the gods. Over the course of the centuries, the role of the gods was to buttress the kingship, but initially, the kings were not concerned with mere piety. We can see quite clearly that the kings of the First Dynasty made clear distinctions in their attentions to the gods: the shrine at Elephantine was utterly neglected²² while the Palermo Stone clearly shows that some selected gods profited from repeated royal devotion.²³ The gods served as a backdrop for the kings – and the most important architecture of the era was certainly destined for the kings rather than the gods. This attitude prevailed long after the age of the stone temples began with Dyn. XII: ever after, the most prominent decoration would celebrate the king, as we can see on the pylons at Edfu and Philae. However, over time, even the neglected Satet shrine at Elephantine received royal support in the form of stone.

Yet, it is the kings who are celebrated, perhaps serving the state, perhaps serving the gods, but nevertheless as kings. This is clear enough from both the architectural and philological evidence – and it can be taken at face value. The nuggets of information from this early age are quite clear on this level. By contrast, the role of the gods is far from clear, and during the entire Pharaonic period, the amount of information about the gods did not augment a great deal, while our data on kings increases astronomically.

Furthermore, there is another detail in what does appear in the later texts. Aside from their paucity, one of the most striking things about those mythical texts from Bronze Age Egypt which have been recognized is their banality. The Tale of Isis the Trickster is merely

a parody on epithets, and the Contendings of Horus and Seth is but a satire on those two gods, as well as on the contending and incompatible traditions. The details of the story which can be traced back further in time are far from edifying.²⁴ The Tale of the Destruction of Humanity (or the Celestial Cow) is the most profound, but the motif was probably borrowed from Mesopotamia.²⁵ As preserved, it presents a cowardly and indecisive Sun-god who refused responsibility for his acts and likewise refused to follow through on his own decisions.

Thus these gods are nothing when set beside the kings of Bronze Age Egypt. And, of course, the explanation that the Sun-god was not up to the requirements of the kingship not only gave the kings their legitimacy, but also demonstrated that they were superior to the greatest god. If one takes Baines’s (1996, 1999) observations at face value – that it is difficult to distinguish between myth and fiction, and that myths are tales about gods – then one must seek the reason for which the Egyptians chose to ridicule their gods when they had the full freedom of fiction to express their adoration. (The answer to this rhetorical question is of course that the kings came out looking much better this way).

The powerful message of the Osiris system was that kingship is based upon legitimate inheritance. Yet taking this at face value would mean denying the rest of the evidence which implies that the kingship demands effort on the part of the officeholder. Thus, the office brought burdens which not even the Sun-god was capable of meeting. And against all expectations, also seemingly enemies.²⁶ As Assmann (1970, etc.) has shown, in the New Kingdom, the concept of legitimacy was linked to extensive challenges and expectations.

These expectations were expressed in many ways. The most obvious is that of Sesostris III who states that any descendent of his who does not perform as he expects is not a descendent of his.²⁷ The origins of this thought pattern do not lie in the

21 See, e.g., Graf, “Myth”, *Brill’s New Pauly* = “Mythos” *Der Neue Pauly*.

22 Wilkinson 1999: 279.

23 Wilkinson 2000b.

24 I refer here to the homosexual episode in the Lahun papyri, cf. Collier & Quirke 2004: 20-21 (lines 1,9-2,8).

25 Hornung 1982.

26 Cf. the teaching of Amenemhat, Helck 1969: 15-31.

27 *Lesestücke* 84, 15-16. It is striking that Sesostris III was so farsighted as to understand what would happen. In this fashion, he places the blame squarely on the later rulers for failing to meet his standards, while neglecting the possibility that he might have been demanding too much.

depths of Prehistory, but rather in the unification of the two lands, the creation of Egypt. This was the defining moment of Egyptian history.

Narmer & Ahmose

Narmer as Menes, First King of Egypt

We can follow the lists of Egyptian names back to Narmer/Menes. And with Narmer/Menes the line stops: in the Turin Royal Canon and in Seti's kinglist at Abydos, Narmer/Menes ends the anonymity of prehistory, and begins the pageant of history.

Narmer's transcendent feat in conquering the Delta depicted on the Narmer Palette²⁸ was an event recorded on a label.²⁹ Thus, the ceremonial palette and the label confirm both the deed and the author. The sealing³⁰ clearly demonstrates the identity of Narmer as the first king of the First Dynasty in the contemporary historical memory of the Egyptians. Narmer's name is at the start of the list of kings of Dyn. I on a sealing dating from after Dyn. I. This lists a series of kings in the correct chronological sequence, with no rulers omitted between Narmer and Qa'a. It follows from this list that these were considered to have been the kings of the First Dynasty.³¹ This demonstrates that Narmer was the first king of Dyn. I, and viewed as such.

Furthermore, the Nagada label indicates that the diadem name of a king earlier than Aha was *mn*, and thus that Menes was the predecessor of Aha who was the same Narmer visible on the sealing.³² This means that Narmer is Menes. Thus, Hornung's concept that Meni was invented in the New Kingdom to provide a "founder" is no longer necessary. Instead, one can argue the opposite, namely that the name *mnj* may have given the meaning to the word *mn*, "to last, endure"; and *mn*, *mn.w* was probably borrowed and thus lived on in Greek (μνάομαι, μνήμη) – and in our modern word *monument*.

Narmer as the first prototypical king

Thus, on the one hand, I stress Narmer as Menes and *mnj*. But, I also stress that in the Bronze Age

Egyptian records, there is (a) no memory of Osiris, nor is there (b) any indication of a memory of those kings who have been recovered by archaeological research. In this sense, Namer was the prototypical Horus. Significantly, each of the kings of Egypt was a Horus – and we can follow the line back to the first Horus – Narmer – of whom the Egyptians maintained a memory.

Historically speaking, "Horus" is simply the title of the king – used by Narmer and all of his successors. Aside from the recognized kings of Egypt, there are possibly three other individuals who used the "Horus" title: *Jrj*, *K3* and Scorpion. Kaiser's claim for Scorpion having also been Horus may be farfetched. In itself, the concept of a "Horus-Scorpion" is a *non-sequitor*: logically, the predator is either Horus or Scorpion and not both; although he dismisses the others, even the readings of the "scorpion" on those documents which Kaiser has argued named "Horus-Scorpion" are not beyond doubt.³³

Like the alleged, "Horus-Scorpion", *Jrj* is not beyond doubt.³⁴ *K3/shm* is a more difficult case. However, the positions of the alleged tombs of *Jrj* and *K3* along with that of Narmer – exactly parallel to that of Aha, and following the same double chambered configuration as Narmer's – raises the possibility that one of them is merely the *ka* of Narmer (who at that time would then have been the only "Horus") and that the other belonged either to a retainer or to a similar type of manifestation. There could thus be an argument for the alleged King *K3* to have been literally merely the double or soul of Narmer. As the alleged tombs of both are right beside those of Narmer, on the edge of the B-cemetery at Abydos, they could be viewed as a prototype of the multi-chambered tomb of Aha. Yet, even if they existed, then they certainly left no significant traces of their existence, and they deserve to have been forgotten when compared to Scorpion and Narmer.

