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# A COMPANION TO ANCIENT EGYPT

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CHAPTER 2

# Prehistory

*E. Christiana Koehler*

The prehistory of Egypt is a wide area of study that covers hundreds of thousands of years from the Palaeolithic (c.500,000–10,000 BC) to the end of the Chalcolithic period (c.4000–3300 BC) (see table 2.1). It witnessed the emergence of early humans in the Nile Valley, the first villages and towns, the introduction of agriculture and animal husbandry, craft-specialization, social complexity, early religion and funerary beliefs as well as a wide spectrum of aspects of a material culture that together laid the foundations for Pharaonic civilization. This chapter will focus particularly on the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods in the lower Nile Valley in order to identify the roots and origins of Egyptian culture and society.

## 1 The Palaeolithic

The climate during the periods under discussion, especially during the Pleistocene and early Holocene periods, varied significantly between hyper-arid and very humid with torrential rains and "Wild Niles." The latter resulted in a high degree of erosion and sedimentation that shaped the physical appearance of the Nile Valley today, and that affected the archaeological preservation and accessibility of sites (Butzer 1976; 1998). This is probably the reason why much of the archaeological evidence of the earliest human occupation is found not in the Nile Valley proper, but in the areas directly adjacent, for example, on preserved Nile terraces along the edges of the high desert plateau, and in particular the surrounding deserts and their oases.

The first evidence for human activity in the Nile Valley is provided by various and highly prolific lithic industries that derive from the Lower Palaeolithic Acheulean tradition (c.500,000 BP). The early assemblages are not associated with any evidence of human or structural remains until much later and well into the Upper (c.70,000–25,000 BP) and Late Palaeolithic (c.24,000–10,000 BP), which is when

**Table 2.1** Chronological table of prehistoric cultures in the Nile Valley

| *Absolute date in years* BC | | *General culture-historical phase* | *Relative chronology* |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2700 | | Early Dynastic | Naqada IIIC–D |
| 3100 | Early Bronze Age | | |
| 3300 | | Proto-Dynastic | Naqada IIIA–B |
| 3600 | | Late Chalcolithic | Naqada IIC/D–IIIA |
| 3900 | | Early Chalcolithic | Naqada IB/C–IIB |
| 4500 | | Late Neolithic | Naqada IA/B<br>Badarian el-Omari<br>Merimde Benisalame |
| 5100 | | Early Neolithic | Fayum A |
| 7000 | | Epi-Palaeolithic | |
| 10,000<br>500,000 | | Palaeolithic | |

there is the first, albeit scarce, evidence for human burial from the sites of Taramsa, Nazlet Khater, and Wadi Kubbaniya (Vermeersh 1983; Wendorf and Schild 1986). An important Late Palaeolithic site is Wadi Kubbaniya that includes several contexts with evidence for seasonal occupation and a subsistence which suggests that humans took advantage of the seasonally changing availability of food plants, wild animals and aquatic resources. These late Pleistocene hunter-gatherers were organized in small, mobile groups and were highly adapted to their environment (Wendorf and Schild 1980; Wetterstrom 1993).

## 2 The Neolithic

The transition from the Palaeolithic to the Neolithic period during the early Holocene, when the occupants of the Nile Valley eventually became fully dependent on food producing strategies, i.e. agriculture and animal domestication, is still ill-understood. This can in part be explained by the lack of chronologically appropriate sites with sufficient relevant evidence. Although there is some indication of a change in the mode of subsistence and habitation at a number of sites in the Western Desert of Egypt, such as at Bir Kiseiba, Nabta Playa, and the Dakhla Oasis, with limited evidence for pastoralism of cattle accompanied with pottery production during the seventh and sixth millennium BC, these sites cannot as yet be clearly related to the somewhat later and fully developed early Neolithic of the Nile Valley. The evidence in the Western Desert also cannot be compared with those processes in the Levant, Anatolia, and northern Mesopotamia that traditionally illustrate the transition from a mobile hunting and food-gathering to a food- producing subsistence with permanent settlements, that is usually followed by pottery manufacture. Although an independent and possibly multi-linear development of a Neolithic way of life, including the cultivation of food plants and domestication of animals, cannot be excluded for

Egypt, it appears as if external influence may be responsible for the neolithization of the Nile Valley. Select evidence from the Epi-Palaeolithic period as well as some of the specifics of the earliest traces of Neolithic culture may provide substantiation of this point.

Collections of surface finds from the desert region in the north-east of Egypt and especially near the modern city of Helwan gathered around the turn of the twentieth century (De Morgan 1896; Debono 1979) produced an interesting sample of Epi-Palaeolithic stone tools that show close affinities to the Levantine Epi-Palaeolithic and Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN) of the ninth to seventh millennium BC. These included typical tanged projectile points made in a peculiar bipolar blade technique with lateral notches, which were later called Helwan points (Gopher 1998; Hikade 2001). Although there are no contemporary structural remains or any traces of ecofacts preserved from Helwan, and, although the assemblage is otherwise quite distinct from the PPN in the Levant, a connection cannot be excluded. This may be further corroborated by a single Helwan point from the earliest level at Merimde Benisalame (Eiwanger 1984: pl. 57), dating around 5000 BC, that also produced ceramics decorated with an incised herringbone design which has parallels in the Yarmukian culture in the southern Levant of the sixth millennium BC (figure 2.4D; Eiwanger 1984: 62). Similar links to assemblages in Palestine, Jordan, and Israel have also been discussed in relation to ceramic technology and morphology at el-Omari (Debono & Mortensen 1990: 40). These earliest fully developed Neolithic sites display many traits that are characteristic of the Levantine Neolithic, including the cultivation of cereals such as emmer wheat and barley and the domestication of sheep and goat, which have no wild ancestors in northern Africa. In combination with other finds, such as Red Sea shells found in early Neolithic sites of the Nile Valley, these traits would suggest that Neolithic subsistence was introduced from Western Asia at a time when that region appears to have experienced a phase of decline. On the other hand, there is also evidence for interaction between the Nile Valley and the desert regions further south throughout the prehistoric era, and it is important to consider the early cultures of the Nile Valley as essentially north-east African in nature.

The earliest fully developed Neolithic sites in the Egyptian Nile Valley are located in the north and date between c.5100–4500 BC, with Fayum A and Merimde Benisalame being the older ones. Although el-Omari has strong affinities with both sites in its material spectrum, it appears to be slightly later and displays a number of new features that one can also find in the late Neolithic complex of the Badarian culture in the south. All three sites have in common that their inhabitants largely relied on a subsistence economy that combined cultivated cereal crops (mainly emmer wheat and barley), domesticated animals (cattle, sheep/goat, and pig), a number of wild food plants, such as fruit and tubers, as well as fish, turtles and a range of other wild animals, like gazelle and water fowl, thus suggesting a well-adapted subsistence economy that changed with the seasons (Wetterstrom 1993). Although the three areas defined as el-Omari may be considered seasonal settlements that probably shifted with the flow of the creek in Wadi Hof, early Neolithic society can be described as sedentary, egalitarian village communities. The size of the settlements would have been small, consisting of a number of semi-subterranean, round or oval huts of organic wattle-and-daub construction organized in groups that sometimes

formed rows of houses along narrow paths (figure 2.1F–G). Between them were often found a number of pits and basket-lined grain silos up to 1.5 m in diameter which are a shared feature among the three early Neolithic sites in the north.

A small number of burials has been identified in those areas of the sites that had been previously abandoned, but there is no evidence to suggest that the early Neolithic farmers deliberately buried their dead within the settlement. The graves are simple, round or ovoid pits that normally contain a single burial as well as a very small number of grave goods, such as pottery vessels. Area A at el-Omari produced two graves that display an unusual feature, namely, rows of posts set up on the surface and around the grave, possibly forming a fence or a tent. One of these, the burial of an adult male (figure 2.2F; A35, cf. Debono and Mortensen 1990: 67), also contained a wooden staff that was placed near his hands and that may be interpreted as a sign of social distinction.

