

PREHISTORIC REGIONAL CULTURES  
الحضارات المحلية لعصر ما قبل التاريخ

*Béatrix Midant-Reynes*

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## PREHISTORIC REGIONAL CULTURES

### الحضارات المحلية لعصر ما قبل التاريخ

Béatrix Midant-Reynes

Regionale Kulturen im prähistorischen Ägypten  
Les cultures régionales de l'Égypte préhistorique

*In Egypt at the beginning of the fourth millennium BCE two distinct cultural units developed. In the south arose the Naqada culture, named after the great cemetery discovered by Petrie at the end of the nineteenth century. In the north, spanning the Delta up to the Memphite region, arose the "Maadi-Buto," or Lower Egyptian culture, named after the two reference sites of Maadi and Buto. The establishment of these two entities, whose material culture and funereal traditions differed, was the result of the role played in the process of neolithization of the Nile Valley by two great regions: the East on the one hand and the Sahara on the other. During the fourth millennium, after a period of interactions between those two regions, a cultural uniformity was born comprising elements of a mixed culture dominated by southern features.*

تطورت في مصر بشكل واضح خلال بداية الألف الرابع قبل الميلاد وحدتين ثقافيتين ، في الجنوب نشأت حضارة نقادة ، والتي سميت باسم الجبانة الكبرى التي كشف عنها عالم الآثار بترى في نهاية القرن التاسع عشر. أما في الشمال ظهرت حضارة المعادى- بوتو ، والتي كانت تغطي منطقة الدلتا وصولا الى منف ، أو (بمعنى آخر) حضارة مصر السفلى والتي سميت على اسم موقعي المعادى وبوتو. ان انشاء وظهور هذين الكيانين حيث الاختلاف بينهما واضح في المواد الثقافية وعادات الدفن ، كان نتيجة للدور الذي لعبته اثنتين من المناطق الكبيرة في عملية النولته (عملية التحول النيوليتي) في وادي النيل: الشرق من جهة والصحراء من جهة أخرى. وخلال الألفية الرابعة وبعد فترة من التفاعل بين هاتين المنطقتين ، انبثق الإدماج الثقافى والذي كان يتألف من عناصر من ثقافات مختلطة تسيطر عليها الملامح الجنوبية.

**I**n 1892, when W. M. F. Petrie uncovered the vast cemetery of Naqada, in Upper Egypt, he signed the virtual "birth certificate" of Egyptian prehistory. Although Petrie's first interpretation was that the material found at Naqada dated to the end of the Old Kingdom, he nevertheless inaugurated the systematic study of Predynastic Egypt by the application

of his innovative sequence-dating system (Petrie 1901; and see Hendrickx 1996). Some archaeologists before him had drawn attention to the stone artifacts present in many parts of the Nile Valley and in the Egyptian deserts (Tristant 2007), but the existence of a "history before history" was not convincing and remained to be proved. Since Petrie's time, the evolution of the research has progressed more

or less steadily, benefiting in the second half of the twentieth century from the rise of cultural anthropology, which sparked a renewed interest in cultural origins. Concomitant technological progress made possible not only absolute datations (C14) and large surveys in the deserts, but allowed the development of the paleoenvironmental sciences. The chronological framework is now solid, although adjustments remain discussed (Köhler, ed. 2011), and numerous new data—particularly from the deserts and Delta—allow us to construct a clearer image of the previously “dark millenniums.”

*The Process of “Neolithization” and the Development of Regional Cultures*

To understand the development of regional cultures in the Nile Valley, we must take into consideration the fact that Egypt is located at the crossroads of two continents, Asia and Africa, connected by the Sinai Peninsula. Although Egypt is part of Africa, we cannot ignore the role played by southwestern Asia, and particularly the south Levantine area, in the emergence of the Neolithic Period in Egypt and in the development of different regional entities.

