



The Fayum revisited: Reconsidering the role of the Neolithic package, Fayum north shore, Egypt



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ABSTRACT

Discussion concerning the origins of the Egyptian Neolithic is often framed in terms of a Neolithic package or 'Neolithisation' that appears late in Egypt via diffusion from southwest Asia. Here we propose an alternative approach using the results of new fieldwork in the Fayum north shore. We summarise a detailed study of the Fayum archaeological landscape interpretable at different temporal and spatial scales using an expanded version of low-level food production to organise observations concerning palaeoenvironment, socioeconomy, settlement, and mobility. While domestic plants and animals were introduced to the Fayum from elsewhere, when a number of aspects of the archaeological record are compared, a settlement system is suggested that has no obvious analogues with the Neolithic in southwest Asia.

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1. Introduction

Debate concerning the origins of the Neolithic in Egypt focusses on two questions: why did it develop and where did it come from? The answer to both invokes environmental change with increasing desiccation seen to drive the movement of people from the eastern Sahara toward the Nile Valley bearing with them particular artefact types (Warfe, 2003; Kuper and Kröpelin, 2006). Other groups of people from southwest Asia, with domestic plants and animals together with aspects of a Neolithic package, were driven to Egypt, either via the Mediterranean coast or the Red Sea (Goring-Morris, 1993; Bar-Yosef, 2002; Close, 2002; Brookbank, 2013). Variants of these explanations have held sway since before the middle of the 20th century, however, in common with all large scale models that seek to answer 'The Origins of the Neolithic in Egypt' they necessarily subsume a great deal of regional variability in favour of a generalized explanation. The models are often used to create regional divisions in the Egyptian Neolithic that mimic the geographic divisions that existed later in time yet these divisions are rarely considered in their own right. They are typically based on a limited set of observations of artefact morphology without a

theoretical discussion indicating why these artefacts should in fact be so culturally diagnostic at a macro-regional level.

Here we propose an alternative approach to large scale explanation by summarising the results of new fieldwork in the Fayum north shore, the region made famous both by Caton-Thompson and Gardner's (1934) initial work and continued research since that time (Wendorf and Schild, 1976; Wenke et al., 1988; Kozłowski and Ginter, 1989). Our interest is in the detailed study of an archaeological landscape at multiple temporal and spatial scales partly as an alternative to the construction of wide ranging models but also as a way of emphasising the importance of observing the full extent of the archaeological evidence that remains in parts of Egypt. We use an expanded version of Smith's (2001) notion of low-level food production to organise our observations since this allows us to consider the way groups of people interacted with the landscape and engaged in food production that does not rely on unilinear, cultural evolutionary categories (Holdaway et al., 2010). We summarize the results described in detail in a larger study (Holdaway and Wendrich, submitted for publication) considering the Fayum in its wider regional context.

2. Background

The origins and development of the Neolithic in Egypt inevitably involves discussions of the so-called 'Neolithic package' and its late

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arrival in Egypt. Despite studies that question its utility (e.g. [Finlayson, 2013](#); [Lucarini, 2013](#)), attempts to identify inter-regional connections for aspects of the Neolithic package pervades research in North Africa. The appearance of diagnostic stone tool types, ceramic types, and particular domestic species, in addition to socio-economic structures are all considered in relation to other regions, with the intent of documenting colonization or diffusion pathways into Egypt. In this way, the culture historical frameworks that dominated much of the early 20th century continue to structure contemporary research.

Perceived stylistic similarities are used to define distinct cultural entities in the Egyptian Neolithic. For example, a distinction is often made between the Neolithic of the eastern Sahara and the Nile Valley based on material culture, economy, and settlement. While the cultural differences that make up these entities are partly explained by adaptation to different environments, they are also related to the movement of populations. Many environmental models, for instance, suggest the Saharan Neolithic originated with immigrants from the Nile Valley who moved out into the Sahara during the Early Holocene, using cattle pastoralism to access areas made economically useful by the northward movement of the Inter Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) (e.g. [Wendorf and Schild, 1976](#); [Marshall and Hildebrand, 2002](#); [Wenke, 2009](#)). The use of cattle pastoralism combined with the exploitation of wild resources is contrasted with the Neolithic in the Nile Valley, Delta and Fayum, where the economic system is considered to be based on the cultivation of cereals in addition to animal domesticates. The Neolithic of this region is explained as a result of the confluence of influences from Sudan, the Sahara and southwest Asia (e.g. [Bar-Yosef, 2002](#); [Close, 2002](#); [Wengrow, 2006](#); [Shirai, 2010](#); [Wengrow et al., 2014](#)).

