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Author(s): O. G. S. Crawford

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## THE BIRTHPLACE OF CIVILIZATION

O. G. S. Crawford

*Ordnance Survey, Great Britain*

LAST winter the oldest remains of a civilized people were found in Iraq by the Joint Expedition of the British Museum and the University Museum of Philadelphia. The mound that Mr. Leonard Woolley, Director of the Expedition, is now excavating is called Tell-el-Obeid, the ancient "Ur of the Chaldees"; it lies on the south bank of the Euphrates, a little more than 100 miles from Basra. His discoveries were quite sensational, for they included a contemporary inscription of a "mythical" king and a masterpiece of an art whose very existence had hardly been suspected.<sup>1</sup> The inscription of A-anni-padda, son of Mes-anni-padda, is the earliest dated historical document in the world—the discoverer puts it somewhere in the fourth millennium before the Christian era, probably about the middle. The art is Sumerian, and the site of Tell-el-Obeid has provided the oldest known remains of Sumerian civilization. It will be profitable, therefore, to summarize the facts known about the earliest cultures in this region and in that other early home of civilization, Egypt, and to propound a hypothesis which may account for the origin of both civilizations.

### THE PAINTED POTTERY FOLK OF IRAQ

The Sumerians of the fourth millennium before the Christian era were not the first inhabitants of Iraq. On the sites where they built their temples at Ur and Eridu (now Abu Shahrain) there lived a prehistoric people whom we may call the Painted Pottery Folk. They were entirely distinct from the Sumerians; and it is possible that the sites where they had lived had both been deserted for some time when the Sumerians arrived. They "were not only able to make exquisite pottery (artistically painted and almost certainly made without the wheel) but were also good agriculturists. They used stone hoes to till the ground, reaped their crops with clay sickles, and rubbed their corn with stone querns into flour; their spindle whorls show that they could weave; for weapons they had bows, slings, and axes of ground stone; for ornaments it is probable they also had delicately-made obsidian pins, and perhaps carnelian beads . . . they were unable to write and seem not to have been able to carve

<sup>1</sup> The Sumerian masterpiece referred to is a frieze of cattle being milked; and statues of bulls also adorned the façade of the temple of A-anni-padda.

stone, which may doubtless be explained from there being no certain indication of their possessing metal. For food, besides cereals, they ate fish and fresh-water mussels, and doubtless, as they had slings and bows, birds and small animals."<sup>2</sup> They may have been able to build mud-brick houses, but more probably they lived in reed huts like the modern Arab. These people occupied the hills of Abu Shahrain before the Sumerians.

It is difficult to prove a negative; but it is stated that the Painted Pottery Folk, unlike their Sumerian successors, had no domesticated animals, being agriculturists, hunters, and fishers only. This conclusion is strengthened by the abundance of arrowheads found amongst their remains, in contrast again with the Sumerians who did not use the arrow in those early days.

Little else is known about these Pre-Sumerian folk. Painted pottery of identical character has been found on the island of Bender Bushire, in the Persian Gulf. At Susa pottery painted in the same style was found by the French "Délégation" under 80 feet of accumulated strata; and again at Musyan not far off. The earliest phase of this very fine abstract style seems to be found in the Susian pottery. Consequently Mr. Frankfort<sup>3</sup> infers that the Painted Pottery Folk of Iraq migrated there from the neighborhood of Susa and that at Musyan, 150 kilometers to the west, we have an intermediate station on their journey.

However this may be, we really know very little about these Neolithic hunters; and we are not now primarily concerned with them. They disappeared, and they did not plant the seeds of an enduring civilization. It seems certain that they came from the north; possibly the climate of Persia was beginning to get drier, and the game on which they subsisted was retreating inland to the mountains southward and to the well-watered plains of the Two Rivers. Desiccation would make Iraq more, not less, habitable in these remote ages, nearer perhaps to the Ice Age than we are to them.

