

BRIDGES and BALANCES

by

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I am pleased to have the opportunity of addressing a learned audience in this great University of Cairo, and to be visiting that portion of the earth's surface we refer to as «The Cradle of Civilization». I have the honour to belong to the permanent full-time teaching staff of the University of Melbourne, within its Department of Middle Eastern Studies. In that Department we define our area of interest and study as all the territory lying between the valleys of the Indus and the Nile, on an East-West line, and all the territory lying between the Caspian Basin and the headwaters of the Nile, on a North-South line. We have language courses and non-language studies, for three years in the Ordinary B.A. degree, and four years in the B.A. degree with honours. We also have post-graduate studies for the research degrees of M.A. and Ph. D.

There is an interesting geological connexion between Australia and the Middle East. In Palaeozoic and Mesozoic times much of the Middle East was covered by a vast Tethyan sea which eventually deposited successive layers of limestone. This was changed and rechanged by geological movements and great morphological factors which prepared the Middle East for its role as «The Cradle of Civilization». In due course Tethys disappeared and there began those gigantic folding pressures which were to change the face of this one segment of the globe, all the way from Southern Europe and North Africa to the far continent of Australia in the Southern hemisphere. This folding took place in part because of the pre-Cambrian rock-shields, — between which the pressures built up and against which the folding took place. In the North you have the Bohemian, Ukrainian and Siberian shields, and in the South the Nubian, the Arabian, the Deccan and the Australian shields. The Australian shield seems to have served a slightly different role from the others, in that it appears to have acted as an end-buffer, against the enormous mass of which the gigantic chain of anticline and syncline folding-movements came to a halt. This left Australia sitting out on a continental 'limb' in the Pacific, Southern and Indian oceans.

On the northern side of the Middle East these gigantic east-west folding movements left behind great mountain chains; on the southern side and along the centre, great basins, valleys, plains, plateaux, bays and gulfs formed, into which great rivers poured. Further minor folding and major north-south fissures formed, creating zones of weakness along which there were lava flows, and as part of which there developed also the enormously significant Rift Valley, the Red Sea and the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Basin. Geological and geomorphological actions were thus 'kind' to the Middle East and somewhat 'unkind' to Australia. I mean by this that all these changes in the earth's crust, right up to the most recent Pleistocene period, left the Middle East well designed for its role as 'the cradle of civilization', but left Australia as a kind of continental 'backwater' — the last to be discovered by modern man, albeit with unique flora and fauna because of this very continental disconnexion.

All these things have an important meaning for history. Even the origin of man himself seems to be linked with the great limestone areas left behind by the Tethys sea. But we are thinking here about the earliest history. History is based upon a number of factors; but the written records of man are vital to the historiographer. So history began at Sumer, because that is where writing began, (though of course we have found out about Sumeria comparatively recently). Sumer left a story and a literature on clay, from the late 4th. millennium down to the end of the 3rd. millennium B.C., and this entitles it to be classed as the first civilization. Close behind it, of course, came the great Egyptian civilization, with its records carved in stone.

Now, in this lecture, we are not interested in playing off against one another the civilizations of Sumeria and Ancient Egypt, but rather in the fact that they are chronologically and geographically close. Both had glorious beginnings and enormous impacts upon later civilizations; both have question marks over the sources of their emergence as civilizations. Comparatively speaking their beginnings were sudden and, to modern scholarship, still somewhat unexplained. And here at this point we return to the title of our lecture and come also to declare our aim. Our point is that scholarship does not need to look merely for specially equipped migrating peoples, one of whom settled in the Nile valley, and who brought with them the main elements of their future civilizations. Scholarship does not need either to swing to the other extreme, seeking a civilization in isolation by virtue of its people's inherent intelligence. It seems rather to be a matter of international trading activities and the reactions engendered by them in the two areas where the

lines of trade converge. At the risk of over-simplification, we are indicating here what we consider to be two fundamental elements which are perhaps in danger of being overlooked: 'Bridges and Balances'. The first is physical — geographical and geomorphological; and the second is conceptual.

In common speech a bridge is a man-made structure which gives passage over a stream of water. Here, however, we are taking 'bridge' as any geographical feature on land or sea which spans, breaks through or facilitates a passage over or around, gaps and barriers. Land itself, with its deserts and mountain ranges, has provided the greatest gaps and barriers to man's early trading and progress, so that in a sense, rivers, waterways, gulfs and calm seas were the bridges that helped early man to overcome the land-barriers. The Middle East should sometimes be examined with the map up-side-down, because when the map is turned around the other way we are able to see more readily the 'bridges' as they converge upon the Middle East. Both Sumer and Egypt were the most favourably situated countries and became great trading centers for man's early commercial activities between three continents and one sub-continent. There were certainly a number of highly important land routes supplying both areas, through mountain passes, around deserts and marshes: from Europe via the Turkish and Caucasian passes; from Asia via the Fertile Crescent and across the plateaux of Iran; and from Africa via the Sudan and via Libya. Nevertheless, it was surely the waterways that specially favoured both areas from the earliest trading times, by means of gulfs, seas and vast river systems. In these two countries in particular peoples, goods and services mixed, and cultures intermingled, and the resulting reactions would bring about a metamorphosis of society, in the beginning gradually, but often swiftly.

