

THE PICTURE OF NAQADAN-LOWER EGYPTIAN TRANSITION RECONSTRUCTED ON THE BASIS OF SEPULCHRAL DATA

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The issue of the Naqadan-Lower Egyptian transition is widely discussed by various specialists. The most recent research, like excavations at Tell el-Farkha and Kom el-Khilgan, or reevaluation of older thoroughly published and well known works (*e.g.* Minshat Abu Omar) throw new light on the case. According to our present knowledge earlier theories, which attempted to explain this interesting change in Egyptian history as a result of a conquest, failed. Actually proposed theories – depending on the point of view, that is usually the site from which the situation is interpreted – are more North or South oriented. The most convincing seem to be those accenting assimilation (BUCHEZ & MIDANT-REYNES 2011) and integration (MACZYŃSKA 2011), which point to the fact that the contact of North-expanding Naqadans and resident Lower Egyptians brought to creation of a new cultural value. Many of these disagreements come from overestimation of the leading Naqadan role and, at the same time, underestimation of the Lower Egyptian cultural unit complexity (see also KÖHLER 2008; *in press*; MACZYŃSKA *in press c*).

1. THE LOWER EGYPTIAN CULTURE BURIAL CUSTOMS

The Lower Egyptian culture, also from historic reasons called the Buto-Maadi complex, is the first unit known in the history of Northern Egypt, which was recognized at as many as 24 sites, spread over such a wide area. It evolved, expanded and maintained active trade contacts with the Levant and Upper Egypt being a real partner in the exchange. According to recent proposals the Lower Egyptian culture should be dated to the period between 3900-3300/3200 BC and it is divided into three chronological phases (MACZYŃSKA 2011: tab. 2; 2013): early – Naqada I-IIAB, middle – Naqada IIC-IID1 and transitional – Naqada IID2-early IIIA1. The level of social complexity of the Lower Egyptian culture is currently widely discussed and new discoveries suggest significant advancement in building technologies and high density housing planning (MACZYŃSKA *in press a*). Good examples

come from Tell el-Farkha from the Central (a Lower Egyptian residence – see CHŁODNICKI & GEMING 2012) and Western Koms (a brewery complex and early Naqadan residence – see CIAŁOWICZ 2012ab), where clear organization of the settlement pattern and very early application of mud bricks show that the Lower Egyptian society was much more organized than it was supposed.

In comparison to information gathered thanks to settlements relevant cemetery data present a surprisingly poor picture. Burial customs of the Lower Egyptian culture appear to be simple, only creating its clear rules which were never fully followed. There is a bunch of such “rules” like: structurally simple pit inhumations of insignificant size (with a slight tendency toward growing in time) with bottoms inlaid with mats as the maximum of care; the obvious preference for the extra-mural burial custom; the preferable contracted body position on its right side with its head mostly oriented southwards.

Grave offerings were a practice known by the people of the Lower Egyptian culture but not always present. Generally, only ca. a half of the culture burials was equipped with any object, however, there is an observed tendency toward increasing popularity of the tradition together with the whole unit development. Apart from that, rich offerings seem to be a practice borrowed from other areas since it appeared as late as in the period of intensified Lower Egyptian-Naqadan contacts. Before, typical offerings had comprised a single pottery vessel from the commonly attested functional repertoire, frequently severely worn out. Objects of other categories also appeared in graves sporadically, however, they constituted rare discoveries, moreover, they were rarely of any significant value. A general rule seems to be local origin of all items accompanying burials. Studies by N. BUCHEZ and B. MIDANT-REYNES (2011) suggest that among the rather narrow repertoire of local pottery registered in Lower Egyptian graves especially characteristic lemon-shaped jars deserve special attention and thanks to their distinctive form and popularity they are even seen as cultural markers (*cf.* KÖHLER *this volume*). Also large Nile mollusks shells, which were probably used as containers, may have similar significance. The small number of grave goods does not allow to capture social stratification and is sometimes interpreted as a proof that the society functioned according to simple rules, without division into material groups. However, the picture looks much more complicated when compared with the data collected in the settlement in Tell el-Farkha (CHŁODNICKI & CIAŁOWICZ 2002: 60-70; 2004: 50; MACZYŃSKA *in press ac*), which strongly suggest the beginning of social differentiation with the moment when mud brick structures were introduced. As burial customs are popularly regarded as very conservative and change-proof, the evolution of social situation could not find its reflection in the grave tradition.