### THE SUMERIANS

Civilization was founded in Iraq by the Sumerians, who brought with them two epoch-making inventions—copper implements and writing; together with, as has been said, domestic animals. They wore a peculiar form of dress—a kind of pleated skirt (called by the Greeks a *kaunakes*). The upper part of their body was naked. Whence did they come? The *kaunakes* is not a garment for a cold climate;

<sup>2</sup> R. Campbell Thompson: The British Museum Excavations at Abu Shahrain in Mesopotamia in 1918, *Archaeologia*, Vol. 70, 1918-1920, pp. 109-110.

<sup>3</sup> H. Frankfort: Studies in Early Pottery of the Near East, I: Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt, and Their Earliest Interrelations, *Royal Anthropol. Inst. Occasional Papers No. 6*, London, 1924, p. 39.

it suggests the warm south; and Mr. Frankfort<sup>4</sup> gives convincing reasons against a northern origin, which indeed is unsupported by any archeological evidence. The northwest has never been suggested and is quite impossible. There remain only two possible directions, the southeast and south. In choosing between these two possibilities we have but the scantiest evidence to guide us. Apart from the *kaunakes*, which might suit either, all we know is that their

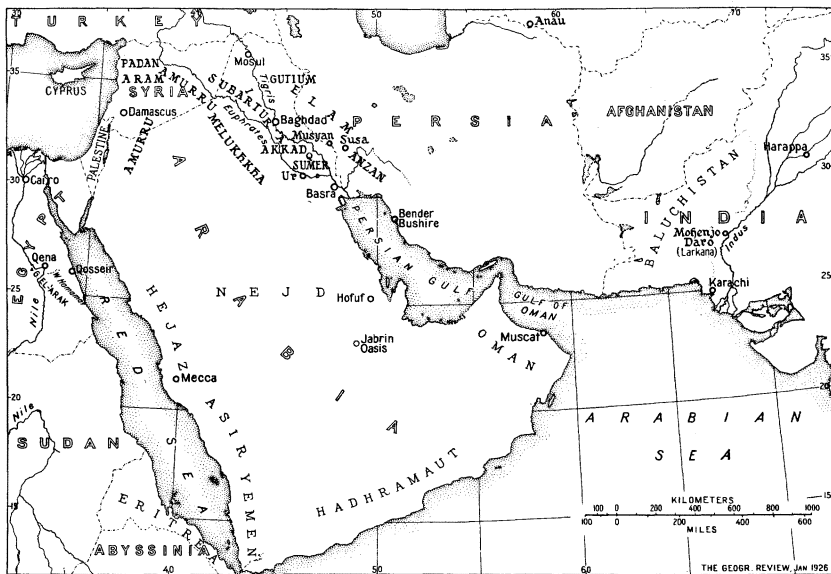


FIG. 1.—Map to show the localities mentioned in the text. Scale 1:38,000,000.

religion, as we see it at Ur and elsewhere, is that of a mountain people. They made huge artificial hills for their temples, owing to lack of natural “high places” for worship on the plains. Their script, according to the best authorities,<sup>5</sup> must also have developed in a mountain region and was certainly invented before they reached the plains.<sup>6</sup>

### RELATIONS WITH INDIAN CULTURES

Dr. Hall<sup>7</sup> has suggested that they may have come from India; and recent discoveries in that country have provided sensational evidence of an early and hitherto unknown civilization there. These discoveries were made at Mohenjo-Daro, in the Larkana district of Sind, and at Harappa, on the Ravi River. Underneath buildings of

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>6</sup> British Museum Guide to the Babylonian and Assyrian Antiquities, 3rd edit., 1922, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> H. R. Hall: *Ancient History of the Near East*, 5th edit., London, 1915, pp. 173-174.

much later times (third century before the Christian era and later) were found brick buildings and remains of a far earlier period. The culture belongs to the Copper Age, and amongst the finds are certain inscribed seals "which appear to be exactly similar in shape to square stamp seals which are commonly found at Susa and on Babylonian sites of the early period—say about 3500 B. C. to 2500 B. C. The bulls are distinctly Sumerian in appearance. . . . As to the signs on the Harappa seals [i. e. those from one of the two newly-discovered Indian sites] which obviously form some kind of writing, the illustrations will sufficiently show that nine of these signs very closely, and seven partially, resemble the Sumerian writing; while many of the others may prove to be related. . . . Above all, the numeration appears to be the same. . . . These close resemblances . . . cannot be accidental. The people who made these seals must have been in very close contact with Sumerian civilization and have borrowed their artistic style and the basis of their writing from the Sumerians at some period about 3000–2800 B. C."<sup>8</sup>

