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THE ANCIENT CAPITALS OF EGYPT (4241 B.C = 332 B.C)

By

Dr. YOUSRY EL GOWHARY

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the change in the site of the Egyptian capital between 4241 B.C. and 332 B.C. and to show how the religion, politics and foreign relations of the country influenced the removal from one place to another of the "chef lieu" of Egypt. The morphology of capital will not be discussed here according to the lack of data. In 4241 B.C. the calendar was introduced to the Egyptian life, and this date may be considered the time from which one can trace the beginning of the Egyptian civilization (1) whilst the foundation of Alexandria in 332 B.C. marked the beginning of the Greek and Roman period as well as representing another phase in the history of the Egyptian capital. The period between 4241 B.C. and 332 B.C. can be divided from a historical point of view into ten stages during which the site of the Egyptian capital changed many times.

I. Predynastic period before 3400 B.C (the earliest settlements).

There is very little to be said about the capital of Egypt during this period because we do not know whether the prehistoric Egyptians formed small communities or states (2). The earliest phase of Egyptian culture so far known is the Dair Tasa and the Badarian in Upper Egypt and the Merimde Beni Salama in the West Delta. Although these sites represent the Egyptian Neolithic age (3). Baumagtel pointed out that the Badarian site was not a regular settlement but something in the nature of a temporary encampment (4), whilst Alimen mentioned that some sort of urban organisation was evident at Merimde Beni-Salama station (5). Amratian (Nagada I), Gerzean (Nagada II), and Maadi were other cultural centres during the predynastic period. Like Badarian, the settlements of Amratian were small in size (6) and no plan of the village or town can be made out (7). However, "from the importance of the Amratians' cemetery and from the position of its gods" some writers have concluded that Nagada played a dominant role and that it was a capital (8). The

III. *The Old Kingdom and the first intermediate period 2980 B. C - 2160 B. C.*

The importance of Memphis as a political and military centre, controlling the river and caravan routes, increased during the Old Kingdom. Thus it became the "chef lieu" of Egypt during the period 2895-2560 B.C. It should be noted that the kings of the first two Dynasties did not rule from Memphis but from their homeland, Upper Egypt. They kept only to Memphis the function of a fortress. Memphis became the administrative capital "par excellence" during this era, especially during the time of the 6th Dynasty. Traffic from all the branches of the Nile came to its port, to such an extent that the Treasury of Thebes found it was necessary to have an agency there (21). Moreover in the New Kingdom and in the later periods, until Alexandria was founded in 332 B.C. it continued to be the foremost city of Egypt and the stronghold which all invaders, Ethiopians, Assyrians and Persians, had to capture before gaining any real mastery over Egypt. The city of Memphis covered, during its supremacy, an area about one and three quarter miles in length and three quarters of a mile in breadth (22). Situated 17 miles south of Cairo it is now nothing but nearly flat land shaded by palm trees.

IV. *The Middle Kingdom and Thebes 2160 B. C - 1788 B. C.*

By the end of the intermediate period the unity of Egypt disappeared owing to the internal conflict between different rulers. In 2040 B.C. the Theben Mentuhotep restored the lost unity and from that date Thebes began to be the chief centre of the country. Very little is known of its early beginnings except that it was the capital of the 4th nome of Upper Egypt. In antiquity Thebes was called the "Amon City" because Amon "King of the Gods" had throne there. Thebes replaced Memphis after the expulsion of the Hyksos, as the great political and religious centre, and soon became the capital of Egypt (23). After 664 B.C. (the Assyrian invasion) Thebes declined and never recovered again. At the present time the remains of Thebes at Luxor include Deir El Bahari on the left bank of the Nile and Karnak on the opposite bank.

V. *The second intermediate period (the Hyksos invasion and the foundation of Avaris) 1788 B.C. - 1580 B. C.*

About 1675 B.C. before the end of the Thirteen Dynasty, the Hyksos poured into the Delta from Asia. These Asiatic invaders came

unexpectedly out of the Eastern Delta and subdued the country by force without a battle (24).

