THE PRINCETON

DICTIONARY OF

ANCIENT EGYPT

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Nabta Playa

Neolithic site in the Western Desert, c.100 km west of Abu Simbel. The Early Neolithic site E-75-6 at Nabta (c.7000 bc) is the earliest known settlement in Egypt, consisting of three or four rows of huts, probably situated along different shore lines of the playa (ancient seasonally filled lake). It is difficult to estimate the original number of huts, each of which was associated with bell-shaped storage pits and wells. Despite its size, the Early Neolithic phase at Nabta does not seem to have been a permanent settlement.

In 1992 circular and linear arrangements of small standing stones were identified as Late Neolithic monuments oriented to astronomical phenomena (the cardinal points and the summer solstice), created around 4000 BC. Alongside one of these alignments were two tumuli covering burials of long-horned bulls; other cattle burials, surrounded by large stones, were discovered in one of the wadis leading into the Nabta Playa depression.


F. Wendorf, 'Forty years of archaeological research in Sudanese and Egyptian Nubia, Sudan & Nubia 7 (2003), 2-10.

Nag el-Deir (Naga-el-Deir)

Cemetery in northern Upper Egypt situated on the east bank of the Nile south of Abydos and spanning the Predynastic Period to the Middle Kingdom (c.4000-1650 BC). Its excavation was begun in 1901 by the American scholar George Reisner, whose team recorded the excavation in meticulous detail and excavated the cemetery as a whole, rather than concentrating only on individual, potentially rich tombs, as had been the case with many late nineteenth-century excavators. As a result, it has proved possible to gain some idea of the development of the cemetery and to examine the burial practices closely. Reisner made a full publication of each Predynastic tomb, rather than simply publishing those that he considered to be significant, surpassing his predecessors (and indeed many later excavators of Egyptian sites). Details of the clothing and position of the bodies, which would have otherwise been lost, were recorded. Among the finds from the Dynastic period is a 6th-Dynasty letter to the dead from the tomb of Meru (n5737).

The work conducted by Reisner and Albert Lythgoe at the n7000 Predynastic cemetery was sufficiently detailed to allow recent re-analysis of the remains. Their excavation records included unusually detailed descriptions of the skeletons themselves, provided by the anatomist Grafton Elliot Smith, thus supplying medical anthropologists with a good database for further research.

G. A. Reisner and A. Mace, The Early Dynastic cemeteries of Naga-el-Deir (Boston, 1908-9).


P. V. Payzowski, Their bones shall not perish: an examination of Predynastic human skeletal remains from Naga-el-Deir in Egypt (New Malden, 1990).

Nakht

Scribe and astronomer of Amun who probably lived during the reign of Thutmose IV (1400-1390 BC). He is best known for his well-preserved tomb (TT52) in the Theban cemetery of Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, which is decorated with many paintings depicting scenes from daily life, including agricultural activities, as well as the entertainment of guests at a banquet. The name of the god Amun was excised from this tomb during the time of Akhenaten (1352-1336 BC) as part of the ATEN 'heresy'.

N. de G. Davies, The tomb of Nakht at Thebes (New York, 1917).


Names

Egyptians set great store by the naming of people and objects, and the name was regarded as an essential element of every human individual, just as necessary for survival as the ka, ba or akh. Fashions in personal names often follow those of the rulers of the time, and often incorporate the name of a deity chosen either because they were pre-eminent at that period or locally important in the place where the individual was born. The name of an individual is therefore often a clue as to date or geographical origins. Although some names are simply nouns or adjectives, such as Nefertiti ('beautiful woman'), others take the form of statements such as Rahotep ('Ra is satisfied') or Khasekhmeny ('the two powers appear').

The importance of words and names, not merely as abstract symbols but as manifestations of the named phenomena themselves, is re-emphasized by the so-called Memphite Theology, inscribed on the Stabuqo Stone, in which the god Ptah creates everything in the
universe by pronouncing each of the names (see creation). In the same way, the Egyptian reference works known as Onomastica simply consisted of lists of names for such things as people, professions and places, without any description or definition, since it was presumably felt that the name or word was in itself a perfect expression of the phenomenon concerned.

Like the shadow, the name was regarded as a living part of each human being, which had to be assigned immediately at birth; otherwise it was felt that the individual would not properly come into existence. In the case of king lists inscribed on the walls of temples and tombs, the cult of the royal ancestors was celebrated by writing out the cartouches of past rulers, and in a sense it was the list of names on which the cultic rituals focused rather than the individual rulers themselves.

The symbolic importance of the name also meant that the removal of personal or royal names from monuments or statuary was considered to be equivalent to the destruction of the very memory and existence of the person to whom the name referred. Conversely, the addition of a new name to a relief or statue (an act usually described by Egyptologists as the 'usurping' of a work) was considered to imbue it with the essence and personality of the new owner, regardless of its actual physical appearance.

See also Royal Titulary.