The archaeological sepulchral material does not reveal any particular care of the afterlife. Neither sophisticated architectural constructions nor significant number of grave goods were registered. The dead were buried directly in ground pits without care of any protection or tight body cover. Still, some issues are far from being explained, which may add some individual colour to the uncomplicated burial customs. One of these unanswered questions is the tradition of animal burials. Similarly obscure remains the purpose of the

so-called pottery pits which were attested in cemeteries but cannot be directly attributed to any of the surrounding graves and therefore they are treated as independent structures. Presumably, both animal burials and loose human bones registered in settlement strata (*e.g.* on the top of a mound of ashes in Maadi), the so-called pottery pits and the presence of hearths in cemeteries compose particular elements of the Lower Egyptian tradition and enriched the burial customs as a whole. However, the actual importance of these elements is presently undefined and we must await future discoveries before they are eventually explained. It is likely that intensification of field research in previously archaeologically untouched areas would bring new comparative material.

2. CEMETERIES IN NORTHERN EGYPT FROM THE PERIOD OF NAQADA IID2

In the period of Naqada IID2, that is with the terminal phase of the Lower Egyptian unit, the northern cultural picture was no longer as homogenous as before. Apart from settlement remains of the mature Lower Egyptian culture, in the archaeological material registered in the area appeared also Naqadan elements (Fig 1). However, the problem of the developed Naqada culture arrival in Northern Egypt and the process of the local unit supplanting or evolving into another cultural quality, is still far from being explained. The cultural situation in the Late Predynastic period is difficult to be properly assessed, because in the Delta only two cemeteries were precisely dated: Kafr Hassan Dawood (TASSIE & VAN WETERING 2003: 502; TUCKER 2003: 532) and Minshat Abu Omar (KROEPER & WILDUNG 1985; 1994; 2000). The case of Kom el-Khilgan (MIDANT-REYNES *et al.* 2003; 2004; BUCHEZ & MIDANT-REYNES 2011) remains unclear since no burials were attributed to the particular period, although the cemetery was used during Naqada IIC and IIIA without undisputable hiatus period. The possible explanation may be the fact that at the rather poor necropolis all burials from the transitional phase were indistinctive because they contained no datable offering material. Another two well dated sites come from the distant Fayum area, that is Gerzeh (PETRIE *et al.* 1912) and Abusir el-Meleq (MÖLLER 1926; SCHARFF 1926).

Besides the above mentioned sites, a group of partially published cemeteries was registered in the area of Northern Egypt. Some of them were also imprecisely dated (in the Delta: Minshat Ezzat – EL-BAGHDADI 1999; 2003; el-Huseiniya – KRZYŻANIAK 1989: 271; MOSTAFA 1988ab; and Beni Amir – EL-HAGG RAGAB 1992; EL-MONEIM 1996), others merely general (et-Tibbin – LECLANT 1973: 404; Gurob – LOAT 1905: 2; BRUNTON & ENGELBACH 1927; and el-Bashkatib near Lahun – PETRIE *et al.* 1923: 21-22 – outside the Delta), or even unreliable as Gezira Sangaha and Tell el-Ginn (KRZYŻANIAK 1989: 271). In addition, the material collected at the sites is mostly uncharacteristic – simple pit burials in a contracted side position, with bodies sometimes wrapped in leather and devoid of offerings – that is why it could probably date to some earlier or later periods and, thus, its cultural affiliation remains unclear. Nevertheless, the sites' presence itself proves that the cultural process was in progress, however, it does not provide information about its relation to the previously popular local cultural unit.

3. FOCUS ON THE LOWER EGYPTIAN SEPULCHRAL TRADITION IN THE LATE PHASE

Burial customs of the late phase of the Lower Egyptian culture are hardly recognized, although the phase is well attested at numerous settlement sites, where slowly but gradually local Lower Egyptian traditions were blurred and melted into the new cultural picture of the Delta in the period of Naqada IIIA. The only cemetery site attributed to the phase is Minshat Abu Omar Ib and, very tentatively, also II.¹ As MAO Ib is generally dated to Naqada IID, only a part of these burials (ca. 56% of early graves at the site) actually represents the late phase of the Lower Egyptian culture (see also MACZYŃSKA *in press b*; *this volume*). Unfortunately, to precisely mark them off more studies have to be completed. The situation does not become clearer when the presence of other neighbouring cemeteries is considered.

