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Recent archaeological evidence on the earliest settlement in the eastern Nile Delta

Until recently, the prehistory and earliest history of the eastern Nile Delta was as little known as that of the rest of the Delta. A change for better occurred with the mounting of the Munich East-Delta Expedition (MOE), organized by Dietrich Wildung in 1978, and the subsequent execution of its programme. It should be emphasized that the programme aims at investigating the archaeological information dated to the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods originating from the whole of the Eastern Delta; it comprises excavations, surveys and work on the archaeological material that has been excavated but so far never published. Large-scale excavations by MOE are being conducted since 1978 at a Late Predynastic-Early Dynastic cemetery at Minshat Abu Omar where some 342 graves have been excavated in the course of the first six seasons, 1978 - 1984 (Wildung 1981; 1984; *cf.* also Leclant 1978 : 350 - 351; 1980 : 356 - 357; 1982 : 59 - 60; 1983 : 472).

The survey that has been so far carried out by MOE, took place in 1982 in the vicinity of the site at Minshat Abu Omar and in 1982 on selected sites in the eastern Nile Delta (*cf.* Leclant 1983 : 472). Parallel to this field-work was the continuing recording of Predynastic and Early Dynastic finds which had been excavated by Egyptian archaeologists in the past but which have never been published, and which now are kept in the local museums and reserves; the recording work took place in 1981. It is hoped that MOE will be able to continue the study of field-notes and finds registers of these excavations and that subsequent publication of these sites will follow.

It is believed by the present writer that, despite the early stages of this research, a presentation of the results obtained so far by MOE in the course of the survey and documentation work may be beneficial for other researchers working on the prehistory and early dynastic archaeology of the Delta¹.

¹ I would like to express my most sincere thanks and gratitude to Professor Dr. Dietrich Wildung, director of MOE, for inviting me to participate in the research of MOE and for his permission to publish the results of the survey and documentation work so far carried out by MOE. I would also like to express my deep gratitude to Karla Kroeber for her help during the preparation of this paper.

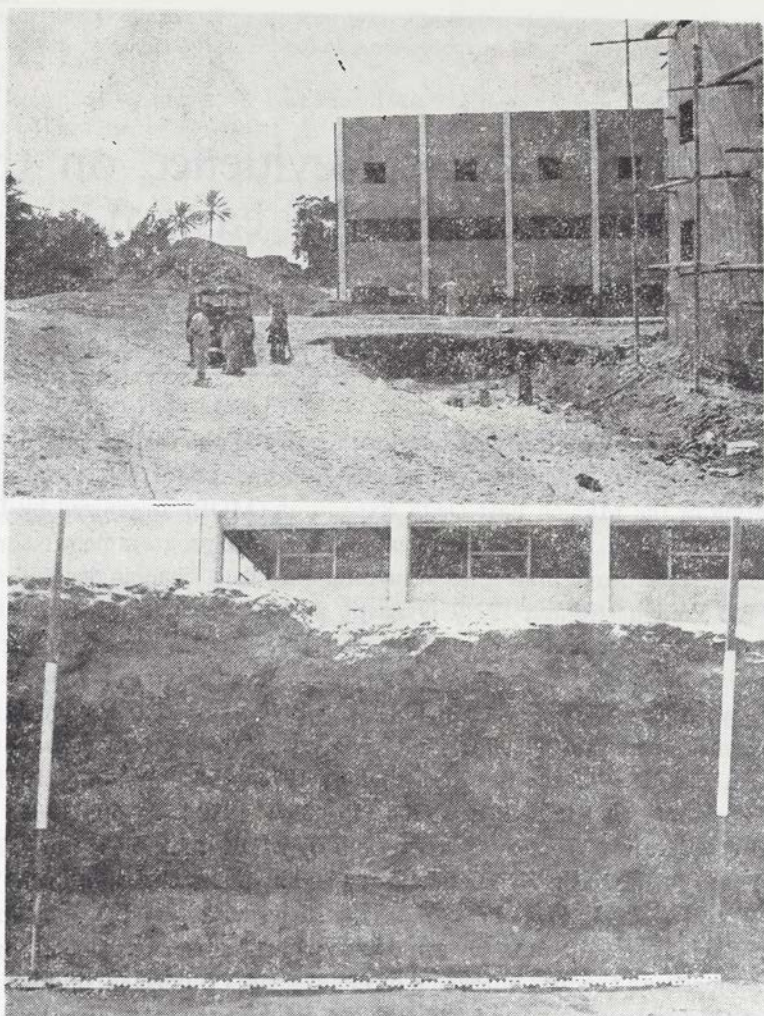


FIG. 1. Survey in the eastern Nile Delta (September 1981)

Top: Localizing the man-made section through the settlement deposit of the Dynastic age at El-Huseiniya (construction site at the Predynastic cemetery); Bottom: Recording the section

In the course of a survey carried out in 1981 in the vicinity of the site at Minshat Abu Omar (*markaz* El-Huseiniya), an area of some 25 square kilometres was investigated. In total, eleven localities, mostly situated on rises and hills, including sand hills (turtlebacks) called *geziras* by the local inhabitants, were visited, and their local surfaces, natural and man-made sections through the soil, and pits, investigated (Fig. 1). No archaeological material was found at the following seven localities²:

² The names of localities (villages, towns, *etc.* and topographical features are given in this paper according to their graphic form given in the sheets of the 1 : 25,000 Map of Egypt, 1951 (2nd edition).

1. Tell Umm Efein (Omm Maafin, Umm' Afen)
2. Geziret (Gezira) Su'ud
3. Kafra el-Medina (Tell el-Medina, Ezbet Ibrahim Husein Omar)
4. Geziret (Gezira) Ilewa
5. Ezbet (Gezira) Amid
6. Ezbet Tell el-Da'iq
7. Geziret (Gezira) Barad (Barada)

At four localities in this area archaeological features and other surface material were found and recorded:

1. Tell el-Ginn
2. Tell Zinein (T. el-Zinein)
3. Tell Tamlikh (T. el-Tamlikh)
4. Tell el-Biheim

The archaeological remains at these sites consisted of dwelling walls built of mud bricks, red burned bricks, granite column bases and rose granite columns (Tell el-Ginn), sherds of glass, copper coins, potsherds (including those of Terra sigillata ware), lumps of limestone slag and remains of glass manufacturing; all these sites date to the Roman period and are not the subject of this paper³. No archaeological material of pre-Roman date has been found so far in the course of the survey made by MOE in the vicinity of Minshat Abu Omar.

