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Predynastic mace-heads in the Nile Valley

The present study is mainly concerned with the Predynastic mace-heads found in the cemeteries and the settlements dug up in the Nile Valley, and published in the reports of excavations and general studies on the period in question (*cf.* also Ciałowicz 1987). The other group of items, comprising the objects which were bought, found during some hotch-potch excavations or were some chance finds, is preserved in various collections scattered throughout the world. As regards the chronology, their value is of minor importance; however, from the typological point of view they are a valuable supplement of the materials yielded by excavations proper. During the research made on a large scale by contacting many world museums and by direct collecting of the published material we managed to gather more than 400 items coming from the Nile Valley. Most of the Predynastic mace-heads known now constitute the basis of the present study.

The Predynastic mace-heads have been divided into four principal types, but in particularly well-founded cases smaller groups or variants have been distinguished. As concerns the relative chronology, the generally accepted division into the cultures of the Predynastic period is followed here. In relation to the Nagada culture, Kaiser's system of relative chronology (1956; 1957) has been adopted.

As has been already mentioned above, the mace-heads were divided into four types:

1. Conical mace-heads. The items included in this group were till now most frequently named as disc-shaped mace-heads. The proposal of changing their name results from the fact that the majority of them resemble an upturned cone rather than a disc, whereas the items coming from the Sudan have more disc-like shapes.

2. Conical pear-shaped mace-heads. The shape of this sparsely represented type is intermediate between conical and pear-shaped mace-heads, till now specified by some research workers as flat-topped.

3. Pear-shaped mace-heads. The traditional terminology has been kept here. The objects included in this group are more or less spherical, oblong, round or oval in their longitudinal and cross-section.

4. Double-pointed mace-heads. This group comprises oblong mace-heads, most of them pointed on both ends, infrequently with rounded ends.

As has already been said, over 400 items were gathered; among them 130 come from 100 more or less precisely dated graves. The mace-heads found in the settlement are dated less precisely. Both groups constitute the basis of further considerations and yielded characteristic specimens which could help to specify the chronological problems in particular.

Conical mace-heads

This is the most numerous type of mace-heads in the Predynastic period. The analysis of the material has allowed me to distinguish among them three principal groups:

a) Convex-topped mace-heads (Fig. 1 : 1). The items belonging to this group are characterized by a shape similar to a disc. In most cases the upper and lower surfaces

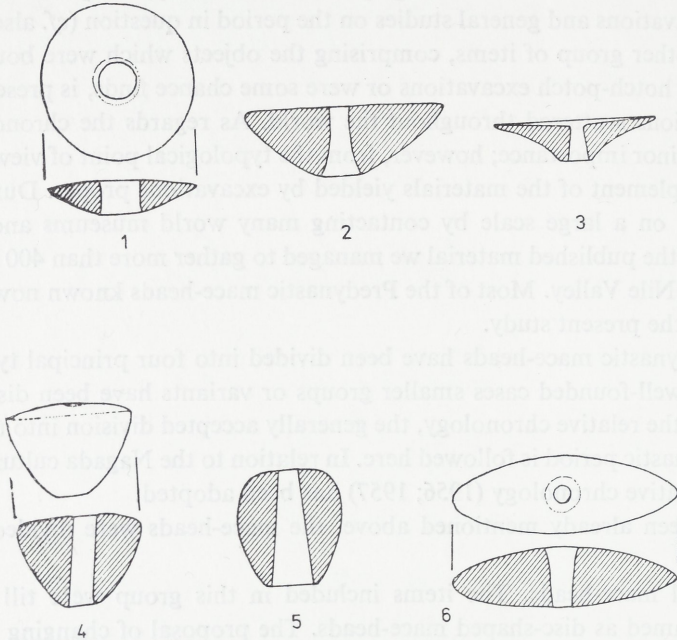


FIG. 1. Mace-head types

1: Convex-topped; 2: Flat-topped; 3: Concave-topped; 4: Conical pear-shaped; 5: Pear-shaped; 6: Double-pointed

are convex, and the sharp edge is formed in the middle or three-fourth up their height and not on the top like in many conical mace-heads. Until now 14 items or their fragments have been recognized. All of them are made of hard stone. 13 items were excavated in the Sudan, at the sites at Shaheinab, Kadero and Kadada (Arkell 1953,

Figs. 15 - 17; Krzyżaniak 1978: 159 - 172, Fig. 4; Geus 1981, Fig. 12a). The remaining object was found on the surface in the Fayum Oasis (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934: 33, Pl. XXX: 3). The group seems to be the oldest variety of conical mace-heads in chronological and typological terms. It was probably from these that the varieties of conical mace-heads, characteristic of Naqada I - IIa periods, evolved.

b) Flat-topped mace-heads (Fig. 1 : 2). The earliest precisely dated items belonging to this group come from a man's grave at el-Amrah dated to Naqada Ib (Randall-MacIver and Mace 1902 : 16, Pl. X, 6). The overwhelming majority of examples come from the graves dated to Naqada Ia-Ic, so it seems that the flat-topped mace-heads are very characteristic of this period. They also appear in the Naqada IIa period, but their popularity definitely decreases. They were found first of all in men's graves, and only exceptionally in women's graves. They were frequently broken before being put into graves and some of them are certainly models.

c) Concave-topped mace-heads (Fig. 1 : 3). This group of conical mace-heads is the most numerous in the archaeological material. The earliest dated items derive from the Naqada Ia (Peet 1914 : 15, Pl. XXVII) but most of them can be dated to the Naqada Ic-IIa periods of which they seem to be the most characteristic. Sometimes they, too, were broken before being put into graves. However, this occurred in a relatively smaller number of cases than in the group described above.

