



**One day Annual Egyptological Colloquium 2008
Monday 28 July**

**'EGYPT AT ITS ORIGINS'
PREDYNASTIC AND EARLY DYNASTIC EGYPT: RECENT DISCOVERIES**

The Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan's annual colloquium will be held in conjunction with the Third International Colloquium on Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt at the British Museum from 27 July to 1 August 2008. For further details, visit www.origins3.org.uk

Abstracts of papers

Monuments of Egypt's early kings at Abydos

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As the location of the first royal necropolis, the site of Abydos has a particular significance in the history of ancient Egypt. All the kings of the First Dynasty, and two of the Second, were buried in subterranean tombs at the site. Some 1.5km north of the tombs are the remains of a group of contemporary structures, namely, a series of enigmatic mudbrick enclosures. Given the remote location of the tombs and the likely modest character of the tomb superstructures, the enclosures, which were built overlooking the ancient town of Abydos, are likely to have represented the primary monumental statement of royal presence and power for each king at the site. The Abydos enclosures also appear to comprise the earliest tradition of monumental royal funerary building in Egypt.

Excavations in recent years have revealed the existence of a number of previously unknown royal enclosures at Abydos, as well as significant new information about those already known and intriguing evidence about their use. The earliest of the securely dated enclosures belong to the reign of king Aha at the beginning of the First Dynasty, when significant increases in scale and complexity also characterize the royal tomb. Most enclosures of the First Dynasty were surrounded by the tombs of courtiers, and recent excavations have resulted in the discovery of a number of new tombs from the reign of Aha. Although most had been looted, much remained of the tomb assemblages and of the occupants themselves, providing information about the status and identity of the individuals buried around the enclosures. Evidence from these tombs, as well as re-examination of some of those adjacent to the enclosure of king Djer, which were excavated many years ago by Petrie, has also shed important new light on the question of human sacrifice in Early Dynastic Egypt. Another previously unknown large enclosure has been discovered that appears to date to the beginning of the First Dynasty, or possibly to the end of Dynasty '0'. This enclosure also had associated graves, but these contained the remains of ten much-worked donkeys. Another of the enclosures featured a group of fourteen large boat graves adjacent to it, each comprised of a boat-shaped mudbrick grave structure that contained an actual wooden boat.

Evidence for cultic practice has been found in several of the enclosures, and each ruler's enclosure may have represented the primary setting for the performance of rituals associated with the royal funerary cult. With one exception, each of the known enclosures appears to have existed as a standing monument for only a short time, perhaps the duration of the reign of the ruler for which it was built. Most significantly, evidence has been found to suggest that the enclosures may have been ritually demolished, undergoing a form of symbolic burial, such that it would be available to the king in the next world along with his interred courtiers. The only one of the Abydos enclosures still standing today was the last and largest, built for king Khasekhemwy at the end of the Second Dynasty. It too has produced significant evidence for its use in connection with the funerary cult of the king, as well as for how it was revered and reused by later generations. For several years, a comprehensive large-scale program of architectural conservation has been underway at this enclosure, with the aim of preserving the single surviving representative of the early royal monumental building tradition at Abydos.

Ivory and gold in the Delta: excavations at Tell el-Farkha

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The site of Tell el-Farkha, adjacent to the village of Ghazala 120km north-east of Cairo, is composed of three mounds or koms (designated Western, Central and Eastern). Excavations on each of these koms has revealed the 1000-year-long history of the site, which began many centuries before the foundation of the pharaonic state and provides the best view to date of the momentous developments that occurred during this formative period in Egyptian history. Several distinct phases have been distinguished. The oldest phase contains a settlement of the so-called Lower Egyptian culture, providing important information on the distinctive lifestyle of the native inhabitants of the Delta who lived at Tell el-Farkha c.3600–3300 BC. Soon thereafter the first settlers from the south arrived at the site, bringing with them the Upper Egyptian Naqada culture and many profound changes in the nature of the settlement. The apogee of Tell el-Farkha's history occurred during the Protodynastic period (Dynasty '0' and the First Dynasty, c.3200–2950 BC), when the site played a major role in international trade. Its prosperity was short-lived, however, and by the middle of the First Dynasty it began to decline until the site was finally abandoned in the early Fourth Dynasty (Old Kingdom, c.2600 BC).