The survey and recording programme carried out by MOE in the eastern Delta beyond the vicinity of Minshat Abu Omar concerned only the Late Predynastic and Early Dynastic sites. Due to the state of preservation and accessibility, however, a full survey could be effected only at Ezbet el-Tell. The recording of unpublished finds from earlier excavations took place in the Huriya (Ahmed Orabi) Museum in Zagazig and in the Ismailia Museum. All finds of the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods exhibited in these museums (they possessed no reserves in 1981) were recorded: all were photographed and described on individual MOE cards and most of them were drawn. The following seven sites from the eastern Delta were the subject of the survey and/or recording:

1. Tell el-Ginn
2. El-Huseiniya
3. Gezira Sangaha
4. Tell Samara
5. Beni Amir
6. Ezbet el-Tell
7. El-Beidha

³ Tell es-Saaba Banat, which consists of an extensive Ptolemaic and Roman settlement and a cemetery located on the gezira mound of Minshat Abu Omar, should also be taken into account when describing the late historic settlement in this area.

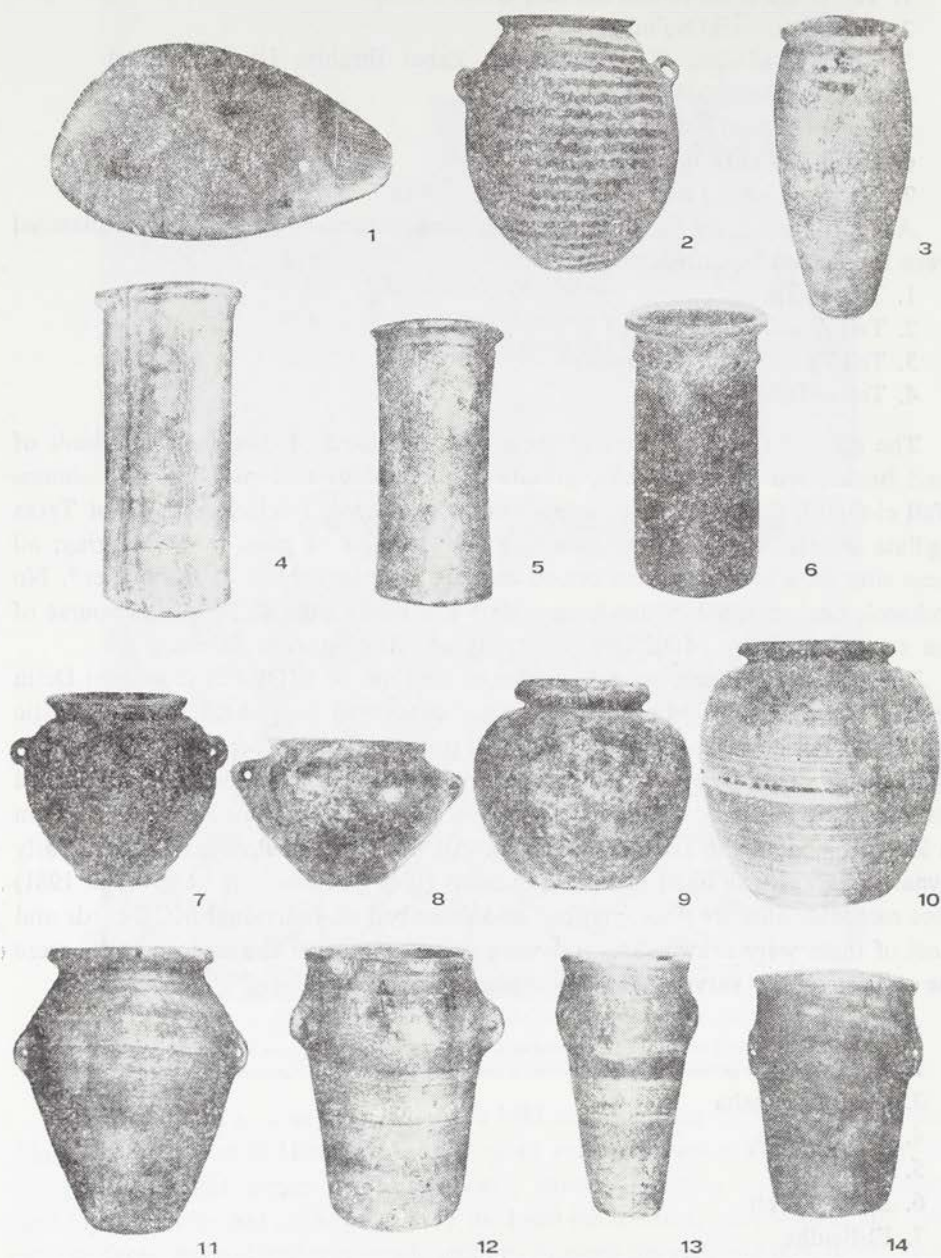


FIG. 2. Tell el-Ginn (?)

1: Slate; 2: Pottery; 3 - 5, 9 - 14: Calcite; 6: "Grauwacke"; 7: Basalt; 8: Diorite. Different scales

Tell el-Ginn. Markaz El-Huseiniya

Geographical coordinates: 32°02'30"E and 30°55'18" N

This is a sandy hill (*gezira*) of ca 9.6 hectares (ca 40 feddans) in surface area, elevated ca 9.5 m a.s.l. and 5.15 m above the surrounding cultivated alluvium⁴. Two large pits excavated in the hill seem to be the remains of an earlier digging for sand, apparently for construction purposes (personal communication by the local inhabitants). Although only the Roman age remains were seen on the surface of the hill during the survey (granite columns and bases, potsherds, glass *etc.*) it is reported that this site yielded Early Dynastic finds (Bietak 1975 : 99, footnote 364a) and that some of the "archaic" finds (stone- and pottery vessels and palettes) now exhibited in the Ismailia Museum originate from a cemetery at this site (personal communication by the late Labib Habachi in 1978). Local inhabitants interviewed by MOE recalled seeing "groups of stone- and pottery vessels" which had once been found deep in the *gezira* sand of the hill. Altogether, 19 stone vessels, 1 pottery vessel and 1 palette presumably originating from Tell el-Ginn were recorded by MOE in the Ismailia Museum (Fig. 2). Almost all are marked in the register book of this museum as "Hehya, June 1952", *i.e.*, after locality of a local antiquities dealer well known in the eastern Delta in the 50s and 60s Abd er-Rahman Sadiq. The authenticity of this site as regards these Early Dynastic finds should be the subject of future studies.

