

Acknowledgements

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The New Excavations in the Early Dynastic Necropolis at Helwan

E. Christiana Köhler, Australian Center for Egyptology, Macquarie University, Sydney

Introduction

The archaeological site today known as Helwan / Ezbet el-Walda was first explored during the 1930s by the Swede H. Larsen who excavated and published half a dozen tombs (Larsen 1940a, 1940b). However, most evidence of this vast Early Dynastic necropolis was uncovered by the Egyptian archaeologist Z. Saad between 1942 and 1954. Over at least 12 seasons of excavations he uncovered more than 10.000 graves which he dated to the First and Second Dynasty (Saad 1942-1969). More archaeological activities took place during the 1960s and 70s by the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation (el-Banna 1990, Adeeb 1991), but the site remained largely unexplored until 1997 when the Australian Center for Egyptology at Macquarie University in Sydney resumed investigations. This new work has been carried out over five seasons thus far and has not only confirmed the importance of this site for the history and material culture of the Early Dynastic Period in general and the region of Memphis in particular, but it has also demonstrated the urgency of archaeological excavation as Helwan's significant remains are threatened by the urban sprawl of modern Cairo.

Summary of recent research activities since 1997

The project's original aim was to re-excavate select tombs in order to clarify outstanding issues pertaining to their archaeology, architecture, construction and chronology. Such work was successfully carried out in the first season of 1997/98 when one of the famous stone tombs (40.H.3 in Saad's numbering system and Operation 1/1 in the new designation, cf. Saad 1947: 164-165, Wood 1987) was re-excavated in the north-western part of the site (Fig. 1). The tomb and the surrounding areas were cleared, mapped and precisely dated to Naqada IIIC/D with the assistance of ceramic material from nearby spoil heaps of Saad's work (Köhler 1998, Köhler et al. in press). The ceramic material from the spoil heaps also indicates that this part of the site was continuously in use at least until the Middle Kingdom.



Fig. 1

Operation 1/1 after re-excavation.

excavated and which forced us to modify the project's objective as this area is currently threatened by the expansion of a modern village. This section is designated Operation 4 and has proven most productive for a number of reasons. An important aim of the exploration of Operation 4, which covers an area of approximately 150 x 100 metres, is to establish a precise chronology of the graves. Forty out of an estimated number of up to 200 graves have thus far been excavated, most of which date to Naqada IIIC and D, i.e. Dynasties 1 and 2 (fig. 2; Köhler 2000a). The graves are cut into the underlying Pleistocene gravel deposits and divide into the 2 basic types; are open pits (Type I, fig. 3) and subterranean chamber tombs (Type II, fig. 4). Both types vary in size and preservation and most, if not all, of the 40 graves excavated to date were robbed in antiquity. The smaller pits are relatively shallow and hence close to the modern surface which accounts for exposure to humidity, mineral salts and for a varying degree of organic preservation, although on occasion remains of basketry, textiles, hair and plants were recovered. The human remains in the poorer graves were often found wrapped in reed mats, most of the others were placed in wooden coffins of varying sizes. In some instances, the sides of the grave pit were lined with mud forming an oval outline for the burial, which was then covered by reed and twigs. Some of the larger tombs have mud brick superstructures, which, in some cases, were preserved to a height of more than 1 metre. The large tombs particularly were found heavily plundered and hence, not many objects inside the burial chamber were found in a primary position.

