

# The Late Predynastic cemetery at Elkab (Upper Egypt)

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During the 1968 campaign of the Belgian Archaeological Mission at Elkab (Upper Egypt), Professor P. M. Vermeersch, while excavating his recently published Epipalaeolithic Elkabian, found a number of intrusive late predynastic tombs (Vermeersch, 1978). The excavation of this cemetery was finished by the Belgian Mission during the 1977 - 80 seasons.

The site is situated within the great enclosure wall of the dynastic Elkab, in the area F85--G00/G50-75 (Depuydt and Vermeersch, 1972). In total, the cemetery yielded some 100 tombs, out of which only 25 were undisturbed. Originally the cemetery must have been larger, since Quibell too excavated a number of late predynastic tombs within the enclosure wall of Elkab in 1897 (Quibell, 1898). The exact location of these tombs was not given by him but it is highly possible that they were located in the immediate neighbourhood of our excavation<sup>1</sup>.

Typologically, the cemetery can be placed within Petrie's S. D. 65 - 81, or Kaiser's Stufe III A1-B (Petrie, 1920; Kaiser, 1957). However, since the Petrie system is highly doubtful nowadays, without trying to attack the original value of the S. D. (the Kaiser system is also largely based on it), we can not consider this as definitive results.

## 1. General description of the cemetery

The tombs have the normal predynastic orientation, SE — NW, parallel to the direction of the Nile at Elkab. The skeletons always lie on the left side, in a contracted position, facing the west, arms bent in front of the chest, but the degree of contraction is slightly different.

<sup>1</sup> There is a fragmentary list of 19 tombs with their grave contents in his publication which seem to belong to the same group of tombs as those considered here. Quibell also mentions a number of plundered early predynastic tombs, „well outside the town, on the west side of the railway...” (Quibell, 1898).



As regards the tomb construction, a division into two kinds of tombs can clearly be made (cf. also Krzyżaniak, 1977: 156). The first and the most numerous group, 21 out of 25 undisturbed tombs, and nearly all the disturbed ones, are simple pits, without any further indication of construction. The second group consists of tombs where the construction is reinforced by means of large, unworked, sandstone slabs.

The distribution of the grave goods within the first group of tombs has the general outline, well known in Upper Egyptian predynastic burial areas. The large storage jars stand around the feet, whereas the smaller jars and bowls are situated before the chest and around the head. The most precious grave goods such as slate palettes, stone vessels and spoons are generally placed between the face and the hands.

In the small second group, the tombs are all different from one another. They seem to have only one common trait: the grave goods and the deceased are as much as possible separated from one another. Following is a short description of the most interesting tombs of this group:

#### **Tomb 50**

This tomb was partly disturbed but the construction was clearly evident. A slope led to the burial chamber proper. This burial chamber was a niche dug out from the slope and separated from it by a sandstone slab. The grave goods were situated at the end of the slope, towards the sandstone slab and had been partially disturbed, but the burial chamber had not been touched and there were no grave gifts at all near the skeleton.

#### **Tomb 65**

Here the skeleton was laying in a grave pit and the grave goods were placed separately in a niche on the southern side of the tomb. One side of the grave pit was lined with a sandstone slab and another slab covered the niche with grave goods. Once more, no objects were situated around the skeleton.

#### **Tomb 76**

This tomb was clearly the richest one found at Elkab. The grave pit of 2.5 × 1.2 m was entirely covered by four sandstone slabs. The objects were so numerous that there was no separation between them and the body. The skeleton was even lying on the grave goods. There were 50 pottery vessels of different types, 8 stone vessels and 2 slate palettes. A spoon, a small vessel and four hairpins, all of bone and a necklace of beads of different hard stones were also found here.

All these tombs belong to relatively old male adults, except the richest one of all, tomb 76, which belongs to a rather young male adult. Following the traditional vessel typology of Petrie these tombs are the youngest in the Elkab cemetery and can be dated to S. D. 78 - 81. So, we can well see at this cemetery the link between the predynastic pit burials and the Old Kingdom burials with a separated shaft.



Remarkable at Elkab are the several multiple burials. In general, this custom assumed to have disappeared towards the end of predynastic times. At Elkab, however, there were at least 10 multiple burials. Since the deceased were buried at the same time, family burials are highly unlikely. Despite the study of the human remains from these tombs their interpretation is inexplicable (Van Rossum, 1980). This is because the soil in the tombs contains a great amount of salt which disintegrated the skeletons thus making the determination of their age and sex almost impossible. We can only say that there are no tombs of children under 3 years of age at Elkab and that this fact is compatible with the general conclusions reached by Masali and Chiarelli (1972).

## 2. Grave goods

The contents of the graves consisted mostly of pottery although a number of stone vessels, palettes, pearls etc. were also found. The pottery is a particularly interesting feature since research on predynastic times has mostly been based on its typology (Petrie, 1921; Kaiser, 1957). Although the form of these ceramics is well known, no appropriate research has been made on their material and manufacturing. The attempt made at Armant (Mond and Myers, 1937) remained unfollowed. In this paper, a descriptive system and a typological list following the criteria used by Nordström (1973) will be used. This means that an attempt has also to be undertaken to distinguish the differences in raws and pottery technology.

