

UCLA

Thinking Gender Papers

Title

The Importance of Gender Studies for Predynastic Egypt: A Case Study of Cemetery N7000 at Naga-ed-Deir

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1070z066>

Author

Lords, Krystal

Publication Date

2008-02-01

The Importance of Gender Studies for Predynastic Egypt:
A Case Study of Cemetery N7000 at Naga-ed-Deir

In the study of ancient cultures, gender issues are often ignored. Although Egyptology generally follows this trend, several scholars have published studies examining the status and role of women in Dynastic Egypt (Watterson 1991; Robins 1993; Capel and Markoe 1996). In many of these publications, the position of ancient Egyptian women is simply determined to be more or less powerful than that of men. Because artistic representations and textual sources are plentiful for ancient Egypt, these are the central pieces of evidence for much of the gender research on the civilization. However, art and literature assuredly skew the knowledge of what is ascertained as “powerful” in ancient Egypt because it was mainly upper-class men who commissioned and created these forms of representation (Roehrig 1996).

Even though this is the case, many researchers who remark on gender in ancient Egypt tend to choose their evidence based upon whether they are arguing for or against a so-called powerful status of women. For example, some scholars have commented that Egyptian wives were usually buried in their husband’s tomb and represented artistically in a “submissive” or “reverent” manner (Fischer 1989; Bochi 1998). However, other scholars have disagreed and asserted that images of tomb-owners’ wives and mothers were consistently given exalted treatment within tombs belonging to males (Robins 1993; Johnson 1996). Obviously, these broad generalizations about “power” or “status” ignore the Egyptian as an individual, where differences in age, economic class, time period, and location within Egypt are also an essential part of the research.

The primary use of artistic representations and textual sources as evidence for Egyptological research has brought about a widespread disregard for the Predynastic Period, when the writing system and artistic conventions were not yet fully developed. The Predynastic Period is dated from about 5000 to 3000 BCE and marks the development and foundation of cultural characteristics that would continue into the dynastic era for thousands of years (Midant-Reynes 2000). From the beginning of studies on the Predynastic Period, work on the era has primarily focused on examining increases in social stratification and the formation of the pharaonic state.

Prior to the last decade of the 19th century, information about the Predynastic Period was unknown. In 1894, two Egyptologists began excavating over 3000 burials at two then-unknown Predynastic cemeteries (Petrie and Quibell 1895). Compared to the lavish burials and monumental funerary architecture already discovered in Egypt, these burials were considered unusual, mainly due to the modest nature of the graves, which consisted of little more than the body of the deceased deposited in a simple pit hollowed out of the sand. Due to these unique discoveries, the cemeteries were attributed to primitive Egyptians, while the later, more lavish burials represented a group of foreign invaders who eventually initiated the formation of the Egyptian state (Petrie 1939). This foreign invader or "Dynastic Race" theory asserted that pharaonic civilization had been brought to Prehistoric Egypt by these foreigners, who were considered to be both culturally and politically superior to the native Egyptians (Vandier 1952; Derry 1956; Emery 1961; Baumgartel 1970).

By at least the end of the 1970s, the "Dynastic Race" theory was widely regarded as unacceptable, and while the focus of Predynastic studies remained fixed in the formation of the unified state, the theory shifted to an indigenous origin (Hoffman 1979; Bard 1994; Midant-

Reynes 2000). Although researchers initially tried to focus on continuities in Egyptian culture, extreme differences between the Predynastic sites of Upper and Lower Egypt were unmistakable, and a debate arose as to which of these areas laid the foundation for the pharaonic period.

Because of the complex social stratification of Upper Egypt and the disappearance of Lower Egyptian culture right before state unification, many studies asserted that the latter conquered the former and united Egypt. These studies focused on comparing the complex social hierarchy resident in Upper Egypt to the simple egalitarian society of Lower Egypt and how subjugation was inevitable. These ideas follow the pattern of the "Dynastic Race" theory, where a superior society invades and replaces an inferior group with new advanced culture.

This same attitude has also surfaced in statements authors have made regarding the status of women in the Predynastic Period as compared to post-unification. Some researchers have noted that females lost power to males during the formation of the Egyptian state (Brunton 1927; Hassan 1992). These scholars argue that before the rise of complex society in Egypt, women were powerful because of their important role in kinship-based social organization. With the rise of formal hierarchies, power was transferred from the home to the temple, which is considered a masculine domain. This argument stems from the assumption that women in ancient Egypt were regulated only to the house, which is demonstrably untrue. For example, all aspects of cloth manufacturing were conducted by women, and given the use of linen in everyday life as well as in mortuary contexts, this enterprise is thought to be second only in importance to agricultural production (Roehrig 1996). Women also held many significant political and religious positions, including: Pharaoh, vizier, "Mistress of the House", priestess, and "God's Wife" (Bryan 1996).

