



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Quaternary International

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/quaint

Basket use, raw materials and arguments on early and Middle Holocene mobility in the Fayum, Egypt

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 July 2016

Received in revised form

14 November 2016

Accepted 10 January 2017

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Basketry

Neolithic

Fayum

Egypt

ABSTRACT

The Fayum Neolithic is well-known because the earliest evidence to date for domesticated wheat and barley in Egypt is found in the Fayum depression, north of present day Lake Qarun. Here, in 1924 and 1925, Gertrud Caton-Thompson and Elinor Gardner identified two Neolithic settlements, which they named Kom K and Kom W. The evidence for early agriculture did not derive from these two settlements, however, but from a series of storage pits which Gardner found quite by accident on a high ridge, north of Kom K. What is less well-known is that apart from domesticated wheat and barley this area also yielded evidence for a well-developed basketry technology. Recent fieldwork by the URU Fayum Project (University of California, Los Angeles; Rijksuniversiteit Groningen; University of Auckland) has provided a wealth of new information on the material remains of the Fayum Neolithic including the plant fibre objects. While animal bones and ostrich egg shell have been preserved both on the surface and in stratified deposits, no animal fibre was found. The well-preserved basketry lined storage pits and their content have been used to argue that the Middle Holocene occupation in the Fayum was characterized by a sedentary society. Recent field work has shown that the basket-lined pits were sealed off in a manner that could have enabled long-term caching. This, as well as more recent insights that long term storage does not equal sedentism, leaves the question open the nature of mobility in which Fayum Neolithic society was involved. The question whether the type of materials, basketry techniques and employment can be used as indicators of a way of life, is addressed in conjunction with the results of the interdisciplinary research team as a whole.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

Archaeology rarely makes headlines, but in 1925 the discovery in Egypt of well-preserved domesticated cereals certainly did. These “lowly forms of their kind”, as the excavator, Gertrude Caton-Thompson, drily accounted in her memoirs (1983, 102), were desiccated emmer wheat (*Triticum turgidum* ssp. *dicoccon*) and 6-row hulled barley (*Hordeum vulgare* ssp. *vulgare*) (Cappers, 2013). The place of discovery was the Fayum North Shore, a desert region in the north of the Fayum Basin, which is a depression in the Western Desert of Egypt, fed by a branch of the Nile. Throughout its history the Fayum has been a swamp-like area, with the lake in the lowest, northern, part of the basin (Fig. 1), the level of which varied over time. At present the lake surface is 44 m below sea level, but in

the early Holocene the lake was approximately 40–50 m higher and consequently covered a large area of the basin (Phillipps et al., 2016). The domesticated wheat and barley were found thanks to Elinor Gardner, who was a geologist by training. While excavations were going on in an area now known as Kom K, she explored a ridge at an elevation of 32 m, which she named K-ridge. After removing the desert pavement, Gardner not only found the surface of the ridge (mostly indurated tertiary clay and shale, capped by silty sandstone) but to her surprise also regular round shapes with a diameter of approximately 1 m, dug into the surface. These turned out to be storage pits, in total 67, many of them lined with coiled basketry. A second area, dubbed the Lower K Pits, was less well-preserved, and had remains of 109 pits, of which 38 had evidence of reed or straw matting. The remaining 78 pits were comparable in size to those with evidence of matting and were therefore also considered storage pits (Caton-Thompson and Gardner, 1934, 45–54).

