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Dendara at Its Origins

New Evidence for a Pre- and Early Dynastic Settlement Site in Upper Egypt

Gregory Marouard

Aerial view of the Hathor temple complex from the northwest. Photo by the author.

Dendara, ancient Iounet-Tentyra, and provincial capital of the 6th Nome of Upper Egypt, is one of the major stopping points for a visitor to modern Egypt; it is where one of the most complete, and also the most recent, Egyptian temple complexes can be admired. Renowned for its well-preserved Ptolemaic and Roman sanctuaries devoted to the goddesses Hathor and Isis, the site has been a major religious center since at least the Old Kingdom, but its origins, and particularly the emergence of a community and then a settlement, were still mostly unknown until The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago's recent archaeological work at the site.

Since 2012, a team from The Oriental Institute has been investigating the evolution of the settlement site at Dendara, particularly focusing on the period between the mid-fourth to the late third millennium B.C.E. until the early Middle Kingdom (ca. 2000 B.C.E.). Focused on urban archaeology, this project works on the eighty-year-old archaeological concession of the French Archaeological Institute in Cairo (IFAO), which allowed The Oriental Institute to investigate the settlement remains inside and outside of the main sanctuary enclosure wall. The cemetery area, located south, is also under new investigation by a team from Macquarie University, Sydney.

The specific focus of The Oriental Institute team is an extensive study of the urban vestiges from the origins of the settlement to the Early Christian period, and the interconnections between the religious structures and the civic and administrative spaces. This research is combined with the excavations of another provincial capital of Upper Egypt at Tell Edfu, the "sister site" of Dendara, also conducted by The Oriental Institute. In this

regard, the current project provides an exceptional occasion to examine on a deeply comparative level the archaeological data from two major settlements with the aim of better characterizing the multiple facets and long-term development of urban phenomena in addition to the dynamics and resilience of Upper Egyptian agglomerations over more than three thousand years.

During the excavations undertaken in 2015 and 2016–2017 by The Oriental Institute team in the intramural area of the Hathor and Isis sanctuaries (fig. 1), the earliest archaeological levels ever discovered to date at Dendara have been highlighted, with several strata from the Naqada IIC–D (ca. 3600–3350 B.C.E.) and Naqada IIIC–D/Early Dynastic period (ca. 3100–2685 B.C.E.). This discovery pushes back the date of a first permanent community in the Dendara region by more than five hundred years.

If one considers a recent inventory by Hendrickx and Van Den Brink, since the early 1980s, only a dozen predynastic settlement sites have been investigated in Upper Egypt, half of those were only surveyed or reported, six have been excavated, and few have been significantly published, namely, Elephantine, Hierakonpolis, El-Kab, Adaima, Armant, Mahgar Dendara, and Abydos.

A Site in the Cradle of Upper Egyptian Pre- and Early Dynastic Societies

Such a new discovery should not be considered as really unexpected: Dendara is located halfway between the well-known predynastic areas of Abydos-Mahasna to the north and the Naqada-Nubt-Ballas to the south (fig. 2), and was most likely under the influence of the second of those two important cultural centers.

Several sites already provide information about the early occupation in the Dendara region. The most ancient is the cemetery excavated at Taramsa Hill at the end of the 1980s and early



Figure 1. Aerial view of the southeastern corner of the Hathor Temple with localization of the excavations trenches of The Oriental Institute team. Photo by the author.



Figure 2. Map of the Dendara region with neighboring pre-Pharaonic sites. Plan by the author.

1990s by a team led by Pierre M. Vermeersch (1998: 475–78). The team excavated a child's skull between 50,000 and 80,000 years old, with a mean age of 55,000 years (Middle Palaeolithic), which makes this the oldest modern human ever discovered to date in the Nile Valley and a precious link to the Levant and southern African Late Pleistocene populations.

