



INTRODUCTION

In 1822, when Jean-François Champollion sent his famous letter to M. Dacier, secrétaire perpétuel de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, declaring that he had discovered the key to interpreting Egyptian hieroglyphs,* Egyptology was born, and a brand new page was turned on the history of the pharaohs. At this time, however, it had not yet been realised that this pharaonic era was preceded by a very long period of prehistory in Egypt.

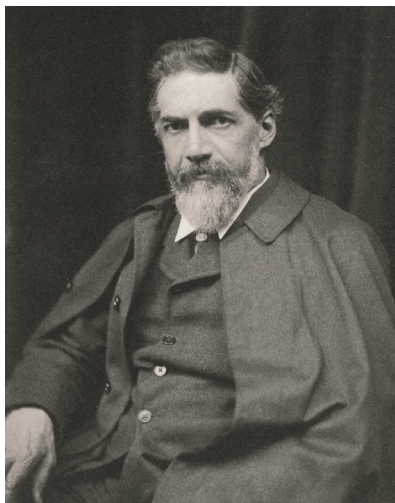


Fig. 1. Portrait of William Matthew Flinders Petrie (1853–1942), c.1890 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

It was in fact not until 1895, just over seventy years later, that a massive cemetery was excavated at the site of Naqada by the British archaeologist William Matthew Flinders Petrie (Fig. 1), providing the first substantial evidence for the Predynastic* period. Long regarded as a kind of ‘dark age’, the Predynastic both preceded and foreshadowed pharaonic civilisation. The importance of the question of Egypt’s origins was already widely recognised, even at the very birth of Egyptology. However, in the absence of any Predynastic equivalent of the Rosetta Stone to decipher, it is easy to see how the years went by and this issue continued to be only a faint watermark on the first page of the history book.

Where did the pharaohs come from? Was it simply a miracle that three thousand years of history seemingly emerged from the desert sands? Or did these rulers come from the Near East, where other civilisations had previously flourished for several millennia? What happened in the Nile Valley before the pharaohs’ arrival? The researchers in the nascent field of Egyptology were perplexed—perhaps even tortured—by this crucial question: was there any prehistory in Egypt? Were stone tools to be found, like those already being discovered in Europe? All of these questions were left to fester in the shadows for almost a century. However, research in recent decades has shed significant light, sweeping away some early uncertainties and opening a new chapter in the history of African populations living at the very gates of the Orient. Certainly, the environment cannot be used to explain everything, but it does offer a finite set of possibilities: opportunities that humans have been able to exploit, and constraints that have forced them to adapt or look elsewhere.

It is in these ecosystems, and in this unstable equilibrium, that the curtain rises on the stage of prehistory in general and the Predynastic period in particular. We will therefore take the environment as our starting point.

The geographical setting

Clinging to the northeast corner of Africa, at the crossroads of two continents, Egypt is located in the so-called ‘arid tropical zone’. It owes its existence to one of the world’s greatest rivers, the Nile, which springs from the heart of Africa, traversing 6671 kilometres of arid terrain, then finally percolating across a vast deltaic plain, and flowing into the Mediterranean. The Nile is the dominant force in Egypt, defining two major geographical areas: the Valley and its Delta (Fig. 2). Two large—and quite different—deserts lie on either side: the Libyan (or Western) Desert and the Arabian (or Eastern) Desert. The Sinai Peninsula is effectively an extension of the Eastern Desert beyond the Gulf of Suez, opening out onto Asia..



Fig. 2. The Nile Valley in Upper Egypt © Béatrix Midant-Reynes.