During the first and the following seasons a large subterranean tomb, identified as one of Saad's storage tombs (Op.3/1; the Saad number is unknown, Köhler & Smythe in press, Smythe forthcoming), was excavated and cleared of its contents. It contained a total of more than 800 ceramic vessels, human long bones of 27 adults and 9 juveniles as well as a number of stone vessels. Importantly, a large number of pottery vessels were still labeled with Saad's tomb numbers and can now be re-assigned to their original provenance. This material now enables us to not only date particular grave assemblages but also to determine the date of the earliest occupation of the site, which currently goes back to Naqada IIIA. The content of this storage tomb is valuable evidence particularly in combination with work on material excavated by Saad and now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Here, more than 6000 objects that at the time were deemed worth keeping, are stored in 158 crates in the basement and are currently under study by us (Köhler 1999, in press b, Köhler et al. in press, Köhler & van den Brink 2002, Köhler & Birrell forthcoming). As a result, the Helwan Project has been able to start an ever growing database which links on-site work with Museum work and which in the long term allows us to partially reconstruct grave assemblages for further diachronic and social analysis.

The last four field seasons between 1998-2002 particularly focused on an area which was previously un-

Table 1 - HELWAN OPERATION 4, GRAVES WHERE SEX, AGE OR ORIENTATION ARE KNOWN
(PLEASE NOTE THAT THE HUMAN REMAINS CURRENTLY AWAIT A FINAL EXAMINATION). #=
DATES ARE GIVEN IN NAQADA STAGES* = DUE TO THE LACK OF RELEVANT DATA A MORE
PRECISE DATE IS IMPOSSIBLE TO PROVIDE

Tomb no.	Grave type	Age	Sex	Orientation head/face	Volume in m ³	Date#
20	I	Infant-juvenile	?	N/E	0.14	III*
34	I	Adult	?	N/E	0.16	III*
37	I	Infant	?	S/W	0.02	III*
16	I	Infant	?	S/W	0.05	III*
17	I	Infant	?	S/W	0.21	III*
30	I	Adult	?	S/W	0.3	III*
18	I	Adult	Female	S/W	0.84	III*
8	I	Adult	Female	N/E	10.13	IIICD
11	I	Juvenile-sub adult	Female	N/E	2.97	IIID early
23	I	Sub adult	Female?	S/W	1.07	IIID early
12	I	Infant	?	S/W	2.24	IIID early
14	I	Infant	?	S/W	6.48	IIID early
28	I	Adult	Female	S/?	21.45	IIID early
2	II	2 adults ?	Female/ male	S/?	10.34	IIID late
6	III	Juvenile-sub adult	2 males	N/W	1.5	Dyn. 3

