The origins of civilization have long aroused scientific curiosity and inflated the popular imagination. At least six different times—in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley, China, Central America and Peru—civilizations have arisen independently in the last five thousand years. What are civilizations, what do they share in common and why are they so important to modern man? When we say someone is "civilized" we are generally using the term in a much different way than anthropologists and historians who study the phenomenon of civilization. A "civilized" person, in the popular sense, is literate, appreciates art and music, cultivates a taste for "the finer things in life" and spends at least part of his or her time living, working or playing in cities. The word civilization itself comes from the Latin for citizen; and in ancient Rome a citizen usually dwelt in a city or "urbs." Thus, we say that a "civilized" person is also "urban" in that he is intimately connected to the culture of the urban center. This version of what it means to be civilized, although far too culture-bound for the scientist, does hold something in common with the dryer, more materialistic definitions employed by archaeologists. Those of us who try to learn from the past by tracing the regularities and patterns in social and cultural development often find ourselves drawn to certain exceedingly rich and complex cultures typified by the presence of monumental art and architecture; dense populations located within cities or around impressive ceremonial or administrative centers; complex social, political, economic and religious institutions; social stratification; developed sciences like astronomy and mathematics; organized warfare and, in most cases, a written as opposed to an oral literature.

In the last twenty-five years, anthropologists working with archaeologists and historians have made great strides in the study of particular civilizations. Especially in Mesopotamia and central America, we have developed new tools for uncovering, studying and interpreting ancient complex societies—strategies more dependent on the social and natural sciences than the arts and humanities. Thanks to massive efforts and funding in these areas of the world and to new archaeological methods, we are learning details about the rise of civilizations once available only to historians of later, more well-documented ages. Today in Mesopotamia and central America we are beginning to understand the nature of the social, economic, political, religious and environmental systems that generated and supported and occasionally destroyed the amazing metropoles and imposing temples that foreshadowed the awesome complexities of modern urban life.

Unfortunately, in our enthusiasm over the many new and exciting finds in these regions, some of the other civilizations of the ancient world have been forced to take a back seat. There is even a tendency on the part of scientists who study Mesopotamian and central American civilizations to see the other civilizations of the Old and New Worlds as secondary or derivative. Such, in the last thirty to forty years, has been the fate of Egypt. The focus of civilization studies has shifted away from Egypt for a variety of reasons, including a decline in prehistoric field work between the Second World War and 1960, a reaction to extreme "diffusionists" who once insisted that all "high culture" was originally spread from the Nile Valley by missionaries of the sun cult of Re, and finally due to more spectacular results achieved in Mesopotamian early urban studies in recent years. Despite the temporary eclipse of prehistoric and problem-oriented archaeology in Egypt, however, the general public has remained fascinated by the unique and striking civilization that arose in the Nile Valley during the fourth millennium before Christ.

In many ways, such popular interest is more than justified. Egypt stands as the second oldest example of an essentially autarchic complex society—antedated only by Mesopotamia. The uniquely arid Egyptian climate has preserved a greater variety of cultural material than has been found in the other civilizations in the Near East, its distinctive environment and long historical record provide the scientist with an unparalleled opportunity to study special human ecological problems. Moreover, written records, drawings, wall paintings and reliefs provide a rich body of information on the daily lives of the ancient Egyptians.

Finally, although long known to the historian, epigrapher and archaeologist, Egypt is practically untouched as a field for anthropological research.

With these factors in mind, an interdisciplinary team of archaeologists, Egyptologists and anthropologists under the direction of Professor Walter Fairservis of the American Museum of Natural History undertook investigations at the ancient site of Hierakonpolis in the narrow, desert-bound defiles of the Upper Egyptian Nile Valley. The aims of the expedition were ambitious—to study the entire culture history of the region around Hierakonpolis using the combined talents of its international crew. The area to be covered included not only the eroded, grass-grown ruins of the walled town of Hierakonpolis itself, but a series of Predynastic farming villages and Palaeolithic...
campsites scattered throughout a largely unexplored stretch of desert on the west bank of the Nile. All told, the archaeological concession involved an area of 145 square miles and cultural remains covering a minimum of 50,000 years of human history and prehistory. There were two principal aspects to our project—excavations in the walled town (the Kom el-Ahmar) and a survey of the adjacent Western Desert. Our goals were shaped by a desire to learn as much as possible about the long-term cultural evolution of the region and the peculiar importance that the ancient Egyptians themselves attached to Hierakonpolis.

