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Neolithic Aspects of the Western Desert and its Possible Role During the Following Time Periods in Egypt

Unlike most of the Western Desert basins in Egypt, Nabta Playa basin contains several significant sites. It was one of the biggest Neolithic localities, about 140 km southwest of present-day Abu Simbel city and 30 km north of the Egyptian-Sudanese border (Fig. 1). It is one of the most unique prehistoric areas in the Western Desert that contains several hundreds Holocene age sites, which represent the entire time span of human settlement, from the Early to the Late Holocene about 10.000 – 4500 BP, when increasing aridity forced the general abandonment of the desert (Schild and Wendorf 2004a: 1-2).

During the Neolithic period, the Western Desert was not a very dry and lifeless place as it is now. It was receiving a fair amount of rainwater that made it a good environment for several Neolithic societies to establish seasonal camps on lakeshores, herd their own cattle, manufacture fine decorated pottery, make their distinctive lithic tools that suite their needs and have their own beliefs and ceremonies around 9500 years ago. The Neolithic occupants settled in several localities in the Western Desert before the first known Neolithic settlements along the Nile Valley (Wendorf and Schild 2004: 14-15).

Nabta Playa megalithic ceremonial centre is one of the oldest in the world, and unique in Africa. At which, large stone constructions were erected during the last two phases of the Neolithic period, Late and Final Neolithic (Cattle Herders and the Megalith Builders) between 6500 and 4100 PB (Schild and Wendorf

