

Ostrich Eggs of Predynastic Egypt

Dina M. Ezz El-Din♦

Abstract

Ostriches were hunted by the Egyptians from earliest times. This practice was commemorated on rock- drawings dating to the Predynastic Period.

Ostrich eggs were widely used during that period in order to serve various purposes. Their contents provided food, whereas emptied eggs were used as containers. Small ornaments were also made from ostrich egg-shells which are considered to be amongst the earliest objects of any kind from Ancient Egypt. From the Badarian Period onwards, the shells were worked into jewellery. They were employed for disc beads, pendants and amulets.

On the other hand, a few ostrich eggs were decorated with incised or painted designs which took the form of geometric decoration or drawings of birds and animals. These decorated eggs are of a great interest from an archaeological point of view, they shed light upon an important era of the Ancient Egyptian civilization.

♦Lecturer in the Faculty of Tourism and Hotels – Guiding Department – Alexandria University. The abstract of the research was presented in the 13th Conference of the Arab Archaeologists Association (Libya, 24-26-2010).

–القي البحث في مؤتمر الاتحاد العام للآثاريين العرب الثالث عشر بالجمهورية الليبية ولم يقدم في الموعد المحدد للنشر بكتاب المؤتمر .

Ostriches were hunted in Egypt from the earliest times. They used to inhabit the southern desert of Egypt and the dry regions bordering the whole of the Lower Nile Valley¹. Ostrich bones were found in strata that date back to the Upper Palaeolithic Period in Egypt (c. 13.000-10.000 B.C)². Their eggs were also found in many Upper Palaeolithic sites such as Bir Tarfawi in Nubia, Nazlet Khater near Tahta in Middle Egypt and in Wadi Mushabi in the Gebel Maghara region; and in others Neolithic ones in Fayoum & Merimde beni Salama³.

The ostrich (*struthio camelus*) is considered to be the first bird species for which there is pictorial evidence in Ancient Egypt⁴. The practice of hunting ostriches was an activity that was commemorated on rock-drawings along the Nile cliffs and in the Upper Egyptian and Lower Nubian deserts⁵. It is from these ancient rock-drawings carved by the hunters that the distinctive form of the ostrich can be recognized⁶. One of the most significant examples of rock-carvings in which the ostrich figured is that of Silwa Bahari near Aswan. It is a Predynastic representation which shows a man shooting with a bow and an arrow at an ostrich⁷. (fig. 1)

The success in capturing this game was also recorded on a number of Predynastic palettes. An important example is the Manchester Palette (also known as the Ostriches Palette) which is

¹Needler, W., Predynastic and Archaic Egypt in the Brooklyn Museum. Brooklyn : Brooklyn Museum, 1984, p.18.

²Darby, W., Ghalioungui P. and Grivetti, L., Food : The Gift of Osiris, Academic Press, 1977, vol.1, p.315.

³Midant-Reynes, B., The Prehistory of Egypt (From the First Egyptians to the First Pharaohs). Translated by I. Shaw, Blackwell Publishers Ltd. Oxford. 2000, pp.28, 43, 62, 102, 103.

⁴Houlihan, P., The Birds of Ancient Egypt. The American University Press in Cairo, 1988, p.1.

⁵Phillips, J. "Ostrich Eggshells" in: Nicholson, P. and Shaw, I. (eds.) Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology Cambridge – University Press 2000, p.332; Houlihan, *op.cit.*, p.1; Behrens, P. "Strauss", *LA* VI, Wiesbaden, 1986, col.72.

⁶Houlihan, *op. cit.*, p.1.

⁷*Ibid*, p.3, fig.2; Arnott, G. Birds in the Ancient World, Routledge, New York, 2007, p.335.

made of schist and dates back to Naqada II Period⁸ (fig. 2). It is decorated with the figure of a man and three tall ostriches. The hunter's arms are upraised in order to capture the animals. One of the interesting details of the palette is the hunter's head which is similar to those of the animals probably as a maneuver to approach the birds⁹.

Furthermore, a fragment of the Hunters Palette (now in the British museum– EA20790) shows a number of hunters chasing an ostrich and other wild animals (fig. 3). It is also made of schist and dates back to Naqada III (late Predynastic to First Dynasty)¹⁰. The relief carved on the palette shows an organized expedition to capture wild animals among which the ostrich is depicted. The hunters chasing the animals are characterized by animals' tails hanging from their belts and ostrich feathers in their hair¹¹.