Still in the late 1980s, a team led by Stan Hendrickx and Béatrix Midant-Reynes investigated a settlement site at Mahgar Dendara 2, located in the lower desert fringe of the Nile Valley about 5.5 kilometers west of Dendara. Probably occupied on a seasonal basis, the single season of excavations revealed significant traces of habitats characterized by about twenty stone hearths that date back to the Badarian period (Naqada IA–B, ca. 4400–4000 B.C.E. according to carbon-14 dates).

On the opposite side of the Nile River, in 1937 and 1944, Ahmed Fakhry excavated the cemetery at El-Gozeriya (fig. 2) and exposed several phases of burials from the Badarian and Naqadian periods and several Old Kingdom mud-brick mastabas dating from the Fourth to the late Sixth Dynasties (Fischer 1968: 189–94).

Although the area we excavated is quite small, our new discovery in the area of Dendara Temple is important not only because of the good condition of the



Figure 3. (a) Black-Topped ware jar from Dendara, ca. Naqada IID, H. 13.5 cm. Oriental Institute #E5075; photo by the author. (b) Decorated Ware ovoid jar, ca. Naqada IIC–D, H. 11.5 cm. Oriental Institute #E26038; photo by the author.

remains and their significant stratification, but also because of the impact that the existence of a perennial community at Dendara might have on our understanding of the macroregional development of the predynastic cultures of Upper Egypt.

Evidence of Pre- and Early Dynastic Occupation at Dendara before 2015 B.C.E.

If only historical and textual data are considered, Hathor's sanctuary seems to have been founded in the early Old Kingdom, almost 4,600 years ago. The inscriptions on the eastern and northern walls of the Western Crypt 3 of the Hathor Temple, which date to the end of the Ptolemaic period (ca. 54–51 B.C.E.), correspond to the transcription of older texts (Daumas 1973: 13) and details the history of the sanctuary (Mariette 1870: 53–56; Daumas 1973: 13–15, 18–20; Fischer 1968: 44–54; Cauville 2004: 64–65). According to the text, a first sanctuary appeared during the reign of King Khufu at the beginning of the Fourth Dynasty (ca. 2600–2575 B.C.E.). It was either enlarged or restructured under the long reign of Pepi I (ca. 2330–2290 B.C.E.), which marks a period of increased activity in the Upper Egyptian provincial centers. This period initiated at Dendara the beginning of a strong development of the agglomeration that continued throughout the First Intermediate period until the first rulers of the Twelfth Dynasty, which probably marks the maximal extension that the town ever reached before a clear withdrawal of the urban occupation.

From an archaeological perspective, the original Old Kingdom monument was dismantled and replaced long ago by successive sanctuaries until the last Ptolemaic and Roman phases (first century B.C.E. to second century C.E.). The existence of an early Fourth Dynasty sanctuary seems to be confirmed by a small group of early *mastabas*, excavated during the winter of 1897–1898 by W. F. Petrie and C. Rosher for the Egypt Exploration Fund and the American Exploration Society (Petrie 1900: 1–5). Those were reexcavated by C. Fisher during the extensive excavations conducted between 1915 and 1918 for the University of Pennsylvania



Figure 4. Wavy-Handled marl clay jar from Dendara, ca. Naqada IID. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston #98.1086.

Museum (Fischer 1968: 1–2, 16; Slater 1970: 19; 1974: 20–21, 217, 224–25), then cleared one more time in 2014 by the Macquarie University team. This so-called Abu Suten Group is related to the main mastaba of the “*hem*-priest of the Goddess Hathor” Ni-Ibunesut, whose inscribed elements from his funerary chapel are now in the British Museum. This high-ranking local personage