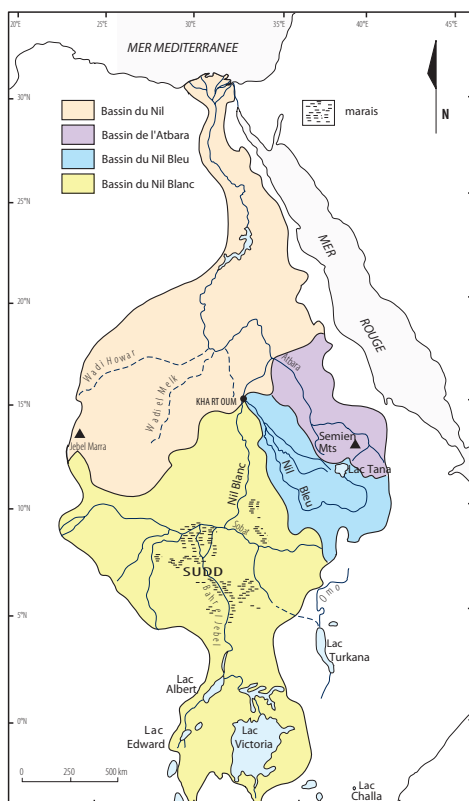
THE NILE: AN ENIGMATIC AND MIRACULOUS RIVER

Few rivers have captured the imagination to such an extent as the Nile. Even Greek travellers found it strange that a river should behave in the opposite way to those familiar to them in the Mediterranean world: that it should swell in midsummer, in the midst of the driest season; that a miraculous annual flood should fertilise the land each year; and that it should flow from so far south that it was said to emerge from the eternally snowy Mountains of the Moon. It was not until 1860 that an expedition led by two English explorers, John Speke and

James Grant, identified the origin of the White Nile in the channel that flowed out of Lake Victoria, between present-day Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda; thus, putting an end to two thousand years of anguished uncertainty and aborted expeditions.

In fact, the stage of the Nile that flows through Egypt represents the confluence of two great rivers: the White Nile and the Blue Nile, which meet at the city of Khartoum, in Sudan. Originating in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa, at an altitude of 1135 metres above sea level, the White Nile plunges some 680 metres in tumultuous falls to reach the South Sudan region, where it is joined from the west by the Bahr el-Ghazal with its immense drainage basin,

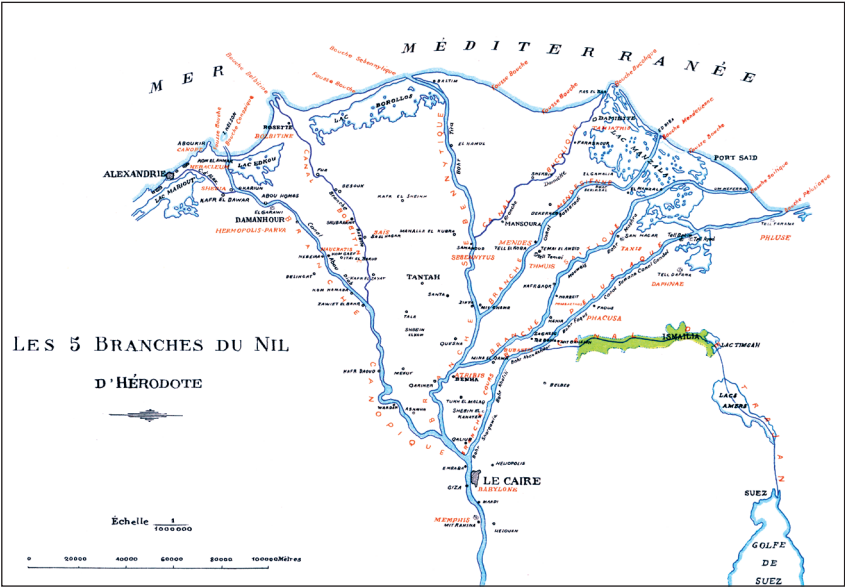
and then from the east by the Sobat River flowing down from Ethiopia (see Map 1). It is another 800 km further to the north that it receives the churning waters of the tempestuous Blue Nile, which flows down from Lake Tana, at an altitude of 1800 m above sea level, on the Ethiopian plateau. It is the Blue Nile that erodes tons of fertile silt from the loose soil and then deposits it far downstream, all the way down to the Egyptian Delta. Some 200 km further north, the waters of the Atbara, also originating in Ethiopia, mark the final recharge before the Nile crosses 1000 km of desert. The miraculous Nile flood is caused by the monsoon rains that fall in late spring on the Ethiopian volcanic highlands, triggering a dramatic rise in water levels that reach their peak in August–September. The water level recedes gradually until reaching low-water* in April–May. Six rocky cataracts* punctuate the Nile's course. The first cataract marks Egypt's southern natural border at Elephantine (modern-day Aswan). The sixth cataract extends to the confluence of the White Nile and the Blue Nile, at Khartoum. The second cataract, at Wadi Halfa, has now disappeared beneath the waters of Lake Nasser.