Ostriches were most valued for their feathers, meat, and eggs¹². Feathers were mainly used by the Egyptians for decoration whereas ostrich meat was undoubtedly a source of food¹³; the meat of a single bird might have fed several hunters¹⁴. Ostrich eggs, on the other hand, were also a dietary supplement that provided large amounts of protein¹⁵.

Ostrich eggshells in particular have a major archaeological importance. They are considered amongst the earliest objects of any

⁸Manchester Mus.5476. Davis, W.G., *Masking the blow: the scene of representation in Late Prehistoric Egyptian Art*. University of California Press-Oxford, 1992, p.82 ; Crompton, W.M., "A carved slate Palette in the Manchester Museum", *JEA* 5, no.1, 1918, p.57.

⁹Crompton, *op. cit.*, p.57

¹⁰Davis, *op. cit.*, p.93

¹¹*Ibid*, p.93

¹²Darby *et al*, *op. cit.*, p.317; Houlihan, *op. cit.*, p.4 ; Phillips, *op. cit.*, p.332.

¹³Phillips, *op. cit.*, p.332. Ostriches feathers were found at el-Badari in tomb 5754, Midant - Reynes, *op. cit.*, p.155.

¹⁴Darby *et al*, *op. cit.*, p.315.

¹⁵*Ibid*, p.315; Phillips, p.332.

kind from Ancient Egypt¹⁶. They can be up to 15 centimeters in length, and 13 centimeters in diameter. The shell's thickness might reach about 3.5 millimeters while the egg's weight might be up to 1.5 kilograms¹⁷.

Not only were ostrich eggshells of a great dietary value, they were also used in different ways. They were either emptied and used as containers or cut into disc beads and other small ornaments that were probably amuletic¹⁸. From the archaeological point of view, the presence of remains of ostrich eggshells is of a great interest, since they permit radiocarbon analysis and are therefore an important dating material¹⁹.

Besides being used as containers, some eggs were also manufactured as cups and bowls²⁰. At Qau (Cemetery 1400, Grave 1414) an egg was turned into a bowl by cutting off one-third of the side and smoothing its rim²¹. This egg was broken and repaired in ancient times; holes were drilled beside the cracks in order to insert lashings²².

When whole eggs were emptied of their contents, they were used as containers for liquids such as water or milk²³. Nordström thinks they were strong enough to stand the everyday use²⁴ whereas, according to Rizkana and Seeher, the shells were considered brittle

¹⁶Houlihan, *op. cit.*, p.4; Lucas, A. Ancient Egyptian Materials and industries, The St Ann's Press. Attrincham-Great Britian, 1948 (3rd edition), p.49.

¹⁷Phillips, *op. cit.*, p.332; Behrens, P. "Straussenei", *LÄ VI*, Wiesbaden, 1986, col.75.

¹⁸*Ibid*, p.332; Needler, *op. cit.*, p.306.

¹⁹Midant-Reynes. *op. cit.*, p.73.

²⁰Needler, *op. cit.*, p.18.

²¹Brunton, G. and Caton-Thomson, G., The Badarian Civilization. British School of Archaeology in Egypt-30th year, 1928, p.3

²²*Ibid* p.28

²³Houlihan, *op.cit.*, p.4; Ghalioungui, *et al, op.cit.*, p.315; Behrens, *LÄ VI*, col.76.

²⁴Nordström, H., Neolithic and A-Group Sites.Scandinavian Joint Expedition to Sudanese Nubia. Stockholm, 1972, vol. 3:1p.122.

and less durable than pottery and, consequently, might have been reserved for special purposes²⁵.

The egg was emptied through a hole that was generally drilled on top of the egg, and then it was refilled with the liquid (fig. 4). In some examples, the hole was surrounded by a circle of small drilled holes²⁶.

After being emptied the eggs were either left plain²⁷, or engraved with incised decoration²⁸. There were different types of motifs that were applied to the eggs such as floral designs, geometric lines or, animal and human figures. At Bir Kiseiba, at site E-79-8, about 25 fragments of ostrich eggshell were discovered (fig.5). They date back to the Early Neolithic Period (ca. 9800 to 8900 B.P.) and are considered among the earliest examples of decorated eggs²⁹.

The decoration is in the form of patterned incisions forming four basic elements³⁰:

- a-The first is named by Wendorf and Schild as “ Fern Leaf”, it consists of short, obliquely opposed strokes which produce a chevron-like pattern
- b-The second motif has been designated “Rainbow” and consists of arched parallel lines.
- c-The third motif consists of three or four closely spaced, parallel, undulating lines. The curves appear to have been continuous S-shaped bands.
- d-The fourth motif is in the form of simple, straight lines.