A consistent element of the early Neolithic material culture is its pottery. It can be characterized by hand-made vessels of coarsely tempered silts that often have a polished surface and were fired in relatively basic firing conditions. The morphological spectrum is simple and displays only a small number of distinct shapes such as deep hole-mouthed jars and bowls. Where there is evidence of decoration, it is in the form of raised relief knobs or simple incised designs, such as circles, strokes or herringbone patterns (figures 2.3 and 2.4; Eiwanger 1992: 36–41). The lithic industries are dominated by fine bifacially retouched core tools, such as sickle stones and knifes with serrated cutting edges and concave-base arrowheads. Also common are polished axes of hard stones as well as pear shaped mace heads (figure 2.5B–C). Apart from these main artifact categories, early Neolithic sites also produced bone tools and a limited number of clay figurines. Of particular importance is a small human clay head from Merimde Benisalame, layer V, which appears to have been deliberately buried as fragments (figure 2.7A; Eiwanger 1992). Although its facial features are basic, the area around the face and at the back of the head shows punctures of varying depth, which may suggest that hair and a beard were indicated by real hair or other organic materials. Its shape suggests that it may have been placed on a staff for display.

Some aspects of the lithic tools, especially the concave-base arrowheads, bifacial sickles, as well as a distinct new form of blade knife first in evidence at el-Omari (figure 2.5C; Debono & Mortensen 1990, pl. 19: 7–13; Holmes 1988, 1989), provide a link in time and space with the later, but clearly Neolithic, southern Badari culture. Its precise chronological position, development, and geographical distribution have been intensively reviewed over the past decades. More recent radiocarbon dates appear to cluster between 4400–4000 BC (Hendrickx 1999). Today its distribution is considered well beyond the region of Badari in Middle Egypt extending as far south as Hierakonpolis. The spectrum of domestic pottery is still very much dominated by coarse and rough-faced wares, but fine, well-made polished wares appear to have become increasingly popular. Two new aspects allow us to observe how Badarian potters have succeeded in mastering the medium of clay. One is a peculiar technique that results in a conspicuously rippled vessel surface, and the other is the introduction of bi-chrome wares, in particular the so-called Black Topped Brown and Red wares (Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928). Badarian rippled pottery is probably achieved by the desire to create very thin vessel walls and by

removing excess clay with a serrated tool. Once this process has been completed, the vessel surface is smoothed over, often coated with a red slip, and carefully polished, thus creating a subtle ripple effect. Bi-chrome wares frequently display this particular technique as well as very fine and well-made vessel shapes, often with a characteristic carination or keel towards the base of the vessel (figure 2.3C). The fact that the vessel rims of Black Topped ceramics were deliberately fired black also suggests that the potters well understood the effects of manipulating the fuel and firing atmosphere in the kilns. The lithic industry is now dominated by a flake and blade technique which produces a range of tools such as scrapers, burins, perforators, and very fine blade knives, but the early Neolithic bifacial core tradition, in particular for sickle stones and arrowheads, is still part of the assemblage (Holmes 1988, 1989).

The material culture of the Badarian complex suggests a gradual process of social segmentation and overall technical advancement. For example, decorative adornments play an increasingly important part of Badarian personal identity, especially in the sphere of the funerary remains. The graves sometimes contain items of jewelry, cosmetic utensils such as rectangular stone palettes, delicately carved ivory spoons, combs and vessels, as well as figurines (figures 2.6A and 2.7B). Metal objects, such as copper pins and beads, made from cold-hammered native copper have been recorded in very small numbers. It appears as though there is a degree of specialization occurring at a very basic level, in particular in areas of activities such as flint knapping, pottery manufacture, jewelry making or basketry. However, at this stage they are probably not subsistence activities. On the basis of the graves, some scholars have suggested that there is also evidence for unequal distribution of wealth as an indicator of social inequality. This is measured by the contrast between a small number of graves that display greater material wealth than shown by the vast majority (Anderson 1992). This distinction may be indicative of an early form of social differentiation and possibly of a ranked society, where rank was assigned through different age or sex grade associations. Although there is evidence that certain individuals, such as village elders, may have enjoyed greater social esteem, social differentiation, however, was still largely horizontal and based on kinship affiliations within the villages.

Due to the limited quantity of modern data, many aspects of the Badarian complex, for example, the significance of material that had previously been assigned to the so-called Tasian culture, or the chronological and geographical relation between the Badarian and the Naqada complex, are still awaiting clarification. It appears as though the Badarian and the early stages of Naqada I are, in part, contemporary and, in part, consecutive, cultural developments. There is also reason to suggest that the material culture of the late fifth millennium BC on the one hand drew from a common Neolithic tradition, but was also subject to differential regional developments influenced by interregional commodity exchange with adjacent areas, such as Nubia in the south, the Eastern Desert and Red Sea in the east, the oases in the west and the Levant in the north. This element of regionalism becomes increasingly obvious as the archaeological data gain greater density and wider geographical coverage, especially as time progresses towards the 4th millennium BC. A hindering aspect has been, however, that there is no consistent chronological, geographical, and material representation throughout the Nile Valley. For example, the early Neolithic of the north has no direct southern counterparts, and the late Neolithic of the south is

hardly represented in the north. Also, with more than 15,000 graves the south is vastly overrepresented with respect to its mortuary data. This situation cannot be matched by the north where only about 600–700 graves are known (Hendrickx and Van den Brink 2002). In contrast, the north produced much more information concerning the domestic sphere. This unequal representation of data has caused a significant imbalance and is, in part, responsible for a number of misinterpretations and disagreements. What some scholars consider as evidence for regional differentiation has been interpreted by others as evidence for cultural distinction. Consequently, the latter group has afforded much attention to the possible division, definition and interaction of contemporary cultures in the north and south of Egypt. This has especially complicated the explanation of cultural and socio-political change towards the end of the prehistoric era, and of the process of state formation leading to the start of the historical era in Egypt. Modern scholarship, however, has been gradually moving away from this notion and is now considering a strong element of regional diversity and interregional exchange as a possible avenue to further our understanding of these crucial processes (Holmes 1989; Friedman 1994; Köhler 1995, 1998, 2002, 2008; Buchez and Midant-Reynes 2007).

## 3 The Chalcolithic

It appears as though the transition from the fifth to the fourth millennium BC also saw a significant change in the subsistence, economy and social organization of Prehistoric Egypt that had far-reaching consequences. There is increasing evidence that a range of craft industries, such as pottery and stone vessel manufacture, textile production, flint knapping as well as metal working, now became subsistence activities that were operated by specialized full-time craft workers (Takamiya 2004).

For example, the Black Topped pottery wares that first appear in the late Neolithic continue to be in use throughout the remainder of the prehistoric period, but take on a more standardized morphological spectrum and quality initially comprising relatively simple restricted and open vessel shapes. In the south of Egypt the ceramic fabric usually consists of a fine alluvial Nile silt groundmass with very little or no temper, and tends to be relatively hard and well-fired. The distribution of this pottery ware is wide; while it is very frequent near its production centers, such as Naqada and Hierakonpolis, it occurs at a lower frequency in the periphery, but it is traded as far north as Maadi. This distribution pattern, technological consistency, and the degree of morphological standardization, strongly suggest that the producers of this kind of pottery were craft specialists who operated an economically viable industry (Friedman 1994).

A similar contemporary case can be made with vessels that are manufactured from hard stones, such as basalt. Due to the sole geological occurrence of basalt near the Fayum oasis, basalt vessels in Egypt are a trait of the north. They may have been produced at or near the site of Maadi, where they have been found in large quantities together with ceramic shapes that match their stone counterparts (figure 2.6B; Seeher 1990). The standardized shapes of these vessels, the technical requirements

resulting from the fact that basalt is a material that is very hard to work as well as their wide distribution extending as far south as Naqada and Hierakonpolis, where they are popular grave goods, again support the conclusion that these also were manufactured as part of a highly specialized industry.

