

NekhenMasks:Exploring the Intersection of Veneration and Funerary Rituals

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الملخص:

لعبت أقنعة نحن دورًا محوريًا في مصر ما قبل الأسرات، حيث خدمت أغراضًا دينية وجنائزية على حد سواء. تتناول هذه الدراسة الدور المزدوج لأقنعة نحن في المجتمع المصري ما قبل الأسرات، مُسلطة الضوء على أهميتها في كل من الطقوس الدينية وممارسات الدفن. غالبًا ما صُنعت هذه الأقنعة بدقة فنية متناهية، وتعكس معتقدات المصريين القدماء حول الحياة الآخرة واستمرارية الروابط بين الأحياء والأموات. وباعتبارها قطعًا مقدسة ومكونات أساسية في طقوس الدفن، تجسد أقنعة نحن تداخل الوظائف الأيديولوجية والروحية والاجتماعية. ومن خلال تحليل شكلها ورمزيتها وسياقها الأثري، يسلط هذا البحث الضوء على كيفية إسهام هذه القطع الأثرية في التماسك الاجتماعي، وتعزيز عبادة الأسلاف، والتعبير عن مفاهيم معقدة للسلطة والحماية والحضور الإلهي في مصر القديمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نحن، أقنعة، الطقوس الجنائزية، مصر ، ما قبل الأسرات

Abstract

Nekhenmasks played a pivotal role in pre-dynastic Egypt, serving both religious and funerary purposes. This study examines the dual role of Nekhenmasks in pre-dynastic Egyptian society, highlighting their significance in both religious rites and mortuary practices. Often crafted with meticulous artistry, these masks reflect early Egyptian beliefs in the afterlife and the continuity of connections between the living and the dead. As sacred objects and essential components of funerary rituals, Nekhenmasks embody the intertwining of ideological, spiritual, and social functions. By analyzing their form, symbolism, and archaeological context, this research sheds light on how these artifacts contributed to social cohesion, reinforced ancestor worship, and expressed complex notions of power, protection, and divine presence in ancient Egypt.

Keywords : Nekhen, masks, funerary rituals, pre-dynastic, Egypt

Introduction

Nekhenmasks played a central role in pre-dynastic Egypt, bridging Through their symbolism and use in mortuary contexts, the masks highlight social cohesion, ancestral worship, and the interplay of spiritual and ideological values in early Egyptian society.

According to Poyil, ancestor worship was a universal form of religious expression that emphasized the ongoing influence of the deceased on the living. It is not a religion, but rather a facet of

religious practice that acknowledges forces beyond human control. This form of worship was central to the religious life of many societies, including ancient Egypt¹.

Taylor confirmed Poyil's observations, further emphasizing that ancestor worship constituted one of the major branches of human religion. Its principles were grounded in the social relationships between the living and the dead: a deceased ancestor, having become a deity, continues to protect their family and receive offerings and service from them, just as in life. Similarly, a deceased leader maintains authority over their community, aiding allies and punishing adversaries².

Hierakonpolis Site

Hierakonpolis is located approximately 113 km north of Aswan and about 650 km south of Cairo. It is remarkable as a genuine and unmistakable urban center. Unlike many early settlements in the Nile Valley, which were primarily agricultural and depended on a widely dispersed peasantry forming the base of a hierarchical society centered around the court of the divine king, Hierakonpolis represents an exception. The growth of cities in the early centuries was generally limited by these social and economic conditions. However, Hierakonpolis, situated opposite the modern site of El Kab, stands out as a notable exception to this pattern³.

The Importance of Nekhen

Hierakonpolis, the city of the Hawk, known in ancient Egypt as Nekhen, is one of the most important archaeological sites in Egypt. The settlement and development of the city span from around 4000 B.C., when the fundamental elements of Egyptian society began to take shape, to the dawn of the historic era. According to Harlan, Hierakonpolis provides substantial evidence for understanding the foundations of ancient Egyptian civilization. A century of archaeological research has highlighted the site's central role in the transition from prehistory to history and in the rise of early Egyptian civilization⁴.

Rice noted that Hierakonpolis, or Nekhen, held the key to the mysterious origins of ancient Egyptian civilization. Nekhen, one of Egypt's first capitals and known as the city of the Hawk, was unparalleled among contemporary Egyptian cities⁵.

¹ - M. POYIL, "Death, funeral and the ancestors: Cult of the dead and the Malabar tribes", Thesis. Department of History, University of Calicut, 2006, p.291.