The slow development of the Palaeolithic was followed—almost everywhere in the world although at different times—by new forms of production characterized by the control of livestock breeding and the beginnings of agriculture. In the tenth millennium BCE, the small communities of what is now the Middle East built the first villages and began the process of “neolithization” (for the terms “Neolithic” and “neolithization” in North Africa, see Smith 2013). The Nile Valley, however, did not follow the same trajectory as its neighbors. There the hunter-gatherer way of life—that is, the late Pleistocene (19,000 – 17,000 BCE) hunter-gatherer strategy of exploitation elucidated by the work of Wendorf and his team at Wadi Kubbania (Wendorf and Schild 1980; Close et al. 1989)—lingered until the sixth millennium, when the first domestic species (goats, sheep, pigs,

barley, wheat, and peas; flax for linen), originating in Asia, appeared on the eastern margins (i.e., in southern Sinai and along the Red Sea coast) (Close 2002; Vermeersch et al. 1994; Vermeersch, ed. 2008) and eventually spread, during the fifth millennium, not only throughout the Valley but also along the desert borders and southward to the area of what is now Sudan. Sites such as el-Omari, in the southern part of modern Cairo, Merimde Beni-Salame, on the western margin of the Delta, and the Fayum testify to the adoption of the new strategy of controlling resources through livestock domestication and agriculture. We unfortunately have almost no information about the local populations who occupied the Delta at this turning point, because the alluvial deposits have buried archaeological data under thick layers of silt. We do know that at Helwan at the end of the nineteenth century arrowheads were noticed by travelers, who collected them because of their aesthetic appearance. At the beginning of the twentieth century, archaeologists systematically surveyed the area (Debono 1948) before a military base and urban expansion closed it definitively. Much later, Schmidt (1996), having studied some 3000 pieces collected during the early surveys, linked the industry at Helwan with the Levant Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN) from the ninth millennium BCE. The most clearly recognizable of these remains can be dated to the beginning of the fourth millennium.

*Climatic Shifts and Regional Groups*

The large surveys conducted over the past thirty years by American and German expeditions in the eastern Sahara have provided an overview of the environmental and cultural changes that occurred during the Holocene in Egypt’s Western Desert and have revolutionized our knowledge of the emergence of Predynastic cultures in Middle and Upper Egypt. In the 1970s, Wendorf and his team concentrated on the Bir Sahara-Bir Tarfawi area (Wendorf et al. 2002). Over the next two decades, the BOS and ACACIA German expeditions surveyed more than 1500

kilometers between Siwa and the Gilf Kebir (Kuper 2002; Kuper and Kröpelin 2006), revealing several new sites that exhibited extended periods of occupation along with short-lived climatic oscillations (Riemer, Lange, and Kindermann 2013).

From 8500 to 1500 BCE the climatic history of the Eastern Sahara was dominated by a gradual aridization that had increased dramatically by about 3500 BCE. The climatic and ecological variations determined the dynamics of the human population, who had necessarily to adapt to the changing conditions. Between 8500 and 5000 BCE monsoon rains reached the northern Sahara, supporting the growth of savanna. As a consequence of annual precipitation of up to 100 mm, the area supported hunter-gatherer groups capable of covering vast distances. They brought with them ceramic technology and possibly domesticated cattle (for the question of the domestication of the *Bos* in Africa, see Marshall and Hildebrand 2002). Although we can only speculate on the relationships between the eastern Sahara and the Nile Valley during this time due to the lack of data from the Valley itself, it is clear that the region we currently identify as “desert” was not the large area of hyperaridity that exists today, nor was it a barrier between the Saharan nomadic populations and the inhabitants of the Valley. On the contrary, the two groups shared the hunter-gatherer way of life.

In the sixth millennium BCE the landscape changed. The gradually increasing seasonality of rains and the increasing rate of evaporation during the hot seasons rendered pools and lakes temporary, necessitating that people be highly mobile on the one hand and agglomerate in permanent water areas (e.g., oases and the Nile Valley) on the other (Riemer 2007): thus they adopted a radical new way of life based on livestock breeding.

In the fifth millennium the drastic shift toward aridity prompted far-reaching migrations to areas with permanent water sources and consequent restricted activity in waterless areas. As shown by specific types of vessel and by strong similarities in the lithic equipment, an original culture, the Tasian, which constitutes a branch of a Nubian tradition, flourished from the Gilf Kebir to the southern part of the Western and Eastern deserts (Gatto 2002, 2011). Although discovered by Brunton at Mostagedda in 1937, the chronological classification of the Tasian culture and its status as a cultural entity have been long debated (Friedman and Hobbs 2002; Gatto 2006; see also Kobusiewicz et al. 2010). Nevertheless, the Tasian is believed to have given birth to the Badarian—the first Egyptian Predynastic culture—in northern Upper Egypt.

The development of Predynastic regional cultures at the end of the fifth millennium was thus determined largely by the regional adaptation to new living strategies in the unsteady context of climatic and ecological changes. While the adoption of food production was a response to the drastic environmental deterioration of the eastern Sahara, the choice of Asiatic species suggests a connection with the northern regions, and the marshy areas of the Delta, which first became available to agricultural settlers around 6500 – 5500 BCE (Stanley and Warne 1993).

