



*This ebony tablet from the First Dynasty is one of the earliest known examples of hieroglyphics, and contains the royal hawk of Menes (upper left).*

more advanced culturally than her southern neighbor. But it was King Menes, the ruler of Upper Egypt, who succeeded in conquering the north, and thereby united the entire country.

Menes (who was also known as Narmer) came from Thinis, a town in southern Egypt. After subduing the northern kingdom, he referred to himself as “King of Upper and Lower Egypt,” a title that was retained by succeeding pharaohs for thousands of years. Near the former boundary between the two kingdoms Menes founded a new city, Memphis, which because of its central location was well suited to be the capital of the united country. Memphis, the ruins of which lie not far from present-day Cairo, was for many centuries one of the leading cities of Egypt, and for a considerable period her capital.

Little additional information about Menes has been preserved. He is credited with a very long reign—sixty-two years, according to one ancient source, although that may well be an exaggeration.

Despite our limited knowledge of the events of that distant time, Menes’s achievement seems to have been of enormous importance. During predynastic times (that is, before Menes), Egyptian culture was considerably less advanced than that of the Sumerian civilization, situated in what is now Iraq. The political unification of Egypt, however, seemed to release the latent powers of the Egyptian people. Certainly, the unification was followed by a period of rapid advance in social and cultural matters. Governmental and social institutions were developed during that early dynastic period which were to endure, with comparative little change, for two millenia. Hieroglyphic writing developed rapidly, as did building and other technical skills. Within a few centuries, Egyptian culture had equalled—and in many ways surpassed—that of Sumeria. Indeed, during most of the

two thousand years following Menes, Egypt, from the standpoint of wealth and culture, was either the most advanced nation in the world or a close second. That is a record of enduring achievement that few civilizations can rival.

It is difficult to know just where Menes belongs on this list, for we have no direct information as to how important his personal activities were in the conquest of the north and the unification of Egypt. Lacking reliable information, we can only conjecture how large his role was; but it seems a rather safe guess that it was quite important. In general, Egyptian pharaohs were not figureheads but actual rulers possessing enormous authority. Furthermore, history tells us that kingdoms rarely achieve important conquests under the leadership of an inept king; nor are they likely to retain and consolidate their conquests without able leadership. It therefore appears highly probable that Menes personally was an important factor in the great events of his day. Despite the paucity of our knowledge concerning him, it appears that Menes was indeed one of the most influential figures in history.