The state of preservation at Tell el-Farkha is exceptional and the organization of the site into three main spheres is clearly evident: residential and cultic on the Western Kom, habitation and utility on the Central Kom and cemetery and settlement on the Eastern Kom. Discoveries on the Western Kom include the remains of one of the world's oldest brewing centres and a monumental mudbrick building, so far the largest known in Egypt from the period c.3300–3200 BC. In addition, an administrative-cultic centre from the beginning of the Egyptian state contained votive deposits composed of intriguing, intricately carved ivory figurines depicting human, animal and divine subjects. Many of them are unparalleled. Equally interesting results were provided by the Eastern Kom, where mudbrick-lined graves of Protodynastic date were investigated. For their time, all were very wealthy and furnished with large numbers of pottery and stone vessels, ornaments of semi-precious stones and gold, cosmetic palettes and tools. Also on the Eastern Kom, a rather non-descript settlement gave rise to some extraordinary discoveries that presently have no counterpart in Egypt. In one of the many small rooms within the settlement, two remarkable gold-plated statues depicting standing men (60 and 30 cm high) were found. They were recovered from a context dating to about 100 years before the beginning of the Egyptian state, but may be far older and possibly represent an early ruler and his son or successor.

A desert crossroads: the Rayayna Culture

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During the past ten field seasons the Theban Desert Road Survey has identified and recorded the remains of an important and distinctive Predynastic culture in the broad desert bay and the deep wadis west of modern Rayayna and Rizeiqat. The people of this area – the Rayayna Desert – appear to have had connections with the Western Desert and Nubian/Sudanese Neolithic cultures, their eclectic ceramic fabrics and forms being most closely associated with the elusive Tasian culture. The Rayayna Culture was later increasingly interconnected and perhaps ultimately integrated with the Predynastic cultures of the Nile Valley.

Four major sites in the area preserve important remains of the Rayayna Culture: 1) a cave with important botanical, faunal, lithic, and ceramic remains in the far west (the “Cave of the Wooden Pegs”); 2) a decorated cave of apparent religious significance in the northwest (the “Cave of the Hands”); 3) a burial feature in the northeast; and 4) a probable campsite in the southeast (the “Beaker Feature”). The ceramic and lithic remains at these sites link them all temporally and culturally, and reveal what may best be characterized as an eclectic branch of the Tasian culture.

The Cave of the Wooden Pegs

The cave in the far west of the site preserves considerable quantities of ash, with botanical, faunal, ceramic, and lithic remains interspersed. The botanical remains have revealed a limited but interesting array of Rayaynan foods. In addition to a number of plants most likely used for a combination of animal fodder and starters for fire (*Acacia* spp., *Grewia*, *Citrullus colocynthus*, and *Zilla spinosa*), others, such as *Sorghum halipense*, *Moringa peregrina*, carob (*Ceratonia siliqua*), and *Ziziphus spina-christi* (Jajube, the *nabq* eaten in Egypt even today) are elements of the Rayaynan diet. Only a few domesticated plants appear in the undisturbed, earliest layers (corresponding to the early phase of the Rayaynan Culture, prior to the presence of imported Nile Valley ceramics), these being six-rowed hulled barley (*Hordeum vulgare* ssp. *vulgare*), hulled emmer (*Triticum turgidum* ssp. *dicoccon*), and a group that is either emmer or einkorn (*Triticum dicoccon/monicoccon*). The small amounts of these grains do not suggest use on a large scale.

Although the botanical work continues, the Predynastic people using the Cave of the Wooden Pegs appear to have had a relatively limited range of edible plant resources. This correlates with the considerable remains of flint tools, debitage, and animal hair and bones from the cave – the diet of the Rayayna people was based more on their animal resources, including hunting, than on agriculture or plant gathering. The relative paucity of barley and emmer suggests that the people were careful not to lose any of what must to them have been very precious grains.