### *Lower Egyptian Culture*

As we have seen, the Neolithic is represented on the desert borders of Lower Egypt at the sites of el-Omari, Merimde Beni-Saleme, and the Fayum. In the Delta, the first witnesses of a new Predynastic culture appeared in the first part of the fourth millennium, synchronous with the Naqadan culture in Upper Egypt

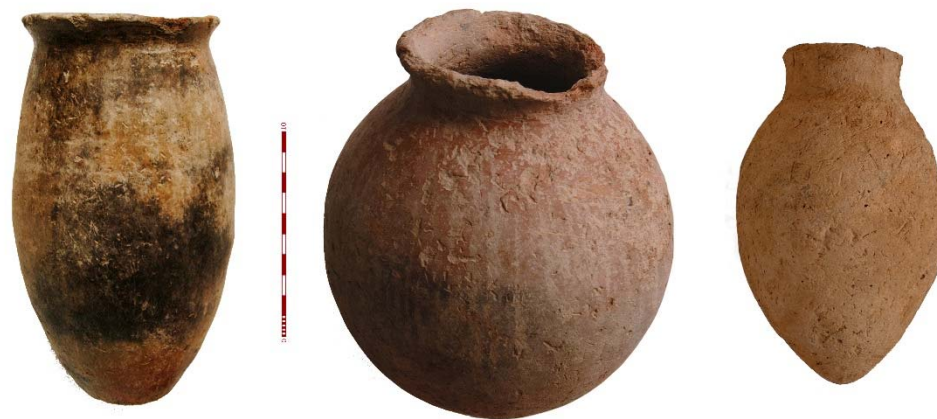


Figure 1. Pottery of the Lower Egyptian tradition, Kom el-Khilgan.

(Naqada I-IIc, 4000 – 3400 BCE) (Tristant and Midant-Reynes 2011). It has been identified as the Maadi/Buto culture, according to the main sites where it was represented, but here we will refer to it as “Lower Egyptian Culture” because the discovery of new sites, particularly in the eastern Delta, has widened its extension. In the Memphite region around the site of Maadi and the necropolis of Wadi Digla (Rizkana and Seeher 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990; Hartung 2003, 2004; Hartung et al. 2003) it includes the cemeteries of Tura, Heliopolis, and the isolated finds of Giza. It extends as far south as the site of el-Saff, located 45 km south of Maadi. The culture is much better represented in the Nile Delta at the sites of Buto (Von der Way 1997; Faltings 2002), Ezbet el-Qerdahi (Wunderlich et al. 1989), and Konasiyet el-Sardushi (Wunderlich 1989) in the northwest, as well as at Tell el-Farkha (Chlodnicki et al. 2012), Kom el-Khilgan (Bucheze and Midant-Reynes 2007, 2011), and Tell el-Iswid (Van den Brink 1989; Midant-Reynes and Bucheze, eds., *fc.*).

The Lower Egyptian cultural complex is characterized by light dwellings, a weak investment in funerary assemblages, and a strong connection with contemporary Levantine cultures. The settlements comprise small structures made of light, perishable material, identified by trenches, postholes, and remains of wooden posts, and by hearths, buried jars, and storage pits. The pottery corpus consists of globular shapes with a flat base, narrow neck, and flared rims, and by narrow tumblers, bottles, bowls, and cups (fig. 1). Maadi distinguishes itself by the exceptional presence of subterranean structures (Rizkana and Seeher 1989: fig. 15 and pl. 14.5; Hartung 2003) attested nowhere else in Egypt but for which parallels are found in the Beersheva region during the Late Chalcolithic and the initial Early Bronze I periods; indeed Maadi seems to have displayed the characteristics of a south Levantine community from its inception. In the lowest strata from Buto (Buto Ia) a similar scenario is revealed by a specific group of ceramics, the so-called V-shaped bowls (Faltings 2002), which, although locally

produced, clearly derive from South Levantine Chalcolithic production in their morphology, decoration, and exceptional use of a wheel in their manufacture. The technique of wheel manufacture ceased during the following phase (Buto IIa), about the time the Maadi occupation ended, but Levantine influence is nevertheless evident in the ceramics made with calcareous clay fabric bearing foot, neck, mouth, and handle decoration. The local flint industry is characterized by twisted blades and bladelets (Schmidt 1993), clearly distinct from “Canaanite” tools. Copper objects are common in Maadi, including not only needles, pins, and fishhooks, but also rods, spatulas, and axes. Metal analysis revealed a probable provenance of the eastern and southern Sinai Peninsula (Abdel-Motelib et al. 2012).

