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DE GRUYTER
Auch die letzte Scherbe1 –
More thoughts on the ‘Naqada Culture’

By E. Christiana Köhler

1. Introduction

There is probably nothing more subjective than the term ‘culture’ in the long history and discourse on prehistoric archaeology. Following a growing national consciousness in Europe during the 19th century, early scholarship on archaeological cultures developed in this particular intellectual environment and essentially arose from the concept of culture as an expression of ethnic identity through material culture. This is evident in the works by then leading prehistorians such as G. Kossinna and O. Montelius and is well-captured in G. Childe’s definition of 1929: “We find certain types of remains – pots, implements, ornaments, burial rites and house forms – constantly recurring together. Such a complex of regularly associated traits we shall term a “cultural group” or just a “culture”. We assume that such a complex is the material expression of what would to-day be called “a people””. Within this tradition, cultural history was observed through change in material culture, which was largely considered the result of either diffusion or ethnic migration. This is clearly what W. M. F. Petrie had in mind when he suggested that the ‘New Race’ was the carrier of early civilization from western Asia to Egypt1. Petrie’s early work at the important site of Naqada was considered pivotal for the understanding of prehistoric cultures and their historical sequence, which is why the discovery of the ‘Naqada Culture’ is obviously attributed to him. On the other hand, he never used this term, but tended to refer to the Pre-dynastic in general, or the 1st and 2nd culture or civilization, or later to his tripartite sequence of phases called Amratian, Gerzean and Semainean. One of the first scholars who consciously tried to replace Petrie’s terminology was A. Scharff5. In his works of 1927 and 1931 he spoke of “Erste” and “Zweite Negadekultur” and rejected the need of a third such culture (Petrie’s Semainean) because the second ‘Naqada Culture’ had already achieved the unification of the entire Nile Valley in a north to south direction and had thereby created one culture in all of Egypt6. In those days, the scholarly community was largely divided in two main schools of nomenclature, i.e. English and in part French-speaking archaeologists who essentially followed Petrie, and a German-speaking tradition which subscribed to Scharff’s terminology, although language was not always the leading criterion of difference. A particular example is E. Baumgartel, herself born and educated in Germany, but later working in the Petrie Museum and on his Naqada excavation notebooks. She explicitly subscribed to the German tradition and followed Scharff’s terminology8. Although fundamentally divergent on the origins, nature, number and sequencing of Pre-dynastic cultures, these early scholars all shared one common concept, i.e. the notion of numerous separate cultures or civilizations following one another and representing distinct peoples; perfectly in line with Childe’s understanding of the term ‘culture’. And this is precisely the intellectual environment in which W. Kaiser studied and in 1954 completed his PhD thesis in Munich, where A. Scharff had taught before his death in 1950. Whilst Kaiser continued Scharff’s ‘Negade’ I and II, he did not blindly subscribe to his definitions, in fact he was very critical of many of his ideas, but he rehabilitated Petrie’s third culture, the Semainean. He also refined the internal chronology of the ‘Naqada Culture’9 by which he de-

1 Paraphrased from W. Kaiser 1956, p. 92.
3 Petrie 1920.
4 Kaiser 1957, p. 69; Id. 1957, p. 88.
5 Scharff 1927, p. 18; Id. 1931, p. 20.
6 Scharff 1931, p. 26. This view is also defended by Kantor 1944.
7 In an emended version, Petrie’s system was also followed, amongst others, by Massouliard 1949.
8 Baumgartel 1947, pp. 1–2.
9 Kaiser 1957.
termed the relative chronological parameters of research on Pre- and Early Dynastic Egypt that are widely employed to this day. KAISER’s influence on modern-day Predynastic research therefore cannot be overstated. This is not only because of his relative chronology, but also since he persistently responded to his own call for a better foundation of archaeological evidence in the published record by initiating numerous new projects in his later role as director of the German Institute of Archaeology in Cairo. Moreover, his legacy is most influential for his continuous efforts of understanding the fundamental aspects of the nature and history of prehistoric cultures in Egypt.