Scorpion

The most extraordinary aspect of this arbitrary beginning with Narmer is thus that it effectively excludes Scorpion. Regardless of all the debate (of

28 Wengrow 2006: 42.

29 Wengrow 2006: 205.

30 Wengrow 2006: 132, lower sealing

31 Wengrow 2006: 132, lower sealing.

32 Wengrow 2006: 129, bottom label, top register right.

33 Kaiser & Dreyer 1982: 263-267, with notes u), v), w) and x). Kaiser (Kaiser & Dreyer 1982: 67, n. x)) only remarks that *for the others* "scheint grundsätzliche Reserve angebracht zu sein".

34 Wilkinson 1993.

which more anon), it is clear that the king we know as Scorpion from the Hierakonpolis macehead was truly a revolutionary figure, in terms of art, war and propaganda. There is no other Predynastic king who left comparable traces of his existence – and yet the transcendental act of creating Egypt is assigned to Narmer and the Egyptians assigned Scorpion to the rubbish pits of history.

It is customary for archaeologists to unearth rubbish heaps and devote themselves to endless arguments about the value of that rubbish. Unfortunately most of the time, it really is rubbish (and thus also the debates). In this case, however, the archaeologists have actually rescued Scorpion from the shadows of Prehistory and also from the seemingly underserved oblivion to which the Egyptians consigned him. And this discovery poses a fundamental question about the Egyptian understanding of history: “Why Narmer?”.

Ahmoose

And this leads to the issue of our second king: Ahmoose. Seti’s kinglist at Abydos begins with Narmer/Menes and then proceeds to enumerate a long list – including many insignificant kings – through to the end of the Old Kingdom, logically omitting the casualties of the First Intermediate Period to continue with Monthuhotep II through to the end of Dyn. XII, and then omitting even the major kings of Dyn. XIII only to resume with Ahmoose.

Here we can see a myth of kingship which is very much the “celebration” in which Hornung rejoiced – but it is also history, not fiction.³⁵ This has nothing to do with fiction. Yet the icons of this myth mean that significant heroes – in this case, e.g., Scorpion, Neferhotep I ((III)) of Dyn. XIII, and even Kamose the brother of Ahmoose – with real reigns and real accomplishments are dismissed in the interest of an ideological programme.

If, however, rather than taking myths as tales about gods or fiction, but instead we approach “myth” as meaning a kind of analytical history expressed as a “traditional narrative” which legitimizes authority, then the situation changes radically. Because obviously Narmer’s was a transcendental feat which provided the precondition

for the deeds which followed. Ahmoose passed the test, but Kamose – like Scorpion – did not. Narmer was the one defined as being the “measure of all things”. It is an oversimplification, but exactly the type of oversimplification which appeals to the human mind. In this sense, it is history as popularly understood.

In this sense, Narmer actually defined history, determining what it was.

Myth as history

The easiest means of illustrating the confusion created by confounding “historical” and “religious” myths can be seen in Seti’s kinglist at Abydos.³⁶ It is in a temple dedicated to Osiris, and it begins with Menes. Neither Horus nor Seth appear in it, let alone Osiris. In this sense, we can see that the myth of Osiris, Horus and Seth belongs to a very different domain: it is “fiction”. This fictional “myth of the state”³⁷ later became a major part of the myth of Ancient Egypt. But it was a deliberate and conscious fiction invented in the middle of the third millennium BC in a very religious context. In the fully fictional version, there was a dispute about the inheritance of an existing kingship. This fictional myth emerged long after the actual events.

In the historical myth, which was based upon actual events, kingship and history began simultaneously with Narmer/Menes, and we can see Menes/Narmer appearing as a kind of “icon”. Whereas there is no trace of Osiris in the archaeological record, Narmer/Menes is quite visible in the archaeological record. Menes might be assigned to the domain of the secular myth, but there was a real event and a real person at the core of the story, as in the types of myth with which we are familiar in the aura surrounding, e.g., Napoléon or Ivan the Terrible. The difference is, however, that the Egyptians did not embellish the historical myth of Narmer; instead, they embellished the fictive myth of Osiris. And this brings us to the issue of history, for this is an historical myth – and the most powerful myth dominating Ancient Egypt. In terms of Egypt it is ultimately far more important than the Osiris myth – as it has survived to dominate

35 And thus differs from Baines’s (1999: 32) concern with distinguishing myth and fiction.

36 Obviously, this draws upon the inspiration of Kemp 2006: 6-69.

37 Kemp 2006: 69

our understanding of Egyptian history as a human phenomenon whereas Osiris is merely relegated to the fringe of the history of religions.

In this sense, the first issue is part of a fundamental problem relating to our understanding of the texts. Fortunately, there is a means of coming closer, and in this case, our particular interest concerns two leaders – Narmer/Menes and Ahmose – who obviously managed to “change history”, and who have thus managed to enter the annals of history, both in their society and in ours. And yet, neither of them was really the sole author of the epoch-changing events with which their names are linked.³⁸ Nor is either of them well documented, to put it mildly.

Significant for us is this other historical “myth of the state” which links Narmer and Ahmose. As we have noted, with the Narmer palette, the labels, the tombs and the sealings, we can actually begin to establish that Narmer was unlike any of his predecessors – or any of his followers. He was a transcendental figure. And obviously, a transcendental figure is invented. It is easier to celebrate Caesar if we forget Marius, and it is easier to celebrate Narmer if we forget Scorpion. The key is that the Egyptians made a conscious decision to forget Scorpion, and did so successfully. By contrast, for the ordinary citizens of Europe, Marius and Julian simply do not form part of the historical landscape – although we have historical documents to indicate that both were extraordinary. It is collectively easier to concentrate on Caesar and Constantine. This is the reality of the way history is made: even where historical sources are available, it is simplified.

This is not the place to delve into the question of what we really could know with certainty about Marius and Julian, as the historical sources at our disposal are not necessarily above suspicion. Thus, Western historical traditions would not really aid us here. Nevertheless, many Western scholars would probably abandon their lives to dissecting the sources to demonstrate, e.g., that Caesar was overrated, or Marius a relative unknown. This is familiar and requires no discussion.

However, I will remark that two of the greatest kings who ever lived – Naram-Sin of Agade³⁹ and Shamshi-Adad of Assyria – are probably completely

unknown to legions of scholars who call themselves historians (let alone to the general public). Those scholars who – consciously or unconsciously – think that they can understand history in ignorant bliss, unaware of Narmer, Naram-Sin, Shamsi-Adad, and Ahmose, probably vastly outnumber those who have even the vaguest of ideas about who they were and what they did. And this is the fundamental issue for the understanding of history. To some extent, Narmer and Naram-Sin will have decided the understanding of history which dominated until Braudel and the *Annales* school proposed another version.

Thus their deeds were not only historical, but they also moulded what history would be for several thousand years. I would be the first to admit that we do not know a lot about any of these kings. But anyone with a grasp of geography can appreciate that their accomplishments went beyond the ordinary. And the ancients preserved them as “icons” in the sense of virtually unparalleled rulers. They were also celebrated in the other kinds of myth whereby fiction was consciously created – but the basis of that myth was their real-life achievements.

We have difficulties coming to terms with this, because we would like to have “more data”, and because of our scepticism. Unfortunately, we don’t have data – but that is no reason to deny the import of the data we have. Thus the existence of such hints as are in our sources should not be neglected out of hand. We should not try to denigrate what we have, but rather to exploit it, fully realizing that the sources are not only far from faultless, but also biased.