Helwan 1998-2002
Grid plan of
Operation 4

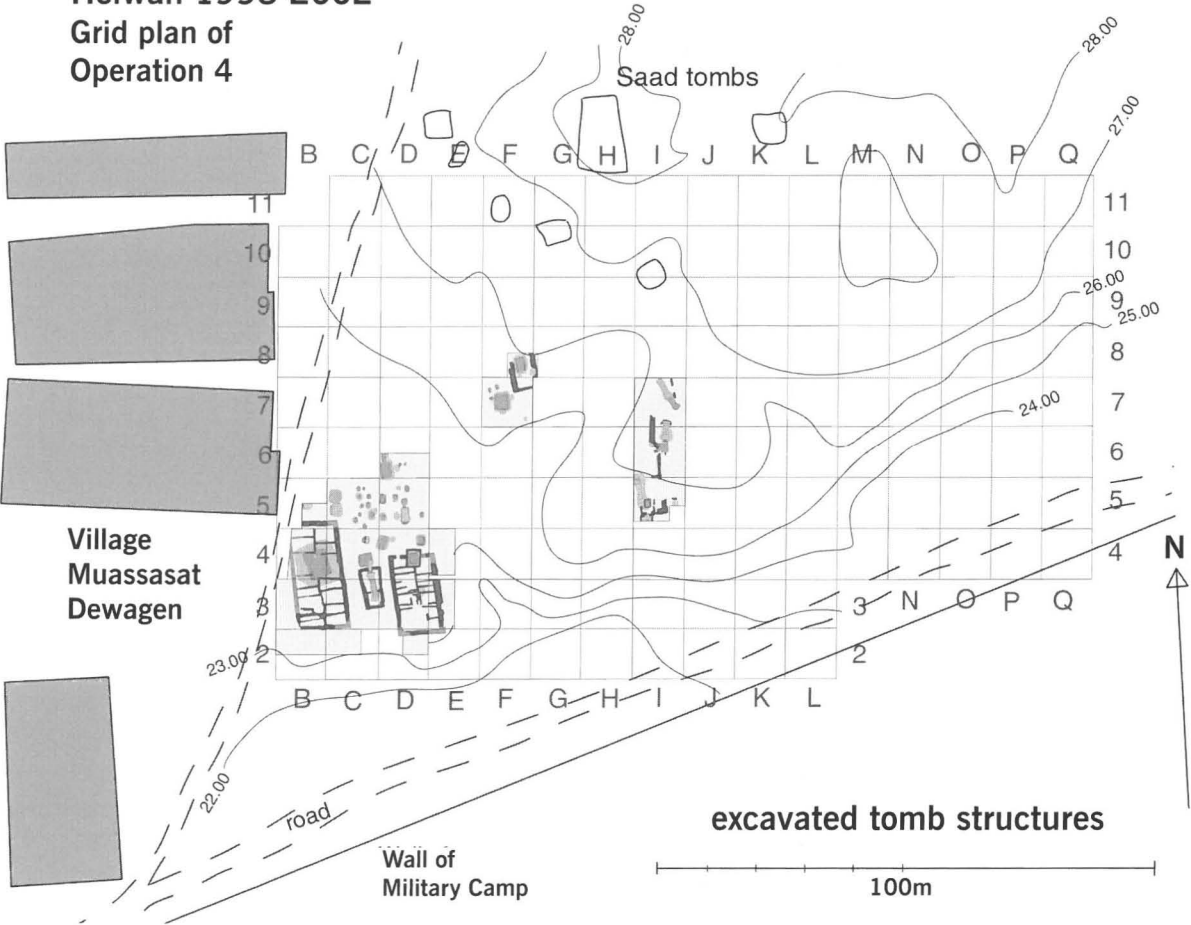


Fig. 2
Plan of Helwan
Operation 4.