Typical graves discovered in MAO Ib followed the same rules that existed in its previous phase – MAO Ia – that is contracted right side position of the deceased, with their heads turned northwards. The offerings were composed mostly of locally made pottery and some imported Upper Egyptian and Levantine wares, as well as limestone and travertine vessels, flints, cosmetic pallets, beads, bone spoons, harpoons and other, though not numerous, objects of bone and copper. Burials were deposited in simple oval or rectangular (1-1.5m in average length) and rather deep (from 0.6 to 3.2m) pits, described even as “shaft pits” (KROEPER 1988: 14).

It remains obscure, though, how far the Minshat Abu Omar data may be representative of the whole cultural unit since the site is the only (as it is presently accepted) Lower Egyptian cemetery dated to the late phase and the only one whose use was incessantly continued in the following period. It should also be considered that MAO II represents the actual cultural transition with continuation of major Lower Egyptian burial traditions and typically Naqadan pottery grave offerings.

4. THE MYSTERIOUS SITE OF KAFR HASSAN DAWOOD

The cemetery in Kafr Hassan Dawood is rather well known (HASSAN 2000; ROWLAND & HASSAN 2003; TASSIE & VAN WETERING 2003; TUCKER 2003; see also ROWLAND *this volume*), although still not entirely published. The deceased there were buried in simple oval and small pits dug in a sandy ground. The average grave dimensions were: 1-1.5 x 0.8m. The grave walls were only rarely plastered with mud. The fact that all these graves were simple in their form and infants were continuously interred in pots without offerings or any differentiation do not point to a complicated social structure of the community. The preferable body position was the contracted left side one with heads southwards. The offerings repertoire was rather limited and a set of typical grave goods was composed of a single pottery vessel and, much less frequently, of some other categories of items like cosmetic objects (among them simple stone palettes), personal ornaments or bone spoons.

¹ MAO II is hardly recognized (only ca. 2% of early graves at the site) and the major argument in favour of the suggestion is the continuing tradition of unchanged burials' form and bodies' position in comparison to MAO I.

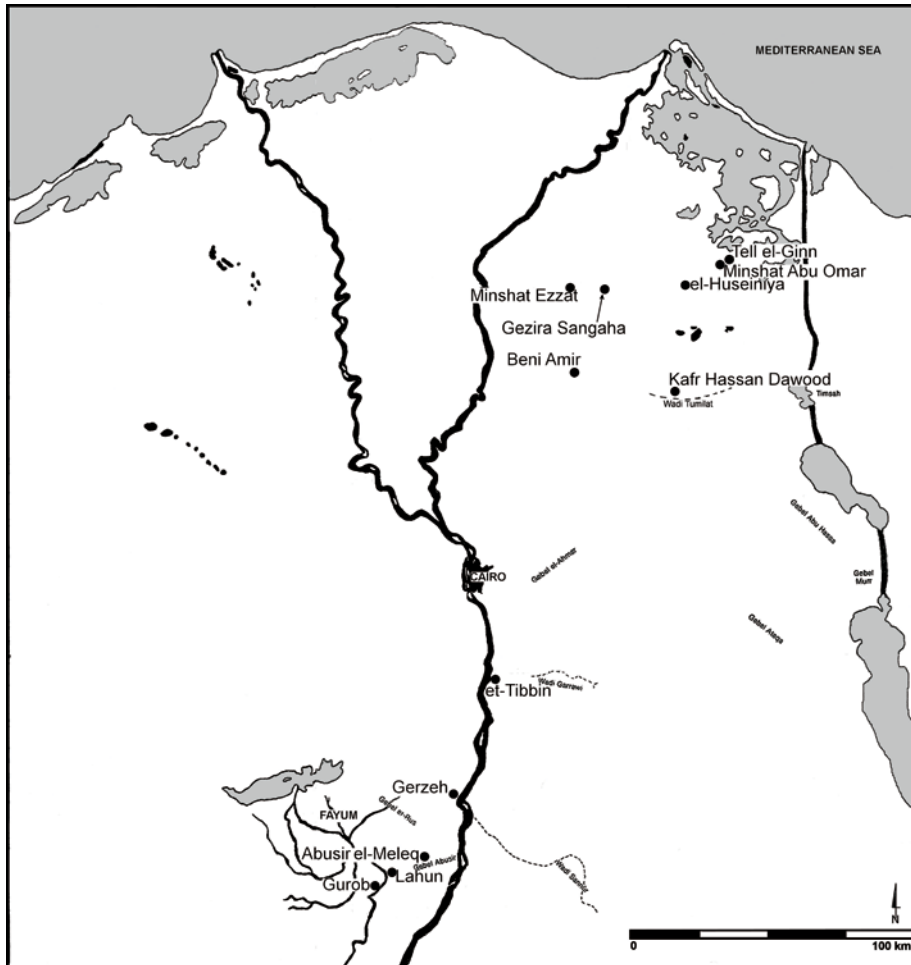


Figure 1. Northern Egyptian cemeteries in the period of Naqada IID2.