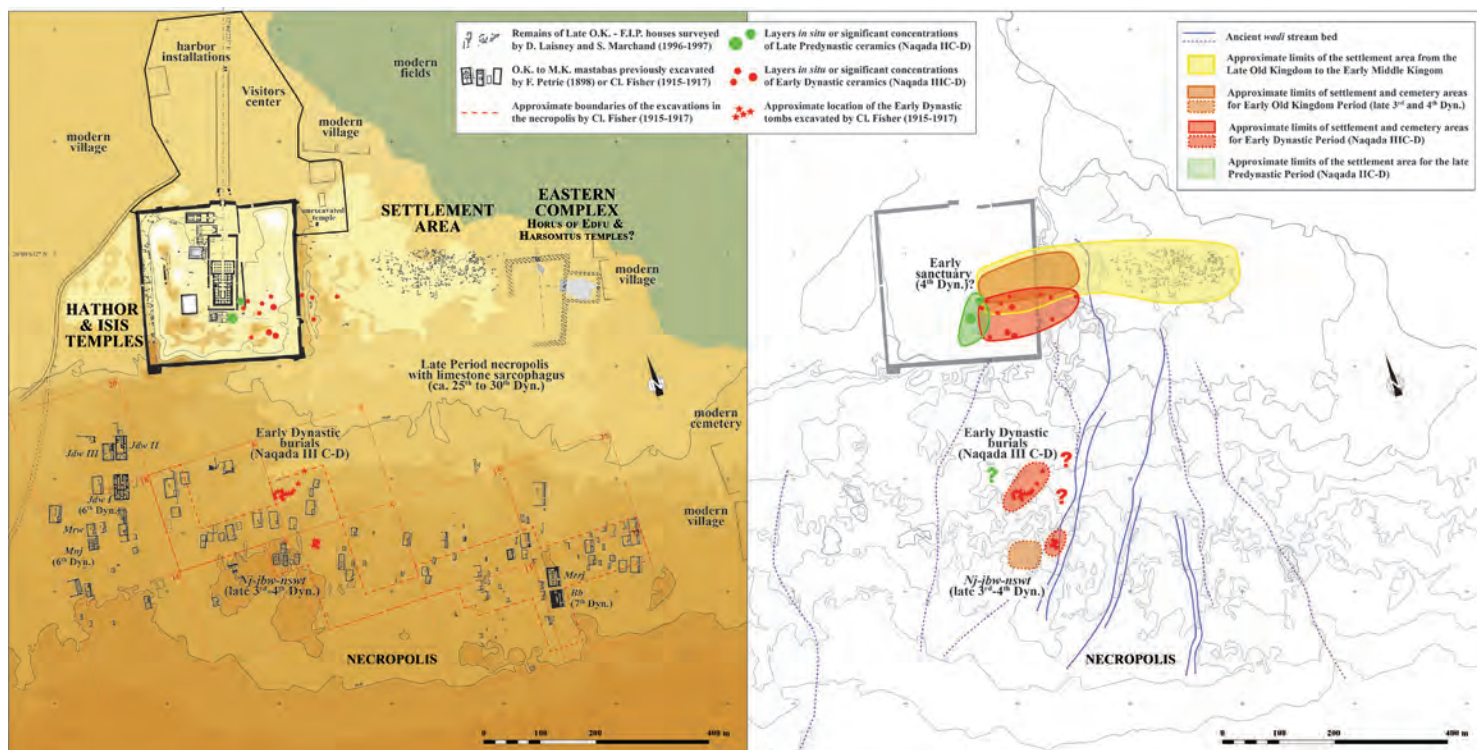


Figure 5. Plan of the archaeological site at Dendara, showing the location of Predynastic and Early Dynastic areas and the possible evolution of the settlement site. Plan by the author.



Figure 6. Clarence Fisher excavating the Early Dynastic tomb 5:880-1 in 1916 (image #38942). Courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

and “king’s acquaintance” had probably been active at the end of the Third and beginning of the Fourth Dynasty. He was only involved in the Hathor cult and administrative activities of the temple, which corroborates the existence of a sanctuary at that time (Fischer 1968: 18–19).