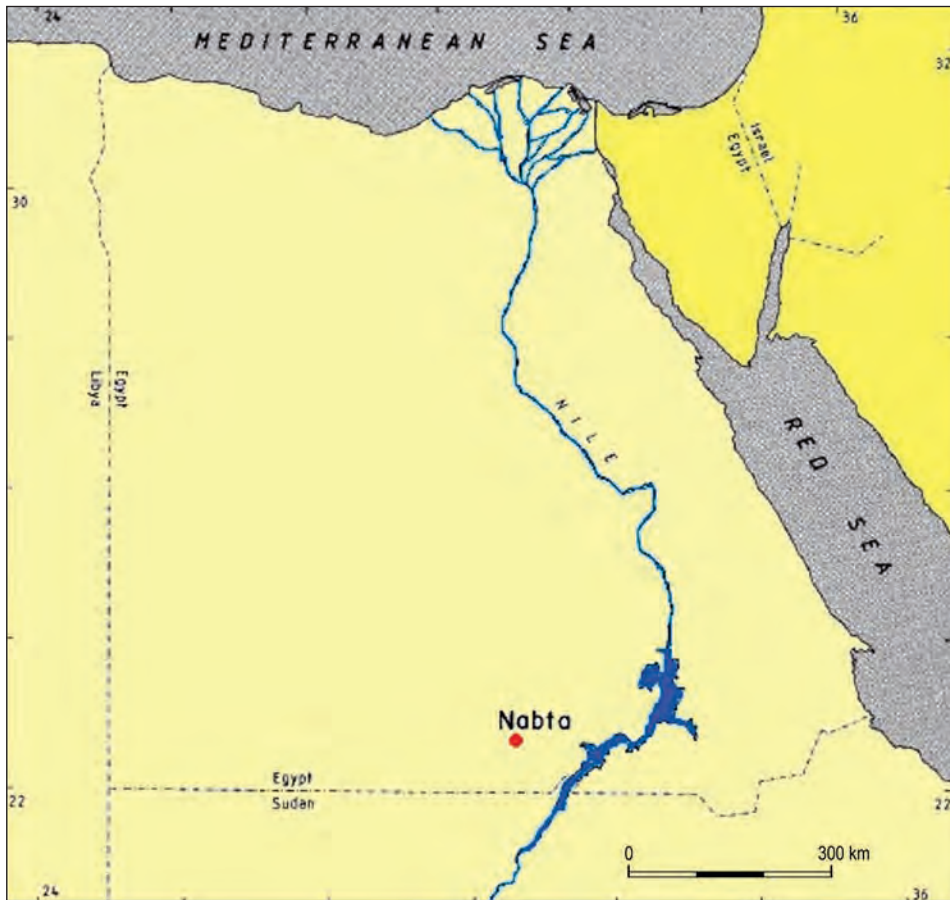


Fig. 1. Map of Egypt showing the location of Nabta Playa

2004b: 14-15). The megalithic centre of Nabta Playa contains several megalithic structures included: the Valley of Sacrifices, the calendar circle, the 4 megalithic large groups of stelae and the megalithic alignments (Fig. 2). The Late and Final Neolithic occupations were mainly depended economically on cattle, and were famous for the creation of these features, which required a high level of complexity and social organization, and the clustering them led the archaeologists to refer to Nabta Playa as a 'regional ceremonial centre' (Cattle Herders ca. 5500– 4500 BC; Megalithic Builders ca. 4500-3500 B.C) (For more details see: Schild and Wendorf 2004; Ibrahim 2013; Ibrahim 2014).

The idea of megalithic structures that started at Nabta Playa basin in the Western Desert appears to be extended to other areas in the Nile valley and some sites of the Eastern Desert during the Neolithic and into the following periods of Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt. The megalithic site at Nabta Playa might have some kind of influence on the Nile Valley and the Eastern Desert that the megalithic tradition appears to be continued in the later periods of Predynastic and Early Dynastic, although in different representations and amounts, and the limited number of examples were found.

Nabta Playa became a dry desert around 3350 BC, when the herders had to move to some place not far, like the Nile Valley, and it may be there that the prehistories of Upper Egypt and the South Western Desert have met. The Late and Final Neolithic megalithic structure of the Nabta Playa may be regarded as the earliest representations of features that continue into the Predynastic and Dynastic periods (Schild and Wendorf 2004b: 15).

At the Eastern Desert, several archaeological sites with a crude megalithic stone architecture were recorded. In Wadi Elei east of the Wadi Allaqi, Wadi Er Arib in wadi

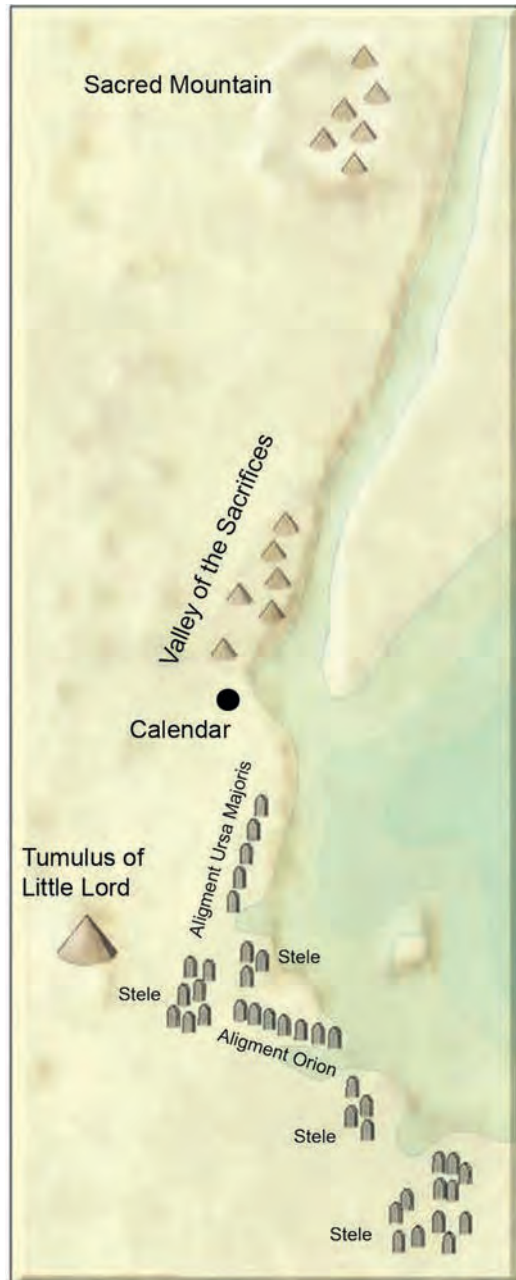


Fig. 2. The Megalithic structures at Nabta Playa (courtesy of R. Schild)

Shurafa el-Sharki, at the southeastern corner of the Eastern Desert of Egypt, and Wadi Atulla that located in the central part of the Eastern Desert of Egypt, north of Wadi Hammamat.

