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Recent excavations at Maadi (Egypt)

The Joint Research Project in Maadi resumed excavations on the Late Pre-dynastic site in 1977 and up to 1984 seasons of field-work have been carried out.

The previous excavations by Menghin, Amer and Rizkana (Menghin 1936; Menghin and Amer 1932; Rizkana 1952) had left a rather limited area of the large settlement unexplored in its eastern part. It was also the only one in this part of the site which had not been damaged by other disturbances. The aim of resuming the work at Maadi was to rescue what remained of a site now seriously threatened with total destruction and, at the same time, to obtain samples for an analysis of the stratigraphy and for the palaeoecological and palaeoenvironmental studies.

The investigated settlement deposit consists of a low mound sloping southwards and cut away on the opposite side. A topographic grid was established on the mound which was subsequently excavated on the area of 380 square metres. In the area of the maximum thickness of the deposit its stratigraphy was characterized by the superimposition of two building levels, the most substantial of which rested on the virgin soil (*gebel*) and which was superimposed by a series of dumping layers with occupation floors interposed.

The building levels consisted of the remains of huts delimited by walls built of posts and probably also of other perishable materials which may be documented by traces of burnt floors and by the presence of parts of the wooden posts found in situ. Such dwellings seem to correspond considerably to those known from the previous excavations. In the base level traces of four huts were discovered, one about ten metres apart from the other. One of them seems to have been built shortly after the other three. This, together with the successive use of this area for dumping refuse probably originating from other dwellings, suggests a diachronic occupation of the entire site with a shift of the occupied areas within the settlement. On the hut floors small fireplaces were found, in some cases together with sunken pithoi and small storage pits, which confirm the already known data from this site which point to the existence of household storing (Fig. 1). Both inside and outside the huts

