

Acknowledgement

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The Prehistoric Period at Saïs (Sa el-Hagar)

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The Egypt Exploration Society has been surveying at Saïs (Sa el-Hagar) in the western Egyptian delta since 1997. Material found during the drill augur survey of the area suggested that there was an area with Predynastic cultural material at the west side of the 'Great Pit' (fig.1 : Sketch Map). A trial trench in this area not only confirmed the presence of such material, but showed that it was relatively close to the exposed ground surface in this area (already about 3-4 m below the local ground level). In September 2001, Excavation 3 was initiated to investigate the area further and obtain samples for analysis. The material has now been examined and this is a preliminary report on the excavation's findings. No radiocarbon dates have been obtained yet, so the resulting dating is based on comparison with other cultural material.

Excavation 3 covered an area of 5 by 5 m and finally achieved a depth of only 1.5 m. Due to the very sandy matrix and the fact that the water table was just below the surface, it proved impossible to work to any

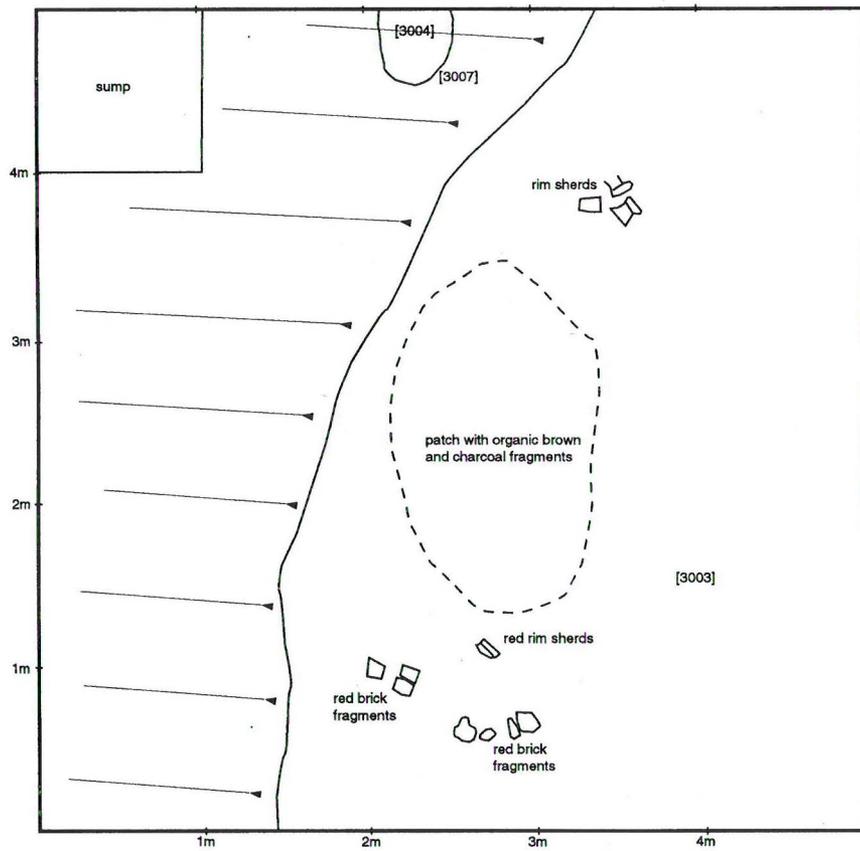
depth without pumping equipment. It seems as if the excavation had in fact only reached the top of a very extensive and quite deep archaeological context. Drill auguring in the immediate area continued to bring up pottery from approximately 3.5 m below the ground surface in this place.

Surface layers

The ground surface proved to be part of a disturbed rubbish pit containing a mixture of modern and Ptolemaic pottery and fragments of stone. Directly beneath this material there was Predynastic pottery and nothing was noted which could be dated to the time in between the Predynastic and Ptolemaic periods. This suggests that either there was massive destruction and removal of all later material possibly during the Late Period, or that this area was abandoned and not much used until later. Looking at the rest of the 'Great Pit' area it seems that the first option is most likely and that the area has simply been stripped right down by seabakhin diggers, probably from Antiquity