Finally, Maadi has also produced material evidence for a new craft industry that appears to have been introduced from the east, i.e. copper metallurgy. Although artifacts of native, cold-hammered copper are known from the late Neolithic, the evidence from Maadi suggests a completely different and far more complex manufacturing process that for the first time justifies the term "metallurgy." The copper involved here is smelted from copper ore, which requires furnace technologies that produce temperatures of more than 1200 degrees Celsius to separate the metal from unwanted minerals. Lumps of copper ore that had been mined in the Wadi Araba–Feinan region of the southern Levant have been found at Maadi as well as cast copper ingots of more than 800 grams and copper tools such as cast axes (figure 2.5A; Seeher 1990). Metallurgy is such a complex technology that it requires a high degree of skill and expertise and a steady supply of high quality fuel to operate the furnaces and to cast objects of the desired shape, thus practically necessitating a high degree of specialization.

In most parts of the ancient Near East, evidence for metallurgy, together with other specialized craft industries, often result in the application of the term Chalcolithic, which in modern archaeological terms means more than the "Copper and Stone Age." The concept of a Chalcolithic culture also signals important changes to the social organization of the societies that engage in these industries. The presence of full-time craft workers, who operate their industry as a subsistence activity, usually indicates significant social differentiation that is no longer decided by age or sex grade associations but by ability and professional skill as well as differential access to resources. We are, therefore, in the position to label prehistoric Egyptian society at the relative archaeological stage of late Naqada I and thereafter (c.3800–3300 BC) as Chalcolithic, which itself can be divided into an early and later stage. A number of other terms are frequently used for the later part of the prehistoric era, such as Predynastic, Naqada or Buto-Maadi Culture, but we prefer the more neutral term Chalcolithic here as it can be applied more easily to all of Egypt, and has fewer cultural or geographical associations.

At the beginning of the fourth millennium BC, a number of significant socio-economic changes can be observed that announce the start of a new era in many other respects. At this stage the specialized craft industries of certain ceramics, stone vessels, and metallurgy tend to be located close to the river and at the intersection of trade routes. Here the resources are easily accessible, and the craftsmen find the infrastructure as well as the demand to engage in regular commercial exchange at places such as Maadi, Naqada, and Hierakonpolis. It is in these early commercial centers where the population grows, where more industries can be found, and where society becomes increasingly diverse as time progresses. The site of Maadi, for example, not only accommodates specialized industries but also appears to have been engaged in interregional trade with Upper Egypt as well as with the southern Levant, from where a number of commodities such as ceramics and copper ore are imported. Maadi is a relatively large settlement that provides evidence for both simple

domestic architecture comprising round and rectilinear houses of wattle-and-daub construction (figure 2.1C) as well as, on a more limited scale, semi-subterranean mud-brick and subterranean stone construction. Of the latter a large stone-built structure of about 10 m length, 5 m width and with walls of more than 1 m thickness has been found (figure 2.1D). It appears to have served the function of specialized, central storage and has strong affinities with contemporary Levantine architecture (Hartung et al. 2003). The Levantine influence at Maadi is so consistent that scholars have frequently suggested that it may even have been inhabited by non-Egyptian merchants who operated the interregional trade with the north-east. Evidence of a similar nature has been identified at the site of Buto, which was located on a western Nile branch near the Mediterranean coast. Its earliest occupation level produced a significant quantity of locally manufactured ceramics, in particular V-shaped bowls, churns, and large dishes with "pie crust" rims. These show the necessary morphological and technological hallmarks of Ghassul-Beersheva style pottery and hence appear to have been made by non-Egyptian potters who possibly came with the traders (Köhler 1996b).

The archaeological evidence currently suggests that the Levantine merchants only initially, i.e. during the early Chalcolithic, had a presence in Egypt and that their trade was subsequently taken over by locals as the commercial centres along the Nile became increasingly successful. Along with the growth in population size and social differentiation came the emergence of leaders who engaged in control over resources and peer competition with neighboring polities to enhance their strategic access to resources, and economic or political leverage. Chalcolithic society in Egypt can be described as a ranked or chiefdom society that provides clear evidence for both horizontal and vertical differentiation. The emerging ruling elites who were based at the numerous commercial centres across Egypt provide the opportunity to study the origins of the ideology of kingship and of Pharaonic political economy. The society in their polities also displays complex cognitive and ideological concepts, such as elaborate funerary beliefs and religious rituals. They are expressed through a rich material culture, art, and a variety of archaeological remains in the different regions of Egypt.

Because of the thousands of Chalcolithic graves from Upper Egypt, the funerary culture in this region is particularly well understood. It is important to consider the graves of the wealthy elites of this period separately from those of the commoners as they display a varying degree of grave goods and mortuary diversity. The majority of graves of the early Chalcolithic are still relatively small and simple burials containing a tightly contracted skeleton that is wrapped in reed mats or animal skin. On average there is a small quantity of grave goods such as pottery vessels for food and drink, personal adornments, and occasionally tools and weapons (figure 2.2D–E). A number of sites provide increasing evidence for mortuary variability relevant to social distinction and differential access to resources. Of interest here are those graves that are comparatively wealthier than others, in particular, the richly furnished graves of young children, which indicate inherited or ascribed status. The elite graves of the late Chalcolithic can be very large in size, for example 3–4 m long, 1–2 m wide and deep, and are often rectangular, encased with plastered mud-brick walls and sometimes divided into two or three chambers (figure 2.2A–B). They also appear to be located in

separate cemeteries at a distance from those of the commoners in their polity. This is evident at sites such as Hierakonpolis, Abydos, and Naqada and is a clear indication of deliberate social distinction. Often they feature a rich spectrum of artifacts, ranging from large quantities of local and imported pottery, fine jewelry of gold, silver, and copper beads, as well as beads and pendants of shell and semi-precious stones such as carnelian, amethyst, lapis lazuli, turquoise, delicate stone vessels of different hard stones, and very fine lithic tools, such as exquisitely retouched fish-tail or ripple-flake flint knives (figure 2.5D). The elite graves of Upper Egypt document well the level of control and patronage that the local leaders exerted over their industries and the interregional trade. The almost immodest and conspicuous display of wealth which is evident in Upper Egyptian elite graves of this period is a phenomenon that is only matched by the monumental elite tombs of the Early Dynastic Period at Saqqara or the Old Kingdom tombs of the highest officials in the Memphite residential cemeteries and should be evaluated against this background. In the past, scholars have relied heavily on these late prehistoric elite graves to characterize Upper Egyptian burial customs and to contrast these with Lower Egypt, where such wealthy burials or such conspicuous display of wealth have not been observed. This lack of evidence in the North has, in the past, been interpreted as an indication of a society that is less complex or more egalitarian than that of the south, that adhered longer to the "Neolithic way of life" (Seeher 1991; 1992; Hendrickx and van den Brink 2002: 347) and that on the whole represented a different culture. It must be remembered, though, that the evidence from the settlement of Maadi, for example, suggests otherwise, and that the north was clearly not lagging behind in terms of socio-economic development. Furthermore, the southern graves only appear to have broader application because there are 25 times more graves excavated in the south than in the north. The lack of an equally representative sample of mortuary data in the north does not mean that there were fewer graves, i.e. a smaller population, and it is not necessarily indicative of northern funerary archaeology. The answer is most likely to be sought in the circumstances of deposition of the cemeteries within the alluvial floodplain, in contrast to the usual southern low desert location, and in the fact that most of the prehistoric northern sites are probably still buried under thick deposits of alluvial sediments. Although a large number of graves have been located on the higher level of *geziras* or "turtle backs" in the north-east, many others are often embedded underneath or above settlement strata, which may suggest that suitable space for cemeteries was limited, thus forcing the people to bury their dead in archaeologically less favorable locations. Therefore, the mortuary data of both regions need to be treated with great caution. Nevertheless, it is still possible that Upper Egyptians placed more material emphasis on their funerary culture than did the others. It may also have been more practicable because they had easier access to resources compared with the Nile Delta. In the Delta, natural resources, other than agricultural produce, are scarce and their acquisition required more expenditure of effort than in the south, which may have been an inhibiting factor in the development of a comparable funerary culture.