Map 1. The Nile basin (after Williams 2020: 21, Fig. 1.2).

THE VALLEY AND THE DELTA: TWO MAJOR GEOGRAPHICAL ZONES

In its Egyptian section, the river creates two contrasting ecosystems, each of which played a significant role in the development of the first Neolithic* cultures. To the south, from the first cataract to the base of the Nile Delta, stretches a plain that is narrow in places, wider in others, and occasionally meandering. Emerging from the cataract, the Nile carves its way through thick limestone massifs rich in flint deposits, carved by deep wadis* that have carried blocks torn from the mountains for kilometres, polishing them over thousands of years. In contrast, the Delta fans out over an area of 2000 km², forming a wide alluvial plain with fertile soil made up of clay and silt, mixed with sands brought from the volcanic plateaus of Ethiopia. Here, the Nile splits up into various branches extending all the way to the Mediterranean. Only two of these remain active today (Rosetta and Damietta), but there were originally at least five in ancient times (Map 2).



Map 2. The Nile Delta, as described by Herodotus (after Toussoun 1922: Pl. III).

To the north, where the land slopes gently down to the sea, lies the region of the great coastal lakes (Maryut, Edku, Burullus, and Manzala), some of which open onto the Mediterranean. These lakes sit within a hinterland of ponds, lagoons, and marshes. To the east, one reaches the Mediterranean coast of the Near East and the Levantine corridor, while to the west lie the arid expanses of the Libyan Desert. Prior to the creation of the Aswan High Dam in 1964, the annual flood transformed this wide, fan-shaped plain into a vast lake from which only sandy islets, called geziras,* emerged.

It was on these islets, safe from flooding, that people settled as early as the fifth millennium BCE, continuing to live there until the landscape was transformed into flat terrain with controlled waters as a result of the large-scale agricultural projects of the nineteenth century and the construction of dams (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. The Nile Delta © Béatrix Midant-Reynes.

These two ecosystems—the Nile Valley and the Delta—are linked to each other without any apparent obstacle by the Nile. However, traversing this long waterway was less straightforward than a leisurely felucca ride might suggest. Navigation was not possible year-round due to the river's unique hydrology, with its periods of flooding and low water, its currents, and occasional high winds. The high-water season was the most favourable for navigation, while the low-water period made any movement virtually impossible, as boats ran aground on the sandbanks. Going up or down the river meant negotiating the currents and winds, the strength of which varied according to the seasons and regions, testing both the skills of the boatmen and the quality of their vessels.

TWO VERY DIFFERENT DESERTS

Seen from the sky, Egypt appears as a long green ribbon crossing a vast yellow expanse of sand and mountain ranges. To the west lies the Libyan Desert, golden and sandy, remarkable in its southern part for its dune fields (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Sand dunes in the Dush region, Kharga Oasis © Béatrix Midant-Reynes.

This would be an area of absolute aridity were it not for the oases, a series of major depressions that collect water from underground networks. The oases are spread from north to south, bringing life to the desert like fleeting miracles. In the far northwest, Siwa, the Berber city, extends towards the Libyan border and would not play a role in Egyptian history until the seventh century BCE (the Twenty-sixth Dynasty) and around 331 BCE, when Alexander the Great came there to consult the oracle of Amun.

