Ancient Egypt - Predynastic Period - Cultures of Lower Egypt

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Entry tags: Egyptian Religions, Prehistoric Religion, African Religions, Religious Group

The Predynastic Period in Lower Egypt (the north of Egypt) is associated with the material culture that was once referred to as Buto-Maadi. This is seen at a number of sites in northern Egypt, but is slowly replaced by the Naqada culture of southern Egypt in what is referred to as the period Naqada IC-IIB. After this, Egypt becomes a unified state. Most of this period is devoid of texts, with simple labels showing up right at the end. This means that our religious knowledge for this era is completely based on an interpretation of the material evidence. Many of these interpretations are built on the belief of continuity of practice between this early phase and later Egyptian religion. This is somewhat problematic, as the meaning of objects and practices may have changed over time. There is therefore disagreement on what religion was like in this prehistoric period, which should be kept in mind. As new evidence surfaces, these interpretations may change.

Date Range: 4000 BCE - 3400 BCE
Region: Peregrine_LowerEgyptPreDynastic
Region tags: Africa, Northern Africa, Egypt
From Peter N. Peregrine's Encyclopedia of Prehistory.

Status of Participants:
✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:


Online sources for understanding this subject:
— Source 1 URL: https://ancientegyptonline.co.uk/maadi/
— Source 1 Description: Ancient Egypt Online - Buto-Maadi Culture
— Source 1 URL: https://oi-idb-static.uchicago.edu/multimedia/88/oimp33.pdf
— Source 1 Description: Before the Pyramids online PDF from the Oriental Institute at Chicago.

General Variables

Membership/Group Interactions

Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:
— Yes

Notes: The two main groups within Egypt during the Predynastic Period (roughly the 4th millennium BCE) are referred to as the Naqada culture in Upper Egypt and the Buto-Maadi culture in Lower Egypt, based on the material culture found at the type sites. In the later predynastic (referred to as Naqada IIc) the cultural complex of Upper Egypt, began to replace that in Lower Egypt, eventually becoming dominant. What caused the spread, whether a slow preference in styles or beliefs, social dominance of the Upper Egyptian peoples, or perhaps warfare, is debated. War was once the monocausal explanation for this cultural replacement, based in part on the images seen in the Narmer palette. This is now considered outdated, and most scholars lean towards a more complicated, multi-causal acculturation process (see Wengrow 2009). In addition, the Lower Egypt Buto-Maadi culture seems to have been in regular peaceful contact with the Levant, and many cultural markers from the Near East, like the shape of dwellings and the remains of imported copper working technology, have been excavated at Lower Egypt sites (Tristant and Midant-Reynes 2011).

Is the cultural contact competitive:
— Yes

Notes: The two main groups within Egypt during the Predynastic Period (roughly the 4th millennium BCE) are referred to as the Naqada culture in Upper Egypt and the Buto-Maadi culture in Lower Egypt, based on the material culture found at the type sites. In the later predynastic (referred to as Naqada IIc) the cultural complex of Upper Egypt, began to replace that in Lower Egypt, eventually becoming dominant. What caused the spread, whether a slow preference in styles or beliefs, social dominance of the Upper Egyptian peoples, or perhaps warfare, is debated. War was once the monocausal explanation for this cultural replacement, based in part on the images seen in the Narmer palette. This is now considered outdated, and most scholars lean towards a more complicated, multi-causal acculturation process.

— No

Notes: While the relationship between Upper and Lower Egypt was competitive, the relationship with Lower Egypt and the Near East seems to have been peaceful.

Is the cultural contact accommodating/pluralistic:
— No
Notes: The two main groups within Egypt during the Predynastic Period (roughly the 4th millennium BCE) are referred to as the Naqada culture in Upper Egypt and the Buto-Maadi culture in Lower Egypt, based on the material culture found at the type sites. In the later predynastic (referred to as Naqada IIc) the cultural complex of Upper Egypt, began to replace that in Lower Egypt, eventually becoming dominant. What caused the spread, whether a slow preference in styles or beliefs, social dominance of the Upper Egyptian peoples, or perhaps warfare, is debated. War was once the monocausal explanation for this cultural replacement, based in part on the images seen in the Narmer palette. This is now considered outdated, and most scholars lean towards a more complicated, multi-causal acculturation process.