The burial customs that are in evidence, however, are highly varied and complex, and they suggest an increasing emphasis on funerary religion as well as differentiation of society. An interesting new development has recently come to the fore of scholarly

discussion that may assist in understanding the early development of the treatment of the human corpse prior to burial. Recent excavations at Hierakonpolis and Adaima in the south of Egypt have produced new evidence for dismemberment and the subsequent use of resin-soaked fabric for the wrapping and padding of certain parts of the body. In particular, it appears as if the area of the neck and the hands received this kind of special treatment. Such evidence had also been noticed by earlier excavators but had been largely dismissed due to the early date of the work and lack of scientific control of excavation. The evidence, as it currently presents itself, is scarce but may indicate that later Pharaonic funerary rituals, including dismemberment and artificial mummification, may have been explored already during the prehistoric periods and may go back even as far as the late Neolithic period (Jones 2007). It is possible that, as in many ancient or modern cultures, such unusual mortuary rituals reflect concepts of a rite of passage that the dead were thought to undergo and that could be a facet of complex religious beliefs, including the notion of an afterlife, and do not reflect practical considerations. On the one hand, it is possible that grave goods, such as jewelry, were deposited in a burial because the deceased was attached to them, and with this person's demise they lost their purpose or were considered polluted. Some customs, such as the conspicuous display of wealth, may be related to rites of separation and, therefore, may reflect more on the living who buried the dead and organized the funeral than on the deceased. The treatment of the corpse described above could be associated with the concept of liminality and may have been practiced in order to prepare the deceased physically for a corporal and spiritual transition or journey into another form of existence or the afterlife. This notion could also be reflected in the contracted or fetal position of prehistoric burials that may symbolize re-birth in another world (Köhler 2003). Grave goods and the differential display of wealth may also allow the deceased to enter the afterlife according to the social status they held in life. Finally, the provision of sustenance in the form of food and drink, supplied in appropriate containers such as pottery and stone vessels, pouches, and baskets, could indicate that the existence in the afterlife was not thought to be in an entirely spiritual form but also had a physical dimension and thus required nourishment. Interestingly, on occasion, such edible grave goods have been recorded in the form of non-edible substitutes made of painted mud, such as bread, fish, garlic, or eggs, that only in shape represent food and that obviously had a symbolic significance only appreciated by the deceased.

Although most of our information about the prehistoric era in Egypt derives from the cemeteries, the settlements also hold valuable additional data that further our understanding and that are at times comparable to, but at times also distinct from, mortuary data. For example, it has been observed that the material culture, in particular the ceramics, of Upper Egyptian graves is quite distinct from that of the contemporary settlements and that the choice of grave goods was so deliberate that certain manufacturing industries specifically catered for funerary consumption. Domestic pottery, on the other hand, was largely produced at the household level and private households only acquired a limited amount of vessels from the more specialized workshops, such as containers of specific and high-value processed goods such as oil. This is particularly evident during the Chalcolithic period when the funerary industries of the south are supported by the high demand for grave goods required

for the funerals of members of the elites and their kin in the well-populated centres. It is during this period that a number of specialized ceramic workshops start to appear that eventually not only cater for the regional markets but also have the economic viability to expand their distribution even beyond the Nile Valley. For example, vessels of the Upper Egyptian Decorated and Wavy-Handled classes of the late Chalcolithic have been found as far north as Taur Ikhbeina in the Levant (Oren and Yekutiely 1992) and as far south as Qustul in Nubia (Williams 1986). Although these vessel categories also occur in the settlements, the domestic pottery tends to be drawn from a different spectrum of forms and fabrics that primarily served the function of food preparation and storage and fulfilled specific domestic needs. It is, therefore, very interesting to observe that, while there is also a strong element of regionalism, the ceramic assemblages from Chalcolithic settlements of the north and south are far more homogenous than those of the cemeteries. This is especially significant in view of the fact that the households either produced their own pottery in a primary household production or acquired it from a local household industry, but rarely imported domestic pottery from further afield. The homogeneity of the domestic pottery of the Chalcolithic is, therefore, an indication for cultural cohesion, rather than distinction of north and south.

As noted above, Neolithic settlements provide the earliest extant evidence for structural remains and domestic architecture in Egypt. The domiciles were simple oval or rounded huts of wattle-and-daub construction, arranged in small clusters or villages and sometimes along narrow paths. The hearths can be found in and outside the houses and frequently storage pits accompany the area used by a household (figure 2.1F–G). There has been discussion about the significance of so-called hut circles that had been excavated by Caton-Thompson at the village of Hemamiya early in the twentieth century and re-investigated in recent times by Diane Holmes and Renée Friedman. These features appear to date to the latest Neolithic and early Chalcolithic phase at the site (Caton-Thompson 1928: 88; Friedman 1994: 343; Holmes 1993; Holmes and Friedman 1994). Nine such circles were excavated and described in more detail; they are made of mud and range between 1 and just over 2 m in diameter and reach up to 1 m in height. Some bear evidence of external enforcement with vertical organic reed stalks. Caton-Thompson had already questioned if they all served as houses and not rather as storage facilities (Caton-Thompson 1928: 83) as many of them are clearly too small to accommodate a household comfortably. It is possible that they were primarily storage bins of different functions, for example, to store fuel or to confine young animals. Interestingly, apart from hearths and a mud wall of about 9 m length, Caton-Thompson did not identify any other structural remains of this prehistoric settlement and described the deposits as homogenous dark muddy midden layers with ashy lenses. What is striking about this observation is that, just as with Caton-Thompson's early Neolithic settlements sites of Kom K and W in the Fayum, there is no mention of postholes which, in comparison with other prehistoric settlements in Egypt, is most unusual. Also, although Old Kingdom coffins and other later features were noted to have significantly disturbed the site, penetrating deep into the lower strata of the settlement, the archaeological stratification, as published, appears oddly horizontally layered and "intact." It is, therefore, possible that the deposits were either too disturbed or Caton-Thompson

did not perhaps recognize the traces of wattle-and-daub post construction, which is an otherwise typical feature of prehistoric settlements.

Early Chalcolithic settlements appear to have utilized organic materials such as wooden vertical posts, tree branches, and twigs for wall screens which were subsequently covered with mud plaster. Also, condensed mud was employed for the vertical walls of circular and rectilinear houses (figure 2.1A, C). Early Chalcolithic mud brick or slab construction has been identified at sites such as Maadi and Hierakonpolis (figure 2.1E), but, similar to tomb construction at the time, they do not play a significant role yet (Köhler 2008; Zdzieblowski 2008). It is only in the late Chalcolithic Period that mud brick is employed on a more consistent scale in both tomb and house construction. This is especially evident as the settlement system becomes more complex and the commercial centres experience a growth in population and industrial activities; however, post construction is not entirely abandoned. For example, the recent excavations at Hierakonpolis have been uncovering the remains of Chalcolithic sites, known as HK 23, HK29A + B and HK25, that display construction with a combination of mud-brick walls and especially posts (figure 2.8). It appears as though numerous, very tall, wooden posts were employed for the construction of a hall of significant size, thus suggesting a special function for this complex, be it sacral, communal or official (Friedman 2008).

Another fascinating settlement has recently come to light at Tell el-Farkha in the eastern Nile Delta. An industrial centre for beer production and large-scale mud architecture have been uncovered, which suggest that Tell el-Farkha probably had some socio-economic significance during the Chalcolithic period (figure 2.1A). The recent discovery of two most unusual prehistoric statuettes made of relatively thick gold sheet and lapis lazuli inlays, both depicting anthropomorphic males with erect phalluses or, more likely, phallus sheaths in style very similar to contemporary ivory figurines, raise this site to the level of high significance in the Nile Delta. The Polish excavators recently also found an offering deposit of a large quantity of Proto-Dynastic and Early Dynastic ivory figurines similar to those found in the early sanctuaries at Abydos, Hierakonpolis and Elephantine, that, together with the gold statuettes, suggest that this site had religious significance. Although the two statuettes were found in a secondary context, they may indicate the existence of a late Chalcolithic sanctuary where an anthropomorphic deity, divine ruler, or ancestor was worshipped (Ciałowicz and Jucha 2003; Ciałowicz 2004; 2006; 2008; Chlodnicki and Ciałowicz 2006).

