



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

September 2018 Meeting
by Margaret Patterson

Egypt's Origins: The View from Mesopotamia and Iran **Paul Collins**

At the beginning of September Paul Collins came to talk to us about the influences that Uruk culture (in Mesopotamia) and Proto-Elamite culture (in Iran) had on Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt. He's not an Egyptologist - his research interests include the material culture of ancient Iraq and Iran in the late 4th Millennium BCE, and the transmission of artistic forms across the Near East and Egypt.

He began with a discussion of historical explanations and ideas about these influences. It begins, as so much of Egyptology does, with Petrie whose work on pottery from Naqada is still the foundation of our understanding of the chronology of Predynastic Egypt today. Petrie also worked at Koptos and Abydos - the royal tombs at Abydos date to the Early Dynastic period. They are an expression of the great power of the Egyptian state at this time and the resources it commanded - including associated burials of sacrificial victims. The site of Hierakonpolis is another key site in early Egypt, including both a settlement and burials which also demonstrate a centralisation of regional power at the site. This is ancient Nekhen, which Renee Friedman talked to the EEG about in November 2014 (my write up:

<https://necats.org/margaret/blog/2014/11/07/new-discoveries-hierakonpolis-renee-friedman-eeeg-meeting-talk>).



Several objects that define kingship in Egypt for a modern audience date to this period, and Collins showed us photographs of some of them. One is, of course, the Narmer palette with an early depiction of the smiting scene that kings used throughout the history of Pharaonic Egypt to show their power. The Scorpion macehead (picture left) now in the Ashmolean shows the king taking part in an irrigation ceremony, another part of the iconography of kingship. But along with this imagery that becomes part of the canon of Egyptian iconography there are other images from this time period that don't seem to "fit". For instance the decoration on the Painted Tomb (Tomb 100) at Hierakonpolis includes motifs that don't show up later in Egyptian imagery - for example in middle left of the picture overleaf you can see a man holding two beasts. This motif is also on the handle of a knife referred to as the Gebel al Arak knife. Another motif that shows up on both the

Narmer palette and the Two Dog palette (see picture page 5) as well as other places is that of serpopards - composite creatures with the body of a feline and the neck and head of a snake, often shown with entwined necks.



The background to this display in the Ashmolean Museum is a replica of the Painted Tomb at Hierakonpolis

These motifs all fit better with the contemporary iconography of Mesopotamia, rather than with that of Egypt. And it's not just the imagery - the distinctive architecture of Predynastic Egypt with niches and buttresses also has similarities to contemporary Mesopotamian architecture. In an Egyptian context it's referred to as the palace facade, and is found both in archaeological evidence and in imagery (like the Horus name of the king which is enclosed in a representation of a palace facade). In the Mesopotamian context it's referred to as the temple facade, and is again found in both architecture and imagery.

So there is a cultural connection here to be explained, and Petrie provided a theory - that Egyptian civilisation as we usually think of it is the result of the movement of a new race into Egypt at the end of the Predynastic period, specifically a northern (white) race. As Collins pointed out these days that's a racist idea, but in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries this was standard scientific thinking. Petrie and other archaeologists did a lot of measuring of skulls and assigning them to races to see what a population consisted of. Of course they assigned those with larger brain cases to white "civilised" people, and used this to back up the idea of a new race arriving from the north.

Petrie's explanation was accepted well into the 1960s, but in the 1970s and 80s this changed and scholarship shifted to looking at internal developments. And once scholars were looking for it there was plenty of evidence that the motifs and imagery of Egyptian civilisation had grown out of older Predynastic imagery that reflected local culture and the local environment. So it is now accepted that Egyptian civilisation

emerges from a long local tradition and was not imported by a new ruling class. There is, however, still a cultural connection with Mesopotamia that needs to be explained.

Having set the scene from the Egyptian perspective Collins now moved on to tell us about Mesopotamia during this time period (late 4th Millennium BCE). Mesopotamia is a Greek term for "land between rivers", and in the context of the ancient Near East it is a region that covers modern Iraq and eastern Syria. The key site in this period is Uruk, which is a city in southern Mesopotamia on the Euphrates river. This area of Mesopotamia is a vast river delta that is largely waterlogged. Transport is easy along the many river channels, although these are also prone to flooding. This is an environment with parallels to the Egyptian Delta. The river channels are also prone to flooding and will change course relatively often, as a result there are not many sites suitable for permanent settlement. Uruk is built on one of the more stable spots - today it is dry and far from the ocean, but when it was in its heyday it was on the river and closer to the open ocean. During the 4th Millennium BCE it was the largest concentrated urban settlement in the world.