— Yes

Notes: The relationship between Lower Egypt and the Near East seems to have been peaceful, and related to trade or the migration of peoples.

Is the cultural contact neutral:
— No

Is there violent conflict (within sample region):
— Field doesn’t know

Notes: Although it seems like there was some sort of violence during the cultural replacement of Lower Egypt by Upper Egypt, it is unclear if there was any inter-fighting within Lower Egypt itself.

Is there violent conflict (with groups outside the sample region):
— Yes

Notes: The two main groups within Egypt during the Predynastic Period (roughly the 4th millennium BCE) are referred to as the Naqada culture in Upper Egypt and the Buto-Maadi culture in Lower Egypt, based on the material culture found at the type sites. In the later predynastic (referred to as Naqada IIc) the cultural complex of Upper Egypt, began to replace that in Lower Egypt, eventually becoming dominant. What caused the spread, whether a slow preference in styles or beliefs, social dominance of the Upper Egyptian peoples, or perhaps warfare, is debated. War was once the monocausal explanation for this cultural replacement, based in part on the images seen in the Narmer palette. This is now considered outdated, and most scholars lean towards a more complicated, multi-causal acculturation process.

— No

Notes: While the relationship between Upper and Lower Egypt was competitive, the relationship with Lower Egypt and the Near East seems to have been peaceful.

Does the religious group have a general process/system for assigning religious affiliation:
— No

Notes: There are no textual references from this period, so we cannot be certain; however, it looks like belief in the gods was assumed, rather than debated. To be Egyptian was to believe in the Egyptian gods, and partake in their worship.
Does the religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members:

— No

Notes: There are no textual references from this period, so we cannot be certain; however, it looks like belief in the gods was assumed, rather than debated. To be Egyptian was to believe in the Egyptian gods, and partake in their worship.

Does the religion have official political support

— No

Notes: Lower Egypt remained relatively socially homogenous with little evidence of what might be considered a ruling class until the acculturation process, during which many Upper Egyptian practices became a dominant feature in the north as well. For the period in question, there was therefore little evidence of an official political structure, and therefore no way for it to provide official religious support.

Is there a conception of apostasy in the religious group:

— Yes

Notes: At the very end of this period, the beliefs of Upper Egypt, including styles of funerary material, replace those of the Lower Egyptian cultures.

Are apostates prosecuted or punished:

— No

Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population, numerical):

— Field doesn’t know

Notes: There is too little evidence from this period to estimate the population.

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (% of sample region population, numerical):

— Field doesn’t know

Notes: There is too little evidence from this period to estimate the population.

Nature of religious group [please select one]:

— Small religious group (one of many small religious groups in sample region)

Notes: The different sites in Lower Egypt all seem to share a similar material culture.

Are there recognized leaders in the religious group:

— No

Notes: There is little evidence of social stratification in this period.
Scripture

Does the religious group have scriptures:
Scripture is a generic term used to designate revered texts that are considered particularly authoritative and sacred relative to other texts. Strictly speaking, it refers to written texts, but there are also "oral scriptures" (e.g. the Vedas of India).

— No
Notes: There are no texts in this period.

Architecture, Geography

Is monumental religious architecture present:
— No
Notes: The sites from this period are characterized by small round dwellings. At Maadi, some of these dwelling are semi-subterranean. There is no evidence for monumental architecture in Lower Egypt until after the acculturation process.

Are there different types of religious monumental architecture:
— No

Is iconography present:
— I don’t know
Notes: There are some human and animal figurines found in burials, but not a formal, repeated iconography that is clearly religious in nature.

Are there specific sites dedicated to sacred practice or considered sacred:
— I don’t know
Notes: The dwelling areas and the burial areas in each site are separated. It is unclear, however, whether this created specific sacred space, or if this was done for hygiene purposes.

Are pilgrimages present:
— No
Notes: There is no evidence for this.

Beliefs

Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:
Answer "no" only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body.
Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.

— Yes

Notes: This assertion has to be made hesitantly, as there is no textual evidence from this period to back it up. The mostly humble burials from this period include pottery and the occasional shellfish, which would suggest that these are objects that might be used in the afterlife.

→ Spirit-mind is conceived of as having qualitatively different powers or properties than other body parts:
  — Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence from this period to answer this question.

→ Spirit-mind is conceived of as non-material, ontologically distinct from body:
  — Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence from this period to answer this question.

