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Social development in Predynastic Egypt: Matmar, a case study

As I pointed out in previous books and papers on general trends in the social development in Predynastic Egypt as exemplified by the cemeteries associated to the settlements belonging to those early communities, which shed some light on several issues (Castillos 1982; 1983a; 1983b; 1991; 1995; 1996; 1997a; 1997b; 1998), the next step in our research had to be an attempt at concentrating on an adequate site in order to make a more comprehensive approach to the subject, as other researchers have already done in recent years (Bard 1988; Anderson 1992; Griswold 1992).

I selected Matmar for several reasons. It is located rather far from major Predynastic sites of Upper Egypt, and it yielded evidence for a clear-cut and continuous evolution (Castillos 1997b). Being the last site published by Guy Brunton after his other excavations in the Badari area (Brunton 1928; 1937), it undoubtedly benefited from the experience he gained elsewhere. The publication (Brunton 1948) was reasonably detailed and included all the relevant tombs he found at this locality. Finally, the soil of the excavated sites was dry enough to preserve easily perishable items such as wood, leather and textiles which usually did not survive in other sites of similar chronology (Petrie and Quibell 1896).

The locality of Matmar seemed to have been continuously occupied in ancient times because cemeteries belonging to periods dating from the Early Predynastic to Late Roman times could be found there. Some Badarian settlements, the remains of a New Kingdom temple and evidence of more Predynastic cemeteries where the ground had been disturbed to the point of almost complete obliteration, were also noted in the area of Matmar (Brunton 1948:2-4).

Generally speaking, the results of my earlier research regarding Matmar has shown that the area was apparently well populated during Badarian times

(123 tombs), had a greatly reduced Amratian presence (24 tombs), again recovered its prosperity in the Gerzean times (34 tombs) and had a certain drop in the Protodynastic (76 tombs; Castillos 1982:129, 137-140). These figures taken from Brunton's publication, may one day be slightly modified due to the presence of 26 other Predynastic graves which could not be precisely dated by him.

Since we do not know the exact duration of each of the Predynastic occupations of the settlements which generated the cemeteries we are studying, I can not be sure about the comments made in the preceding paragraph; future and more accurate chronological estimation may or may not modify the overall picture, but for the time being this is the impression that the site conveys.

The comparatively numerous funerary offerings found in Predynastic Matmar tombs were also useful for our purposes, especially as regards the later periods (Castillos 1983a: Tables 8a and 8b). For intact tombs and for both intact and plundered ones, the Badarian inhumations had the same low average value of 1.5 objects per tomb. In the Amratian inhumations, however this variable jumped to 7.2 for intact graves and 8.0 for all of them. The Gerzean inhumations provided figures ranging from 5.5 and 6.9 respectively and, finally, for the Protodynastic graves the values were 7.8 and 8.3. As these figures show, both sets of values agree quite closely. Another interesting fact is the increasing spatial proximity over time of the richer graves in these cemeteries (Castillos 1983b: Plates V-VII) which illustrates a practice abundantly documented in Egypt in historical times.

Regarding the size of the tombs at Matmar during the Predynastic times, the averages indicate figures of 0.76, 0.86, 1.29 and 1.39 cubic metres for each period. Considering the tomb size distribution (Castillos 1998: histograms 11-14) we can see that the Badarian tombs had more frequently a volume of between approximately 0.3 and 0.6 cubic metres, the Amratian ones between 0.5 and 0.8, the Gerzean graves between 0.5 and 1.4 and the Protodynastic ones between 0.8 and 2 cubic metres (Table 1).