Conversely, the great Faiyum depression, the closest to the Nile, is completely integrated with the valley. Further south, the closed basins of Bahariya and Farafra follow one another, between which rise the surreal sculptures



Fig. 5. The White Desert, Farafra Oasis © Béatrix Midant-Reynes.

of the White Desert (Fig. 5), then that of Dakhla and finally Kharga, the southernmost. These oases constitute stages along a route parallel to the Nile, offering access to the Libyan and Sudanese borders, and beyond to Chad. But as well as being stages leading to distant horizons, these oases are places of vibrant

life, marked by the stamp of humanity, lands made fertile by the Nubian Sandstone Aquifer system (groundwater exploited through artesian wells) where livestock farming and agriculture flourish.

From the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries onwards, the long history of this part of the eastern Sahara has become better understood, revealing alternating cycles of humidity and aridity that have sometimes allowed human communities to flourish and at other times forced them into exile.

The Eastern Desert, located between the Nile and the Red Sea, comprises landscapes entirely different from those of the Western Desert. Here, tectonic movements have thrown up a mountain range out of the depths of the earth, stretching from the vicinity of Cairo to the Sudanese border, and reaching heights of over 2000 metres. Unlike the Western Desert, which receives almost no rainfall, the high massifs of the Eastern Desert receive approximately 120 mm of precipitation annually. This rain, absorbed by the deep wadis, gives rise to torrents that can sometimes have a devastating impact. This desert has yielded unexpected treasures in the form of a whole variety of rocks and precious minerals, enriching the art and architecture of the pharaonic era: gold, porphyry, sandstone, granite, gneiss, alabaster, marble, gabbro, diorite, quartz, and greywacke* (the latter from Wadi Hammamat). At the dawn of Christianity, the first hermits populated the silence of this region known as the 'Thebaid'. At the foot of the eastern slopes of the mountains, along the narrow shores of the Red Sea, maritime expeditions set out for the turquoise mines of Sinai and the more distant land of Punt.

SINAI: LAND OF PASSAGE

If you cross the thirty or so kilometres of the Gulf of Suez, which separates the Eastern Desert coast from the western shores of Sinai, you find yourself on



■ Fig. 6. Paysage du Sinaï © B. Midant-Reynes

a peninsula that is essentially a region in its own right, both geologically and in terms of the history of the people who have inhabited and traversed it (Fig. 6). Geologically speaking, the Sinai peninsula is a product of the Red Sea, or more precisely of the rift formed by the meeting of the African and Asian tectonic plates, which extends northward from the fracture zone of the Great Rift Valley.*

It is in this narrow corridor that the Red Sea flowed, pointing one finger toward the Negev and the Jordan Valley—the Gulf of Aqaba—and the other toward the Mediterranean—the Gulf of Suez. These two tectonic rifts isolated Sinai from the rest of the two continents of which it forms the junction, Africa and Asia, and shaped its triangular form. In its southern part, the mountain range of the Eastern Desert is found, offering the same array of igneous,* metamorphic,* and sedimentary* rocks, with its highest points around Mount Sinai (2285 m) and Mount Saint Catherine (2642 m). To the north, a sandstone plateau slopes down towards the Mediterranean. It was along this ancient coastal route, known as the ‘Way of Horus’ (running from the eastern Nile Delta to the northeastern corner of Sinai), that one reached Gaza and the Near East. The Way of Horus was the primary means by which people entered the peninsula, but few actually stayed. Only the hermits of early Christianity found another Thebaid in the stark stillness of the mineral world. No people settled there for any significant length of time until the early centuries of Islam, when Bedouin populations came to lead a nomadic life. Sinai is a place of passage and wandering. From prehistoric times onwards, hunter-gatherers from the Levant made incursions into the area. But it was copper and turquoise that the Egyptians were seeking in Sinai from a very early date, launching expeditions as early as 3000 BCE, and leaving evidence of their presence on the rocks themselves. It is of course also through these primordial massifs that the Hebrews are said to have sought their way.

The discovery of the Predynastic

END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: THE BEGINNINGS

It was a difficult process for European scholars to accept that there had been a prehistoric period in the land of the pharaohs, so deeply had the Christian tradition—steeped in the biblical vision of human origins—permeated minds for centuries.