The Cave of the Hands

The decorated cave on the northwestern part of the Rayayna Desert, with minimal habitation remains outside it, reveals definite patterns in the layout of the Predynastic art. The principal areas are: 1) large rocks facing the entrance to the cave; 2) several large cracks leading a short distance into the gebel to the left of the main cave entrance; and 3) the ceiling of the cave proper. The images on the rocks facing the cave (area 1) are almost exclusively giraffes, other quadrupeds – principally desert animals – and boats. In the large cracks (area 2) are some quadrupeds, as well as human figures. A number of the latter figures are strangely stylized, some elongated, others with enormous hands.

A number of images of fish also appear, along with curious abstract designs. On the ceiling of the cave (area 3) are prints of hands, primarily outlined in red, but with a few made by dipping the hand in red pigment; the ceiling also preserves a single large figure in red depicting what appears to be a running man with an elaborate headdress. The outermost areas show depictions of the terrestrial world (area 1); the gaps leading into the rock seem to show those animals of outside yielding to fish, inorganic designs, and strangely made human figures – the natural world (area 1) becomes a world of somehow unnatural humans, the terrestrial becomes aquatic, organic becomes inorganic (area 2) as one literally progresses into the hillside. Finally within the cave (area 3) attention is focused on the ceiling. Apparently the rock art shows a progression from the diurnal world outside to some transformed space within the cave – the natural gives way to the supernatural. The significance of the Cave of the Hands for potential understanding of the religious beliefs of the Rayaynan people is therefore considerable.

The Burial Feature

In the northeastern portion of the Rayayna Desert a large stone enclosure surrounds a series of superimposed burials. Several belong to newborns, who nevertheless received burial goods. A number of the burials reveal reuse of earlier pits, and one intact burial contained three bodies. An initial burial still occupied the bottom of the pit, with the burial goods in place, but the head had been removed and set in the far north of the pit. Two additional bodies had been added later, as collections of bones, with the heads stacked atop the head of the initial burial. Similar to the ossuary burials in the Nabta region, the Rayayna burials suggest a possibly transhumant lifestyle for the Rayaynan culture, with bodies later retrieved and buried at one or more burial sites.

Decorated boulders bearing pecked images surround the burial feature. The figures are principally abstract designs and quadrupeds, with giraffes and ostriches the most common subjects of the latter group; the closest parallels for the designs and the pecked execution thereof – and to some extent the location of the art on boulders – come from the region of Abka in Nubia. As with certain of the ceramic fabrics attested in the Rayayna Desert, so here in the rock art are connections with Abka in Nubia. Our location plan reveals that the boulders indeed surround the Badarian feature, and probably relate to the use of that feature as a burial place. Again we have in the Rayayna Desert unparalleled evidence for the religious beliefs of the earliest Predynastic cultures.

The Beaker Feature

In the southeastern corner of the great desert bay are the sand-covered remains of a dry-stone structure of early Predynastic date, with a fragmentary but varied set of remains. The ceramic remains include not only a variety of vessels of more utilitarian type, but also ripple burnished, black-topped vessels with restricted necks, and sherds of elaborately decorated versions of classic Tasian beakers. The ceramic assemblage is strikingly similar – in forms and fabrics – to a Tasian burial from the Eastern Desert (Wadi Atulla). The fabric of the Tasian beaker sherds from the Rayayna Beaker Feature is similar to Abkan sand tempered silt, a Nubian fabric we have also identified on the Kurkur to Dunqul route atop the Sinn el-Kiddab plateau (and also attested from the Catfish Cave site in Lower Nubia, now in the Yale Peabody Museum). Some of the fabrics and forms in the Rayayna Beaker Feature find close parallels in the remains we discovered in the Tasian cave near the Wadi el-Hôl, and in the burial feature in the northeastern portion of the Rayayna Desert.

The Tasian ceramics from the Rayayna Desert are – with the Tasian material from the Wadi el-Hôl site – the first direct links between the Tasian vessels of the Deir Tasa region in the north (Middle Egypt), those of Gebel Ramlah in the south (near the Sinn el-Kiddab escarpment in the region of Nabta playa), and the Tasian material from the Eastern Desert. Like the Tasian material from the Wadi el-Hôl, that at the Beaker Feature is directly associated with a major desert road. Both of the Tasian assemblages we have discovered in the Western Desert suggest that the Tasians of the Theban Desert were closely associated with desert routes, and perhaps with desert travel and commerce. Just as the Wadi el-Hôl Tasians were active on a major Western Desert road leading north and west out of the Thebaid, so the Rayayna Tasians were active on the Darb Gallaba, a major route leading south out of the Thebaid.