1. Wadi Elei Region

In the middle of the Nubian Desert, along the Wadi Elei (Fig. 3), east of the Wadi Allaqi, there are several archaeological sites related to the Predynastic period. In this area a dispersed village with rough stone architecture, and burial



Fig. 3. Map showing the location of Wadi Elei, east of Wadi Allaqi, southeast of the Eastern Desert, Egypt (after Sadr *et al.* 1994: 68)

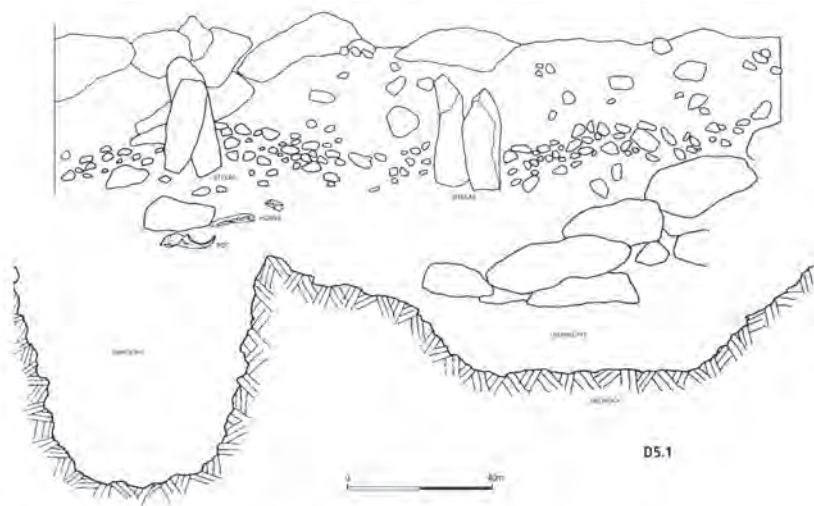


Fig. 4. Profile of a burial type of Wadi Elei, southeast of Egypt (after Sadr 1997: 71)

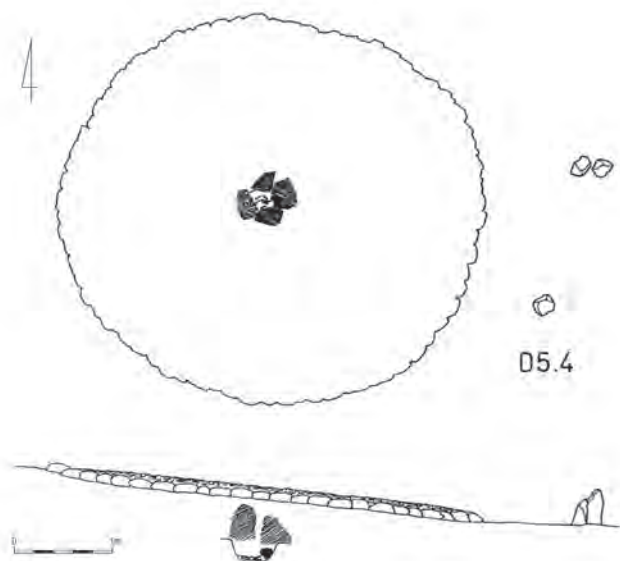


Fig. 5. Plan of a grave type at Wadi Elei, south of the Eastern Desert (after Sadr 1997: 72)

grounds were located. The dates from this site suggested to the 5th – 4th millennia B.C. and the late 2nd millennium B.C (Sadr 1997: 67).