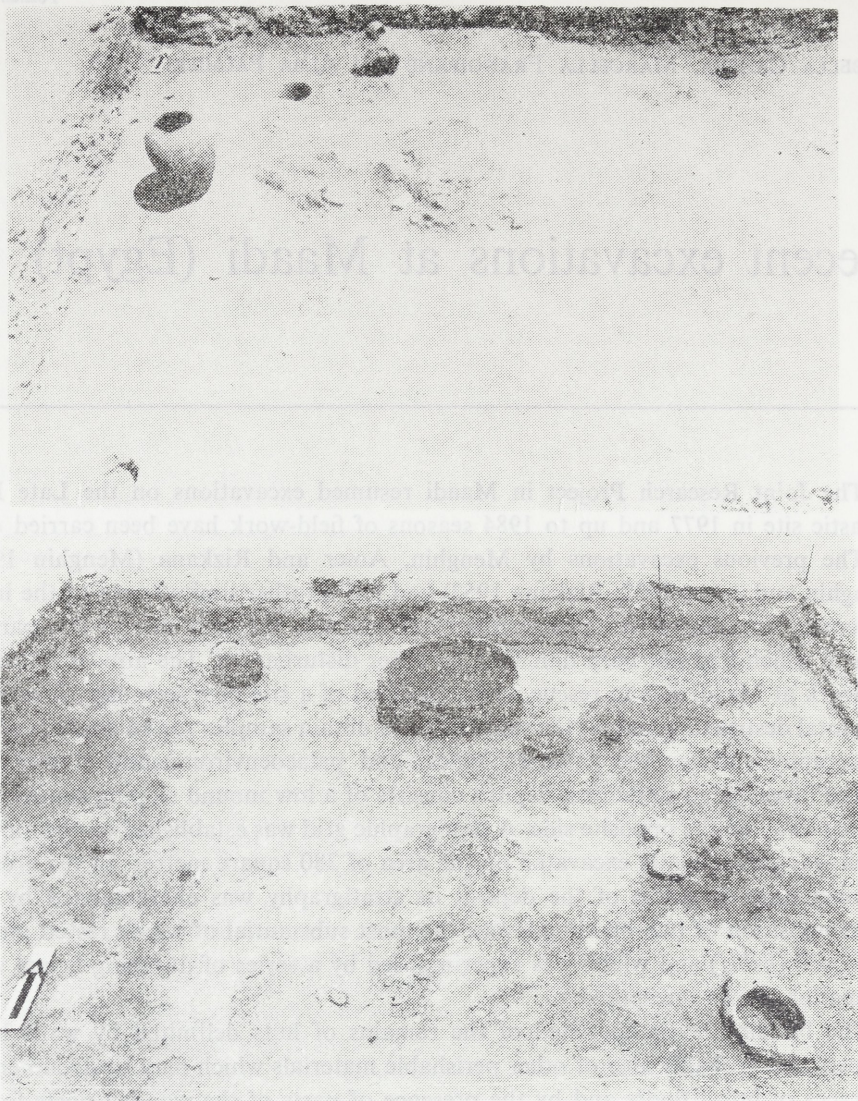


FIG. 1. Maadi. Remains of huts

numerous complete pots were found, covered with a sandy layer accumulated after the abandonment of the area. An infant burial below the floor of one of the dwellings documents a different funerary custom from the use of cemeteries situated to the south of the settlement.

In an area between two huts a considerable heap of ashes with charred vegetal material was found (Fig. 2). It included the remains of different wheats (*Triticum monococcum*, *T. dicoccum*, *T. aestivum*, *T. spelta*), barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) and

pulses such as peas (*Pisum* sp.) and lentils (*Lens culinaris*). The variety of cultivated plants already recognized in the small sample analyzed so far sheds new light on the Late Predynastic agriculture.



FIG. 2. Maadi. Charred seeds

Besides plant cultivation the inhabitants of Maadi also depended on animal husbandry. According to the preliminary report on the animal remains from Maadi provided by S. Bökönyi (1985), the most favoured species were the caprovines (mostly sheep) followed by pigs and cattle.

Domestic animals also included dogs and donkeys; the occurrence of the latter is the earliest evidence of the domestic donkey in Africa. The inhabitants of Maadi complemented their diet with the flesh of wild animals, especially fish, turtles and birds.

Four radiocarbon dates made on charcoal were recently provided by the Laboratorio per la datazioni con il C-14 dell'Università di Roma „La Sapienza” and are calibrated by both the MASCA (Ralph *et al.* 1973) and the Klein system (Klein *et al.* 1982). These measurements (Table 1) date only the earliest level at Maadi

Table 1

C-14 dates from Maadi

Lab. ref.	¹⁴ C age BP	Calibrated age MASCA	Calibrated age (Klein <i>et al.</i>)	¹³ C ‰
R-1425	4860±70	3620 : 3735 BC	3385 : 3865 BC	-25
R-1426	4680±70	3380 : 3580 BC	3185 : 3750 BC	-24.3
R-1427	4900±70	3655 : 3760 BC	3400 : 3880 BC	-26.5
R-1428	4890±70	3650 : 3750 BC	3395 : 3875 BC	-25.5

and, therefore, do not contradict the idea that the occupation on the site terminated later, at the end of the 4th millennium B.C.

The pottery is characterized by a fairly wide range of shapes and by a chaff-tempered paste which only varies as regards the grain size and the frequency of mineral inclusions. Among the wares are items with a red or red-orange slip, either burnished or only smoothed, items with a black or brownish slip and generally burnished, as well as items without any surface treatment. The most common forms are the ovoidal, elongated jars with a low foot and flaring rim, usually red-slipped, and the more globular jars with a flat base and short neck, which always have a black burnished surface and are made of a more refined paste. The foot of the red jars was made separately and then applied, before drying, to the bottom of the vase, the latter being deeply incised to secure a better weld. Other forms can also be mentioned such as bowls of various sizes, large basins with thickened rims underlined with rows of impressions, and large necked jars, although the latter appear to be less common (Fig. 3).

