

Tracing the Origins of the Ancient Egyptian Cattle Cult

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Studies of ancient Egyptian religion have examined texts for evidence of cattle worship, but the picture given by the texts is incomplete. Mortuary patterns, ceremonial buildings, grave goods, ceramics and other remains also contain evidence of cattle worship and underline its importance to early Egypt. The recently discovered cattle tumuli at Nabta Playa in the Western Desert are identified here as a potential source of evidence on the origins of cattle worship in the ancient Egyptian belief system.

Climate and Society in the Palaeolithic and Neolithic of North-East Africa

Throughout the past 250,000 years, North-East Africa has known alternating periods of dry (arid) and moist (pluvial) climatic conditions. During the rainy periods, the eastern Sahara was covered with grassy plains inhabited by wild herd animals, including wild cattle, *Bos primigenius*. Whenever the climate changed to arid, only pools and oases remained and the archaeological and faunal visibility of both humans and herds becomes very scarce.

A northward shift of the African monsoons around 10,000 B.C. saw the end of the Late Palaeolithic¹ period of hyper-aridity², and the Western Desert once again became inhabited. We will focus on one site in that Desert, the Nabta Playa basin situated 100 kilometres west of Abu Simbel, and on simultaneous developments in the Nile Valley.

The 10th millennium B.C. yields the evidence of the earliest sediments within the Nabta Playa basin. The first occupational layers are dated to 8,800 B.C. As summarised in *Table 1*, the El Adam industry continued until 7,800 B.C. (Wendorf 1998, pers. comm.). The excavators, Fred Wendorf and Romauld Schild, noted that the artefacts which they assigned to this industry display flaking techniques similar to the near-contemporary Nile Valley Arkinian industry (Hoffman 1979: 102; Wendorf & Schild 1998: 100). On this basis, the first inhabitants of Nabta Playa have been hypothesised to be immigrants from the Nile Valley (Wendorf et al. 1985: 135).

It was during the arid post-El Nabta/Al Jerar phase that the present topography of Sites E-75-8, E-94-2 and E-94-1 was formed (Wendorf et al. 2001: 650), and Nabta Playa became depopulated. The Late Neolithic groups which subsequently re-occupied Nabta Playa, from Saharan areas as yet undetermined, display signs of social systems with a degree of organisational control not present in contemporary Nile Valley communities (Malville et al. 1998: 488).

The desiccation of the Western Desert over the course of the Late Neolithic occurred about the same time as a drop in the flood levels of the Nile River, as documented by Hassan (1988: 146-47). The tempered, black-topped and red-slipped pottery found in the Late Neolithic layers of Nabta Playa sites E-75-8 and E-94-2 are similar to that of the Badarians in the Nile Valley (Nelson 2001: 539-40), suggestive of an interaction between the two areas.

While there is evidence for Eastern Desert influence on the Badarian culture (Majer 1992), Midant-Reynes (2000: 148, 164) convincingly argues for a strong element of Saharan culture:

¹ For North-East Africa, the Palaeolithic period divides into: Lower Palaeolithic (c. 500,000-250,000 B.P.), Middle Palaeolithic (ca. 250,000 -70,000 B.P.), Transitional Group (70,000-50,000 B.P.), Upper Palaeolithic (ca. 50,000-24,000 B.P.), Late Palaeolithic (ca. 24,000-10,000 B.P.) and Epipalaeolithic (ca. 10,000-7,000 B.P.).

² The Late Palaeolithic was an entirely arid period with no pluvial interruptions.

“With regards to lithics, [Holmes (1989: 183)] points out that there are some similarities with the post-Palaeolithic culture in the Sahara (an industry based on blades and flakes, in which polished axes and hollow-base arrowheads are not lacking), which means that we cannot exclude the possibility that the semicircle formed by the Bahariya, Farafra, Dakhla and Kharga oases might have been the point of origin of populations who perhaps already pursued a pastoral mode of subsistence; these people might have been pushed eastwards by increasing aridity and would eventually have settled in the region of Asyut and Tahta . . . [It] might even be suggested that the Neolithic cultures of the oases and the Faiyum could be regarded as the eastern fringes of the Sahara Neolithic groups.”