Bibliography: Bietak 1975 : 99 - 100, footnote 364a, fig. 12.

El-Huseiniya. Markaz loco

Geographical coordinates: 31°54'22" E and 30°51'43" N

The site is situated on a sand hill (*gezira*) of ca 1.26 hectares (ca 3 feddans). The foot of the hill is 5 m a.s.l. and rises to 2.5 - 3.0 m above the surrounding cultivated alluvium. The site is situated near the place investigated by Petrie (1888 : 4 - 37) and is now built over by the Secondary School for Boys. Numerous finds excavated at a Late Predynastic-Early Dynastic cemetery are now exhibited in the Huriya Museum in Zagazig and further finds from this site are stored in the reserve of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization (EAO) in Tell el-Basta, Zagazig (previously in San el-Hagar). According to the personal communication of Mohamed Abd el-Hag from the Inspectorate of EOA in Zagazig in 1981, two seasons of excavations directed by Ibrahim Kamil took place at this site in 1965 - 1967 and as a result an "archaic" cemetery containing some 60 graves was found. The finds from these excavations exhibited in the Huriya Museum in Zagazig - some 30 objects in all - were recorded by MOE; they consisted of 17 stone vessels, 4 pottery vessels, 1 palette, 56 flint knives and small implements of bone and stone (Fig. 3 - 4). In the autumn of 1983, the present writer was shown several more finds from this site which had just been excavated by Magdy Saad Salib, then the Inspector of EAO in Faqus.

Gezira Sangaha (Sanaga)

A sand hill (*gezira*) of huge dimensions situated ca 14 km to the north of Abu Kebir. It rises up to 12 m a.s.l. A Late Predynastic cemetery is reported (see bibliography) in this locality. However, the members of MOE were not able to localize the position of such a cemetery during their brief visit in 1982. The huge dimensions of this hill - ca 3.5 x 1.0 km - clearly requires extensive fieldwork.

Bibliography: Bietak 1975: 106, footnote 401, 100, fig. 12; Fischer 1958 : 86.

Tell Samara. Markaz El-Simbillawein

15 km to the north-east of El-Simbillawein and some 22 km to the north-north-west of Abu Kibir. This may be the "Fundort S" ("Fundplatz S") reported by Müller (1979) where some Early Dynastic finds have been excavated. An inspection by members of MOE in 1982 revealed that

⁴ The heights a.s.l. in this paper are given according to the data in the 1 : 25,000 Maps of Egypt, 1951 (2nd edition).

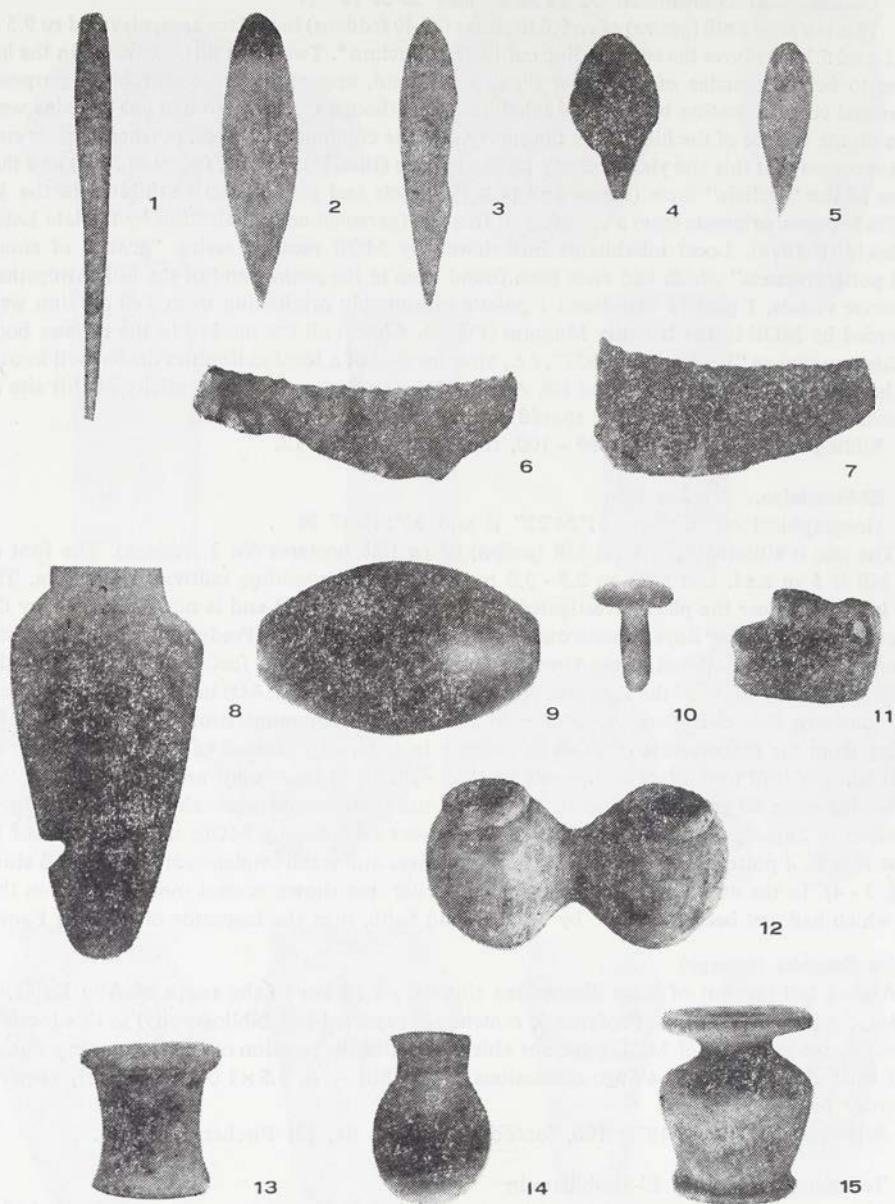


FIG. 3. El-Huseiniya

1 - 5: Bone; 6, 7: Flint; 8: Slate; 9: Basalt; 10, 12 - 15: Calcite; 11: Faience. Different scales