Data collected from the early phase of the site were usually supplemented by scarce observation made at other surrounding sites (such as: similar northward body orientation in Minshat Ezzat and opposite southward in Beni Amir) and together interpreted as examples of early Naqadan presence in the Delta. But, taking into consideration the fact that at the beginning of Dynasty 1 in Kafr Hassan Dawood were built large and richly equipped tombs for local elites (*e.g.* tomb no. 970 – HASSAN 2000: 39; see also ROWLAND *this volume*) but without application of a single mud brick, the obvious scarcity of grave goods in the period of Naqada IID2 may also be seen as a manifestation of sticking to simple Lower Egyptian burial traditions. Then, it is possible that the upset of the rules illustrates the accommodation process of the incoming people to new conditions or the

last expression of the stepping away native cultural unit, however, with the reservation that this is hardly sufficient material for such a discussion. In the light the phenomenon of surprising burials and offerings simplicity in comparison to the South can be explained in two ways. By continuation of local customs or the possibility that the early Naqadan settlers, who certainly were not conquerors, did not represent the elites of their culture and at the time were not wealthy or influential but rather immigrants in unfavourable position, thus in both cases, simple burials were the most suitable solution. The heralded by G.J. TASSIE (*pers. comm.*) reinterpretation of the earliest materials from Kafr Hassan Dawood as of Lower Egyptian characteristics seem to perfectly suit the picture and can be very helpful for understanding of the complicated situation.

5. EARLY NAQADAN PRESENCE IN NORTHERN EGYPT

The earliest Naqadan cemetery in Northern Egypt is commonly accepted to be the eponymy site of Gerzeh (PETRIE *et al.* 1912: 1-24). Although there are some discrepancies among scholars in the understanding of the site (see BUCHEZ & MIDANT-REYNES 2011), it is generally believed the cemetery does not display features that could link it to any older type of human activity in the area of the Fayum oasis, so it is regarded (WENKE 1999: 316) as an early Naqadan intruder in the region.

All graves registered in the cemetery of Gerzeh represented the simple pit type – large and oblong or small and oval. All of them had been dug in sandy ground to the level of hard gravel which formed bottoms of the deepest burial pits, reaching up to 0.75m of depth. No remains of any actual grave roofing or strengthening other than mud plaster were registered. The deceased were eventually secured with a kind of coffin which was plastered with mud and filled in with earth and then covered with another layer of mud.

Every burial but three belonged to a single deceased, the exceptions were adults buried with infants and one grave with three adult skeletons. G.A. WAINWRIGHT (PETRIE *et al.* 1912: 5) suggested in the final publication of the site that the majority of these cases had been mothers with their offspring, however, no detailed studies on the bone material were undertaken, therefore the sex of the deceased was left undetermined. Moreover, there are also doubts concerning age distinction, most probably done on the ground of simplistic size criteria of skeletal remains. We should keep in mind that if the term “infant” is fairly clear, more problematic is talking about “children”. The beginning of childhood does not need explaining but its end is dependent on cultural phenomena. That is why we can only tentatively accept the number of 51 as burials belonging to small children. Even in such a case, G.A. WAINWRIGHT’S assessment of infant mortality rate was surprisingly low. It has been estimated (STEVENSON 2006: 14) that the typical childhood mortality rate was ca. 50%, that is much higher than 20.5% of burials from Gerzeh. Children were interred in pottery jars, in most cases devoid of offerings. There are, however, exceptions from the rule as grave no. 70 comprised a tiny child buried in a large pit furnished with 11 pottery jars, one stone vessel and a shell pendant. To explain the differences and the significantly low number of child graves, a selective burial practice is proposed (STEVENSON 2006: 15).