Now "the land of Egypt came into the possession of the polluted and no lord became king" (25). The Hyksos made one of themselves king (Safatis) and he constructed a chief base at Avaris to the east of the arm of the Nile near Bubastis. He set up his capital there on the extreme east of the Delta and not at Memphis or any other central position in Egypt in order to be on a site close to the borders of Asia. He thought that the Assyrians who had then the greatest power might invade the Delta, so that he must choose his chief centre on the wadi Tumilat, the natural route from Asia. Another reason was that the Hyksos might from this centre rule their Asiatic dominions as well as Egypt (26). They also could retreat from this site, as they did later, to Palestine and Syria. All the Above mentioned probabilities throw light upon how the Hyksos chose the site of their capital in the Eastern Delta in order to meet their political and military needs.

VI. *The New Kingdom (the Theban supremacy and the religious revolution 1580 B.C. 1350 B. C.*

For the third time the fate of Egypt was determined by the people of Upper Egypt. The Theben kings (Eighteen Dynasty) were able to liberate Egypt from the Hyksos' domination about 1580 B.C. and consequently Thebes became 'paramount among the cities of Egypt, and Amon-Re, the principal deity at Karnak, at last vindicated his right to the title King of the Gods' (27). However, this supremacy did not continue during the reign of Amenophis. IV. (Akhnaton) 1377 B.C.—1360 B.C who worshipped "Aton" (the sun). In 1370 B.C he founded a new town for his personal god Aton and removed his residence to it from Thebes or the city of the Brightness of Aton", as it was called during this time. This town, which was called Akhet-Aton "Horizen of Aton", is known in modern times as Tell El Amarna. He chose as its site a bay in the cliffs about three hundred miles to the north of Thebes. At this point, the cliffs leave the Nile in a semi circle, retreat some three miles from the stream and return to it again after five miles. In this wide plain which is bounded on the west by the river and the other sides by the cliffs, Akhnaton built his capital which lasted as long as his heresy (28). So after twenty years at „Akhet-Aton" he transferred his court again to Thebes.

VII. *The Ramesside period (the foundation of Tanis) 1350 B. C—
1150 B. C*

After the recovery from the religious revolution Egypt was governed from the Delta by the Ramessides kings under whose rule Egypt possessed as much of an Asiatic empire as at any other period in her history (29). The capital during this time was Pir-Rameses or "House of Rames". Its location is not certain but it has been though he identical with Tanis. At the present time there is a controversy over where or not was Tanis was first a Hyksos fortress under the name of Avaris, and whether it later became the city of Ramses (30). Although the origins of the town are unknown, one thing is certain: Ramsis II. built a new town in the Eastern Delta on ground belonging to an estate of Amon-Re. This land could have been the "Field of Tanis" when the Theben kings drove out the Hyksos (31). Moreover, the site of the town must have been to the eastern frontier, for a poet of the time singing of its beauties refers to it as being between Egypt and Syria and at the same time being accessible to sea faring traffic (32).

Tanis flourished until the Roman time and continued to act as the seat of administration for the eastern nome in succession to its role as royal residence. It continued also to demonstrate its military utility in spite of the fact that the key position in the the defensive system of the Eastern Delta had been advanced to Pelusim at the mouth of the ancient Bubastite branch of the Nile (33).

VIII. *The decadent period (Egypt under foreign rule) 1150 B. C—
662 B. C*

Under a series of weak Ramessides, the country rapidly declined and power passed to the High Priest of Amon. Thus from the end of the XX Dynasty until 945 B. C Egypt was governed from two separate capitals, Thebes in the south and Tanis in the north. The god Amon, who had been adopted at Tanis, was regarded as the possession of the Theben god and the political power of Thebes was represented accordingly.