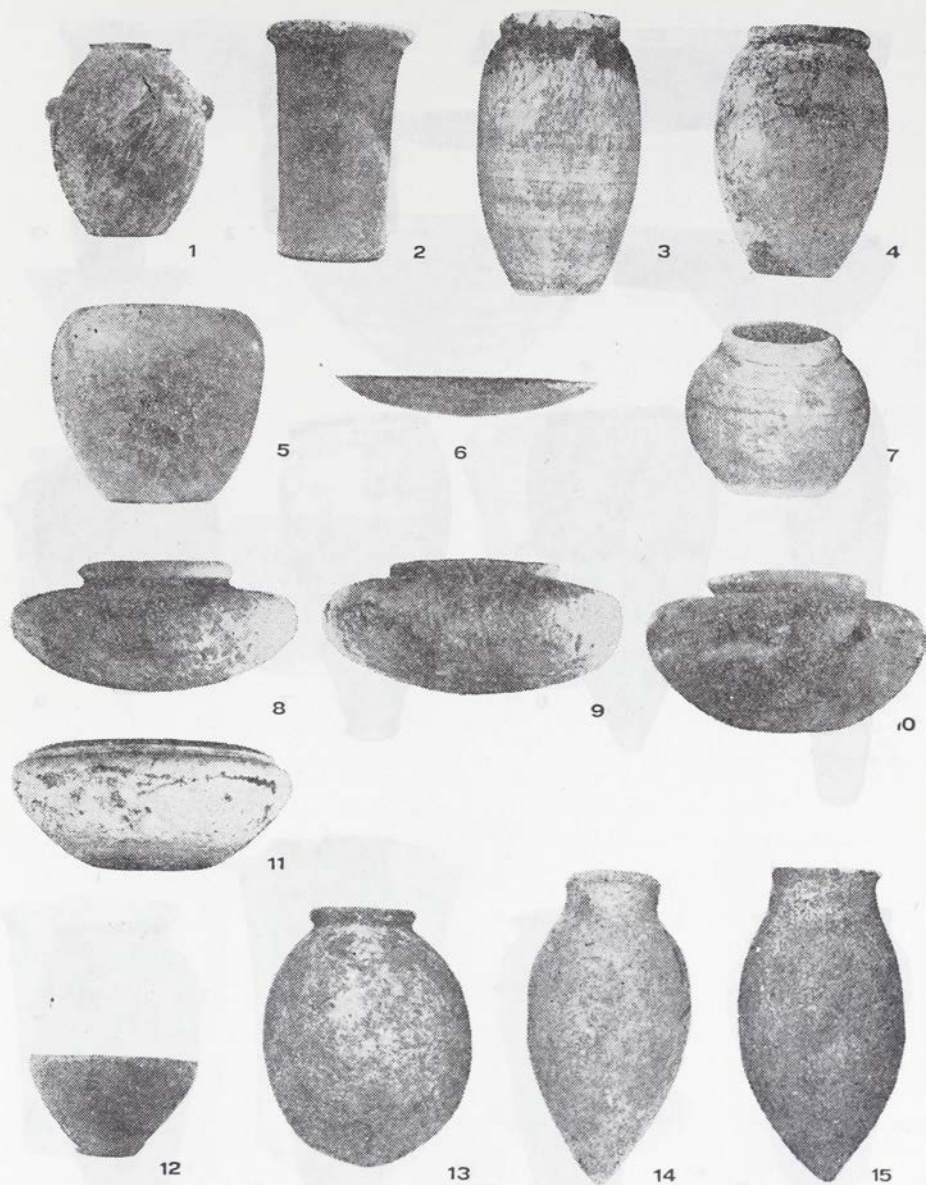


FIG. 4. El-Huseiniya

1: Sandstone (?); 2 - 11: Calcite; 12 - 15: Pottery. Different scales



FIG. 5. Beni Amir

1, 3: Flint; 2: Basalt; 4: Calcite; 5 - 12: Pottery. Different scales

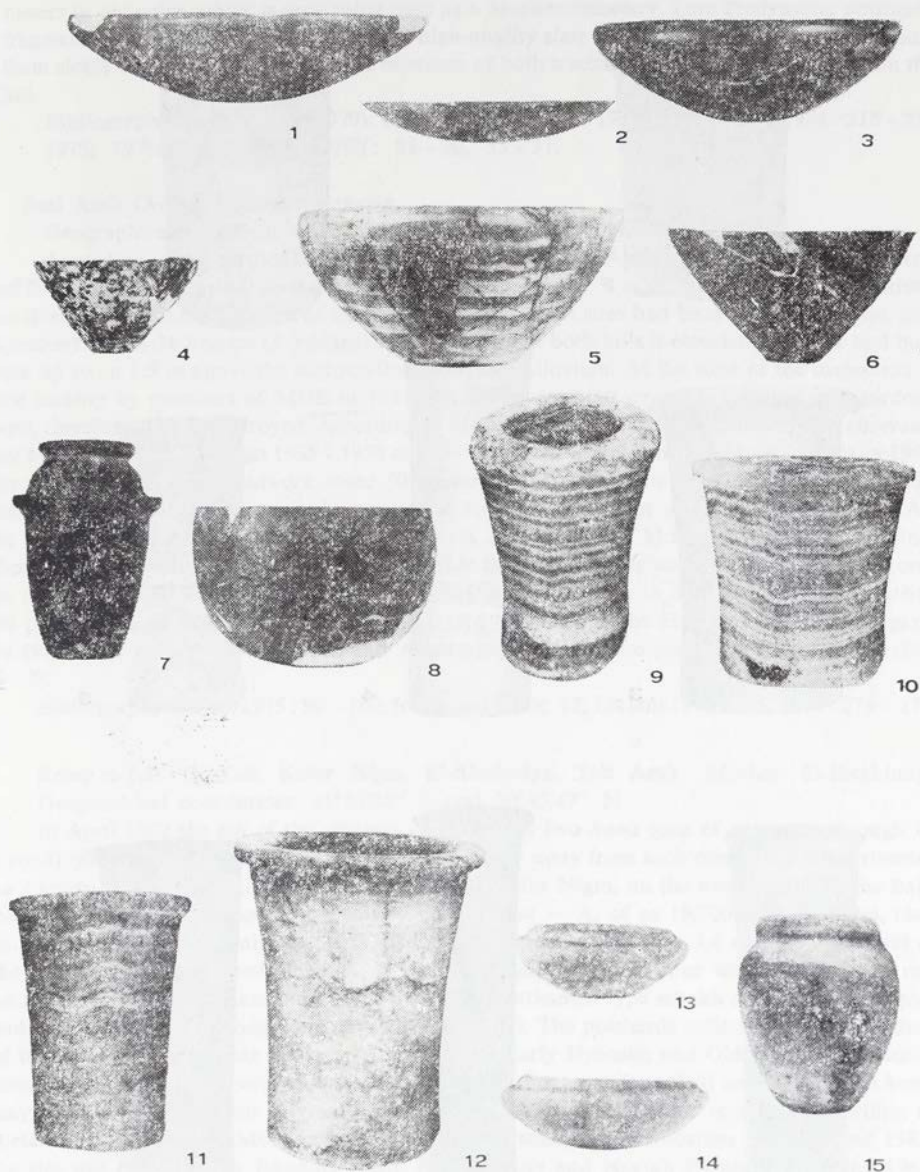


FIG. 6. Beni Amir

1 - 3, 8: Slate; 4: Diorite; 5, 9 - 12, 14, 15: Calcite; 6: Granite; 7: Basalt; 13: Limestone (?). Different scales

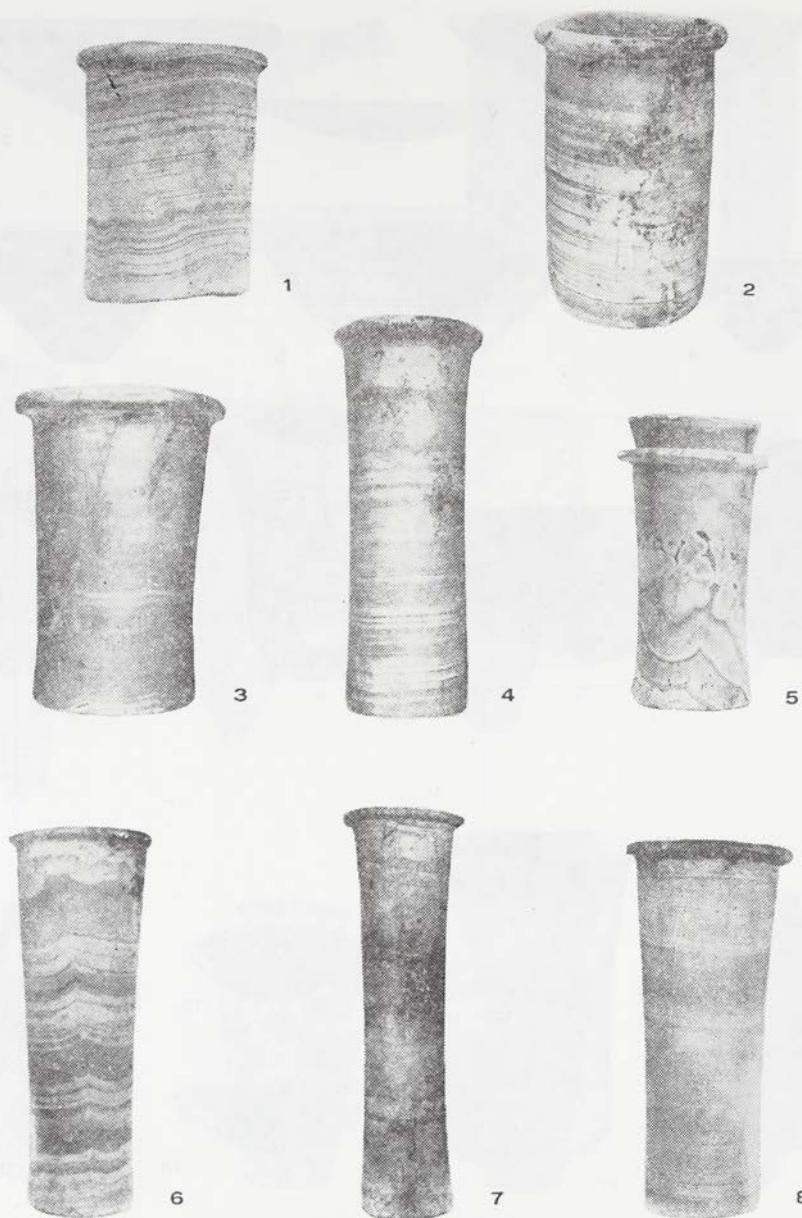


FIG. 7. Beni Amir

1 - 8: Calcite. Different scales

a Late Predynastic site is situated at this locality on a silt and sand hill measuring several hundred meters in diameter, which is now being used as a Moslem cemetery. Late Predynastic potsherds, fragments of stone vessels (among them a high-quality slate bowl) and flint implements (among them sickle bladelets) may indicate the existence of both a settlement and a burial ground on this hill.

Bibliography: after Müller (1979): Fischer 1958; Leclant 1977 : 236; Müller 1974 : 215 - 216; 1975; 1976a : 225 - 227; 1976b : 28 - 30, 35 - 37.

Beni Amir (Amer). Markaz Zagazig

Geographical coordinates: 31°33'50" E and 30°35'30" N

