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Predynastic Hairpins and Combs from the Necropolis of Naqada: Preliminary Conclusions

Recent works show the importance of items of everyday life, left in the background by previous generations of Egyptologists. They have, nonetheless, the possibility of providing a large quantity of information about all activities of ancient Egyptian life. Personal care objects are an example of those aspects. Although toilette utensils found at historical sites have already triggered an important range of studies, there is a great gap of knowledge about its predynastic counterparts, which result in great difficulty in determining the function of different objects found in the archaeological register.

Although a considerable amount have appeared in funerary equipment in predynastic tombs, hairpins and combs have never been the subject of academic research (Martín del Río Álvarez & Almenara Rosales 2004). They show a great range of decorative features, among which, theriomorphic designs play an important role. There are a great variety of patterns, and they show us the deep interest that the first Egyptians had in the animal world, and their preferences for certain species in different periods. Another interesting aspect would be the identification of the function of each one in the environment of personal care, and we should add their symbolic meaning to an ideological and social context. For this reason, it is necessary to make a study, in which the first step would be the creation of a corpus for these objects, that would facilitate their chronological organisation and typological classification.

One of the biggest problems in carrying out this corpus, as is usual in works of this type, is the difficulty to ascribe an exact chronology and origin of pieces kept in Museum storerooms. This is because the great majority come from clandestine or unreliable excavations that were carried out between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, arriving at these institutions as private donations. To find a solution to this problem, and to obtain a first chronological

classification of some pieces, thus allowing us to make a comparison with other sites or objects with unknown provenance, we have decided to focus the first part of our enquiry on sites with reliable information.

The present study collects preliminary conclusions obtained from the analysis of the Naqada cemetery, excavated mainly by W.M.F. Petrie in 1885. We have chosen this site because of the great quantity of material found there, and of studies printed by Petrie and other authors. Nevertheless, we have taken into account the particular limitation of works that were carried out at the end of the 19th century, and we have introduced new chronological parameters and researches. We understand that this test is only indicative, since the study of a unique site influences results because of its temporal limits and the repetition of material typologies associated with a specific geographic environment.

In reference to specific literary sources used in this analysis, we have focused on texts by William M. F. Petrie, including his excavation diaries, and supplements of the same excavation made by Elise Baumgartel and Joan Crowfoot Payne (Baumgartel 1970; Payne 1987; 2000). Following these sources, we found 192 objects, of which 172 come from different museums collections. The greatest number of pieces came from the Petrie Museum (University College London) and the Ashmolean Museum Oxford, and to a lesser extent, from Musées Royaux d´Art et d´Histoire Bruxelles, Staatliche Museen Berlin and the Manchester Museum.

At the moment of working with this material, we encountered two specific problems. Firstly, we had to take into account the general state of preservation of some pieces, and as to whether or not they concealed some form of decoration, or if fragments belonged to objects already assigned for study. Furthermore, a so called hair-comb has been removed from the present work, because it is an item with a double function, it needs further analysis that will be carried out later. Secondly, manufactured material is not always precisely described in catalogues. Therefore, with the absence of more specific information, we decided to unify bone and ivory as a single study variant. In terms of chronology, as we have found relative dates using Petrie´s SD, Kaiser (1957) or Hendrickx (1996; 1999) systems, we decided to unify them under the latter.

Naqada Cemetery presents a good point of reference for this analysis, although we should take its particularities into account. As its extensive chronology occupied all phases of predynastic time (NI – NIII), we should sum the total quality of its numerous tombs, which present interesting and diverse funerary goods, with "exotic" or "luxury" items, such as stone vases, copper goods, ivory artefacts, and semiprecious stones, like lapis lazuli (Hendrickx & Bavay, 2002) mixed together with ordinary items of daily use.

With respect to the representation of funerary goods in 1310 tombs excavated, we found 123 that contained hairpins and combs. There are more hairpins than combs, and usually one to three pins or combs per tomb were found. The appearance of both items in the same burial was unusual, as they were found together in only 13 tombs. Nevertheless, curiosities have appeared, such as in tomb number 162. Here we found five combs but only one pin. On the other hand, there were eight pins and no combs in number 1224.