We see the process of developing ideas from a mixing of cultures in the various changes and developments in pottery types. A final culture in a given area may well have a high degree of homogeneity. However, the ideas and the inspiration often come from a distant culture. In Egypt's early dynastic Narmer palette, for example, one can see signs of Sumerian influence, although Egyptian art quickly developed in its own way thereafter. Despite the homogeneity, it is easy to underestimate and even to overlook the important initial role of geography and commerce. That considerable trading activity on an inter-continental level did take place as early as mid-fourth millennium down to mid-third millennium (and of course later,) seems to be the correct inference from a number of factors.

First of all, the geographical facilities ('bridges') were there. The question is, however, whether these were being used sufficiently early for international trade to have made a vital contribution to the birth of civilization. We have

already indicated the Narmer palette as indicating the early existence of communications and influence between Sumeria and Archaic Egypt. We might also mention the probability of a direct influence upon the Saqqara pyramid from the Sumerian Zikkurats, — in terms of structural design. Thereafter of course, the structural design of the Egyptian pyramids went their own way, and in any case their purpose and their materials seem always to have been different. And there is also the evidence of the Arak knife - that early example of Egyptian carving skills. It is most interesting indeed from the point of view of our thesis here, because the scenes on one side depict the ships and men of Sumeris and Egypt locked together in battle. More important evidence still of early international reading converging upon Sumeris and Egypt comes from etymology. Word borrowing has operated down the ages, from one language into another, because of the power of long-established usage. Borrowed words are extremely difficult to displace, despite the usual efforts to do so by national interests, because of the power of common speech.

We will now briefly examine the etymology of two words still in current use in certain parts of the Middle East, the first of which has even come through to modern English, via Old Saxon, viz. the word «ape». It is now a specialized word for a specific group of animals, but it goes back to a Greek word : κῆβος and κῆπος, both having the general meaning of the order of monkey. The Greeks borrowed it from the Middle East. The common semitic word for 'monkey' goes back to the Akkadian ugupa. So you have the Hebrew gef, Syriac qupâ and Arabic qard; but none of these is Semitic, and you have Egyptian gyf and earlier still Sumerian ugubi. The interesting thing here is that monkeys were not native to the mesopotamian valley. There were perhaps monkeys in South Arabia and certainly in Africa. There was however a fascination for the monkey in Ancient Egypt and Sumeria, as evidenced by the story of the 'Ship-wrecked Sailor' from Egypt of the early Middle Kingdom and other things; and from Sumeria there is the simile : 'like the monkey of the music-hall of Eridu, that was thrown out and had to find its food on the rubbish-heap'. Now, it is obvious that the Sumerian word ugubi 'monkey' must have come into the country with the importation of the monkey itself; The import therefore could not have been Arabian or African. However, when we turn to Sanskrit our problem is solved, because there the word for monkey is kapi. So the first Sumerian monkey came from India, and the process seems to have been repeated in Egypt, probably later and through Sumeria. The indications here are that there was trading in monkeys at least as early as the end of the fourth millennium, and possibly earlier.

Our second etymological case is the Semitic equivalent of the English word «lyre». Some years ago, the German Semitic linguist Noldecke, in his «Mandaische Grammatik», questioned the Semitic origin of the Mandaeen word *kiurā*, lyre. The same word occurs in Aramaic as *kinara*, in Syriac *kenara* and Hebrew *kinner*. The word is also represented in Ugaritic, *k-n-r*, and in Egyptian *knr*. And clearly from one of these sources we get the Greek word *κίβυρα*. (*kinura*) The stringed instrument, such as the lyre and the harp, seem to have had a special place in both Egypt and Sumeria, as evidenced by the famous carving of the Blind Harpist in the Temple of Hatshepsut at Der el Bahri in the XVIII Dyn., and at a much earlier period, by the Golden Lyre of Ur in the first half of the Third millennium B.C.

It seems that the same pattern of etymology as for monkey has also to be applied to 'lyre'. That is to say, the original is to be found in the Sanskrit tongue, where the word for lyre is *kimmari*. Similar conclusions are to be drawn here, as for 'monkey'.

The geography and geomorphology of the Middle East is a vital factor in any consideration of the emergence of civilization there, because it induced international trading at a significantly early date. If there be also any human factor that was decisive in bringing about the birth of civilization, it would seem to be the concept of 'balance', i.e. of good order, just weight, and justice in disputations. This factor is common to both Sumeria and Egypt, and seems to be a factor in the founding of all later civilizations. The sense of good order would be evoked by trading also. And as justice developed and manifested itself, so the trading developed even more in the favourable climate of the recognition and protection of rights. Indeed, we can say, perhaps, that the interaction of trading and good order played a major role in the development of writing, which was the crucial factor that led to civilization. Pictorial itemizing and the checker's tick, could well have given encouragement to the concept and formation of words, and the development of language would itself promote further trading and the promulgation of justice.

I believe that «Bridges and Balances», as outlined here, have been vital elements in the creation of every civilization, and in particular the first two civilizations. First, comes geographical and geomorphological advantage, then commercial trading, followed by justice. What minimal advantage of human genius has been involved has never been so great as to ward off the inevitable destruction of what it has helped to create.