² - M. POYIL, 2006, p.293; E. B. TAYLOR, *Primitive Culture II*, London, 1871, p.113.

³ - M. RICE, *Egypt's making, the origins of Ancient Egypt 5000–2000 BC*, London, 1990, p.76.

⁴ - J.F. Harlan, *Excavations at Locality 11C, In the Predynastic of Hierakonpolis*, M. A. Hoffman (ed.), *Egyptian Studies Association I*, London, 1982, pp.14–25.

⁵ - M. RICE, *Egypt's making, the origins of Ancient Egypt 5000–2000 BC*, London, 1990, p.76.

Friedman confirmed Rice's observations, supporting them with evidence from Hierakonpolis, including industrial production, temples, masks, mummies, and funerary architecture dating as early as 3500 B.C. These discoveries underscore the importance of this city⁶.

The religious significance of Hierakonpolis is further confirmed by archaeological finds such as the Narmer Palette, Nekhen masks, and remains of temples, highlighting its role in early Egyptian ritual and ceremonial life⁷.

Definition of Masks

Masks are objects designed to cover the face for a variety of purposes, including protection, disguise, entertainment, or ritual practices. The art of mask-making may be very ancient; however, due to the perishable materials often used, such as leather and wood, many early examples have not survived to the present day⁸.

History of Mask Use

The earliest uses of masks were generally associated with rituals and ceremonies. The oldest known mask dates back to around 7000 B.C. Wolinski argued that funerary masks in historical times were placed on mummified bodies to transform the deceased into spirits reborn in the afterlife. The use of human-faced masks in this context is well documented and extends back at least to the Fourth Dynasty⁹.

Adams, however, confirmed that future excavations at HK6 revealed masks dating back to the Predynastic period¹⁰. She supported this view by noting that the facial features of these masks closely corresponded to those of figurines from the Naqada II and Naqada III periods, demonstrating the continuity and early development of this funerary tradition¹¹.

Nekhen Masks

In the elite cemetery at Hierakonpolis, the earliest funerary masks have been discovered, dating to around 3500 B.C. According to Friedman, these masks, along with the high-quality grave offerings found in the same cemetery, provide significant insight into the social characteristics of ancient Egyptian society¹² (fig: 1).

⁶- R. FRIEDMAN, "City of the Hawk", in: *Archaeology*, 56, No. 6 (November/December 2003), p.56.

⁷ - M. RICE, 1990, p. 80.

⁸ - History of Masks - Ancient Use of Masks, in: <http://www.historyofmasks.net/> © 2017

⁹ - A. WOLINSKI, "Egyptian Masks: The Priest and His Role", in: *Archaeology*, 40, No. 1, 1987, pp. 22- 23,

¹⁰ - B. ADAMS, "More Surprises in the Locality HK6 Cemetery", in: *NN*, 11, 1999, p. 5.

¹¹ - B. ADAMS, *Some Problems Solved in the Locality 6 Cemetery*, in: *NN*, 12, 2000, p. 4.

¹² - R. FRIEDMAN, *Preliminary Report on Field Work at Hierakonpolis: 1996-1998*, in: *JARCE*, Le Caire, 36, 1999, pp. 1-35.



(Fig.1) -Ceramic face applique, front and side. Louver E25726.

R. A., Friedman, "The Masks of Hierakonpolis Cemetery HK6, fig.15.

Adams described these masks in detail, noting that two unique—but incomplete—straw-tempered pottery masks with cut-out eyes and mouths were found at opposite ends of Tomb 14, near Tomb 16, in the elite Pre- and Protodynastic cemetery of Hierakonpolis at Locality HK6 in the Wadi Abu Suffian (fig:2). Only a small yet evocative portion of one mask was preserved, featuring cut-out, feline-like slanted eyes and an aquiline nose. At the south end of the trench, a tuft of twisted human hair was discovered, possibly part of a headdress that accompanied the mask¹³.



(Fig.2)-Reconstructing an eternal palace at HK6

- X. DROUX, 2010, p.32.