By the middle of the 10TH century B.C. the "chiefs of the Mesh-wesh" who were closely akin to those Libyans whom Merenptah and Rameses. III. had repelled with such difficulty, ruled Egypt from the Delta at Bubastis (Zagazig). Shesbonk I., a Libyan mercenary commander, gained the throne and became the founder of the Twenty-

Second Dynasty in 945 B.C. Although the High Priest of Theben still exercised undisputed religious authority, the city had politically become a backwater (34). Bubastis continued to be the chief administrative centre in Egypt until the centre of activity shifted to Sais (near from Kafr El Zayat) with the Twenty-Fourth Dynasty and later to Napata when the Ethiopian kings were dominant 722 B.C. 663 B.C.

Napata was situated a short distance down stream from the Fourth cataract. It was founded at the head of the caravan route leading to the interior of the Sudan and in a remote position in order to develop without much-danger of any interference from the north. The transference of leadership from Napata to Meroe later on was probably due to the stagnation of Ethiopia's political and economic relations with Egypt (35).

The Ethiopian kings were unable during their rule from the south, to suppress the mercenary lords of Lower Egypt who continued to rule. It was in the midst of these conflict that the Assyrians entered the Delta and subdued the country (670 B.B—662 B.C) in a period contemporary with the last years of the Ethiopians.

IX. *The restoration 663 B.C. — 525 B.C*

This was the age of power in which the native party endeavoured to restore the old glories of the classic age before the Ramesside empire. Again the seat of power was in the Delta at Sais, the native town of Psamtik and his descendants (36). It became a great and splendid city, adorned with temples and palaces, whilst Thebes no longer possessed either political or religious significance.

X. *The Persian conquest 525 B.C. — 332 B.C*

The kings, who depended upon Greek mercenaries for their rule, failed to save Egypt from the Persian conquest in 525 B.C. Egypt was left helpless by the conflicts of the preceding centuries. She lived for a time under the Persians and the Ptolemies, till she became the granary of Rome, when Alexandria flourished and the history of the ancient-capital of Egypt closed.

Conclusion

The site of the ancient capital of Egypt is determined by three factors, namely, the religious, military and political factors. The reli-

gious influence is shown in the shifting of the administrative centre from one place to another, e.g., from Memphis to Thebes-to Akhet Aton-to Thebes again. The military purpose is the main reason behind the foundation of Memphis on the western side of the Nile at the apex of the Delta, for the construction of Avaris in the Eastern Delta, and for the selection of Napata to be the capital of the Ethiopian empire. The political factor is connected with the religious and military factors, so that it is difficult to separate it from the others. However, its influence is apparent in the dividing of Egypt into forty-two nomes, each of which had its own "chef lieu". In conclusion it should be realised that the site of the Egyptian capital was always chosen with regard to the river Nile, the main source of water.