Chronologically, combs appear in great number in NIC, with 16 examples, following NIIB y NIIC, with 9 each; while in NIII, there were none. From a total of 88 combs, only 14 presented problems in defining shape, due to their poor state of preservation. As to the others, 22 are undecorated and the rest have diverse designs. Among them, the most relevant is the theriomorphic motif (birds and mammals) which is represented on 27 items. Geometric and anthropomorphic designs are the least represented. From a chronological point of view, zoomorphic designs appear in all phases, with special reference to NIC, in which we found 9 examples – 6 birds and 3 mammals. Geometric designs appeared in NIIA, and anthropomorphic appeared only in NIIB.

As far as the measures, it has been detected that the average for the smaller is between 4 and 6 cm length, those of intermediate size measure between 6 and 10 cm, but the great ones between 10 a 17 cm. The great ones usually display designs that make them be attractive pieces

We found that the designs varied. The simplest in design are those whose bodies are rectangular, quadrangular, pointed or rounded. They are without any decoration at all. A few appeared with a notch on both sides of its body, or with incised lines over the teeth. We located curious examples exhibiting rows of teeth on both sides of the main body, and some authors suggest that they were used to remove lice, just like those used today. Despite, the majority present rather complicated designs, with geometric elements, such as rhomboidal and rounded segments, which were used as base for zoomorphic elements. Sometimes, birds appear in pairs forming a V with an individual in each vertex, or double pair may be placed one above the other. Nevertheless, representations of single birds are the most common. With respect the mammals, *bovidae* are the most common, among them two hartebeests (*Alcelaphus bucelaphus*) (Ash.1895.942 and Ash.1895.933) and one dorca gazelle (*Gazella dorca*) (Ash.1895.943) could be identified (Fig. 1c). On the other hand, anthropomorphics combs are special features that represents heads of bearded men, with eyes, brows and modelled ears, and lines of incisions in the neck area that appear to imitate necklaces (Fig. 1b). Only two examples of this type appear in the cemetery.
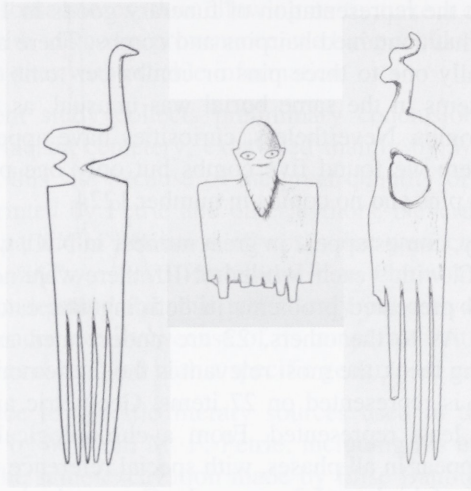
Fig. 1. Three examples of combs from Naqada. a) Ash. 1895.936, burial N1815. b) Ash.
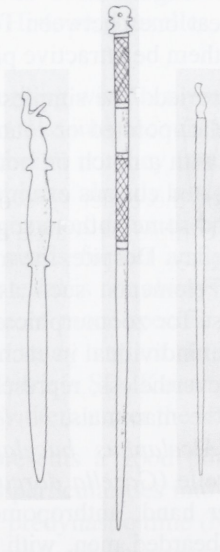1895.939, burial N268. c) Ash. 1895.943, burial N1687.

Fig. 2. Three examples of hairpins from Naqada. a) Ash. 1895.950, burial N1503. b) Ash.
1895.952 burial N1774. c) Petrie´s type 47 (Naqada and Ballas, 1896: LXIII).

Hairpins are very fragile material, often appear broken into small pieces, which means that the appearance of numerous fragments, sometimes belonging to several units, make the identification of complete items for statistic purpose very difficult. For this reason, we only included those which came from an assigned tomb or formed a describable element as far as decoration is concerned. Needles have representation in all the phases, although they display a remarkable increase in NII and a drastic reduction in NIII.

Regarding its section, the round one predominates over the flat one in 75%, and with respect to its chronological frame, the last one is represented in outstanding form in NIC, and in a lesser number in the final phases of NII, disappearing in NIII. Those of round section are present in all the phases, although they are not identified in NIB and NIIA.

