

Neolithic in the Nile Valley (Fayum A, Merimde, el-Omari, Badarian)

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What has been said for the Palaeolithic and Epipalaeolithic very much applies also for the period immediately following, although the situation has improved slightly as there are more sites with structural remains on the record on the one hand, and because the lithic industries are now complemented by the presence of ceramic data on the other. However, the distribution of sites along the Nile Valley is still inadequate as their precise interrelationship in material and chronological terms is yet to be established.

The earliest evidence for Neolithic cultures of the Nile Valley is located in the north of Egypt and exhibits a well-developed stage of Neolithic subsistence, including the cultivation of crops, animal domestication and sedentism as well as pottery production from the late 6th Millennium B.C. onwards. The main archaeological sites are located near lacustrine or riverine water sources; along the shores of the Fayum Lake (Fayum A/Fayumian), on a spur above the edge of the western Delta floodplain (Merimde Benisalame) and on the upper banks of a small side stream of the Nile River (el-Omari) and in the south along the edge of the cultivation (region of Badari). All three northern sites have a strong domestic character although a small number of contemporary graves have been recorded at Merimde and el-Omari. Since the absolute chronological position of the earliest remains near Badari has now been better defined, placing it towards the end of the 5th Millennium, rather than the start, it has been less difficult to correlate its material culture with that of the north and explain its more advanced development, both in terms of ceramic technology, artistic development and social organisation. This is why we refer to it as Late Neolithic. What remains to be determined, however, is to what extent this late Neolithic Badarian tradition correlates with the earliest stages of the Naqada Culture, especially since the latter's beginning is now being pushed further back (see Hartmann, this volume).

Fayum A/Fayumian

Initially excavated by Gertrude Caton-Thompson, the remains of what are probably the earliest of Neolithic sites, is located on the northern shore of the lake forming two mounds of occupation, Kôm K and Kôm W (Caton-Thompson & Gardner 1934; Wendrich & Cappers 2005; see also Shirai, this volume), as well as scattered camp-sites along the perimeter of the lake (Wendorf & Schild 1976; Kozłowski & Ginter 1989; Wenke, Long & Buck 1988). Kôm K produced especially interesting, well preserved archaeological features, such as a number of large pits that were lined with basketry and possibly served as grain silos, as remains of grain seeds and a complete composite sickle were found therein. Apart from large quantities of hearths and settlement debris, there appears to be no significant evidence for house structures or well-stratified occupational layers. The material remains comprise of coarsely made pottery representing simple, multifunctional shapes, especially deep bowls, with little decoration; polished stone axes; bifacially retouched tools such as sickles and concave-based arrow heads; as well as stone maces. What has been described by Caton-Thompson as 'Fayum A' or 'Fayumian' by the more recent Polish excavators, can indeed be characterized as an early Neolithic Culture, whose absolute chronological position between 5400-4400 cal B.C. (Hendrickx 1999: 18) would place it at the very beginning of the Neolithic sequence in the Nile Valley, although the material culture is highly comparable with the later material at Merimde and el-Omari. While the stage more recently defined as 'Moerian' (Kozłowski & Ginter 1989: 166-169) is often also classified as Neolithic, its material traits would suggest a cultural and temporal proximity to the early Chalcolithic sites of the north.

Merimde Benisalame

Merimde Benisalame is probably the most representative and best recorded site of the Early Neolithic as it exhibits a large settlement of about 25 hectares with well stratified remains of up to 2.50 m thickness (Eiwanger 1984-1992). These strata can be divided into five phases starting just before 5000 cal B.C. and continuing well into the 5th Millennium B.C. Although the earliest occupation (*Urschicht*) suggests links with the Early Neolithic cultures of the Levant, phases II-V show close material and cultural ties with the Early Neolithic in the Fayum, as the occupational features, including basket-lined storage pits, ceramics and lithic tools are highly comparable. This well-stratified and well-recorded Early Neolithic material is a suitable archaeological assemblage for relative chronological studies.

