CHAPTER II

EARLY EGYPT—PREHISTORIC AND DYNASTIC

It is not possible to trace step by step the process by which any style of architecture first arose, partly because the earlier and imperfect structures of perishable materials have generally been replaced by more perfect and durable ones, and partly because, when they have survived, historical records and inscriptions which would enable us to assign dates to them only occur after a considerable degree of mechanical or artistic skill has been attained. The one art which affords material help to the archaeologist is that of ceramics, for there occasionally occur remains of earthenware extending from neolithic times, to those which may be called historical, the progressive character of which enables us to assign, with more or less certainty, at least comparative dates to the successive strata in which they are found. The main fact which has become obvious is that long before historical data are available, a well developed and widely spread civilization prevailed round the eastern coasts in the islands of the Mediterranean, and in the fluvial region of Mesopotamia, traditions of which—long familiar from Greek mythology and Biblical history—have been to a large extent corroborated by excavations during the past and present centuries.

Of the foci of this ancient civilization, Egypt is that which has left at once the most imposing remains and
the oldest decipherable inscriptions: facts which are due to the existence in the regions south of the Nile-delta of extensive beds of limestone, sandstone and granite, and to the predilection of the inhabitants or their rulers for monumental building and permanent records.1

There are, at the same time, abundant traces of a more primitive human life in Egypt. Prehistoric cemeteries have been explored, in which bodies, unlike those of historic times, were buried in a contracted position;2 and manufactories of palaeolithic stone implements have been found on the desert border of the Nile-valley. Of a later date, when metal had already come into use, occur specimens of remarkable stone knives and of pottery decorated with designs of human, animal, and structural forms.

1 The remarkable preservation of many of the monuments of ancient Egypt is due partly to the dryness of the climate and partly to the isolation of the inhabited tract by the desert, which kept it for some thousands of years almost entirely free from barbarian invasion.

2 A specimen of this contracted form of burial may be seen in the British Museum. There is evidence that the custom was not absolutely abandoned in the IVth dynasty. The inference is that it is due to a more primitive race which had not been completely amalgamated. The whole subject is treated in detail by Messrs. King and Hall, “Egypt and Western Asia,” ch. i and p. 83.
Whatever may have been the aboriginal race in the Nile-valley, the distribution of the primitive cemeteries, and a comparison of the earlier and later neolithic remains together with evidence of mingled elements both in the language and religion of the later Egyptians, tend to show that before the end of the neolithic period Egypt was divided into two kingdoms, and was invaded more than once by an Asiatic and probably proto-Semitic race, who introduced a higher civilization, including a system of writing, and superior skill in mechanical crafts and the arts of life. But at a time when it is possible to assign something like definite dates and names to the kings, when what is known as dynastic history begins, probably about the middle of the 4th millennium B.C. the Egyptian people must already have attained to a considerable degree of civilization, and practised the art of building on a large scale.

The dynastic history of Egypt appears to fall into

1 Breasted, p. 14.
2 K. and H., p. 34.
3 Slate slabs of this date, like the one illustrated above, show on plan fortified enclosures surrounded by buttresses or towers, not unlike buildings of which remains exist in Mesopotamia.
three main epochs which are generally divided as follows.¹

1. The Old Kingdom comprising the first eleven dynasties extending from some time in the 4th millenium to the beginning of the 2nd millennium B.C.²

2. The Middle Kingdom comprising dynasties XII to XVII, and extending approximately from 2000 to 1600 B.C.

3. The New Empire, comprising the succeeding dynasties to the end of the twenty-sixth (525 B.C.), at which date Egypt fell for a time under Persian domination. A few more native dynasties are registered, interrupted by internal wars and foreign invasions until 332 B.C., when Egypt, then a Persian satrapy, was conquered or reinstated as a kingdom by Alexander the Great. After his death it was ruled by the descendants of his representative, Ptolemy, until 30 B.C., when it became a Roman province.

The first king of the first dynasty is generally said, in accordance with Manetho's list, to be Menes or Men. It is more than probable that he is identical with Aha-

men, who with his contemporary or successor Narmer

¹ See page 10. The list of so-called dynasties is due to Manetho, a priest, who wrote a history of Egypt in the time of Ptolemy I, about 300 B.C. Though it is known that some of his dynasties are wrongly indicated, his classification is universally accepted as a convenient formula for the grouping of the royal houses.

² The actual chronology of the first eleven dynasties is a subject of much doubt, the various systems which have been proposed differing by as much as 2,500 years. In these pages the system which gives the shortest dates has been in the main followed. In the XIIth dynasty the dates are said to be capable of verification by astronomical calculation, but it is only in the XXth dynasty that the several systems practically coincide. See Breasted, pp. 597-8.
came from the south, and by conquest added the Delta, the chief city of which was Buto, not far from the Mediterranean coast, to the extensive kingdom already established in the upper valley of the Nile. The southern capital was probably originally at Nekhen, afterwards called Hierakonpolis, nearly 400 miles south of the Delta, but later at Teni or This near Abydos, 150 miles lower down the Nile. Mena is said to have built Memphis, and transferred the capital to the north; but whatever the earlier history of this town may have been, it is probable that it did not supersede Buto as the royal city until the IIIrd dynasty, to which the earliest royal tombs in that neighbourhood are assigned. Before that the kings seem to have been buried at Abydos, near the ancient capital This. The remains of two brick-built fortresses of the 1st or IIInd dynasty, one of which is called by the Arabs Shunet-ez-Zebib, show that the early kings had residences at Abydos. The heavily buttressed walls illustrate the plans of northern fortresses shown on the sculptured slate slabs which commemorate the conquests of Mena or Aha and Narmer.\(^1\) Timber was also used more than some writers have supposed, and was probably more plentiful during the earliest dynasties than afterwards. There is evidence that tombs of the 1st dynasty were both floored and roofed with boards, but it was superseded for such purposes in the IIIrd dynasty by stone.\(^2\)

\(^1\) K. and H., pp. 50 and 89, and Murray's Handbook, p. 362.