Although of a younger generation than CHILDE, PETRIE and SCHARFF, KAISER was obviously an intellectual heir of the early 20th century because his concept of archaeological culture was not significantly different from that of his forebears. Unfortunately, his publications on the topic were always limited in space and scope, which is why the modern reader must work with highly condensed summaries of his thoughts. Nevertheless, there are perceptible degrees of distinction in his works regarding the approach to the ‘Naqada Culture’ in comparison to that of his seniors. Of particular note in this context is that he frequently spoke of this culture as one entity and emphasized that the cultural breaks from one phase to the next had previously been overstated, in comparison to especially PETRIE and SCHARFF who had suggested that these phases represented different cultures of diverse ethnic and geographical origin which replaced one another. For KAISER, the distinction of phases, especially of Naqada II and III, was essentially a matter of chronology although the immigration of foreigners into the Nile Valley was considered as a possible cause for changes from phase I to II. In addition to that, KAISER closely followed PETRIE by emphasizing this culture’s apparently striking uniformity, especially in contrast to the cultures of Nubia and northern Egypt of the 4th Millennium B.C.E. Generally speaking, KAISER’s understanding of archaeological cultures was very firmly embedded in early 20th century thinking because to him, each culture represented distinct peoples. In his view, it was only the ‘Naqada Culture’ that laid the foundations of Pharaonic Egypt by spreading from south to north, displacing the northern culture and thereby laying the foundations for the political unification of Egypt, a process today generally termed the ‘Naqada expansion’. This ‘Naqada expansion’ has been the subject of intense, yet productive debate over the last two decades and its arguments need not be reiterated as they are not the central object of this discussion. What is important, however, is that although the modern archaeological discourse has lately shifted from concepts of invasion, ethnic migration or displacement to acculturation, integration and other possible forms of intercultural or interregional interaction, it is the concept of the ‘Naqada Culture’ itself that has probably not received appropriate attention in this context. Whilst much progress has been achieved, many archaeologists working in Egypt still refer to the ‘Naqada Culture’, the ‘Naqadans’ and their spread (in whatever form) from south to north and thereby replacing the Lower Egyptian ‘Buto/Maadi Culture’ in the Nile Delta. In doing so, they have evidently not yet overcome early 20th century thinking à la CHILDE on the concept of archaeological culture. It is this underlying premise which requires scrutiny as it may indeed represent a hindrance to arriving at a more current understanding of the cultural processes that accompanied the emergence of ancient Egyptian civilization.

2. Is the ‘Naqada Culture’ an archaeological construct?

Modern archaeologists are sometimes at pains to avoid the general term ‘culture’ altogether and, depending on the context, rather prefer terms such as cultural system, material culture, site assemblage or society. This is largely the product of certain trends in modern archaeological thinking, generally summarized under the headings of New or Processual Archaeology, and of sound intellectual debates going back into the 1960s and 70s. There were a number of leading archaeological theorists such as D. CLARKE, L. BINFORD and K. FLANNERY who were critical of traditional ‘culture history’ of the early 20th century. In consequence, they formulated, for example, the concepts of ‘cultural systems’ and ‘cultural

10 Cf. KAISER 1956.
11 KAISER 1957, p. 69, fn. 6. See also BAUMGARTEL 1947, p. 2 on the lack of evidence for ‘a new culture penetrating Egypt’ at the end of stage II which caused her to reject the existence of a separate stage III.
12 PETRIE/QUIBELL 1896; PETRIE 1920; SCHARFF 1927, Io. 1931.
13 KAISER 1956, p. 103; Io. 1957, p. 75, fn. 58.
14 PETRIE 1920, p. 3; KAISER 1957, p. 76.
process as potentially better explanatory frameworks for the phenomenon of cultural change. Since then, archaeological thinking has certainly moved on and the benefits of a modern approach can be illustrated very well with the problems that present themselves to researchers investigating cultural change during the 4th Millennium B.C.E. in the Egyptian Nile Valley.

Although the 'Naqada Culture' has been defined through a wide spectrum of cultural traits including subsistence, house construction, funerary customs, artistic elements, as well as lithics, cosmetic palettes or works of bone and ivory, it is particularly the pottery that has always been the primary criterion for a cultural assignment and classification.

In 1920 Petrie wrote: "The striking feature of this material is its uniformity of styles over a long range of country. From Gizeh and Turah for 350 miles to Naqadeh there is no difference in the protodynastic work; and the same is true of the earlier prehistoric times for more than 300 miles from Gerzeh to Nagadeh."

