Upper Egyptian Predynastic
Nagada Culture

ABSOLUTE TIME PERIOD: 7000–5000 B.P.

RELATIVE TIME PERIOD: Follows the Late Paleolithic Egyptian tradition and precedes the Early Dynastic tradition. The Upper Egyptian Predynastic sequence is generally divided into the Badarian, Nagada I (Amratian), Nagada II (Gerzean), and Nagada III (Protodynastic) periods. There are from 11 to 15 subdivisions in Nagada I–III.

LOCATION: The upper Nile river valley from Lower Nubia north to Asyut. Some lithic similarities between sites at Kharga oasis and sites in the Nag Hammadi to Nagada region suggest that aspects of the Nagada culture may have originated in the western desert and the delta; other cultural affinities exist between the Maadi culture in the north and the region around Badari. Badarian period settlements appear to have been concentrated between Asyut and Hierakonpolis. Nagada I period settlements are thought to have expanded southward from the Nagada region into lower Nubia, and Nagada II sites are known from as far north as the delta, where the material culture is almost wholly from the south by Nagada III. The core area of the Upper Egyptian Predynastic is concentrated between modern Edfu and Asyut or ancient Hierakonpolis and Matmar. The expansion of the Nagada culture into the delta by the end of Nagada II marks a cultural assimilation that may have preceded political unification by about a century.

DIAGNOSTIC MATERIAL ATTRIBUTES: Several classes of pottery are diagnostic of various subperiods. All are handmade from Nile silt of varying coarseness or from calcareous marl clays dug out of the desert shales. Nile silt varieties include finely polished plum-red wares, some with white line decoration, others with black tops and interiors, and some that are blackened throughout but made of the same clay as the red varieties. One class is decorated with incised geometric designs. Utilitarian pottery is made of coarse Nile silt and chaff temper. Marl clay varieties include red-line-decorated forms, undecorated jars with wavy ledge handles, and smooth vessels, often with a thin reddish slip.

Slate palettes were cut into rectangular and zoomorphic shapes and were probably used for grinding cosmetic pigments. Disk- and pear-shaped maceheads, made from various hard stones such as granite and porphyry, occasionally occurred in graves. Stone vessels made of alabaster (gypsum), limestone, basalt, serpentine, breccia, diorite, dolerite, dolomite, assorted porphyritic rocks, and schist were manufactured in specialist centers and deposited in elite graves. “Ripple-flaked” flint or chert knives and “fishtail”-shaped blades represent some of the finest flint knapping in the Old World. Some graves contained small implements of
copper, such as fishhooks and chisels. Elephant and hippopotamus ivory was carved into figurines, amulets, combs, and fetish objects. Combs were also made of bone; both ivory and bone examples were decorated with zoomorphic figures.

Houses were circular, subrectangular, or rectangular, sometimes semisubterranean with stone or mud-brick-lined lower walls, and sometimes rings of posts supporting skin-covered or plaited reed superstructures. The brick or stone foundations were frequently chinked with potsherds. Villages were located on the low terraces above the Nile floodplain and presumably on the floodplain and levees and sometimes along large tributary wadis. In the early Predynastic, burials in fetal position, wrapped in grass mats or skins and laid in simple oval pits with none to a few simple furnishings, were common; a few graves had more elaborate furnishings. Gradually, the mortuary program became more elaborate, with the appearance of some graves with boxes and trays, rectangular mud-brick chambers, superstructures, and abundant furnishings, indicating clear social differentiation. Subterranean rock-cut tombs occur in some elite cemeteries.

REGIONAL SUBTRADITIONS: Hierakonpolis Region, Nagada Region, Abydos Region.

IMPORTANT SITES: Hierakonpolis “Town Site,” the Armant cemeteries, the Nagada cemeteries, Cemetery N7000 at Naga-ed-Dér, Hemamiah.

CULTURAL SUMMARY

Environment

Climate. The Predynastic tradition developed during a generally arid climatic regime, with occasional periods of relatively more rainfall and apparently cooler temperatures than those that characterize the region in recent times. At no time, however, did the western desert and Red Sea hills receive sufficient rainfall to allow appreciable settlement. By the early Predynastic, frequent, gentle rainfalls in the western desert and Red Sea hills had diminished to levels of only about 10 mm per year. The 6th millennium B.P. was characterized by occasional heavy rains and flash floods, whose unpredictability and violent nature forced inhabitants of Upper Egypt to rely on the Nile itself. Throughout the long period from c. 7000 B.P. to c. 5000 B.P., the annual Nile flood levels were generally high; there was a slight reduction just before 6000 B.P. Following this period, the level of the annual inundation declined, with only a brief respite around 4600 B.P. The decline reached its extreme after the end of the Predynastic period. At about the time the Nile floods began to diminish, sporadic rainfalls tapered off in conjunction with a gradual warming trend that culminated in essentially modern climatic conditions in Upper Egypt by about 4200 B.P.

Topography. The Upper Egyptian Predynastic culture was centered on the Nile valley and nearby oases. The Nile moves across a convex alluvial floodplain north of Aswan that varies from about 2–12 km wide. The river’s characteristic discharge has resulted in 1–3 m high levees along its length. Natural and artificial overflow channels in the levee system allowed the annual floodwaters to be effectively trapped in broad alluvial flats behind the levees. In a typical flood of the historic period, all but the tops of the levees would be inundated, and water would spread out to a depth of between 1–3 m.

The alluvial basins are frequently traversed by remnant levees or other sinuous depositional features, which served to divide them into smaller units, ideally manageable for inundation-based agriculture by small communities. Behind the basins, the low desert terrace rises approximately 1–2 m above the floodplain in the region of Hierakonpolis, increasing to about 8 m near Nag Hammadi and Hu. The low desert is bounded on both banks by high desert uplands extending across North Africa in the west and to the Red Sea in the east. The meanders of the river have cut a series of embayments in the desert terraces, many of which are intersected by extensive wadi systems (e.g., the Wadi Abul Suffian at Hierakonpolis). The wide alluvial basins and wadi bottoms in these areas provided an abundance of agricultural land for early settlers.

Geology. North of the Edfu–Hierakonpolis area, the bedrock of Upper Egypt is mostly limestone, in which can be found nodules and tabular deposits of chert. South of this region, the bedrock is red sandstone of the Nubian formation. In the Aswan area, red and black granite outcrops cut across the Nile valley; the river crosses them at the first cataract, near Elephantine. During several periods in the Pleistocene, pluvial periods allowed the tributary wadis of the Nile to transport significant amounts of desert skree into the valley bottom, leading to the deposition of approximately 3–5 m of undifferentiated sands and gravels on the low terraces, below the more recent late Pleistocene–early Holocene sands and Holocene silt deposition in the floodplain itself. A variety of hard volcanic rocks may be found in the Red Sea hills, as well as semiprecious stones.