In 2004 the URU Fayum Project set out to re-investigate the

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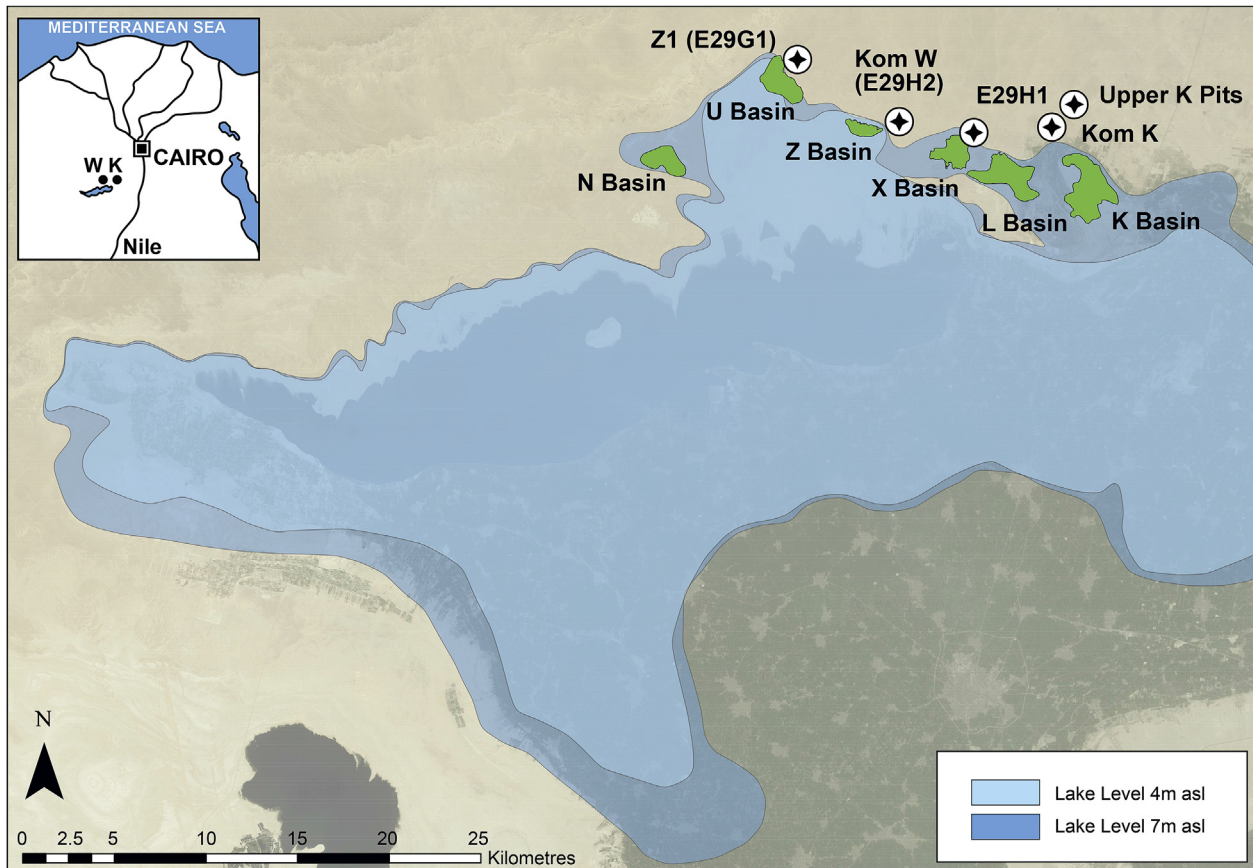


Fig. 1. The Fayum Basin, with the region rich in Early Holocene cultural deposits north of present day Lake Qarun.

region, including the Upper and Lower K Pits (Holdaway and Wendrich, 2017; Wendrich and Cappers, 2005). Workers of a governmental land reclamation company set out in the 1990s to cultivate over 2000 ha of desert, right in the K Pits area. They dug a large canal system, and built roads and pumping stations. By 2004 the infrastructure was ready, but the canals were dry. In 2014 the situation was still the same, the development had halted because of a lack of available water. The area of the Lower K Pits was, however, completely destroyed by two large canals and an asphalt road. The area of the Upper K Pits was cut through by a large north-south running canal and covered by adjacent dykes. Reinvestigation of the Upper K Pits area resulted in the discovery of six additional storage pits and seven “preparation areas” in which a mixture of materials were found similar to indurated pit covers. This discovery was part of a much broader research endeavor which studied the Fayum north shore as an ongoing cultural landscape, rather than a number of “settlements” and “activity areas” (Holdaway and Wendrich, 2017).

2. Material and methods

After relocating the area of the Upper K Pits, surface indentations were mapped with a total station, the locations incorporated in a GIS, and these compared to a map published in 1934 (Caton-Thompson and Gardner, XXIV). Excavation of the pits was done in a 5 × 5 m grid, following a method of stratigraphic excavation, adapted from the manual of the Museum of London, Archaeological Service (MoLAS, 1994). This included removal by brush and trowel of stratigraphic layers throughout the entire square. An indurated layer that covered several of the pits was

sectioned using chisels and an angle grinder to section the cover. The pit contents, which in most cases were quite uniform, were excavated in layers of 10 cm and recorded and screened separately. Botanical, zooarchaeological, as well as other finds were hand collected and all soil was dry-screened through a 2 mm² mesh. The same methods were used to excavate two stratified sites, named Kom K and Kom W by Caton-Thompson. These stratified deposits and the Lower and Upper K Pits form only a small part of the Fayum north shore archaeological record. The majority of this record consists of surface scatters of stone artefacts, ceramics, faunal material, and the remains of heat retainer hearths. A multi-scalar approach was used to investigate this surface record combining transects orientated north-south reaching into the Fayum Basin as well as survey areas consisting of two perpendicular strips of 10 m wide and 100 m long. Areas of modern day disturbance were excluded but all remaining areas were surveyed for hearths and grindstones by foot with 10 m spacing. A detailed description of the sample and recording method is found in (Holdaway and Wendrich, 2017). Detailed studies of the north shore topography were conducted (Phillipps et al., 2016) combined with analysis of the character of sediments (Koopman et al., 2016). Intensive recording was conducted at and around the site identified as E29H1 by Wendorf and Schild (1976) demonstrating a more extensive spatial record than was previously identified.

3. Results

A total number of 129 pits were recorded in the Upper K Pits area, 62 more than should have been visible based on the Caton-Thompson and Gardner map. We estimate that the land

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