It is our conception of these kings that assigns them a role. And we are obviously following the Egyptians here: But is it wrong? Or is it useful? I would argue that we have no choice for two reasons. Firstly, because this was how the Egyptians understood history, and secondly because to a considerable extent, this determined how history would be understood for the following millennia. And, I would argue that in the case of Narmer, we can clearly confirm that despite the paucity of his monuments, the Egyptians clearly placed Narmer/Menes in a very special category, even in their own concept of history. And significantly, the Egyptians dismissed Scorpion.

And the evidence can actually be read. We would argue that Narmer and Ahmose represented fundamentally different phenomena and that their

³⁸ As amply shown by, e.g., Wilkinson 2000a.

³⁹ For an historian’s understanding of Naram-Sin, cf. Westenholz 1999.

cases can be used not only to illuminate history, but also the link between “myth” and “history” in several different ways. It is an often repeated commonplace that we have no original Egyptian stories about the great developments in the history of the Egyptian state. However, we also know that the Egyptians used brief references to pass on complicated messages, pictorial or literary icons, as Assmann terms them.

From Seti’s kinglist at Abydos, we can read that (1) all of the rulers before Menes were omitted, that (2) all women rulers were omitted, that (3) all foreigners were omitted, that (4) all rulers who did not rule all of Egypt were omitted, and that (5) those who did not worship the gods of Egypt were omitted. Thus, for the understanding reader, the kinglist at Abydos proves that Menes, Mentuhotep II and Ahmose were each understood to be the founder of a new era. Thus, for us they are icons; the Egyptians of the Ramesside Era may have known more (but even they may not have known as much as we think we know today). What is important is that for the Egyptians, each began an epoch, with Menes/Narmer standing at the very beginning.

This has a two-fold importance. On the one hand, we have the historical level which we can follow or create. Narmer is associated with the transcendental feat of unifying Egypt. He may have been the first person to have been deliberately immortalized in all of human history. His predecessors were forgotten, and he was pushed to the fore – at that time and later. Ahmose is associated with the feat of liberating Egypt from foreign occupation, expelling or defeating the Hyksos and thus re-unifying Egypt under native rule. But for the Egyptians, there was a clear consciousness that he was by no means alone, as the story of Seqenenre reveals. Yet Narmer remained paramount.

On the other hand, we have the fictional level. The episodes concerning Horus and Seth were never consolidated into some kind of myth; the icons were merely collected, and the two gods separated from the icons became the pillars of the state and the cosmos, respectively. Horus avenges the murder of his father and is recognized as the legitimate king. From the bow of the bark, Seth wards off the enemy of the Sun-god every night. The different tales about the two had no importance for Egyptian society, and they had no bearing on the Egyptian memory

of the historical events surrounding the creation of the state, or even the creation of the world. Neither appears in the kinglist at Abydos, and neither appears on the Palermo stone. Neither appears as a specific individual historical figure.

Historically, Narmer provided the building block for the world’s first territorial nation state, and Ahmose set the foundations for what would become the most powerful empire of the Bronze Age. And yet, Narmer would be unthinkable without Scorpion and Ahmose’s feat would have been relegated to oblivion had he not been followed by Thutmose III and Seti I. Whatever Narmer/Menes and Ahmose might actually have accomplished, their actual deeds can only properly be understood in a larger historical context.

And that “larger context” immediately relativizes their own actual actions to the extent that they appear to be over-rated. Yet it is not the Egyptians who forced us to accept this. It is our own choice to elaborate on the “icons” the Egyptians bequeathed to us. And this we have done with chronological charts and history books which elaborate details about a world for which there is little data – and what data there is suggests that the situation was far more complicated than in our simplified version. In debunking this version, we are actually debunking our own work. But we are also denying the Egyptian understanding of history – and there they left us in no doubt about their conceptions.

To understand the true implications of this, we must recall that the original “unification” of Egypt was probably a political event of limited import at the time. Narmer does not have a tomb at Negada or Hierakonpolis or Saqqara; he does not even have another complex at Abydos. As is suitable for a figure on the margin of the transcendent, Narmer’s is not a world of monumental architecture. Yet the world that he brought about assured that his successors lived in such a world. Thus, it was not during his time that the changes took place, but rather thereafter, even if it was only decades later. Yet, it must be conceded that within decades of Narmer’s death, changes become visible across Egypt, and a new political organization appears. This organization eventually becomes a

major actor in its own right – incomparable to any human institution that had previously existed.⁴⁰

What the Egyptian sources clearly maintain is that this state – created by Narmer and Scorpion – became the standard by which Egyptian rulers would be measured and by which other states would be judged. However, they simplified things. This mythical aura surrounding the event of the unification leads to the creation of the myth which then takes on a reality of its own – and itself then determines conceptions of history. It is only in this context that Narmer becomes interesting, because something lasting and unique was created.

Scorpion, Narmer & Aha

In order to grasp exactly what happened, we need to take a closer look at part of the Egyptological record, as this touches a peculiar aspect of history, myth and fiction.

The End of Prehistory

As scholars of the Ancient Orient, we know that writing was invented in the Ancient Orient and from that moment onwards, history has gradually begun to encroach on prehistory. Obviously scholars of Mesopotamia can point to a long legacy

of very gradual developments which eventually reached their pinnacle in the texts of the late Uruk period in Mesopotamia. These developments are undisputed.⁴¹

However, it is suggested that writing was spontaneously created in Egypt at roughly the same time (i.e., independently of Mesopotamian influence and without any of the nuisance of millennia of preparation stretching from the PPNB through the Middle Uruk period, as is documented for the Near East). At first sight, this looks rather improbable, but somehow the idea seems to have become acceptable.

The idea that writing may have been developed independently in Egypt depends upon assuming that the written sources from Abydos Umm el-Qaab tomb U-j date to several centuries before the other written sources of Egypt. This is done by separating the owner of U-j from the King Scorpion known from the macehead from Hierakonpolis, and assuming that the owner of tomb U-j was another Scorpion.

There is no question of the fact a king Scorpion was a major ruler and one of the immediate predecessors of Narmer. Yet no tomb belonging to this king Scorpion has ever been identified. However, the tomb U-j at Abydos has been assigned to another Scorpion, and dated two centuries earlier. The basis for this is the following dates:⁴²

Laboratory Sample	Tomb	C-14 bp	Cal BC	Mid-point cal BC
Hd 13057-12953	U-j (Scorpion)	4470±30	3310-3045	3178
Hd 13057-12953	U-j (Scorpion)	4470±30	3180-3160	3170
Hd 13057-12953	U-j (Scorpion)	4470±30	3120-3030	3075
Hd 13058-12954	U-j (Scorpion)	4595±25	3375-3335	3355
Hd 13054-12926	B 19 (Aha)	4535±40	3350-3110	3230
Hd 13055-12947	B 19 (Aha)	4505±20	3335-3105	3230

⁴⁰ There is no possible comparison with Mesopotamia which was the base of the only system which was marginally older. Firstly, the Uruk system faltered and collapsed after only a few centuries. Secondly, the rest of Mesopotamian history is marked by division. And finally, there was no Mesopotamian memory of the heroic deeds which created the most extraordinary society mankind had known until that time. By contrast, Egypt instead is marked by an amazing continuity lasting for millennia and involving a territorial expansion rather than a reduction – and it traces that continuity back to a moment which has been clearly supported by archaeological evidence.

Egypt was most assuredly the first territorial nation-state in human history, maintaining its identity for the two millennia of the Bronze Age.