Observation of the manufacturing technique showed that at least the most common vessels such as red and black jars were first hand-made and then finished by modelling the rim and the base on a slow wheel. This manufacturing process

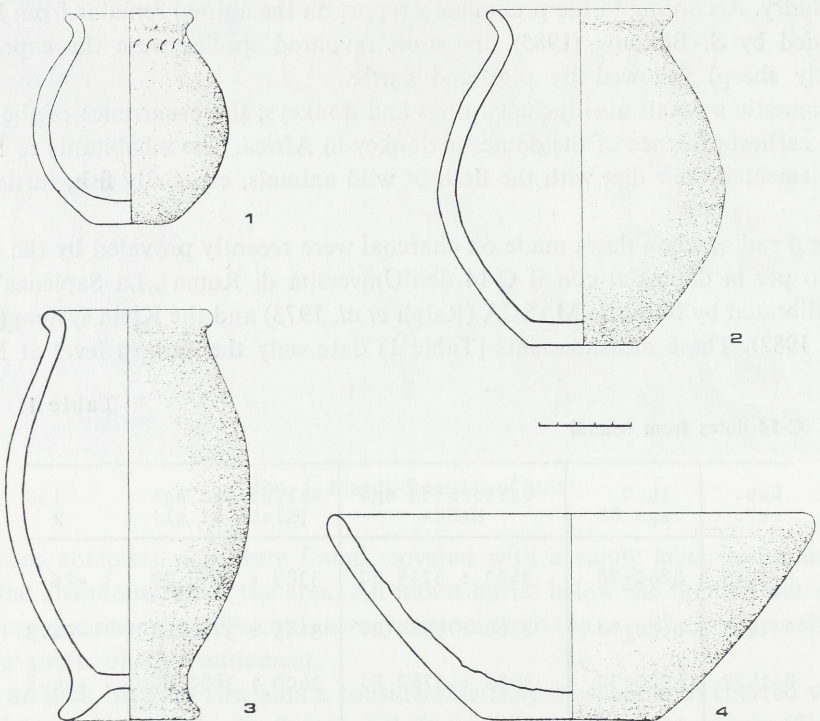


FIG. 3. Maadi. Vessel shapes

together with the uniformity of both the shapes and paste seem to point to a pottery production by specialized craftsmen.

A single sherd bearing a wavy-handle confirms the presence of imported pottery of the Palestinian type.

Participation of Maadi in a wide network of communication, including the Levant and reaching northern Syria, is also suggested by the occurrence of the well-known fan scrapers made of tabular flint which were abundantly found at such sites as

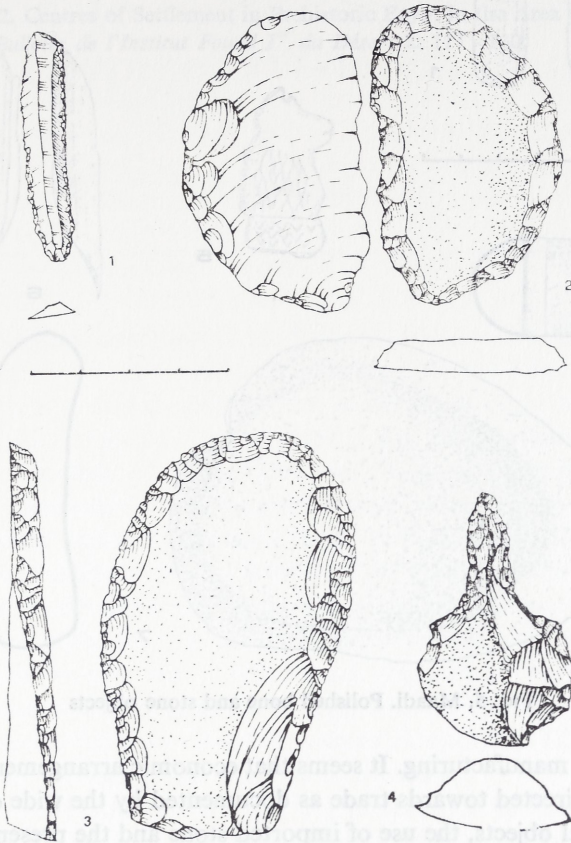


FIG. 4. Maadi. Lithic industry

Arad or the late-Uruk centres on the Middle Euphrates (Habuba Kabira, Jebe Aruda). Except for very rare blades, the Maadi tool kit, however, is never made of tabular flint. It consists mostly of borers and scrapers made on flakes or blades struck from fairly small pebbles (Fig. 4). Other tools include objects made of bone: points, spatulae, combs, etc. (Fig. 5), metal and polished stone such as spindle whorls, mortars and pestles as well as the typical basalt and alabaster vases.