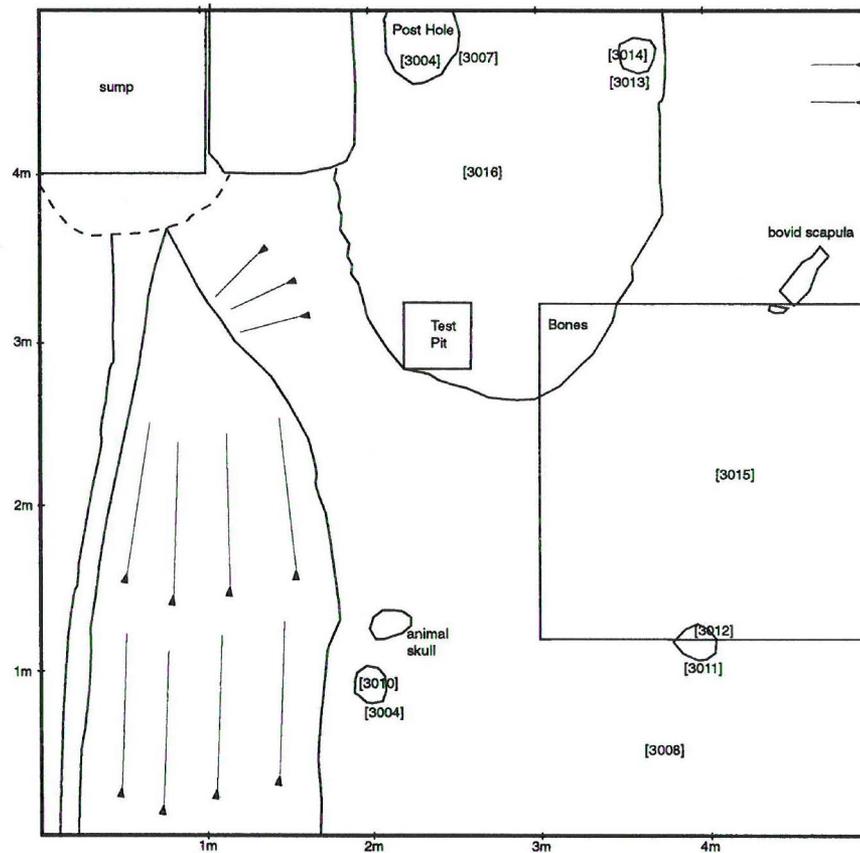
¹. With material from Nicola Midgley (excavation), Salima Ikram (bones, AUC) and Jacqueline Cotton (environmental material, Archaeological Services, University of Durham).

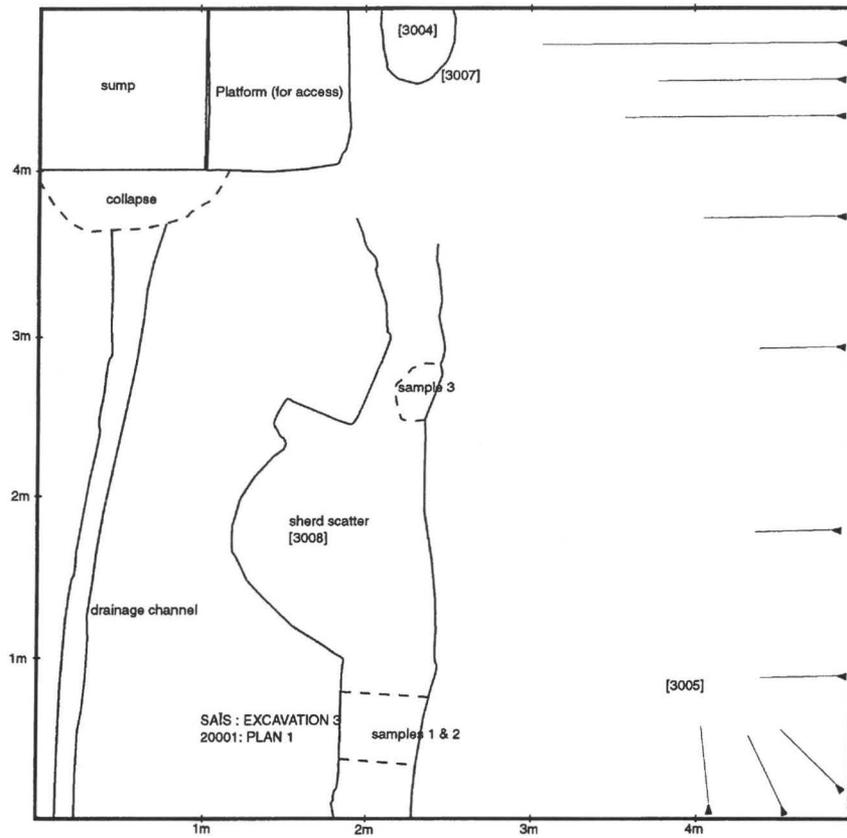
Fig. 1



Sais : excavation 3
2001 : plan 1.