These texts complement a stela of another high-ranking official and prince, Netjeraperef, a son of Snofru, the first king of the Fourth Dynasty, discovered about 450 km north of Dendara in the royal necropolis at Dahshur. According to the stela found in the chapel of his mastaba I/1 at Dahshur, he was chief of the nomes and governor of Coptos, Hiw, and Dendara. The site was at that point an emergent settlement already with the status of a provincial capital

and therefore a significant and active religious center.

Another datum from the Western Crypt 3 of the temple of Hathor further illuminates the origins of the site. The eastern wall mentions a “great charter of the foundation of Iounet/Dendara, copied on a leather roll in the time of the followers of Horus, found in the time of Pepi I among the ancient writings, in a chest of the royal palace at Memphis” (Cauville 2004: 64, 463).

Obviously, caution must be taken, but the symbolic reference to the “followers of Horus,” traditionally regarded as the first rulers of Egypt who descended from the founding king Narmer, seems important. It underlines the apparent desire of the later kings to link their intervention in Dendara to this legendary lineage of the first rulers and it would seem that in some way the memory of a first sanctuary—at least of a first ritual or important festivities associated with the cow goddess and dating back to the Early Dynastic period—had been preserved in the royal archives of the Old Kingdom.

Our discovery during the 2015 and 2016 seasons of significant archaeological contexts and a relatively constant occupation for the Naqada IIC–D and Naqada IIIC–D periods seems to give a new meaning to this inscription from the Western Crypt 3. In addition, previous excavations conducted in the area of the necropolis in 1898 and 1915 to 1917 had



Figure 7. Occupation floor 1061 from the Naqada IIC–D period and detail of the firebar fragments dumped in a pit. Photo by the author.

uncovered several inconspicuous traces relating to these early phases of occupation.

Only in his final publication from 1900 does Petrie begin to present the archaeological material associated with the mastabas from the late Third and early Fourth Dynasty. However, after conducting preliminary investigations of several museum collections that have objects from his 1898 excavations, it appears that some of them, mostly pottery vessels, belong to the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods. In accordance with the inventories and accession lists all dated to the year 1898, their origin is exclusively attributable to Dendara. At this stage, it seems probable that Petrie had very occasionally uncovered some burials from the Naqada II and Naqada III periods.

The Oriental Institute Museum has two complete pieces from Petrie's Dendara excavations: A Black-Topped vase (#E5075) with a typical shape that indicates a Naqada IID date (fig. 3a), which arrived in 1898 with many other objects from Dendara, and a small ovoid marl clay jar of the Decorated Ware group (#E26038 originally labeled #98-4-43 at the MET) with several horizontal dark-brown wavy lines on its body, a characteristic design of the Naqada IIC–D period (fig. 3b).

In the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, a complete Wavy-Handled marl clay jar (#98.1086), also from the Dendara excavations in 1898, can be attributed to the end of

the Naqada IID period (fig. 4). Gifted by the Egypt Exploration Society in 1898 to the Metropolitan Museum, a complete gray-wacke palette should also be mentioned (#98-4-56). Rectangular in shape with three parallel lines incised on the edge, it corresponds to a very common type of funerary equipment from the Protodynastic and Early Dynastic periods.

This last object from Petrie's excavations seems to be well connected with the strata exposed nearly twenty years later by the excavation project Fisher carried out in the necropolis. Very briefly mentioned and still unpublished (Fischer 1968: 1–2; Slater 1974: 21, 224–225), several tombs from the Early Dynastic period (Naqada IIIC–D) were discovered during the 1916 and 1918 seasons in two specific areas, Squares 5 and 7 (fig. 5). Classified as “surface burial” probably due to their appearance at a shallow depth, they consist of about fifteen to sixteen circular or oval pit tombs, the largest about 1.5 m in length, with bodies in contracted positions, regularly furnished with offering goods such as pottery vessels, stone vessels, and occasionally objects such as strings of beads or flint bracelets.