Hierakonpolis—City of the Hawk—was the name the ancient Greeks gave to the Egyptian town of Nekhen. According to Egyptian legend, Nekhen was the first capital of Egypt—the spot from which the first pharaoh, "Mones," launched the military expeditions that united the land around 3100 B.C. So important was Nekhen to the principle of kingship in ancient Egypt that one of the five official titles that comprised any royal name derived from "Horus of Nekhen." This title and the legend that Nekhen had once housed Egypt's first pharaoh persisted throughout Egyptian history for roughly three thousand years, and has aroused considerable interest and disagreement among Egyptologists and archaeologists over the last eighty years. Beginning in 1897-98 the British archaeologists J.E. Quibell and F.W. Green undertook extensive explorations within the walled town that added considerable fuel to the controversy. With almost blind luck, they stumbled onto two extraordinary finds that underscore the antiquity and importance of Hierakonpolis to the early kings of Egypt. First, in what are now thought to have been the storerooms of an Old Kingdom temple, Quibell found a golden hawk—a representation of Horus of Nekhen—and a nearly life-size copper statue group of the Sixth Dynasty pharaohs Pepi I and his young son Merenre, the earliest large-scale metal sculpture ever found. In neighboring storerooms, Quibell and Green unearthed a number of fancy alabaster and limestone vases that probably once were used in rituals honoring Horus of Nekhen on behalf of his loyal servants, the god Kings Pepi and Merenre.

A second, and in some ways even more important discovery, was made by Quibell under highly confusing circumstances. In 1897, he found a deposit of stone palettes and maceheads of the Protodynastic kings Narmer and Scorpion, portraying their attempts to subdue the northern provinces and their concern for promoting agricultural production by irrigation; some of the first examples of hieroglyphic writing and carved scenes in stone and ivory of fantastic animals that resemble contemporary work from Sumeria and Elam—countries that lay far to the east.  

3 Objects from the royal storerooms of the 1st and 2nd Dynasties at Abydos: fragments of vessels with inscriptions, stone cosmetic pot with cover of gold leaf, and fragment of a gaming board with a chessman. Sculptures of a woman [mother?], and a baboon [Pharaoh? from the temple of Hierakonpolis.}

4 Large alabaster jar from the same temple at Hierakonpolis as the doorknocker. 2nd Dynasty.

5 Architeic ivory figures of men, women and animals from Hierakonpolis and Abydos.
These objects also raise a number of important questions: Was Hierakopolis actually Egypt’s first capital and did Narmer and Scorpion, the historical counterparts of the legendary Meros, really use it as a base of military operations against the North? Did these events coincide with and have any effect upon the development of writing in Egypt? And finally, does the presence of Near Eastern artistic motifs indicate that Egyptian civilization owed its origins to invaders from the East or to some other, more subtle, connections with the proto-urban societies of Mesopotamia and the Iranian Plateau?

Unfortunately, the most important piece of evidence, the Narmer Palette, has itself been the center of controversy. Although in 1900 Quibell initially reported it as coming from the Main Deposit, Green’s recently published field notes indicate that it actually came from a spot one or two meters away. In his portion of the Hierakopolis report published in 1902, Green even said that the Narmer Palette was directly associated with a Proto-Neolithic or early Archaic temple. Today it is impossible to resolve the question and we cannot really be sure whether the palette had stood in or near the spot where it was originally excavated at the time of the unification, or whether it was buried with the rest of the Main Deposit between five hundred and a thousand years after the events that it portrays, and thus might have traveled long distances before coming to rest at Nekhen. What still makes the Narmer Palette and the Scorpion Macehead so important, however, are the events that they portray: On the Narmer Palette, a triangular slab of dark green slate, the king is portrayed on one side wearing the crown of Upper Egypt and ritualistically slaying an enemy beneath the watchful and protective gaze of the hawk Horus, while on the reverse, Narmer, wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt, reviews the slain on a battlefield accompanied by his allies and courtiers while a rampant bull (another traditional royal symbol) surges in the wall of an enemy town. On the pear-shaped white limestone “macehead,” King Scorpion is shown in the crown of Upper Egypt engaged in some kind of agricultural ceremony—probably relating to irrigation.

Although the particular archaeological context of these finds and the rest of the Proto-Neolithic material in the Main Deposit will forever be in doubt (as it did not even know when the deposit was buried), what cannot be denied is the ceremonial importance that the site had in the ancient era. The Hierakopolis temple and the fact that, beginning with a crude, semi-circular stone platform or “settlement” erected about the time of Scorpion or Narmer or shortly earlier, their kings continued to build and renovate temples to Horus at Nekhen for the next half millennium. The question left by the British excavations and a number of later, smaller-scale expeditions was “why?” Why did the ancient Egyptians show so much attention on Nekhen? What led them to believe that the site played a crucial role in the unification of the country? And finally, if Hierakopolis really did play a major part in the transition from prehistory to history, from chiefdom to state, why is it so important?