It was only in 1859, with the recognition of the work of Jacques Boucher de Perthes (inventor of the stratigraphic method) and the highly significant publication of Charles Darwin’s book on the origin of species, that prehistory as an object of research gained its legitimacy, thirty-seven years after the birth of Egyptology. There was not yet any technique available to allow people to create a chronology for human evolution, as radiocarbon dating would begin to do after 1950. Thus, the painted bison in the Altamira cave, discovered in 1868, was initially viewed with some perplexity. A year later, in 1869, Napoleon III and Empress Eugénie inaugurated the Suez Canal, while the trumpets of Aida were preparing to sound on the stage of the new Cairo opera house (although this performance was delayed, and would not take place until 1871). It was around then that the prehistorian and archivist Adrien Arcelin was sent to Egypt by the French Ministry of Public Instruction to try to find traces of the so-called ‘Stone Ages’ that Europe had lately discovered. Two unusually adventurous

scholarly travellers, Ernest-Théodore Hamy and François Lenormant, had already noted the abundance of worked flint on those upper terraces of the Nile that lay above the annual flood. Arcelin took a solidly scientific approach to his task.

From Cairo to Aswan, Arcelin travelled through the country, identifying thousands of stone tools clearly made by humans, attesting to the existence of a primitive people who had occupied the banks of the river before the first pharaohs.

The question was a very good one, but for Egyptologists at that time—still stubbornly resisting and vigorously refuting these new ideas—it was irrelevant. The worked flints, they argued, were from the historical period, since the Egyptians had always worked them, and more would be needed to demonstrate the existence of an Egyptian prehistory. This was achieved by other scholars, including the German botanist Georg Schweinfurth, the Frenchman Jacques de Morgan (Fig. 7), and the Briton Flinders Petrie (Fig. 1).



Fig. 7. Portrait of Jacques de Morgan (1857–1924), 1891 © Bibliothèque nationale de France, Société de Géographie, Paris.

So we begin with Flinders Petrie, at the end of the nineteenth century, in the great cemetery of Naqada, in Upper Egypt (Map at the beginning of the book). Petrie was working for the Egypt Exploration Fund, which had been founded by Amelia Edwards in 1882, and which initially had biblical aims: to find traces of the Hebrews and to unearth their remains. However, at Naqada, Petrie found neither Hebrews nor carved stones; instead, he found just over two thousand tombs of a type completely unknown until then. Men, women, and children were buried in a flexed, foetal-style position, on their sides, their hands most often in front of their faces. The commonest funerary objects were pottery vessels with a beautiful red polish, often with black rims, and sometimes decorated in white paint either with geometric patterns or with scenes depicting Nile animals (and, more rarely, dogs and hunters). Another category of ceramics featured dark ochre-coloured images executed on a creamy beige background, primarily comprising curved boats and silhouettes of women with raised arms, like dancers. But the funerary objects extended well beyond pottery; in front of the amazed and probing eyes of the archaeologist and his numerous workers lay the full range of Predynastic artefacts, including stone vessels, zoomorphic greywacke palettes,* pins, spoons, and combs carved from bone and ivory, terracotta figurines, mace-heads, and flint knives. All of this material, however, was not yet recognised as Predynastic, for Petrie initially attributed these remains to the so-called New Race*, a foreign population from elsewhere, to whom the fall of the Old Kingdom was attributed: in other words, invaders, with strange customs, dating to historical times. Petrie's hypothesis shows how the idea of Egyptian prehistory still struggled to gain acceptance. However, his ideas did meet with resistance. Jacques de Morgan, recently appointed Director General of the Egyptian Antiquities Service (in a context of strong diplomatic

tensions and power struggles between France and Great Britain—one need only mention Fashoda*), acknowledged the excellence of the English archaeologist's excavation methods, which were far ahead of their time, but he strongly disagreed with his conclusions. In the introduction to the second volume of his work *Recherches sur les origines de l'Égypte*, published in 1897 and largely devoted to a monumental mastaba* at Naqada (Fig. 8) (Focus 1), de Morgan argued: 'It follows from these observations (a comparative table between the New Race and the Pharaonic Egyptians) that the two races did not live side by side, that there was no contact between the men of the New Race and the pharaonic Egyptians, and that, consequently, these two races did not occupy the same country at the same time. [...] One of the peoples therefore preceded the other on the soil of Egypt, and the first occupier can only be the New Race, since it borrowed nothing from the other despite its less advanced level of civilisation.'