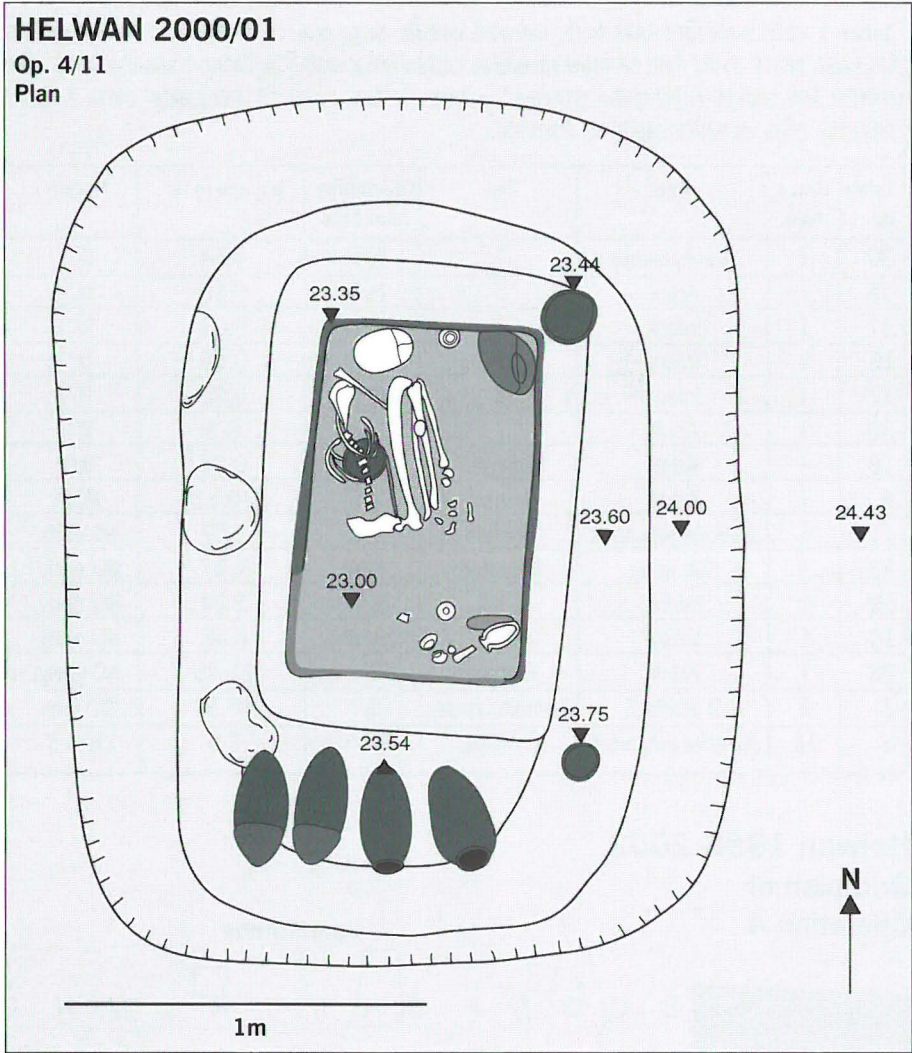


Fig. 3
Helwan Tomb 4/11.

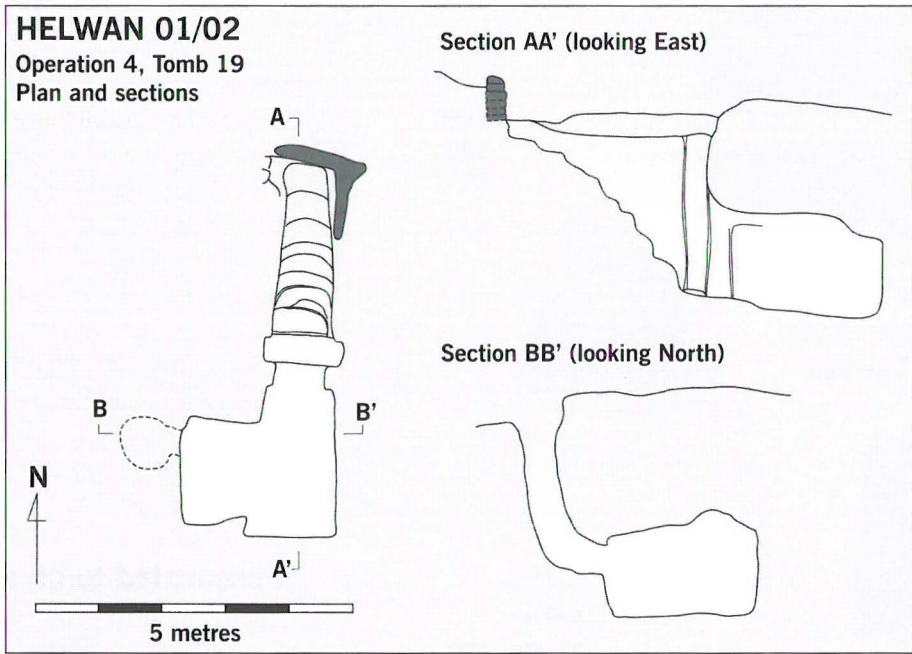


Fig. 4
Helwan Tomb 4/19.



Fig. 5
View of Operation 4
from south.

Of the 40 graves excavated only 15 provided sufficient information as to burial orientation as well as age and sex of the occupant. Although the sample is still small and has as yet no bearing on social, cultural or religious notions, there is already a pattern visible which indicates that head south and face towards west is the most common burial orientation, followed by head north facing east. In other parts of the cemetery excavated by Saad an almost equal distribution of head north, face east and head south, face west has been observed. The sample also includes 5-6 infant/juvenile graves whose size difference, matched by a variation in the quantity of the contents, is notable and as a whole, the sample suggests that several different social ranks are represented.

