

## Terminal prehistory of the Nile Delta: theses

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So far, in presenting the general outline of Egyptian prehistory, the Nile Delta — the whole area north of Cairo — has played an insignificant part, because except for the Neolithic site of Merimde Beni Salama, no representative archaeological sites in this region were known and no systematic field research on the prehistory of the Delta was carried out.

Actually, the research of Werner Kaiser has shown as early as the fifties that a prehistoric settlement of the Delta should be taken into account; and the considerations on the history of religion carried out by Kurt Sethe already at the beginning of our century succeeded to disclose that the great religious centres of the Delta in historical times, Buto and Sais, should have gained their overregional significance already in the prehistoric period.

Archaeological research on the terminal prehistory of the Delta began with chance finds which appeared around 1950 in the art trade and found their way partly to the Egyptian museums (Cairo, Ismailia), and partly to the foreign collections (Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Staatliche Sammlung Ägyptischer Kunst in Munich). On the East Delta sites of Beni Amr, east of Zagazig and Tell Aga (Kufur Nigm/Khudiriya), north of Abu Kebir, known from objects in the art market, the Egyptian Antiquities Organization undertook test excavations in 1961/62 and in 1978. Their results remain unpublished but they prove, at any rate, that the presence of significant prehistoric find complexes in the eastern Delta can be taken into consideration.

The third area of provenience of prehistoric finds in the Eastern Delta known from the art market was located by a mission of Staatliche Sammlung Ägyptischer Kunst in Munich in 1966. North of the modern village of Minshat Abu Omar, ca 30 km NE of the modern town Faqus and 15 km SE of the famous archaeological site Tanis (San el-Hagar), the Tell es-Sabaa Banat conceals a cemetery which was used between Nagada II and the First Dynasty, ca 3,300 - 2,900 B.C. and then, after a total lack of finds of ca 3,000 years, again in the Roman Period.



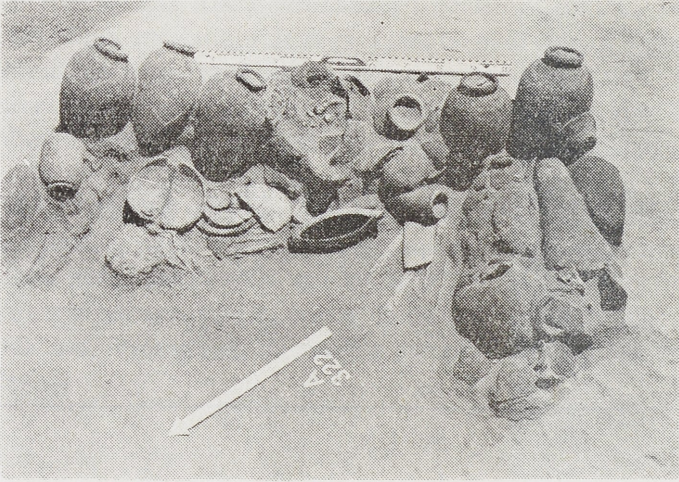


FIG. 1. Minshat Abu Omar. Late Predynastic grave No. 322 containing rich furnishing



FIG. 2. Minshat Abu Omar. Model of a papyrus boat made of calcite found in grave No. 322

During systematic excavations since 1978 which should continue until *ca* 1985, 205 prehistoric and protodynastic graves have been discovered. They are simple pit graves in the homogenous sand of the mound, which rises to 3 metres over the level of the surrounding fields. No overground structures are preserved. Skeletons lay in a contracted position, with head oriented to the north or north-east, mainly on the right side, facing westwards, and less frequently on the left side, facing eastwards (Fig. 1).



Grave goods include pottery, stone vessels and models (Fig. 2), copper tools, adornments and palettes, rarely flint tools (Fig. 3). Pottery with the exception of B-vessels (Black Topped) and C-vessels (White Cross-Lined), consists of all types of the predynastic vessels with a predominance of R (Rough Faced) and P (Polished). Particularly remarkable are the D-vessels (Decorated) with representations of ships

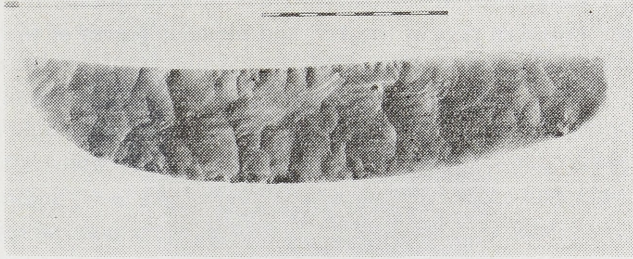


FIG. 3. Minshat Abu Omar. Bifacially worked flint knife from grave No. 761 (scale in cms)

(Fig. 4) and spiral motives (Fig. 5) as well as P-vessels with engraved names of kings, which can be interpreted as Horus Scorpion (or Aha) and Horus Narmer (?). Both kinds of pottery span the extreme points of time: D-vessels – Nagada IIa/b and P-vessels – „0” Dynasty, an uninterrupted sequence of pottery, which proves the continuous use of the cemetery during the Nagada II, Nagada III, “0” Dynasty periods until the First Dynasty. Continuous use of the cemetery – and uninterrupted occupation of the settlement belonging to it – is particularly indicated by the pottery of the W-type (Wavy Handled), which ranges from the earliest Nagada II-type – bulged, with deeply set and broadly protruding wavy handles through the slightly bulged conical forms – to the cylindrical vessels with cord ornament, so that it reaches a direct adjacency with the early historic pottery.