The theory that dynastic men replaced Predynastic women in roles of power follows the trend of research on the Predynastic Period, where one superior group, like the "Dynastic Race"

and Upper Egyptians, inevitably overtakes an inferior group, like the primitive natives and Lower Egyptians. Therefore, studies on gender in Predynastic Egypt do not usually focus on the Egyptian as an individual, or take into consideration the many facets that shape and constitute a person. Although this notable deficiency is incentive enough to argue for the application of gender studies to the era, a careful examination of finds from sites dating to the Predynastic Period show promising patterns related to gender studies. One such example is the Predynastic cemetery N7000 at Naga-ed-Deir.

The site of Naga-ed-Deir is located on the east bank of the Nile about 160 kilometers north of Thebes. The area around Naga-ed-Deir is at the center, and perhaps even the capital, of one of the three proto-state kingdoms believed to have existed in Upper Egypt prior to the political unification of the country (Kemp 1989). Therefore, it is an extremely important region, and the Predynastic cemetery N7000 represents the largest group of burials from this area. The cemetery was excavated in 1906 by Albert Lythgoe, who took and made extensive notes, sketches, and photographs of each tomb's contents, and whose precise scientific methods were advanced for his time (Lythgoe and Dunham 1965). Approximately 850 individuals were discovered in the 635 numbered graves at the site. Once the human remains were excavated, they were turned over to Doctor G. Elliot Smith, an expert on anatomy, who examined the material and recorded information regarding age, sex, physical abnormalities, cranial metrology, pathologies, and other physical characteristics (*idem.*). Due to the excellent preservation of the burials, other annotations included detailed information about hair, nails, skin, and genitalia.

Since the original excavation report of Cemetery N7000 was published, several studies on the site have been completed, although the subject matter of these reports always focus on state formation or the rise of social complexity (Savage 1997; Delrue 2001; Campagno 2003). In

1982 and 1990, the human remains from the site were re-examined in publications that produced credible age and sex assignments for the remains (Podzorski 1982, 1990). Some of these remains, as well as most of the material culture of the burials, were shipped to the Museum of Anthropology at the University of California in Berkeley, where I studied them for a thesis about items from the cemetery. In that project, I examined specific objects of personal adornment from graves at the site.

These items of personal adornment included: combs, hairpins, tusk amulets, clothing-pins, pouches, bangle bracelets, and beads. Combs, which were carved out of bone, horn, or ivory and decorated with figures of animals, birds, or abstract designs, were usually positioned in the hair of the deceased. Hairpins were similar to combs in placement, material, size, and design, except they ended in a point rather than a row of teeth. Tusk amulets were carved out of natural tusks and sometimes inscribed with lines or crosshatching. The tusks were perforated on one end and usually found in singles or pairs on a leather string around the neck of the deceased. Clothing-pins, which were crafted out of shell or ivory in a crescent shape ending in a knob, were sometimes discovered fastened into clothing at the shoulder. Pouches were constructed out of leather and tied to a braided rope for suspension from the waist. Bangle bracelets were carved out of undecorated shell or ivory and most commonly found in pairs around the wrist of the deceased. Beads were crafted out of 20 different materials into 14 different shapes and strung into necklaces or bracelets.

Part of my previous research included charting the age and sex of the interred individuals in relation to their personal objects of adornment. These charts showed notable patterns, for example, the placement of certain items occurred only with one sex or age group, but because these particular aspects were outside the scope of my project, they were not pursued further.

Recently, I began recording more specific data concerning correlations between object placement and the age and sex of individuals. Almost every item of personal adornment and the sex of the owner has now been charted.

The results of these tables demonstrate that combs, hairpins, and clothing-pins were customarily buried with women and tusk amulets and leather pouches typically with men. Bangle bracelets and beaded jewelry were found in the graves of both males and females, but because the thousands of beads discovered at the site have yet to be charted, further patterns may emerge, especially in the individual materials and shapes of the beads. When all of these objects were charted according to the age of the owner, the tables revealed that bracelets were usually buried with infants under one year old, tusk amulets and clothing-pins were mostly discovered with individuals no younger than the approximate age of five, and combs, hairpins, and leather pouches were customarily found with persons aged about thirteen and above.

A summary of these results shows that in graves at Naga-ed-Deir, certain items of personal adornment were buried with individuals based, at least partially, on the age and sex of the individual. At this point in the research, these patterns fall into three groups: first, both male and female infants had bangle bracelets; second, females age five and above had clothing-pins while males of the same age definition had tusk amulets, and third, females thirteen and up were buried with combs and hairpins while males of the same age group had leather pouches.

I believe that these preliminary findings might be evidence for certain characteristics in the lifecycle of the Predynastic Egyptians at Naga-ed-Deir, including a possible age of gender acquisition and certain gender and age-marked rituals. Due to the fact that this research is not complete, the conclusions are not absolute, but possibly demonstrate that within a year after birth, both males and females were given one or two bangle bracelets, perhaps in some type of

naming ceremony. Gender acquisition may have occurred around the age of five, when females were given clothing-pins and males were given tusk amulets. At the relative age of puberty, females were given combs and hair-pins while males were given leather pouches. This latter assemblage may also be connected to “coming of age”, marriage, or other rituals.