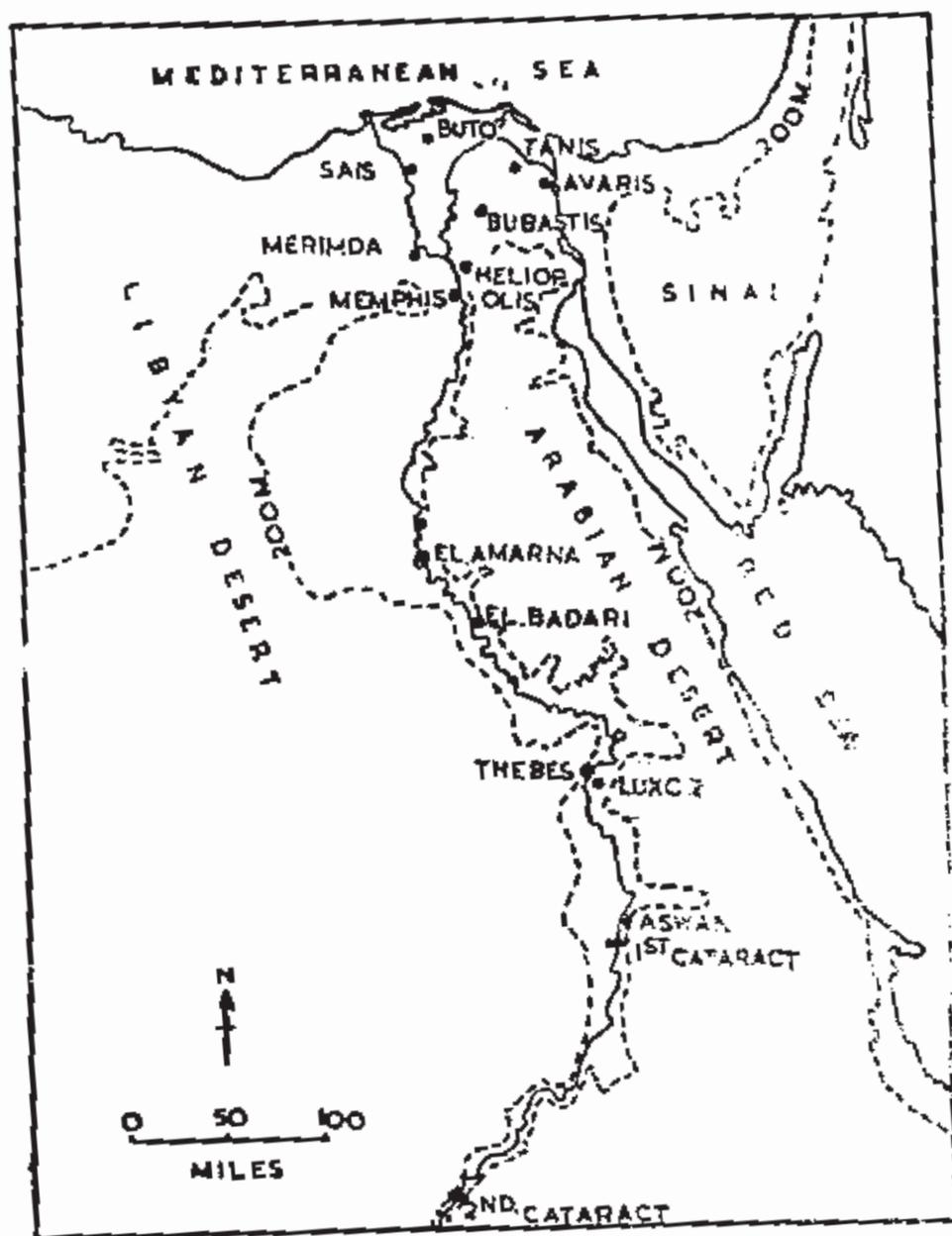


FIG. 1. THE ANCIENT CAPITALS OF EGYPT

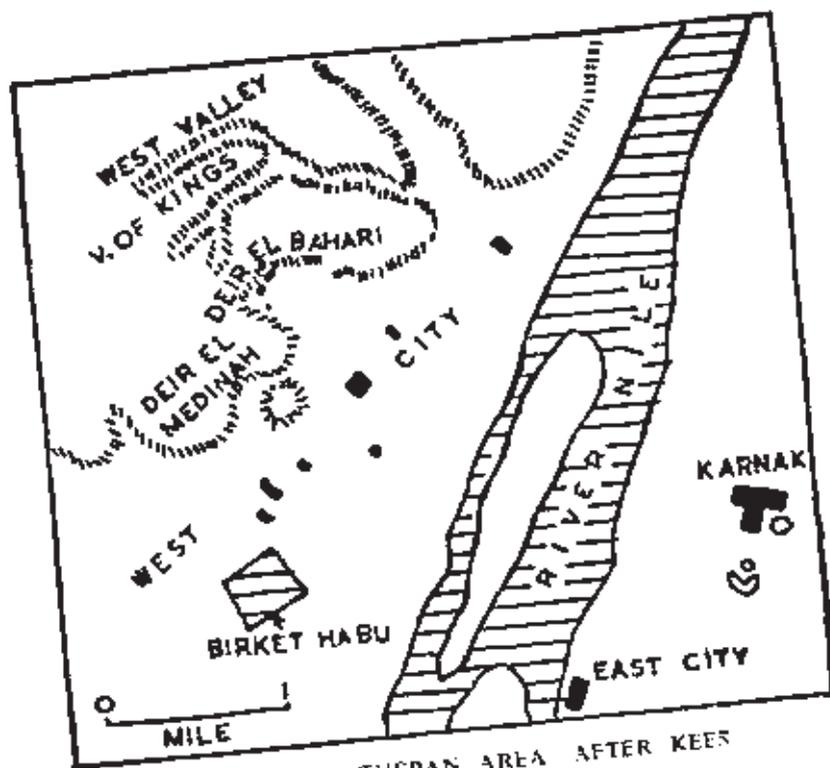


FIG. 2 THE THEBAN AREA AFTER KEES

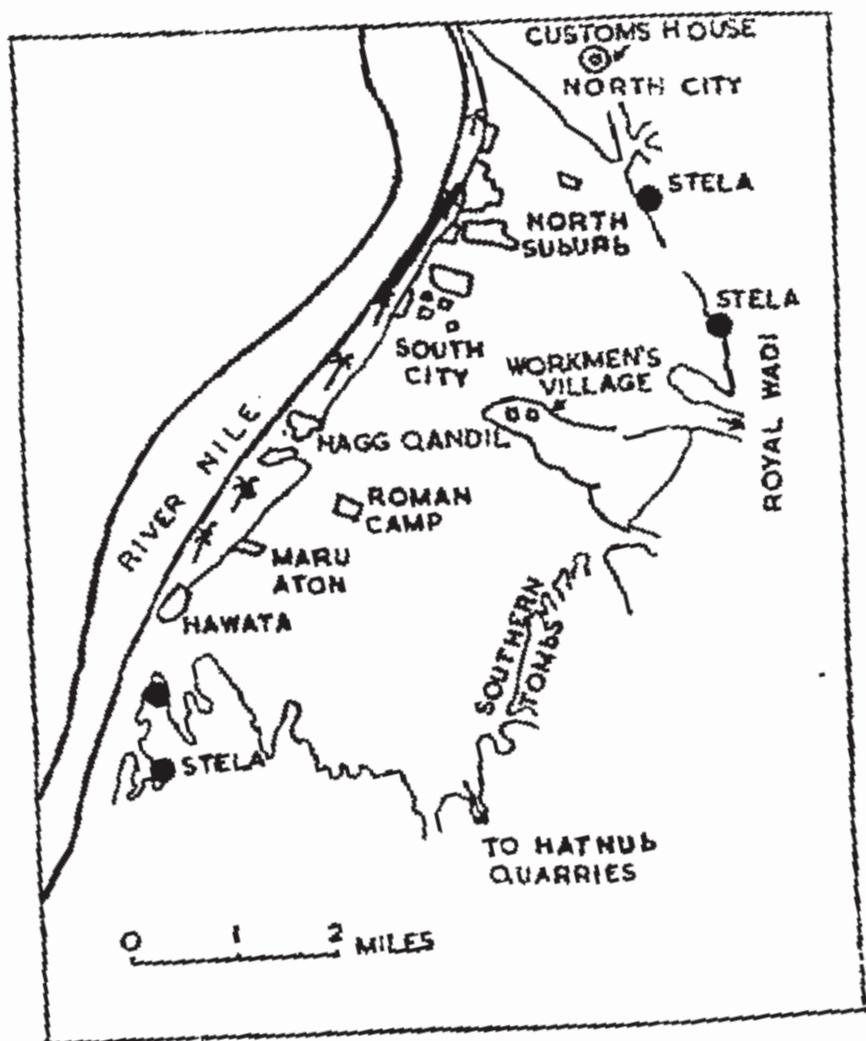


FIG. 3. AFTER PENDLEBURY.

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8. *Ibid*, p.50.
9. Allmon, op. cit. p.119.
10. *Ibid*, p.125.
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12. It should be pointed out that Lower Egypt, from the political and administrative point of view in ancient Egypt, was not simply identical with the Delta proper, but it included the transit zones around the apex of the Delta. *Ibid* p.34.
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