Bestock

Reponse to Baines “Origins of Egyptian Kingship”

This week’s readings fell, for me, into two basic categories: things that make me really happy to work on the rise of kingship, and things that make me irritated and sick of working on this period. Sadly, the Baines fell in the latter camp. I found the chapter (which I have read more than once before, which probably didn’t help) to be simultaneously obfusc and not particularly innovative – we are hashing over the same ground and same questions again and again with very little new data or new points of view. (My reaction to the Seidlemeyer, which I haven’t read for much longer, was precsiely the opposite – here we have new material! And new ways of thinking about old questions! And even some new questions!)

Baines attempts to present a synthesis of early institutions of kingship. He acknowledges the inherent problem of using iconographic evidence (which is really all we have in many ways, especially for early – boy do I prefer Kahl’s more systematic approach, though Kahl never really developed an argument out of his cataloging). To me the main tensions of this period still have not been adequately dealt with. What are the relationships between kingship, symbols of kingship, and a centralized state? Baines of course flirts around the edges of this – you can’t discuss the period without doing so – but I find some of his reconstructions problematic. For instance, he says that symbols that are later associated with kings cannot be taken as evidence of kingship in the earlier parts of the Naqada period because the society was insufficiently stratified for it to have evolved such an institution. For later Naqada, however, iconography of kingship IS enough for us to be confident that there are kings. In this case, the argument for or against kingship has little to do with iconography and everything to do with social complexity. But as Baines himself says, we are in trouble when really trying to reconstruct the evolution of social complexity in Egypt (nothing but graves). And we are still then lacking a mechanism by which this imagery is first evolved and later made to represent kingship.

Also troubling for me is Baines’ somewhat muddy appraoch to the relationship between a “cultural” and a “political” unification. Again this is a very old tension. On page 102 Baines says quite explicitly that the “cultural” unification of late Naqada II could not have taken place without military action organized by a king – effectively this denies that there is a difference between cultural and political unification and situates the development of a unified state polity much earlier than is traditional. He plays with the idea of a notion of “unity” here (I think this is a little dangerous). He goes on to sya that ‘since later Egypt never conceived of itself internally as an ‘empire’, unification may not have been envisaged as the conquest of ‘foreign’ palces, whether or not that was originally the case.” I find this somewhat contradictory to his immediately preceding argument that cultural unification could not have happened without political unification. It strikes me that in fact, if the country had not already been culturally unified at the time of political unification, then it very much would have seemed like conquoring foreigners. I point this out only as what I perceive to be an inconsistency in a fairly major argument, not because I am certain that I have figured out the relationship between the cultural and political unifications. I would like to discuss them both and their relationships to one another in class.

In sum, I find this chapter a useful summary of the key evidence. That is really important – he’s not missing much that can be brought to bear on this discussion. But I do not think he has answered his own questions, and I am still very unsure of the relationships between the types of evidence he cites and the types of institutions he sees growing. One thing that I do find very useful is Baines’ strong condemnation of the notion that “monumental” depictions should be read as anything other than commemorative in a broad sense. I am glad we can discard the notion of historicity in the Narmer palette.

I will be quite interested to hear Julia’s talk and then discuss Baines’ contention that rock drawings are “peripheral in relation to major royal monuments”.