One very important aspect of our work is the establishing of a more precise chronology for this largest of Memphite cemeteries. For the earliest occupation of the site there is now evidence in the form of un-contexted artefacts from the fill of later tombs such as a prehistoric bifacial sickle stone and a sizeable number of bowl fragments made of fine alluvial silt with straw temper, red slipped and black topped as well as other prehistoric ceramic finds. At this stage, we are unable to tell if this material derives from cemetery or settlement contexts.

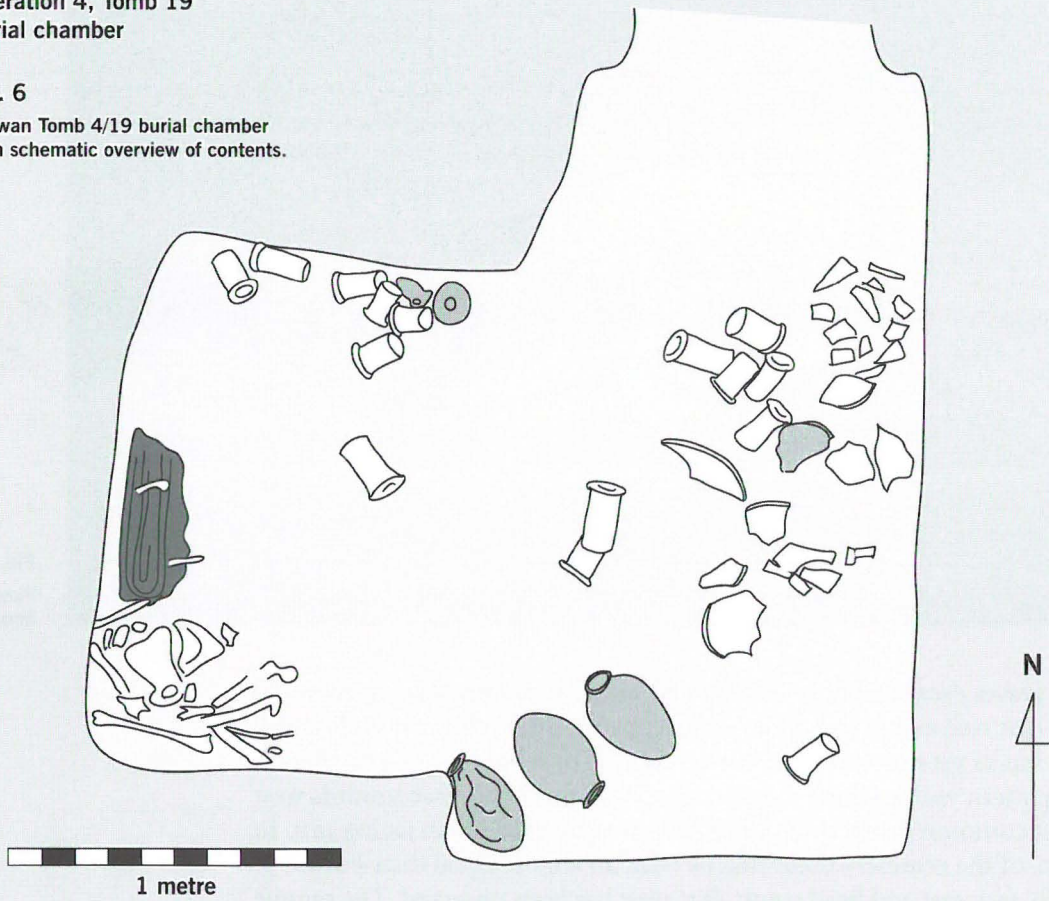
Pottery vessels from Op.3/1, such as cylindrical vessels type W 51 and 62, and at least two fish shaped cosmetic slate palettes in the Saad collection, (fig. 5; Saad 1969: 156, pl.76, Köhler in press b; Köhler & Smythe in press) suggest a fairly secure beginning of the necropolis at the latest in Naqada IIIA. The palettes could also be earlier, ie starting with early Naqada II, but they end with Naqada IIIa according to Kaiser (Kaiser 1957) and in combination with the ceramics, a later date would seem reasonable.