Sais : excavation 3
2001 : plan 3.





Saïs : excavation 3
2001 : plan 2.

Sketch Plan of Saïs.

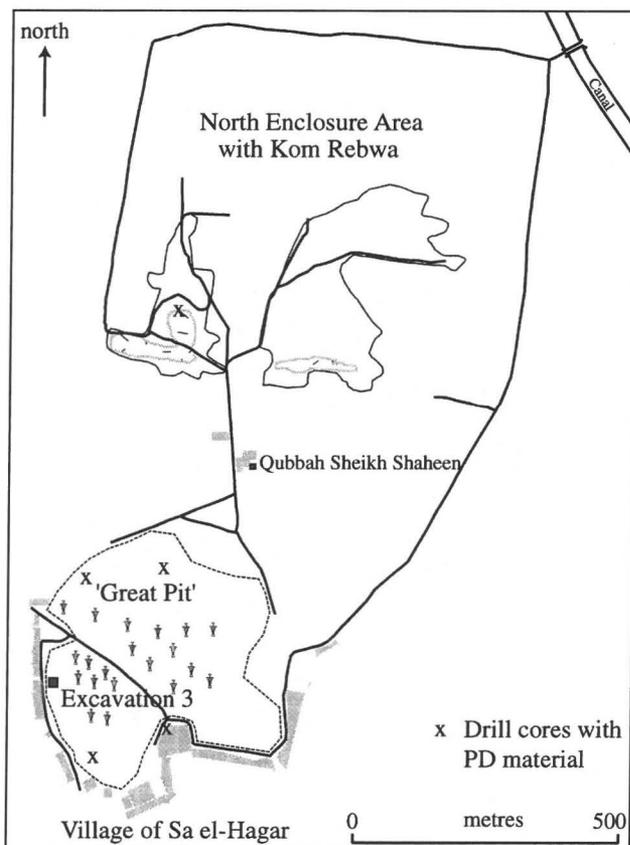
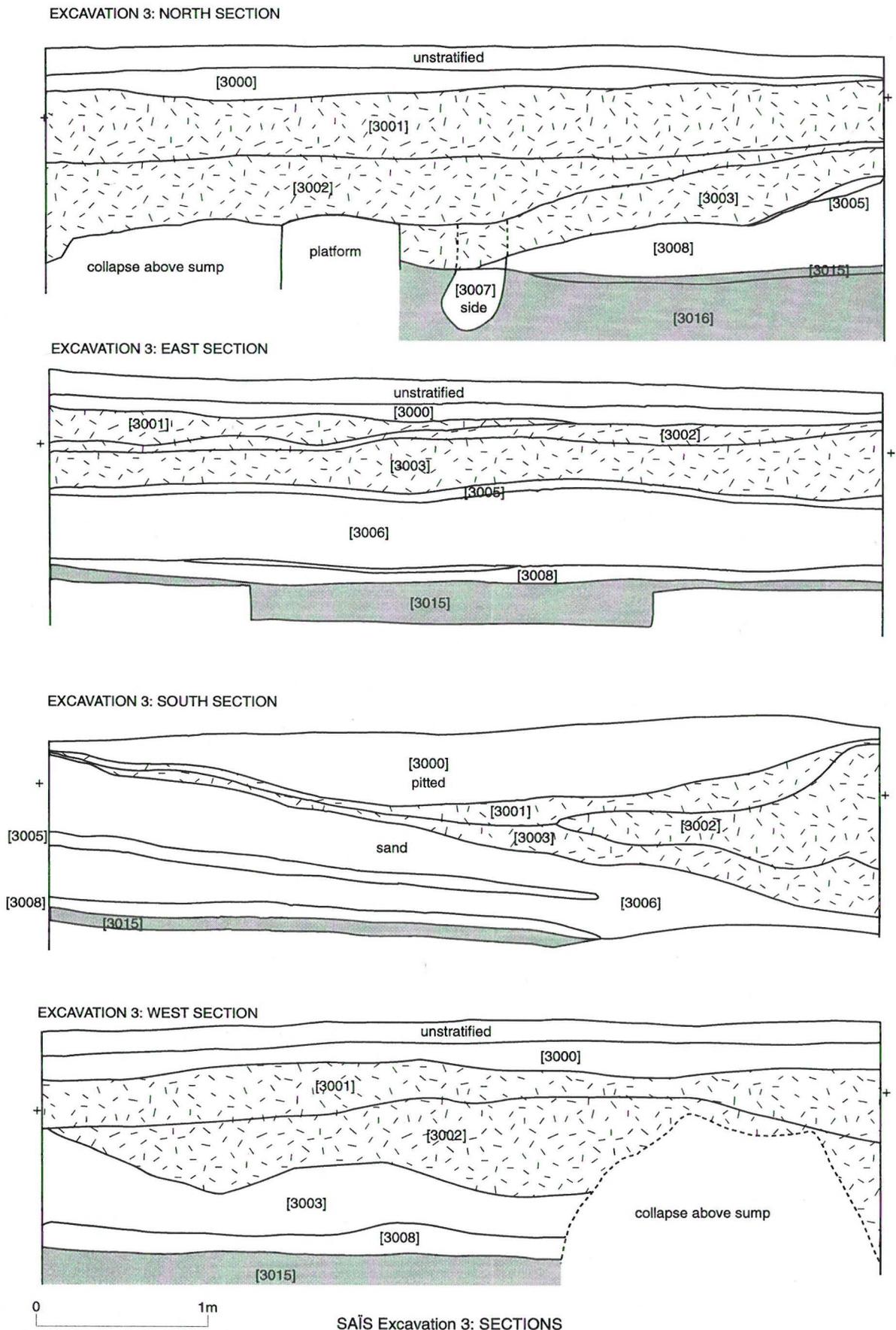


