

E. Christiana Köhler

## **Evidence for interregional contacts between Late Prehistoric Lower and Upper Egypt: a view from Buto**

---

### **Introduction**

The main ideas for the development of the late prehistoric cultures in Egypt were essentially worked out by Werner Kaiser in the last thirty years (Kaiser 1956; 1957; 1985; 1990). As a result we learned that the rise of the archaic Egyptian culture was built on two different traditions: Lower and Upper Egypt. These developed in two different ways in prehistory and came together when the Upper Egyptian Naqada culture expanded to the north and this led to the unification of Egypt.

These ideas were for a long time *argumenta ex silentio* since archaeological records had not provided sufficient material until the last ten years, when the archaeology of the Nile Delta began to evolve.

### **The evidence from Tell el-Fara'in - Buto**

In Tell el-Fara'in/Buto - a site in the western Nile Delta - the main interest of the excavation project by the German Institute of Archaeology was to shed light on the point in history when Upper Egypt (Naqada culture) met and incorporated Lower Egypt by conquering it.

The stratigraphy of the last excavations in 1989 provides a very tight sequence and show the evolution of the Late Predynastic material of a Lower Egyptian tradition (namely Buto/Maadi culture) into those of an Early Dynastic unified Egypt of Naqadian traditions. There is a transitional layer "IIIa" present in Buto in which the ceramic provide evidence for a slowly evolving acculturation from the one to the other cultural tradition with both features appearing side by side. The evidence, we thought, would show that the acculturation should have taken place in a later stage of the Naqada culture, namely IId2, speaking in Upper Egyptian chronological terms according to Kaiser.

At Buto two layers - I and II - (to be compared with Naqada IIb-d), were found followed by a transitional IIIa (Naqada IId2) and then by Early Dynastic

layers of a unified Egyptian culture (starting in Naqada IIIa). The stratigraphical sequence shows no hiatus between Layer I and II nor between Layer II and IIIa but instead a gradual change of the artefactual assemblage.

The acculturation can be characterized in more detail by going down through the strata. The uppermost part of Layer III contained mudbrick architecture with a well evolved ceramic industry in the tradition of Naqada IIIa. Further below the mudbrick architecture ends, but in this stratum the material culture is still of Upper Egyptian tradition recognizable by typical ceramic features and includes as well Lower Egyptian traditions indicated by some typical ceramic features and wattle/daub architecture. Between Stratum IIIa and Stratum II there was no hiatus but a kind of change to be observed in the material culture. Layer II apparently possessed exclusively Lower Egyptian features with some imports from Upper Egypt (Köhler 1992).

Lower Egyptian features in Layer II can be described by ceramics with impressed decoration (von der Way 1991), small ovoid vessels with cylindrical necks (see Fig. 4 below) and in Layer I by intense and close connections to the type site Maadi with e.g. pedestal and black polished vessels (Rizkana & Seeher 1987: pl. 1-12). The pottery of these layers is simply manufactured: the clay fabric contains big amounts of organic and anorganic temper e.g. straw, chaff, dung and sand. It is hand-built and fired in uncontrolled and mainly reducing atmosphere indicated by dark grey and brownish colours with firing spots. Most of the ceramics are rough faced or burnished and show rectangular hollows deriving from organic inclusions (chaff or straw) which have burnt out by firing. Also to be mentioned is a very distinct fabric (Fibrous ware) tempered with extremely fine organic and curling fibres, an obviously typical ware for the Delta (Köhler 1992: 16f.).

### The evidence from Upper Egypt

The Upper Egyptian pottery tradition was mainly determined by cemetery material which provides very fine ceramics like "Black-topped", "Red polished" and later marl-clay wares. These wares were produced under much more elaborate production conditions and were often taken to demonstrate the cultural difference of Upper and Lower Egypt. Taking a closer look we can see analogies between the Lower and Upper Egyptian Predynastic cultures which are actually well known, but obviously underestimated and which have to be explained.