Taken together, the two indications above suggest that the population which arrived in Nabta after 5,500 B.C. – apparently pastoralists from the Sahara with a new and higher level of organisation – influenced the developments in the nearby Nile Valley. Wendorf & Schild (1998: 114) also hypothesise that the primary external stimulus for the rise of social complexity in Upper Egypt was contact with the pastoralists of the Western Desert. If this view is correct, social complexity in the Nile Valley was the end product, not only of numerous differentiating factors associated with the rise of craft specialisation, but also of the dynamic interaction between two contrasting lifestyles, pastoral and centralised agricultural economies, existing in close proximity (Wendorf & Schild 1998: 113). The Nile Valley and desert economies were characterised by structural and functional differentiation providing mutual support for each. Yet a tense harmony would also have been present, as well as diffusion of ideas and practices. Rock art from the Predynastic to the east and west of Armant, situated on the west bank of the Nile River, depicts domesticated cattle with artificially deformed horns, indicative of pastoralism (Hoffman 1979: 234-35).

Nabta Playa	Dates	Nile Valley	Dates
El Adam ³	8,800 – 7,800 B.C.	Makhadma	11,300 – 10,000 B.C.
El Ghorab	7,600 – 7,200 B.C.	Arkinian	c. 7,400 B.C.
El Nabta/Al Jerar	7,100 – 6,300 B.C.	Fayum B	7,100 – 6,000 B.C.
Middle Neolithic	6,100 – 5,600 B.C.	Badarian	5,200 – 4,000 B.C.
Late Neolithic	5,500 – 4,000 B.C.	Fayum A	5,200 – 4,000 B.C.
		Merimde	5,000 – 4,400 B.C.
		Nagada I	4,000 – 3,700 B.C.
		Nagada II	3,700 – 3,300 B.C.
		Nagada III (Terminal Predynastic)	3,300 – 3,100 B.C.

Table 1. Comparative chronology of Nabta Playa and contemporary sites in the Nile Valley.

The contemporary Badarians engaged in a semi-sedentary way of life based on riverine exploitation, crop cultivation and selective herding practices. Assertions by Trigger (1983: 27) that the Badarians possessed a predominantly egalitarian social community have been challenged as a result of mortuary analyses at Armant and Nagada (Bard 1987: 123-25; 1988: 55) and at Badari, Matmar and Mostagedda (Anderson 1992: 51-66). Wendy Anderson examined the distribution of grave goods across age and sex divides. She also quantified which graves were most targeted for plunder, and the different types of goods likely to have been most prevalent within the plundered graves, based on the contents of graves

³ Wendorf & Schild (1998: 100) termed the El Adam, El Ghorab and El Nabta levels Early Neolithic, although the basis for this claim is unfounded as will be discussed below.

of the same size and shape which were not robbed, and the intact burials of all shapes and sizes. Correlations were found between the contents of certain types of graves and the area in which they were most prevalent, and between the condition of the graves and the sex and age of the inhabitants, although no relationship was found between the sex of the dead and the type of grave goods most prevalent in their grave types. Anderson (1992: 60) found that the plunderers targeted the graves containing predominantly luxury materials, which she terms “sociotechnic” artefacts. The results of Anderson’s analysis indicate that the Badarian society was hierarchical, although whether or not inherited status existed remains far from proven; the most that can be stated is that it was a culture which practiced social differentiation.

In regard to this greater social complexity, which has been linked above to the rise of pastoralism, Nabta Playa may be said to predate (cf. Malville above) the developments of Late Predynastic Egypt. The date of cattle domestication and its influence on society and culture are the topics of the next chapters.

Cattle domestication in North-East Africa

Originally, cattle had only been hunted in its wild form (*Bos primigenius*) – in Egypt since at least the Middle Palaeolithic. Recent research of genetic signatures has lent support to the hypothesis of an independent center for cattle domestication in North Africa (Stockstad 2002; Hanotte et al. 2002), versus the old hypothesis of diffusion from the Middle East. But when did domestic cattle reach the Nile Valley?