Focus 1. The monumental mastaba tomb at Naqada

In 1897, Jacques de Morgan excavated a monumental mud-brick tomb at Naqada. Rectangular in plan, this mastaba,* measuring 54 m long by 27 m wide, is decorated with niches and recesses, and comprises 16 compartments built into the superstructure. The grave goods consist of pottery vessels, stone vessels, and exquisitely crafted objects in ivory, flint, and metal, as well as inscriptions mentioning the names of kings of the First Dynasty and members of their families. De Morgan attributed this tomb to a courtier called Rekhit, son of King Narmer and brother of King Hor-Aha, but Petrie considered it to be the burial place of Neith-Hotep, long considered to be the wife of Narmer and the mother of Hor-Aha. Others argued that it was the tomb of the semi-mythical ruler Menes. Today, it is generally agreed that Petrie's identification was correct, and that this mastaba is therefore the eternal resting place of Queen Neith-Hotep, whose family origins were in the Naqada region. She was perhaps the wife of Hor-Aha rather than his father Narmer, and thus would have been the mother of Djer, acting as co-regent after her husband's death, during the early years of Djer's reign.

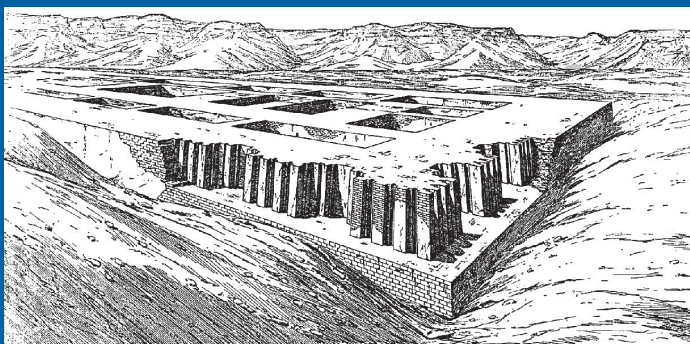


Fig. 8. The mastaba at Naqada (after de Morgan 1897: 157, Fig. 521).

Petrie resigned himself to accepting what he would call in Prehistoric Egypt, published in 1920, de Morgan's 'happy intuition' despite the lack of 'definite proof', the latter suggesting a hint of irritation on the part of the British archaeologist. However, it was Petrie, with his advanced scientific methods (very different from those of other researchers at the time), who was responsible for the 'invention' of the Predynastic period, or at least the establishment of its cultural definition and chronology (Fig. 9) (Focus 2). De Morgan had been the first to identify the Predynastic, but it was Petrie who truly analysed it and brought it to the attention of the scientific community through his numerous publications.