The typical impressed decorations on ceramic of the Buto layer II is also characteristic for Upper Egyptian settlement sites of the Naqada IIc period (Adams & Friedman 1992). They are very common in domestic purpose ceramics such as the "Rough-Ware" and other coarse wares (Fig. 1-3). Also the small ovoid vessels with cylindrical neck are quite common at cemetery sites and are a so called typical features of the Buto/Maadi culture (Fig. 4-6). The parallels are still few until now, but they do exist and we have to explain them.

As regards the impressed decorations it has been suggested that they were imports or influenced by Western Desert groups migrating into the Nile Valley (von der Way 1991; Caneva 1992). It could also be possible that this decoration is present in Upper Egypt as a link between the Nubian-Sudanese Neolithic cultures and Lower Egypt and that it is not a normal feature in Upper Egypt since it occurs so rarely (von der Way 1991). While this may be true we must remember that settlement sites in Upper Egypt are badly recorded compared to cemetery sites and we only have little evidence yet and also that of all ceramic in Buto there is only a portion of less than 1% impressed decoration present.

Recent investigations at Upper Egyptian settlement sites showed that this decoration has to be considered a typical settlement feature which can be found in nearly all Naqada II settlements (Adams & Friedmann 1992).

### Consequences

Will it be necessary to redate the Naqada expansion and assume that the Naqada culture was present in the Delta earlier than we thought before, i.e. during or before Naqada IIc? This would imply a more or less sudden change in the stratigraphical sequence, material culture or settlement pattern between Layer I and II for which there is so far no evidence. Or will it be necessary to reconsider the definition of the Lower and Upper Egyptian cultures and the processes and contacts in the later prehistory of Egypt? (Holmes 1992).

The question is whether we are dealing with an ethnic and territorial expansion of Predynastic Upper Egyptian groups which created early centres like Hierakonpolis and Naqada - or whether these groups maintained a long distance trade with other regions, like the Delta, which resulted in early contacts and influences. We know of intensive contacts in the Neolithic Period readable in the lithic assemblages (Eiwanger 1983, 1987).

In the Chalcolithic period, i.e. the fourth millennium B.C., there is evidence for close connections between the north and the south, indicated by lithic and ceramic industries. Most of the contacts for the lithics in terms of technology and typology have been detected by D. Holmes (1989).

In the well recorded early settlement site of Hierakonpolis, many features of the Naqada IIb-d settlement material are comparable to Buto I and II and the latest stages of Maadi (Adams & Fridman 1992. [Fig. 1-5]).

It is clear that there were connections and influences in both directions, not only from south to north, indicated by e.g. stone vessels which were produced in Maadi and exported to the Naqada region where they form typical cemetery offerings of the Naqada I and II period (Rizkana & Seeher 1988: 63; Seeher 1990: 141). The Naqada II "rough ware" seems to be influenced by the North where it was produced already in Neolithic times. It cannot be decided yet which part of Egypt was responsible for the development of the Naqada II "Decorated ware" with dark-on-light painting. In Maadi as in Naqada it obviously appeared in an early stage of Naqada II on the interior and exterior of simple open bowls

(Rizkana & Seeher 1987: pl. 42-47; Crowfoot-Payne 1992: 188). These examples can give evidence for intense contacts and cultural exchange between the two parts of Egypt already in the early stages of the Predynastic period.

Another question is also whether we are really dealing with two different cultures or with several different styles. One has to face the fact that also in the area of Upper Egypt the Naqada culture has many differences, local traditions and styles (Kemp 1982; Hassan 1988; Mortensen 1992). They have often been ignored since this region was always seen in the tradition of one homogenous Naqada culture. As a matter of fact there are no two identical cemeteries even in the same area! Further north of the nucleus area of Naqada, we find gradually more and more differences.

Also underestimated has been the role of the Badari region which could have served as a link between Upper Egypt and the Delta since not only the wares but also the shapes of the pots are comparable to the Maadi assemblage (Holmes 1992; Köhler in prep). The recent research of D. Holmes in this region will be of great value in this aspect. If we knew more about Middle Egypt we could observe this change better, but all we have until now is the evidence from the region between south of the Faiyum up to the Mediterranean coast.