The elites of the late Chalcolithic chiefdom societies throughout Egypt became increasingly successful at controlling the exploitation of local resources, interregional trade, and the overall political economy of their polities. The more powerful polities in the south were probably located at Hierakonpolis, Naqada, and Abydos, where elite cemeteries and significant proto-urban architecture (figure 2.1B) have been uncovered suggesting a high degree of centralization. In the north, there is evidence to suggest that similar centres were located in the Girza-Tarkhan area and within the Delta at sites such as Buto and Tell el-Farkha. There are also other important sites such as Manshiyet Ezzat, Tell Ibrahim Awad, Kafr Hassan Dawoud, and Minshat Abu Omar, but their socio-political and regional significance is yet to be established. Nevertheless, the political landscape of late Chalcolithic Egypt can be reconstructed as a series of polities along the river and its branches in the north that appear to have

competed with each other for access to resources, control of the trade routes, and eventually for regional authority.

The ideology behind this peer-polity competition is probably well illustrated in a variety of artistic representations that emphasize the figure of the leader, subjugation of enemies, and the interaction of the symbolic forces of nature. One of the best examples where all these iconographic elements can be found united is the wall painting found in the late Chalcolithic Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis which was probably the burial of a local ruler. The painting is applied in red, black, and white colors on to the plastered mud-brick walls that encase the large tomb pit. The painting shows a series of boats as they travel along the river and numerous smaller scenes involving animals and people, such as dancing women and fighting men. Of particular interest here are two scenes that are close to each other; one shows a tall human figure brandishing a mace-like weapon with one hand and with the other restraining three kneeling smaller figures (figure 2.7G). This iconography of subjugation has its antecedents in earlier white-painted vessel designs on White Cross Line pottery (figure 2.7F) and continues well into the Pharaonic era, where it is one of the most popular and powerful symbols for the supreme power of the king. The other scene in the mural shows a human figure restraining with his hands two large animals that can be interpreted as lions, based on the more detailed parallel on the ivory handle of the contemporary Gebel el-Arak knife (figure 2.7H). This imagery clearly serves to illustrate the ruler's supernatural powers and assists in the ideological legitimation of the ruler's authority over his subjects. It appears as though this iconography is somehow related to representations where pairs of wild animals, such as giraffes, crocodiles, wild dogs or even mythical creatures face each other very peacefully and are restrained or hunted by humans (figure 2.7I–K). Such representations can be found in isolation but also in many combinations and on different media, such as painted pottery, cosmetic stone palettes and ivory knife handles. It is interesting to note that these motives, i.e. the subjugation of enemies, the hunting of wild animals, the taming of the forces of nature and warfare are all found combined in the wall painting of Tomb 100. They still echo in the imagery of Proto- and Early Dynastic ceremonial palettes, glyptic, or rock art, and are always closely associated with the figure of the ruler. Thus, they indicate that some of the principles of later royal symbolic imagery, which centres around the contrast of chaos and order, were long established by the time that kingship emerged, and that they had their origins in a wide variety of ideological concepts arising from the prehistoric past which were later incorporated into the new notion of the ideology of the Egyptian state (Kemp 1989; Köhler 2002; Köhler in press).

One of the most important sites in this context is Abydos, where over the past twenty years the German excavations have been uncovering significant material which illustrates the growth of a southern chiefdom polity and its development into one of the earliest regional kingdoms of Egypt. The main part of the prehistoric evidence derives from Cemetery U which is located on a low desert plain where more than 600 graves have been identified which cover a time span of several hundred years between the late Neolithic and the beginning of the historical period. This cemetery continues well into the dynastic era and spatially develops into Egypt's first royal necropolis where a majority of the kings of Dynasties 0, 1 and 2 are buried.

The late Neolithic graves in Cemetery U are small, modest burials which only contain a small number of grave goods, such as one or two beakers of the bi-chrome Black Topped class. The contracted corpse is usually oriented with the head to the south facing west and is often wrapped into a reed mat (figure 2.2E). As time progresses, some of the graves appear larger in size, e.g. 2.4 × 1.5 × 1.7 m. (figure 2.2D), and also tend to be furnished with more grave goods, such as cosmetic palettes, decorated combs of bone, jewelry of ivory, gold, faience and semiprecious stones, clay and ivory figurines, very fine flint tools and, particularly, pottery vessels of different kinds that are also more elaborate in character. Especially interesting are red polished ceramic vessels of fine alluvial silt that are painted with white figural designs representing wild animals, a hippopotamus hunt or the subjugation of captives. These are motifs that obviously relate to the symbolic imagery of the power of the leader and the taming of the chaotic forces of nature. It appears as if these early Chalcolithic graves belong to members of a wealthy elite who have access to a wide range of resources acquired from within and without their polity, and who proudly display their status in their graves. The elites continued to bury their dead in Cemetery U which appears to evolve gradually into a space reserved solely for elite burials towards the end of the Chalcolithic. Many of the late Chalcolithic graves, although encountered in a highly disturbed state of preservation, are not only very large in size, e.g. 3.7 × 2.2 × 1.8 m, and often enforced with mud brick walls (figure 2.2B), but they are also accompanied by a large number of exquisite grave goods, including dozens of pottery and hard stone vessels from within and outside the region of Abydos and the Nile Valley., How well connected these Abydene elites were emerges, for example, from the ever growing number of imported commodities, especially pottery vessels from the Levant. This evidence for interregional trade culminates in the multi-chambered Tomb U-j of Naqada IIIA date which contained several hundred imported wine jars of Syro-Palestinian origin as well as an exquisitely carved bowl of imported obsidian, ivory objects and local Egyptian pottery vessels (Dreyer 1998b; Hartung 2001). The owner of this tomb is probably one of the earliest rulers of a southern regional proto-kingdom who commanded a healthy regional economy and interregional trade as well as a local administration which, for the first time, explored avenues of written communication, including the use of cylinder seals and commodity labels which would eventually develop into the hieroglyphic writing system of Pharaonic Egypt. These elite tombs at Abydos demonstrate the local development of complex society and of an early regional state that comprised a far more complex social hierarchy than its chiefdom predecessor, including the ruler and his extended family, specialists such as scribes and administrators, highly skilled full-time craft workers, and the large body of farmers and laborers. This Abydene proto-kingdom appears to have been in contact with other regions in the south and north of Egypt, which may have been in the form of peaceful as well as competitive interaction. The former is possibly indicated by commodities of northern origin that ended up in Tomb U-j and that are identified by small bone labels upon which place names such as Buto or Bubastis are inscribed. It is also possible that Abydos engaged in peer-polity competition with its southern counterparts at Naqada and Hierakonpolis and that these three southern proto-kingdoms eventually competed for regional authority

that may have ultimately resulted in a single Upper Egyptian polity (Campagno 2002; 2004; Hendrickx and Friedman 2003).

At the time when these proto-kingdoms competed for dominion in the south, there is evidence to suggest that, in addition to the flourishing polities of the Nile Delta proper, a new regional centre at the apex of the Delta had emerged. The area appears to have experienced a significant growth in population at the very end of the prehistoric era, indicated by an increase in cemetery sites and social complexity (Mortensen 1991). This development marks the beginning of such important sites as Helwan, which represents the main necropolis of Early Dynastic Memphis and from where late prehistoric and proto-dynastic archaeological evidence is known that also suggests the presence of elite tombs (Köhler 2004). The area of Memphis eventually became incorporated into the early Egyptian territorial state and consolidated as the primary centre and political capital of the early historical era.