Some authors have posited that the first signs of cattle domestication can be seen at the sites of Tushka (c. 11,000 B.C.) and Dibeira West (c. 7,400 B.C.). The cattle remains at these two sites are smaller in size than the remains found at Isna (c. 15,000 B.C.), and Wendorf & Schild (1994: 127) believe that the reduced size indicates the first stages of cattle domestication. More than 20 *Bos* bones and teeth were found in the El Adam layers of Nabta Playa. Morphologically, these fall within the size range measurements of Tushka and Dibeira West. Based on these deductions, Wendorf & Schild (1994) identified the Nabta cattle remains as a domesticated descendant of the wild *Bos primigenius*.

However, two observations weaken this conclusion: firstly, those Nabta *Bos* bones which can be measured fall within the size range of the bones of wild *Bos*; and secondly, the *Bos* from Isna are of even greater size than those from Middle Palaeolithic sites (Gautier 1993). Therefore it seems that bone sizes in this case do not allow us to draw conclusions in regard to domestication at such an early date, whether in the Nile Valley or at Nabta Playa.

Wendorf et al. advance several other arguments for an early date for cattle domestication in Nabta Playa. Since the term ‘Neolithic’ is linked by definition to agriculture and animal husbandry – in North-East Africa and the Sahara notably to pastoralism – the issue of cattle domestication also affects the question of whether the earliest Nabta layers should be considered as Early Neolithic or not. The main additional argument of the authors is that the ruling environmental conditions were too arid to support a wild population of *Bos*, and that the *Bos* bones found would therefore belong to domesticated cattle. Wendorf et al. (1985: 136) said:

“The early Holocene desert fauna lacks all of these medium-sized animals, indicating an environment too harsh to support anything larger than a small ruminant.”

It is also contended (Wendorf & Schild 1994: 126) that the lack of aquatic vertebrates is evidence for the absence of permanent water. From this the authors deduced that any *Bos* in the desert would have needed human assistance to survive. However, any *Bos* under the control of humans would also require adequate grass cover and the water to sustain this nourishment. The desert playas would have held large amounts of water after the rains. Grass cover adequate to sustain domesticated *Bos* would

also be capable of sustaining wild *Bos*. It should further be noted that hundreds of gazelle and hare bones have been found in the El Adam layers at Nabta Playa – gazelles are medium-sized animals and hares prefer short grasses. All in all, there is no reason to conclude that the environmental conditions were such that wild *Bos* could not have survived.

Another point advanced by Wendorf et al. is that at Late Palaeolithic sites in the Nile Valley, such as Wadi Kubbaniya and Makhadma (Wetterstrom 1993: 179, 181), wild *Bos* and hartebeest remains are found in association, with Wadi Kubbaniya also yielding the bones of gazelle. As hartebeest remains are absent in El Adam layers at Nabta Playa, the authors suggest that the conditions would probably also be unfit for wild *Bos*, and that the layers should be assigned a post-Palaeolithic date, with *Bos* remains being those of domesticated (or at least semi-wild) cattle. However, as already indicated above, plenty of gazelle bones are found in these layers, as they are in Wadi Kubbaniya, and it is not clear why wild *Bos* and hartebeest have to be considered cohorts per se, just because the species occupy the same ecological niche. Large desert antelopes like *Addax nasomaculatus* are still present today in the Central Sahara and yet their remains are lacking at Nabta Playa, which indicates that the full range of animals is not necessarily represented in a limited faunal record (Smith 1986: 198). Therefore, one should not assign too much weight to the absence of hartebeest remains.

In short, the hypothesis of Wendorf & Schild about early cattle domestication at Nabta Playa, based on presumptions about the ruling environmental conditions, is problematic and best rejected. Their pre-Middle Neolithic phases of Nabta Playa are defined here as falling in the Terminal Pleistocene.

As the arguments about bone sizes and environment cannot be regarded as sufficient to sustain the hypothesis of an early cattle domestication at Nabta Playa, there is no reason to assign the El Adam layers to the Early Neolithic.⁴ The fact that only 2% of the faunal assemblage in the El Adam layers was *Bos* also does not suggest specialisation of some kind (e.g. pastoralism), unless one were to explain the scarcity of bones by the suggestion that the cattle were not used for meat but only for milk and blood.