Although the Tasian culture was first identified at Deir Tasa, near Badari in southern Middle Egypt, the people of that culture buried near Deir Tasa were probably desert Tasians who were interacting with the Nile Valley Egyptians, perhaps even already semi-sedentary, ‘Niloticized’ versions of the Tasians. The earliest elements of the Rayayna group appear to be living and working exclusively in what is now an arid desert area, and only later do they begin to interact with the Nilotic cultures. The ceramic fabrics from the Rayayna Desert reveal affinities with other Saharan ceramic material, and with the Abkan and Early A-Group traditions of Nubia, suggesting that the desert Tasians have their earliest associations with the far west and south. The Rayayna Tasian culture appears to be one of a number of intermediary groups who blended Saharan, Nubian, and nascent Nilotic cultures.

**Origins of monumental architecture:
investigations at Hierakonpolis HK6**

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Recent investigations in the elite predynastic cemetery at HK6 at Hierakonpolis have revealed the largest tomb of this time period yet known (Tomb 23), and one outfitted with the earliest evidence for above-ground architecture in Egypt. Undoubtedly the tomb of an early king, excavations in 2008 have revealed that it was only one part of a larger precinct reserved for the construction of multi-columned wooden buildings, or hypostyle halls, an architectural form hypothetically postulated for this period, but never before actually found.

These remarkable above-ground structures have no tomb in clear association with them and the entire precinct, at least in its earliest phases, appears to be free of human burials. Given their location within a cemetery and the ritual and prestige objects found within them, these buildings appear to have been erected for the performance of funerary rites and are thus Egypt’s first funerary temples.

The superimposed walls of several structures demonstrate that demolition and new construction stretches back for many generations prior to the building of Tomb 23. At least three main phase of construction can be detected and within each phase growing levels of effort and elaboration are evident. Although built entirely of wood, these funerary temples were not meant to be ephemeral. Nearly 1000 years after they were built and more than 300 years after the cemetery was abandoned, offerings of bread and beer dating to the early Third Dynasty indicate that some of them (i.e., the final phase buildings) were still present and the object of veneration. This unanticipated activity presents the intriguing possibility that parts of the stone-built Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara were deliberately

modeled on the ancient wooden architecture observed in this cemetery precinct and the memory of their once powerful owners, if somewhat vague, was still revered into Old Kingdom times. This discovery also opens up questions regarding the ancient Egyptians' view and knowledge of their own hoary past, and their efforts toward the conservation of monuments that were already old even as Egyptian civilization was being formed.

Recent investigations at Tell el-Fara'in (Buto) in the western Nile Delta

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The settlement mound of Buto (modern Tell el-Fara'in) is situated in the northwest Nile Delta, and features mudbrick ruins rising up to 18 m above the surrounding cultivation. Buto is already mentioned on Early Dynastic labels and seal impressions, and seems to have played an important role during the Old Kingdom and throughout Pharaonic times as a counterpart to Hierakonpolis in Upper Egypt, both in religious belief and in cultic life. However, until today, rather little is known archaeologically about the history of the site. The visible ruins mostly date to the Ptolemaic/Roman periods, while others are perhaps of Late Dynastic date. Even the first excavations, conducted at the beginning of the 20th century and during the 1960s on behalf of the EES, revealed only Late Period remains. Therefore, during the 1980s the German Archaeological Institute (Cairo) began new investigations which focused on the early history of the site. During this work conducted by Thomas Von der Way, a Predynastic occupation with a material culture similar to that of Maadi was found for the first time within the Nile Delta proper. Early Dynastic layers were also detected which yielded remains of a large administrative building. The work highlighted the problems of excavating such early layers at Buto: all early remains are covered by thick later deposits, and the Predynastic layers are found below the modern water table and may be reached only by means of pumping equipment. These difficulties considerably restrict the size and scope of excavations at the site.