Recapitulating the information concerning the conical mace-heads it can be stated that they were invented on the territories of the present Sudan where they were employed as a weapon. From there the tradition of using them was transferred to Upper Egypt. Here, in the first stage of Naqada culture, they still functioned as a weapon proper after having been fitted with a handle of bone or wood (group b); later they became almost exclusively an element of grave equipment (a considerable amount of items included in the group c), as models only, not as weapons.

Conical pear-shaped mace-heads

This type of mace-heads (Fig. 1 : 4) is rather rare in the archaeological material. They are found first of all in the Neolithic cultures of the Sudan, in small number at Fayum A and at the beginning of stage I of the Naqada culture. The items derived from the sites at Shaheinab and Kadero seem to be the oldest examples (Arkell 1953 : 49, Fig. 14; Krzyżaniak 1978 : 167, Fig. 3 - 6). Made of hard stones, they are squat with a flattened, slightly convex top. Similar items are known from Kom W at Fayum (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934 : 33, Pl. XXX: 2) and from the grave 130 at Qau dated to Naqada Ia-b (Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928, Pl. XXX). Arkell repeatedly suggested that this type of mace-heads had evolved from the ochre grinders and that from those in turn conical mace-heads had been formed (Arkell 1955 : 32, 35, 1975 : 34, 38; Arkell and Ucko 1965 : 149). He also found that one of

the fragments included in this group and excavated at Mostagedda could be linked with the Badari culture (Arkell 1975 : 34, 38). However (and this is also acknowledged by Arkell), the mace-heads of type 1a are undoubtedly contemporary with those of type 2, a statement confirmed by the identical ceramic vessels found together with them. The possibility of the use of these maces by the Badari people ought to be decidedly declined. No example of mace-head is known from the graves dated reliably as coming from this period, and the fragment from Mostagedda is a loose find and cannot be precisely dated. But the existence of the type in question both in the Sudan and the Fayum Oasis is of interest. It can be one more proof of a connection between so distant territories. On the contrary, in the Naqada culture the discussed type of mace-heads seems to appear sporadically and only in its earlier stage, at the latest until the beginning of Ib.

Pear-shaped mace-heads

This is the second type of Predynastic mace-heads (Fig. 1 : 5) as far as popularity is concerned. In the Nile Valley they occur in the Merimde culture and in the second stage of the Naqada culture. Lack of variety of forms and dominant characteristics have made it possible to distinguish their variants. A small group of knobbed mace-heads is the only exception. It is important to stress the existence of pear-shaped mace-heads in the Merimde culture, the oldest in the Lower Egypt; this is considered by many research workers as the proof of the Merimde culture connections with the South-Western Asia. Later they appear in the stage IIa of the Naqada culture, and till the period Naqada II_d they occur almost exclusively as grave equipment. The only exceptions are some mace-heads found in Nubia in the rich graves dated to the Naqada III (Firth 1912 : 193; 1927 : 206), and the mace-heads from the same period excavated at the Abusir el-Meleq cemetery (Scharff 1926 : 48). It seems, however, that most of them are models made solely to be put into graves. One mace-head found at the Gerzeh cemetery is also very characteristic (Petrie *et al.* 1912 : 21, Pl. IV : 2). It is evident that the pear-shaped mace-heads were used by the Upper Egyptians to the south of Assiut. The knobbed mace-heads seem to be peculiar to the Naqada III. They are decorated with stylized or more naturalistically treated heads of animals and humans, and they are certainly models or symbols of power. It should be emphasized that in the Naqada II_d the function of maces was distinctly changed. They ceased to be weapons and became symbols of power. At that time they must have been put into the graves of tribal chiefs, rare and the most exposed to plunder; for this reason there are practically no graves with mace-heads known from that period. The graves from the Early-Dynastic period show the existence of a similar custom; the maces are found only in the graves of royal necropolis at Abydos.

Double-pointed mace-heads

The items found in the precisely dated graves indicate that this type (Fig. 1 : 6) of mace-heads appears exclusively in the Naqada IIa stage. It seems that the occurrence of double-pointed mace-heads can be linked with a final stage of the Naqada I (Amratian) culture. An additional element supporting this statement is the decoration of some items in the form of engraved representation of animals (scorpion, crocodile) made in the manner typical of this period (hatched silhouettes).

Finally, it seems worth pointing out that the graves with different types of mace-heads in their equipment are almost totally absent. Out of 100 published graves with mace-heads only one contained types 1, 3 and 4 occurring together (grave H 23 at Mahasna; Ayrton and Loat 1911: 21, 32). In two graves types 1 and 4 were found (grave 88/17 at Bahan; Reisner 1910: 126; Grave B 102 at Abadiyeh; Petrie 1901: 33); in another two, types 1 and 3 (graves 1401 and 1488 at Naqada; Petrie and Quibell 1896: 23 - 29) were encountered.

The following conclusions can be drawn from our studies of the mace-heads:

1. The occurrence of type 1a (conical, convex-topped) and 2 (conical, pear-shaped) is almost exclusively known on the territory of the Sudan and in the Fayum Oasis; this may testify to some connections between the Sudanese Neolithic and the Fayum A, referred to earlier by Arkell on the basis of different data (Arkell and Ucko 1965 : 147).
2. The origin of the conical type took place on the Upper (main) Nile.
3. Most of the flat-topped mace-heads (group 1b) occur in the Naqada Ia-Ic and concave-topped (group 1c) ones occur mainly in the Naqada Ic-IIa.
4. The pear-shaped mace-heads ceased to serve as weapons at the end of the Naqada IId period.
5. The knobbed mace-heads appeared in the third stage of the Naqada development.
6. The double-pointed mace-heads occurred only in the Naqada II period.

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