Different ecological conditions, craft specialization and economical factors might have been the reason for some very distinct local peculiarities in utilitarian objects such as the Lower Egyptian "Fibrous ware", the early development of the straw tempered wares in the north and the imports of Naqadan "Decorated", "Wavy-handled" and "Late" ware to the Delta. This may be, for example, the result of different pottery production methods, namely simple household production in the Delta and household or workshop industry in Upper Egypt where the climatic condition was much better for the development of a specialized pottery industry than in the Delta. Here the archaeological evidence gives reason to speak of a simple manufacturing methods indicated by firing conditions (uncontrolled bonfire without intentional addition of oxygen) and large amounts of temper, which have a positive effect on the drying and firing behaviour of pottery (Arnold 1985: 62ff.).

The pottery production of Buto did not evolve or change before the Late Naqada II/Early Naqada III. Cemetery sites like Minshat Abu Omar apparently give no further evidence for a separate pottery production in the Delta since mainly simple "Rough wares" and marl clay imports of the "classical" Naqada wares (Kroeper & Wildung 1985; Kroeper 1986/87; Kroeper 1988) were found. It seems that the more humid environment of the Delta was responsible for the lack of low tempered fine wares like "Black-topped" vessels or others. In Maadi these Upper Egyptian fine wares were imported and imitated in the local pottery tradition with a high degree of organic temper and a simple technology (Rizkana & Seeher pl. 68f.).

In Upper Egypt the contemporaneous settlements also provide straw tempered wares which were probably produced locally in the vicinity of the habita-

tion area and which are comparable to those of Lower Egyptian settlement sites. But in addition to these also fine wares were produced by specialized potters, perhaps of workshops of the cemeteries (Allen et al. 1982; Geller 1985).

In Upper Egypt the climatic conditions were much more favourable for a specialized pottery industry in Naqada I and Early Naqada II with a full time craft specialization in the Later Naqada II. The fine Nile and marl clay wares need more specialized knowledge of firing conditions, since they are less porous than the straw tempered wares. As an open bonfire reaches its firing temperature very quickly, fine wares could be prepared for firing by heat treatment, e.g. by putting the pots into direct sunlight or over an open fire before firing so that little water remained in the clay (Rice 1987: 15). Fine wares could be fired more easily in kilns where the walls had an insulating effect and let the temperature rise more slowly and under more controlled conditions. Some of the fine wares give evidence for an oxidizing firing atmosphere and temperature up to 1000°C.

These industries probably produced not only the pottery for the nearby settlements and cemeteries but also for the already established regional market in the area and for an interregional exchange system. The products for the trade were the "Decorated", "Wavy-handled" and "Late" wares, which contained commodities for a developed exchange system.

As we can see there were two different pottery production stages in Lower and Upper Egypt responsible for the definition of two different cultures. The overlap in Late Naqada II could be explained by migrating people on the one hand, but also by economical demands of the specialized workshops in Upper Egypt to expand their market, mainly through pottery.

## Conclusion

The classical scheme of the development of Egypt in the later prehistory divides Egypt into two main cultural centres: the Naqada culture of Upper Egypt and the Buto/Maadi-culture of Lower Egypt. At a later stage the Naqada culture expanded to the north establishing trading posts, conquering settlements and towns in the Delta. This expansion was seen as the basis for the unification of Egypt (Kaiser 1990). It seems that especially the ancient Egyptian term "unification of the two lands" seduced us to think of the existence of two different cultural areas which had to be unified by a warlike power such as the people of the Naqada culture.

The aim of this contribution is to show that we cannot really speak of two fully different cultural areas faced with the fact that it might be rather a matter of style, ecological conditions and economical demands which caused the difference between north and south in the time of Naqada II. The connection between the two parts of Egypt was probably much closer than we dared to think before.