Adams rejected the idea that these masks were intended to be worn. She described them in detail, noting that one of the two masks is flat on the interior and would not easily fit over a human face,

¹³ - B.ADAMS, 1999, p.4.

although it is certainly not too small to do so, and the exaggerated slant of the eyes would not prevent the wearer from seeing out. The other mask is larger and more complete, featuring sloped, cut-out eyes and an aquiline nose, with brows, eyelines, mouth, and a beard painted in plum red with white strap details¹⁴. The breaks at the top corners of this bearded mask appear incorrectly positioned for human ears, possibly indicating that bovine horns or animal ears were once attached. This mask is essentially life-sized and curves to fit over a human face. Whether it was intended for use in life or death remains an intriguing question. Even more curiously, it was discovered at the north end of the trench alongside a hollow pottery breast with a flattened rim, suggesting it had been attached to a vessel or figure¹⁵ (fig:3)- (fig :4).



(Fig.3) -Egypt's earliest funerary masks, dating to 3500 B.C.

R. A., Friedman, "The Masks of Hierakonpolis Cemetery HK6, fig.2.

¹⁴ - R. A., Friedman, "The Masks of Hierakonpolis Cemetery HK6." *Aegyptus Est Imago Caeli. Studies Presented to Krzysztof M. Ciałowicz on His 60th Birthday*, 2014, pp.115-127

¹⁵ - B.ADAMS, 1999, p.4.



(Fig :4)-Ceramic Mask, PredynasticPeriod, FindspotHierakonpolis, Egyptian Museum Cairo

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/manna4u/26693242855>

Adams further confirmed that these masks were made to serve a religious purpose during the early dynastic period, acting as a medium through which the wearer could become a divinity or a conduit for divine powers.¹⁶ (fig :5)



(Fig :5)- Mask fitted over a humane face

R. A., Friedman, "The Masks of Hierakonpolis Cemetery HK6, fig.4.

However, it is also reasonable to suggest that these masks had a funerary purpose, given that they were found within the funerary furniture of a tomb in the cemetery.

¹⁶ - B.ADAMS, 1999, p.5.

The Relationship between Masks and the Souls of Nekhen

Friedman suggested that these masks may be associated with the concept of the “Souls of Nekhen” in ancient Egyptian thought. These souls were often depicted as jackal-headed beings and were referred to as the “Souls of Nekhen”¹⁷ (fig:6).



(Fig. 6) Souls of Pe and Nekhen- New Kingdom, 18th Dynasty, reign of Amenhotep III, ca. 1391-1353 BC. Now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. JE 41210, JE 41211

<https://egypt-museum.egypt-museum.com/post>

The Souls of Nekhen are first mentioned in the Pyramid Texts and are understood to represent the ancestral spirits of the early Egyptian kings¹⁸. Nekhen itself was the principal Upper Egyptian center for the worship of the god Horus, with whom the Egyptian pharaohs were closely associated as his earthly successors. This connection suggests that the masks may have symbolized or embodied these ancestral or divine forces within a ritual or funerary context.¹⁹

The Ritual Roles of Masks

¹⁷ - R. FRIEDMAN, R., 2007 Field Note 6 - The Early Kings of Hierakonpolis, *Archaeology's interactive dig*, November 2002-April 2009.

¹⁸ - G. HART, *the Rutledge Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses*, Rutledge, 2005, p.152.

¹⁹ - H. FRANKFORT, *Kingship and the Gods*, Chicago, 1978, 93- 94.

Masks played a very important ritual role in ancient Egypt as well as in other ancient civilizations. Rice noted that the use of masks was widespread across the ancient world, particularly in temple ceremonies, where priests wore them while performing ritual²⁰ practices. He further emphasized that masks were an essential component of many rites conducted in Egyptian temples during historical periods, as priests wore them to impersonate the deities they served. In this context, Rice considered the Nekhen masks to represent an early example of the use of pottery masks, dating back to the Naqada I period.²¹

Masks and Magical Hunting

Rogers explained that masks also played a role in prehistoric magical practices, particularly in hunting. He suggested that early humans used masks in “magical hunting,” as evidenced by rock art depicting individuals wearing animal masks to control or more easily capture animals²². Some scholars have linked this practice to shamanistic traditions and ritual magic²³.

Quibell pointed to two examples of masks worn by hunters depicted on carved palettes from the late Predynastic period: the “Two-Dog Palette” and the “Ostrich Palette,” both discovered at Hierakonpolis²⁴ (fig:7). These artifacts emphasize the importance of hunting scenes in early Egyptian visual culture.



(Fig.7). Masked figure on Two Dog palette- (Ashmolean Museum)

B. ADAMS, 1999, p.5.

²⁰ - M. RICE, 1990, p. 85- 86.

²¹ - M. RICE, 1990, p.86.