The period from Naqada IIIB onwards is well attested through numerous ceramic vessels, inscriptional material and other artefacts found by Saad, and during our recent excavations, and certainly represents a period of most intensive activity for this Memphite necropolis.

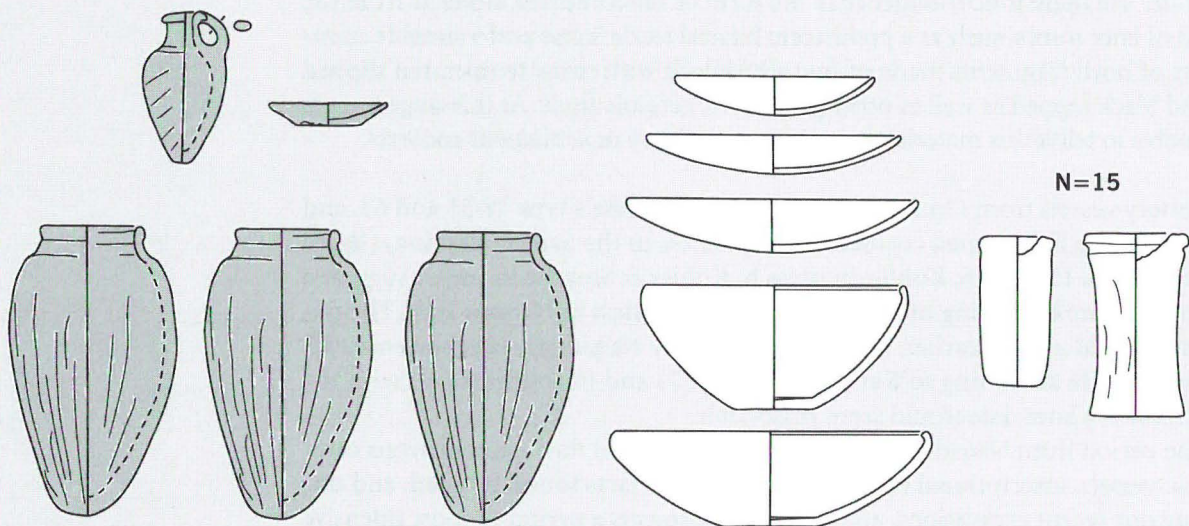
HELWAN

Operation 4, Tomb 19
Burial chamber

Fig. 6
Helwan Tomb 4/19 burial chamber
with schematic overview of contents.



Overview of contents (not to scale):



The later occupation phase of Naqada IIID, which corresponds to Dynasty 2 in historical terms, is still incompletely understood and defined, and represents a major challenge in our work. This problem applies to both the beginning and the end of this period (Köhler 2000a, Köhler & Smythe in press) as there is not sufficient historical evidence which would allow a correlation of royal names and archaeological material.

We are, however, currently in the position to define at least 2, possibly 3, sub-phases for Naqada IIID which are distinguished from Naqada IIIC by the absence of cylindrical vessels, the presence of certain other diagnostic artefacts as well as by tomb architecture in Operation 4. The graves defined within the earliest group are all open pit type tombs of varying sizes. The rich ones contain tall wine jars and other pottery types which have close parallels in the tomb of Qa'a at Abydos as well as in the tombs of early 2nd Dynasty kings at Saqqara. A possibly later group is particularly defined through the architecture and contents of two of the tombs so far excavated (Op. 4/15 and 4/19). The difference between these and the earlier group lies in the observation that, although both are rich, they have no 'wine jars'. This absence of 'wine jars' *per se* should not be counted as an indicator for a later stage as such vessels have been observed elsewhere even in late Dynasty 2 contexts; however, they also contain a new type of artefact, previously not observed, which is the cylindrical limestone 'dummy' vessel.