We know of contacts between Upper and Lower Egypt already in the Neolithic period. The links seem to get more and more intense during the Chalcolithic period where we can see analogous developments in north and south: Upper

Egypt's Naqada culture developed its second stage while Lower Egypt changed into a later stage of the Buto/Maadi culture (Buto Layer I and II). At this time both regions have nearly the same utilitarian pottery and lithics.

The next change took place in both areas at the end of the fourth millennium B.C., when Naqada evolved into its third stage - a process which is still open to questions ! For Lower Egypt we thought that the changes were due to an increasing cultural and ethnic Naqadan influence and the use of the Naqadian material culture. It is now evident that the material culture was "unified" long before the political system of Egypt. I believe that both parts of Egypt grew together by trade and cultural exchange which made trading posts or conquests unnecessary. This came much later.

It should be studied whether there ever existed an ethnic territorial expansion during the Late Predynastic Naqada expansion. This may be only an egyptological idea based on archaic kingship evidence projected on Prehistoric events.



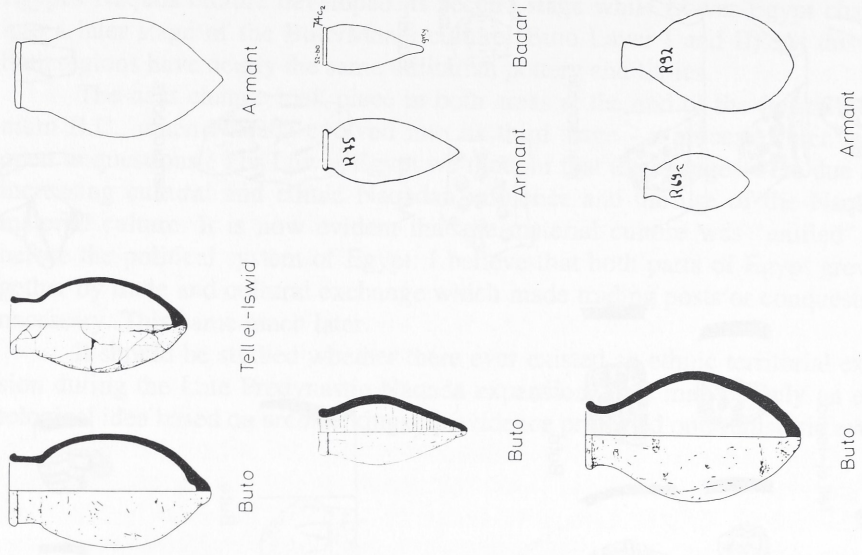


Fig. 3. Selection of closed vessel shapes.

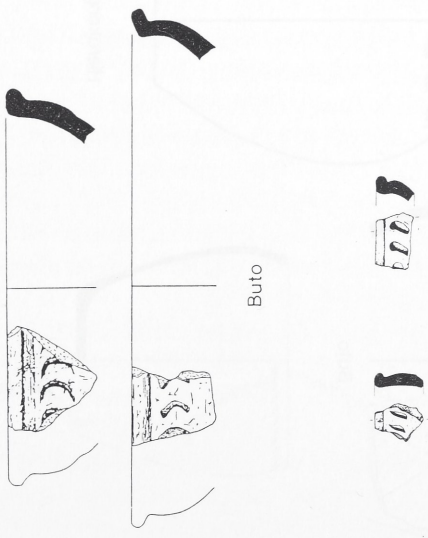


Fig. 2. Selection of coarse vessel fragments with impressed decoration.