At Wadi Elei, several tumuli burials were recorded, relatively undisturbed graves that have a superstructure composed of rings of boulders filled with sand. Within the circles were upright stelae, or slabs of stones marking the offering area (Friedman and Hobbs 2002: 182). The stone features extend along the Wadi in scattered clumps for at least 5 km. Among them there were many potsherds and stone tools of entirely local raw material. The ceramics were associated with the Predynastic period (for more details see: Sadr 1997; Sadr *et al.* 1994; 1995). Several radiocarbon dates, provided from the excavated graves, are comparable with the date of the village as assessed by ceramics (Sadr 1997: 67-68).

Three types of graves were documented; most contained offerings such as a polished stone pendants, beads, ceramic and in some one case gold objects. At the first type of graves, the burial shaft was located to the east of the offerings pit, they were constructed of boulders filled with sand and approximately 7 m. in diameter, revealed an offering area in the centre of the tumulus. These graves were marked by megalithic stelae (Fig. 4, 5). The overall Predynastic character of these finds was confirmed by radiocarbon dates of ca. 4475 BC. Another grave gave date of ca. 3962 BC. One of the graves types had low superstructures of circles of stones capped with small pebbles. To the east, it had two megalithic stelae placed like a gate (fig. 6). This grave gave a radiocarbon date to ca. 1295 BC. Another type of grave was like a cairn of stones rather than a ring of boulders. No data is available to know if it was associated with any grave goods, because it was destroyed by looters (Sadr *et al.* 1995: 207-11; Sadr 1997: 68-73). Faunal remains from the site suggest a pastoral population, while the ceramics suggest a population in contact with both Upper Egypt and Eastern Sudan (for further readings see: Sadr 1991)

2. Wadi Er Arib Cemetery

The site was noted by Murray, 1926, and recent archaeological research has been conducted in the area. According to Murray, the site was recorded as a remarkable cemetery, which is located at the foot of the mountain of Er Arib, in wadi Shurafa el-Sharki, at the southeastern corner of the Eastern Desert of Egypt, north of Gebel Gerf. It was marked by a low rubble wall, about 25 cm high, with an entrance at the east marked by a high monolith, now fallen, around 6 m in length. In the centre of the cemetery is a platform, about 50 cm high, formed of rubble walls filled in with earth. Three other megalithic stelae or standing stones,