In this group of burials, at least one (5:880-1) was of a child, as shown in a picture taken during the process of excavation (fig. 6). Published in the Penn Museum journal (Slater 1970: 18), the picture of grave 7:840–2 shows a contracted adult body in a wooden coffin surrounded with identifiable goods such as pottery and



Figure 8. Selection of Naqada II C–D pottery vessels from Trench 2 (Black-Topped and Red-Polished wares, left, Rough Ware open and closed forms, right. Photo by the author.

cylindrical stone vessels. In the same area, tomb 7:950–1 also revealed a wooden cylinder seal of a shape typical for the Early Dynastic period (Fischer 1968: 1–2; Slater 1974: 136; and online at <https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/40930>), similar examples are available from excavations at Abydos. Henry Fischer also mentioned the graves 7:750–1, 7:750–3 and 7:650–11 as clearly from the “archaic” period (Fischer 1968: 1, n. 2).

New Evidence for a Predynastic Occupation at Dendara

Since the preliminary survey The Oriental Institute conducted in 2012 and the resumption of the excavation in the settlement areas in 2014, evidence for such Early Dynastic occupations is clearly supported by the discovery of several concentrations of material and stratified contexts. These new findings underline the presence of a significant settlement for this period and even for the earlier Predynastic period preserved underneath the southeastern part of the later sanctuary complex.

Most of the intramural area has been damaged since the cleaning operation was conducted in the 1910–1920s and, taking into consideration those degradations, only extremely narrow trenches have been dug near the temple in 1988 and 1996/98. Despite encouraging observations by Barry Kemp (1985: 89–98), who has located traces of the early town, even recently many experts considered the main monuments to be founded on “levels of windblown sand virgin from any older anthropogenic artefacts” (Zignani 2001: 433), which is now proven to be incorrect.

Near the Isis temple and directly east of the Hathor temple, the thickness of the earliest occupation in the underlying sand levels can reach a thickness between 60 cm and 1.30 m, as indicated by preliminary coring conducted in 2015. Those operations also indicate that the site was originally settled on a sandy zone at the bottom of the desert slope, away from the most important *wadi* streams, in a strip of escarpment that marks a clear boundary between the lower desert and the floodplain. The immediate proximity of the valley is undeniable, with the Nile probably located much farther south than its present position, but the drillings also demonstrate an absence of alluvial deposits under the temple area and the urban area. This underlines the choice of a protected area that was safe from the annual flooding of the Nile.

The location of the settlement, at least for the Early Dynastic period, also emphasizes a congruent location in relation to the cemetery (fig. 5), which is situated to the south on noncultivable areas located far above the level of the Nile flood but in the immediate vicinity (within 250 m) of the area of habitat recognized at that point.

So far, the Naqada IIC–D habitat has been more extensively exposed in Trenches 1 and 2, which are close to and right under the foundation of the early Middle Kingdom phase of the Isis temple (fig. 1). Remains are preserved with clear stratification and at least three phases of muddy surfaces corresponding to successive floors have been exposed. Each one is characterized by a domestic occupation according to the pottery assemblages, with sherds generally fragmented and worn down by regular circulation. One phase is mostly characterized by a significant

concentration of faunal remains, and systematic sieving has made it possible to collect hundreds of very small flint flakes, which are not necessarily connected to the debitage residues of production but to sharpening operations of large blades.

The last Naqada IIC–D level of occupation for this area is marked by fireplaces, important concentrations of ash and a pit in which significant fragments of firebars were dumped (fig. 7). Those pieces are well-known for supporting large vats associated with circular kilns used for beer production.

Despite some fine ware ceramic fragments such as Black-Topped ware, Red-Polished ware, and marl clay open forms (fig. 8a), the pottery is dominated by a large quantity of Rough Ware vessels (fig. 8b), large containers, and big parts of vats with burned coarse mud mortar attached to their outer surface. Many irregular ceramic slabs with rope marks and hand-crafted shallow bowls covered with a coarse mud coating and irregularly fired are also found and probably related to brewery activities.