In conclusion, the Maadi site reveals a marked craft specialization in different sectors of activities such as metallurgy, lithic industry, stone vase production and,

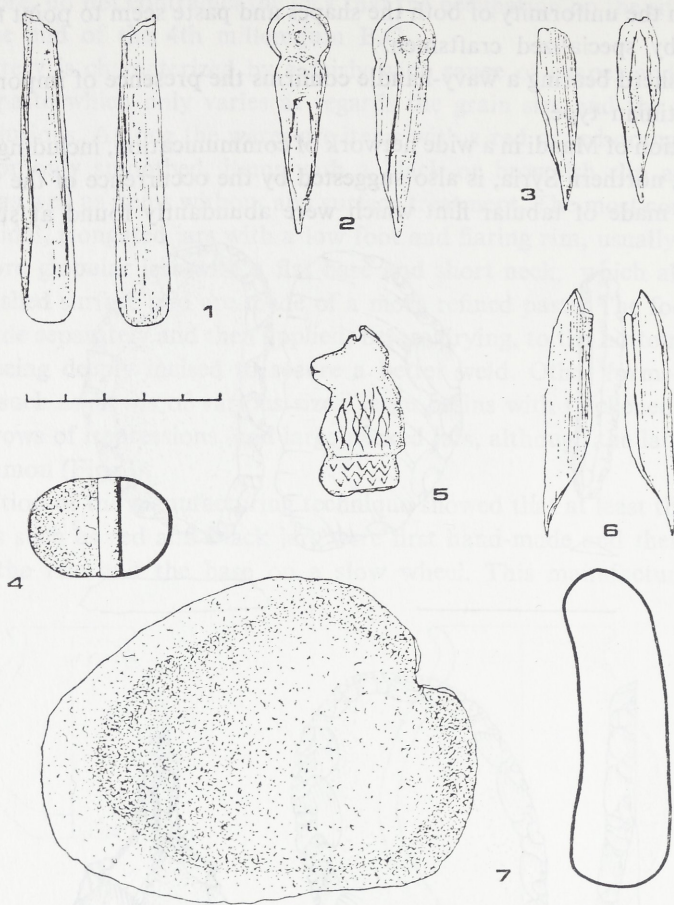


FIG. 5. Maadi. Polished bone and stone objects

above all, pottery manufacturing. It seems that economic arrangement of the Maadi community was directed towards trade as documented by the wide diffusion of fan scrapers and metal objects, the use of imported stone and the presence of imported pottery. An important part of the economic activity was the specialized manufacturing of pottery, characterized by a mass-production of certain kinds of containers.

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The archaeological expedition of the Institut Universitaire Oriental to Upper Egypt started the fieldwork in the autumn of 1977 in the Nagada region, encompassing the western bank of the Nile and the gravel plain along the Theban plateau between Ballas and Nagada. The Nagada region offers relevant archaeological information for the study of the formative period of the Egyptian State as regards the density of settlement, the wealth of the burials as well as the monumental buildings in Predynastic and Early Dynastic times. The impressive discoveries of W. H. Flinders Petrie at the site of Gizeh (Nubet), J. B. Quibell at the site of Ballas and J. de Morgan at the site of Nagada at the end of the 19th century were first to point to this area as one of the cores of the Egyptian culture through the 4th millennium B.C. Since then the main stream of information available has been to a great extent confined to burials and associated furnishings, whereas the lack of any substantial settlement excavation has constrained the growth of evidence. The intention of the IHO project is to obtain this kind of information.

It seemed most appropriate to begin our project as a detailed re-investigation concentrated on the most impressive Predynastic site found in Upper Egypt: the South Town. The selection was then made quite independently of any tactical considerations and, in particular, of the site's present state of preservation.

The project aims in three directions:

1. Analysis of the topography, geomorphological setting and state of preservation of the early site;
2. Re-collection of a broad spectrum of data on resources, their exploitation and craftsman's production in the Predynastic settlement;
3. Studies on the degree of social complexity reached by the Nagada social group in the late 4th millennium B.C.