## 4 Conclusion

Although there is indeed a significant amount of data informing us about the prehistoric era in Egypt, much fieldwork and active research are still required to produce more primary evidence. This is especially necessary in relation to the archaeology of the Neolithic in the Nile Valley, of Chalcolithic settlements in the south, and cemeteries in the north. This may eventually result in wider and denser geographical coverage and scientifically representative data that would allow for a more comprehensive modern re-evaluation and interpretation of existing evidence. Another area of research priority lies in the definition and precise chronology of the various material cultures in the regions of Egypt and in the elucidation of how a number of significant socio-economic and cognitive processes pertaining to cultural change throughout the prehistoric era can be explained. Nevertheless, the evidence currently available strongly suggests a gradual and continuous development of culture and society in Egypt that witnessed the independent formation of complex society and political economy and of the world's first territorial state system.

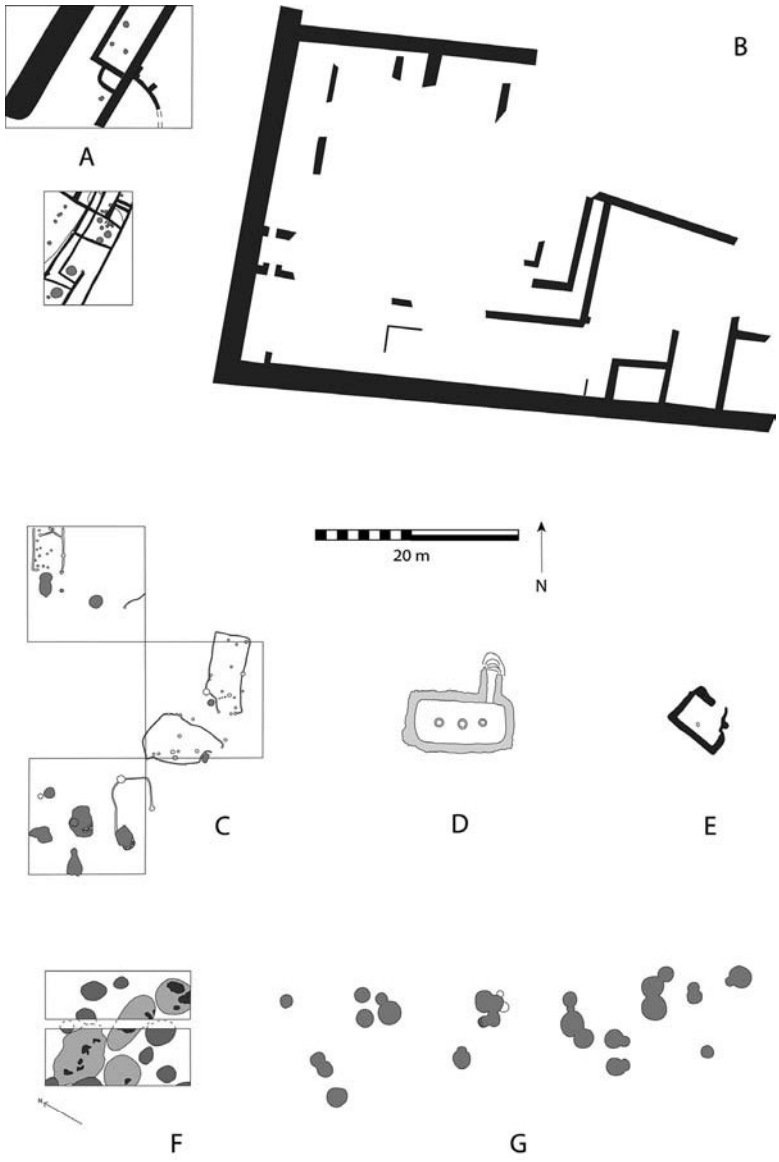



**Figure 2.1** Prehistoric settlements (A = Tell el-Farkha; B = Naqada; C, D = Maadi; E = Hierakonpolis; F = Nabta Playa: G = el-Omari).