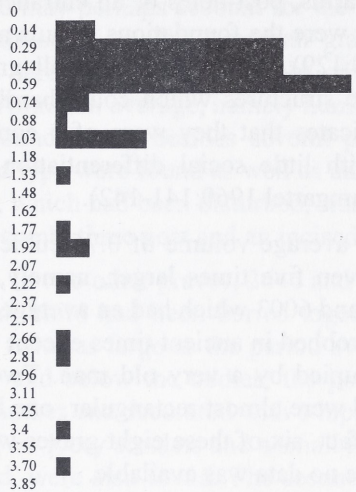
The Badarian

Remains of several Badarian settlements were found by Guy Brunton in areas 2000, 2100, 2400-2700 and 3200. Among the objects recovered there was a fine black topped brown polished pot, rippled all over, which has been frequently praised as a masterpiece of ancient craftsmanship (Brunton 1948:5; Vandier 1952:210; Midant-Reynes 1992:153), but numerous rough cooking vessels as well as other pots, flints and grinding stones were also found in these sites.

The most interesting feature was the presence of several large, roughly circular pits, described by Guy Brunton as granaries. The largest granary had a dia-

Table 1
SIZE DISTRIBUTION HISTOGRAMS

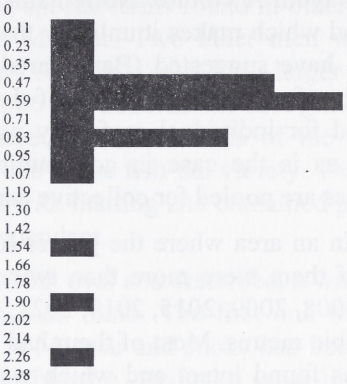
Badarian - Matmar



n: 55

$\bar{x}$: 0.760 s^2: 0.625 s: 0.790
MX: 3.57 MN: 0.07 R: 3.50

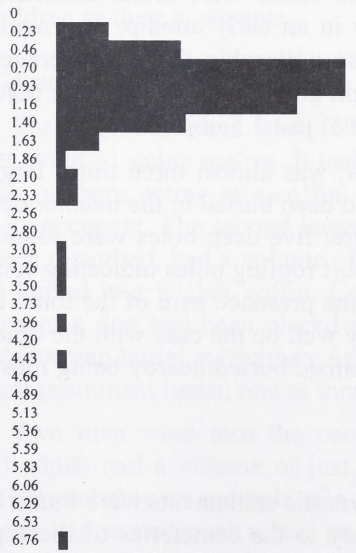
Amratian - Matmar



n: 21

$\bar{x}$: 0.860 s^2: 0.270 s: 0.520
MX: 2.28 MN: 0.17 R: 2.11

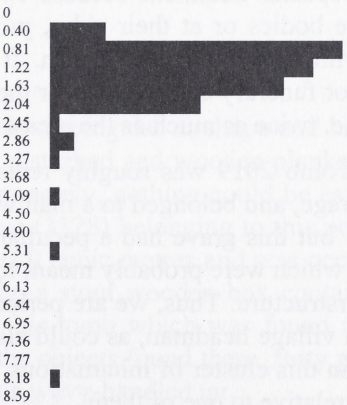
Gerzean - Matmar



n: 106

$\bar{x}$: 1.285 s^2: 2.736 s: 1.650
MX: 11.05 MN: 0.13 R: 10.92

Protodynastic - Matmar



n: 66

$\bar{x}$: 1.386 s^2: 1.375 s: 1.172
MX: 8.01 MN: 0.09 R: 7.92

meter of 2.7 metres and was about 3 metres deep; others were 1.35 metres across and 1 metre deep or 2 metres across and 1.25 metres deep. A few of these objects still had remains of basket-work that originally lined them, similarly to granaries of the Fayum A culture. No remains of hearths, post-holes or an entrance could be found which makes it unlikely that they were the foundations of huts as some authors have suggested (Baumgartel 1960:129). Although few small granaries were also found, the presence of the large structures which could hardly been intended for individual or family use indicates that they were of a communal nature, as is the case in communities with little social differentiation where resources are pooled for collective use (Baumgartel 1960:141-142).

In an area where the graves had an average volume of 0.76 cubic metre, eight of them were more than twice or even five times larger, namely, tombs 2006, 2008, 2009, 2015, 2019, 2021, 3083 and 6003 which had an average size of 2.46 cubic metres. Most of them had been robbed in ancient times except for one that was found intact and which was occupied by a very old man. Two other graves had been more carefully shaped and were almost rectangular, one belonging to a woman and the other to a man. In fact, six of these eight graves were occupied by men, one by a woman and for one no data was available.