In the area of Trench 3, a large test trench has been dug into a thick dump of finely stratified ash (US1055) and charcoal (tamari, acacia). In addition to a large volume of pottery sherds corresponding to the Naqada IID period, there is a high concentration of flint flakes and many flint tools including complete bifacial blades, some with a particularly distinctive denticulate cutting face (fig. 9). Faunal remains are abundant and often show traces of cuts and calcination, and there are notably remains of goats whose dung was obviously used as fuel.

Botanical remains of cultivated plants have been well preserved, with traces of flax and an abundance of cereal seeds and husks, which preliminary analyses have identified as a dominance of barley compared to emmer wheat. The seeds sometimes appear flattened and very roughly crushed, which is not necessarily the residues of incomplete grinding but could also be from other possible food production processes (porridge cooking, malting for fermentation?). Carbonized pellets of processed organic matter, probably a cereal-based food preparation, have also been found and could indicate the production of bread and beer. This latter industrial activity is also well documented in Trench 3 by dozens of large fragments of firebars.

The majority of Naqada IID contexts at Dendara thus regularly show a large-scale beer production activity, which has been recognized only at very few Egyptian sites to-date. The most important traces that have been preserved and studied in Upper Egypt are from Hierakonpolis where several massive cooking structures, some still standing, were excavated in Sectors HK 24B, HK29, and HK 11C (Baba 2008: 18–19; 2009: 23–24). Important elements of beer production were also discovered in Abydos at the beginning of the twentieth century dating to the Naqada III period and traces appeared in excavations at Naqada and more recently in Mahasna.

The continuation of the excavations in Trench 2 also led to the discovery of a much older occupation level, deeply sealed under a 60 cm thick hiatus constituted of coarse wadi gravel and sand covered by windblown sand, a kind of deposit that precedes the Naqada IIC–D levels. This occupation phase is characterized by a series of circular piles made of medium and large limestone pebbles (fig. 10). These could correspond to the reinforcement



Figure 9. Debitage flakes and flint tools from Trench 3 and bifacial blades with distinctive "denticulated" cutting faces. Photo by the author.

of postholes, since they are arranged in a regular alignment, or more likely they belong to de-structured hearths, although the larger pebbles do not show any visible signs of exposure to fire. Several concentrations of ash and charcoal can be observed, with the occasional faunal and fish remains. The lithic pieces are mostly composed of coarse size flints and flakes, with no bifacial or sickle blades, and the ceramic material is very fragmented and eroded with a clear predominance of very coarse Rough Ware. Only briefly investigated at this point, this phase, which is the oldest one unearthed on the site so far, presents in its aspect and its stratification many points of comparison with the seasonal Badarian occupation (ca. 4400–4000 B.C.E.) discovered at Mahgar Dendara 2 (fig. 2).

The Rise of a Rural Community during the Early Dynastic Period

After the abandonment of the Naqada IIC–D levels and several phases of aeolian deposits marking a significant *hiatus*, excavations revealed multiple phases of occupation floors and light walls, which mark a growing, more permanent, and sustainable community, probably in close connection with the synchronous Early Dynastic cemetery.

Since the preliminary survey conducted in 2012, large concentrations of ceramics from the early Egyptian dynasties (Naqada IIIC–D, ca. 3100–2685 B.C.E.) have been found further east of Trenches 3 and 4, both inside and outside of the great enclosure wall of the temple (fig. 5). Those areas are all distinguished by a highly sandy substrate and significant quantities of beer jars and

Figure 10. Aerial view of Trench 2 with the earliest occupation phase (Badarian?) deeply sealed under a thick hiatus of coarse wadi gravel. Photo by the author.



large bread-mold fragments, often bearing several kinds of pot-marks executed before firing. Some craft and food-production activities are also noted, such as the production of beer indicated by the regular presence of firebars, in addition to the fabrication of stone containers, as evidenced by numerous stone-vessel fragments and hard, limestone borer heads.

