

# "Too Much Stuff": Recent Finds in Predynastic Egypt

By Mario Beatty, Ph.D.

Approximately two hundred and fifty objects from the Old Kingdom in Ancient Egypt are now on display in a major exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York until January 9, 2000. Although this exhibit reflects a cooperative effort from various museums around the world, it will only be shown in three venues: Paris, New York, and Toronto. The exhibit embodies the beauty of the Ancient Egyptian script and language along with meticulous craftsmanship fashioning sculptural and architectural masterpieces using the crudest of tools by modern standards.

In conjunction with the exhibit, there were two major scholarly presentations given on a period that precedes and lays the foundation for the Old Kingdom. This period is referred to as predynastic Egypt and roughly covers a time spanning throughout the 4th millennium B.C. (c. 4000 to 3100 B.C.).

One presentation, entitled the "Beginnings of Writing in Ancient Egypt," was given by Gunther Dreyer who is now heading the German Institute of Archaeology in Cairo. For over twenty-five years, this Institute has been at the forefront of forging a reexamination of the Royal Necropolis of Abydos in Upper Egypt. This site is often referred to as Umm el-Qaab or the "Mother of Pots" because of the large number of vessels and jars found there used for funerary offerings in the context of burial sites and rituals. Dreyer defined writing as "a system to encode the sounds of language by using signs." To illustrate his point, he provided a modern-day example of our ability to look at traffic signs and understand their meaning without being able to "read" them because they do not represent sounds. When signs are used to represent sounds in systematic ways the beginnings of writing emerge. In interpreting various inscribed tags,

seals, pottery, and jars found, Dreyer placed the origin of writing in Ancient Egypt at approximately 3400 B.C. He highlighted the theme of trade and commerce as perhaps being the catalyst for the emergence of writing because various objects describe quantities of imported and exported goods such as oil and fat functioning as tribute.

An important artifact found at the site was an obsidian bowl. Obsidian is a natural glassy-looking material of volcanic origin. As a natural resource, it does not exist in Egypt; it comes from the south either from modern-day Sudan or Ethiopia. Dreyer asserted that the obsidian used to make this bowl came from Ethiopia suggesting significant cultural contacts among Nile Valley populations. He concluded his presentation by noting similarities between specific Egyptian and Mesopotamian objects and suggesting that perhaps there is an initial influence of Egyptian writing on Mesopotamia because there are signs on Mesopotamian objects that are only "readable" from the standpoint of the Egyptian language, but not the Mesopotamian language.

The second presentation, entitled "Too Much Stuff: Recent Finds at Hierakonpolis," was given by Renee Friedman, co-leader of The Hierakonpolis Expedition. There have been many important archaeological finds at Hierakonpolis, the most notable being heretofore the famous Narmer Palette. The Ancient Egyptians referred to Hierakonpolis as Nekhen and afforded this site a sacred place in its historical memory. Modern expeditions have affirmed the validity of Ancient Egypt's historical memory and continue to highlight its central role and import in the context of the emergence of the civilization. Among the most notable discoveries are the oldest preserved house in Egypt (c. 3600 B.C.), Egypt's earliest brewery (c. 3500 B.C.), the first attempts at artificial mummification (c. 3500 B.C.), Egypt's first temple (c. 3400 B.C.), a first dynasty royal palace (c. 3000 B.C.), and ritual masks (c. 3600 B.C.)

Other finds continue to amplify important African cultural features and continuities. As was the case in Abydos, significant amounts of obsidian were found at various burial sites and these samples have been scientifically determined to have come

from Ethiopia. Burials of elephants and baboons continue to highlight the shared animal world of the Nile Valley cultural complex. And last, but not least, the burial of an older woman (approximately sixty years of age) showed definitive evidence of hair dyeing and hair weaving dated to about 3500 B.C. Hence, we encounter the first recorded hair extensions in history 5500 years ago and it's a tradition that is still going strong among African women worldwide!

Unfortunately, this sacred place is about to be lost to researchers forever. The contemporary Egyptian government wants to settle 100,000 people in the area of Hierakonpolis and this encroaching dynamic will ultimately destroy this ancient and sacred predynastic site. The Hierakonpolis expedition is feverishly attempting to salvage and preserve as much of this site as possible given the seemingly inevitable inflation in population.

In the area of archaeology, Ancient Egypt is always providing us with something new that continues to give us important glimpses into the world of our ancestors. We owe it to ourselves and to them to pause, look, listen, and continue to learn from this complex civilization.