

## Neolithic and Predynastic in the Fayum

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In 1966 - 1968 Professor Salvatore M. Puglisi, director of the Institute of Palaeoethnology, University of Rome, carried out a survey in the Fayum Depression. The surveyed area is located to the north-east of the present-day lake, the Birket Qarun, and was previously studied by Caton-Thompson and Gardner (1934). In the course of their field-work the remains of what was thought to be a chain of Neolithic villages situated along the ancient shores of the lake were found: subsequently, several Neolithic and Predynastic implements in some mixed concentrations near Qasr el Sagha, on the north-western shore of the Birket Qarun lake were discovered. This locality yielded also the Early Dynastic (Protodynastic) sites. Caton-Thompson recorded several of these concentrations and, on the basis of their vertical and horizontal stratigraphy, constructed a picture of the cultural sequence in this area.

The geomorphology of the Depression had also been studied by Sandford and Arkell (1929) and Butzer and Hansen (1968). All these studies turned out to be indispensable for the altimetrical and topographical localisation of the sites in the north-eastern part of the Depression alternated by large, flat plains. In summary, in the course of earlier field-work, a large amount of archaeological material was collected from surface concentrations in several areas. As regards its typology, the material could be classified to Lower and Middle Palaeolithic, Epipalaeolithic, Neolithic A, Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom times.

During the Italian survey in 1966 - 1968, the Fayum A, Predynastic and Early Dynastic surface materials were collected in several localities. Some of these were small, other seem to have been large. The occupation debris of these sites was composed of animal bones, lithic artifacts and pottery sherds (Fig. 1) which were found lying scattered on the sandy surface of the sites. These sites seem to have formed a series of villages, "ateliers" and camping places situated along the shoreline of the present-day lake.

The sites which are the subject of this paper are situated on the northern edge of the Fayum Depression and on the northeastern side of the shores of the present-day



FIG. 1. Concentrations of surface materials

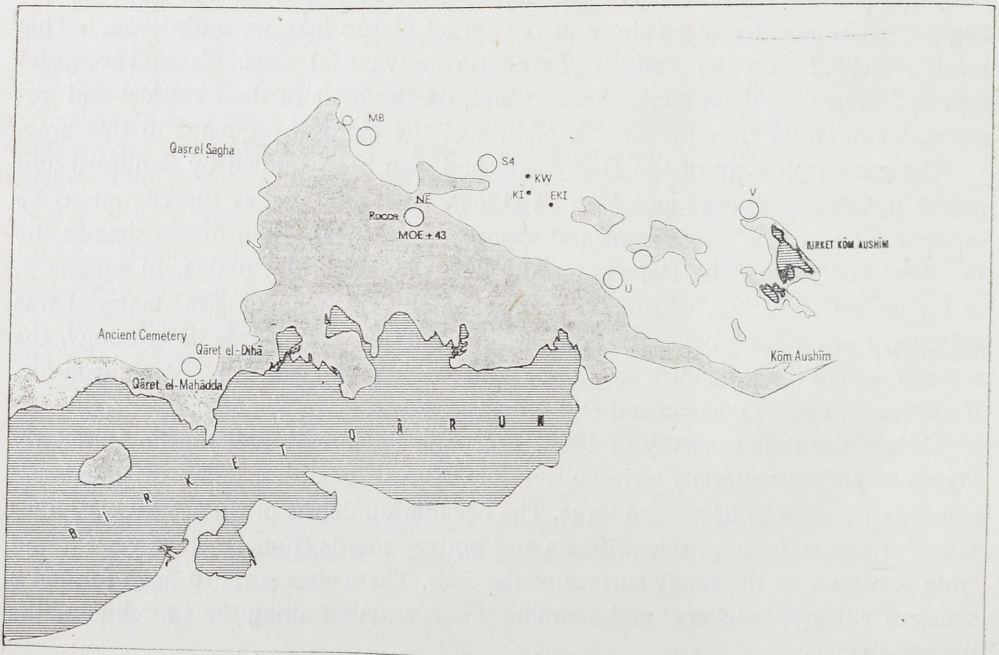


FIG. 2. Map of the sites located in the northern part of the Fayum Depression and in the north-eastern section of the shore-line of the present-day lake



FIG. 3. Drills of Early Dynastic age found near Qasr es-Sagha

lake. They are numbered by the following abbreviations: K-I, EK-I, EEK-I, SS-4 and SES-4 (Fig. 2). Near Qasr el Sagha several drills of Early Dynastic chronology have also been found (Fig. 3).

The Neolithic A sites yielded such typical implements as arrow-heads with concave base and sickle blades. The Predynastic sites yielded saws, bifacial knives and fish-tailed points worked all-over with the shallow retouche commonly known as ripple-flaking, typical technique and implement of the Naqada period (Fig. 4).