Uruk was excavated in the early 20th Century. The main area of excavation was the centre of Uruk around the ziggurat (which is a structure from a later period than the late 4th Millennium BCE). There was a religious precinct around the ziggurat which does date back to the right period, that was called Eanna in later records. In this area of the city were several monumental buildings made of mudbrick. Collins demonstrated what he meant by "monumental" by showing us a plan of these buildings and then added the Parthenon onto the plan at the same scale. Each of these buildings was of a similar size to the Parthenon - built some 3000 years or more before it. They were made of very regular mudbricks, each about the size of a modern London brick. The structure was decorated with cone mosaics. These were made from clay cones which were baked and coloured on the flat end. Each cone was then pushed into the plaster. This isn't purely decorative, it also served to protect the mudbricks from the elements. The sheer amount of work required to build and then decorate buildings on this scale demonstrate the power available to make it happen.

During this period the society of Uruk began to develop technology for the administration of people and resources, and Collins talked us through some examples. One is the development of record keeping. First by collecting together tokens to represent the number of objects (or people etc), and then the development of proto-writing using a number of impressions in a clay tablet to represent the number plus a symbol to represent what was counted. Collins pointed out that these clay tablets with their grids of numbers are in their own way just like spreadsheets! Another technology was the use of a standard measure. This grew out of the practicalities of how bread was made - in Uruk bread was baked in pottery bowls called beveled rim bowls. These bowls were mass-produced in their thousands and discarded after use. As they were all the same size they became a standard measure, not just to measure out one portion of bread but a portion of other things too. The Uruk culture also began to use stamp seals to demonstrate ownership of goods or to control access to rooms.

Collins told us that at this time the hierarchy begins to be expressed through imagery. Simple stamp seals developed into cylinder seals which let the seal owner show off their status via more elaborate imagery. This sort of imagery also begins to appear on vessels, which have long registers of imagery that look almost like seals rolled out.

In the 4th Millennium BCE Uruk type features start to be found in places that are quite distant from Uruk itself. These sites in places like eastern Syria were excavated in the later 20th Century. Collins took us through a few examples to show us the different sorts of contexts that Uruk artefacts and technology show up in. The first place he talked about was Habuba Kabira in modern Syria. It's a long way north of Uruk on the

Euphrates River, perhaps a week's journey at the time. It's also a very different environment to that of Uruk - instead of alluvial plain it is situated in a steppeland. The settlement here is laid out from scratch, in a similar layout to Uruk using the same standard Uruk mudbricks. There are monumental buildings just like those at Uruk, cone mosaics and all. It's a very large scale settlement, completely unlike anything in the local area at that date and uninhabited before the Uruk-type settlement is built. As Collins pointed out, the fact that the people of Uruk were able to do this demonstrates the incredible amount of power and resources at the disposal of their elites.

Hacinebi Tepe is a different sort of site where Uruk culture begins to show up around 3400 BCE. It's in the foothills of the Taurus mountains and there is a local settlement there that pre-dates the arrival of Uruk features. It is sophisticated and administratively organised in its own right before beveled rim bowls start to show up in some areas of the settlement. After this there are some specific areas of the settlement where the Uruk artefacts are found, and the two cultures appear to have co-existed side by side with no mixing for a long time.

Tel Brak (in modern Syria) was excavated in the late 1990s through to the 21st Century. It was very ancient by the late 4th Millennium BCE dating back to at least the 5th Millennium BCE. Again in the time period Collins was discussing Uruk pottery began to show up in the archaeological record of the city, and after this one area of the settlement has the features of late Uruk culture, with an Uruk style monumental building in another area of the settlement.

The last of the sites that Collins told us about was Godin Tepe which is in modern Iran. It sits on the trade routes to the east which would later become known as the Silk Road. The site is a circular fort that overlooks the valley - controlling passage along that route. It's a local settlement, almost all locally made except a few Uruk style vessels and administrative tools.

Collins summarised this last part of the talk by discussing how this evidence is interpreted. The various sites are "colonised" over a 500 year period, and to varying degrees. So clearly this is not one single expansion and perhaps not one explanation. The traditional explanation is control of trade, in particular of stone, metal and wood. But there's no real evidence in Uruk of this trade, so there must be some other explanation. Other possibilities include the idea that these settlements are something to do with textile production and trade. Uruk cylinder seals generally have designs related to labour on them, and they are often related to textile production so this must have been important to the economy of Uruk. It is also possible that these settlements were to exploit the pasturelands of the north, or perhaps a straightforward migration of people to establish a new colony (like the Greeks and Phoenicians did much later).