According to the personal communication by Mohamed Abd el-Hag from the Inspectorate of EAO in Zagazig in 1981, two different cemeteries — A and B — of "archaic" date once existed in this locality, situated 10 km to the east of Zagazig. Both sites had been located on sand hills (*geziras*) of ca 1.26 hectare (3 feddans) each. The foot of both hills is elevated 8 m a.s.l. and both rise up to ca 1.5 m above the surrounding cultivated alluvium. At the time of the inspection of the locality by members of MOE in 1981, the sites were built over by dwellings and gardens, and, therefore, totally destroyed. According to Mohamed el-Hag, the first cemetery was excavated by Moheddin Abd el-Atif in 1955 - 1958 and by Mohamed Mussalami and Mounir Basta in 1967. In the course of their fieldwork some 50 graves were found. Bietak (1975 : 99, footnote 362) had an opportunity to take a look at the finds register book (kept in the Inspectorate of EAO in Zagazig) of the excavations by Mounir Basta and Mohamed Mussalami in 1967. The finds from these excavations are now partly exhibited in the Huriya Museum in Zagazig and are stored in the reserve of the EAO in Tell el-Basta, Zagazig (previously in San el-Hagar). Altogether, 36 pieces of finds from Beni Amir were recorded by MOE in the Huriya Museum in Zagazig in 1981. They consisted of 24 stone and 9 pottery vessels, 1 stone plate and 2 flint knives (Fig. 5 - 7).