The interregional contacts with the Levantine area constitute one of the most striking features of the Lower Egyptian Culture. They took place in a complex dynamic of exchanges and borrowings correlated with the social organization of both regions and with their fluctuating evolution during the first part of the fourth millennium (Guyot 2008).

The Lower Egyptian culture was, above all, pastoral-agricultural and sedentary. Domestic animals built up an overwhelming majority of the culture’s faunal spectrum: goats, sheep, oxen, pigs, and the donkey, which was employed for the transport of the goods. Kilos of grain, including wheat and barley, were found in jars and storage pits, along with lentils and peas.

In contrast to those of Upper Egypt, the Lower Egyptian graves are characterized by extreme simplicity. Two cemeteries corresponding to two distinct phases of inhumation are associated with the site of Maadi, at nearby Wadi Digla. Bodies were placed in individual pits, on their side and in a contracted position, either without any offering, or accompanied by a few pots and, from time to time, a bivalve shellfish (*Unio*). In Kom el-Khilgan, in the eastern Delta, 226 tombs were excavated, revealing three phases of occupation. The first two phases belong to



Figure 2. Burial of the Lower Egyptian funerary tradition, Kom el-Khilgan (Grave 23).



Figure 3. Burial of the Naqadan funerary tradition, Kom el-Khilgan (Grave 188).

the Lower Egyptian cultural complex (Buto I-II) (fig. 2) and the third is attributed to the Naqadan tradition (Naqada IIIA-IIIIC) (fig. 3). The occurrence of two different funerary traditions in the same cemetery is exceptional and initiated for scholars a new way of thinking about the cultural unification of Egypt (Bucheux and Midant-Reynes 2007, 2011).

*Upper Egyptian Culture*

In the area of the modern town of Assiut, in approximately 4500 BCE, a cultural complex arose of whom our knowledge is based essentially on funerary remains, and to a lesser extent on poorly documented settlements: the Badarian culture, first identified in the Badari region, near Sohag. In the light of new discoveries in the Egyptian deserts, however, and in the context of the paleoclimatic reconstruction of the Holocene period, we can now consider the existence of the still earlier Tasian culture, for which the cultural marker is a round-based caliciform beaker with incised design filled with white pigment (fig. 4). New data from the Eastern and Western deserts, the area of modern Sudan (Friedman and Hobbs 2002; Kuper 2007), the exceptional cemeteries of Gebel Ramlah, some 130 km west of Abu Simbel (Kobusiewicz et al. 2010), and from a well-dated settlement at Kharga Oasis (Briois et al. 2012) allow us to sketch the cultural identity of the Tasian and to locate it at the roots of the Badarian. The Badarian now tends to be considered as a regional development of the Tasian nomadic culture, which occupied the southern part of the Egyptian deserts and the Sudan during the fifth millennium.

Research conducted over the past thirty years has revealed the extent of the Badarian area to be considerably larger than was previously thought. Badarian items have been found as far south as Maghar Dendera (Hendrickx, Midant-Reynes, and Van Neer 2001) and Elkab (Vermeersch 1978: pl. VI), and as far east as the Eastern Desert (Friedman and Hobbs 2002). The Badarians were herders and farmers. Their settlements are poorly documented but suggest small structures made of perishable materials, grouped in small villages. Thus the Badarian way of life did not differ fundamentally from that of the Lower Egyptian.

The contrast between the Lower and Upper Egyptian cultures is striking, however, in the realm of funerary practices. Numerous cemeteries located in the low desert (close to



Figure 4. “Tasian beaker” (UC 17869 or UC 17870).

the fertile land of the Nile Valley) comprised hundred of graves that exhibited the onset of a process of social stratification that became increasingly pronounced in the following (Naqada) period. Bodies were placed in a simple pit, often on a mat, in a contracted position, on the left side, head to the south, looking west.

The main grave offering was pottery (figs. 5 and 6), simply shaped and made by hand, including cups and bowls with straight rims and a rounded base. The finest example is a very thin-walled, black-topped ware, whose surface was combed prior to being polished, producing a ripple effect. The repertoire of funerary goods also included personal items such as ivory and bone hairpins, combs, bracelets, spoons, and beads, and the graywacke palette made its first appearance, thus beginning its long development through Predynastic times. The shapes were limited to oval and rectangular forms, but would display great variety during the following Naqadan

Period. The lithic industry, which we know essentially through settlements, was principally a flake industry with a small component of bifacial tools.



