

## PREDYNASTIC BURIALS

## دفنات ما قبل التاريخ

*Alice Stevenson*

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## PREDYNASTIC BURIALS

### دفنات ما قبل التاريخ

Alice Stevenson

Prädynastische Gräber

Enterrements à l'époque prédynastique

*In ancient Egypt, the primary evidence for the Predynastic Period, principally the fourth millennium BCE, derives from burials. In Upper Egypt, there is a clear trend over the period towards greater investment in mortuary facilities and rituals, experimentation in body treatments, and increasing disparity in burial form and content between a small number of elite and a larger non-elite population. In Maadi/Buto contexts in Lower Egypt, pit burials remained simple with minimal differentiation and less of a focus upon display-orientated rituals.*

يأتي الكم الأكبر من الدلائل الأثرية التي تشهد على عصر ما قبل التاريخ (القرن الرابع قبل الميلاد) من الدفنات، فيوجد بمصر العليا اهتمام واضح خلال هذه الفترة الزمنية بالاماكن الجنائزية والطقوس، واختبار طرق جديدة لمعالجة الأجساد، ويظهر أيضاً بهذا الوقت فجوة كبيرة ما بين دفنات عليا القوم والأغلبية العظمى من عامة الشعب. ظلت الدفنات بمنطقتي المعادي وبوتو بسيطة باختلافات ضئيلة بين الطبقات وتركيز أقل على الطقوس التي تعتمد على المظهر.

**T**he principle data for the Predynastic Period derives from funerary remains, and it was from Upper Egyptian cemetery sites such as Naqada and Ballas (Petrie et al. 1896) and el-Abadiya and Hiw (Diospolis Parva) (Petrie and Mace 1901) that the Predynastic was first recognized and classified. Over 15,000 burials are documented for Upper Egypt, but less than 600 Maadi/Buto graves from Lower Egypt are known (Hendrickx and Brink 2002).

From the content and form of these burials, the chronological framework of the fourth millennium BCE has been constructed and the nature and development of social complexity during the rise of the state charted. There has been a particular focus upon aspects of wealth and status differentiation (e.g., Bard 1994; Castillos 1998; Rowland 2007) following the work of Hoffman (1979: 336). The clear trend identified in these

studies, for Naqadan burials at least, is for a widening disparity between graves in terms of the effort invested in tomb construction (size and architecture) and in the provision of grave goods. Less attention has been paid to other aspects of social identities represented in burials, such as gender (however see Hassan and Smith 2002), age, and ethnicity (but see Stevenson 2008), although recent excavations at Adaima (Crubézy et al. 2002), Hierakonpolis (Friedman et al. 1999), and in the Delta (Rowland 2004) are providing firmer foundations for more nuanced interpretations, together with a reassessment of early twentieth century excavations.

#### Location

In comparison to Neolithic fifth millennium BCE 'house burials', interred in what are probably the abandoned parts of settlements at el-Omari (Debono and Mortensen 1990: 67

- 77) and Merimde Beni-Salame (but see Badawi 1978: 75; Junker 1929: 185 - 202; Kemp 1968), most graves known from the Badarian and fourth millennium BCE are from cemeteries set apart from habitation. Nevertheless, in both Upper and Lower Egypt some interments, predominately those of children, are still found within settlements (Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928: 89; Petrie et al. 1896: 2; Rizkana and Seeher 1989: 65 - 68), sometimes within large ceramic vessels ('pot-burials'). This may account, to some extent, for the under-representation of children within most cemeteries (although see Duchesne et al. 2003).

In Upper Egypt, the earliest identified burials date to just before the fourth millennium BCE and are considered to be Badarian burials (Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928). These are known principally from the locales of Badari, Mostagedda, and Matmar, although more limited evidence has been recognized further south to Hierakonpolis.

Naqada I burials are known to stretch further south into Lower Nubia (Firth 1912, 1915), but none are attested north of the Badari region. These cemeteries were usually placed at the low desert above the floodplain, thus facilitating their preservation. More detrimental to the mortuary record has been grave robbing, an occurrence not restricted to modern times, and many interments were plundered shortly after the funeral by perpetrators who were aware of the goods interred within (Friedman et al. 1999: 5 - 6).

From Naqada IIC on (following the sequence as outlined in Hendrickx 2006), burials with Upper Egyptian characteristics began to appear in Lower Egypt at Gerza, Haraga, Abusir el-Melek, and Minshat Abu Omar. These are associated with the spread, and eventual predominance, of Upper Egyptian social practices and ideology across Egypt.