Virtually all of the proposed dates for Abydos Tomb U-j lie after 3200 cal BC, with one exception. And the dates for the tomb of Aha are before 3200 cal BC. Thus two laboratory samples provide dates for the tomb of Aha (B19) which would be older than the majority of dates for U-j. Since the C-14 dates are the same, under ordinary circumstances, the tomb U-j would be dated to roughly the same time as the beginning of Dyn. I. This is a matter of relative dates

⁴¹ Cf. Englund 1998 for a masterly summary.

⁴² Dreyer 1998: 18, supplemented by Görsdorf et al. 1998: 173.

which completely disregards the historical dates for Dyn. I (to which we will return in an instant). However, one single sample offers an earlier date for U-j. On this basis, Dreyer somehow concludes that there is a gap of 150 years between the tomb of Aha and U-j, and thus proposes that the owner of the tomb cannot be the Scorpion of the Scorpion mace head from Hierakonpolis.

However, I would argue that the C-14 dates virtually assure that Abydos Tomb U-j belongs to the same Scorpion who was responsible for the macehead found at Hierakonpolis, and who was among the immediate predecessors of Narmer. This follows because the C-14 dates imply that the owner of Abydos Tomb U-j was virtually a contemporary of Narmer and did not live a century or so earlier.

The reason that this tomb U-j is not assigned to the Scorpion of the Scorpion mace head is that Dreyer argues that the C-14 dates place it centuries earlier. However, this is not the case. The C-14 dates for tomb U-j lie in virtually the same range as those of the tombs of the First Dynasty, and in fact one of them appears to be almost identical in range to one of those for the tomb of the last king of the dynasty.⁴³

Furthermore, typological arguments have been advanced to suggest that more than two centuries should be introduced to separate these dates, i.e. that identical C-14 dates are separated by several centuries.⁴⁴ However, the centrepiece of these arguments is the Kaiser Series Nagada IIIa2-IIIb1-IIIb2-IIIc1-IIIc2-IIIc3 – yet Hendrickx has collapsed IIIb1-IIIc1 into a single unit, IIIB.⁴⁵ It thus follows that the typological developments do not need to be stretched out over several centuries, but can be compacted. Furthermore, the palettes reveal that the period around the beginning of Dyn. I was an era of rapid artistic change, and thus even if there were significant changes, these cannot be used to argue a long gradual development. The era of Scorpion and Narmer was an era of change. Thus, the C-14 dates can be taken at face value, and Abydos Tomb U-j can be assigned to the same Scorpion as the mace head, either the immediate predecessor of Narmer or one of his immediate predecessors.

There is, however, a second difficulty. Virtually all of the calibrated dates for the First Dynasty lie in the

last half of the fourth millennium BC,⁴⁶ but the actual calendar dates for the First Dynasty lie in the first quarter of the third millennium.⁴⁷ To understand the situation, one needs merely look at the C-14 dates for the third millennium Egyptian kings,⁴⁸ and compare these with the historical dates.⁴⁹ It is quite evident that the dates do overlap, but the tendency is for even the calibrated C-14 dates of the third millennium to tend to be assigned an older average age than that suggested by the historical dates.

Yet the historical sources simply do not allow the kings of Dyn. IV to be shifted back to match the calibrated C-14 dates. Thus, the Prehistorians do not insist on the point, as both Wengrow (2006: 276) and Midant-Reynes (2003: 386) generally accept the historical dates for the third millennium kings. Dreyer (1998: 18) likewise agrees that the C-14 dates seem to be off by a century or a century and a half. However, in order to bridge the gap between the two systems, Wengrow allows 300 years for Dyn. I (3100-2800) whereas Hornung et al. (2006: 490) have less than two centuries.

Thus, it is generally recognized that the dates for the third millennium Egyptian kings should be left there, rather than placing them in the third quarter of the fourth millennium, as would be implied by the calibrated C-14 dates. The same applies to Mesopotamia where the C-14 dates for the Late Uruk Period lie in the middle of the fourth millennium, but the period is assigned to the end of the fourth millennium.⁵⁰

Yet it is somehow assumed that, exceptionally, Abydos Tomb U-j should be dated by using the absolute age of the earliest exceptional calibrated C-14 date. In general, it is assumed that the dating of archaeological contexts should follow the youngest date, and thus this procedure is already remarkable. Furthermore, there are some remarkable consequences of this procedure. The most important is the issue of relative chronology. As noted – despite the calibrated C-14 dates which place it in the middle of the fourth millennium – the Late Uruk Period is shifted to the last quarter of the fourth millennium as

46 Görzsdorf et al. 1998: 173.

47 Hornung et al. 2006: 490.

48 Hornung et al. 2006: 344-345.

49 Hornung et al. 2006: 490-491.

50 Midant-Reynes 2003: 387; less accurate is Wengrow 2006: 275, but the reasoning is still the same.

43 Görzsdorf et al. 1998: 173; cf. Hd-12953 and Hd-12907

44 Görzsdorf et al. 1998: 174.

45 Wengrow 2006: 272.

the First Dynasty is shifted to the first quarter of the third millennium. Yet this procedure is not followed for Abydos tomb U-j.

Thus, Midant-Reynes (2003: 387) places Abydos Tomb U-j towards the beginning of the Late Uruk Period. However, the calibrated C-14 dates from Uruk demonstrate that even the one – exceptional – early C-14 date for Abydos Tomb U-j is comparatively younger than the dates for Temple C at Uruk.⁵¹ Thus, Abydos Tomb U-j cannot – by definition – antedate the Late Uruk period. The C-14 dates for Abydos Tomb U-j not only postdate the Late Uruk Period, but they also place it in line with those of the First Dynasty.

Yet, the Egyptological consensus nevertheless allows one single exceptionally early C-14 date for Abydos Tomb U-j to date the earliest use of writing in Egypt. This single date is then used to argue for the earlier date – and also to argue that writing was invented independently in Egypt. However, even this exceptional date is comparatively younger than the dates for Temple C at Uruk where the earliest written texts from Mesopotamia were found.⁵² Thus, in relative terms (based upon samples tested by the same laboratory at Heidelberg), Abydos Tomb U-j is unquestionably younger than the earliest textual sources for Mesopotamia.

However, Englund also notes,

Tablets and other debris were used in the leveling and other architectural elements, including wall fill and the bricks themselves [...]⁵³

Thus the earliest written documents in Mesopotamia antedated the building in whose foundations they were found, whereas the writing samples in Abydos tomb U-j will presumably have been roughly contemporary with the youngest C-14 date for the tomb. Therefore, in terms of the relative span of the C-14 dates, the writing samples which belonged to Abydos tomb U-j must postdate the invention of writing in Mesopotamia by centuries.

The erroneous premise upon which Dreyer constructs his chronology is based upon using the unique early C-14 date for Tomb U-j at Abydos, but disregarding the C-14 dates for Temple C at Uruk, and taking the conventional dates for the Uruk period. Writing was invented in Mesopotamia and Dreyer

has invented a gap of two centuries – during which even Dreyer must admit that writing was not used in Egypt – to support his claim that the Scorpion of Abydos Tomb U-j is not the only king Scorpion known in Egypt, and that writing was independently invented in Egypt.