→ Other spirit-body relationship:
  — Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence from this period to answer this question.

Belief in afterlife:

— Yes

Notes: This assertion has to be made hesitantly, as there is no textual evidence from this period to back it up. The mostly humble burials from this period include pottery and the occasional shellfish, which would suggest that these are objects that might be used in the afterlife.

→ Is the spatial location of the afterlife specified or described by the religious group:
  — Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence from this period to answer this question.

Reincarnation in this world:

— No

Notes: There is no evidence for this practice.

Are there special treatments for adherents’ corpses:

— No

Notes: Bodies were generally placed in pits in a contracted position. There is no evidence of special treatment of the corpse other than burial (Tristant and Midant-Reynes 2011: 50).
Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:
— No

Are grave goods present:
— Yes
  Notes: Burials for the majority of this period were quite simple. They usually included a few pots and the occasional shellfish and flint blade (Tristant and Midant-Reynes 2011: 50-52). Exceptional burials at Wadi Digla also included "one rhomboid palette, an ivory comb, and a single stone vessel" (Stevenson 2009: 6).

  Personal effects:
  — Yes
    Notes: Burials for the majority of this period were quite simple. They usually included a few pots and the occasional shellfish and flint blade (Tristant and Midant-Reynes 2011: 50-52).

  Valuable items:
  — No

  Other grave goods:
  — No

Are formal burials present:
— Yes
  Notes: They were simple, but burials were grouped into cemeteries. No group burials are known for this period.

  As cenotaphs:
  — No

  In cemetery:
  — Yes

  Family tomb-crypt:
  — No

  Domestic (individuals interred beneath house, or in areas used for normal domestic activities):
  — Yes
    Notes: The burials of stillborns or infants are occasionally found within the settlement at Ma'adi
Supernatural Beings

Are supernatural beings present:

— Field doesn't know

Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present:

This refers to surveillance by supernatural beings of humans’ behaviour and/or thought particularly as it relates to social norms or potential norm violations.

— Field doesn't know

Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:

— Field doesn't know

Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards:

— Field doesn't know

Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Messianism/Eschatology

Are messianic beliefs present:

— Field doesn't know

Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Is an eschatology present:

— Field doesn't know

Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Norms and Moral Realism

(Bard 2015: 98).

Other formal burial type:

— No
Are general social norms prescribed by the religious group:
– Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Is there a conventional vs. moral distinction in the religious group:
– Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Are there centrally important virtues advocated by the religious group:
– Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

**Practices**

**Membership Costs and Practices**

Does membership in this religious group require celibacy (full sexual abstinence):
– Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Does membership in this religious group require constraints on sexual activity (partial sexual abstinence):
– Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Does membership in this religious group require castration:
– Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Does membership in this religious group require fasting:
– Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Does membership in this religious group require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods):
– Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.
Does membership in this religious group require permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations:
— Field doesn't know
   Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Does membership in this religious group require painful physical positions or transitory painful wounds:
— Field doesn't know
   Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of adults:
"Adults" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition of a human who is 18-years-old or older and who is legally responsible for his/her actions, then please specify that difference in the Comments/Sources: box below.
— No
   Notes: There is no evidence for this.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of children:
"Children" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition, please specify that different in the Comments/Sources: box below.
— No
   Notes: There is no evidence for this.

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):
— No
   Notes: There is no evidence for this.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of property/valuable items:
— No
   Notes: There is no evidence for this.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of time (e.g., attendance at meetings or services, regular prayer, etc.):
— Field doesn't know
   Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Does membership in this religious group require physical risk taking:
— Field doesn't know
   Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.
Does membership in this religious group require accepting ethical precepts:
— Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Does membership in this religious group require marginalization by out-group members:
— Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Does membership in this religious group require participation in small-scale rituals (private, household):
— Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Does membership in this religious group require participation in large-scale rituals:
I.e. involving two or more households; includes large-scale "ceremonies" and "festivals."
— Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Are extra-ritual in-group markers present:
E.g. special changes to appearance such as circumcision, tattoos, scarification, etc.
— Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Does the group employ fictive kinship terminology:
— Field doesn't know
  Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

## Society and Institutions

### Levels of Social Complexity

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose one):
— A band
  Notes: There is very little social differentiation visible in the remains from Lower Egyptian predynastic sites. The only exception may be at Tell el-Farkha, where some social distinctions begin to appear at the very end of this period.