In the process of trying to answer some of these questions, the American Museum of Natural History’s 1999 excavations revealed an archaeological level or “stratum” immediately south of the area where Green had found the stone macehead. Thanks to careful digging and analysis of the potsherds, we were able to resolve at least one longstanding archaeological dispute by confirming Green’s dating of the earliest temple stratum to the crucial Predynastic era. The early date of this level attests the importance of this new development as we consider the discovery of two new structures that are apparently contemporary with the circular macehead—a large mudbrick pavilion and a silt trench and post building. The paving, although badly decayed, displayed a rather formal plan and was associated with several boulders of precisely the type used in the construction of Green’s temple, which lies just 40 to 50 meters to the north. One of these boulders, near the junction of a paved walkway and the pavement itself, seems to have been used as a door socket. Adjacent to the pavement were found the telltale discards left by a wooden post—circular “postholes” arranged about two parallel “slit trenches” which were originally dug to accommodate perishable objects. The site was probably made of interwoven reeds, which were supported by the posts.

The discovery of this structure is significant in two ways: First, it demonstrates the importance of and need for extremely careful archaeological excavations aimed at the recovery of so-called “perishables” remains. Secondly, the plan of the structure seems to suggest that it is all that remains of a temple and post shrine traditionally sacred to Upper Egypt (the st.2). Egyptologists have long speculated that such shrines depicted on the walls of later temples should date back to prehistoric times but none had ever before been reported from actual archaeological excavations.

If our findings have confirmed the presence of a Predynastic temple precinct at Hierakopolis, then the discovery of a niche mudbrick wall and gateway 40 meters to the ancient South has even more pointed implications for the early political importance of the town. From the First Dynasty on, the Horus name of the king was an enclosed within an oval or rectangular border or “cartouche” surrounded by the falcon [Horus of Nekhen] and set upon a stylized niche facade. This “cartouche” facade was one of the first symbols

Credits
Michael A. Hoffmann, 34-35, 39 #1, University Museum, p. 37, #1
Quibell, Hierakopolis I, p. XXX; p. 37, #2
Steven Smith, The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt
of kingship and is believed to have derived from the decorative palace enclosure walls such as those known from First and Second Dynasty tombs at Sakkara.

Some Egyptologists believe that the serekh facade as employed in tombs and as represented by hieroglyphs must have been copied from the walls of the royal residence itself. One finds at Hierakonpolis evidence to confirm this suspicion. Not only are the niched wall and gateway associated with a non-temperary structure (a royal or administrative compound) but its particular style and stratigraphic context suggest that it dates to the early First Dynasty. When compared with the securely dated mastaba tombs at Sakkara, the complex style of mudbrick niching, the presence of paws and occasional flagstone paving within niches, and the intrusion of a dog burial into the top of the wall, all suggest that the niched structure at Hierakonpolis was built at the beginning of the First Dynasty—only a generation or two after the construction of the Protodynastic temple precinct and not more than a century after the close of the prehistoric epoch. Here then, in addition to the Narmer Palette and Scorpion macehead we have concrete testimony to the importance of Hierakonpolis at the very moment that Egypt stood poised on the threshold of statehood.

Although these new finds have shown the undoubted importance of Nekhen at the inception of Egyptian civilization, they do not explain its importance. The question of just how such an agriculturally poor region could serve as a possible focal point for the political unification of Egypt remains a mystery. Over the years a number of theories have been proposed to explain the legendary role of Hierakonpolis—theories which now can be re-evaluated in light of our findings both within the walled Kom el Aähmar and along the parched watercourses that once flowed into the Nile from the Western Desert.

Despite the fact that the archaeologists who excavated the tombs of the first two dynasties at Abydos and Sakkara—Sir William Flinders Petrie and Sir Walter Emery—and believed that he had found the real graveyard of Egypt's first kings (a dispute that is still unresolved), they agreed that the unification of the "Two Lands" was the work of an invading "Dynastic Race" of cultural supermen. Although such interpretations are usually rejected today, many experts think that the evidence for a Mesopotamian or more general Near Eastern role in the beginnings of Egyptian civilization is strong. During the last phases of the Predynastic (the late Gerzean period) and in the Protodynastic era immediately preceding the final unification, a number of traits that are thought to reflect this Eastern influence have been isolated. These include high-propped boats, cylinder seals, the animal master motif, the standing winged griffin, serpent-necked panthers, figures wearing headresses and long robes, and niched mudbrick architecture.