In the subterranean burial chamber of tomb 4/19 a total of 15 such 'dummy' vessels was recorded, together with fragments of at least five calcite bowls and dishes and five pottery vessels (fig. 6). The skeletal remains of the mature age male occupant were found in a disarticulated bone cluster near the remains of the wooden coffin in the south western corner. As a possibly additional dating criterion, both tombs belong to the later subterranean chamber Type II (see fig. 4). It is possible, though, that these two tombs still belong to the earlier group and, if so, simply reflect different burial customs and preferences.

Importantly, Tomb 4/19 produced three new funerary stelae found in secondary position at the bottom of a robbers shaft leading to the burial chamber (figs. 4, 7-8). They represent fine examples of such stelae and add to the corpus of Early Dynastic funerary stelae showing the deceased at the table of offerings surrounded by their names and titles as well as a variety of foodstuffs. It is important to note that they certainly did not originally belong to this tomb as all three display very distinct stylistic and iconographic features.

Also, in accordance with Haeny (1971), it is more likely that the many other funerary stelae from Helwan, found in a similar archaeological position (Saad 1957, Köhler & Birrell, forthcoming), were later reused as fill for the purpose of sealing the robbers shafts and preventing further access to the burial chambers. Also, it was observed that after filling up the robbers shaft of tomb 4/19, its top was sealed by what appears to be a deliberate deposit of several collared beer jars, a ceramic type which was not found in association with primary contexts in this tomb and which clearly dates to a period after the Dynasty 2.



Fig. 7
Robbers shaft of Helwan Tomb 4/19
with three funerary stelae in situ.



Fig. 8
Funerary stela from
Helwan Tomb 4/19.



Fig. 9
Funerary stela from
Helwan Tomb 4/19.

The latest stage of Naqada IIID, however, is more securely dated on the basis of a number of new diagnostic elements. The architecture of Type II as well as the ‘dummy’ vessels continue and new types of pottery vessels are introduced, which have parallels in later Dynasty 2 contexts, such as at the tombs of Peribsen and Khasekhemui at Abydos (Petrie 1902: pl.VII) as well as in Layer VIa at Buto (Köhler 1998a) and at Elephantine, where such material has been studied in more detail (cf. Raue 1999). They include the coarse type of beer jar with direct rim and wavy surface which represents a typological deterioration from the classical Naqada IIIB/C ovoid beer jar with round base, shoulders, restricted rolled rim and often with vertically scraped surface. Both types have been encountered in association and suggest a gradual development from one type to the other. Another diagnostic pottery type is the coarse alluvial silt bowl with small interior lip which occurs in the same contexts both at Helwan and elsewhere.