In Upper Egypt, the contrast between an emerging elite and non-elite is manifest starkly at three sites, hypothesized to be regional

power centers of Upper Egypt (Kemp 2006: 76, fig. 22), where discrete elite cemetery areas were maintained apart from the others. These comprise: Hierakonpolis, Locality 6 (Adams 1996, 2000); Naqada, Cemetery T (Davis 1983; Petrie et al. 1896: 18 - 20); and Abydos, Cemetery U (Dreyer 1998).

Far fewer burials of the Maadi/Buto tradition are known in Lower Egypt, possibly due to Nile flooding and shifts in the river's course, as well as the fact that such burials were only archaeologically recognized and published relatively recently. Those that have been found are roughly equivalent to mid-Naqada I to Naqada IIB/C. The eponymous settlement site of Maadi and associated cemetery Wadi Digla (Rizkana and Seeher 1990) hold the largest concentration of material, with other notable remains at Heliopolis (Debono and Mortensen 1988). Eleven graves at el-Saff (Habachi and Kaiser 1985) represent the furthest south that burials of this sort are attested.

### *Naqadan Burials*

Predynastic burials were subterranean pits dug into the ground. Initially, during Badarian times, oval pits were the norm, but over the course of the Predynastic Period there was a trend towards larger, more rectangular graves. Nonetheless, many burials remained shallow and only large enough to accommodate a contracted body wrapped in a mat. Quantifying the proportion of such poor burials is problematic as they often went undocumented in early excavation reports or have been destroyed on account of their shallowness.

In late Naqada II, some funerary offerings in larger tombs came to be placed in separate niches, presaging the compartmentalization of Pharaonic Period tombs. A small percentage of Naqadan II/III tombs were plastered in or over with mud (e.g., Gerza, see Wainwright 1912: pl. II), or were lined or roofed with wood (e.g., at Abusir el-Melek, see Möller and Scharff 1926: pls. 50 - 51). Wood and pottery coffins are known by Naqada III (fig. 1). The use of mud-brick for the construction of

subterranean tombs is attested at a few sites in late Naqada II (e.g., Tomb 100 in Hierakonpolis), but by early Naqada III, this had been adopted as a standard feature of high-status burials, such as at Minshat Abu Omar (Kroeper 1992: fig. 3). The series of Naqada III brick-lined tombs at Abydos, some with multiple chambers, form direct precursors to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty royal tombs that extend south from this location.



Figure 1. Pottery coffin (c. Naqada IIIA1). El-Mahasna, grave H92.

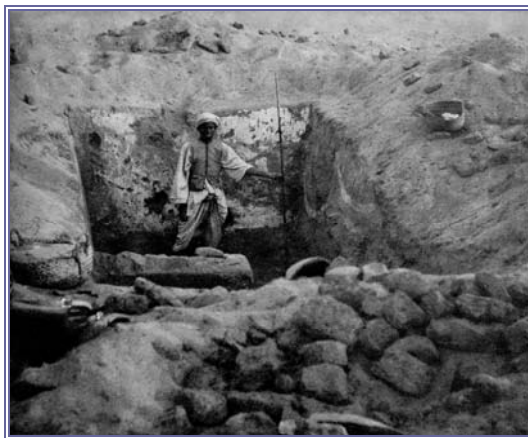


Figure 2. Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis.

The presence of an above ground feature demarcating burial plots may be assumed from the infrequency of inter-cutting graves and underlines the importance of social memory to ancient communities. There is limited evidence for the form these memorials might have taken, but a simple hillock, as has been observed at Adaima, is one possibility

(Crubézy et al. 2002: 454). In the elite cemetery at Hierakonpolis, Locality 6, post holes have been found around some graves, including a Naqada IIA-B tomb (Tomb 23), implying that some form of covering was erected over the burial chamber (Figueiredo 2004: 9 - 10). Measuring 5.5 m by 3.1 m, it is the largest tomb known for this date. Also unique to Hierakonpolis is a large (4.5 x 2 x 1.5 m deep) mud-brick-lined pit with painted plaster walls, known as Tomb 100 (fig. 2); it is dated to Naqada IIC, which attests to an early date for tomb painting in an elite context (Case and Payne 1962; Payne 1973; Quibell and Green 1902: 20 - 23, pls. 75 - 79). On a white mud-plastered background, images of animals, boats, and humans in combat are portrayed in red and black.