Bibliography: Bietak 1975 : 99 - 100, footnote 362, fig. 12; Leclant 1973 : 395; 1976 : 278 - 279.

Ezbet el-Tell (El-Tall, Kufur Nigm, El-Khudariya, Tell Aga). Markaz El-Ibrahimiya

Geographical coordinates: 31°36'04" E and 30°45'47" N

In April 1982 the *tell* of the site was composed of two *koms* (one of them cut through by a road) of ca 3.5 hectares in total, situated some 230 m away from each other. The *tell* is situated ca 2 km to NNE of the villages of Khudariya and Kufur Nigm, on the western side of the Bahr Moweis. The more northerly, irregularly shaped *kom* — A, of ca 19,700 square metres, rises to 2.9 m and the southernly one — B, of ca 15,100 square metres, to 3.4 m above the level of the surrounding cultivated alluvium. It was not possible to determine whether the *koms* rest on the *gezira* sand. They are built up of the typical settlement-type *sebakh* containing potsherds and flint implements (among them the sickle bladelets). The potsherds collected from the surface of both *koms* seem to bear features typical for the Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom ceramics (among them a potsherd with an incised drawing of a boat was found). It seems that both *koms* may be the remains of an originally much larger body of settlement remains. According to Bietak (1975 : 106) and Mohamed Abd el-Hag (personal communication in 1981 and 1982) the site was excavated by Iskander Asad, Rashid Noër and Naguib Faraq in 1961 and 1962, during two seasons lasting two month each, and by Hamdi Youssif and Mohamed Abd el-Hag himself, in 1978. Both the Old Kingdom and perhaps Early Dynastic settlement remains (two *koms*) and a Terminal Predynastic-Early Dynastic cemetery had been excavated in the course of this fieldwork. (It was not possible to localize the exact excavation site of either the cemetery and/or the settlement). Some 300 graves were excavated in a cemetery which was situated — according to the information received from the local *gafir* of the EAO — in the northern part of Kom A. The finds from these graves, so far unpublished, are now housed in the Huriya Museum

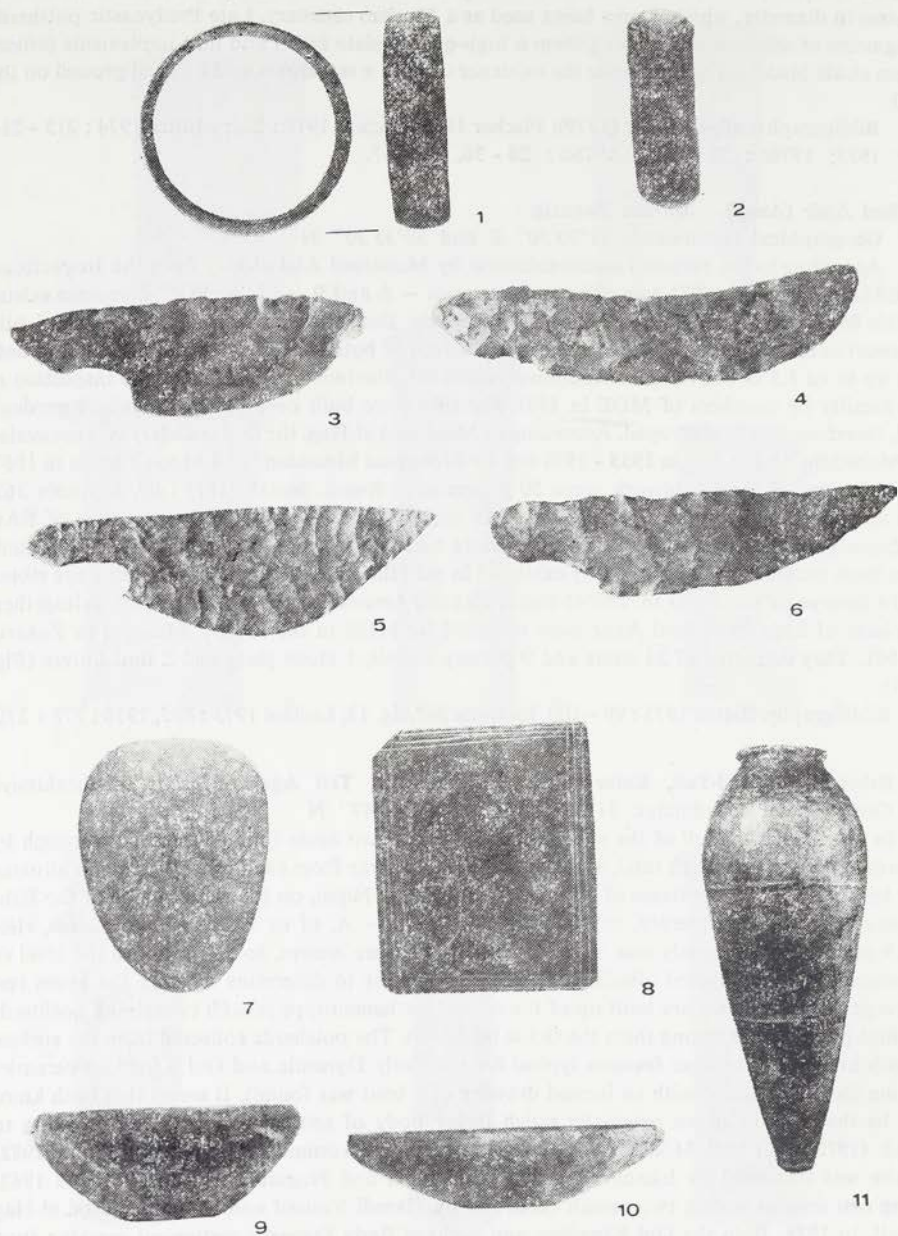


FIG. 8. Ezbet el-Tell

1, 7, 8: Slate; 2 - 6: Flint; 9: Diorite (?); 10: Calcite; 11: Pottery. Different scales



FIG. 9. Ezbet el-Tell

1 - 7, 9, 11: Calcite; 8, 10: Diorite. Different scales

in Zagazig, in the reserves of the EAO in Tell el-Basta, Zagazig (previously in San el-Hagar) and in Saqqara to where — according to Mohamed Abd el-Hag — as many as 52 boxes containing different finds had been transported. Altogether, 24 finds from Ezbet el-Tell were recorded by MOE during the work in the Huriya Museum in Zagazig in 1981. They consisted of 14 stone and 1 pottery vessels, 2 palettes, 2 bracelets and flint implements (Fig. 8 - 9). Since 1984, the site is being excavated by the University of Zagazig.