In the desert adjacent to the cultivated land and close by the Kom el Aähmar, F. W. Green excavated a number of Pre- and Protodynastic graves. In one area in particular the tombs were larger and more impressive than the rest. The most imposing tomb of the lot was a large mudbrick structure that was partitioned into two compartments. Despite the fact that it had been looted, enough artifacts remained to date the grave to the late Gerzean period. Moreover, on one of the walls the archaeologists found a scene painted on plaster depicting boats (one of which was high-propped) carrying double cabins or shrines, men fighting, assorted animals and the "animal master" motif.

That the "painted tomb" and the large graves around it were built to accommodate local prehistoric rulers or big men cannot be denied. But does the presence of animal master motifs, fighting men and a high-propped vessel reflect Mesopotamian influence or contact any more than the existence of a niched building within the walls of nearby Nekhen? Also, how do we evaluate the so-called "Mesopotamian" or "Eastern" motifs on the Narmer Palette and a smaller, oval palette found in the Main Deposit? Even though our recent excavations at Hierakonpolis have expanded the inventory of Protodynastic and Early Dynastic remains from Hierakonpolis and proven the real political importance of the town, are we really any closer to the riddle of how and why the Egyptian civilization emerged under men like Scorpion, Narmer and their successors?

In seeking the answers to these questions, we must turn to the second line of archaeological investigation pursued at Hierakonpolis—the prehistoric survey. It has become axiomatic in modern archaeology that in order to understand the role of a given site we must first know how it related to other sites in the same area and how all sites, in turn, related to broader climatic and ecological factors. If the results of our investigations within the walls of ancient Nekhen were encouraging, then the outcome of the site survey conducted by Professor Fairbairn and the author was unexpectedly rewarding for the new light it has shed on the emergence of Egyptian civilization.

For many years, archaeologists have known about a large "tower" of Predynastic age sitting on the low desert, less than a quarter of a mile from the walls of Hierakonpolis itself. Here, an area of approximately one million square meters is covered with settlement debris. It is suspected that not all of the surface area was ever occupied at any
one time, and, judging from surface in-
dications, a series of small villages or hamlets probably accounts for the huge extent of the site. As one proceeds from the Predynastic "town" into the unexcavated hills and ravines of the Western Desert, one encounters the so-called "Great Wadi"—a wide, dry gulf that is the major drainage channel for the entire area. Today the wadi's course is bone dry and only occasionally—every few years—does it run with water during a freak rainstorm. What is so striking to the archaeologist, however, is that the banks of this now barren channel are dotted with the remnants of Predynastic farming villages stretching back through Gerzean, Amratian, and ultimately Badarian times, 5000 years before the birth of Christ.

This unusual pattern of settlement suggests that during a rainy period beginning around 5000 B.C., a considerable population was able to support itself in an area that now is stark wasteland. To gain a more precise view of the way of life of these people and the unusual climatic conditions under which they must have flourished, I undertook test excavations at a locality where localizer (sebakh) diggers had revealed a thick zone of buried occupation debris. In addition to the pottery and stone artifacts that enabled us to date the site to Amratian times (around 4000 B.C.), there was preserved an unbelievably wide range of normally perishable materials—sawdust, bones, leather, fragmentary papyrus scrolls, and plant remains among them. A complete assemblage of dozens of varieties of plants, from grains to wild plants, was preserved as a result of the long period of time between the time of burial and the time of excavation. Among the most striking finds were the remains of wild and domesticated animals, including birds, fish, and reptiles. The presence of these animals provides important clues to the environment of the area at the time of the site's occupation.

In the second phase of our work, we turned to the study of the natural environment of the area. We found that the area was characterized by a combination of dry, desert conditions and occasional periods of heavy rain. The presence of these conditions suggests that the area was inhabited by a people who were able to adapt to the changing environment and to take advantage of the occasional periods of plentiful rainfall. We also found evidence of the use of irrigation techniques, including the construction of small dams and the use of canals to bring water to the fields. The presence of these techniques suggests that the area was inhabited by a people who were skilled in the use of agriculture and who were able to sustain a large population.

A shift of the wadi population back into the Nile Valley in later Predynastic times would have had social consequences of the type that I believe must have given Egyptian cultural development an important boost. Many scholars have suggested that the rise of civilization in ancient Egypt was due to the development of a social structure that allowed for the concentration of resources and the growth of large, urban centers. The rise of such a social structure would have been possible only in an area with a rich and diverse resource base, and the presence of the Nile Valley in later Predynastic times would have provided such a resource base.

Finally, the presence of the Nile Valley in later Predynastic times would have had environmental consequences as well. The presence of the Nile would have provided a source of water for irrigation, and the presence of the desert would have provided a source of food and other resources. The combination of these factors would have been ideal for the development of a complex society.

In summary, the presence of the Nile Valley in later Predynastic times would have had important social, cultural, and environmental consequences. It would have provided the conditions necessary for the rise of civilization, and it would have contributed to the development of a diverse and complex society.