Besides ongoing excavations, a systematic survey was started in 1999, combining auger drillings and geophysical survey in order to build a more complete understanding of the site's history. Comparison of the results obtained by both methods allows the reconstruction of the general development of the settlement in connection with the surrounding landscape, and is also of great help in selecting distinctive areas for further excavation. Recent work has focused mainly on two areas at Buto. The investigation of the Early Dynastic administrative building complex was continued and revealed its palace-like character which seems to confirm the assumption that it might be the so-called "Palace of the harpooning Horus". This royal estate is well known from seal impressions during the First and Second Dynasties and is thought by scholars to be situated at Buto. The second excavation area was chosen after drillings had indicated Old Kingdom and Early Dynastic deposits relatively close to the surface, and magnetic measurements had provided the outlines of unusual structures. Although only Late Dynastic and Old Kingdom building remains have come to light so far, some of the finds and other evidence point to a special cultic function for the place. Perhaps it is to be identified with the holy district where the pre-nw sanctuaries were situated – another landmark of Buto, depicted already on Early Dynastic labels, in Old Kingdom tombs and still represented on the doorjambs of the palace of Apries at Memphis. This paper will present the results of the latest work at the site.

**Origins of monumental architecture:
recent excavations at Hierakonpolis HK29B and HK25**

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Michael Hoffman's work at HK29A in the 1980s, resumed by Renée Friedman in 2002, revealed an early ceremonial complex and possibly Egypt's earliest temple. This complex included a paved and mud plastered courtyard floor surrounded by a series of post- and mudbrick walls, as well as a large trench supporting a substantial wall of posts. New excavations north of HK29A were begun in autumn 2005 by the University of British Columbia, with the aim of exploring how the monumental precinct may have interacted with the Predynastic settlement. Two new areas, HK29B and HK25, have already revealed a substantial amount of data related to the architecture of the fourth millennium BC.

At HK29B the foundation trench of a palisade has been uncovered. The length of the palisade trench has so far reached 40 m, with more than 20 large postholes up to 140 cm in depth associated with the palisade. Remains of wood indicate that large posts, or possibly carved wooden statues, were placed inside the large holes, although their exact function remains unclear. The orientation of the palisade indicates that it stood in direct relationship to HK29A. Based on ceramic evidence, the area at HK29B was in use during Naqada IIB–D. Large body sherds and small rim sherds of tall, slender black-topped beakers or hole-mouth jars and matte red collared jars were found associated with the foundation trench. These rather unusual forms were also found in association with deposits in the funerary complex surrounding Tomb 23 in the elite cemetery HK6, hinting at a special, possibly cultic function for these vessels.

In the area of HK25 the remains of a large columned hall were unearthed. A layer of clean sand, the early precursor of the 'High Sand' of Dynastic Egypt, had been placed on top of the Pleistocene Nile formation and then covered with a thick mud floor. The hall consists of at least 5 rows of 10 columns and measures at least 20 x 8 m. The lack of finds directly associated with the building makes it difficult to date. Most of the ceramic and lithic material is similar to the Naqada II assemblages at HK29B, but there are also some differences. It is clear that food production, such as brewing, took place in an earlier phase (Naqada I–IIA) in the vicinity of HK25.

Intriguing remains of a possible deposit of precious stone tools can be linked to the building at HK25. This included material from bifacial flint knives, projectile points and mace-heads, dating to Naqada I–IIA. These stone artefacts were all deliberately burnt, and may have been placed as a foundation deposit for the columned hall at HK25. Both structures at HK29B and HK25 have a similar orientation to the precinct at HK29A and thus they may all belong to a monumental architectural complex created by the people of Hierakonpolis during the second half of the fourth millennium BC.