Bibliography: Bietak 1975 : 196, footnote 399 and 400, 100, fig. 12; Fischer 1963 : 44, fig. 3; Habachi 1962 : 439; Leclant 1952 : 244; 1964 : 341; 1983 : 472; Müller 1966 : 11; Wildung 1984 : 269.



FIG. 10. El-Beidha. Pottery jar decorated with a sign composed of two birds sitting on a *serekh*

El-Beidha (Bedah, Béda)

The site seems to have been situated on the ancient route along the Mediterranean littora of the Sinai leading to Palestine. Altogether, 5 or 6 large pottery jars were found, possibly a hoard of some kind. Four jars bore a *serekh* and three of these had a double falcon on the *serekh*. Out of the original set of vessels, only one was found by MOE in the Ismailia Museum in 1981; the place of storing of the other remains unknown to the present writer. The larger pottery jar, decorated by two groups of three half-bows under the rim, bears an incised sign composed of two birds sitting on a *serekh* (Fig. 10). Kaiser and Dreyer (1982 : 263, Abb. 14 : 1 - 3, 12) date it — together with other examples from this site — to the earliest stage in the development of *serekh* forms in Egypt. The pot is marked in inked hand-writing as "Bedah 1928".

Bibliography: Clédat 1914.

It may be worth adding that several stone vessels and a palette of the Late Pre-dynastic-Early Dynastic date from Tell el-Basta (Fig. 11 : 1 - 5), El-Amid (Fig. 11 : 8) and El-Ghassana (El-Chasana?) (Fig. 11 : 6 - 7) were also recorded in the Huriya Museum in 1981. It seems that the vessels from Tell el-Basta are different from those excavated from this site and published by Ahmad el-Sawi (1979 : 63); the localities of El-Amdid and El-Ghassana have not, so far, been identified.

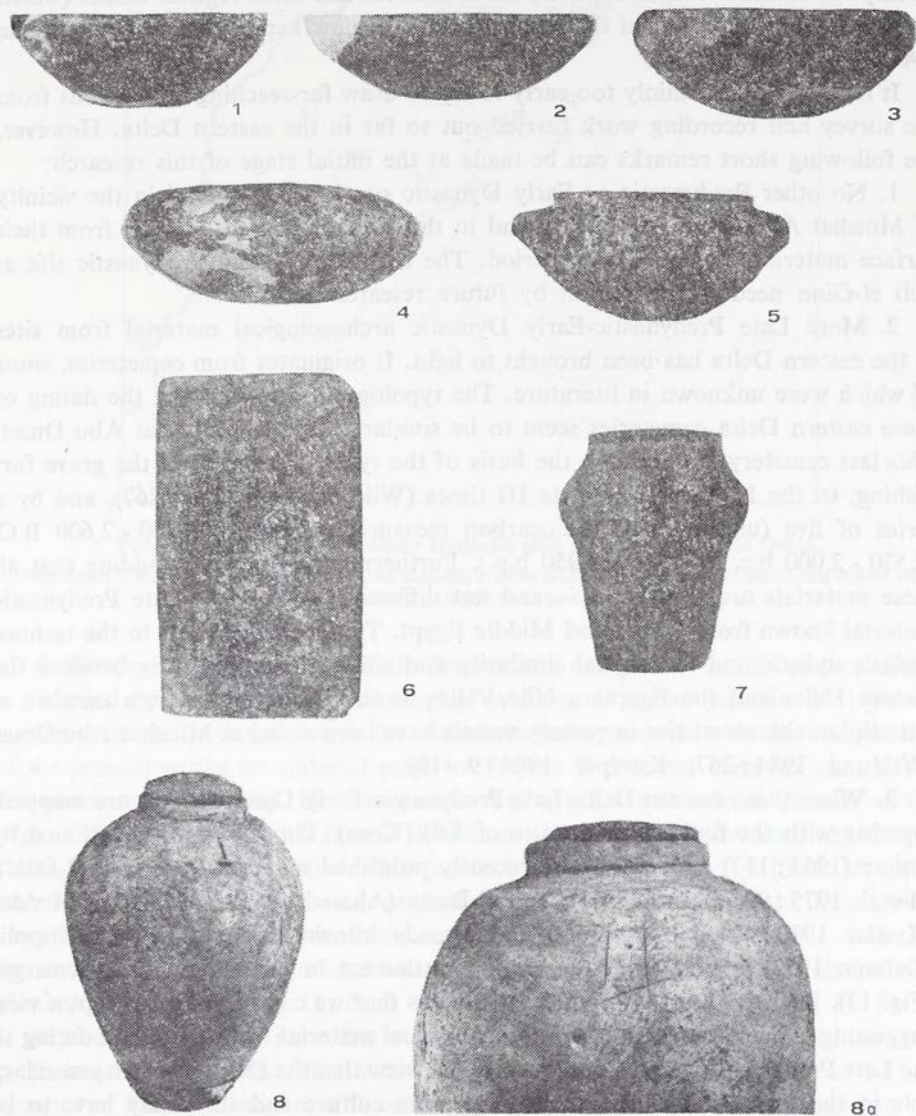


FIG. 11. Tell el-Basta (1 - 5); El-Ghasana (6, 8); and El-Amdid (7)

1: Black stone; 2 - 5: Diorite; 6: Slate; 7: Red-brown stone; 8 - 8a: Pottery. Different scales

It should be kept in mind that in the course of the recording programme of the museum collections in the eastern Delta, only individual finds have been documented and the actual grave assemblages (complete grave furnishings) have not yet been reconstructed. This makes premature any attempt at a comprehensive study of the typology and chronology of this material and of the respective graves and cemeteries in which they were found. A further step in the programme of MOE will be an attempt to consider the contents of the field notes and finds register books (which are written in Arabic) from the earlier fieldwork, now kept in the archives of the EAO.