Figure 5. A stone vase, two black-topped jars, an ivory comb, and bone bracelets were the offerings in a child grave of Naqada I, Adaima.



Figure 6. Child grave of Naqada I, Adaima, in which the objects in Figure 5 were found.

Identifying the precise connection between the Badarian and Naqadan cultures is more complex than previously believed. It has been thought that the Naqadan culture developed out of the Badarian and spread to the south, covering an area between Matmar and Hierakonpolis, but there is no clear break between the two cultures. Conversely, it is now believed that the Naqadan culture developed in regions south of the Badarian core area. In every case, and despite regional variations identified through the ceramic and the lithic assemblages (Friedman 1994; Holmes 1989),

the cultural complex that developed in Upper Egypt during the first half of the fourth millennium, represented by a consistency in material culture and funerary practices, was totally different from that of Lower Egypt and the northern part of Middle Egypt. The situation began to change in the Naqada II C and D phases, when a period of interaction between the northern and the southern complexes took place, which would be followed by cultural unification in Naqada IIIA (Buchezy and Midant-Reynes 2007, 2011). Middle Egypt, due to its central position, undoubtedly played an important role in the process of cultural unification, but our data is unfortunately limited, since no new excavation has been conducted there since 1930. A recent reappraisal of the Gerza cemetery by Stevenson drew her to the conclusion that “the community at Gerza was a migrant one who were embedded in Naqadan traditions” (Stevenson 2009: 207; cf. Buchezy and Midant-Reynes 2007, 2011).

#### *Cultural Unification: An Acculturation Process*

The expansion of the Naqada culture has been the object of much debate and controversy. The dominant traits of the Naqada IIIA assemblage were assimilated by the Lower Egyptian complex, which as a consequence lost its own cultural identity. This phenomenon became the model for Kaiser’s “Naqadan expansion” (1964, 1990, 1995), which implied a conquest, at the end of which the entire country was subjugated by the Naqadan elite. This model, though largely accepted, has been strongly criticised by Köhler (2008), who draws attention to the fact that notable regional variability existed within what was thought to be a single cultural entity. Based on the material culture from settlements, rather than cemeteries, she proposes that the local differences were gradual simultaneous developments in the different regions of the Nile Valley. The connections between the Naqadan and the Lower Egyptian contexts are explained as inter-relationships between permeable cultural entities. Instead of an

external stimulus—the Naqada expansion—a model of internal development is suggested in which the changes that occurred in Lower Egypt from Naqada IIC-D are the result of the general evolution of the entire Nile Valley.

New data recorded from the excavation of Kom el-Khilgan, in the northeastern Delta, lead us to somewhat different conclusions. Before Naqada IIC, two main entities (i.e., the Upper and Lower Egyptian cultures) took shape, within which we can observe variability in material culture and funerary practices. Yet these entities—though stemming from different traditions—exhibit the same socio-economic level in regard to their settlements and means of production. A change took place, however, after Naqada IIC, in the form of a

process of interaction whose impetus was provided by the fundamental social changes that occurred in the Naqada sphere. The following period—100 to 150 years—saw a progressive transformation that led to the appearance of a “syncretic” culture, which finally culminated in the assimilation of southern traditions by the north. In this way, Naqada III is not a “pure” Naqadan culture but a “mixed” one with Naqadan-dominant traits. A similar pattern is found in southern Egypt, which has dominant Naqadan traits intermixed with traits of the Lower Nubian tradition (Gatto 2006). The emergence of power in this process requires the analysis of the economic and political structures of the social groups involved, how they interacted, and the role played by war (Campagno 2004).

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Figure 1. Pottery of the Lower Egyptian tradition, Kom el-Khilgan. (© IFAO.)

Figure 2. Burial of the Lower Egyptian funerary tradition, Kom el-Khilgan (Grave 23). (© IFAO.)

Figure 3. Burial of the Naqadan funerary tradition, Kom el-Khilgan (Grave 188). (© IFAO.)

Figure 4. “Tasian beaker” (UC 17869 or UC 17870). (© Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London.)

Figure 5. A stone vase, two black-topped jars, an ivory comb, and bone bracelets were the offerings in a child grave of Naqada I, Adaima. (© IFAO.)

Figure 6. Child grave of Naqada I, Adaima, in which the objects in Figure 5 were found. (© IFAO.)