From Badarian times onward, great care, attention, and reverence was conferred upon the disposal of the dead. There is the general tendency to interpret these mortuary contexts as simply being for the benefit of the deceased and their afterlife (e.g., Midant-Reynes 2000: 187; Spencer 1982: 29), but the social significance of these practices for the surviving community should also be acknowledged. With regard to the latter, scholars have interpreted Naqadan funerary rituals in terms of competitive status display (e.g., Hoffman 1979: 327), identity expression, and social memory formation (e.g., Stevenson 2007; Wengrow 2006).

In Badarian burials, corpses were generally contracted on their left side with heads positioned south, facing west, and with hands clasped in front of the face. Bodies were carefully laid upon a mat and wrapped in animal skins, with occasional addition of a pillow made from straw or rolled-up animal skin.

Naqadan graves are similar, and although single inhumation was the standard arrangement, multiple burials do occur—usually two to three bodies, much more rarely four or five (e.g., at Naga el-Deir and Naqada Cemetery T). It has been suggested that multiple burials are more common in earlier Naqada I Periods (Petrie and Mace 1901: 32 -

35), but a statistical survey is wanting (although see Thomas 2004: 1045 - 1047).

In Naqada I, bodies were also predominately placed on the left side with the head to the south and face to the west. This position was still the most common in Naqada II, although more deviations in alignment occurred, particularly for those Naqadan burials in the north. At Gerza (Naqada IIC-IID2), for instance, several combinations of position are evident (Wainwright 1912: 5). In Naqada III, the cemeteries of Tarkhan and Tura display a greater alternation in alignment; on average, about 70% were positioned with heads pointed to the south and 30% to the north, 72% were faced west and 28% east (Castillos 1982: tbs. 3 and 4).

In addition to inhumation of the complete corpse, other body treatments are known but are far less frequent. These include post-interment removal of the skull (e.g., Adaima, see Midant-Reynes et al. 1996: 96), rearrangement of skeletal remains within the grave (e.g., el-Amra, see Randall-MacIver and Mace 1902: pl. V; Wengrow 2006: 116 - 119), and the first occurrence of mummification in the form of resin-soaked linen pressed upon the hands and around the face of some Naqada IIA-B cadavers (e.g., Hierakonpolis, see Jones 2002, 2007).

The Neolithic burials at Merimde were usually without grave goods, and at el-Omari only one small pot was generally included. In contrast, from the Badarian onward, the investment in burial symbolism was more pronounced, and the dead could be accompanied to the grave by numerous types of accoutrements, the number of which varied considerably depending upon period and social factors, including status. In all periods, several interments were still entirely devoid of offerings, although decomposition of organic offerings as well as grave robbing may account for some of these absences. Yet other graves contained numerous artifacts, with the average number of grave goods increasing from the Badarian through to mid-Naqada II; approximately only 2% of graves contained more than 10 goods in Badarian times

compared to roughly 13% in Naqada I and II (Castillos 1982: tb. 8). From Naqada I-III, fewer and fewer individuals were buried in graves that possessed abundant grave goods.

Ceramics are the most prominent offerings in all periods, but the profile of pottery types changed significantly. In Naqada I, ceramic offerings were primarily fine-wares (on average no more than 5 per grave) made up of black-topped (B-ware) vessels (comprising over 50% assemblage), red polished (P-ware) vessels, and occasionally white cross-lined (C-ware) vessels. In Naqada II, these fine black-topped ceramics declined in number, C-ware disappeared, and there was a shift towards the inclusion of larger quantities of coarser fabric vessels (rough-ware), sometimes numbering in the hundreds in elite tombs, as well as the introduction of marl clay vessels. This shift from fewer fine containers to greater numbers of rougher forms has been related to the increasing importance of storage of offerings and vestiges of complex burial rites (see Wengrow 2006: 72 - 98). These include: remains of bread, beer, and animal products (Fahmy 2000), remnants perhaps of a funeral feast shared with and presented to the deceased; charcoal and ashes, possibly from a 'great burning', the residue of which was transferred to the grave (Fahmy 1999: 15; Hoffman 1979: 17; Petrie et al. 1896: 19); or 'dummy offerings' of sand, earth, or mud (Petrie et al. 1896: 39). This diversity of contents reflects the increasing complexity of mortuary rituals and social obligations that were conducted at and around burials.

Other than pottery, beads, sometimes of a wide variety of materials, are the most common artifacts found, but a diverse array of stone vessels (especially in Naqada II), mudstone palettes, flint bladelets, and knives are also fairly frequent. Clay figurines, stone maceheads, animal bones, pendants, and ivory spoons or pins are found more sporadically. Notable is the increasingly wide repertoire of goods, such as lapis lazuli, obtained via long-distance exchange during Naqada II, interpreted as forming part of a prestige-goods economy (see examples in Hendrickx



and Bavay 2002). In particular the imported Canaanite jars (over 400) from the early Naqada III, twelve-chambered tomb U-j at Abydos (Dreyer 1998; Hartung 2002) give some indication as to the social abilities of emerging leaders.