Almost all these bodies had been wrapped in matting, the one occupying the largest tomb with an unusual amount of it; they had also been buried with skins, pots, flints, palettes and/or shells. Some of the bodies had been given further special treatment because twigs and sticks were found underneath and over the bodies or at their sides, probably in an early attempt at providing the dead with some sort of a coffin. It is also noticeable that the average extant wealth or funerary endowment for these eight graves was almost three objects per tomb, i.e. twice as much as the area average of just 1.5 objects.

Tomb 2019 was roughly rectangular, was almost three times larger than the average, and belonged to a man who had been buried in the manner described above - but this grave had a peculiar feature: five deep holes were found in the ground which were probably meant to support roofing poles indicating some type of superstructure. Thus, we are perhaps in the presence here of the tomb belonging to a village headman, as could also very well be the case with the other large graves in this cluster of inhumations, the female buried nearby being most likely a close relative to one of them.

The Amratian

Since no later Predynastic or Protodynastic settlements were found by Guy Brunton at Matmar, I will confine my study to the cemeteries of these periods that he brought to light in this locality. Among the Amratian graves found here, a few were remarkable for several reasons. Tomb 2716 was the largest with almost

three times the average size for this period at Matmar. It was rectangular, was occupied by a man and had its sides lined with matting and boards, in a probable attempt to provide a coffin for the deceased. The fact that it had been thoroughly robbed may perhaps account for the lack of special items found in other remarkable although smaller Amratian graves at Matmar. Two other men were also found here buried in oval tombs of roughly similar size, a little larger than the local Amratian average, namely numbers 2666 and 2681. In the first grave, which was found intact, besides several pots three fine flint knives of the common curved type were found as well as another one of the fish-tail variety. The second grave, which had been disturbed, was lined with matting and contained part of an ivory comb, three pots and an incised ivory pendant.

In two other graves, 2646 and 2717, both oval and disturbed, a woman and a small child had been buried together in each tomb. The first one was large, about twice as large as the period average at Matmar and sticks had been placed above and below the bodies; the pottery included a decorated cross-lined bowl and another one decorated with a hippopotamus and crocodile in relief around the rim. Two ivory amulets and a small ivory bangle which had probably belonged to a child, were also found. The second grave had been badly plundered and was a little smaller than the Amratian average here but contained, however, no less than fourteen pots, five of which were cross-lined decorated. The characteristics of these graves place them in a group apart from other contemporary burials and, again, would point to prominent members of their community and to their wives and children as their occupants.

The Gerzean

The largest Gerzean tomb (3072) was rectangular in shape and had a volume of about 11 cubic metres. It had been disturbed and wooden planks covered its sides, perhaps acting as a coffin. Unfortunately, nothing could be established about its occupant. The second largest grave (3128) belonging to this period had also been disturbed, had a volume of almost 9 cubic metres and was occupied by a man buried in a wicker coffin. Curiously, a stout wooden box containing the skeleton of a dog had been placed inside this tomb which was found to be the richest Gerzean burial at Matmar. Among the objects found there, forty pots were the most prominent items; one of them was a wavy-handled jar.

Two men were also the occupants of the next largest disturbed grave (3074) which had a volume of just over 8 cubic metres. It was not a multiple burial but probably an example of a tomb that had been re-used. The lower body had been laid to rest over a bier made of sticks. A total of sixteen objects was found in the tomb, among them were several pots; one of them was decorated.

Two other not so large rectangular graves (3129 and 5105) were both

found disturbed. They had a volume of about 3.5 cubic metres each, both were occupied by a man and both had a large number of funerary offerings; among them was a wavy-handled pot, a pear-shaped alabaster mace-head, two palettes and two stone vases in the former burial and one stone vase and a decorated pot in the latter. Grave 3129 had been provided with a roof and remains of the poles that had supported the structure and of the holes where they had been placed were found in this tomb. A man was also the occupant of a disturbed rectangular tomb of unreported size (3126) from which 21 objects could be recovered, among them sixteen pots; one of them was a wavy-handled jar. This grave had also been roofed with sticks.