**Upper Nubia before the emergence of Kerma:
a fortified settlement from the beginning of the third millennium BC**

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Over the past ten years, research on the prehistory of the Kerma region has focused on the period preceding the kingdom of Kerma, from the first sedentary settlements (c.8000 BC) to the development of the Pre-Kerma culture (c.3500–2500 BC). The archaeological discoveries demonstrate that the region was very dynamic, especially during the Neolithic period, and contained huge settlements and numerous cemeteries. The conditions that led to the emergence of the Kerma civilisation are still difficult to reconstruct due to the scarcity of sites dated before 2500 BC; however, the excavation of a large Pre-Kerma settlement agglomeration, south of the third cataract, provides crucial information on the process of proto-urbanisation and the organisation of a protohistoric settlement in this area c.3000 BC. Covering a surface of approximately two hectares, the agglomeration is composed of huts, rectangular buildings, numerous pits, fences and fortifications. These fortifications have been traced for a distance of 160 m and were composed of six parallel palisades forming a unit 8 m wide. Comparisons with other archaeological fortifications in the Nile Valley and with ethnographic data can help us to better understand the architectural tradition and the importance of this defensive system.

'Lascaux along the Nile': Late Pleistocene rock art in Egypt

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In March–April 2004, a survey of rock art in the el-Hosh area on the west bank of the Nile, about 30km south of Edfu in Upper Egypt, led to the discovery of a hitherto unknown petroglyph locality on the southernmost tip of a Nubian sandstone hill called Abu Tanqura Bahari, about 4km south of the modern village of el-Hosh. This locality (designated ATB11) shows, among other things, several images of bovids executed in a vigorous naturalistic, 'Franco-Cantabrian, Lascaux-like' style, which are quite different from the stylised cattle representations in the 'classical' Predynastic iconography of the fourth millennium BC. On the basis of patination and weathering, these bovid representations are extremely old. They most probably predate the fish-trap representations and associated scenery previously documented at several locations in the el-Hosh area and AMS 14C dated to >7000 BP. As these el-Hosh bovid images are similar to cattle representations discovered in the Gebel Silsila region on the east bank of the Nile by the Canadian Prehistoric Expedition in 1962–1963, the Belgian mission attempted to retrace the latter images. The attempt was successful and the sites were recovered in October–November 2005 near the modern village of Qurta, along the northern edge of the Kom Ombo Plain, about 40km south of Edfu and 15km north of Kom Ombo. As far as is known, these sites, which are still in pristine condition, have not been visited by archaeologists since the time of their discovery in 1962–1963. There are at least 160 individual images in total.

The rock art of Qurta consists mainly of naturalistically drawn animal figures, none of which show any evidence for domestication. These naturalistic images of animals are often combined with highly schematic human figures. The dimensions of the drawings are exceptional: often the bovids are larger than 0.80 m; the largest example measures over 1.80 m. In this respect, the Qurta rock art is quite unlike the rock art of the Predynastic period, in which animal figures are only exceptionally over 0.40–0.50 m. Based on nearby archaeology, stratigraphic position immediately below the 'Wild Nile' silts, and stylistic comparisons, we propose an attribution of this Qurta rock art to the Late Pleistocene Ballanan-Silsilian culture or a Late Palaeolithic culture of similar nature and age, thus about 15,000 years BP.

**Memphis at the dawn of history:
recent excavations in the Early Dynastic necropolis at Helwan**
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The recent excavations of the Australian mission to Helwan have uncovered more than 140 tombs dating between the First and Fourth Dynasties. The current project's main objective is to examine the social organization, architecture, chronology, material culture, funerary rituals and bio-archaeology of Early Dynastic society in the Memphite region, and to thus elucidate a range of concepts relevant to the more advanced stages within the process of state formation in Egypt.

One of the very notable characteristics of this cemetery is its mortuary variability within each chronological stage that in part can be explained by the presence of several distinct social classes who chose tomb size, construction materials and architecture according to their economic means. This evidence assists in the reconstruction of the social organization and, in particular, the definition of social complexity and vertical differentiation of early Egyptian society at the capital city Memphis. On the other hand, variations in the orientation and furnishings of the burials also suggest that within each period there may have been a degree of horizontal differentiation indicating the existence of different social groupings whose distinction is not necessarily affected by social stratification.

This paper will summarize and discuss the latest results of ongoing excavations at Helwan in the background of the current understanding of the emergence of Memphis as the primary urban centre of early historic Egypt.