Did the Sumerians, then, really come from India? We think not; there are great objections to that hypothesis. Let it, however, be clearly stated at the outset that the resemblances referred to above appear, even to one unfamiliar with Sumerian art and writing, to be quite convincing; and one is amazed that they should not have been observed either by the discoverer, Mr. Banerji, or the Director General of Archeology in India, Sir John Marshall. If, however, the date suggested for contact with Sumeria, B. C. 3000–2800, prove correct, that is several centuries after the arrival of the Sumerians in Iraq, even reckoning by the shortest chronology; so that if there was a derivation of script or style, as there certainly was, the Indian culture must have derived from Sumeria. There may, of course, be earlier forms of the Indian script still undiscovered in the 60 feet of stratified deposits or on other sites; but both the Indian script and the Sumerian script of 3000–2800 B. C. are highly developed and conventionalized. The Sumerian, we know, had even then a long ancestry, going back to a pictorial script; and it would be rather remarkable if in both countries the lines of evolution were so closely parallel for (perhaps) a thousand years. Had the Indian script resembled the earliest pictorial writing of Sumeria, it might have been possible to argue that the Sumerians originated in India. But, as we have seen, no traces of the pictorial script have been found there; the resemblances are to a much later stage in the Sumerian writing, when it had already become specialized into conventional forms.

In at least four other regions civilization was flourishing when most of Europe was still in the Stone Age. In Crete it began early in the

<sup>8</sup> C. J. Gadd and Sidney Smith: *The New Links between Indian and Babylonian Civilisations. Illust. London News*, Oct. 4, 1924, p. 614.

third millennium, if not before, and embraced the adjacent islands and mainland. Asia Minor is still, for those remote ages, an unexplored territory; but that it was an early center of culture is proved by tantalizing hints from the lands around it.<sup>9</sup> China is still completely unexplored, save for its newly discovered Neolithic painted pottery. But it is otherwise with Egypt.

### CONTEMPORARY EGYPTIAN CIVILIZATION

In Egypt the historic period began, even according to the "shorter chronology," about the middle of the fourth millennium. Before this dynastic period was a long prehistoric civilization, separated into two (or, according to the latest reports, three) successive phases. With these we are not much concerned; it will be enough to note that the last phase, immediately preceding the first dynasty, was characterized by pottery often decorated with ships and in a style which, like the earliest at Susa, Mr. Frankfort calls "abstract." There is, however, no geographical connection whatever between the two styles, which in content are quite dissimilar. It has been suggested that the people of this last prehistoric phase entered Egypt from the eastern desert. Since they certainly did not come from Nubia, there is little doubt that this suggestion is correct.

It is probable that the dynastic civilization was introduced, as in Sumeria, by an invading race; but the development of culture is continuous and unbroken from prehistoric to historic; and although, as we shall see, foreigners must have come in, they did not necessarily come under arms. That much is evident from the effects produced by their presence. The indigenous culture was disturbed by their influence, but when the foreigners were absorbed, or ceased to come, the older culture reasserted itself. The detection of that foreign element in the culture of the prehistoric and early dynastic Egyptians is an admirable example of archeological finesse. Let us briefly examine it.

### ASIATIC INFLUENCE IN EARLY EGYPT

The first sign of something that is not Egyptian appears towards the close of the prehistoric period. The most remarkable single object betraying influence from outside is a carved ivory knife handle in the Louvre, found recently at Gebel-el-Arak. Mr. Frankfort expresses the unanimous opinion of Egyptologists when he asserts<sup>10</sup> that this knife handle "has confirmed the existence of Asiatic influence in early Egypt beyond any possible doubt." At the top, on one side, is a man or hero, dominating two powerful lions between which he

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<sup>9</sup> Frankfort, *op. cit.*, p. 88 *et passim*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

stands. This antithetic arrangement is itself characteristic of Mesopotamian art, and the subject recalls "the cycle of legends known as the Gilgamesh epos. The garment which the hero on the handle wears is as certainly Mesopotamian as his very full beard and cap." Below are two very un-Egyptian dogs; and a lion below them jumps on the hind quarters of a bull which "quietly strolls on, as if nothing was happening." The theme and its treatment are not Egyptian; for the theme is Mesopotamian, and the style of its treatment is "abstract," in the sense with which Mr. Frankfort uses the word.