Thus, Dreyer's entire argument is either pure fiction or very dubious.⁵⁴ In any case, it is not the logical conclusion which one would ordinarily draw from the available evidence. However, I will assume that Dreyer is not deliberately writing fiction (although he does seem to demand that we "suspend disbelief") but rather that he is doing this in the interests of protecting the reputation of Ancient Egypt as a cradle of civilization. Thus, he has a programme which excuses him.

This should shed light on the issue of the nature of myth and propaganda, and perhaps also their role in the creation of what later became literary fiction in the sense of deliberate intention with a view to inviting readers to "suspend disbelief". I stress that historical "myth-making" comes close to interpreting events, whereas the fictional myth-making of religion involves invention in the service of a programme. The two are quite different, and the endeavour of the historian (as, e.g., in Hornung 1965) is to follow the events, whereas the creation of myth in service of a programme is quite different. However, I will not continue in that vein here – merely leaving it to the readers to digest the fundamental importance of the mistaken dating of Abydos Tomb U-j and the claims about the independent invention of writing in Egypt.

Kaiser and Dreyer have also perpetrated another error (originally espoused most fervently by Emery in order to boost the claims to the importance of the tombs in his Saqqara cemetery) in suggesting that Aha was Menes. However, the label⁵⁵ now confirms that the Narmer Palette⁵⁶ affirmed an event of some kind, confirming both deed and author. The sealing⁵⁷ clearly demonstrates the identity of Narmer as the first king of the First Dynasty, which is necessarily further supported by the Nagada label⁵⁸ indicating

51 Boehmer et al. 1993: 64.

52 Boehmer et al. 1993: 64.

53 Englund 1998: 40.

54 Cf. also Breyer 2002.

55 Wengrow 2006: 205.

56 Wengrow 2006: 42.

57 Wengrow 2006: 132, lower sealing.

58 Wengrow 2006: 129, bottom label, top register right.

that the diadem name of a king earlier than Aha was mn.

We need not discuss just why Kaiser and Dreyer go to such lengths to perpetuate a deliberate untruth while denying the import of the evidence (a good deal of which they themselves discovered!). Again, there is no reason to insinuate that they really are asking us to “suspend disbelief”. But it means that their work is being driven by a programme which involves an idiosyncratic understanding of Egyptian history, and depends upon misreading both laboratory data and the available documentation.

I note that the repercussions are quite serious for the understanding of history. Firstly, it means that events happened quite rapidly during the reigns of Scorpion and Narmer and that Scorpion was clearly exploiting writing in his propaganda programme. Yet, nevertheless, Scorpion was consigned to Prehistory and forgotten whereas Narmer was remembered. The use of the same crowns by Narmer and Scorpion means that the external trappings of kingship had been established, but Narmer’s hereditary kingship differed fundamentally from Scorpion’s rule.

The fact that Narmer was recognized as having this role does not mean that Scorpion was insignificant, but it does mean that for the Egyptians, there was a difference between the two. Yet Baines dismisses this historical myth a fiction.⁵⁹ And at the same time remarks of Narmer

The principal change of his period seems rather to be that economic growth was harnessed both in monuments [...] and also in far-flung and archaeologically visible networks.⁶⁰

In fact, however, there is no evidence of monumental royal architecture from the reign of Narmer. Ultimately Baines contradicts himself and the evidence several times on this issue, at one moment stating that the reign was characterized by monumental royal architecture (whereas it was not), and then stating that the Early Dynastic temple construction expenses were not that great,⁶¹ but then again that they were considerable.⁶² Furthermore, one should note that the trade networks which meant that Narmer’s name has been identified at sites in Palestine were the outcome of a century-long development which

59 Baines 1995b: 146.

60 Baines 1995b : 124.

61 Baines 1995b: 140.

62 Baines 1995b: 126, 129.

was abandoned immediately after his reign. Thus, one could more compellingly argue that Narmer put an end to the campaigns of conquest which allowed the administrative control of imports to be relinquished. This would explain the Narmer Palette as commemorating the end of the conquests, and also the fact that the extensive Predynastic trade networks were abandoned immediately thereafter. He was the first of the First Dynasty and began the traditions which really did initiate monumental architecture, bureaucracy and a nation-state. Yet Baines concludes that

Recent evidence confirms that he was seen as an ancestor [...], but he was probably the last of his line and not a great conqueror⁶³

In fact, the evidence points clearly in the opposite direction, demonstrating that he was viewed as a conqueror and his reign clearly marked the beginning of the new era. Thus Baines has actually changed our understanding of the documentation by proposing that like his successors, Narmer and the final Predynastic leaders were associated with monumental architecture.⁶⁴ Narmer was most certainly not: his tomb is notably disappointing (and would remain so, even if we also assign him the alleged tombs of *Jrj* and *K3/shm*) and he has no complexes anywhere else in Abydos or elsewhere in the land. In this sense, Baines’s entire suggestion – that the later kingship with its monumental architecture – was characteristic of the original Predynastic form is explicitly contradicted by the evidence. The same applies to his suggestion of “general royal ideology” as it is Baines who is projecting this onto the evidence, rather than the evidence which suggests this interpretation. From prehistory, we can see an élite ideology, but not necessarily a royal ideology. And obviously what rendered the state possible was the transformation of the role of the ruler and the élite. Whereas the role of the ruler was elevated, and the possibilities of the élite circumscribed (as hereditary kingship excluded competition for the top place), both rulers and élite

63 Baines 1995b: 124.

64 Baines (1995b: 105–106); Baines also misleads students in suggesting that the successors of Narmer likewise left their traces abroad. In fact, the ties with the external world were broken shortly after Narmer, who was effectively maintaining the traditions of his predecessors, and not determining a policy for his successors.

gained from the wealth generated by the emerging state. This can be clearly seen in the evolution of private élite tombs from the late Prehistoric period and the contrast with those of Dyn. I-III at Saqqara and Helwan, quite aside from the momentum which continued through to Dyn. VI. Obviously, Baines's concentration of royal monumental architecture neglects these major private tombs. And thus the entire approach takes us further and further from the evidence.

Part of Baines's method seems to involve diminishing the value of the Egyptian evidence and another part seems to rely on stressing anthropological theory to justify neglecting the accomplishments of the Egyptian state. This allows him to dismiss those scholars who perceive that rituals developed with the kingship, and to suggest that

Comparative studies, however, suggest that kingship, like many other human institutions, is always strongly ritualized and conventionalized.⁶⁵

How comparative studies based on material dating to millennia after the creation of the Egyptian kingship can demonstrate this is far from clear. Yet for Baines, it follows that one can project later developments back to the origins:

By the time it was fully formed, kingship probably had the cross-culturally normal character of a generally hereditary form of autocratic rule in a complex society that has strong elements of divine sanction and legitimation.⁶⁶

It is unclear how he comes to these conclusions, but it is certainly not on the basis of the evidence. Methodologically, the Egyptian evidence should be far more important than any comparative studies, since one can actually follow the development of Egyptian kingship in Egyptian history, and such an approach would in fact support the traditional interpretation. Yet, like Dreyer and Kaiser, Baines prefers to mix his own fiction into the presentation rather than to follow the data. Again, one can find a reasonable motive for this procedure: where Dreyer is stressing the originality of Egypt by attempting to assign it an independent invention of writing, Baines is attempting a sophisticated academic argument

aimed at introducing social science theory into Egyptology.

