

Juan J. Castillos

## **Egyptian Predynastic cemetery research**

---

The subject of my paper for this Symposium - a study of some aspects of the predynastic cemeteries at Badari - was recently published elsewhere (Castillos 2000). What follows here is then only a summary of the main points I had made in that paper as well as a statement of intention about future work on this subject that we agreed to carry on during the last session of this meeting.

As a result of my study I have found that the predynastic social evolution in the Badari area differed from that of the neighbouring contemporary communities of Mostagedda and Matmar, mainly by the development of a more stratified society which is revealed by the funerary archaeological record.

In the Badari section of the Nile valley the social inequality emerging from our figures for both size and wealth of the tombs, appears to have peaked during the Badarian culture and declined in the following Predynastic periods (Nagada I and II) to rise back to the Badarian level during the Protodynastic (Nagada III).

The Badari area also seems to indicate the existence of a major centre of the Badarian culture which had negatively affected the subsequent cultural development, while in, e. g., the Mostagedda area no such centre had grown and this area seems to exhibit a steadily growing development throughout the whole Predynastic times.

When I became interested in the Predynastic Egypt years ago, scholars - with very few exceptions - were still drawing conclusions based mostly on quite subjective estimations of certain features of the archaeological record ("descriptive hypothetical") (Bard 1994: 36) such as unusual tombs or objects found in them. This resulted in formulation of theories, which soon proved wrong (Castillos 1981: 105). A cornerstone of my studies was the assumption that a statistical evaluation of all adequately published Egyptian predynastic cemeteries

might provide a more consistent and reliable picture of social conditions in this time period. After building up a large data base of approximately over 6,000 (now about 8,000) Upper and Lower Egyptian tombs dated from Early Predynastic to Protodynastic period, I was rewarded with a number of firm and mutually supporting indicators of social and cultural change in the Predynastic Egypt (Castillos 1982; 1983; 1998a; 1998b). For instance, variations in the form of the tombs, their size (volume), their extant wealth in funerary objects, the drop in the number of subadults in the graves, the drastic and widespread change in body orientation, among other findings, indicate that there had been significant changes in the Predynastic Upper Egypt during Naqada I period. In spite of this, some authors continued to insist that the Badarian society as represented by their funerary practices was socially more stratified than our studies (as well as those of few others, e.g. Atzler 1981: 77) had indicated (Anderson 1992; Hoffman 1979), and this led me to carry out further work which eventually have confirmed my earlier conclusions.

In recent years some scholars have written explicitly or by omission on the apparent lack of a consistent guiding principle in the orientation of the predynastic Upper Egyptian tombs in their relationship to the course of the river (Adams 1988: 19; Bard 1994: 53). This has been done ignoring my work clearly showing an alignment of the main axis of the graves parallel to the local course of the Nile; this has also recently been confirmed by archaeological work carried out at El Kab (Hendrickx 1994: 149).

Having obtained such encouraging results in this preliminary quantitative study of the Egyptian Predynastic cemetery data, I have decided to concentrate on an adequately published area of Upper Egypt in order to try to detect the evolution of social inequality in this time period. In effect, the study made of the data originating from the Badari/Mostagedda/Matmar sections of the Nile valley produced a picture that reveals the probable changes that took place in each of these areas throughout the Predynastic period.

My intention in the future work is, on the one hand, to apply the method and experience I have gained in the studies of the social development to more important regions in Upper Egypt such as Abydos, Naqada and Hierakonpolis and, on the other hand, to test my results based on funerary data against these yielded by the settlements, of different rank; it is also my intension to consider the results of current archaeological work in Lower Egypt.

---

## References

- ADAMS, B. 1988. *Predynastic Egypt*, Princes Risborough.
- ANDERSON, W. 1992. Badarian burials: evidence of social inequality in Middle Egypt during the early Predynastic era. *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 29: 51-66.
- ATZLER, M. 1981. *Untersuchungen zur Herausbildung von Herrschaftsformen in Ägypten*. Hildesheim.
- BARD, K. 1994. *From Farmers to Pharaohs*. Sheffield:
- CASTILLOS, J. J. 1981. An analysis of the tombs in the Predynastic cemeteries at Naqada. *Journal of the Society for the Studies of Egyptian Antiquities* XI, 2, 97-106.
- ..... 1982. *A reappraisal of the published evidence on Predynastic and Early Dynastic cemeteries*. Toronto.
- ..... 1983. *A study of the spatial distribution of large and richly endowed tombs in Predynastic and Early Dynastic cemeteries*. Toronto.
- ..... 1998a. Tomb size distribution in Egyptian Predynastic cemeteries. *Discussions in Egyptology* 40: 51-65.
- ..... 1998b. Inequality in Egyptian Predynastic cemeteries. *Revue d'Égyptologie* 49: 25-36.
- ..... 2000. The Predynastic cemeteries at Badawi. *Revue d'Égyptologie* 51: 253-256.
- HENDRICKX, S. 1994. *El Kab V, the Naqada III cemetery*. Brussels.
- HOFFMAN, M. 1979. *Egypt before the Pharaohs*. New York.