### Welfare
Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized famine relief:
– No
    Notes: There is no evidence of substantial storage and redistribution in the archaeological evidence.

Is famine relief available to the group’s adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
– No
    Notes: There is no evidence of substantial storage and redistribution in the archaeological evidence.

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized poverty relief:
– Field doesn’t know
    Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Is poverty relief available to the group’s adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
– Field doesn’t know
    Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm:
– Field doesn’t know
    Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Is institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm available to the group’s adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
– Field doesn’t know
    Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

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**Education**

Does the religious group provide formal education to its adherents:
– Field doesn’t know
    Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.

Is formal education available to the group’s adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group:
– Field doesn’t know
    Notes: There is too little evidence available to answer this question.
**Bureaucracy**

Do the group’s adherents interact with a formal bureaucracy within their group:

— No  
**Notes:** There does not appear to be a formal bureaucracy during this period, largely based on a lack of written evidence.

Do the group’s adherents interact with other institutional bureaucracies:

— Yes  
**Notes:** At the very end of this period, there seems to be interactions with the developing communities of Naqada. Previous to that, no.

**Public Works**

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:

— No

Is public food storage provided to the group’s adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

— No

Does the religious group in question provide water management (irrigation, flood control):

— No

Is water management provided to the group’s adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

— No

Does the religious group in question provide transportation infrastructure:

— No

Is transportation infrastructure provided for the group’s adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

— No

**Taxation**

Does the religious group in question levy taxes or tithes:

— No
Notes: There is no evidence of taxation or tithes.

Are taxes levied on the group’s adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
— No
Notes: There is no evidence of taxation or tithes.

**Enforcement**

Does the religious group in question provide an institutionalized police force:
— No
Notes: There is no evidence for this.

Do the group’s adherents interact with an institutionalized police force provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
— No
Notes: There is no evidence for this.

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized judges:
— No
Notes: There is no evidence for this.

Do the group’s adherents interact with an institutionalized judicial system provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
— No
Notes: There is no evidence for this.

Does the religious group in question enforce institutionalized punishment:
— No
Notes: There is no evidence for this.

Are the group’s adherents subject to institutionalized punishment enforced by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
— No
Notes: There is no evidence for this.

Does the religious group in question have a formal legal code:
— No
Notes: There is no evidence for this.
Are the group’s adherents subject to a formal legal code provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

— No

**Notes:** There is no evidence for this.

### Warfare

Does religious group in question possess an institutionalized military:

— No

Do the group’s adherents participate in an institutionalized military provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

— No

**Notes:** There is no evidence for military equipment.

Are the group’s adherents protected by or subject to an institutionalized military provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

— No

### Written Language

Does the religious group in question possess its own distinct written language:

— No

**Notes:** There is no evidence of a written language at this time.

Is a non-religion-specific written language available to the group’s adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

— No

**Notes:** There is no evidence of a written language at this time.

Is a non-religion-specific written language used by the group’s adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

— No

**Notes:** There is no evidence of a written language at this time.

### Calendar

Does the religious group in question possess a formal calendar:

— Field doesn’t know
Notes: There is not enough evidence available to answer this question.

Is a formal calendar provided for the group’s adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
— No
Notes: There is not enough evidence available to answer this question.

### Food Production

Does the religious group in question provide food for themselves:
— Yes
Notes: The predynastic cultures of Lower Egypt are known to have practised animal husbandry, which included cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and dogs. They also grew different types of wheat and barley (Tristant and Midant-Reynes 2011: 50)

Please characterize the forms/level of food production [choose all that apply]:
— Gathering
— Hunting (including marine animals)
— Fishing
— Small-scale agriculture / horticultural gardens or orchards
— Large-scale agriculture (e.g., monocropping, organized irrigation systems)
Notes: The predynastic cultures of Lower Egypt are known to have practised animal husbandry, which included cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and dogs. They also grew different types of wheat and barley (Tristant and Midant-Reynes 2011: 50)

Is food provided to the group’s adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
— No
Notes: There is no evidence of centralized food production and redistribution, though there is a brewery complex found at Tell el-Farkha in the latest phase of this period, which at least demonstrates more intensified production practices (Tristant and Midant-Reynes 2011: 51).