Adults were buried in the contracted mostly left-sided position, the head turned northwards (of course, numerous exceptions were present) while for children the preferable position was also the left-sided one, however their heads were pointing South and North with almost the same frequency. A practice which was quite common was wrapping bodies in reed mats or eventually in cloths, no leather in this function was recorded. Wood was rarely preserved, in majority as a single stick placed along walls of a grave pit or beneath the deceased.

Among objects registered in graves of Gerzeh were: pottery vessels; stone vessels made of colour limestone, colour granite and basalt, porphyry, brown alabaster/travertine and dark serpentine; model vessels made of stone and pottery; beads and pendants from necklaces made of meteoric iron (REHREN *et al.* 2013), gold, carnelian, agate, chalcedony, sard, steatite, calcite, limestone, lapis lazuli, turquoise and onyx; zoomorphic, shield-shaped and round cosmetic palettes sometimes decorated as it was with the so-called “Hathor-palette” (see STEVENSON 2006: 41-42); very few flint knives also ripple-flaked and a single fish-tail; ivory spoons and pins; a pottery cow horn model, stone balls (so-called “marbles”, which may possibly be tokens used as elements of an early counting system) of granite and limestone; a copper bowl and finally a pottery rattle. Green ore malachite probably used as green dye was also quite popular in the Gerzeh graves, other colours obtained thanks to galena and kohl were registered in a part of richer burials, therefore it seems possible they might have been regarded as having underlined some specific status. The richest grave (no. 67) in the cemetery belonged to a young individual who was equipped with unique iron beads, the only registered pieces of weapon (a pear-shaped mace head of limestone and a copper harpoon), one cosmetic palette of greywacke and the only ivory vessel known from the site (PETRIE *et al.* 1912: 5).

281 graves from the site comprise material wide enough to preserve some ritual activity remains. The most imagination firing are those examples associated with body mutilation practices (STEVENSON 2006: 58-63). In the above-mentioned grave labeled no. 67, the deceased’s head had been parted from the rest of the body and left on its base, while quite an impressive necklace with golden beads was found still on the neck. Grave no. 251 belonged to an adult devoid of the head and offerings. The owner of grave no. 260 had been buried on the back, but the head was lying face down to the ground. In graves nos 123, 137, 138, 142, 187 and 284 absence or rearrangement of some body parts as feet, hands or pelvis was noted. Finally, in grave no. 206 adult bones had been piled in the centre of the pit. The first three examples are most likely to be interpreted as some ritual body mutilation practices, the latter example can be easily explained as a secondary burial, while the remaining ones may be incomplete well due to post-depositional intrusions.

A somehow reverse phenomenon, but still related to unexplained practices of body treatment, are graves where only fragments of skeletons (according to G.A. WAINWRIGHT’S disputable identification) were registered. These are the cases of graves nos 40, 61, 71,

95 and 281. There, pieces of skulls and phalanges were discovered in pots that had been meant as funerary goods of the main grave occupant (STEVENSON 2006: 23). In the context, a unique structure, labeled as grave no. 108 (PETRIE *et al.* 1912: 8), is also worth mentioning. There, the only discovered human bones were a few phalanges, while the whole pit was full of ashes and charcoal. The structure could have possibly played the function of a hearth related to burial custom rituals, which are presently undefined and obscure, however, since we have no more data, the actual function and significance of the structure remain unknown.

Ritual related activity may also be reflected by observations made in graves nos 11 and 263. In the former, some linen had been wrapped around bones of a young individual, while in the latter an adult body was found with thick pads of fabric that covered his/her hands and pelvis. These two examples are sometimes quoted as the beginnings of mummification (STEVENSON 2006: 19), tentatively comparable with discoveries made at Hierakonpolis (JONES 2002).

Thus, Gerzeh appears to be a site composed of structurally simple graves but, what is interesting, rather wealthily equipped with a relatively wide range of functional objects, including those of personal use, frequently made of precious material. And although some pottery types are similar to those known from the native Delta context, the general abundance of diversified offerings, as well as remains of some ritual activity point to another, not Lower Egyptian, tradition.

6. ABUSIR EL-MELEQ – A PERFECT LOWER EGYPTIAN-NAQADAN COEXISTENCE?

In the period when the presence of the first Naqadan settlers was gradually becoming a normal element of the Delta cultural picture, that is NIID2, ca. 300km south, in the Fayum oasis area a cemetery in Abusir el-Meleq (MÖLLER 1926; SCHARFF 1926) was founded. Except for Gerzeh (at the end of its occupation), small Gurob and a single, uncharacteristic and very widely dated burial from el-Bashkatib near Lahun (PETRIE *et al.* 1923: 24), no other traces of burial practices were registered in the region. It is surprising that the burial customs from Abusir el-Meleq seem very homogenous. The total number of graves registered at the site reached at least 850, which forms quite reliable material for statistical analyses.