²² - J.E. Quibell ,*Hierakonpolis Pt. 2*, Heidelberg ,1902,p. 42

²³ - A. ROGERS, *From Hunting Magic to Shamanism: Interpretations of Native American Rock Art and the Contemporary Crisis in Masculinity* Richard, in: *Women's Studies in Communication*, 30. Number 1. Spring 2007, pp. 86-87.

²⁴ - B.ADAMS, 1999, p. 5.

The Hunter's Palette reflects continuity with earlier incised palettes that focused on hunting themes. It is likely that such palettes were originally used in rituals to prepare face-paint worn by hunters. At this stage, there is no explicit representation of a ruler figure²⁵.

Wilkinson provided another example in the form of the Oxford Palette, which similarly emphasizes hunting scenes. In this case, wild animals are shown being controlled by a figure wearing a dog mask and playing a reed flute. This figure may be compared to the individual wearing an ostrich mask depicted on the Ostrich Palette in the Manchester Museum. These representations suggest that preparations for hunting involved ritual practices in which participants adopted animal attributes, symbolically assuming the powers of nature. Such rituals were likely intended to ensure the success of the hunting expedition²⁶.

Towards the end of the Predynastic Period, the scenes depicted on carved palettes shift from representations of hunting to scenes of warfare. The earlier concept of controlling untamed natural forces was gradually replaced, within the emerging ideology of royal authority, by the notion of defeating chaos and enemies opposed to the king. However, the symbolic use of the natural world was not entirely abandoned.

On the Battlefield Palette, which predates the reign of Narmer by a few generations, the dominant theme is warfare. Yet, the ruler is portrayed with attributes that emphasize his power through animal symbolism. Similarly, in the Gebel Sheikh Suleiman inscription, the king is represented metaphorically as an aggressive wild animal. In this way, the ruler embodies the qualities of a lion, with explicit animal imagery reinforcing his strength, dominance, and authority²⁷.

The final example of this iconographic tradition—depicting the king in animal form—appears on the last of the great ceremonial palettes, the Narmer Palette. This artifact, undoubtedly the most famous from the reign of Narmer, reflects themes that hark back to Predynastic beliefs and practices, particularly those associated with hunting. In the lower register of the obverse, the king is represented as a powerful wild bull, destroying his enemy's fortress and trampling his foe underfoot²⁸.

This imagery suggests a symbolic connection with earlier hunting rituals²⁹. The figure also recalls parallels such as the "Bird Man" of Lascaux; however, despite possible

²⁵ - T. A. H. Wilkinson, *What a King Is This: Narmer and the Concept of the Ruler*, in: *JEA*, 86 (2000), p. 27.

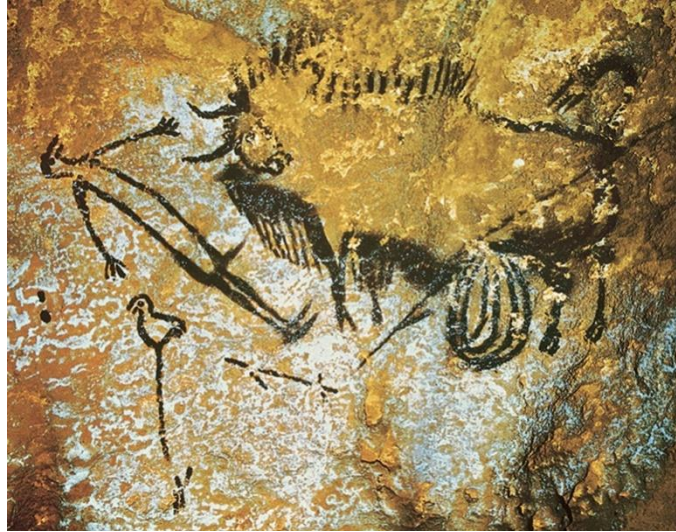
²⁶ - T. A. H. Wilkinson, 2000, p. 27.

²⁷ - T. A. H. Wilkinson, 2000, p. 27.

²⁸ - T. A. H. Wilkinson, 2000, p. 27.

²⁹ - B. ADAMS, 1999, p. 5.

shamanistic interpretations, such representations should not be understood exclusively within that framework, but rather as part of broader cultural and symbolic traditions (fig:8).



(Fig.8)- Bird Man of Lascaux

O. RETOUT, *A modern, original and unique exhibition, in: Lascaux Director of the Lascaux – International Exhibition Project*, PARIS, 2011, p.5.