There are other evidences of the same influence acting upon prehistoric Egyptian art. Mr. Frankfort cites the motif of entwined serpents and the custom of representing mountains or ground in some of the carved scenes. This latter feature is plainly un-Egyptian; on the purely native sculptures of this period—such as the other knife handles, the slate palettes, and the vases—the objects figured are dumped down with little regard for any decorative arrangement or scheme of values. They have plenty of vigor taken singly and individually, but the whole design lacks balance.

Mr. Frankfort concludes his argument by emphasizing the difference in style between the works of purely Egyptian art and those where foreign influence is perceptible; and he calls attention to the early and complete disappearance of this influence. "These themes possess a common feature which characterizes them, as a whole, as foreign to the Egyptian art. That common feature is their unrealistic purely decorative character. Whatever transformations the natural forms have to undergo, when in the Egyptian reliefs they are translated from the three-dimensional into the two-dimensional world, it is actual life throughout which is pictured, and in a matter-of-fact way too. . . . But in Sumer no artist ever displayed this eager wish to capture life. In almost all cases he was satisfied with a general indication of what he wanted to represent. . . . [The designs on the seal cylinders] are purely abstract, symbolical, and are dominated by the laws of decorative composition. In the last instance this contrast between Egyptian and Mesopotamian art is exactly the same as that between hieroglyphic and cuneiform writing, *it is an essential difference in mentality* . . . the contrast between drawing and writing."<sup>11</sup>

This contrast appears to us to be rather overemphasized. The frieze from Tell-el-Obeid, of the cows being milked, is decidedly realistic, and so indeed are some of the other art products recently brought to light there. They had not, of course, been revealed when Mr. Frankfort wrote his monograph; and we should like to know his opinion of them. However that may be, his other arguments sum-

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124.



marized here are in no way affected; for they rest on real resemblances of design as well as on analogies of style.

We must pass over other connections between the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations, such as the recessed brick-building, which appears first in the mastabas of the First Egyptian Dynasty, and the cylinder seals. There are geographical reasons as well for looking from Egypt to Mesopotamia, for "it seems quite clear that [the new-comers] met the Egyptians near the shores of the Red Sea, where the Wadi Hamamat leads up to the Nile Valley; for it is on the Egyptian side of Wadi Hamamat that the earliest signs of their presence appear in late predynastic times. Again, the foreign elements are particularly connected with the First Dynasty, which originated in the adjacent part of the Nile Valley."<sup>12</sup> Obviously the Red Sea must have been crossed; but we know from the Gebel-el-Arak knife handle that the foreigners had ships; and Mr. Frankfort publishes some most interesting new evidence bearing on this point. On some pots of the time of Gudea of Lagash (about B. C. 2500 according to Dr. Langdon) there is represented a design consisting of a rather conventionalized ship and a long-legged bird standing on it and pecking at a fish. This design appears to have had a long history in Mesopotamia, for on the vase of Gudea it is somewhat "degenerate." Now the same design appears on two, and only two, prehistoric Egyptian vases! "We have to account for the remarkable fact that two designs, apparently unconnected—a special type of boat [foreign to Egypt] and a bird on a fish—appear but twice on the predynastic pottery and both times together. And, more striking still, exactly the same designs appear combined on the Babylonian vases."<sup>13</sup> Mr. Frankfort is surely justified in concluding "that this very type of boat was used by the Sumerianized foreigners who already in the end of the predynastic period influenced Egyptian art, as is conclusively shown by the decoration of the ivory knife-handles and the slate palettes."