In Trenches 3 and 4, a sequence of four to five successive phases of narrow walls and mud floors (fig. 11) marks the appearance of mud-brick construction at Dendara and the development of a more sustainable architecture for the living areas with a progressive structuration of the available space. The rapid succession of the installations highlights the dynamics and the permanence of this occupation as well as a first step in the phenomenon of anthropic accumulations that contribute to the *tell* formation process in Egypt. The extension of the settled areas is still marked by “rural” activities and the search for a better method of protecting the agricultural products (storage pots inserted in the floor) and especially the livestock. There are also signs of the emergence of a stronger economy of storage and exchange. The last phase assuredly considered as Early Dynastic is thus characterized by a rare example of a pig-pen (fig. 12) attesting to the existence of pig husbandry. The pen, the floor of which still preserved the imprints of the swine’s feet at different stages of growth, was equipped with a feeder placed at the inner corner

of the southern and western mud-brick walls and was delimited to the north by a light fence with postholes.

This last phase was rapidly followed by a radical change in the function of the area, which subsequently received the dumps and residual products from the administrative or even ritual activities during most of the Old Kingdom period. The stratigraphic cleaning undertaken on the western side of the Middle Kingdom enclosure wall highlighted another massive earlier wall (fig. 12), which was installed at a turning point probably between the early Third Dynasty and, at the latest, at the very beginning of the Fourth Dynasty. The size (about 2.2 m in thickness) and orientation of this construction, which forms a right angle and a southeastern limit, might correspond to the very first phase of an enclosure wall and the appearance of some monumental installations for the first time at Dendara, which would be tempting to consider as the very first phase of the Hathor sanctuary.

Future Prospects

The importance of the early occupation at Dendara lies in its relatively continuous stratigraphy, with deeply buried archaeological levels, perhaps beginning with Badarian (Naqada IA) then Naqada IIC–D followed by the Early Dynastic (Naqada IIIC–D), which mark a gradual evolution and transition from

Figure 11. Successive phases of narrow walls and mud floors in Trench 3, which mark the appearance of mud-brick architecture at Dendara during the Early Dynastic period. Photo by the author.



Figure 12. Level of the Late Naqada III pig-pen in Trench 3 preserved under the foundation level of an early phase of the mud-brick enclosure wall. Photo by the author.

a possibly seasonal area of occupation—in harmony with the rhythms of the Nile River—to a small “farming village” progressively marked by the appearance of several manufacturing activities, the first mud-brick architecture, and then the emergence of economic and maybe administrative complexity. This trend accelerates at the turn of the historical period, at the very beginning of the Fourth Dynasty, with the emergence of a provincial capital and a major administrative and religious center. However, the real urban explosion will only occur in the course and at end of the Old Kingdom, especially during the reign of Pepi I.

The absence of elite tombs and a possible increase in social complexity of the population as can be seen at Naqada or Abydos is still a major missing element at Dendara. The question that arises in the pursuit of the settlement—and necropolis—excavations is whether Dendara should be considered a peripheral satellite location among the dominant cultural influence of Abydos-Mahasna or Naqada-Nubt-Ballas regions, or if some more complex facies of Dendara’s predynastic community may have existed? If the region formed by Naqada-Nubt-Ballas further south forms a coherent whole, did Dendara constitute its northern limit or can some form of tentyrite identity be revealed? A differentiation of these two sectors of the Nile Valley could be induced by the geographic configuration, which naturally isolates the Dendara region from the other southern neighboring settlements. Dendara also has its own opening on the Western Desert and especially towards the mineral resources of the eastern desert via the Wadi Qena.

The question of a “shift” of the Naqada-Nubt-Ballas region towards Luxor on one side or Dendara on the other at the beginning of the Old Kingdom would no longer be meaningless if Dendara was already a full-fledged community by then. The emergence of a local chieftdom at Dendara after the consolidation of the state and its rise as an important religious and a provincial center before the composition of the nomes—regional subdivisions—could support such a working hypothesis.

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