el-Omari

The sites summarised as and named el-Omari are distributed over a relatively large area at the mouth of Wadi Hof and include what appear to be seasonal dwellings of rounded semi-subterranean huts and graves scattered among them, although direct contemporaneous habitation is not indicated (Debono & Mortensen 1990). The published radiocarbon dates place el-Omari at the end of the northern Early Neolithic sequence, i.e. between 4600 and 4400 cal B.C.; although the material remains, which share significant traits with the Fayumian and Merimde, have been compared to the earlier levels at Merimde

(Mortensen 1992). That this site may indeed be slightly later, or more advanced in material terms, is possible as the lithic industry not only exhibits the usual bifacially retouched tools, but also a new technology of large blades comprised of knives with handles and sickle blades. The knives especially in this case, are an entirely new feature and may or may not have influenced the blade industries known from Badari (Holmes 1989; Debono-Mortensen 1990).

Badari

The remains of the later Neolithic in the region of Badari¹ (Brunton & Caton-Thompson 1928) comprise of both settlement as well as mortuary evidence. What is notable are the similarities of the Badarian lithic industries with those of the north, especially when considering the bifacial hollow-based arrowheads, sickles and axes, as well as the emerging specialised blade industry, which may have originated in the north. On the other hand, the Badarian can also be characterised by new technologies, such as the flake-blade industry of endscrapers, perforators and the like (Holmes 1989: 336). A similar general development can be observed in the ceramics repertoire. The coarse domestic wares of the Badarian share a great deal with the north, especially considering the restricted spectrum of simple, multifunctional shapes and surface finishing methods. What is new, however, are the fine wares often exhibiting bi-chrome firing patterns, sharp bi-conical vessel contours, specific decorative polishing techniques (pattern burnishing), as well as the typically rippled surface. All of the above traits cannot be found in the north, but are frequently used to identify Badarian material further south and may possibly be considered as evidence for contacts with Nubia and the deserts (see also Gatto, this volume). Moreover, well known objects from Badari are made of cold-hammered, native copper, documenting that new materials are being explored. The material culture is further enriched by small artistic media, such as carved ivory figurines, jewellery or spoons that find no parallels in the north or in the south. These differences can be attributed both to regional variation as well as chronological development. Badari is in character a valley culture of farmers and is not only significantly further south along the river, but it also seems to be later than the comparable northern sites with more recent radiocarbon dates ranging between 4400 - 4000 cal B.C. (Hendrickx 1999: 19). That it still adheres to a Neolithic tradition, rather than Chalcolithic, is probably indicated by a lack of consistent, full-time craft specialisation (especially metallurgy) and social ranking, even though the analysis of graves might suggest a degree of social inequality (Anderson 1992). This Late Neolithic material complex known as Badarian may not only have regional variants; but moreover, show further developments indicated by the material studied at Mahgar Dendera 2 (Hendrickx, Midant-Reynes & van Neer 2001: 85). This, in turn could provide a certain material basis, though limited due to the fragmentary preservation of ceramics at this site, to correlate this assemblage with that of the earliest Naqada stages in the Abydos region as now suggested by Hartmann (this volume).

Considering its prominent location between Upper and Lower Egypt and between the Eastern and Western Deserts, the external influences on this early valley culture at Badari may have been substantial, which could potentially result

1. The material found at Tasa will be excluded from this chapter as its precise cultural and chronological affiliation as part of the Nile Valley cultures are still undecided; see Gatto, this volume.

in a blending of a variety of traditions and thus have an impact on its assessment within the relative chronology of the valley. However, due to its early investigation and lack of comprehensive recent re-investigation, its precise character according to modern archaeological understanding is yet to be defined.

To conclude, it must be said that the Neolithic of the Nile Valley is an area where a lot more focussed research will be needed in order to better understand the chronological sequences connecting north and south during the 5th Millennium B.C., as well as the exact material origins of what is currently termed Naqada Culture. However, at this stage it appears as if at least one index fossil can already be identified that may help separating this material from earlier and later assemblages, namely the concave-based bifacial arrowheads and other diagnostic bifaces, such as sickle stones. Although they can never be considered frequent in the Neolithic tool repertoire, either, they do not feature at all during the Epipalaeolithic or in any significant numbers within the Chalcolithic assemblages (Seeher 1988: 32).

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