I now am working on recording other pertinent information about the objects and individuals, such as: the exact location, material, design, and quantity of the objects, as well as the alleged economic class of the individual and other items discovered in the graves, for example, palettes, figurines, pottery, and knives. I would also like to extend my research to other Predynastic cemeteries, where excavators and scholars have frequently made comments about “unusual” correlations between the sex or age of the deceased and associated burial techniques and items (Bard 1994; Friedman 1999). I hope that in championing and performing this type of research, future studies on gender in Egypt will eventually move away from only determining the “power” or “status” of women, and studies on Predynastic Egypt will move away from ideas about “subjugation” and “social hierarchy”, towards the realm of gender studies and an examination of the Predynastic Egyptian as an individual and as the product of a multi-faceted life-cycle.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bard, Kathryn A. 1994. *From Farmers to Pharaohs: Mortuary Evidence for the Rise of Complex Society in Egypt*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Baumgartel, E.J. 1970. "Predynastic Egypt". In *Cambridge Ancient History* 1:1. 463-497.
- Bochi, Patricia A. 1998. “Gender and Genre in Ancient Egyptian Poetry: The Rhetoric of Performance in the Harpers’ Songs”. *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 35: 89-95.

- Brunton, Guy. 1927. *Qau and Badari I. British School of Archaeology in Egypt and Egyptian Research Account*. London: British School of Archaeology.
- Bryan, Betsy M. 1996. "In Women Good and Bad Fortune are on Earth: Status and Role of Women in Egyptian Culture". In A.K. Capel and G.E. Markoe (eds.), *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven: Women in Ancient Egypt*. New York: Hudson Hills Press.
- Campagno, Marcelo. 2003. "Space and Shape: Notes on Pre- and Proto-State Funerary Practices in Ancient Egypt". In S. Bickel and A. Loprieno (eds.), *Basel Egyptology Prize 1*. Basel: Schwabe & Co. AG. 15-28.
- Capel, Anne K. and Glenn E. Markoe (eds.). 1996. *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven: Women in Ancient Egypt*. New York: Hudson Hills Press.
- Delrue, Parsival. 2001. "The Predynastic Cemetery N7000 at Naga-ed-Dêr a Re-Evaluation". In H. Willems (ed.), *Social Aspects of Funerary Culture in the Egyptian Old and Middle Kingdoms*. Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters. 21-66.
- Derry, D.E. 1956. "The Dynastic Race in Egypt". *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 42. 80-85.
- Emery, W.B. 1961. *Archaic Egypt*. Harmondsworth.
- Fischer, Henry G. 1989. "Women in the Old Kingdom and the Heracleopolitan Period". In B.S. Lesko (ed.), *Women's Earliest Records from Ancient Egypt and Western Asia*. Atlanta: Scholar's Press.
- Friedman, Renée F. 1999. "Preliminary Report on Field Work at Hierakonpolis: 1996-1998". *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 36: 1-35.
- Hassan, Fekri A. 1992. "Primeval Goddess to Divine King: The Mythogenesis of Power in the Early Egyptian State". In R. Friedman and B. Adams (eds.), *The Followers of Horus: Studies Dedicated to Michael Allen Hoffman*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Hoffman, Michael. 1979. *Egypt Before the Pharaohs: The Prehistoric Foundations of Egyptian Civilization*. New York: Knopf.
- Johnson, Janet H. 1996. "The Legal Status of Women in Ancient Egypt". In A.E. Capel and G.E. Markoe (eds.), *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven: Women in Ancient Egypt*. New York: Hudson Hills Press.
- Kemp, Barry J. 1989. *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization*. London: Routledge.
- Lythgoe, Albert M., and Dows Dunham. 1965. *The Predynastic Cemetery N7000 at Naga-ed-Der*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Midant-Reynes, Béatrix. 2000. *The Prehistory of Egypt: From the First Egyptians to the First Pharaohs*. Trans. by I. Shaw (2000). Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers.
- Petrie, W.M. Flinders. 1939. *The Making of Egypt*. London.
- Petrie, W.M. Flinders, and J.E. Quibell. 1895. *Naqada and Ballas*. London: British School of Archaeology in Egypt.
- Podzorski, Patricia V. 1982. *A Descriptive Summary of the Human Skeletal Remains from the Early Predynastic Cemetery N7000, Naga-ed-Der, Egypt*. Unpublished MA Thesis. University of California, Berkeley.
- Podzorski, Patricia V. 1990. *Their Bones Shall Not Perish: An Examination of Predynastic Human Skeletal Remains from Naga-ed-Der in Egypt*. London: SIA Publishing.
- Robins, Gay. 1993. *Women in Ancient Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Roehrig, Catharine H. 1996. "Women's Work: Some Occupations of Nonroyal Women as Depicted in Ancient Egyptian Art". In A.E. Capel and G.E. Markoe (eds.), *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven: Women in Ancient Egypt*. New York: Hudson Hills Press.
- Savage, Stephen H. 1997. "Descent Group Competition and Economic Strategies in Predynastic Egypt". *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 16: 226-268.
- Vandier, J. 1952. *Manuel d'Archéologie Égyptienne*. Paris.
- Watterson, Barbara. 1991. *Women in Ancient Egypt*. New York: St. Martin's Press.