The importance of masks in ancient Egyptian religion is closely linked to the function of animal symbolism. Egyptian deities were frequently depicted as animal-headed gods, and in ritual contexts, priests wore animal masks that visually transformed them into the deities they served. These masks functioned as a medium through which divine powers could be embodied and enacted³⁰.

Belief in rebirth also played a significant role in shaping these practices, as many communities revered certain animals and birds thought to carry or embody the spirits of ancestors.³¹

Therefore, it can be argued that there is a strong relationship between animal symbolism, totemic beliefs, the use of masks, and ancestor worship in prehistoric Egypt.

Masks and Immortality

Human societies have long grappled with concepts of life, death, and immortality, often envisioning existence as a transition rather than an end. From the time of the Neanderthals and Cro-Magnon, beliefs in ancestral continuity and some form of afterlife have permeated the cultural and psychological framework of *Homo sapiens*. Cross-cultural studies of burial practices

³⁰ - A. WOLINSKI, "Egyptian Masks: the Priest and His Role", in: *Archaeology*, 40, No. 1, 1987, p.23.

³¹ - M. POYIL, 2006, p.301.

and ritual offerings—including sacrificial rites—suggest widespread beliefs in a netherworld inhabited by nature spirits and ancestral beings³².

In ancient Egyptian thought, everyone was understood to consist of multiple elements: the physical body, the *ka*, the *ba*, and the *akh*. In addition, the name and shadow were also regarded as vital components of the individual. For the deceased to attain and enjoy the afterlife, all these elements require preservation and protection from harm³³.

Funerary masks formed an essential part of mortuary traditions in many cultures, including ancient Egypt. One of the most significant stages of the Egyptian funerary ritual was the mummification process. After the necessary prayers and consecration, the body was placed within a decorated sarcophagus, often adorned with gold and precious materials. A key component of this ritual was the placement of a sculpted mask over the face of the deceased. This mask was believed to strengthen the spiritual essence of the mummy and protect the soul from malevolent forces during its journey to the afterlife³⁴.

Ancestor Worship

Scholarly interpretations of ancestor worship in ancient Egypt vary, but many emphasize the close relationship between the living and the dead. Miller highlighted the interconnectedness of life and death, suggesting a conceptual link between funerary masks and the enduring spirit of the deceased³⁵.

Thayer supported this perspective, noting that in many cultures the dead were not simply buried and forgotten; rather, they were regarded as powerful forces. Rituals were performed both to honor their memory and to facilitate their transition to the afterlife³⁶.

William further pointed to the practice of offering gifts and sacrifices as a means of appeasing and honoring the dead. In various civilizations, ancestor worship involved the offerings and animal sacrifices, with the belief that ancestors could, in turn, provide guidance, protection, or prophetic insight into living, often through dreams.³⁷

³²- I. MILLER, "The Mask of Eternity The Quest for Immortality and the Afterlife", in: *JCER*, 2016, 7, Issue 11, p.1218.

³³- S. RAPOPORT, *the Animated Soul: Gateway to Your Ka*, Leonardo, 25, No. 2, 1992, 218-219.

³⁴- A. O. BOLSHAKOV, Man and his Double in Egyptian Ideology of the Old Kingdom, in: *ÄAT*, 37, 102

³⁵- I. MILLER, 2016, p. 1223

³⁶- T. THAYER, *Ancestor Worship in Africa*, in: *The Harvard Theological Review*, 17, No. 2, 1924, 165.

³⁷- C. WILLIAM, *Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, Oxford, 1926, p184

The ancestor cult, according to Taylor, was a common feature of Pharaonic society, serving to reinforce social cohesion within extended families while also acting as an intermediary between the living and the netherworld³⁸.

Baines further discussed the cult of ancestors, noting that communities bore social obligations toward their dead. Ancestors were believed to expect offerings and sacrifices as acts of veneration; failure to fulfill these duties could result in misfortune or divine retribution. However, the continuity of such cults was not always secure, as they were vulnerable to gradual neglect or even the destruction of tombs.³⁹

Spencer argued more broadly that ancestor worship constituted one of the foundational elements of religion in prehistoric societies.⁴⁰

Friedman identified the cemetery at Nekhen as compelling evidence for these practices. The presence of animal burials in many tombs, alongside exceptional finds such as Tomb 16—which contained the masks—highlights the ritual and symbolic significance of the site⁴¹.

These masks, therefore, may be interpreted as material evidence for ancestor worship in Predynastic Egypt. It is possible that the tomb containing these masks belonged to an individual of special status, perhaps a ritual specialist, shaman, or revered ancestral figure⁴² (fig:9).

