

Preface

In Search of the Origins of Lower Egyptian Pottery: A New Approach to Old Data is an account of studies that were conducted from 2015 to 2018, as part of a project entitled *The Development of the Early Neolithic Societies in Lower Egypt in the 5th Millennium BC and their Interactions with the Southern Levant*, financed by the National Science Centre Poland. However, the idea to search for the origins of Neolithic pottery in Lower Egypt had emerged earlier. For many years, I had been studying the relationships between Egypt and the southern Levant in the 4th millennium BC. From 2011 to 2015, I was involved in a project entitled *The Nile Delta as a Centre of Cultural Interactions between Upper Egypt and South Levant in the 4th Millennium B.C.*, which was financed by the Foundation for Polish Science. The project was part of the Parent Bridge programme aimed at providing assistance to young parent-researchers returning to professional work after a parenting break. My studies of the interrelations between these two regions at the time when the Egyptian state was being formed relied mostly on ceramic assemblages. In this way, I realised how little is known about the earliest relationships between Egypt and the southern Levant, as well as about the origins of Neolithic communities in Lower Egypt. Given the presence of the typical Levantine Neolithic package in Egypt (domesticated plants and animals and some technological innovations, including pottery), the hypothesis assuming that Neolithic communities in Lower Egypt developed under Near Eastern influences used to be generally accepted. As the Latin saying *Ex oriente Lux* goes, the introduction of the Neolithic package was a turning point for Lower Egyptian communities, as it initiated social and economic processes that eventually

led to the formation of the Egyptian state. An attempt at a closer look at this issue made me realise that the archaeological evidence on which the above hypothesis is based is very poor and calls for further, more detailed studies. I decided that going back to the 6th and 5th millenniums BC would be a good idea for another research project. Its key objective would be to collect archaeological evidence confirming the role of Levantine elements in the development of Lower Egyptian Neolithic communities. Once again, I chose pottery as the subject of my studies. If pottery had indeed been an element of the Neolithic package introduced to Egypt from the Near East, it could be considered as important evidence confirming relations between both regions in this early period. As such, it would point to the Near East as the main source of the Egyptian Neolithic.

However, as my research progressed, I had to revise my views. Despite having access to Neolithic pottery from Lower Egypt and the Late Neolithic ceramic assemblages from the southern Levant, I was unable to find new, previously unknown links between pottery production in both regions. In my research I did not go beyond the theses previously proposed by other scholars, based on similarities in vessel forms, surface treatments or decoration. Thus, my studies did not contribute any new evidence but merely confirmed the theses already known in Egyptian archaeology since the early 20th century. Under such circumstances, I concluded that the only chance for continuing the project was by verifying another hypothesis, namely that linking the beginnings of the Neolithic communities in Lower Egypt with migrations from the Western Desert in the second part of the 6th millennium BC. What makes this hypothesis less popular is the fact that the history of studies on the Egyptian part of the eastern Sahara is much shorter. Furthermore, the proponents of this theory include, first and foremost, research involved in explorations of the desert. With no access to ceramic assemblages from the desert and given the limited number of publications, researching this issue was far from easy. An important role in this context was also played by the most recent discoveries from the Fayum and Wadi Gamal, regularly published over the last couple of years. A new approach to the Neolithic period in Lower Egypt, extending beyond the Near Eastern model generally accepted for the period in question, helped me look at the oldest Lower Egyptian pottery from a broader perspective, incorporating the pottery production of north-eastern Africa. At a certain point of my studies, I accepted the possibility that the Neolithic pottery of Lower Egypt may be rooted in the Western Desert, where pottery had been known from the beginning of the Holocene epoch. Unfortunately, also in this case, comparative analyses did not offer any archaeological evidence that would directly confirm the above hypothesis. Consequently, at the end of my studies, I was facing two hypotheses on the origins of Lower Egyptian Neolithic pottery. Both were supported by similar arguments and neither of them could be confirmed or disproved.

As a graduate student, I was attracted to systems theory. I used this approach in my MA thesis and in my doctoral dissertation (see Mączyńska, 2013). The excellent book by D. Arnold on pottery production (1989), based on the systems paradigm, has been in my 'toolbox' for years. Since the factors analysed by Arnold are prerequisites to pottery production and most of them are relevant in its initial phase, I concluded that by analysing these factors in three cultural contexts (Lower Egypt, the southern Levant and the Western Desert) could help me overcome the impasse in which I was stuck during the project.

In Search of the Origins of Lower Egyptian Pottery. A New Approach to Old Data is the result of this realisation. Ceramic theory thus helped me propose a new hypothesis, according to which the pottery production of Lower Egypt could be rooted both in north-eastern Africa and in the southern Levant. I do hope that readers will find this new approach to old data useful and feel inspired to look beyond traditional views that have dominated Egyptian archaeology since the beginning of studies on the Neolithic period.

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