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Feature Story

Nekhen, Greek Hierakonpolis

By Marie Parsons

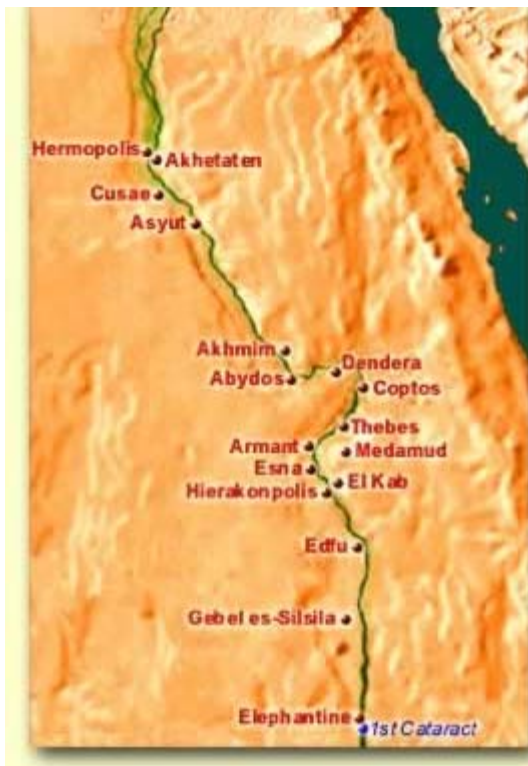


The ancient site of this city, called Nekhen by the Egyptians, its Greek name Hierakonpolis meaning 'city of the falcon', was long venerated by the ancient Egyptians as the early capital of the Kingdom of Upper Egypt. Just as [Naqada](#) or Nubt was the city of Set, Hierakonpolis or Nekhen was the city of the Falcon, first called *Nekheny* the Nekhenite and represented with two tall plumes on its head. He was assimilated very early with the falcon [Horus](#), patron god of kingship, and Nekhen remained a cult center for Horus even after it was supplanted by [Edfu](#) as both provincial capital and temple center. This may have led to one of several outbreaks of strife during the [First Intermediate Period](#). Edfu was taken over for a while by the governor of Hierakonpolis, who was named Ankhtifiy.

Nekhen lay in Upper Egypt, south of Naqada, and Thebes, and across the Nile from [El-Kab](#), which became the city of Nekhbet the vulture deity and one of the two Ladies who guarded the kingship. It lay north of Aswan and just north of Edfu.

Nekhen's history begins around 4000 BCE, when local hunter-gatherers were joined by farming and herding "colonists." Recent explorations have shown that by 3500 BCE Hierakonpolis was the most important settlement along the [Nile](#), a vibrant, bustling city stretching for over 2 miles along the edge of the floodplain. At about that time, the population of Hierakonpolis seems to have increased by large bands of people migrating into the Nile Valley from the outlying areas. This may have been the final days of the old nomadic hunting way of life exchanging for the settled life of plenty in the Valley as





climactic conditions and the fertility of the floodplain for agriculture pushed the people into the Valley.

The town remained important into the early part of the Old Kingdom, and though it declined as a settlement, its temple to Horus of Nekhen was rebuilt in both the Middle and New Kingdoms. Three or four known tombs dating from the New Kingdom have been found here, including that of Hormose. This tomb gives evidence that the temple of Horus had been renewed by [Rameses XI](#), who had followed the building efforts of [Thutmose III](#) five centuries earlier.

A title with [Predynastic](#) significance was *iri-Nkhn*, "keeper of Nekhen". Perhaps "keeper of Nekhen" had prestige when Nekhen was a power center, but by the Early Dynastic period, the meaning of the title may have been lost,

leaving it merely an honorary designation, for example, it was a title held by Nedjemankh in the reign of [Djoser](#).

At its greatest growth Nekhen contained perhaps 7500 inhabitants, already equipped with many features that would later come to typify Egyptian culture and form the basis of its economy. Stretching for over 2 miles along the edge of the floodplain, the city held many neighborhoods, filled with farmers, potters, masons, weavers and other craftsmen, and officials. Signs of the outbuildings of a large farm have recently been discovered, including flint figurines of animals.