Fig. 2



onwards and especially in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century (Wilson, forthcoming).

Prehistoric Layers

The layers of material can be divided into three main phases, distinguished by matrix colour and texture and the pottery and objects (figs. 1 and 2 for plans and sections).

1- Early Predynastic/Buto-Maadi Culture Layers

Context [3001] was directly beneath the upper surface and was less disturbed from above with fewer examples of modern rubbish. The soil matrix had a higher clay content, particularly on the eastern side of the trench. It contained some roots from the surface plants and only a few fragments of pottery. Most of the sherds were very weathered coarse Nile silt wares, with some red/brown burnished sherds. Some of them were identified as Predynastic in date, suggesting that [3001] is already at the top of the prehistoric sequence. In addition, two fired 'bricks' were found near the top of the context, but did not seem to be related to any mud brick features, or any other material. They could have been the remnants of a mud hearth surround, fired in situ. The base of a stone vessel was also found in this context, but it is probably later in date and could be from the disturbed level above. The matrix also contained carbonate nodules and white limestone or salt flecks, suggesting that plants had grown here once, in semi-arid conditions.

[3002] This context was identified as a deposit of organics, possibly once a stagnant pool containing reeds or aquatic plants. The layer was uneven in depth and extent, and deeper on the northern and western sides of the trench. Its nature was deduced from the distinctive blue-black (grey-black) colour with red-brown patches which undulated over the succeeding context, thus sealing it. In places there were concentrations of black oxidised material. Further weathered pot fragments were found in this context. In places [3003] directly succeeded [3001]. Degraded red brick or coarse pot-

tery was noted at the bottom of [3002] and above [3003] particularly on the southern side. A fragment of basalt and some other stones were also found in this layer, maybe suggesting intrusive material from above and that there was a degree of disturbance of this layer.

[3003] is probably a more 'sealed' context with the transitional phases [3001] and [3002] above it. Carbonised roots in the upper western section of the transitional phase go down through into [3003]. The context is a yellow sandy-loam matrix with patches of organic deposits and the slopes down from the east to the west. In the centre of [3003] there was an area of darker coloured material consisting of organic brown patches with charcoal fragments. Pot sherds were found concentrated on the east side of this layer and occurred less frequently on the western, higher side. They included some rim sherds and polished sherds. The forms of the vessels included burnished bowls with straight sides, large bread trays, closed storage jars, closed jars with pointed bases and closed burnished ovoid vessels. Other objects from this context included a few brown fired bricks, a model bovid horn made from pottery, basalt, red quartzite and white quartzite stones, some lithics and bone fragments. Statistical analysis of the pottery showed that 77-81% of the sherds were straw tempered, 5-7% had coarse straw temper and 13-15% were untempered wares. The decorated and diagnostic sherds could be paralleled with examples from other sites as follows:

