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Beatrix Midant-Reynes. *The Prehistory of Egypt: From the First Egyptians to the First Pharoahs*

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We can thank Mr. Ian Shaw for translating, and Blackwell’s for publishing, this 1992 work by an experienced French archeologist and Egyptologist. We have long left behind those pioneer Egyptologists who thought Egyptian civilization arose sans precursors. Prof. Midant-Reynes has brought us up-to-date on the genesis of the Egyptian experience.

The first chapter sets the prehistoric physical-geographical stage, back when the Nile’s delta did not protrude into the Mediterranean and an ur-Nile flowed somewhat west of the present river course.

Chapters 2 to 4 tell of the earliest evidence of human beings in the area, dating back some 300,000 years before the present. Attention is paid to archeological finds and problems of climatic fluctuations. Afrocentrists may note that the oldest skeletal remains are “somewhat negroid.”

In the Neolithic Era, population seems to have moved to the Nile whenever aridity made the Sahara inhospitable. This, along with contacts to the south and to the northeast via the Sinai, makes for interpretations that could benefit from more data yet to be unearthed. By the 5th to 4th millennia BC, proto-civilizations began to emerge with the Badarian and Naqada cultures. The latter had tombs and small cities and artisans serving the elite. Pastoralism was replaced by the cultivation of domestic crops. As Egyptian riverine cultures became unified, the Near East gradually became more a source of influence than regions further upstream.

Given the fuss Afrocentrists have made over Egypt as the first (and solidly Negroid) civilization, I wish the Prof. Midant-Reynes had paid a bit more attention to physical anthropological data, but that, alas for me, was not her focus. She has provided much, as an archeologist would, on tools and other human-produced material remains. For that let us be grateful.

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