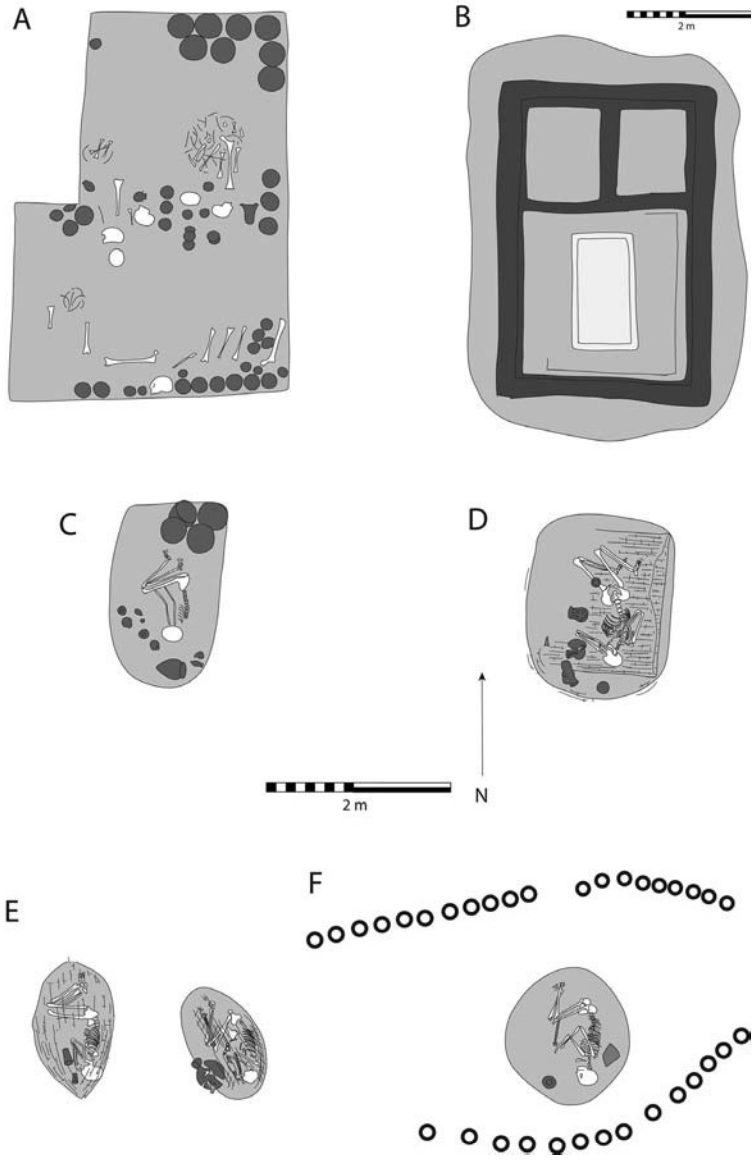



**Figure 2.2** Prehistoric graves (A = Naqada; B, D, E = Abydos; C = el-Girza; F = el-Omari).

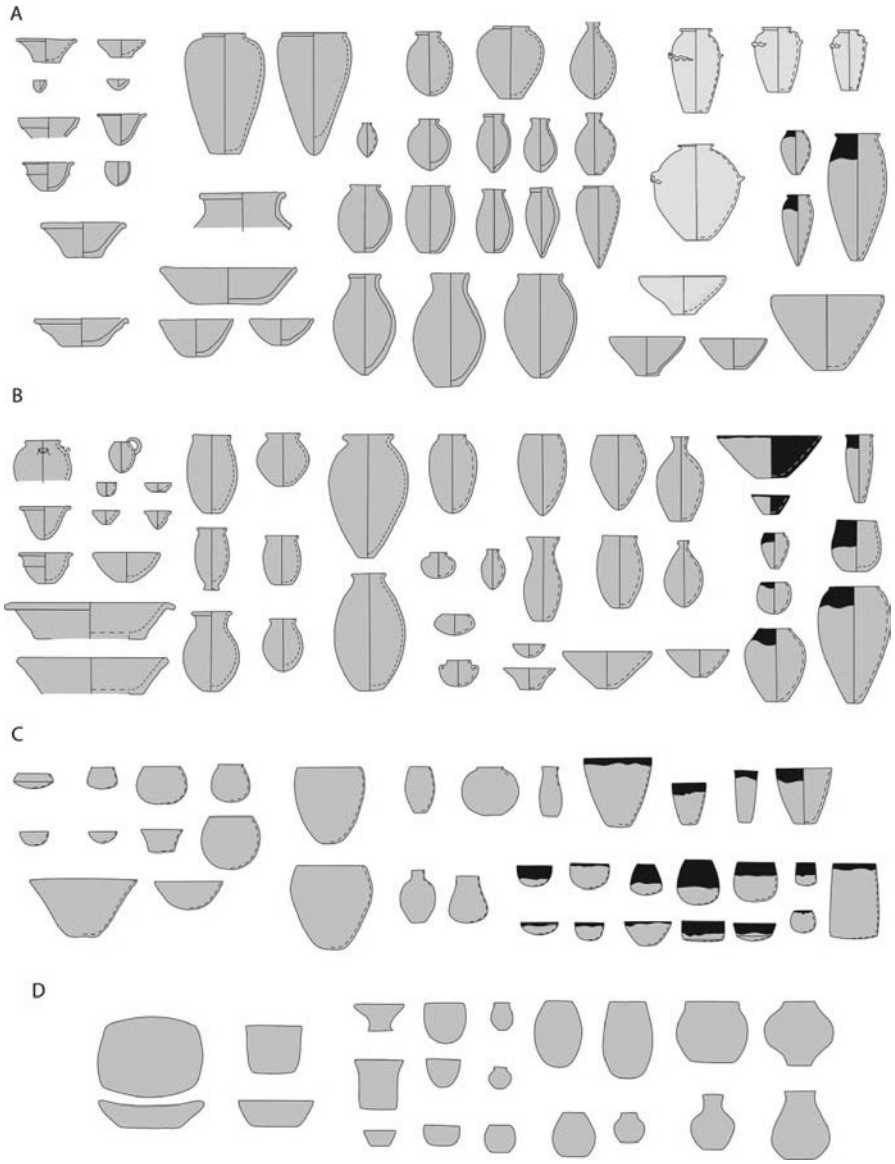



**Figure 2.3** Prehistoric pottery shapes (A = late Chalcolithic; B = early Chalcolithic; C = late Neolithic; D = early Neolithic).

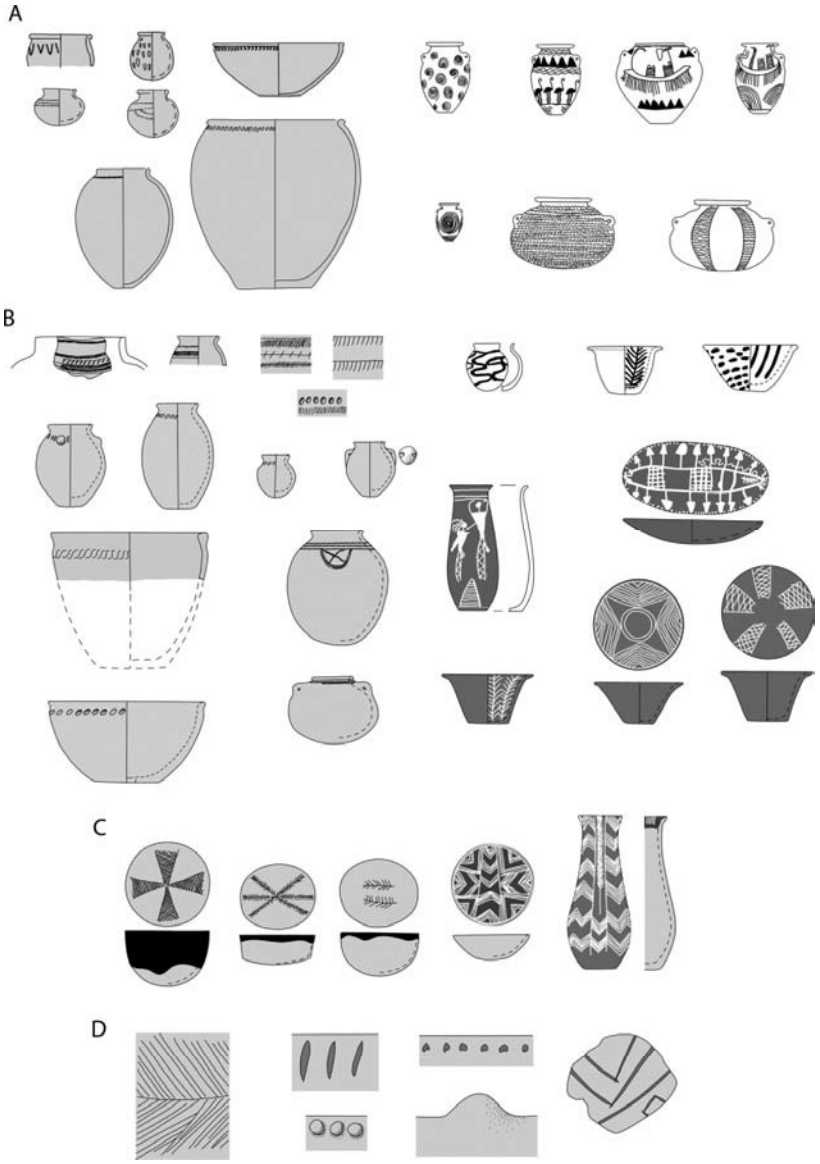



**Figure 2.4** Prehistoric pottery decorations (A = late Chalcolithic; B = early Chalcolithic; C = late Neolithic; D = early Neolithic).

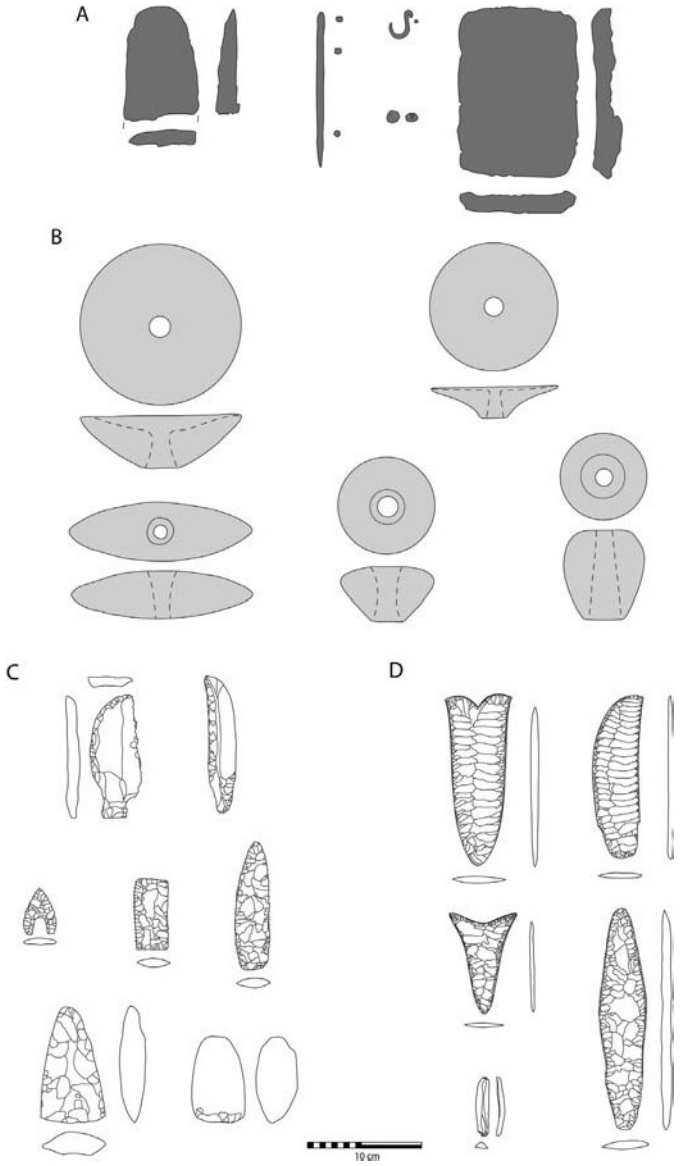



**Figure 2.5** Prehistoric tools and weapons (A = copper objects from Maadi; B = stone mace heads; C = Neolithic stone tools; D = Chalcolithic stone tools).