Because of this postulated material uniformity and the differences in comparison to other assemblages, the definition of other archaeological cultures, such as the Badarian or the Lower Egyptian 'Buto/Maadi Culture' was proposed. And because of the changes in the ceramic assemblages where these cultures supposedly meet, in particular from one stratigraphic phase to the next in settlements of the north, assemblages have been distinguished as either Lower Egyptian 'Buto/Maadi Culture' for the earlier layers and as 'Naqada Culture' for the subsequent phases.

On the other hand, although this characterization of the 'Naqada Culture' as a homogenous, easily distinguishable entity has been widely accepted, thoughts about possible regional tendencies within this culture have already been discussed for a considerable period of time.

For that reason, this writer has recently subjected the notion of the uniformity of ceramic assemblages of the 'Naqada Culture' to a test. Based on Petrie's pottery corpuses and a database devised by S. Hendrickx, a considerable number of pottery assemblages from graves of late Naqada II and early III date in the regions around the Fayum oasis, near Badari as well as in northern and southern Upper Egypt were compared with each other and degrees of correspondence were measured across the regions.

The result showed that in phase Naqada IIICD the correspondence of ceramic types between two adjacent regions never exceeded 50%, meaning that only half of the pottery types occurred in either region. This highest degree of correspondence was between northern and southern Upper Egypt, i.e. between Mahasna and Hierakonpolis (Fig. 1). But as soon as all three Upper and Middle Egyptian regions were compared, the correspondence decreased to only 33%, meaning that two thirds of pottery types were not shared. This is interesting as it was just this stretch of the Nile Valley that was always thought to exhibit greatest uniformity.

Although the assemblages of the Fayum region have previously been assigned to the 'Naqada Culture', they actually have more in common with those of the 'Buto/Maadi culture', even though a comparison is made difficult due to a dearth in contemporary funerary data from the Delta. The same analysis was conducted with assemblages of Naqada IIIAB date and the results were only marginally different with the highest degree of correspondence at 52% for the comparison between the Fayum and Badari regions and no more than 38% for the stretch between Badari and southern Upper Egypt. It has been observed, too, that in both data series, i.e. during phases Naqada IIICD and IIIAB, many of the types which are shared across different regions are ceramic containers (e.g. of Petrie's Wavy Handled, Decorated and Late classes) which may well have been traded interregionally for the sake of their contents at a time when interregional exchange was very active. This means that the degree of comparability of locally produced and consumed ceramics is even less.

What these results bring home is that ceramic assemblages attributed to the 'Naqada Culture' were all but uniform and that a strong element of regionalism should be taken into consideration that casts shadows on the notion of the 'Naqada Culture' as one cultural unit contrasting the Lower Egyptian 'Buto/Maadi Culture' as another cultural entity. Consequently, if the variability of ceramic assemblages is so strong within an area traditionally assigned to the 'Naqada Culture' (i.e. between Girza and Naqada), it could mean that the contemporary Lower Egyptian...
material is nothing more than a northward extension of this variability, and not an entirely distinct cultural complex. This is especially pertinent when the degree of correlation between neighboring regions (as measured by Petrie’s pottery corpus) gradually decreases in south to north direction in late Naqada II. This result also contradicts the assumption of a common register of types and hence for ‘cultural unification’ that has long been postulated for the early Naqada III period, i. e. following the so-called ‘Naqada expansion’. It would undermine notions of the ‘Upper Egyptianess’ of the ‘Naqada Culture’ as the sole origin of Pharaonic civilization.

From a modern perspective, however, it is conceivable that the ‘Naqada Culture’, and by extension also the ‘Buto/Maadi Culture’, was a convenient intellectual construct that assisted in explaining the Pharaonic concept of the ‘Two Lands’ and related mythologies through prehistoric culture history. That this construction deserves to be questioned is supported by four more arguments:

A) The ‘Badarian’ has traditionally been regarded as an earlier as well as distinct cultural unit concentrated in Middle Egypt, especially in regard to the funerary sphere, although the stratification at Hemamiya showed a transitional phase with material typical of both the ‘Badarian’ and the Predynastic (i. e. ‘Naqada Culture’) and without hiatus. In more recent times, Badarian style material, albeit not much from cemeteries, has been identified in Upper Egypt as far south as Hierakonpolis and is now considered by many as a chronological predecessor of the ‘Naqada Culture’ across Middle and Upper Egypt. A variety of material traits, including ceramics and lithics, that can be found in either assemblages, would suggest that the ‘Naqada Culture’ may (at least in part) have developed out of the Badarian and into a variety of other regional assemblages. In other words: is it still necessary to distinguish between the ‘Badarian’ and the ‘Naqada Culture’ when any changes from one to the other can possibly be attributed to no more than the passing of time? And that same question ought to be asked in regard to the later ‘Buto/Maadi’ – ‘Naqada’ transition.