Impressed V pattern (von der Way 1997: 77, fig.40)	Buto	Schicht Ia/b Decoration type G6b; pl. 4.1-6).
Half-moon fingernail impressions (von der Way 1997: 77, fig.40)	Buto	Schicht IIa/b (4) Decoration type G2a.2-5; pl. 43.1-7).
Closed jar rim (Rizkana & Seeher 1992: 33 and pls.1-11)	Maadi El Omari	Jar type 1-4 Group II.1c,2
(Debono & Mortensen 1990: 28 and pl.2.1-5)	Merimde	Schicht V
Model bull horn (Eiwanger 1992: nos. IV 958-960).	Merimde	later levels

In addition there were some 'plum-red' burnished sherds from closed jar forms which may well be comparable to Upper Egyptian pottery and thus represent imports in the Lower Egyptian repertoire. On the other hand, no obviously 'foreign' wares or forms were noted and this forms an interesting point of comparison with the repertoire from Buto. It could be the case that Excavation 3 is just not in an area which would have this kind of material, but it is still worthy of note at this stage. Based on the comparison of all the material, a date of the mid fourth millennium (ca. 3,500 BC) is possible for this Buto-Maadi culture material.

Amongst the faunal material were the bones of cattle, catfish and synodontis and pigs some of which were identifiable as juvenile animals. In general, the bone assemblage was very burned with much charring and blackening of the examples and in some bones were completely whitened. Samples of charcoal were recovered as well as charred cereal remains. Initially the data suggested that this had been an area containing domestic waste. The low numbers of macrofossils, however, and the limited quantities of other waste suggested that this was not a high density waste context (Cotton 2002: 4.22 and Table 7). Material could have been periodically cleared away or, indeed, it could have been redeposited here from somewhere else and is therefore *ex-situ*.

[3004] was a post-hole cut into and through [3003] starting at 20 cm below the top of the context. It appeared as a darker patch and the fill was a mid-brown, sandy-clay loam. The pit contained pottery sherds, a weight (?), some medium-large mammal ribs, fish bones, a sedge seed and a flax seed. The pit was deep and oval in shape and the rubbish seemed to have fallen into the pit from above rather than be related to the contexts below.

2- Transitional layers

Both [3005] and [3006] were relatively unproductive lenses consisting of a yellow or

grey sandy loam with a few preserved brown organic remains, overlying a true transitional layer [3008].

[3008] was a thick lens of material running north-south at western side of trench. The edge of the scatter may align with the post-hole, perhaps suggesting the edge of some sort of settlement or occupational debris. This layer ran under the sandy-loam pile [3006] and into the eastern side of the area. Context [3015] was directly below [3008]. The context contained fewer pot sherds than those main phases above and below, but there were some large mammal bones including a bovine scapula and skull, and also some pig jaws and skull fragments. These were embedded into [3015].

It is possible that this was material which may have washed down onto the top of [3015] and this was suggested by the nature of the finds in [3008]. Fine pottery fragments and slivers predominated in the fine environmental analysis of the samples from this layer. Despite the fact that the samples were relatively large, no waterlogged plant macrofossils were preserved, making it difficult to interpret the context as an in-situ settlement context (Cotton 2002: 4.25, Tables 8 and 9).

Three other possible small pits were identified in this context [3009] and fill [3010]; [3011] and fill [3012]; [3013] and fill [3014]. It was not possible to determine whether they were small post holes, tree root holes, pot emplacements or small depressions which had filled up with darker coloured debris or organic material. One of the samples from [3013], either the fill of a pit or directly from the context below, contained charcoal, fish bone and pottery fragments, suggesting that it was domestic waste. Further, charred grains of emmer wheat glumes with a few examples of barley and wheat and fragments of tamarix wood charcoal suggested that this was waste from fuel burning. Some *Malva* (mallow) seeds were also identified suggesting an interesting mixture of wild and domestic plants here (Cotton 2002: 4.27, Table 9).

3- Neolithic Phases

This was the limit of the excavation with context [3015], a silty-sand context containing bone and pottery coming down to [3016], a brown-black organic layer. Only a small area of this context was excavated, but it is likely that it extended for the whole eastern two-thirds of the trench. The material in was very dense, more like an in situ settlement layer and contained much pottery and bone. The thickness of this layer was considerable, as best as could be determined from a small test pit, which showed that it was at least 13 cm deep. The layers continued downwards with 20 cm of black carbonised material, 14 cm light sand, a black band and a layer of light sand.