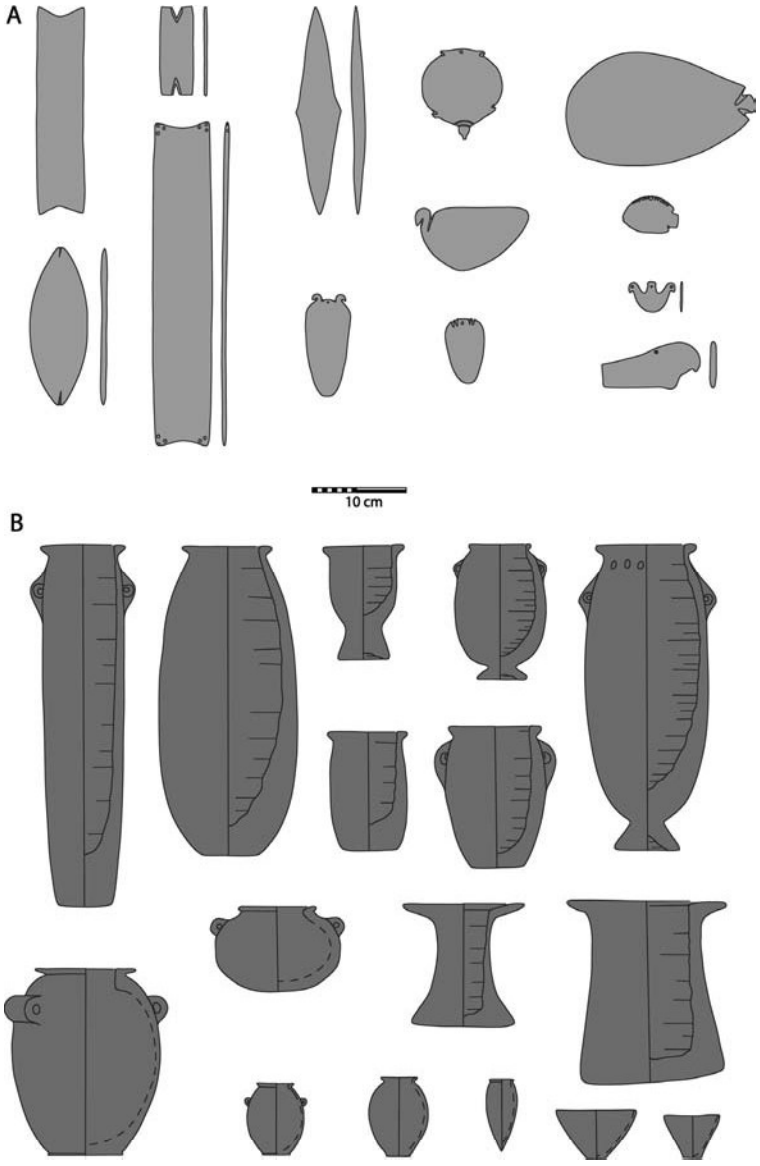



**Figure 2.6** Prehistoric stone objects (A = siltstone cosmetic palettes; B = vessels made from hard stones).

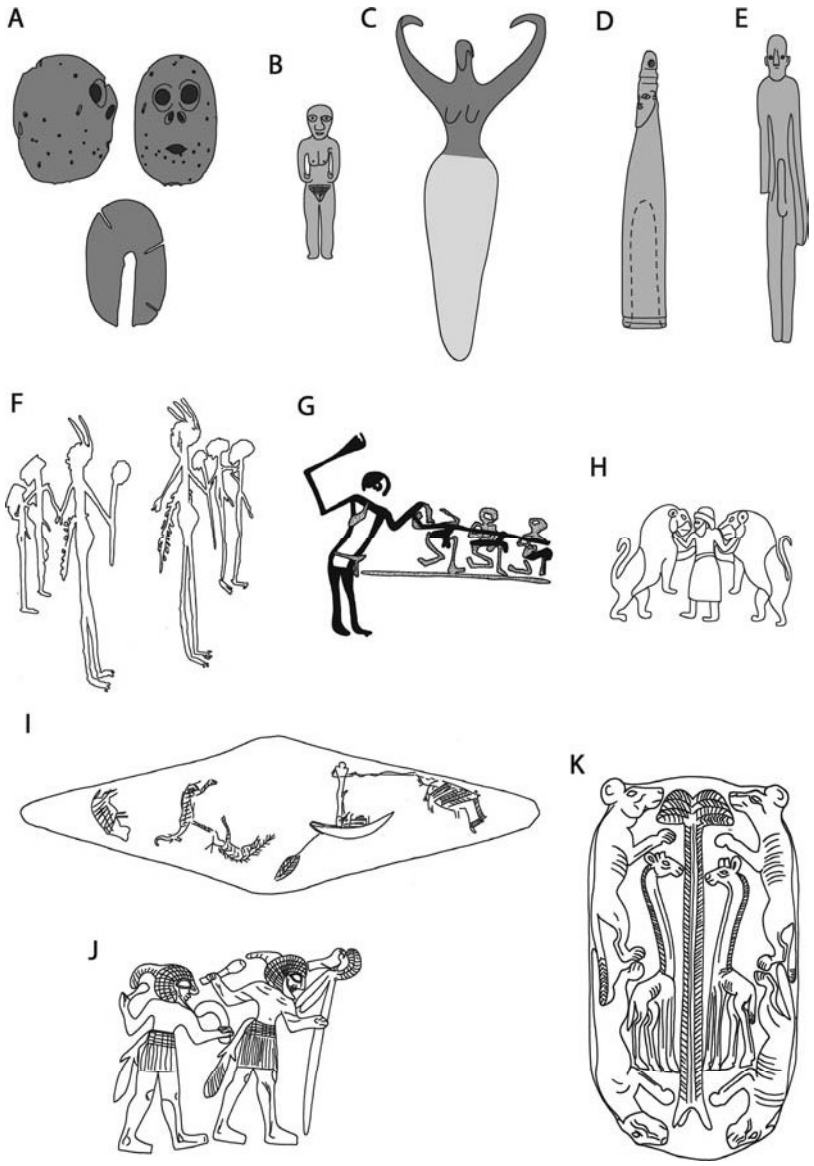



**Figure 2.7** Prehistoric art (A = clay head from Merimde; B = ivory figurine from Badari; C = fired clay figurine from Ma'mariya; D, E = ivory figurines; F = painted design on a ceramic vessel from Abydos; G = painted design from Hierakonpolis, tomb 100; H = carved design on Gebel el-Araq ivory handle; I = carved design on Stockholm Palette; J = carved design on Lions Palette; K = carved design on Four Dogs Palette).



**Figure 2.8** Hierakonpolis HK 25 from the north. Courtesy of T. Hikade, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

## FURTHER READING

Prehistoric Egypt is an area of highly active and on-going research, both in terms of fieldwork as well as interpretation and synthesis. Apart from numerous recent studies specially dedicated to the early periods, such as Midant-Reynes 2000 and 2003 or Wengrow 2006, we particularly recommend the proceedings of the international *Origins* colloquia series, which have so far taken place in Krakow (2002), Toulouse (2005), and London (2008), for updates on more recent results and current discussions. See Hendrickx and others (2004) and Midant-Reynes and Tristant (2008). Many of the studies listed for ch. 3 (Wilkinson) also cover the Prehistoric era and are therefore equally recommended.