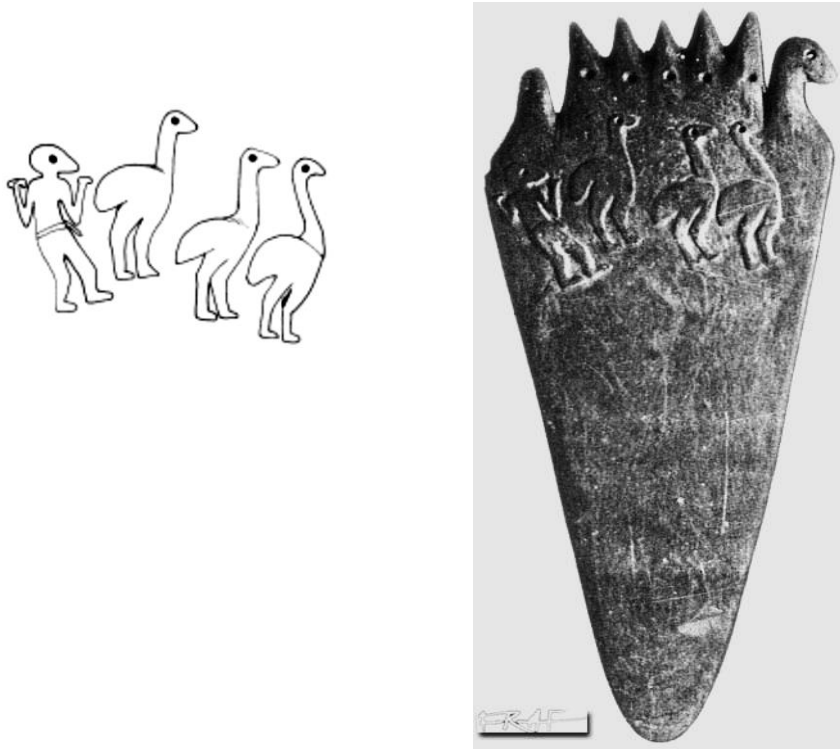
³⁸ - E.B. TAYLOR, *Primitive Culture II*, London, 1871, 113.

³⁹ - J. BAINES, and P. LACOVARA, “Burial and the Dead in Ancient Egyptian Society” in: *JSA*, 2, 2002, pp. 5–36.

⁴⁰ - H. SPENCER, *Principles of Sociology*, New York, 1896, p.411.

⁴¹ - R. A. FRIEDMAN, “Tour of the Palace”, in: *NN*, 21, 2009, p.4.

⁴² - B. ADAMS, Op. Cit., p. 5.



(Fig.9)- Ostrich Palette detail- (Manchester Museum)

B. ADAMS, 1999, p. 5.

Dougherty further explored the relationship between ancestor worship and human sacrifice. The tombs at HK6 appear as subsidiary burials surrounding the large and elite Tomb 16. The demographic composition of these peripheral burials—primarily young individuals—suggests that they occupied subordinate roles within the social hierarchy and were interred in proximity to those they served. These individuals may have been retainers, servants, or possibly concubines. Tomb 18, in particular, contained four young adult females, none older than thirty, which may support this interpretation. At HK6, social structure, rather than biological factors, appears to have played a decisive role in shaping the cemetery's organization.⁴³

Conclusion

In conclusion, masks and ancestor worship played a fundamental role in shaping religious and ideological thought in Predynastic Egypt. The evidence from Nekhen, particularly the masks found in elite burial contexts, underscores the importance of ritual practices centered on death, transformation, and the continuity between the living and the dead.

These masks were likely not only ritual objects but also symbolic tools through which individuals could assume divine or ancestral identities. Their presence in funerary contexts strongly supports the interpretation that they were connected to beliefs in the afterlife and the veneration of ancestors.

⁴³ - S.P. DOUGHERTY, *Death in Fragments : Piecing Together the Skeletons of HK6*, in: *NN*, 22, 2010, p.7.

Moreover, the integration of animal symbolism, ritual performance, and social hierarchy within these practices reflects the early formation of key elements of Egyptian religion. Ancestor worship, as demonstrated through both textual and archaeological evidence, functioned as a vital link between past and present, reinforcing social structure and religious belief.

Ultimately, the study of Nekhen masks provides valuable insight into the origins of ancient Egyptian religious traditions, revealing how early concepts of identity, divinity, and immortality were expressed through material culture and ritual practice.

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