#### ARABIA AS THE BIRTHPLACE OF CIVILIZATION

We will now drop our pilot and set sail alone on the dangerous seas of pure speculation. We have seen that the Sumerians probably came from the south and that they did not come from India. We have seen that an Asiatic influence which appears to be Sumerian influenced the early art of Egypt. Is it possible to find a common source for both Sumerians and what has hitherto been regarded as direct Mesopotamian influence on Egypt? Were the Sumerians driven from some now barren region of southern Arabia by the same

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.



cause as that which at an earlier period had driven (as is conjectured) the People of the Painted Pottery from Susa to the land of the Two Rivers?<sup>14</sup> Did some of these Sumerian nomads settle in the Euphrates Valley, and others in the Valley of the Nile? It is not necessary to assume that both parts of this hypothesis must be right or both wrong. One alone may be correct.

It is *a priori* quite probable that the Sumerians originally inhabited some part of southern Arabia; there is hardly any other place left from which they could have come. But that southern Arabia rather than Mesopotamia was the source of the foreign influence in Egypt is a far more speculative assumption. Nevertheless a theory that explains two events by a single cause seems worth considering. The force of the argument from climate seems to be very strong; we know that deserts must have become drier since the Ice Age; we may even go further and say that during part of the Ice Age the deserts of Asia and Africa must have been preëminently habitable grasslands. They would hardly have been avoided by primitive man, whether he was a hunter or a nomadic herdsman. A relatively slight decrease in rainfall would suffice to turn the grassland into desert and drive the wanderers down to well-watered valleys. Such causes may have operated in Africa. They may have caused the first peopling of Egypt and the gradual dispersion of the neolithic peoples along the western margin of Europe. They may also have driven the Central Asiatic nomads down to the plains of China. But with these vast earlier movements we are not now concerned.

Is there any new direct evidence of an early Sumerian civilization in southern Arabia? As yet there is not; that is one of the few remaining regions of the world not yet explored. Not only have no archeological excavations been made there, but, except for one or two rapid reconnaissances, no European traveler has ever been there. It is possible that in Yemen, Hadhramaut, or Oman there exist undiscovered mounds like those recently discovered in the valley of the Indus. Indeed, if such can be found in India in 1924, unsuspected after more than 150 years of British occupation and many years of official archeology, what may we not hope to find in these vast unexplored territories? There is, indeed, a slight indication—it is almost too slight to be called evidence—which favors part of our theory, and it comes from the latest traveler who has penetrated into southern Arabia, Major Cheesman. Describing his visit to Jabrin (latitude 23° 18' 6", longitude 48° 54' 10") in 1923, Major Cheesman makes some interesting remarks about the Al Murra, the present inhabitants of that oasis. They live entirely in tents (there are no buildings there); they speak Arabic, but only in addition to their native tongue; and until two years before his visit they were pagans.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

Their enemies, the Awamir, who roam over the desert to the south, are said to speak a different language, described by the Al Murra as "a series of grunts." Major Cheesman says: "The Al Murra type of face reminds me of features to be seen on early Sumerian sculptures. It is not unreasonable to suppose that they are the remnants of this, the earliest civilization. The conquests and passing of nations on the trade routes would leave them unaffected and unchanged in the fastnesses of their desert stronghold."<sup>15</sup>

In one respect the hypothesis of early civilization in southern Arabia explains the foreign influence in early Egypt better than an assumed direct connection with Mesopotamia. This influence was ephemeral; it ceased altogether in later times when on a priori grounds one would have expected it to have increased, with the development of shipping and maritime trade. The pictures of ships of Mesopotamian type disappear after the First Egyptian Dynasty. Whether, however, the foreign influence in Egypt, which is a *fact*, came direct from Mesopotamia or from some undiscovered proto-Sumerian source in Arabia, it is reasonable to infer the existence of some such civilization and to hope for early confirmation of its existence.<sup>16</sup> A distinguished American Egyptologist said to the writer more than ten years ago that excavation in the Yemen was one of the few "plums" still left unpicked by archeologists. He spoke hopefully, but soon afterward the Great War destroyed what little hopes we had of searching for the birthplace of civilization.

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<sup>15</sup> R. E. Cheesman: The Deserts of Jafura and Jabrin, *Geogr. Journ.*, Vol. 65, 1925, pp. 112-141; reference on p. 125.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.