

Re-materialising “state formation”: Hierakonpolis 2.0

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(PLATE 1)

The paper discusses the potential of a cross-institutional online database centred on objects from Hierakonpolis. The site is pivotal for understanding the emergence of Pharaonic kingship and archaic states in North Eastern Africa and the Middle East during the late 4th and early 3rd millennium BCE. While objects such as the Narmer palette and the ivory figurines from the temple area of Hierakonpolis are crucial in the debate, the brief excavation reports produced by J. Quibell and F. Green obscure their archaeological context. This has prevented a “thick” understanding of the evidence necessary to substantiate swift theoretical assumptions. It is argued that the database will help define a local perspective on large-scale social transformation and contextualise modern abstract notions such as “state formation” in the material environment of the people living in the ancient settlement. This underexplored perspective shows that the database would combine a clear research aim with the collection of data and objects. The database may stimulate fresh fieldwork and conservation at the site, which is suffering badly from natural and human destruction. The appeal of the exceptionally well preserved objects from Hierakonpolis to museum visitors offers an opportunity to channel public interest in archival research and increase awareness of the need for site and object conservation.

Local horizons of “state formation” in the material world

Hierakonpolis, ancient Nekhen, is one of the central places of Pharaonic “state formation” and a key site for exploring the emergence of early complex societies in cross-cultural research.¹ The Predynastic and a few later remains are located on the modern flat desert strip and along the wadis leading up to the high plateau of the desert (pl. I, 1). The Early Dynastic temple and town area lies in the modern cultivation opposite Nekheb / Elkab, the ancient twin city of Hierakonpolis. Today, the village Kom el-Ahmar occupies part of the site.

The temple and town area was first excavated by the British J. Quibell and F. Green in 1897-99, revisited by J. Garstang and H. Jones in 1905 and by Lansing

1. Cf. e.g., N. YOFFEE, *Myths of the Archaic State. Evolution of the Earliest Cities, States, and Civilizations*, Cambridge 2005; E.C. KÖHLER, *Theories of State Formation*, in W. WENDRICH (ed.), *Egyptian Archaeology*, Oxford - Malden - Chichester 2010, pp. 36-54.