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La chronologie relative de la Basse Vallée du Nil jusqu'au 3^e millénaire BC
(coord. E.C. Köhler)

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The Palaeolithic and Epipalaeolithic of the Nile Valley and the deserts

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The Palaeolithic and Epipalaeolithic periods in Egyptian are probably the most difficult phases to define in terms of relative chronology, which is why this section will be only very brief¹.

There are at least five partly interrelated problems that cause these difficulties. Firstly, the periods span hundreds of thousands of years of early human activity in the Nile Valley and the adjacent deserts, starting with the production of stone tools around half a million years ago and creating an almost impractically long time span to define.

Secondly, considering the great antiquity of these activities, there have also been substantial global climatic and local environmental changes during these phases that dramatically shaped the appearance of the valley and the deserts. These represent significant natural transformation processes that affected the diagenesis of archaeological sites. For example, there were phases of great aridity that forced early humans to move closer to water sources in or near the valley, followed by very wet phases that caused flash floods

and water-borne erosion along the Nile terraces and in the *wadis*. Further, due to the consistent deposition of fluvial sediments in the Nile valley, be it through lateral erosion or inundation, some of the most ancient sites may have been buried by thick deposits of clays or gravel on the valley floor and may yet be found.

Thirdly, although there are large numbers of Palaeolithic stone artefacts, they tend to be widely scattered over isolated and remote sites, as the producers of these stone tools were small and highly mobile groups of hunters and gatherers that moved with the seasonal migration of animals and from one water source to the next. The systematic and broad exploration of Palaeolithic sites is therefore not without difficulty.

Fourthly, because Palaeolithic humans were very mobile, there is no significant evidence for structural remains, such as habitation sites or graves, let alone stratigraphic deposits, until the final stages of the Palaeolithic, therefore evidence remains scarce until the early Neolithic.

1. I am grateful to Philip Van Peer for providing helpful advice on this chapter.

And fifthly, because Palaeolithic and Epipalaeolithic humans did not produce ceramics, which always represent a most important and reliable backbone of any relative chronology, artefact sequences almost entirely rely on lithics and as such cannot be tested against other artefact groups.

Apart from observing very general assemblage characteristics of those lithic industries that only allow for very broad sequences, it is therefore most challenging to identify connections between them, establish direct sequences from one to the other or even precise typologies of individual artefact groups. In order to try to develop such sequences or to determine what is early and what may be later, archaeologists working with this material are, as a result, highly reliant on modern scientific dating methods and absolute chronology. Much of this work is on-going.

However, very broad and general phases can be distinguished whose definition largely rests on European prehistoric terminology.

The earliest lithic industries derive from the Lower Palaeolithic Acheulean tradition (c. 500000 B.P.) in the Egyptian Western Desert and in the Sudanese part of the Nile Valley. They are largely characterized by bifacial

hand axes that, because they seem to be perfectly suited for a variety of uses, have a very long duration. While other core reduction (blade or flake) industries are known from early on, it appears as if flakes of the Levallois technique become more popular during the Middle Palaeolithic (from around 250 000 B.P.). There is some evidence for gradual change from around 60 000 B.P., which eventually leads to lithic technologies of Upper Palaeolithic appearance, although sites are extremely limited until around 25000 B.P. The Late Palaeolithic (c. 24 000-10 000 B.P.) provides the first evidence for microlithic industries, which probably lay the foundations for the Epipalaeolithic (c. 10 000-6000 B.C.E.) tool repertoire, although there is no direct link between them. The latter also increasingly employs the blade technique, but it is possible that external influences from the Western Desert and the Levant may have contributed. The first evidence of structural remains comes from the Upper (c. 70,000 - 25,000 B.P.) and Late Palaeolithic sites such as Nazlet Khater and Wadi Kubaniya (Vermeersch 1983; Wendorf & Schild 1986), but there is little stratigraphic evidence allowing for more precise sequences.