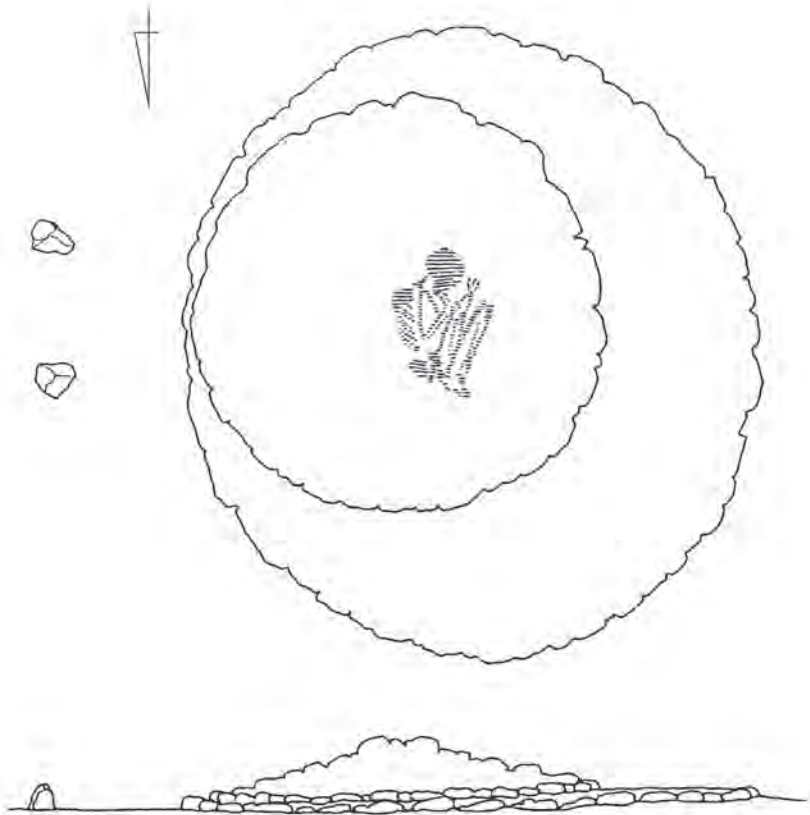


Fig. 6. Plan of a burial type at Wadi Elei (after Sadr 1997: 75)

now fallen, can be seen in the eastern part of the platform. The cemetery contains around 300 low stone tumuli. To the east, outside the walls, there is a subsidiary cemetery, which contained 41 graves. Three graves of the main cemetery were excavated, and one in the subsidiary cemetery (Fig. 7). All contained bones of oxen at a depth of 50-60 cm. The bones were found in a confused state suggesting that the animals had been cut up before they were buried. No ceramics were associated with the site, except for one potsherd, which was found in the fill of one of the graves, representing C-Group type pottery. The burials could be dated to the



Fig. 7. Sketch map showing Wadi Er Arib cemetery (after Murray 1929: 250)

C-Group or later, who inhabited Lower Nubia during the Middle Kingdom. These people undoubtedly possessed cows, because cow heads and horns are common in their cemeteries. They also setup megalithic standing stones. These stones were found in Faras and Dakkah, where the rough outlines of a cow were scratched on two of the stelae. A similar cemetery was recorded at Wadi Abu Had, the Sudanese tributary of Wadi Allaqi (Murray 1926: 248-249).

3. Wadi Atulla Tomb

In Wadi Atulla, located in the central part of the Eastern Desert of Egypt, north of Wadi Hammamat (Fig. 8), a burial site was found, which indicated multiple occupants. The closest finds of this site are parallel with the Tasian. Conventional radiocarbon dating of the remains provided dates of between ca. 4970 and 4455 BC. Ceramics analysis suggests that they were locally made. The recent discovery of similar material deep in the western desert indicates that the makers of these ceramics were apparently far-ranging desert dwellers. The presence of related pottery at various locations in the Egyptian Nile Valley may be the most distinctive