While such large scale regional models attempt to tackle the 'big questions' of Neolithic origins in Egypt, they do so by subsuming much local variability. There is always the risk with such an approach that the apparent uniformity portrayed by the 'big questions' models may actually relate to the relatively small numbers of regional case studies utilized combined with the limited range of data types considered. A small number of cases will always have restricted variability and therefore appear to demonstrate marked regional differences while in fact highlighting differences that are local rather than regional. While there certainly are environmental differences between the eastern Sahara and the Nile Valley, there is also much small scale environmental variation within these regions, the impact of which is rarely assessed. In addition, the classic juxtapositions of desert and valley, Upper and Lower Egypt, Egypt and Sudan, concepts that are well developed in later pharaonic iconography and in modern times, are frequently given prominence in discussions of the Neolithic. While such divisions were of significance in later times, as [Finlayson \(2013:133\)](#) comments in the context of understanding the 'Neolithic' in southwest Asia,

'... by imposing our knowledge of the ultimate significance of the changes that occur onto what is long and diverse pattern of change occurring over a wide area, we create an overly simple single narrative through what is a complex history.'

How people locally adapted to the potential offered by new introduced species is of course important for understanding how the Egyptian agricultural regime, so critical to state formation, developed. But this needs to be assessed in relation to the data sets from specific locations that are available (e.g. [Brunton and Caton-Thompson, 1928](#); [Caton-Thompson and Gardner, 1934](#); [Eiwanger, 1984, 1988, 1992](#); [Debono and Mortensen, 1990](#); [Wilson, 2006](#); [Wilson et al., 2014](#)) without as [Finlayson \(2013\)](#) suggests, imposing

an understanding related to later developments. Models need to assess local as well as wider variation rather than simply aim for big picture explanations and inadequately assessing the significance and extent of variation. Our intent here is to explore such an approach by providing a detailed localized case study of the Fayum north shore.

It is certainly true that the transition between food procurement and food production was related to the receipt of domesticates from southwest Asia as opposed to their local development. Much like Europe, Egypt received a fully developed suite of domestic species and perhaps some forms of material culture. However, this belies the obvious complexity that this process entailed. While the arrival of plant and animal species may have occurred in the context of wider Mediterranean dispersals, there is little evidence to suggest that the 'Neolithic' arrived as a fully-fledged package (see [Lucarini, 2013](#) for similar discussion). In this sense, the concept of a rapid Neolithic transition in Egypt is just as problematic as it is in southwest Asia, where temporal and geographic differences in the timing of its constituents dissolve the notion of the Neolithic package as a coherent whole (e.g. [Zeder, 2009](#); [Finlayson, 2013](#)).

The role of wild resources in the Egyptian Neolithic for example is often understated. There is a tendency to assume that because domesticates were present, they must have represented the most important aspect of the subsistence economy, even when the evidence points to the contrary (e.g. [Linseele et al., 2014](#)). Because changes in subsistence strategy later in time resulted in the cereal subsistence base of pharaonic Egypt, it is assumed these cereals were equally important during the Mid-Holocene. However, the spatial and temporal contexts of domestic species use need to be considered in their own terms, not from a future perspective, and more flexible models are therefore needed that allow alternatives to an inevitable movement toward reliance on domestic species following their arrival. As noted above, [Smith \(2001\)](#) suggests the term 'low-level food producers' to describe the subsistence strategies of groups that do not only practice food procurement or food production, but rather practice aspects of both. In the discussion below we make use of Smith's concept in considering the significance of domesticates in the Fayum.

3. The Fayum archaeological record as a landscape

The research summarised here focusses on applying a multi-scalar landscape approach to understanding human environment interrelationships during the Early to Mid-Holocene in the Fayum. In the early 20th century, [Caton-Thompson and Gardner \(1934\)](#) identified a number of locations across the Fayum north shore attributed to the Neolithic period but they mainly focused on stratified deposits including the well-known sites of Kom K and Kom W, both consisting of archaeological remains that they interpreted as villages, and the K Pits, storage pits containing the remains of domesticated wheat and barley ([Fig. 1](#); [Holdaway Phillipps et al. Google Earth.kmz in supplementary data](#)). Surface deposits between these stratified sites were not a focus of their research, however, when these deposits are included, understanding the distribution, age and relationship among archaeological materials across the Fayum north shore becomes both more informative and more complex than suggested in the earlier syntheses. Despite the conclusions drawn from early studies, modern investigations indicate that the stratified sites like Kom K are not as easily translatable into functional categories like villages, hamlets or occupation sites as suggested in the older literature. Based on recent reinvestigation, Kom K, for example, is composed of windblown sand deposits mixed with portable artefacts, fauna and the rake out from hearths. Beyond hearths, however, Kom K lacks examples of additional feature types that might indicate the presence of the

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