A Civilization Entitled to No Place

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Egypt has no place in a work on the history of mathematical astronomy.
—O. Neugebauer, A History of Ancient Mathematical Astronomy, 1975

4.1 Egypt of the Pharaohs

Any discussion about Egypt seems doomed to begin by quoting an extremely banal sentence of the historian Herodotus, who called Egypt “the gift from the Nile.” Actually, the Egypt that we know today is quite different from the swampy land with a tropical climate that was the typical habitat of that part of Africa until circa the year 4000 BC. It was under this climate, so different from the desert climate that will be the typical Egyptian one from the time of the pharaohs to the present, that the largest part of the history of this country, the so-called predynastic era, took place (the term predynastic means the time of history prior to the beginning of the pharaoh era, around 3100 BC).

It is important to note that the difference between predynastic and dynastic is basically a formal, political one. It is impossible, indeed, to tell prehistory from history in this way; the findings from the predynastic era include many jewels with pearls and ivory carvings, and at that time the Egyptians were masters in the art of carving stones, from alabaster to the very hard diorite (cf. for example Gardiner 1971). Even much of the religious iconography is present from very ancient times, for instance the cow-goddess with the solar disk between the horns; as we will see, astronomy was already present as well.

The drying of the Saharan zones took place progressively through the whole Neolithic Age, ending during the course of the fourth millennium. In the meanwhile, two states were created, one in Upper Egypt (the south) and the other in Lower Egypt (essentially the Nile’s delta). Around the year 3000 BC those two reigns were unified under one ruler, a pharaoh possibly by the name of Narmer, with whom the dynastic history was to begin. The
Figure 4.1: Map of Egypt