B) Any observed regional differences during the 5th and 4th Millennium B.C.E. are greatest in the funerary assemblages, but far less pronounced in the domestic sphere. Studies on domestic ceramics prior to the postulated arrival of the ‘Naqada Culture’ in the Delta (e. g. at Buto and Tell el-Farkha) have shown that assemblages are sufficiently comparable between sites across the entire Egyptian Nile Valley and Delta to question the notion of cultural difference (at the least in the Chaldean sense) between north and south.

C) Other studies have shown that there is as much interregional exchange and influence from north to south as vice versa and that what emerges as the supposed ‘culturally unified’ Naqada III in all of Egypt – if that concept were accepted at all – then really should be considered a mixture of both regions. And that the role that Lower Egypt played in the emergence of Pharaonic civilization, therefore, was not a passive one at all.

D) Finally, the latest, third stage of the ‘Naqada Culture’ is a phase that sees the gradual transition from the Predynastic to the Dynastic period. At this time, archaeologists have been able to devise four different sub-stages, IIIA-D, of which three can be correlated with the Dynastic sequence until and including Dynasty 2. However, those working with the final sub-stage IIIID and beyond find themselves in an awkward state of uncertainty of not yet knowing what to term the subsequent phases, given that there is a strong element of continuity from IIIID to post-IIID assemblages. Many archaeologists then switch from relative chronology (‘Naqada III’) to historical chronology (e. g. ‘Dynasty 3’), even when a correlation with the historical chronology cannot be established due to a lack of inscriptions. On the other hand, Naqada IIE, IV etc. would be possibilities in naming those assemblages, which would correspond to Dynasties 3, 4 or later in the historical chronology. But this raises the crucial question: is it a good idea to still use the ‘Naqada’ label in relative chronology and consequently regard Old Kingdom (and later) assemblages as part of the ‘Naqada Culture’? Even if the site Naqada has only given its name to this Predynas-

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24 Kaiser 1956.
25 Brunton stated that the ‘Badarian’ had a ‘Predynastic character’, but he was adamant that (with the exception of 4 vessels) ‘no true Predynastic pot… is found in a Badarian grave’ and vice versa; cf. Brunton/Caton-Thompson 1928, pp. 38–39.
26 Brunton/Caton-Thompson 1928, p. 73.
27 Cf. Midant-Reynes 2000a, pp. 185–186.
tic culture as a ‘type site’ because it apparently exhibited so many important traits, one wonders if this label is appropriate at all in view of the four points just discussed. Intellectual trends like New or Processual Archaeology aside – given the significant socio-cultural changes that occurred throughout the 4th Millennium B.C.E. in both parts of the country and the many other sites that are just as important as Naqada (such as Hierakonpolis, Abydos, Girza, Tarkhan, Maadi, Tell el-Farkha just to name a few) and that equally contribute to our modern understanding of the cultural processes involved, it seems appropriate to question the validity of the term ‘Naqada Culture’ all together\(^2\).

3. What are the alternatives?

The decision to change and to find an alternative terminology is not an easy charge, given that the current situation is perfectly accepted by many archaeologist working in the field. Hence, it would not necessarily be welcomed wholeheartedly because changing terminologies would certainly cause difficulties and confusion. But unfortunately, in view of the significant terminological and interpretive problems identified thus far, the time of decision making may be long past. Many archaeologists in the field acknowledge that the situation demands change especially in regard to the relative chronological framework which hinges on the ‘Naqada Culture’\(^3\).

One way forward could possibly be to operate with two more current concepts; one is to view the Egyptian Nile Valley within the framework of a cultural system\(^4\), which accommodates a variety of common aspects (i.e. subsystems), such as subsistence, social organization and structure, material culture etc. The inherent complexity of such a cultural system would also allow for a number of regional traits that dynamically interrelate with each other within their regional and geographical setting. Considering that the Egyptian Nile Valley has experienced a significant amount of external influence due to climatic changes since the end of the Pleistocene era, Nile Valley culture is bound to be very heterogeneous in nature. It would hence be conceivable that certain subsystems vary. However, following the adoption of agricultural subsistence and sedentism, the ecological basis along the valley and delta has been relatively consistent throughout and most influential on socio-cultural developments. As far as archaeological evidence of the 5th Millennium B.C.E. currently allows us to say, this millennium sees the development of cultural consistency that increases even further as time goes by and that lays the foundation for the emergence of Egyptian civilization towards the middle of the 4th Millennium B.C.E\(^5\).