**A tale of two funerary traditions:
the Predynastic cemetery at Kom el-Khilgan (East Delta)**
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The predynastic cemetery of Kom el-Khilgan is located in the eastern Delta, approximately 40km from the modern city of el-Mansoura. The site was identified in the 1980s by the Egyptian Service of Antiquities as containing Predynastic and Early Dynastic remains. It is a flattened residual mound, longer than it is wide (measuring approximately 130 m north-south by 70 m east-west, and covering an area of 8600 m²) with a gentle slope from south to north of about 1 cm per metre, and surrounded by a number of small pockets of cultivated land. The modern landscape is completely flat, but this was certainly not the case during the Predynastic period. Thousands of years of flooding and the extensive agricultural work, which commenced during the 19th century and continues until today, have completely changed the environment and the original topography of the site.

Excavations began in 2002 under the aegis of the French Institute of Archaeology in Cairo (IFAO) and continued until 2005. A total of 35 test trenches were opened in order to determine the total extent of the site. They revealed that the entire area of occupation has been totally destroyed by the activity of modern farmers. Kom el-Khilgan is just a small part of an occupation that was originally much larger, but whose full extent is now impossible to determine. The only archaeological remains preserved are exclusively situated on the kom itself, namely an area of 1860 m² in the north-eastern part of the site.

In 2005 a small area of 200 m² was chosen for excavation down to sterile soil in order to obtain a spatial view of the remains and to compile a complete stratigraphic sequence. The stratigraphy of the site shows seven phases of occupation, which can be summarised as belonging to two main periods: in the upper levels, the Dynastic period is represented mainly by the Second Intermediate Period settlement and cemetery (phase 5 = Fifteenth Dynasty); in the lower level, within the light coloured sand of the gezira, the Predynastic period is represented by the necropolis. This large cemetery contains burials from the two main cultural components of Predynastic Egypt: phases 1 and 2 belong to the Lower Egyptian Culture (Buto-Maadi), and phase 3 to the Naqadan Culture (Naqada IIIA–C). A total of 217 graves were excavated. This paper will present the main results of the study of the cemetery, which is vital for better understanding the phenomena which led to the unification of the ‘Two Lands’ at the beginning of the third millennium BC.

Released from the sand: new insights into the royal necropolis at Abydos Umm el-Qa'ab

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During re-investigation of the Early Dynastic royal cemetery in Abydos Umm el-Qa'ab, ongoing since 1977, the German Archaeological Institute, Cairo (DAIK), has fully cleared six of the ten royal tomb complexes: those of Aha, Den, Semerkhet, Qaa, Peribsen and Khasekhemwy. Clearance of the tomb of Djer, the largest tomb complex with over 300 subsidiary burials, was begun in autumn 2005 and will continue for several more years.

In contrast to the earlier excavations by Amélineau, Petrie and Naville, undertaken at the turn of the 19th century, the DAIK is investigating not only the tomb architecture but also the surrounding excavation spoil heaps, which is a very time-consuming task. These dumps not only contain vast amounts of the original tomb equipment but also enormous quantities of offerings – mainly pottery vessels – from later periods, resulting from pilgrimage to the cult of Osiris, which probably commenced during the Middle Kingdom. The cultic activities at this time were not only focussed on the tomb of Djer, which was later considered to be the tomb of Osiris, but all the other royal tombs were also integrated into the cult.

The vast number of pottery vessels produced by the new excavations of the Early Dynastic royal tombs will help to create a distinct relative chronology, dated according to the reigns of individual kings, which will serve as a foundation for other areas in Egypt where no inscribed materials have been found.

The removal of the spoil heaps has not only provided much clearer insight into the variations and amount of the original tomb equipment, but has also revealed architectural details which were not observed by our predecessors working in this area, especially with regard to the covering of the tombs. It has also become clear that the royal tombs were not delimited by enclosure walls that separated them from each other, as for instance is the case for the contemporary tombs at Saqqara. In addition, there can no longer be any doubt that every king enlarged and changed his tomb in the course of its construction – a practice that was later followed by their successors during the more prominent eras of Egyptian history. This is especially true for the tomb of Khasekhemwy, which was the immediate forerunner of the (often-changed) Step Pyramid of Djoser.