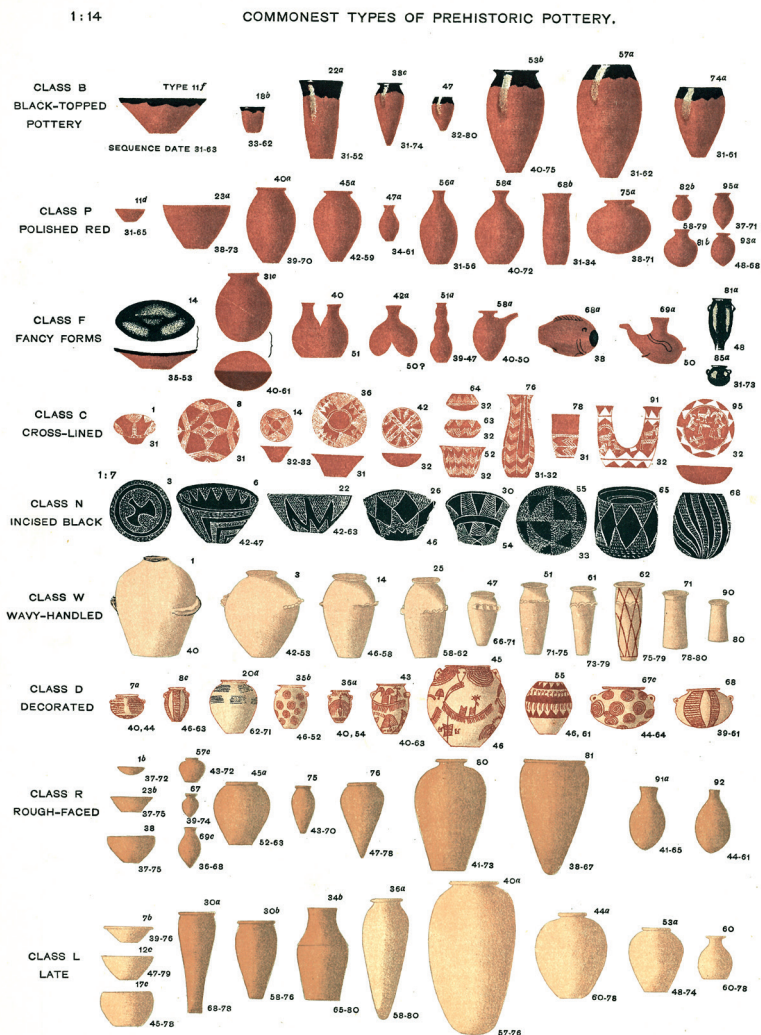


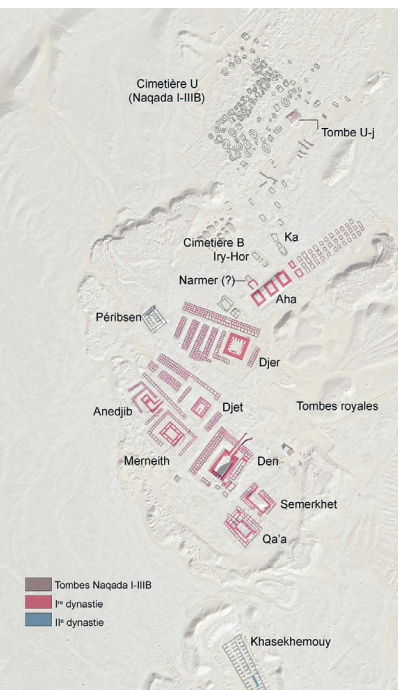
Fig. 9. The so-called 'sequence dates', a seriation of Predynastic ceramics, proposed by Flinders Petrie on the basis of the material from the cemeteries of Abadiya and Hu (after Petrie 1901b: frontispiece).

Following Petrie's efforts, excavators working on behalf of the Egypt Exploration Fund uncovered large groups of tombs of the same type, scattering their tiny dots across the Map of the Nile Valley, and gradually tracing a chain of settlements from Asyut to Aswan. One of these sites, the large cemetery of Armant, excavated and published by Robert L. Mond and Oliver H. Myers in 1937, would later serve as the basis for Werner Kaiser's work in the 1960s (see below).

Focus 2. The Predynastic chronologies of Petrie, Kaiser, and Hendrickx

When Petrie excavated the tombs in the Naqada cemetery during the winter of 1895–6, he discovered types of pottery for which no parallels were yet known. Although he initially attributed them to a foreign population ('New Race') that had supposedly invaded Egypt at the beginning of the Middle Kingdom, he quickly recognised this error and understood that these ceramics constituted a unique corpus forming the basis for a Predynastic chronology (Petrie 1901). He then embarked upon the first attempt at archaeological seriation, selecting approximately 700 ceramic types from the cemeteries of Naqada, Ballas, and Diospolis Parva, which he then classified into nine categories according to their morphology: Black-topped, Red-polished, Fancy, White cross-lined, Incised black, Wavy-handled, Decorated, Rough-faced, and Late (Fig. 9). He then focused on 900 tombs containing five or more vessels, hypothesizing that the association of different types reflected a chronological evolution of the tombs. He observed that the White cross-lined type was never associated with the Decorated and Wavy-handled types; and that the Wavy-handled type evolved from a globular shape with well-marked wavy handles into a cylindrical shape on which the handle was eventually replaced by a simple incised line (Fig. 34). He then divided the assemblages from these tombs into fifty chronological groups named Sequence Dates (SD), numbered from 30 to 80. He subdivided these sequences into three main groups which, for him, constituted distinct archaeological cultures: Amratian* (SD 30–37), Gerzean* (SD 38–60) and Semainean* (SD 60–75), which subsequently became the three phases of the Naqada culture: Naqada I, Naqada II, and Naqada III.