In traditional terms, the most frequent pottery types at Elkab belong to Petrie's Late series. Very common are the large storage jars of L 36 (hard pink ware, limestone tempered) and L 31 families (coarse brown ware, straw tempered). Nearly every tomb contained one or more pieces of these families. The so-called Wavy Handle pottery is also frequently represented. In the Elkab serie we find types ranging from Petrie's W 46 to 80; nearly all of them are made of hard pink ware, often with a white wash. In addition, there is an important series of different bowl types (both in hard pink and coarse brown ware) and other small vessels. There is only a small quantity of decorated pottery but none has figural decoration. Here the most frequent type is W 62, with a line pattern imitating basketwork. A great number of these vessels were fairly or completely worn-out when buried.

The pottery vessels at Elkab did not contain foodstuffs or any other materials with the exception of two small bowls in tomb 76 which contained raw copper. All the other vessels were filled with different kinds of earth. In an attempt to understand the original function of the different pottery types, these contents are under study. But it already seems evident that they do not parallel with the grave filling. A possible explanation was made by Scharff on his excavations at Abusir el Meleq (Scharff, 1926: 14), when he presumed that a kind of "Ersatz"-filling was buried in the vessels instead of real foodstuffs.



Nearly every tomb contains a palette, sometimes even two. They are of different material, quality and measures. The simplest forms are just unworked pieces of quartz. The worked ones are all made of "slate" (in fact, greywacke). Simple rectangular and oval shapes are the most common palette types. A fish-shaped and two double-bird-head palettes are rare forms. On some of these palettes traces of the original pigment were still present and two of them, examined by C. Traunecker (of Centre Franco - Egyptien des Temples de Karnak, Laboratoire de Technologie), appeared to be malachite. In tomb 56, an unfinished palette of greywacke was found together with a quartz hammerstone unquestionably used for shaping. This palette is nearly triangular and it could very well be an unfinished double-bird-head form; only the first phase has been here finished, the shaping was made from the exterior towards the interior, somewhat in the way a Palaeolithic handaxe is shaped; afterwards the sides were reworked. The final shaping and polishing never took place.

The presence of stone vessels was limited to the richest tombs, where there are always more than one of these items. The most popular raw material is alabaster (calcite), but limestone was also frequently used. The type differentiation is rather extensive; there are large, flattened, unrestricted bowls, smaller restricted bowls, small vessels and two stone imitations of cylindrical Wavy Handle types. All these stone vessels were imported to Elkab since neither alabaster nor good limestone can be found in the area.

Bone (not yet determined) was used for the fabrication of bracelets, hairpins, spoons and, in one case, a small vessel. The presence of worked bone was in most cases correlated with the presence of stone vessels. On the partially disturbed body of a child in tomb 46, 19 small bracelets were grouped on the lower arms. A small bone vessel decorated with a cross line pattern on the body was found in the important tomb 76. A rather large collection of beads of different types and materials was also found. Most common were small, flat limestone beads but larger cylinders and other forms in different kinds of stone were also frequently present. Several kinds of shell (not yet determined) were also used for this purpose. No flint implements have been found in these tombs.

It seems that the social differentiation of this population is illustrated by the difference in number and luxury of the goods occurring in graves. The presence of rich tombs mostly belonging to old male adults (in one case also to a younger man), fits well into the picture of the class stratified society in its definitive stage of formation as proposed by Krzyżaniak (1977).

### 3. Conclusions

According to the traditional typological systems, the Elkab cemetery can be placed between S. D. 65 and 81, or Stufe III A1 - B. A C14 date (Lv-1035), made on a char coal sample found in a vessel from the undisturbed tomb 67, gave an (uncorrected).



date of  $4,490 \pm 60$  B. P. Another date (Lv-1050 D),  $3,910 \pm 210$  B. P. on charcoal, was obtained for tomb 46. Further dates are being processed.

The time during which the cemetery of Elkab was used is not therefore easy to establish since the only dating possibilities we have is Petrie's S. D. system. According to Kantor (1965), the sequences of the final predynastic periods are much more restricted in time than those in the initial and middle phase of this period. Due to the fact that Petrie's system is based on only a limited number of tombs found in a much larger graveyard at Naqada and the absence of absolute datings, the value of time that has to be given to every sequence remains disputable.

A serious obstacle for estimating the importance of the Elkab settlement is the fact that the information about the exact number of inhumations is lacking. The cemetery is severely damaged and the results of the Quibell excavations are almost entirely unknown.

It is difficult to say that the area of Elkab was only inhabited in the late predynastic times although, until now, no undisturbed tombs of earlier periods seem to have survived. However, sherds of older pottery (Black Topped, Red Polished) and even some rippled Badarian sherds have been found scattered over the surface within the circular wall of dynastic Elkab — an area completely destroyed by seabkh diggers — and also outside the wall, near the NE corner (Vermeersch, 1978: 144). So, it seems that Elkab may have been inhabited through the whole of the predynastic period. No trace of the settlement related to the cemetery, however, has been found though it is possible that it is situated below the alluvial plain (Butzer, 1959: 49).

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