From the evidence presented to date, it can at best be hypothesised that the inhabitants of Nabta Playa had access to a variety of wild animals and that they selectively hunted gazelles, hares and some wild *Bos*. The environmental conditions were generally good during the Great Wet Phase of the Terminal Pleistocene (Muzzolini 1993: 228, figure 11.1) and there would have been little pressure on or incentive for the hunter-gatherers to alter their way of life. Wendorf & Schild's Middle Neolithic phase at Nabta Playa coincides with the beginning of the Great Mid-Holocene Arid Phase (Muzzolini 1993: 228, figure 11.2). This would have placed pressure upon the hunter-gatherer inhabitants to alter their lifestyle accordingly. Fat is extremely important in a hunter-gatherer diet, and the percentage of fat stored in cattle is greater than in other game animals. Reduced availability of water and grass cover would have placed corresponding pressures upon population sizes of *Bos*.

In order to maintain a reasonable level of access to this valuable food source, control measures would have been introduced and this would have had an impact on the numbers of *Bos* bones recovered archaeologically, and there should also be clear signs of size reduction through genetic manipulation as domestication began. Indeed, this is exactly the trend seen. Wendorf & Schild's Middle Neolithic levels at Nabta Playa E-75-8 show an increase in the proportion of *Bos* bones to 7.7% (Smith 1986: 201). Further, the bones are smaller in size. The conclusion that cattle domestication spread relatively late is further reinforced by the central Saharan Fezzan and Tassili rock paintings

⁴ Another argument the authors advance in support of an early domestication is the analysis of language by Christopher Ehret (1993). Ehret has bracketed a period around 8,000 B.C. for Proto-Northern Sudanic (part of the Nilo-Saharan language family), which includes words indicative of the exploitation of *Bos*. But such an analysis is risky as most linguistic roots describing wild or domestic *Bos* are neutral and the same words that later were applied to domesticated *Bos* may well have been originally applied to their wild ancestors.

which depict the transition from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to a pastoralist way of life around 4,500 B.C. during the Neolithic Humid Phase (Muzzolini 1992).

The spatial distribution of artefacts in Wendorf & Schild's pre-Middle Neolithic layers (in this article redefined as being Epipalaeolithic layers) at Nabta Playa does not reveal sophistication beyond that of a tight hunter-gatherer band organisation. It should be noted that the ethos of hunter-gatherers is to share their food and not to accumulate unwarranted surpluses (Smith 1986: 200). The domestication of *Bos* would have initiated a new mode of production, primarily through the introduction of surpluses into their socio-economic lifestyle, with the potential for accumulating wealth and political status.

Cattle burials in Nabta Playa and the Nile Valley

On the western edge of the largest wadi to the north of Nabta is the first of two differing types of stone-covered tumuli marking the burial sites of cattle. Seven out of the nine tumuli examined have been excavated (Applegate et al. 2001: 468). At E-94-1n, at the northern end of the Late Neolithic ceremonial complex, the stones covered the articulated remains of a young cow in a clay-lined chamber. Radiocarbon tests on the wood from the roof returned a date of 5,400 B.C. The poorly preserved cow is around 125 cm. in height, with the spine oriented north-south and its head facing south (Applegate et al. 2001: 468).

The second type of tumulus consists of disarticulated *Bos* bones scattered between unshaped rocks. Sites E-94-1s, E-96-4, E-97-4, E-97-6 and E-97-16 are associated with the remains of 3, 4 (2 sub-adult, 2 young adults), 2 (1 juvenile, 1 sub-adult), 1 and 1 (sub-adult) bovines respectively (Applegate et al. 2001: 473-481). No particular body part was deliberately selected for deposition.

A similar emphasis on the cattle cult can be observed in Egypt. The Nabta cattle burials are paralleled somewhat by the Badarian animal graves. Certain animals, including *Bos*, were revered during Badarian times as witnessed by their burials in select sections of different cemeteries either on their own, or in association with human burials or within human graves (Brunton & Caton-Thompson 1928: 42, 91-94). This does not presuppose that each species was buried for the same purpose, since pattern variation within the burials is well documented by Flores (1999). Some graves had linen and matting which may have covered the animal (Brunton & Caton-Thompson 1928: 42). Cow remains are present in numbers at Hammamiya (Baumgartel 1955: 21-22). Human and *Bos* remains were also sometimes found buried together. The latter practice continued down into late Old Kingdom times, as evidenced by the ox burials at Qau. These later burials show signs that the cattle had been carefully dismembered before burial.