Another large, disturbed rectangular grave (3131) had a volume of almost 7 cubic metres, contained a coffin made of 2 cm. thick wooden planks and with many funerary offerings of which ten could be recovered. No remains of its occupant survived but an extraordinary object was brought to light from this grave: a large and heavy copper axe-head that had escaped the robbers' attention because it had been placed under the coffin. It was flat and had a sharp cutting edge.

Several women were also found in rich graves but in all cases but one they were buried in grave pits of smaller size than those occupied by men of possibly similar social status. One of them was buried in a well-cut rectangular tomb 3123, which was found disturbed but still contained eighteen object. Its size was 4.3 cubic metres and had been lined with wooden planks in what seemed to have been a sort of coffin to protect the body of its occupant - an adult woman. Among the objects assigned to this tomb, two ivory bangles, three carved ivory tags and two combs, besides several pots, a palette and other items could be recovered. A woman and a child were laid to rest in another disturbed grave (3111) which had a volume of over 3 cubic metres. It had been provided with a roof made of sticks.

Another woman was found buried alone in a rectangular, disturbed grave (3130) that had a volume of over 2 cubic metres. Among the fourteen objects that could still be found there, many pots were identified, one of them was a decorated vase and other was a wavy-handled jar. A similar tomb 5114, also occupied by a woman, which was rectangular, was disturbed and had a size of 1.6 cubic metre, well over the period average at Matmar. Many objects were recovered from this tomb, among them several pots, one of them decorated.

Finally, an old woman occupied the rather small intact tomb 3005, in which twelve objects were found including five pots and a bowl; a carved wooden rod was placed under one of her arms, but the most interesting item was a decorated pot. A child was buried alone in a small grave 3080 that was also found intact and had been favoured with eleven objects left as funerary offerings, among them a long slate palette, two copper awls and several pots; one of them was decorated.

The difference in size, shape and content of uncommon luxury items set the above tombs apart from the other Gerzean graves and also here they most probably indicate the presence of privileged members of the community to which they belonged.

The Protodynastic

The largest tombs belonging to this period were these of Nos. 224 and 239. Both had been plundered and no data could be recovered about their occupants but enough evidence survived to indicate that they were high status burials. The former grave had a volume of almost 4 cubic metres, its walls were lined with plastered bricks and two alabaster stone vases were its main content; six pots and other minor objects were also found in this grave. The latter grave had a volume of just over 5 cubic metres and although it had been thoroughly robbed of its contents, some beads and a bangle were spared.

Two other graves with unidentified occupant but also with special characteristics were these of Nos. 210 and 211. They both were larger than the Protodynastic average at Matmar, with a volume of just under 2 cubic metres and in both wooden coffins were found. Tomb 210 was intact and included seven pots, an alabaster bowl and other minor items. Tomb 211 had been robbed but a total of eight pots, three alabaster vases, two ivory hair pins, a slate palette and other small objects were recovered. Tomb 221 had also been disturbed, was much larger than the period average at Matmar with a volume of 2.26 cubic metres and the man that had been buried in it was placed in a wooden coffin. Among the funerary offerings that came down to us, three pots and a large slate palette are the most interesting.

A man was also buried in a wooden coffin in tomb 222 which had been robbed and was slightly larger than the period average at Matmar. Its walls were lined with mud-plastered bricks and many objects could still be found in this grave such as six pots, two alabaster stone vases and an ivory spoon. Another man was the occupant of tomb 213 for which no size information is available. It was a disturbed grave, its walls had been lined with mud-plastered bricks and the body was found in a wooden coffin. Six pots and an alabaster saucer were some of the items found therein. Tomb 1065 was also found disturbed, its size was more than twice the period average at Matmar with a volume of just over 3 cubic metres and belonged to an adult woman who was buried in a wooden coffin. Five pots and a bone needle could still be recovered and were part of the original funerary endowment.