On the north side of the town stretched a large installation of pottery vats for brewing wheat-based beer stretched here. It is estimated that this brewery could produce about 300 gallons per day, a ration for 200 people.

A potter's house was discovered at Hierakonpolis, consisting of a man-made rectangular house, surrounded by a wall, with an oven. One particular house and workshop was uncovered in 1978. It belonged to a potter, who signed his pots by impressing a crescent-shaped thumbprint into the wet clay just below the rim. Some 300,000 fragments of these pots were found littering the ground. The house was rectangular and semi-subterranean, measuring 13.1 X 11.4 feet, built of posts and mud-coated reeds.

A fire must have swept from the kiln to the house, 16 feet away, and hardened the soil and mud bricks, reducing the posts and mats to charcoal and ash. The house was then rebuilt in stone.

Hierakonpolis increased in population as it benefited from close contacts with Lower Nubia, giving the Hierakonpolis chieftains control of or at least access to trade routes to sub-Saharan Africa. Evidence has also been recently uncovered indicating mining and trade access to the mineral resources of the eastern desert.

The first discovery a hundred years ago of rich caches of discarded temple furnishings on low mound within the modern village seemed to confirm these ancient traditions of this settlement being the early center of the 3rd Upper Egyptian nome. Since a century ago, more recent work has been uncovering objects that slowly expand the knowledge of how these people lived and died.

The macehead of [Scorpion](#) and the palette and macehead of Narmer were found in 1898 by [J.E. Quibell](#) and F.W. Green at the "main deposit" of the temple of Horus in Hierakonpolis. The Two Dog palette, possibly dating earlier than that of Narmer, a number of small ivories inscribed with the names of Kings [Narmer](#) and [Den](#), two statues of [King Khasekhemwy](#) of the [2nd Dynasty](#), and inscribed stone vessels dating to his reign, have also been found.

A seated red pottery lion and the great gold plumed falcon representing Nekheny or Horus have also been found. Many ivory objects such as seals, human and animal figurines in the shapes of scorpions, baboons and dogs, and vessels, wands, plaques and inlays were found at Nekhen, prompting scholars to intimate the perhaps the city was a center for ivory carving craft.

One area excavated within the town yielded almost 4000 flint pieces including a tool kit of scrapers, microdrills, bifacial knives, serrated sickle blades, crescent drills, all for the production of stone vessels. At the same level were found more than 30 carnelian nodules. Carnelian is not a local stone, it has to be imported from the Eastern Desert, so here is more evidence that Nekhen may have been a trade center for exotic goods.

Hierakonpolis remained an important cult center for the god Horus, symbolic of the living king. A large ceremonial center was excavated out on the low desert, which dates back to early Naqada II. It has been interpreted as a temple, closely resembling shrines depicted on seals from the [First Dynasty](#). At the end of Naqada II, religious activity locally was apparently relocated to the center of the walled town. This so far is Egypt's earliest temple, occupying about one-sixth of the entire town area. A circular stone restraining wall and adjoining paved area of compacted earth reinforced by rough sandstone blocks have been found, as have the remains of limestone column bases or pedestals for statues.

In the large oval courtyard probably stood a solitary pole displaying the image of the god, while at its base, on makeshift platforms, the early kings of Upper Egypt viewed their bounty and the sacrificial slaughters for the falcon god: cattle, goats, crocodiles and even fish. Around the courtyard, in little workshops, trained craftsmen transformed raw materials from all parts of the region into luxury goods such as ivory boxes, polished stone jars, jewelry and ceremonial weapons.

The central shrine consisted of three rooms, its façade made up of four huge timber pillars that may have stood at least 20 feet high. With colored mats for the walls, the shrine must have dominated not only the temple complex, but the town itself.

Some scholars believe that Nekhen had contact with the city of Uruk in Mesopotamia. The wall enclosing the temple off from the rest of the city is but more similar to the style in Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia and the Gulf were the only two other places at this time or since that had this Temple Oval, which in both the Near East and in Nekhen was a semi-circular walled structure which contained virgin sand on which the earliest shrines

were raised.