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Neolithic in the Nile Valley (Fayum A, Merimde, el-Omari, Badarian)

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What has been said for the Palaeolithic and Epipalaeolithic very much applies also for the period immediately following, although the situation has improved slightly as there are more sites with structural remains on the record on the one hand, and because the lithic industries are now complemented by the presence of ceramic data on the other. However, the distribution of sites along the Nile Valley is still inadequate as their precise interrelationship in material and chronological terms is yet to be established.

The earliest evidence for Neolithic cultures of the Nile Valley is located in the north of Egypt and exhibits a well-developed stage of Neolithic subsistence, including the cultivation of crops, animal domestication and sedentism as well as pottery production from the late 6th Millennium B.C. onwards. The main archaeological sites are located near lacustrine or riverine water sources; along the shores of the Fayum Lake (Fayum A/Fayumian), on a spur above the edge of the western Delta floodplain (Merimde Benisalame) and on the upper banks of a small side stream of the Nile River (el-Omari) and in the south along the edge of the cultivation (region of Badari). All three northern sites have a strong domestic character although a small number of contemporary graves have been recorded at Merimde and el-Omari. Since the absolute chronological position of the earliest remains near Badari has now been better defined, placing it towards the end of the 5th Millennium, rather than the start, it has been less difficult to correlate its material culture with that of the north and explain its more advanced development, both in terms of ceramic technology, artistic development and social organisation. This is why we refer to it as Late Neolithic. What remains to be determined, however, is to what extent this late Neolithic Badarian tradition correlates with the earliest stages of the Naqada Culture, especially since the latter's beginning is now being pushed further back (see Hartmann, this volume).

Fayum A/Fayumian

Initially excavated by Gertrude Caton-Thompson, the remains of what are probably the earliest of Neolithic sites, is located on the northern shore of the lake forming two mounds of occupation, Kôm K and Kôm W (Caton-Thompson & Gardner 1934; Wendrich & Cappers 2005; see also Shirai, this volume), as well as scattered camp-sites along the perimeter of the lake (Wendorf & Schild 1976; Kozłowski & Ginter 1989; Wenke, Long & Buck 1988). Kôm K produced especially interesting, well preserved archaeological features, such as a number of large pits that were lined with basketry and possibly served as grain silos, as remains of grain seeds and a complete composite sickle were found therein. Apart from large quantities of hearths and settlement debris, there appears to be no significant evidence for house structures or well-stratified occupational layers. The material remains comprise of coarsely made pottery representing simple, multifunctional shapes, especially deep bowls, with little decoration; polished stone axes; bifacially retouched tools such as sickles and concave-based arrow heads; as well as stone maces. What has been described by Caton-Thompson as 'Fayum A' or 'Fayumian' by the more recent Polish excavators, can indeed be characterized as an early Neolithic Culture, whose absolute chronological position between 5400-4400 cal B.C. (Hendrickx 1999: 18) would place it at the very beginning of the Neolithic sequence in the Nile Valley, although the material culture is highly comparable with the later material at Merimde and el-Omari. While the stage more recently defined as 'Moerian' (Kozłowski & Ginter 1989: 166-169) is often also classified as Neolithic, its material traits would suggest a cultural and temporal proximity to the early Chalcolithic sites of the north.

Merimde Benisalame

Merimde Benisalame is probably the most representative and best recorded site of the Early Neolithic as it exhibits a large settlement of about 25 hectares with well stratified remains of up to 2.50 m thickness (Eiwanger 1984-1992). These strata can be divided into five phases starting just before 5000 cal B.C. and continuing well into the 5th Millennium B.C. Although the earliest occupation (*Urschicht*) suggests links with the Early Neolithic cultures of the Levant, phases II-V show close material and cultural ties with the Early Neolithic in the Fayum, as the occupational features, including basket-lined storage pits, ceramics and lithic tools are highly comparable. This well-stratified and well-recorded Early Neolithic material is a suitable archaeological assemblage for relative chronological studies.