The key point is that southern Mesopotamia was the core of the Uruk culture settlements, with some further afield peripheral sites. Some of these were closer to Egypt and so provide routes for contact between the two cultures.

After a break for coffee and cake Collins returned to the connections between Egyptian culture and Uruk culture, first posing the question: Why would Egypt want connections with Mesopotamia? At the time Egypt had all the resources it needed to function and for the elites to express their power. The earliest evidence of a connection between the two regions comes from cylinder seals. These are, by design, small and portable, so their arrival in Egypt is possibly accidental and doesn't necessarily require the direct intervention of people. A seal could have fallen into goods that were being traded. These start showing up in the Egyptian archaeological record around 3000 BCE, in graves. They are decorated in the same way as the Mesopotamian ones. But whereas in Uruk they are administrative tools, in Egypt they are treated as exotic and precious

objects. They appear in Egyptian graves in association with lapis lazuli beads, and Collins explained that this is the key to the Egyptian connection with Mesopotamia. Lapis lazuli is only found in Afghanistan and in both Egypt and Uruk it was associated with the gods as well as being immensely valuable due to its scarcity. So this is something that is worth trading for across such vast distances.

The imagery on the cylinder seals from Uruk parallel the "odd" imagery in Predynastic Egypt that Collins opened the talk with. The boxes that contained the lapis lazuli were almost certainly sealed with impressions from cylinder seals, which provides another route for this imagery to come to Egypt (as well as on the seals themselves). So by the association with lapis lazuli the imagery would become high status in its own right - and would be added to local Egyptian elite objects to express their "otherworldly" status. For instance the Mesopotamian style of art in long registers which developed out of seal impressions begins to show up in Egyptian art. Collins showed us examples of combs with parallel lines of animals - local African animals, but this new Mesopotamian layout.



Two Dog Palette, front (left) and reverse (right)

Critically there is no indication that the imagery is accompanied by people, or by the culture of Uruk. Instead the imagery is used in different ways and with different associations in the two cultures. For instance the serpopards on the Two Dog Palette (see above) are under the control of dogs, and on the Narmer Palette they are controlled by people. This is Egyptian royal propaganda - showing that these otherworldly and exotic beasts are under the control of the king.

Before he wrapped up his talk Collins fulfilled the promise of the title and told us a bit about Iran. Between 3200 and 2900 BCE the culture in the Zagros Mountains was that

which we now call the Proto-Elamite culture. This region is also on the lapis lazuli trade route, so Collins said it was another piece in the jigsaw puzzle of evidence for the "odd" imagery in Predynastic Egypt. They made use of some of the Uruk administrative technology - archaeologists have found clay tablets with Proto-Elamite writing on them, which is a unique script that has not yet been deciphered. They also used cylinder seals. Interestingly the imagery on these seals does not include any human figures. When they wanted to represent human activities they would use an animal in the place of the figure of a person. Collins showed us examples which included a standing figure of a bull in a boat, and of a standing bull holding two lions in a similar pose to the one on the wall of the Painted Tomb at Hierakonpolis (see photo earlier in this review). And if you look at the reverse of the Two Dog Palette, near the bottom left is an animal standing up and playing some sort of flute - a piece of Proto-Elamite imagery in a very Egyptian piece of art.

Collins concluded his talk by summing up all the threads of evidence. He said that in this period there is a sense of Mesopotamian and Proto-Elamite culture feeding into Egypt as part of the elite culture. When the Uruk culture ceases to be an international phenomenon at the end of the 4th Millennium BCE Egypt also abandons the Mesopotamian and Proto-Elamite flavoured imagery. In the Early Dynastic period there is a gap in imports of lapis lazuli to Egypt and Collins said that this lack of trade with the East meant that the imagery was also not reaching Egypt. So this period of the late 4th Millennium BCE was a unique moment where the expansion of southern Mesopotamian culture fed into the emerging Egyptian elite culture as exotic status symbols.

This was a really interesting talk - Collins gave us a view of the world outside Egypt's borders that early Egyptian culture was interacting with. And he also showed how the early Egyptian elites had something in common with more modern people - the impulse to use Mesopotamian imagery in their time sounds like it was born from much the same impulse as the Egyptianising architecture and design of the 19th and 20th Centuries in the West.