In tomb 236, also disturbed and larger than average at almost two cubic metres, another woman was found buried with an assortment of items such as six pots, an alabaster vase, an ivory bangle and a strange flat alabaster object carved at intervals for all its length with a succession of wide notches going from side to

side. The grave originally had a roof supported by poles. An intact tomb of average size, No. 218, contained a pottery coffin in which a woman had been buried. Also present were seven pots (some found inside the coffin, some placed outside it), a long slate palette and several beads. A woman was also the occupant of tomb No. 235, smaller than average but endowed with a wooden coffin made of 1.5 cm thick boards, six pots, a shell bangle and a few beads.

Sub-adults for whom special funerary arrangements had been made were also present in this cemetery. In the intact tomb No. 229, of slightly less than average size, a possibly thirteen year old child was buried in a wooden coffin and with four pots, two ivory pins and a slate palette, besides the usual beads. A roof supported by poles had been provided for this grave. Another child was found in the intact tomb No. 232 which was smaller, less than a cubic metre in size, but which contained one pot, five tortoise-shell bracelets, a slate palette and beads.

Summary

The tombs discussed above were selected mainly because of their size or their wealth in funerary goods but other aspects such as elaborate construction or the presence of luxury items were also taken into consideration.

I am personally very reluctant to accept the principle implicit in some recent publications in which rare or less frequent items in graves were probably more valued by the ancient population (Bard 1994:62, 64). The possible reasons for objects being less frequent are many and not necessarily because they were seen as valuable so that such a criterion - unless it is supported by other relevant evidence such as their repeated association with remarkably large or rich tombs, or the effort its manufacture demanded, or a special value attached to it throughout ancient times and duly recorded in written sources - is not particularly convincing. These tombs clearly differ from the mass of small and poorly endowed contemporary graves situated around them and we will see below to what an extent this was true for each period and how their conditions changed over time.

It is regrettable that Guy Brunton provided just two detailed maps of some of these cemetery areas which prevents us from making a better evaluation of the spatial distribution of graves and their possible shift through time (Brunton 1948: Pl. XIX, XLV). I would also like to emphasize that the conclusions I will be drawing from these sites apply only to a marginal area of Upper Egyptian Predynastic development and do not necessarily imply that the situation here can be extrapolated to represent conditions elsewhere. In my opinion, chronological breakdown per period is feasible in the case of large cemeteries where each subperiod is represented by a substantial number of graves from which statistically valid conclusions can be drawn. As we can see, such a procedure if used for small cemeteries or for incompletely published ones leads to an excessive fragmentation of the data on which no firm conclusions can be based.

Concerning the size of the six Badarian graves I selected as revealing the higher status of their occupants, a wide gap separate them from the other contemporary tombs. The smallest of the group of large burials (1.68 cubic metres) was almost twice as large as the next cluster of five graves which hardly exceeded the size average for this period. Needless to say, an even wider gap separate the size of those six tombs from all the others ranging from between 0.07 and 0.6 cubic metres. As I mentioned above, the average number of objects found in those six large tombs was about twice the period average here, in spite of the fact that all but one had been robbed. This difference becomes even more remarkable if we bear in mind that the majority of the smaller graves were found intact. Also, and with only one exception, it is in the group of six larger graves that we find evidence of more elaborate burial arrangements such as layers of twigs or sticks under and above the body or at the sides and even - in one case - holes in the ground where poles were inserted, probably to support a roof of some kind (Brunton 1928:18; 1937:43).

The Amratian is poorly represented at Matmar but reveals nevertheless a dramatic jump in the number of objects left in the tombs as funerary offerings. The size of the tomb does not, however, indicate a corresponding jump beyond the slight increase mentioned in our introductory remarks. Five in twenty-four graves, to which we might add a sixth (3075), were found robbed and without an identifiable occupant but with a volume of almost 2 cubic metres and as many as twenty-one objects. The fact that some big and/or rich graves were clearly different from the other Amratian burials is made obvious by their average size, 1.4 cubic metres, compared to 0.54 cubic metre for all the rest. Likewise, the number of objects found in this small group of graves and in the other Amratian burials also show a remarkable difference. In the former group an average of 13.2 objects contrasts with just 4.3 for all the others. Because most of these tombs in either case had been robbed, these figures are comparable. In addition to that, we can appreciate in the largest grave here the first attempt at providing the deceased with a proper wooden coffin revealed by the presence of boards on the sides (wooden coffins were apparently not found at Badari and definitely not at Mostagedda before the Protodynastic period; cf. Brunton 1928:53; 1937:82).