It is, therefore, certainly too early to try to draw far-reaching conclusions from the survey and recording work carried out so far in the eastern Delta. However, the following short remarks can be made at the initial stage of this research:

1. No other Predynastic or Early Dynastic site has been found in the vicinity of Minshat Abu Omar. All sites found in this area are dated, judging from their surface material, to the Roman period. The reality of a Late Predynastic site at Tell el-Ginn needs confirmation by future research.

2. More Late Predynastic-Early Dynastic archaeological material from sites in the eastern Delta has been brought to light. It originates from cemeteries, some of which were unknown in literature. The typology of artefacts and the dating of these eastern Delta cemeteries seem to be similar to that of Minshat Abu Omar. This last cemetery is dated, on the basis of the types of finds from the grave furnishing, to the Naqada II-Naqada III times (Wildung 1984 : 265 - 267), and by a series of five (unpublished) radiocarbon measurements to *ca* 3,300 - 2,600 B.C. (2,530 - 2,000 b.c. or 4,480 - 3,950 b.p.). Furthermore, it is worth adding that all these materials are similar to — and not different from — the Late Predynastic material known from Upper and Middle Egypt. This seems to point to the technological, stylistic and ideological similarity and close contacts existing between the eastern Delta and the Egyptian Nile Valley at that time. However, a number of Palestinian characteristics in pottery vessels have been noted at Minshat Abu Omar (Wildung 1984 : 267; Kroeper 1984 : 9 - 10).

3. When these eastern Delta Late Predynastic-Early Dynastic sites are mapped, together with the finds from the site of Tell (Kom) Tinnis already mentioned by Kaiser (1964 : 112) and with more recently published material from Tell el-Dab'a (Bietak 1975 : 99, footnote 363), Tell el-Basta (Ahmed el-Sawi 1979 : 63), Mendes (Kessler 1980 : 404, bibliography) and already known evidence from Heliopolis (Debono 1952), a picture of the earliest settlement in the eastern Delta emerges (Fig. 12). In the light of this evidence it seems that we can no longer accept a view suggesting a lack or scarcity of archaeological material from the Delta dating to the Late Predynastic times. Consequently, the view that the Delta played a secondary role in the formation of the ancient Egyptian culture and state may have to be modified.

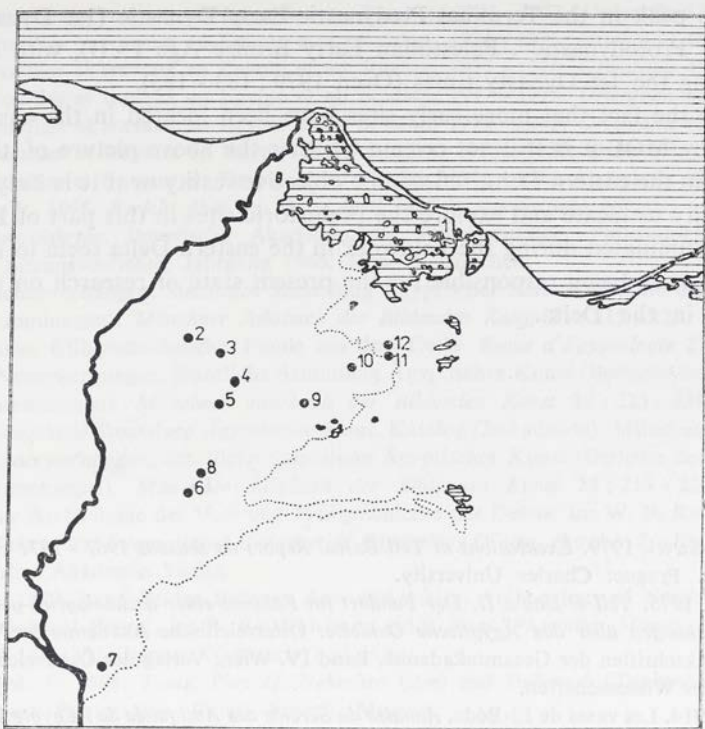


FIG. 12. Late Predynastic-Early Dynastic sites in the eastern Nile Delta

1: Kom Tinnis; 2: Mendez; 3: Tell Samara; 4: Gezira Sangaha; 5: Ezbet el-Tell; 6: Tell el-Basta; 7: Heliopolis; 8: Beni Amir; 9: Tell ed-Dab'a; 10: Huseiniya; 11: Minshat Abu Omar; 12: Tell el-Ginn

4. The appearance of these Late Predynastic cemeteries in the eastern Delta is preceded by the lack of archaeological evidence of earlier periods. This phenomenon seems to be characteristic for the whole Delta proper: to the best knowledge of the present writer no material prior to Naqada II date has been found so far in the interior of the Delta. However, such sites are known to have existed on the edge of the Delta. *E.g.*, at Merimde Benisalame situated on the western edge of the Delta, Early and Middle Palaeolithic artefacts have been collected (Schmidt 1980) and Early Neolithic settlement excavated (Eiwanger 1984). Lithic implements described as Palaeolithic, Neolithic and Predynastic had been earlier collected from the surface of the south-eastern edge of the Delta and of the Wadi Tumilat (Junker *et al.* 1930 : 7, 9 - 15, Pl. 3 - 13; Schott *et al.* 1932 : 41, 45 - 54, Pl. 8 - 9). It may be interesting to note that a somewhat similar situation existed in the later prehistory of the northern Sinai closely neighbouring the eastern Delta. The earliest remains of human occupation found so far in the northern Sinai are dated to the Predynastic times (Palestinian Chalcolithic), but the later prehistoric development

reached its peak in the Terminal Predynastic-Early Dynastic (1st Dynasty) times (Egyptian "Protodynastic", Palestinian Early Bronze Age I - II), with an evident acme during the 1st Dynasty times (Oren 1979 : 183 - 185).

Despite the fact that more early sites have been located in the course of the fieldwork by MOE it is still not certain whether the above picture of the earliest settlement in the eastern Delta reflects the objective reality or if it is only the result of our ability to locate and explore the prehistoric sites in this part of Egypt. Our insights accumulated during the fieldwork in the eastern Delta seem to suggest the second factor as being responsible for the present state of research on the earliest settlement in the Delta.

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