Grave goods were often carefully arranged around the corpse, and it has been remarked that Naqadan mortuary traditions included a ‘formula’ in which “... each object had its appointed position” and that there were “fixed rituals for funeral observance” (Petrie 1939: 35). There is certainly a recurring structure to many tombs, particularly those from Naqada IIC onwards, with wavy-handled jars usually placed above the head, large storage jars below the feet, and objects such as small stone jars and palettes neatly placed near the head and hands (fig. 3). It may not be possible to have insight into the complete symbolic content of these practices, but perhaps in the patterns created by their repetition it is possible to gain a sense that there were socially specific understandings of how a burial should be properly, and efficaciously, conducted, in a manner that suggests the grave could act as an arena for display-orientated practices (Stevenson 2007; Wengrow 2006: 117 - 123). Nevertheless, to say that mortuary rituals were ‘fixed’ is an overstatement as no two Predynastic burials are identical. Rather than there being a universal set of rules governing arrangement, there seem to have been general principles that permitted an improvisatory performance of burial.

Such choice in funeral arrangements is also clear from the objects selected for inclusion in the tomb. It was previously assumed that some objects were made specifically for mortuary consumption, such as decorated pottery (D-ware). Examination of use-wear and settlement deposits has demonstrated, however, that this is not the case (Buche 1998) and that the majority of tomb paraphernalia derived from daily life. Nevertheless, with the benefit of concurrent excavation of cemeteries and settlement at Adaima, it is evident that whilst all the pottery



Figure 3. Naqada II burial (c. Naqada IID). El-Abadiya (Diospolis Parva), grave B379.



Figure 4. Maadi, burial number 44 (c. 3900 – 3600 BCE).

recorded from the cemetery is attested in the settlement, only certain forms from the settlement were deemed to be appropriate in a funeral context (Buche 1998: 86). Comparison of the types of flints found in settlement and burial contexts also reveals preferential selection for blades, bladelets, and knives for use in mortuary arenas (Holmes 1989: 333). Palettes may also have been used differently in funeral contexts in comparison to everyday life, with green malachite staining predominant in burial contexts but red ochre more common on settlement palettes (Baduel 2008).

#### *Lower Egyptian/Maadi/Buto Burials*

In comparison to Upper Egyptian tombs, Maadi/Buto burials (fig. 4) in Lower Egypt are simpler and are poorly represented in the

archaeological record. These graves were oval pits into which the deceased was laid in a contracted position, sometimes wrapped in a mat or other fabric, with the head usually positioned south and facing east. No collective burials are known, but the single inhumations display minimal differentiation in size and provision. Interspersed amongst the human burials were individual burials for goats and a dog, which were accompanied by some ceramics (Flores 2003).

Grave goods are scarce, and most burials at Maadi and Wadi Digla were devoid of offerings. Some contained a single vessel, although a minority contained more—the maximum found at Maadi was eight and at Heliopolis ten. Inclusions of other artifact classes within the burials are rare. *Aspatharia rubens* shells, flint bladelets, gray ore, and malachite pigmentation were documented in a few of the graves at Wadi Digla. One rhomboid palette, an ivory comb, and a single

stone vessel were exceptional additions to a few graves in the Wadi Digla cemetery.

Thus, in contrast to the Naqadan burials, the body at these sites was the primary focus of the grave rather than acting as a foundation around which meanings, relationships, and social statements could be represented by the juxtaposition of several categories of artifacts. This dearth of material is more likely to be a matter of social custom rather than a reflection of the poverty of this society, for the associated settlement deposits displayed evidence for significant amounts of copper, stone vases, as well as examples of locally styled, decorated pottery and anthropoid figures (Rizkana and Seeher 1987, 1989). Therefore, the simpler nature of these burials is not to suggest these communities were any less complex in the social management of death, which may have been conducted away from the cemetery site or in an intangible manner.

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- Figure 1. Pottery coffin (c. Naqada IIIA1). El-Mahasna, grave H92. Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society.  
Figure 2. Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis. Courtesy of the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies Library, University of Cambridge.  
Figure 3. Naqada II burial (c. Naqada IID). El-Abadiya (Diospolis Parva), grave B379. Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society.  
Figure 4. Maadi, burial number 44 (c. 3900 – 3600 BCE). (Rizkana and Seeher 1990: pl. II.)