Surprisingly, for this darker coloured matrix, the sample contained very fine grained material with only a low number of fish bones left after wet sieving. In other words, no charcoal or seed samples were obtained from the samples. Some charred material could have been expected if this had been a domestic area with waste.

On the other hand the pottery from [3015] and [3016] seemed to suggest a phase distinct from those above. The statistical analysis of the pottery was : 7-11% straw tempered, 5-6% coarse straw tempered wares and 83-86% untempered wares. The diagnostic forms were limited to one untempered sherd from [3016] incised with a leaf or tree motif. Parallels to this motif come from the earliest levels at Merimde Schicht I (Eiwanger 1984: nos. I.330 and 341; summary Eiwanger 1992: 40 fig. 9). Also at Merimde, red polished ware is found from the earliest levels, but the grey polished wares are not attested until Schicht II. As both red and grey polished wares are found in [3016] here at Saïs, it is possible that this context dates to the Early Neolithic Period around the early 5th millennium BC (ca. 4800 BC). The forms of the vessels were mostly open forms and included large straight sided or slightly flared bowls and basins, bowls with red and black burnished sides, one fragment with a

repair hole and one from a small, deep bowl with the outside hand smoothed with roughly concentric circles.

The bone material also proved to be interesting with pig bones from juveniles and mature animals predominating in the assemblage over cattle bones. A much smaller proportion of sheep or goat bones were identified, suggesting that the pig was the preferred domesticated animal, reared here, perhaps for a fast return on meat, fat and hide products in the delta marsh environment. In addition, there were synodontis fish bones, a single bone from a species of antelope and a fragment of a male human pelvis with some pathology showing inflammation near the thigh bone socket.

Summary

It is obviously difficult to make definitive conclusions based upon such a small sample size, from contexts whose nature cannot be identified with any certainty and with the dating dependent upon comparison with a few diagnostics from other sites.

There do seem to be two distinct episodes of prehistoric material, one which can be dated to the Buto-Maadi phase and the other to the early Neolithic. Though distinct in time, the archaeology is separated by a possible transitional or abandonment phase. The degraded and eroded nature of the Buto-Maadi pottery, its dispersed nature even within this small area and its association with charred bone suggests that this material originates from a domestic waste dump, possibly in a settlement. Whether the area is in this place, whether it was washed down here from a nearby location (say further up a sand bank), or indeed, whether it has been completely redeposited from elsewhere cannot yet be determined. These contexts themselves seem to have washed down a sandy slope, possibly as the result of a river channel or stream cutting through this area, to form the transitional lens resting on the more substantial earlier phase. The post hole here would suggest a settlement area also.

The material dated to the Neolithic, on the other hand, is also affected by water erosion and the black mottled colour of the matrix may come from degraded organics in a swamp or lagoonal environment. The predominance of pig bones in the faunal assemblage may suggest an early stage of occupation, as pigs are easier to rear in delta conditions and can quickly produce food. The lack of what would be recognised as archaeological human rubbish (burnt chaff, seeds and so on) may suggest that this material derives from a more temporary locus of human activity such as a seasonal animal pen, or a mortuary or even ritual context. In particular, the one identifiable fragment of human bone could indicate the former possibility more strongly. In addition, it might be possible to link the types of pottery to some of the food processing industries taking place. The processing of pig meat and hides and the rendering of fat may have required large open vessels such as the heavy straight sided vessels found here.

The spread of the material could also have been extensive at Saïs. Work from the drill augur programme suggests that prehistoric

material can be found under the modern village and in a band running up the western edge of the Great Pit to its northern extent. There is also a separate area under the Northern Enclosure.

Though there are questions over the original context of some of the evidence, it does seem that the prehistoric period has been located at Saïs and that there is the possibility that the Early Dynastic pictorial and textual evidence can be backed up by archaeological evidence eventually. Future work and the full publication of these preliminary findings will hopefully shed light on the precise context of the material found so far. If radiocarbon dates can be obtained as well, the pottery and scientific data can be used to complement and refine the dating of the material.

Finally, it may be useful to start to think in terms of a Lower Egyptian Prehistoric cultural homogeneity with local variations rather than restrict ourselves to type-sites from which influences or developments radiate outwards. If more sites such as Saïs can contribute to the debate, then Lower Egypt as a real *prehistoric* cultural force may become a reality. ■

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