A set of stone vessels proves the validity of this picture of the continuous use of the settlement and the cemetery. From simple forms of beakers to thin-walled cylinders, the most important forms of the hard-stone and calcite vessels known from other sites are present.

Close analogies in pottery and stone vessels from Minshat Abu Omar with the materials of the Middle and Upper Egyptian sites leave no doubt that Tell es-Sabaa Banat was occupied by a purely Egyptian population. On the other hand, one group of pottery finds proves contacts with Palestine. The earliest vessels with wavy handles from Minshat Abu Omar have a sharp edge – a feature characteristic for the Early Bronze Age I in Palestine, in contrast to the thickened edges of the Egyptian W-vessels. The raw material of the vessels formally assigned to Palestine differs clearly by its sandy structure and its orange-red colour from the clay of the Egyptian vessels which are made of marl clay or of Nile mud.



The total number of the prehistoric and early historic graves from Minshat Abu Omar can be structured chronologically. One early group from Nagada II includes shallow grave pits with few goods (R and W, plus D), situated in the southern part of the cemetery. The middle group, in the central part of the Tell, consists of graves of ca 1 m deep, with Nagada III-pottery and copper objects; the number of grave goods rises distinctly, and the density of the use of cemetery is smaller. The later group was first distinguished at the current stage of excavations. It lies deep in the severely damaged northern part of the Tell and includes graves of the protodynastic

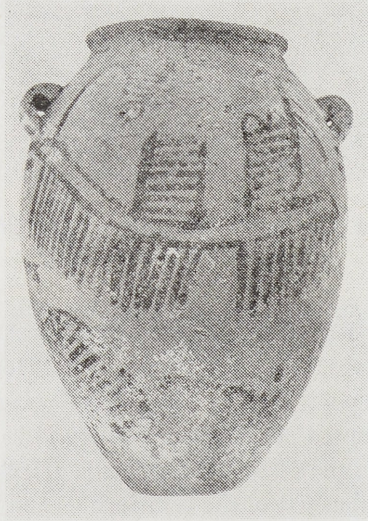


FIG. 4. Minshat Abu Omar. Painted pottery vessel from grave No. 757



FIG. 5. Minshat Abu Omar. Painted pottery vessel from grave No. 750



period with exceptionally fine stone vessels and with types of pottery which on other sites are dated back to the Third Dynasty. On the southern edge of this latest cemetery, in the transitory zone to the middle group, vessels with kings' names have been found.

A preliminary evaluation of the excavation results leads to the following conclusions:

1. Tell es-Sabaa Banat was occupied about 3,300 B.C. by an Egyptian population living there until ca 2,900 B.C.
2. There is no indication of military conflicts in this region. The area lays culturally within the limits of the Egyptian territory.
3. The geographic position on the eastern bank of the former Pelusian arm of the Nile, directly south of its outlet into the Mensaleh Lake, made Tell es-Sabaa Banat a landing point for ships arriving from Palestine and a port of departure for the Egyptian missions to Palestine and the Middle East.
4. The prehistoric settlement on the Tell es-Sabaa Banat functioned as a reloading port between Egypt and Palestine.

For Egyptian prehistory this means that there was never a real "unification" in the sense of the final subjugation of the Delta and its neighbouring areas under the dominance of the king of Upper Egypt — as it is represented, for example, on the Narmer Palette. We should be much more prepared to accept the idea of a continuous cultural evolution of Egypt, which included the Delta as early as 3,300 B.C.

The rise of the Egyptian state occurred at least from Nagada III as a broad-range evolution in the whole area of the later Kingdom and it seems to have been carried out harmoniously, without any major conflicts.

The representations of the "victory" of the Upper Egyptian king over his "enemies", for example on the Narmer Palette, are the heraldic fixation of the situation reached in ca 3,100 B.C., not a historical report of an authentic conquest of foreign "enemies" or internal "rebels".

The alleged "cultural explosion" of Egypt in ca 3,100 B.C. with the foundation of the state, "discovery" of writing, and canonization of arts did not take place. In Egypt, too, the "higher culture" developed in a long, organic process of evolution, which already in Nagada II and Nagada III covered the whole of Egypt, including the Nile Delta, and found its end several generations before the fictitious unification of the Kingdom. What is for us historically legible, are the very latest phases of a long-term, natural growth.

Further information can be expected not only from the next seasons of excavations on the Tell es-Sabaa Banat, but also from the adjacently planned research of settlements at Tell Samara and Tell Aga (Kufur Nigm/Khudiriya), which, during the survey carried out in 1981/1982 yielded large quantities of flint tools and settlement pottery. Particularly Kufur Nigm/Khudiriya (nowadays called Tell Aga), of an area of 400 × 400 metres, and ca. 3 metres of undisturbed stratigraphy of Nagada II until the end of the Old Kingdom, promises good results.