Baines (1995a, 1995b, 1996, 1999, 2008) is thus confusing the issue fundamentally by projecting our impressions of the later kingship into the evidence of the Predynastic rulers and that of Narmer/Menes himself. In assigning Predynastic rulers monumental architecture and general royal ideology, the result is ideological fiction (rather than literary history). Rather than sifting the sources to find what we can, Baines simply projects anthropological theory to obscure the little historical information we actually possess with the result that accomplishments are denied.

Significant is that in the work of Baines, Dreyer and Kaiser, the programmatic endeavour is dependent upon the introduction of unnecessary fictional elements into the narrative. Thus, justly renowned and distinguished Egyptologists are suggesting that we should follow tracks which are effectively the opposite of what would logically follow from the facts – in effect demanding that we must “suspend disbelief” if we are to follow them. Yet, in contrast to the generally held views of fiction demanding a suspension of disbelief, many Egyptologists follow them. Even though there is a track to follow and a tale to tell.

The transformation of power

As we noted at the outset, it is the job of the historian to celebrate or to debunk the mythical versions of history. But, the precondition for this is an understanding of history. Obviously, philologists and anthropologists have different conceptions of history than historians. However, there can be little doubt about the fact that the history of states is about the understanding of power. And it is on this level that recognizing the nature of Narmer's accomplishments and reign are of the greatest importance. He not only created the core of what later became the nation-state, but that nation-state also certainly contributed to the creation of what became history. At the centre of the system lay what became kingship, based upon co-opting the élite into the hierarchy of the growing state while denying them the chance of kingship. This meant a division of power as the kings relied on the bureaucratic élite to maintain the state. Thus

65 Baines 1995: 146.

66 Baines 2008: 842.

for the millennia that followed, history would be dominated by the nation-state and the kingship.

Neglecting the fact that states are unknown before Narmer is a risky enterprise, as is neglecting the speed with which developments took place at this dawn of history. In this sense, using anthropological theory to argue that kingship existed before Narmer is as unhealthy as dating the Abydos Tomb U-j to centuries before Narmer. Once it is realized that within a few generations Egypt moved from being a primitive backwater to becoming a territorial nation-state led by kings and an élite who indulged in monumental architecture, one can appreciate the true nature of history in the sense of transcendental change. For most of the last five thousand years, the state has been the key actor in history.

However, I stress that there has been a change whereby ideology in the form of religion or faith in conceptual ideas (nationalism, liberalism, communism) has also come to play a key role. Peculiarly, Egypt offers a particularly useful means of examining these developments because the historical events which created the state and its kingship demonstrably preceded the religious concepts which were later used to justify kingship.

That the Egyptians were conscious of this is clear in Seti's temple at Abydos where Meni appears in the first position in the kinglist and Osiris, Horus and Seth are nowhere to be found in the historical account. They are, however, to be found in the chapels on the other side of the temple. Since it is now clear that the tales of Horus, Seth and Osiris were all bound together at a point in time long after the creation of the state, one should not confuse the ideology retrospectively created to justify kingship and the state with the origins of that state. To understand this, it may help to recall that the time-span separating Narmer's creation of the state from the Pyramid Texts is roughly equivalent to the span separating Alexander from Constantine. The different justifications for kingship in the eastern Mediterranean during those long centuries between Darius and Justinian do not change the fact that the state was the principle element, and the ideology the justification for the power of the kingship. In Egypt, it meant that there were centuries to develop and consolidate the ideology in the fashion which we can recognize in Seti's temple, where religion and

history are separated. Yet, even here, the principal actor was the state.

States can be understood in terms of both local history and myths, as well as long term history. It is only once the patterns have become established that such self-evident developments take on a metaphysical existence. The conflict between nationalism and religion was transformed by the creation of universal religions. Christianity effectively changed the Egyptian identity and separated it from its mythic past – and thus opened the doors for Islam. Obviously, Narmer, Ahmose, Seti I, Assarheddon, Cambyses, Alexander, Constantine, Muhammad, and others were decisive for these events. And yet there are other trends.

In historical terms, the enduring success of Islam after the Arab Conquest of Byzantine Egypt was a revolution. For the birth of religion as an independent – supra national – phenomenon in itself created the basis for the Arab conquest, and in effect rendered acceptable what had been unacceptable in the case of the Hyksos. The power of the Bronze Age Egyptian state had been based on the divine nature of the political power of the rulers. During the ensuing centuries of foreign occupation, the Egyptian religion was gradually adapted to the circumstances whereby the religion was gradually disassociated from the state.⁶⁷ The leadership continued to maintain the fiction, as at the temple of Horus at Edfu, but in popular terms, the religion had long been disassociated from the state when Christianity and Islam were endorsed by the Egyptians. These two religions represented a transformation whereby the religion took possession of the state. The preconditions for this development were the creation of the state, and the creation of the ideological justification for the kingship which eventually gave birth to religion. Although there have been changes, it is clear that the state dominates the terms of the discourse, and that the discourse can have an impact on the nature of the state. However, one should not confuse the superficial character of the various justifications with the actual nature of the state. States are about political power, and political power was created in the Bronze Age – before the justifications.

⁶⁷ This is clearly recognized in the last paragraph of Rößler-Köhler 1999: 386.

That is our major theme. For the context, we argue that the relationship between *Ereignisgeschichte* and the *longue durée* can only be understood by recognizing both events and underlying patterns. Obviously, there are long term patterns which render certain developments impossible and facilitate others. Today, it can be viewed as inevitable that the Hyksos would be expelled by a local Egyptian dynasty, and that the successors of those who defeated the Hyksos would expand into Western Asia. It can be viewed as equally inevitable that the Arab conquest would lead to the Arabisation and Islamization of the land. Yet none of these events was inevitable – any more than that the creation of the state would have such far-reaching consequences.

In each case, an event came to symbolize an epoch and the ensuing icon or myth itself had a decisive influence on what followed. The birth of the nation-state created a new threshold for ambition, and that would drive Egyptian kingship throughout the Bronze Age, which was an age of competing empires. The Iron Age was the era of successive empires as the Babylonians followed the Assyrians, and the Macedonians seized the mantle of the Persians, which eventually fell to Rome.

The transformation of ideology into religion came with the appearance of the universal religions, and this changed the nature of the state, the nature of religion – and also the nature of history. The appeal of the universal religions lies in the stress on the individual, and thus this cognitive change inevitably took history along a path which gradually separated different strands of history, relegating the kings and the states to a subsidiary role while the lives of ordinary people became more important. Thus the change in the nature of religion had an impact on the history of the states and the understanding of religion. Ironically, as the lives of ordinary people became more important, their faith became less important, and the attention of historians gradually shifted to economic and social concerns (which are the obsession of most ordinary people). In this context, religion developed a completely different character, independent of the state and kingship. The origins of this development can be traced in the history of the Osiris myth which became a part of a popular religion at precisely the time that the Egyptians were abandoning their faith in the kingship. Yet, the Osiris tradition had been invented

precisely in order to justify that very kingship. It is only in recognizing these various trends that we can appreciate historical developments and avoid making anachronistic projections onto historical data.

Conclusions

In Seti's kinglist at Abydos, we have a series of royal names which serve as icons to signify historical events. How we read these icons depends upon our understanding. We should not forget what the Egyptians themselves have bequeathed to us, and can easily cite Baines here:

Narratives about the foundations of the state and other "heroic" phases or episodes are not attested in native Egyptian writings.⁶⁸

The Egyptians left us lists and icons. We can read the text as being xenophobic & misogynistic, selective & misleading – or patriotic & inspiring. However, that is what we read into the text. This is our way of looking at history, making it contemporary.