In another of the large graves we can verify the continuity with the Badarian practice of placing sticks above and under the body as a simple attempt to protect it beyond the usual wrapping made of mats. The larger number of objects found in the tombs, the appearance of decorated pottery and of wooden coffins and the presence of fine flint implements underline some of the cultural progress brought about by the Amratian and expressed in these cemeteries near Matmar. The Gerzean reveals, on the other hand, what is probably the peak of expression of Predynastic social development in this area.

Out of 134 tombs belonging to this period, 13 stand out as remarkable graves because of their size or their wealth in funerary offerings, or because of both these factors occurring together. Their average size of 4.3 cubic metres and average wealth in objects of 14.5 pieces - in spite of the fact that most of them had been robbed, put them several times above the mass of other less remarkable Gerzean tombs. The sheer size of some of these Gerzean tombs is imposing at about 9 and 11 cubic metres, the largest Predynastic burials in the Matmar area.

Matting progressively disappeared from the tombs. Wooden coffins became more common among the occupants of these larger and better endowed graves, as well as stone vases, fine flint implements, mace-heads, large metal objects such as the superb axe-head which escaped the robbers' attention (Brunton 1948:20-21). The most prominent of these graves was the very large grave No. 3128 which must have belonged to a very important man in his community. In spite of the fact that it had been disturbed, as many as forty pots were found in it. The occupant chose to be buried in a wicker coffin, reserving for a dog - probably his prized possession - a proper wooden coffin made of thick boards.

The practice of providing some of these tombs with a superstructure of supporting poles and probably one or more layers of twigs or sticks on top which started in the Badarian, continued in the Gerzean and is well attested in several of the more remarkable graves.

In the Protodynastic cemeteries I identified thirteen graves which stood out from the rest of the burials because of their size, lavish endowment or construction. As a group, although they are clearly different from the other contemporary tombs, this is not so marked as in the previous period. The average size of these burials is 2.2 cubic metres (tomb 102 was dated by G. Brunton to the Archaic period, in fact to the Dynasties II-III; it had a volume of ca 8 cubic metres. I do not included this burial to the Protodynastic graves) and their average content in funerary offerings was 10.4 objects which although higher, is not so dramatic. The latter figure is comparable to that of the whole Protodynastic at Matmar because the ratio intact to violated tombs was similar for both.

Some of these larger and/or richer Protodynastic graves were lined with bricks which had been plastered or covered with a layer of mud, but the same treatment was applied to other not so prominent graves. The same applies to a small chamber or *loculus* usually dug on the east side of the grave (Brunton 1948: 26). Wooden coffins became more common in the Protodynastic and the ancient practice of providing some graves with poles to support a roof could still be identified in some of the tombs. Stone vases became more common, especially in the more remarkable graves.

The greater care and special features shown in the construction of some of the Protodynastic tombs do not hide the fact that many had not been carefully

shaped and resembled the ancient rough ovals of previous periods (Brunton 1948:26). The progress we can appreciate in the life of the contemporary population and which was expressed in their cemeteries seems more the product of an overall development rather than arising from and stimulated by local conditions. These also do not show a more marked social differentiation.

Finally, the general impression these Predynastic cemeteries convey is one of continuous evolution without any noticeable break in the funerary customs, beyond the not entirely unexpected variations occurring due to the technological and social progress made in these periods and to the enhanced or diminished Predynastic human presence in the area of Matmar at different times. Results of this study, especially these indicating a decline in social differentiation in Protodynastic times at Matmar seem to agree well with the recent research on the subject which uses a different methodological approach (Wilkinson 1996:47-49, 75).

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