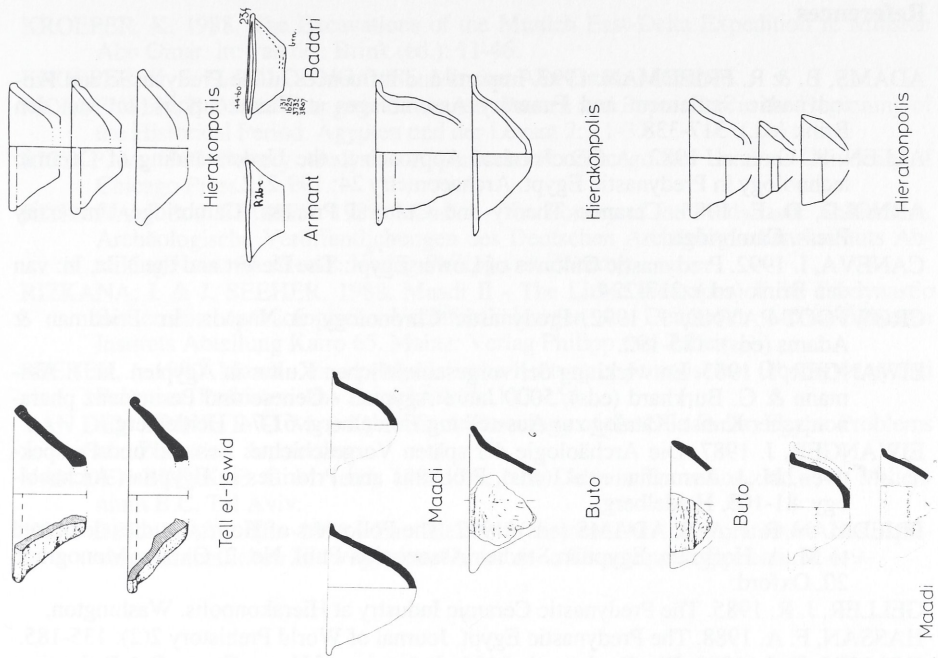


Fig. 5. Selection of open vessel shapes.

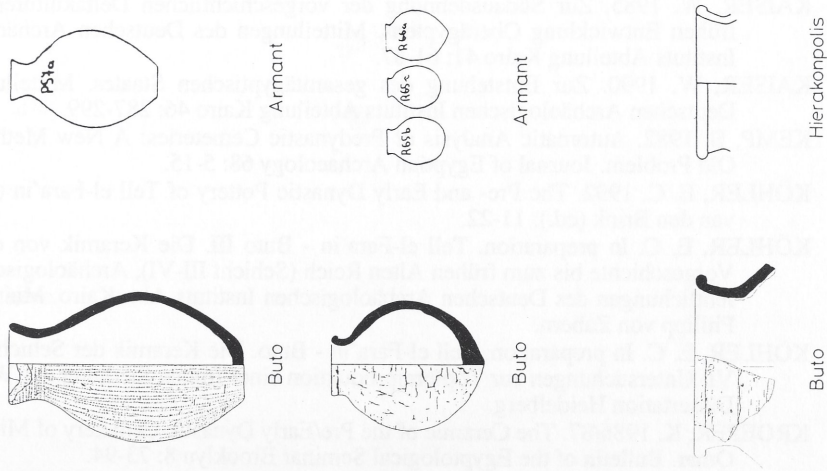


Fig. 4. Selection of closed vessel shapes.