This initial chronology was widely used until the 1950s. In 1957, the German archaeologist Werner Kaiser—aware of the system's limitations (e.g. its failure to account for the horizontal distribution of tombs within necropolises)—published a paper revising this chronology on the basis of the Armant cemetery, as well as material from other burial sites in Upper Egypt. He divided the Predynastic pottery into eleven subdivisions (Stufen), thus refining Petrie's chronology into a number of phases and subphases: Naqada Ia–c, Naqada IIa–d, and Naqada IIIa–c. The most recent major revision of this chronology was undertaken by Stan Hendrickx (1995), who redefined Kaiser's Stufen using well-documented cemeteries from both Upper and Lower Egypt. He confirmed the division of the Naqada culture into three main periods, and proposed a new subdivision: Naqada I–IIB, Naqada IIC–D, and Naqada IIIA–D. This seriation is a 'relative' chronology, since it only allows us to order different phases determined by ceramic typology, but it has now been complemented by an 'absolute' chronology, based primarily on radiocarbon dating, which associates dates with each Predynastic phase (see Table 1 at the end of the book; see also Dee et al. 2013).



Focus 3. Abydos

Abydos, in Upper Egypt near Sohag, is one of the oldest and most important religious centres in ancient Egypt. Linked to the cult of Osiris, god of the dead and resurrection, this site was particularly honoured by Egyptian rulers, and became a place of pilgrimage and remembrance during the pharaonic period. The kings of the First Dynasty and two kings of the Second Dynasty were buried in the necropolis of Umm el-Qa'ab, located in the desert 1.5 km from the alluvial plain at Abydos. Their tombs were large mud-brick monuments, accompanied by storerooms and subsidiary* burials. Although plundered since antiquity, these early royal tombs have nevertheless yielded sumptuous furnishings (including stone vases, ivory objects, and stelae). These royal funerary complexes included a set of imposing brick enclosures (probably serving as ceremonial spaces), built some distance from the tombs.

Fig. 10. Plan of the Umm el-Qa'ab cemetery at Abydos (after Somaglino 2020: 32, and Google Earth image).

At Abydos (Fig. 10) (Focus 3), Émile Amélineau, following in the footsteps of Auguste Mariette, excavated the royal tombs at Umm el-Qa'ab using methods that were considered scandalously inadequate even by contemporary archaeologists. Petrie, succeeding Amélineau at the site, applied his customary rigour and, thanks to the numerous inscriptions found on seals, impressions, and tablets, managed to establish an initial ordering of the kings of the first two dynasties. The history and material culture of this 'Early Dynastic' period (also sometimes called 'Thinite' because the historian Manetho stated that its capital was at This or Thinis, near Abydos) were gradually revealed by a series of vast cemeteries. Apart from Abydos, most of these Early Dynastic cemeteries were located in the Memphite region, near present-day Cairo, attesting to the fact that, at this time, the centres of power shifted towards the north, although the royal necropolis itself remained in the south (Focus 20).

It was Petrie who first unearthed the Early Dynastic cemetery at Tarkhan on the eve of the First World War. We should also mention Pierre Montet, who launched the exploration of the mastabas of Abu Rawash in 1913 and was then driven out by the First World War, only to return to Egypt in 1939, on the eve of the other! Thus, at the beginning of the twentieth century, an additional period of prehistory had been added to the already long history of ancient Egypt. While the chronology of this period remained uncertain, it clearly preceded—indeed virtually crashed into—the first two dynasties. Egyptologists now began to get a grip on this new scenario.