A *Bos* burial from Tomb 19 at Hierakonpolis Locality Hk6 was examined by Sylvia Warman (2000: 8-9). The tomb dates either to the end of Nagada I or to the beginning of Nagada II. Its occupant is a specimen of *Bos primigenius* (the wild ancestor of the domestic cow *Bos taurus*). Reed matting and resin were utilised in the burial of the whole corpse, as indeed they were with human burials in the same locality (Warman 2000: 8-9).

Remains of cattle have also been uncovered at localities Hk11, Hk29 and Hk29A at Hierakonpolis (McArdle 1992). Many of the *Bos* from Hk11 were of mature age, which is indicative of animal husbandry and has led McArdle (1992: 56) to believe "this reflects their use for purposes other than to supply meat (e.g. dairy products, draft animals, religious or social symbols)". Locality Hk29 also displays strong signs of animal husbandry but it is at Hk29A, a ceremonial complex dating to late Nagada II (Friedman 1996), where something unusual occurs in the faunal patterns. There is a discrepancy between the cranial and post-cranial age profiles, wherein the younger *Bos* crania are under-represented (McArdle 1992: 54, 56). The implication of ritual activities involving cattle at Hk29A is given additional weight by Friedman (1996: 30), who states that "representations [on

Predynastic seals and vessels] of fences topped with the impaled heads (mainly cattle) may explain the head to torso discrepancy among the faunal remains at HK29A”.

From the Terminal Predynastic period, cattle burials have been found at the Nubian A-Group cemetery at Qustul (Williams 1986: 176) and again at Hierakonpolis. There is one burial at Hierakonpolis of particular interest, that of Tomb 7 in Locality Hk6 (Adams 2000: 33-34). By contrast with Nagada II tombs, this cattle burial grave has an almost square shape. It has a length of 2.5 m., a width of 2.1 m. and a depth of 0.65-0.75 m. It had been lined with stone slabs during the original construction (Hoffman 1982: 56). The community had placed grass matting over the bones of three dead animals, which were each buried in one piece. An intriguing aspect of this burial was the presence of a dark organic substance that sheathed a few of the bones. Hoffman (1982: 56) hypothesised:

“Since this organic substance was associated with only the ribs and was tightly packed around them, the possibility exists that it was used to fill out the animal’s eviscerated abdomen – a practice foreshadowing the mummification of later time.”

It has a parallel in the earlier *Bos* burial from Tomb 19, mentioned above. This is the first known *Bos* burial triad. *Bos* triads are also known through representations on predynastic Nagada ceramics.

Fekri Hassan (1992) posits that the cattle beliefs of the dynastic Egyptians had their origins in the Saharan pastoralists in the predynastic period and stemmed from the Saharan pastoralists, which in essence is also the hypothesis of this article. However, Hassan proposes a fertility-women-cattle ideology, which in the view of the present writer is based on several unfounded assumptions. He assumes that only women were associated with fertility and the provisioning of the essential ingredients of life, water and food, but there is no solid evidence to back up this claim. He also suggests that it was the women amongst the Saharan pastoralists who herded the cattle, but the ethnographic records of, for example, the Nuer of the Sudan reveal that teenage males herd the cattle (Hoffman 1979: 242). According to Hassan’s hypothesis, the predynastic male king drew power from his association with the female goddesses and the very status of women within Predynastic society – but there is a lack of data for the latter claim. An integral part of Hassan’s (1992: 315) hypothesis are the Nagada female figurines shown with their arms curved above their heads in a posture which he has interpreted as representing the bovine horns of a mother goddess. However, Hassan does not account for the presence of male figurines, or the absence of figurines representing a mother and a son as would be expected in a “Mother Goddess” cult, or the lack of exaggerated features (breasts, buttocks) suggesting fertility and divinity, or alternative explanations of the curved arms, such as the invocation of a bird deity (Ucko 1968: 427; Maisels 2001: 46). In short, there is little reason to connect the cattle burials, or cattle symbolism in general, with a “Mother Goddesses” cult, although there certainly are important symbols that have to do with a cow goddess in relation to the king, as will be demonstrated.