The other point is to understand this cultural system of the Egyptian Nile Valley\(^6\) only as an archaeological culture and to refrain from applying ethnic labels (e.g. ‘Naqadans’). This is not only necessary because by modern archaeological standards, it is impossible to distinguish different regional ethnies and also because the common elements along the valley are far more profound than the differences. And these differences are insufficient as evidence for ethnic distinctions\(^7\). The obvious, measureable dissimilarities can be reduced almost entirely to funerary practices and should nevertheless not be ignored. But burial practices basically represent only one variable; they are a matter of gradient differentiation along the valley and are also subject to change over time. Therefore, the important detail is not to confuse concepts of regionality of archaeological cultures with ethnicity. Modern archaeo-ethnographic studies the world over have shown that ethnicity can, among many other things, be a highly subjective means of deliberate self definition. Differences in material culture, for instance, may not necessarily translate in different ethnic groups as much as different ethnies may employ the same material culture\(^8\). The former may be especially true for ancient Egypt: Nile Valley culture, in Pharaonic times often even united under one political and economic system, knows a great deal of fascinating regional diversity, particularly in the funerary sphere\(^9\).

Viewing Egyptian Nile Valley culture more as a cultural system would also provide for a more adequate explanation of this oft observed particularity of Egyptian civilization emerging from simple village society to territorial state society in little over a millennium. What is astonishing about this is not only the relatively short time period during which this, in its consequences radical, development occurred, but

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\(^{3}\) Cf. the various contributions on the subject of relative chronology in Archéo-Nil 21, 2011.

\(^{4}\) Clarke 1968; Binford/Binford 1968.

\(^{5}\) Köhler 2014, pp. 175–176.

\(^{6}\) The term ‘Egyptian’ is considered in a geographical sense only.


\(^{8}\) Hall 1997; 2005, 2009; Sherratt 2005; Hodder 1982, etc.

\(^{9}\) Baines/Lacovara 2002, p. 7.
also that it was not accompanied by any significant ruptures in the cultural and social fabric of this civilization. This is a detail that has often caused a degree of irritation to those who sought to explain these changes through external ethnic influences or internal migrations\textsuperscript{40}. Because whatever change took place during this time, it would have been triggered in one of the subsystems, e. g. social organization, funerary practices or economy, and then effected dynamic change in some of the others eventually causing sociocultural transformation from within.

4. Conclusion

When W. KAISER formulated his (then probably quite revolutionary) imperative to consider ‘\textit{auch die letzte Scherbe}’ many years ago, he did so in highlighting the problems in the then current state of research. He suggested that a lot more systematic archaeological work was necessary in order to arrive at a more encompassing understanding of prehistoric cultures in Egypt. Due to his intensive involvement with the topic, he himself certainly came true to his own demand. However, this imperative was not only directed at himself, but also to his contemporaries and, by extension, certainly also to his followers. Being one of those herself, this writer would not only like to affirm KAISER’s call for more intensive archaeological research on prehistoric Egypt, but to encourage more modern archaeologists to build upon the foundations that KAISER and others have constructed during the 20\textsuperscript{th} century by also making the most of the advantages of modern archaeological methods and theoretical approaches in order to further our understanding of early Egyptian civilization.

\textsuperscript{40} E. g. PETRIE 1920; KAISER 1957, p. 69, fn. 6.
Fig. 1  Four regions assigned to the ‘Naqada Culture’ and their funerary ceramic type correspondences during phase IIICD in percent
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<td>Jürgen Wunderlich, Andreas Ginau</td>
<td>Paläoumweltwandel im Raum Tell el Fara'in/Buto. Ergebnisse und Perspektiven geoarchäologischer Forschung</td>
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<tr>
<td>Karl-Theodor Zauzich</td>
<td>Gedanken zu einigen Terrakotten</td>
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<tr>
<td>Martin Ziermann</td>
<td>Elephantine wiederentstanden – zeichnerische dreidimensionale Rekonstruktion</td>
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