With only a few exceptions a consequent preference towards the contracted left-sided position (99%) with heads turned southwards (98.75%) and facing west (98.45%) was observed. The majority of identified bones belonged to infants and small children (40%), and the remaining 35% and 16% were males and females, respectively (CASTILLOS 1982: 155). Pottery coffins were found in four graves, three of which contained child burials. In addition, only a single wooden coffin was registered at the site (SEEHER 1999: 92). Graves were simple pit burials, oval or round in their shape, sometimes partially or thoroughly plastered with mud; however, the more structurally sophisticated type of rectangular pits lined with mud brick predominated. Few graves of the latter construction

type were divided into two chambers – an actual burial one and the other of storage function (SCHARFF 1926: 108-165). The average depth of burials in Abusir el-Mepeq was 0.8-1.2m and total dimensions of majority of them were 0.7-2.26m of length and 0.45-1.3m of width. The largest structures were 3.19m long and 1.7m wide. Remains of wood and mats were interpreted as internal wall lining and ceiling constructions. 15 graves clustered in the northern part of the site comprised a sort of mud brier where the dead with grave goods had been placed.

As far as it can be estimated in the situation when numerous burials were robbed in the antiquity, jars representing the wavy-handled type usually stood near the deceased heads while large storage vessels near the feet. Animal bones registered within graves were interpreted as food offerings. The most precious objects were usually found close to the deceased hands or over the body. Vessels and large flint knives were often broken before they were interred.

Grave goods were diversified and composed mainly of pottery and stone vessels. The remaining articles were: miniature vessels of ivory, shell, horn, faïence and copper; personal adornments, such as beads, pins, bracelets (one with relief decoration representing a serpent, others with crocodiles) and cosmetic objects like spoons, sticks, combs – frequently made of bone and decorated. Also the majority of cosmetic palettes were decorated examples. Among other objects copper tools, six pear-shaped mace heads and animal figurines should be mentioned. Grave no. 1035 revealed a cylindrical seal made of ivory and decorated with three rows of animals (SCHARFF 1926: 65-70; SEEHER 1999: 92-93).

In general, the cemetery in Abusir el-Mepeq is wealthier than the ones already mentioned, however, it should not be disregarded that the site was also a bit younger and the more affluent furnishing practice might result from the difference in dating and reflect the general development direction of burial customs registered in the Delta.

As the archaeological material suggests, the considerably far distance of Abusir el-Mepeq from the Delta did not have any influence on the differences that arose between these two regions. And thus, a conclusion can be drawn that the cultural picture registered in the eastern Delta was not of local character and should be regarded as the actual view of the general situation of the period. The Abusir el-Mepeq publication proposes that people buried in the cemetery represented two different types which should belong to descendants of the local Lower Egyptian cultural unit and more robust Naqadan newcomers. At present, the problem is that the anthropological examination was done at the beginning of the 20th century and therefore, the data is not fully reliable, now, on the other hand there is not enough comparative material for such a study. From the physical anthropological point of view the question remains unsolved, however, if the two distinct groups of people really existed it would perfectly suit the theory about mutual merging of the outgoing Lower Egyptian culture and the North expanding Naqadan formation.

There exists a general agreement that the transitional phase of the Lower Egyptian culture is of key importance for the proper understanding of the process of Egyptian cultural unification. It is also clear that our present knowledge is far from satisfying, but field research of last 20 years bring more and more elements of the puzzle. Sepulchral material is burden with conservatism, packed with attachment to ancestors' traditions, however, when changes can be finally seen – and the discussed material shows they are slight, prolonged and discreet, but visible – at the same moment they mark deep cultural evolution of a society and its people way of thinking. Analyzing burial traditions of Northern Egypt, we find another proof for the importance of the native local culture with its wide range, openness to other people and probably also high tolerance and acceptance of their otherness. The reevaluation of Minshat Abu Omar, which for many years was treated as a bright example of originally Naqadan presence in the far Eastern Delta, shows that the formerly admired Naqadan conqueror might have been in fact conquered by the peasants and tradesmen from the Delta, who largely contributed to the Egyptian culture.

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