Cow heads and the codification of religion

Whether the frequent occurrence of separated heads of cow goddesses (humanised or not), often on pillars or poles, in the Predynastic Nile Valley has any relation with the impaled cattle heads at Hierakonpolis (Hk29A) is hard to say. But it is certain that the cow’s head seen front face, associated with a goddess, is an important bovine motif in early Egyptian art.

Dating to the Terminal Predynastic is a sculptured palette that has been found at Gerzeh (Baumgartel 1960: 90). Oval-shaped, it has one blank side with a flat relief covering the whole of the other side. The relief is of a cow’s head reduced to a geometrical form with ears and horns curving outwards, all embellished with five stars. It is identical to the Hathor Bowl dating from the 1st Dynasty at Hierakonpolis (Burgess and Arkell 1958). The stars might suggest that the palette refers to the

Heavenly Cow and (Fisher 1962: 11) to the epithet “Mistress of the Stars”, which in the later “Tale of Sinuhe” (B, 270-274) is applied to Hathor.

Also on the Narmer Palette, on either side of the top of the palette (as if looking down on the scenes from heaven), there are two frontal, humanised, cow heads. Fischer (1962; 1963) has argued for the identification of these heads with the goddess Bat. Bat was a local goddess of the seventh nome in Upper Egypt, where the *b3.t* fetish appears often on official pendants. One of the earliest written occurrences of the goddess’ name is from the 6th Dynasty: “I [Menenre] am *B3t* with her two faces.” (Pyramid Text §1096; Faulkner 1969). Fischer (1962: 11) speculates that the first occurrence of Bat’s name is on a diorite vase excavated at Hierakonpolis and dated to the 1st Dynasty. The vase displays a human face with cow ears and horns. A *jabiru* stork was found near the vase. Fischer regards the vase and the *jabiru* stork (*b3*) as representing a hieroglyphic construction, so that together they make up *b3.t*. This word is the same as that represented on the shrine of Sesostris I at Karnak (Fischer 1962: 11). A gold amulet from the archaic period at Naga ed-Deir displays in it a pendant of the *b3.t* fetish. As the classic representation of Hathor is with an outward curving pair of horns, Fischer (1962: 12) argues that, if Bat were a later offshoot of Hathor, then she should be expected initially to have adopted Hathor’s elegant and outward curving horns, instead of the heavy, ribbed, and inward curving horns that appear in some of the Predynastic cow heads. These heavy archaic horn forms are therefore ascribed to Bat, who supposedly lost this bovine horn structure over time, replacing it with antennae with spiral tips that likewise curl inwards. Based on these arguments, Fischer (1962: 11-12) concludes that the Predynastic representations of cow heads are that of Bat, who consequently also appears at the top of the Narmer Palette, and that Hathor is first mentioned in the 4th Dynasty, a time in which she becomes connected with the *b3.t* fetish.

A close examination of Fischer’s points reveals frailties and circular arguments. The Hierakonpolis 1st Dynasty vase was found in uncertain association with the *jabiru* bird. The context in which Bat (“female *ba*”) is mentioned in the Pyramid Texts is that of funerary items. Furthermore, Fischer’s argument is critically flawed by a point he himself mentions (Fischer 1962: 13-14):

“And even as late as the Eighteenth dynasty the term *b3.t* is still applied to the pendant worn by court officials. But a Middle Kingdom coffin gives the fetish itself the label ‘human-faced,’ and the use of this much less distinctive designation, which is later applied to the human-headed *b3*-bird, and so on, advises caution in regarding every appearance of the *b3.t*-fetish as a specific reference to the goddess Bat.”