For its decoration, and in spite of the fragmentation, it is necessary to emphasize the high percentage of decorated hairpins that have appeared. Of 50 classifiable units, only 7 of them do not display decoration. The designs follow the same rank that the combs but with slight changes. Theriomorphic is the most common, counting up to 33 pieces. Next comes are the geometric, with 10 examples. The anthropomorphous one does not appear represented in the hairpins.

With respect to the zoomorphic, we have to emphasize the birds, with 29 units, whereas the mammals are only present in four cases. As a novelty, reptiles appear once, in a hairpin of flat section and very simple design, whose top shows a serpent in a slithering attitude (UC5265). Its tomb was dated in NIC.

Both birds and mammals are usually very schematized, which disables, in most examples, an identification of the exact type of represented animal. The case of the mammals is still more complex, because most of the designs display horns, including in some of them the head and the ears of the animal. Among the birds, some hawks and waterfowl have been identified. With respect to the geometric design, it usually goes accompanied by an animal figure, although there are some examples where it is the main design. In the needles of circular section, the most common is incised decorations (spiral and crossed line) at the top, normally under the carved animal (Fig. 2). In those of flat section they are usually separated segments, rhomboid or rounded, on which the theriomorphic decorative motif is based.

As far as the dimensions, its calculation is quite difficult because of the fragmentation degree that most of the pieces display. In some cases they have lost their ends and only a detailed recognition of each unit could give us a certain approach of its real measurement. However, with the data gathered in complete units, it has been detected that the average is between 14 and 16 cm, both for

those of flat section and round. The only case that does not respond to this average is a round hairpin that presents 20.3 cm (AM1895.952; Fig. 2b). In spite of this, and given the problem mentioned before, we cannot put forward a reasonable hypothesis and hope to have a greater number of complete units that confirm or not that average.

Conclusions

Considering that this article is a first step in the analysis of hairpins and combs in the site of Naqada, and that its results must be compared with data coming from other cemeteries, we have arrived at diverse remarkable points.

First, the site of Naqada, as it has already been indicated, displays a high number of tombs with funerary goods that could be defined as "rich", given the variety and amount of objects which they presented, as well as the inclusion of an important "exotic" or unusual number of items. Among them, the presence of copper objects and flint, personal ornaments made in semiprecious stones, several ivory elements, stone vases, etc. is emphasized. Next to these, it appears a great number of ceramic pots which have high quality. Therefore, if we consider that hairpins and combs appear in a reduced number of tombs and they do not seem to be a common element among funerary goods, we could establish that they were considered prestige objects.

On the other hand, the high number of combs and decorated hairpins seems to indicate that the predynastic Egyptians liked to decorate these objects. In fact, from our present point of view, we could be surprised with these elaborated designs. Though the decoration of the needle could be justified as an element with double function, the first one of holding the hair on and the second one as a hairdo ornament, whereas for us the comb is a functional object without ornamental necessity. Nevertheless, the pieces found in the site show an elaborated design and an exquisite execution, which along with their size, could demonstrate their use as items to hold the hairstyle with an ornamental reason. Petrie (1896: 47; 1927: 24) presented this suggestion already, and Keimer formulated a theory in 1952, in which he suggested that the combs of long teeth served like decorated elements in the masculine hairdo (Keimer apud Midant-Reynes 2000: 196; Nowak, 2004: 900). Therefore, it could be possible that the combs of long teeth could be useful to show some type of status or social position. The problem is the shortage of anthropological information that we have about the occupants of the burials, and therefore the difficulty to associate sex and typology of comb in the funerary goods.

Finally, to emphasize the role that animals had in the decorative range of combs and needles. In Ancient Egypt, nature had a great weight in daily life. The Nile and animals -harmful or not - which lived in their banks got to have such a

close relation with the human community, that they ended up taking part of its complex pantheon. No wonder the importance of the ecological element form of artistic expression, and therefore zoomorphic decorations supplanted other designs and got to form true iconographies associated power and religion. Such associations are clear at the historical time when we found the vulture or the serpent used as protective elements of the royalty, the hawk used to represent the pharaoh, and a great number of animals identified with gods. Although this seems clear for the society that followed the II Dynasty, diverse authors are trying to solve the great gaps they came across for the pre and protodynastic periods. To establish the difference between a decorative or ideological pattern in a design is something that needs further discussion; and so what it may seem a mere risky decoration of a bird or a mammal, could mean an important ideological reflection of a religious element or social status.

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