As all archaeological materials found in the course of the Italian field-work were surface collected, we do not have evidence on vertical stratigraphy of the respective sites. It seems, therefore, that only a comparison of their contents with the

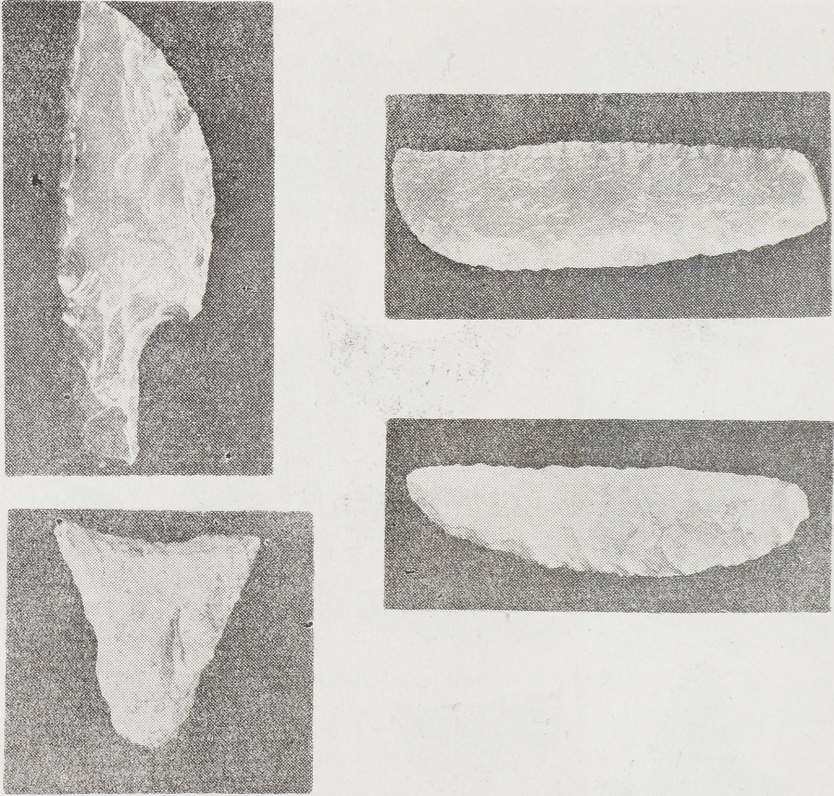


FIG. 4. Bifacial flint implements, typical for the Naqada times. Surface finds from the northern edge of Birket Qârun

artifacts from the Egyptian Nile Valley could shed light on their chronology and cultural context.

The occurrence of mixed assemblages of objects belonging to different facies within the same eroded sites in the Fayum may be explained as a result of an overlapping of original stratigraphy and the subsequent action of the wind which blew off the sand interposed between the different layers.

The studies on the archaeological assemblages found in the course of the Italian survey indicate the presence of a substrate of hunters-fishers-gatherers which preceded the groups of farmers in the Fayum. This, and the changing environmental conditions, which certainly affected the development of the Fayum human groups, lead to the following conclusion: the Fayum A culture can no longer be considered the result of the immigration of alien peoples (Arkell and Ucko, 1965) but as an effect of a process of local evolution and gradual cultural specialization in the course of which the indigenious food-gathering social groups were adapting to the new environmental conditions (Puglisi, 1967).

It is worth adding that several Neolithic A sites are situated about 60 m above the sea-level in the Depression, *i.e.* near the Neolithic shore-line. These sites seem to be the remains of villages whose economy must have depended heavily on water abundance, necessary for agriculture. This situation can also be found in subsequent cultural development in the Fayum.

The presently known Fayum evidence seems to indicate a need for the use of a more general terminology than the traditional one referring to only aspects of the cultural development (Petrie, 1939; Massouard, 1949; Baumgartel, 1955). It seems that some ideas in this respect come from various cultural features evident in the examined assemblages.

The mixed plant cultivation-pastoralism and the hunting-fishing-collecting economy is well reflected in the stone tool kit of the Fayum A sites; this and other traits show the characteristics of a typical Neolithic society. The idea, put forward recently by Wenke (1980), seems worth quoting here: "in the Fayum region in the mid-fifth millennium B.P. peoples were living along the lake shores, subsisting primarily on fishing-hunting and gathering, but also growing grains, which they stored in silos. They also made artifacts from flint, bone and pottery. At the same time settlers in the Delta had essentially the same subsistence basis and technological skills, but were culturally distinct. In Upper Egypt the people of Naqada culture made some advances in stoneworking and other arts and crafts, but the economic and subsistence base probably remained much the same with hunting, gathering and pastoralism".

It seems that in the light of the development of the ecological conditions in the Fayum area, we can regard the local agricultural culture contemporary to the Predynastic (Naqada I - II) period in the Egyptian Nile Valley as the stage of the development of the Fayum Neolithic society and, therefore, a later phase of the Fayum Neolithic culture.

Butzer (1976) thinks that the bifacial knives and concave-based arrowheads of the Fayum A linked to Merimde are macrolithic and quite distinct from all microlithic traditions in the Nile Valley, both on technological and typological grounds. Butzer upholds an interusive origin of the Neolithic and Predynastic, involving migration rather than trait diffusion or local innovation; he believes that the new groups involved were North African, coming from the oases of the northern Libyan Desert or further west in the Sahara or along the Mediterranean littoral. As the Fayum A economy included strong hunting, fishing and gathering components, Butzer thinks that this points to a subsistence pattern already preadapted ecologically to riverine, lacustrine or spring oases, much like the previous Nile Valley culture had been.

An analytical study of all the materials coming from the Fayum area will certainly suggest a complete reconstruction of the agricultural societies of the Fayum depression from Epipalaeolithic to Early Dynastic times and its evolution.



**References**

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