## References

- ADAMS, B. & R. FRIEDMAN. 1992. Imports and Influences in the Predynastic and Protodynastic Settlement and Funerary Assemblages at Hierakonpolis. In: van den Brink (ed.): 317-338.
- ALLEN, R. O. et al. 1982. A Geochemical Approach to the Understanding of Ceramic technology in Predynastic Egypt. *Archaeometry* 24: 199-212.
- ARNOLD, D. E. 1985. *Ceramic Theory and Cultural Process*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.
- CANEVA, I. 1992. Predynastic Cultures of Lower Egypt: The Desert and the Nile. In: van den Brink (ed.): 217-224
- CROWFOOT-PAYNE, J. 1992. Predynastic Chronology at Naqada. In: Friedman & Adams (eds): 185-192.
- EIWANGER, J. 1983. Entwicklung der vorgeschichtlichen Kultur in Ägypten. In: J. Assmann & G. Burkhard (eds), *5000 Jahre Ägypten - Genese und Permanenz pharaonischer Kunst*. Katalog zur Ausstellung Heidelberg: 61-74. Heidelberg.
- EIWANGER, J. 1987. Die Archäologie der späten Vorgeschichte: Bestand und Perspektiven. In: J. Assmann. et al. (eds), *Problems and Priorities in Egyptian Archaeology*: 81-103. Heidelberg.
- FRIEDMAN, R. F. & B. ADAMS (eds). 1992. *The Followers of Horus, Studies dedicated to M. A. Hoffman*. Egyptian Studies Association Publ. No. 2. Oxbow Monograph 20. Oxford.
- GELLER, J. R. 1985. *The Predynastic Ceramic Industry at Hierakonpolis*. Washington.
- HASSAN, F. A. 1988. The Predynastic Egypt. *Journal of World Prehistory* 2(2): 135-185.
- HOLMES, D. L. 1989. *The Predynastic Lithic Industries of Upper Egypt*. B.A.R. International Series 469 (II). Oxford.
- HOLMES, D. L. 1992. The Evidence and Nature of Contacts between Upper and Lower Egypt during the Predynastic. A View from Upper Egypt. In: van den Brink (ed.): 301-316.
- KAISER, W. 1956. Stand und Probleme der ägyptischen Vorgeschichtsforschung. *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 81: 87-109.
- KAISER, W. 1957. Zur inneren Chronologie der Naqadakultur. *Archaeologia Geographica* 5: 69-77.
- KAISER, W. 1985. Zur Südausdehnung der vorgeschichtlichen Deltakulturen und zur frühen Entwicklung Oberägyptens. *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 41: 61-87.
- KAISER, W. 1990. Zur Entstehung des gesamtägyptischen Staates. *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 46: 287-299.
- KEMP, B. 1982. Automatic Analysis of Predynastic Cemeteries: A New Method for an Old Problem. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 68: 5-15.
- KÖHLER, E. C. 1992. The Pre- and Early Dynastic Pottery of Tell el-Fara'in (Buto). In: van den Brink (ed.): 11-22.
- KÖHLER, E. C. In preparation. Tell el-Fara'in - Buto III. Die Keramik von der späten Vorgeschichte bis zum frühen Alten Reich (Schicht III-VI), *Archäologische Veröffentlichungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abt. Kairo*. Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern.
- KÖHLER, E. C. In preparation. Tell el-Fara'in - Buto. Die Keramik der Schichten III bis VI. Untersuchungen zur Töpfereiproduktion einer frühen Siedlung des Westdeltas. Dissertation Heidelberg.
- KROEPER, K. 1986/87. The Ceramic of the Pre/Early Dynastic Cemetery of Minshat Abu Omar. *Bulletin of the Egyptological Seminar Brooklyn* 8: 73-94.

- KROEPER, K. 1988. The Excavations of the Munich East-Delta Expedition in Minshat Abu Omar. In: van den Brink (ed.): 11-46.
- KROEPER, K. & D. WILDUNG. 1985. Minshat Abu Omar. München.
- MORTENSEN, B. 1991. Change in Settlement Pattern and Population in the Beginning of the Historical Period. *Ägypten und der Levant* 2: 11-37.
- RICE, P. M. 1987. Pottery Analysis - A Sourcebook. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- RIZKANA, I. & J. SEEHER. 1987. Maadi I - The Pottery of the Predynastic Settlement. *Archäologische Veröffentlichungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 64. Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern.
- RIZKANA, I. & J. SEEHER. 1988. Maadi II - The Lithic Industries of the Predynastic Settlement. *Archäologische Veröffentlichungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 65. Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern.
- SEEHER, J. 1990. Maadi - eine prädynastische Kulturgruppe zwischen Oberägypten und Palästina. *Prähistorische Zeitschrift* 65: 123-156.
- VAN DEN BRINK, E. C. M. (ed.) 1988. *Archaeology of the Nile Delta, Egypt: Problems and Priorities*. Amsterdam.
- VAN DEN BRINK, E. C. M. (ed.). 1992. *The Nile Delta in Transition, 3rd - 4th Millennium B.C.* Tel Aviv.
- VON DER WAY, Th. 1991. Zur Herkunft keramischer Dekorationen des spätvorgeschichtlichen Unterägypten. *Cahier de la Céramique Egyptienne* 2: 1-9.