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The Predynastic site of Adaima (Upper Egypt)

Introduction

The site of Adaima is situated on the west bank of the Nile, about 8 km south of Esna and approximately 25 km from Hierakonpolis to which some comparison can be made. It includes very plundered cemetery and a settlement appearing as a large area with artefacts scattered all over the surface, extending about 1 km along the cultivated land. The extend of the total site is about 40 ha (settlement: 35 ha, cemeteries: 5 ha).

The site was discovered at the beginning of the century by H. de Morgan, who excavated a part of the settlement and some of the plundered tombs; most of the associated finds are now in the Brooklyn Museum (Needler 1984). The next excavation took place in 1973 by F. Debono who, working for the French Institute of Archaeology in Cairo, excavated 30 badly plundered tombs in the area of the cemetery which is nowadays completely destroyed.

In 1986 and 1987, we found the site in more or less the same state it had been in 1973, with the traces of Debono's excavation still visible. In 1988 however, a large part of the cemeteries had been completely destroyed by the modern extension of the cultivated land and the remains of the site were threatened with complete extinction. To rescue the remaining site the present excavation was planned within the activities of the French Institute and the works was commenced in 1989.

At first a selective surface collection allowed us to gain a great deal of information, such as local cultures and their extension (Midant-Reynes et al. 1990), which excavation revealed only after several campaigns. The application of this method to the site of Adaima showed that the settlement followed a complex development, shifting from the desert to the valley during the Nagada period up to Dynasty I. Excavation were undertaken in the settlement in order:

- to test the result of the surface collection;
- to verify the presence of *in situ* structures (hearths, postholes, pottery).

Concerning the cemeteries, the goal was to test the existence of undisturbed tombs in the preserved area.

The settlement

The settlement includes two parts geomorphologically distinct on each side of a small wadi which crosses the site in a westerly direction. At the northern side, gravel and silt terraces crop out with innumerable traces of the *sebakh*-diggers. At the southern side, a thick level of sand slopes down slightly southward.

Excavations in the northern part revealed, beside the numerous *sebakh*-diggings, occupation features dug into the gravel terrace: trenches and holes smeared with Nile mud were observed. The trenches, perpendicular or parallel to each other, were located in 3 areas which were associated with 73 mudholes. The diameter of these mudholes varied from 13 to 145 cm, and averaged about 45 cm; they varied from 2 to 19 cm in depth, averaging about 8 cm. The trenches are probably remains of reed fences plastered with mud and occasionally reinforced with wooden posts, as found at other Predynastic sites, especially in Hierakonpolis (Hoffman 1982).

More enigmatic are the mudholes, which could be interpreted in some cases as postholes, but most of them are too large and rather not deep enough for these. Botanical material was recovered by flotation from the filling of these holes. Among the seeds, *Triticum monococcum* and *Hordeum sativum* have been identified (de Vartavan 1992). It may be hypothesized that these holes could have been used as mortars cut in the hard gravel terrace. The absence of big grindstones among the surface material and the presence of an elongated rod-shaped granit hammerstone in one of these holes argue for this possibility.

Based on the sherds found in the filling of the trenches and the holes, these structures can be dated from the end of Nagada I to the middle of Nagada II. This stands in contrast to the very mixed surface material found, but also here the material never extends beyond Dynasty I.

The excavation in the southern part of the site revealed features such as hearths, postholes, storage jars found in situ, and granit grindslab. A newborn child skeleton associated with a small pot and a Nile shell (*Etheria elliptica*), probably used as a spoon, was also discovered. The existence of an undisturbed domestic area is of special interest and our aim is now to uncover a sufficiently large area to learn something about these units of Predynastic settlement. Two C14 samples from the hearths resulted in the following dates: Ly 5208: 3763-3531 cal. B.C. and Ly 5207: 3307-2923 cal. B.C.

The cemetery

Turning now to the cemetery, 120 graves have been excavated so far. Seventeen out of these were intact. Some others were completely destroyed, the great majority had been disturbed during the Predynastic times allowing little observations to be made about the skeletons and the funerary offerings.

As regards mortuary practices (Crubezy 1992), two kinds of burials can be distinguished: simple single burials (82 graves) and multiple burials (21 graves).

Nothing can be said about 17 of them. The simple graves included burials with offerings (of up to 30 vessels for one tomb) and the burials without goods (two undisturbed graves).

The multiple burials included double burials of which two out of seventeen were intact, burials with three bodies (three cases, all disturbed) and also graves with five bodies occurred (one disturbed); in one case five bodies were found in a big hearth which was constructed and used long before the burial and in which months or years later they were placed. This tomb had been badly plundered, giving the impression of ashes mixed with broken human bones. One cannot help wondering whether such pictures could be responsible for the theory on "cannibalism" in Predynastic times. A few cases of infectious illness have been identified by the anthropologists which will be soon published.

Based on the ceramics, the cemetery appears to have been used without interruption from Nagada Ic to IIIb which corresponds to the date obtained from the Adaima ceramics now in the Brooklyn Museum. Nothing has so far given hints that the site might have existed before Nagada Ic. However, the continuation of the cemeteries till the 1st Dynasty is attested by the surface collection of sherds dating to this period (Petrie type 50 and 76).

Detailed analyses of the lithic manufacture and the ceramics have been undertaken with a double aim,:

- the typo-chronological approach: analyses of the material coming from a well dated context;
- the technological approach: raw material provenance and fabrication variations.

Conclusion

The multi-component character of Adaima, with its functionally specific activity areas and its domestic units give it a special importance as a site to collect data on Egyptian prehistory, palaeo-environment and subsistence strategy. The site includes cemeteries and a settlement which cover the same period and allow comparisons. Eventhough partially disturbed, the two areas offer information of special relevance to those interested in town patterning, daily life and mortuary practices. The stone industry and the ceramic will permit comparison with other sites in Egypt and beyond.

References

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