el-Omari

The sites summarised as and named el-Omari are distributed over a relatively large area at the mouth of Wadi Hof and include what appear to be seasonal dwellings of rounded semi-subterranean huts and graves scattered among them, although direct contemporaneous habitation is not indicated (Debono & Mortensen 1990). The published radiocarbon dates place el-Omari at the end of the northern Early Neolithic sequence, i.e. between 4600 and 4400 cal B.C.; although the material remains, which share significant traits with the Fayumian and Merimde, have been compared to the earlier levels at Merimde

(Mortensen 1992). That this site may indeed be slightly later, or more advanced in material terms, is possible as the lithic industry not only exhibits the usual bifacially retouched tools, but also a new technology of large blades comprised of knives with handles and sickle blades. The knives especially in this case, are an entirely new feature and may or may not have influenced the blade industries known from Badari (Holmes 1989; Debono-Mortensen 1990).

Badari

The remains of the later Neolithic in the region of Badari¹ (Brunton & Caton-Thompson 1928) comprise of both settlement as well as mortuary evidence. What is notable are the similarities of the Badarian lithic industries with those of the north, especially when considering the bifacial hollow-based arrowheads, sickles and axes, as well as the emerging specialised blade industry, which may have originated in the north. On the other hand, the Badarian can also be characterised by new technologies, such as the flake-blade industry of endscrapers, perforators and the like (Holmes 1989: 336). A similar general development can be observed in the ceramics repertoire. The coarse domestic wares of the Badarian share a great deal with the north, especially considering the restricted spectrum of simple, multifunctional shapes and surface finishing methods. What is new, however, are the fine wares often exhibiting bi-chrome firing patterns, sharp bi-conical vessel contours, specific decorative polishing techniques (pattern burnishing), as well as the typically rippled surface. All of the above traits cannot be found in the north, but are frequently used to identify Badarian material further south and may possibly be considered as evidence for contacts with Nubia and the deserts (see also Gatto, this volume). Moreover, well known objects from Badari are made of cold-hammered, native copper, documenting that new materials are being explored. The material culture is further enriched by small artistic media, such as carved ivory figurines, jewellery or spoons that find no parallels in the north or in the south. These differences can be attributed both to regional variation as well as chronological development. Badari is in character a valley culture of farmers and is not only significantly further south along the river, but it also seems to be later than the comparable northern sites with more recent radiocarbon dates ranging between 4400 - 4000 cal B.C. (Hendrickx 1999: 19). That it still adheres to a Neolithic tradition, rather than Chalcolithic, is probably indicated by a lack of consistent, full-time craft specialisation (especially metallurgy) and social ranking, even though the analysis of graves might suggest a degree of social inequality (Anderson 1992). This Late Neolithic material complex known as Badarian may not only have regional variants; but moreover, show further developments indicated by the material studied at Mahgar Dendera 2 (Hendrickx, Midant-Reynes & van Neer 2001: 85). This, in turn could provide a certain material basis, though limited due to the fragmentary preservation of ceramics at this site, to correlate this assemblage with that of the earliest Naqada stages in the Abydos region as now suggested by Hartmann (this volume).

Considering its prominent location between Upper and Lower Egypt and between the Eastern and Western Deserts, the external influences on this early valley culture at Badari may have been substantial, which could potentially result

1. The material found at Tasa will be excluded from this chapter as its precise cultural and chronological affiliation as part of the Nile Valley cultures are still undecided; see Gatto, this volume.

in a blending of a variety of traditions and thus have an impact on its assessment within the relative chronology of the valley. However, due to its early investigation and lack of comprehensive recent re-investigation, its precise character according to modern archaeological understanding is yet to be defined.

To conclude, it must be said that the Neolithic of the Nile Valley is an area where a lot more focussed research will be needed in order to better understand the chronological sequences connecting north and south during the 5th Millennium B.C., as well as the exact material origins of what is currently termed Naqada Culture. However, at this stage it appears as if at least one index fossil can already be identified that may help separating this material from earlier and later assemblages, namely the concave-based bifacial arrowheads and other diagnostic bifaces, such as sickle stones. Although they can never be considered frequent in the Neolithic tool repertoire, either, they do not feature at all during the Epipalaeolithic or in any significant numbers within the Chalcolithic assemblages (Seeher 1988: 32).

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