However, our interpretation does not negate the fact that the text itself is merely a proclamation about a way of viewing history synthetically. In this fashion, the myth of the foundation of the state by Menes/Narmer offers a means of interpreting history as a reflection of that deed and that state. The annals of the Palermo Stone reveal that the Egyptians realized that Menes/Narmer had predecessors – however, it is clear that the transcendental deed which established the state effectively made history possible. And in this sense, the Egyptians invented history. This remains true to this day. History is only possible in those states which made a point of recording it.

In the Narmer Palette we have an ideological summary of a transcendental event. It is not an historical text, nor does it claim to be one. Thus, the Egyptians have bequeathed to us a mass of historical evidence. Some of it in the form of icons which we must interpret, and some in the form of propaganda records. They clearly distinguished – as can be seen in the kinglist in Seti's temple in Abydos – between the fictional myth of Osiris and the historical myth of Narmer/Menes. The fictional myth of Osiris was

68 Baines 1996: 361.

related to the concept of hereditary kingship and emerged long after the powerful kingship.

By contrast, the historical myth of the founding fathers merely involved a simplification. At the time of his conquest, Narmer was clearly recognized as that king who had completed the unification of the land, and thus he was identified as the founder. Those kings who either maintained or extended his accomplishments (such as Sesostris III) or were lucky enough to have found themselves in identical circumstances – such as Ahmose – were then recognized as being his descendents. Those kings who failed the test – no matter how great, such as Kamose – were forgotten. And those kings who were more fortunate in having been born at the right time were rewarded with a place amidst the successors of Narmer.

And it is in this context that the campaigns of the Thebans take on meaning, for they were thus based on this myth. Yet, the initial reconquest of the North was but one step on the way to the creation of an Empire which transformed the entire political understanding of the world. During Dyns. XVIII and XIX Egypt was transformed from a minor peripheral actor in the international scene to a major player. A great deal of the growth of the Egyptian empire was the result of historical accidents which the Pharaohs were able to exploit, and not their own doing. Yet, at the beginning of the Ramesside era, the original founding by Menes was still viewed as the origin of these developments. That is the significance of the kinglist at Abydos.

This is a conception of history with which we can identify. Thus, in fact, the actual situation is quite different from that of trying to understand what the Egyptians thought. However, to grasp this, we must first of all deal with what Egyptologists have insinuated into the record, and judge that by the standards of Western historical understanding. Then, we can look at what the Egyptians themselves said.

Ultimately, in recognizing that the Egyptians left no grand narratives, Baines realizes that the Egyptians were not purveying fiction. It is Baines himself who is accusing them of purveying fiction and then adding to their alleged fiction. There are two elements here: one comes from the Study of Religion (*Religionswissenschaft*), and the other comes from Anthropology. Using the concept of

myth in the sense of *Religionswissenschaft* means that it must be dismissed as fiction. Unfortunately, however, the kinglist in Abydos demonstrates that by the late New Kingdom, the Egyptians did not confuse religion and history. The kinglist provides a version of history which is closer to the other “historical” interpretation of myth I noted at the outset.

The other problem here is the introduction of anthropology into history. The history of Ancient Egypt was a true tale with heroes, villains and idiots. It was a true historical drama of panoramic dimensions and it is not an anthropological example where we should look for parallels to understand developments. Particular events and people can determine when things change. But these changes need not be related to the individuals alone. There is a *longue durée* which determines what is possible. Recognizing these developments and people is only possible after the events have taken place. History plays a role in shrouding these events in a mythical aura, and thus it is only when “history” is written that specific events can be assigned their true “historical” significance – which is, however, effectively mythical.

Unfortunately Egyptologists unwittingly play a villainous role in these developments by trying to seek the origins of Egyptian kingship in Prehistory – with the *longue durée*, e.g. Baines, Midant-Reynes, Wengrow, Wilkinson, etc. – and are thus completely oblivious to the fact that Narmer and Scorpion effectively changed history. Our job is not to denigrate Narmer or to place Scorpion on a pedestal, but rather to sift the existing remains to try and figure out not only what happened, but also to understand what the Egyptians might have thought. Certainly the evidence indicates that it was the state which formed the kingship as we know it in historical terms, and thus arguing for continuity with Prehistory depends upon some wilful interpretations of the actual evidence and neglect of fundamental issues. However, the situation was quite complicated. It is not our job to confuse all this with anthropological literature, and to use the concept of myth drawn from the Study of Religion to denigrate the ancient Egyptians since their sources clearly point in a different direction.

Rather than drawing on the definition of myth proposed in the Study of Religion, one might be better placed to suggest that in Egypt we can trace

a genealogical path from the myth of the state and kingship based on historical sources which preceded the era of the fictive myths characterizing religion. In the same sense, one can justifiably propose that the concept of kingship diffused from Egypt to neighbouring regions, and thus that the “cross-cultural” traits of kingship can actually be traced back to the Egyptian model. Rather than advocating a static kingship, one can take the sources at face value and appreciate that state and kingship grew together.

We have absolutely no evidence whatsoever that the Egyptian kings could have understood our concept of “historical truth” and of critical treatment of sources. However, most governments – up to the present day – suffer from the same lack of objectivity. What they had was an understanding of historical developments, and they organised these developments into a coherent pattern. And this we could understand – or at least we could if the Egyptologists did not insist on embellishing the record with fictional elements which distract attention from the pageant of Egyptian history. And then making all sorts of unjustified complaints about the Egyptian records. In fact, the Egyptians expressed themselves quite tersely and it is up to us to read the material – but not merely to stress shortcomings which we perceive, and then increase the confusion by adding our own intellectual shortcomings. Instead, we should take the recorded material at face value – as propaganda – and sift it. However, we should carefully distinguish between the historical myth of the state which was based on events and the fictional myth of the state which was based on theological invention. And we will also have to be careful about recognizing where colleagues have taken liberties in interpreting the evidence. And this is one of the problems with the Western understanding of history, for each of us – in this case, Baines, Dreyer, Kaiser, Warburton – has our own understanding of the synthesis necessary for interpreting Egyptian history in a Western fashion. And the pitfalls are evident.

The Egyptians left us quite enough to produce history *wie es gewesen*. It is for us to provide our synthesis. But more importantly, we should be in awe of the fact that the Egyptians defined what history would be for most of the five thousand years of recorded history. What they had was a coherent

narrative whereby each later development could be related to the origins, and the origins related to the later developments. This is still the goal of historians working today.