And Jonathan van Lepp (1998 & 2000: pers. comm.) suggests:

“The inward curved horns on the Narmer Palette have antecedents in Predynastic art where they appear to be the form of surgical horn manipulation originally applied to bulls.⁵ This motif is also applied to sheep . . . Thus, the inward curved horns are not species specific and cannot be considered the domain of Bat . . . [If Bat was] important, as the prominent positioning on the Narmer Palette indicates, then there should be some evidence of temples, cults, and priestesses to her . . . There is no evidence of [Old Kingdom] kings associated with temples belonging to Bat. None of the princesses, or noble women, at Memphis have this titulary. If the Goddess on the Narmer Palette is Bat, she should be manifested in some way among the royalty, as clearly there is an important attachment to the deity and the king.”

⁵ For a short survey of the different types of cow’s horns in Predynastic art, see van Lepp 1999: 101-105.

Of interest in this regard is that, in the Armant rock art, as has already been noted, horn manipulation is a mark of early pastoralism in the Nile Valley.

The present author therefore prefers to identify the goddess depicted on the Narmer Palette as Hathor. Noteworthy is Pyramid Text §546, “My kilt which is on me is Hathor” (Faulkner 1969), which reminds one of the four cow heads on Narmer’s kilt (van Lepp, 1988 & 2000, pers. comm.), identical to the ones on top of the Palette. A statue of Djoser displays a similar belt which Lana Troy (1986: 54) has identified as displaying Hathor’s head. Fisher’s idea that Hathor appeared relatively late can also not be maintained: a temple of Hathor at Gebelein dates from the late 2nd dynasty (Wilkinson 1999: 312). While Toby Wilkinson (1999: 283) is probably accurate in saying “it seems likely that, in this area, Egyptian theology was characterised by ‘a common substratum of ideas which lent the two goddesses a somewhat similar character’ (Fischer 1962: 12)”, it is Hathor who is consistently connected with the pharaoh, not Bat. In the Valley Temple of Mycerinus there are triads of Hathor, Mycerinus and a nome diety. Hathor stands in the middle of the figures in two of the triads, with her arm around Mycerinus as if in a protective stance and showing that she is related to him.

The connection of the pharaoh with bovines is apparent from the beginnings of dynastic Egypt. On the Narmer Palette, a bull breaking down the enemy’s fortifications symbolises the conquering pharaoh. The name Menes (*mni*) is usually linked with either the pharaohs Narmer or Hor-Aha (Wilkinson 1999: 66-68) and Fairservis (1992: 62) hypothesises it has a possible origin in *mniw*, meaning “herdsman”. Hor-Aha’s name is proof of a close relationship between the pharaoh and the god Horus, who is sometimes depicted in bull form (Wendorf & Schild 1998: 116). It is during the late Predynastic that Horus (and by extension the king) adopts the cow goddess as his mother, formalised in the form of Hathor (*hw.t-hr*, “House of Horus”). This event is also evidenced by the dedication of the Narmer Palette in the temple of Horus at Hierakonpolis. The Narmer Macehead has many features in common with the ceremonial complex Hk29A (Friedman 1996: 33) and also displays the pharaoh in association with bovines.

The end products of the codification of such traditions are commemorative objects like the Narmer Palette, which built on the works of earlier commemorative pieces. It was a combination of formal commemorative hieroglyphic writing with the basic iconography of the evolving kingship.

Conclusion

Bos primigenius, originally only hunted, became domesticated in order to protect a valuable source of fat in the hunter-gatherer diet and to enhance chances of survival during changing environmental conditions. At Nabta Playa in the Western Desert, evidence of the domestication of cattle dates from the Middle Neolithic. This brought about socio-economic changes within the desert communities, which is later reflected in the Late Neolithic cattle tumuli and megalithic constructions at Nabta Playa. The *Bos* tumuli are indicative of cattle worship, and the Late Neolithic site as a whole displays evidence of a community with greater social complexity than its contemporaries in the Nile Valley. Prolonged contact with desert pastoralists led to the first socially complex society in the Nile Valley, the Badarian. It introduced a new religious and socio-economic element into the life of the Upper Egyptians, namely ownership and burial of domestic cattle. *Bos* burials are found in Nagada period settlements, in clearly ceremonial contexts. As pastoralism became increasingly fused in the Nile Valley economy with agriculture, religious associations evolved between the cow goddess and the king. These aspects became codified in the artefactual representations dating from the time of Unification.

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