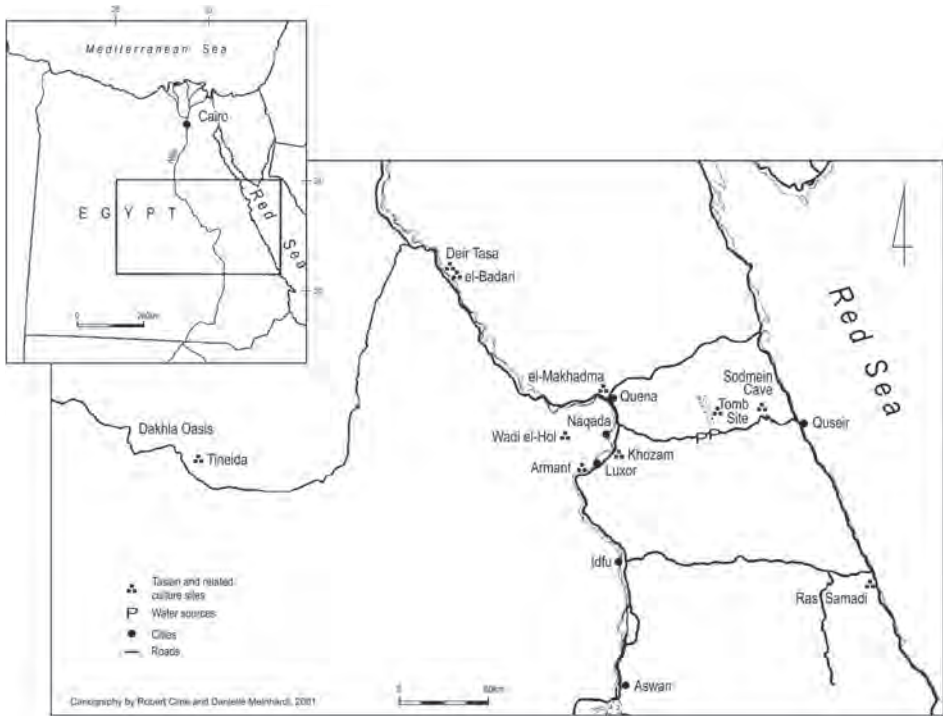


Fig. 8. Map showing the location of Wadi Atulla tomb (after Friedman and Hobbs 2002: 179)

evidence for the early interaction of the desert people with those in the Nile Valley (Friedman and Hobbs 2002: 178).

Excavation at the site yielded human bones, pottery, beads, palettes, lithic tools and sea shells. The tomb is located on the eastern edge of a sloping ridge overlooking a confluence of two wadis. As a result of multiple disturbances in the site, probably in ancient and recent times, it was difficult to determine the original above-ground appearance of the superstructure, or to determine what induced its users to select such a seemingly unlikely place for the tomb. According to Bedouin reports about the site, the area contained several burials. A single upright stone at the edge of the ridge was found. Additionally, a prominent cluster of around 20 boulders, darker than other stones in the area, were located lower on the ridge, protruding from the ground. Probably these stone slabs were brought in from the Wadi bed below (Friedman and Hobbs 2002: 178-182). The megalithic structures at the Eastern desert could be used by different groups of people who did not have

any connection with the people of Nabta, but putting in mind that there is an evidence for an active trade network between the Western Desert and the Nile Valley by the beginning of the Final Neolithic and the existence of some goods and shells from the Red Sea might show that there was some direct or indirect connections between Nabta Playa and Eastern Desert. During the following period, the Early Dynastic period, there were numerous examples for using stone megaliths as tomb stelae beside the graves, at several localities in Upper and Lower Egypt as the cemeteries of Um el-Qa'ab cemetery at Abydos, Abu Rawash north of Giza, Helwan, southeast of Giza and Dahshour south of Giza. At the Royal and Private tombs, some stelae were rough, others were decorated and some were well shaped and finely decorated. The most interesting part concerning these tomb stelae, at Um el-Qa'ab cemetery, the private rough stelae were oriented to the northwest, the same direction of Nabta Playa megaliths.

The amount of evidences from the Eastern Desert and the Nile Valley might be enough proof for extending the use of megalithic stelae from the Neolithic through the Predynastic to the Dynastic period and explain the development and the changes of their shapes and uses. Finally, The Tasian-related material in the Eastern Desert and at the burials at Gebel Ramlah area near Nabta Playa in the Western Desert suggests that this Neolithic culture may be the most distinctive missing link in the picture of interaction between the desert dwellers and the Nile Valley cultures, which led ultimately to the development of Egyptian civilization (for further reading see: Friedman and Hobbs 2002: 178; Kobusiewicz *et al.* 2010).

The megalithic structures, perhaps the most striking of the ceremonial features at Nabta, do not have close analogs in the Neolithic or in the Predynastic record along the Nile; although the shaping and use of large stones occurs in some of the tombs in Badarian graveyards. It is possible, however, that similar features to those at Nabta are present in the Nile Valley, but are unrecognized. The Combined Prehistoric Expedition worked at Nabta Playa for several years, even mapping some of these features as bedrock, before they recognized that they were of human origin (Wendorf and Schild 2004: 25). Perhaps, other expeditions did not pay enough attention, in the past century, to recognize the presence megalithic structures in the Nile Valley. On the other hand, they could have been destroyed or they were never there at all.

The small amount of evidences from the eastern desert may not create a strong argument for extending the use of megalithic stelae from the Neolithic through the Predynastic to the Dynastic period. Similarly, it may not explain the development and the changes of their shapes and uses. However, their representation

shows the existence of the use of megalithic structures during the Predynastic period, and offers proof that there were megaliths in Egypt during these periods.

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