References

Traditional sources

- Assmann, J. 1970. *Der König als Sonnenpriester*. Glückstadt: Abhandlungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Kairo, Ägyptologische Reihe 7.
- Assmann, J. 1999. “Literatur zwischen Kult und Politik,” in Assmann & Blumenthal 1999: 3-22.
- Assmann, J. & E. Blumenthal (eds.). 1999. *Literatur und Politik im pharaonischen und ptolemäischen Ägypten*. Cairo: Bibliothéque d’Etudes 127.
- Baines, J. 1995a. “Kingship, Definition of Culture and Legitimation,” in O’Connor & Silverman 1995, pp. 3-47.
- Baines, J. 1995b. “Origins of Egyptian Kingship,” in O’Connor & Silverman 1995, pp. 95-156.
- Baines, J. 1996. “Myth and Literature,” in Loprieno 1996a: 361-377.
- Baines, J. 1999. “Prehistories of Literature: Performance, Fiction, Myth,” in Moers 1999: 17-41.
- Baines, J. 2007. *Visual and Written Culture in Ancient Egypt*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Baines, J. 2008. “Birth of Writing and Kingship: Introduction,” in *Egypt at its Origins 2*, pp. 841-849.
- Breyer, F. M. K. 2002. “Die Schriftzeugnisse des Prädynastischen Königsgrabes U-j in Umm el-Qaab: Versuch einer Neuinterpretation,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 88: 53-65.
- Boehmer, R., G. Dreyer & B. Kromer. 1993. “Einige 14C frühzeitliche Datierungen aus Abydos und Uruk,” *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 49: 63-68.
- Collier, M. & S. Quirke. 2004. *The UCL Lahun Papyri: Religious, Literary, Legal, Mathematical and Medical*. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports International Series 1209.
- Capagno, M. 2004. “In the Beginning was the war: conflict and the emergence of the Egyptian state,” in S. Hendrickx et al. (eds.), *Egypt at its Origins 1* (Louvain: Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 138), pp. 689-703.
- Dreyer, G. 1998. *Umm el-Qaab I. Das Prädynastische Königsgrab U-j und seine frühen Schriftzeugnisse*. Mainz: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Archäologische Veröffentlichungen 86.

- Edel, E. 1994. Die ägyptische-hethitische Korrespondenz. 2 vols. Opladen: Abhandlungen der Rheinisch-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Egypt at its Origins 2 = Midant-Reynes & Tristant 2008.
- Englund, R. K. 1998. "Texts from the Late Uruk Period," in J. Bauer, R. K. Englund & M. Krebernick, Mesopotamien: Späturuk-Zeit und Frühdynastische Zeit (Freiburg: Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 160/1 = Annäherungen 1), pp. 15-233.
- Eyre, Ch. J. 1996. "Is Egyptian historical literature 'historical' or 'literary?'," in Loprieno 1996a: 415-433.
- Görsdorf, J., G. Dreyer & U. Hartung. 1998. "¹⁴C Dating Results of the Archaic Royal Necropolis Umm el-Qaab at Abydos," Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo 54: 169-175.
- Grandet, P. 1994. Le Papyrus Harris I (BM 9999). 3 vols. Cairo: Bibliothèque d'Etude 109.
- Hartmann, A. & M. Neumann (eds.). 2004. Mythen Europas: Antike. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Helck, W. 1969. Der Text der „Lehre Amenemhets I. für seinen Sohn“. Wiesbaden: Kleine Ägyptische Texte.
- Hornung, E. 1965. Grundzüge der ägyptischen Geschichte. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Hornung, E. 1966. Geschichte als Fest. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Hornung, E. 1982. Der Ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh. Fribourg: Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 46.
- Hornung, E., R. Krauss & D. A. Warburton (eds.). 2006. Ancient Egyptian Chronology. Leiden: Handbuch der Orientalistik/Handbook of Oriental Studies I: 83.
- Junge, F. 2003. Die Lehre Ptahhoteps und die Tugenden der Ägyptischen Welt. Fribourg: Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 193.
- Kaiser, W & G. Dreyer. 1982. Umm al-Qaab: Nachuntersuchungen im frühzeitlichen Königsfriedhof 2. Vorbericht," Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo 38: 211-269.
- Loprieno, A. 1988. Topos und Mimesis. Wiesbaden: Ägyptologische Abhandlungen 48.
- Loprieno, A. (ed.). 1996a. Ancient Egyptian Literature. Leiden: Probleme der Ägyptologie 10.
- Loprieno, A. 1996b. "Defining Egyptian Literature," in Loprieno 1996a: 39-58.
- McCutcheon, R. T. 2000. "Myth," in W. Braun & R. T. McCutcheon (eds.), Guide to the Study of Religion (London: Cassell), pp. 190-208.
- McNeill, W. 1986. Mythistory and other essays. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Midant-Reynes, B. 2003. Aux origines de l'Égypte. Paris: Fayard.
- Midant-Reynes, B. & Y. Tristant (eds.). 2008. Egypt at its Origins 2. Louvain: Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 172.
- Milfull, I. & M. Neumann (eds.). 2004. Mythen Europas: Mittelalter. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Moers, G. (ed.). 1999a. Definitely: Egyptian Literature. Göttingen: Lingua Aegyptia Studia Monographica 2.
- Moers, G. 1999b. "Fiktionalität und Intertextualität als Parameter ägyptologischer Literaturwissenschaft," in Assmann & Blumenthal 1999: 37-52.
- Moers, G. 2001. Fingierte Welten in der ägyptischen Literatur des 2. Jahrtausends v. Chr. Leiden: Probleme der Ägyptologie 19.
- Neumann, M. 2004ff. Mythen Europas: Schlüsselfiguren der Imagination. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- O'Connor, D. & D. P. Silverman (eds.). 1995. Ancient Egyptian Kingship. Leiden: Probleme der Ägyptologie 9.
- Rainey, A. F. 2004. Review of Warburton 2001. In Bibliotheca Orientalis 61: 554-558.
- Rößler-Köhler, U. 1991. Individuelle Haltungen zum Ägyptischen Königtum der Spätzeit. Wiesbaden: Göttinger Orientforschungen IV. Reihe Ägypten 21.
- Schenkel, W. 2006. "Ist 'Mythos' ein griechisches Lehnwort aus dem Ägyptischen?," in G. Moers et al. (eds.), *jn.t ḏr:w* Festschrift für Friedrich Junge (Göttingen: Lingua Aegyptia), II: 547-580.
- Sievertsen, U. 2008. "Niched Architecture in Early Mesopotamia and Early Egypt," in Egypt at its Origins 2, pp. 783-805.
- Spalinger, A. 2004. War in Ancient Egypt: the New Kingdom. New Malven: Blackwell Publishing.
- Warburton, D. A. 2001. Egypt and the Near East: Politics in the Bronze Age. Neuchatel: Recherches et Publications.
- Warburton, D. A. 2004. Review of Junge 2003. In Discussions in Egyptology 59: 99-104.
- Warburton, D. A. 2006a. "Aspects of War and Warfare in Western Philosophy and History," in T. Otto et al. (eds.), Warfare and Society (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press), pp. 37-55.
- Warburton, D. A. 2006b. Review of Spalinger 2004. In Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 49: 260-267.

- Wengrow, D. 2006. *The Archaeology of Early Egypt*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Westenholz, A. 1999. "The Old Akkadian Period: History and Culture," in W. Sallaberger & A. Westenholz, *Mesopotamien: Akkade-Zeit und Ur III-Zeit* (Fribourg: Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 160/3, = Annäherungen 3), pp. 17-117.
- Wilkinson, T. A. H. 1993. "The Identification of Tomb B1 at Abydos: refuting the existence of a king *Ro/*Iry-Hor," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 79: 241-243.
- Wilkinson, T. A. H. 1999. *Early Dynastic Egypt*. London: Routledge.
- Wilkinson, T. A. H. 2000a. "Political Unification: Towards a Reconstruction," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 56: 377-395.
- Wilkinson, T. A. H. 2000b. *Royal Annals of Egypt*. London: Studies in Egyptology.

websites

- 9/11 Commission Report: <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>
- Economist Poll Data <http://www.economist.com/media/pdf/FullPollData.pdf>