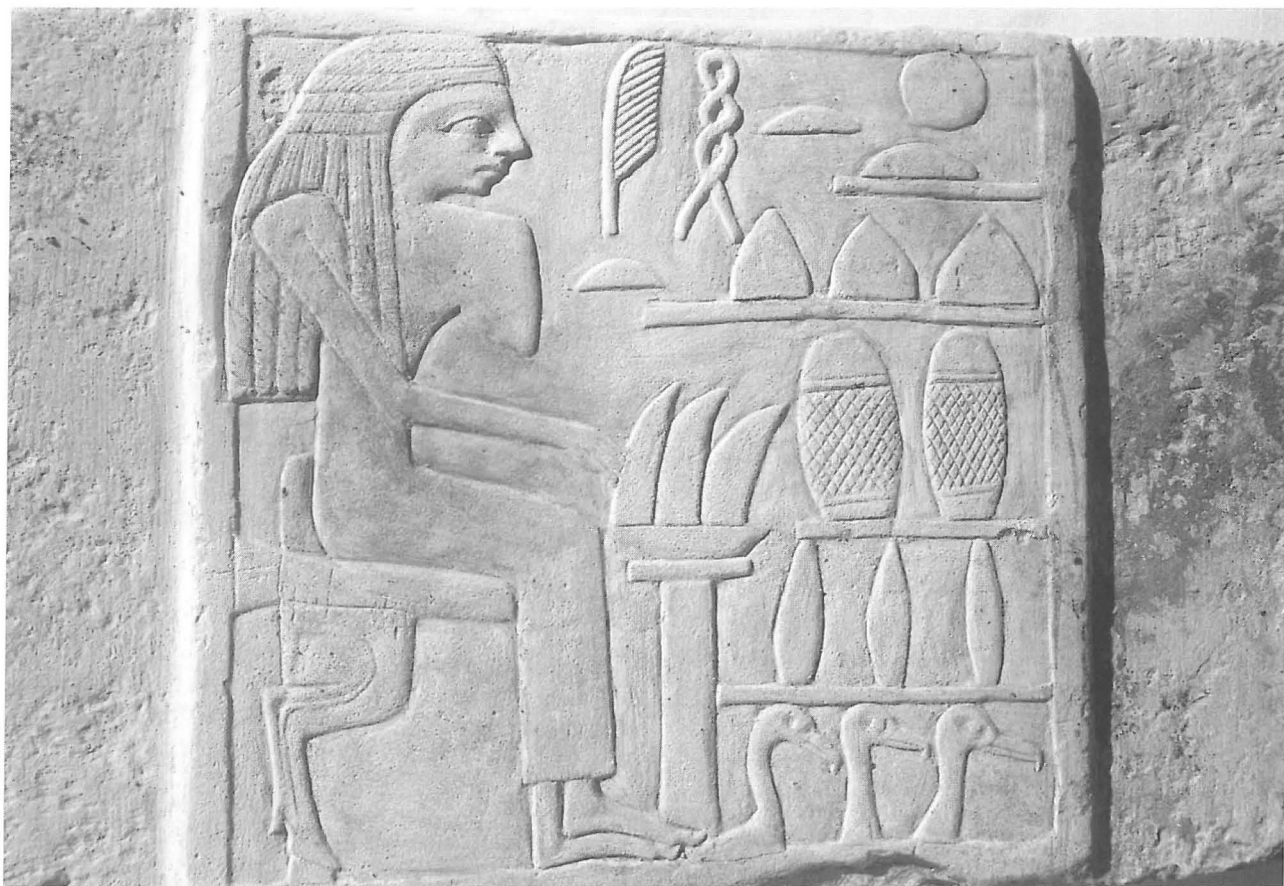


Fig. 10
Funerary stela from Helwan Tomb 4/19.

It is currently impossible to determine where to draw the line at the end of Naqada IIID and how to name the subsequent archaeological phase. For example, Naqada IV would not be an unreasonable option considering the high degree of continuity in the material assemblages. On the other hand it might perhaps call for a revision of the chronological terminology as it questions the validity of the term Naqada culture for later historical phases. In a recent personal communication Stan Hendrickx has suggested that Naqada IIID should end when collared beer jars, bowls with internal lip and carinated Meydum bowls appear. All these are typical for a group of tombs which we have currently dated to the early Old Kingdom by parallels from Dynasty 3 contexts. (see also Köhler & Smythe in press).

Conclusion

The necropolis of Helwan is probably one of the most crucial archaeological sites for the understanding of Early Dynastic material culture, society and overall history. This was clearly demonstrated by Saad's large-scale excavations last century. The new Helwan Project, however, is particularly important to the preservation and recording of such evidence as the archaeological site is currently threatened by urban expansion. The recent excavations continue to produce valuable archaeological evidence, uncovered by modern methods, and promise to clarify a number of outstanding questions pertaining to the chronology of Naqada III, the beginning of the site as an elite cemetery, the foundation of Memphis, as well as to significant social, administrative, economic and historical issues surrounding the Unification of Egypt. ■

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