Also, elements similar in Mesopotamian reliefs and paintings are first seen here at Nekhen. Examples of these are "the master of beasts", and the niched facades on the walls. An elaborately niched mud-brick façade within the town has been interpreted as the gateway to a palace, or at least an administrative center of the early state. The gateway wall was no less than 34 feet thick in places and consisted of a double skin of mud brick. Both as a defensive structure and a piece of urban development, the gateway shows the same niches and recessed and buttressed paneled walls that were used on the serekhs.



Tomb 100, called "The Painted Tomb", now lost, contained wall murals that showed similarity to Near Eastern themes. The confronted animals, the bovine turning back its head, the whirling birds, horned beasts, the two warriors with bucklers, all typical of the Gulf and Elam and the Arabian mainland. It showed scenes of hunting and the mastery of animals, fights between small groups of men, a sacrifice and several boats, including a rather non-Egyptian looking one. The figures engaged in hand-to-hand combat held maces of a type used by later culture, and in fact the Naqada II culture brought in the pear-shaped macehead which replaced the flat disc-shaped macehead used earlier.

Work progressing on the cemetery 6 burial area out in the desert show that this cemetery was used and reused. Between 1979 and 1985, Cemetery 6 was found to contain twelve tombs from the Naqada I and early Naqada II period. The tombs belonged to members of the local elite. Some of the tombs still contained valuable goods despite being heavily disturbed. This site was abandoned during the later Naqada II period, when the burials of later elite nobles were moved closer to the cultivated areas. The Painted Tomb, or Tomb 100, was found herein. During Naqada III, the ending of the Predynastic period, burials of the local elite were moved back to Cemetery 6, within massive rock-cut tombs with offering areas. Excavations at cemetery 6 reveal several large tombs containing Naqada III ware. Tomb 11, looted, still contained beads in carnelian, garnet, turquoise, faience, gold and silver, fragments of artifacts in lapis lazuli, ivory, obsidian, and crystal blades, and a wooden bed with carved bulls' feet. These indicated elite burials but not quite of the quality of the royal burials at [Abydos](#). Tomb 1 in locality 6 has a sunken pit surrounded by triple-coursed mud-brick walls, with wooden planks overlaying it. The walls were plastered, and the pit was surmounted by a replica of a temple or palace made from wooden posts and surrounded by a wooden fence. This may have been a precursor of the mastaba tombs of the First Dynasty and later.

In 1998, two more tombs were discovered at Cemetery 6. Bones within one of the two latest tombs found proved to be a mixture of bones from two human males and seven dogs. In the second tomb were also found the bones of a young savanna elephant.

Other intriguing finds here include two pottery masks with cut-out feline-shaped slanted eyes, aquiline noses, and mouths. Near one mask was found a tuft of twisted human hair, perhaps part of a headdress. The second mask had a beard colored plum red and human ears attached. Part of a third mask have also been uncovered. Masks may have been drawn on the hunters inscribed on the Two-Dog Palette and the Ostrich Palette. To date, the earliest use of human-faced masks dated back to the [Fourth Dynasty](#). Perhaps further work on this tomb will provide more information on the ritual useage of masks, and how early that useage began.

Charcoal samples found in this tomb helped identify the original wood as cedar of Lebanon, the first time that imported wood was discovered at Nekhen, though it is possible that the temple may have also made use of cedarwood for its pillars.

In another tomb a figurine of a cow was found buried with human bodies, while in yet another tomb, a cow's skeleton was found laid out with a human figurine. The cow's bones as well as the human bones were impregnated with resin, a precursor to mummification.

To date, 150 burials have been found in another cemetery area, called cemetery 43, belonging to the working class inhabitants of Nekhen, as indicated by a general lack of grave goods and the robust physical nature of the bodies. Seven of these bodies show evidence of decapitation and grave goods such as copper pins and linen matting. Although these burials contained finer grave goods there was a marked absence of disturbance or robbery, unlike many of the other burials.

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