²⁵Rizkana, I. and seeher, J. Maadi III. The Non-lithic Small Finds and the Structural Remains of the Predynastic Settlement. Mainz am Rhein, 1989, p.19.

²⁶*Ibid*, P.19, PL. 5,1.

²⁷Quibell, J. Catalogue Général des Antiquités Egyptiennes du Musée du Caire (Nr.11001-12000 et 14001 -14754) :Archaic Objects, Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, Le Caire, 1905, Tome II, pp.271 – 272, CG 14472 – 14474.

²⁸Capart, *op. cit.*, p.39 ; Needler, *op.cit.*, p.18.

²⁹Wendorf and Schild, p.246

³⁰*ibid*, p. 243-246; fig. 11.16.

The three eggs found at Maadi (probably dating back to Naqada II) are also decorated with linear and geometric incisions. These are in the form of vertical rows of staggered, opposing triangles which were cross-hatched with incised lines filled with black colouring³¹. A special motif appears on the bottom of one of them, it is in the form of two zigzag lines in a circle from which the vertical rows of triangles start (fig. 6).

The egg of the Oriental Institute (no.12322) is unique in the variety of its motifs. It is considered the only example completely covered with decoration. The motifs are in the form of two long-necked animals, an ibex followed by a dog, a spray of foliage and a linear design³² (fig. 7). There are features which attribute the egg to the Amratian art such as the stylized character of the animals, and their bodies which are covered with diagonal lines³³. There is also an important element which is common in Amratian art; the animals are accompanied by their young³⁴.

As for the linear pattern covering many parts of the egg, it contains two ordinary Predynastic elements: a hatched zigzag band and the simplified ostrich head which is attached to the bands. Such heads appear on objects of both Amratian and Gerzean periods. Consequently, according to Kantor, this egg is a good example in which linear patterns are combined with simplified elements representing heads³⁵.

At Dakka, in cemetery 102, a number of eggs were found in Graves 96 and 102. They were incised with drawings of human figures, birds and animals and they date back to the Late Predynastic

³¹Rizkana and Seeher, *op.cit.*, p.19, pl. 5, 1-2-4.

³²Kantor, H., "A Predynastic Ostrich egg with incised decoration", JNES 7, no. 1, 1944, p.46; pl.IV-V.

³³*ibid*, p.49-51.

³⁴*ibid*, p. 49.

³⁵*ibid*, p.51

Period³⁶. The egg deposited in Grave 96 had been carved with animal and geometric designs. It is now exhibited in the Nubian Museum in Aswan³⁷. Its decoration is in the form of two unidentified animals(probably giraffes)having between their bodies an interesting representation of three triangles. The animals' bodies as well as the triangles are cross-hatched with incised lines.The hole on top of the egg also has a unique motif incised around it. It is in the form of two cross-hatched circles instead of drilled holes.(fig. 8).

It is important to note that in order to apply the decoration to an ostrich egg; its surface was scratched with a thin instrument which was probably a sharp copper tool or a flake of flint³⁸. There are some examples with coloured engravings. One of the eggs found at Maadi was incised with lines filled with black pigments³⁹, whereas some eggshells found at Bir Kiseiba had incised decoration filled with ochre⁴⁰. In this case the surface of the eggs was probably wiped with a coloured cloth or by hand after being engraved. The eggs were then washed and consequently the colour would only adhere to the rough scratched lines⁴¹.

Not only were the emptied eggs used by the early Egyptians as containers, but they were also buried in their graves (fig. 9) This practice of depositing ostrich eggs in tombs was attested in many Egyptian sites dating to different periods⁴².

According to many scholars, this custom took place in Ancient Egypt as early as the Badarian Period⁴³. However in the

³⁶ Firth C.M. The Archaeological Survey of Nubia – Report for 1909-1910, Cairo.1915, pp.60-61, pl. II, d-e (1-2)

³⁷http://www.numibia.net/nubia/artefacts.asp?p_Name1=Vessel&p_Numb=40, (Object no.440-according to the museum's registers).

³⁸Rizkana and Seeher, *op. cit*, p.19

³⁹ *Ibid*, p.19

⁴⁰Midant – Reynes, *op. cit*, p.75

⁴¹Rizkana and Seeher, *op. cit*,p.19..

⁴²Capart *op. cit*, p.39;Needler,*op.cit*,p.306;Midant– Reynes, *op. cit*, p.43, Phillips, *op. cit*, p.332

⁴³Phillips, *op. cit*, p.332 ; Laufer, B., Ostrich Egg-shell Cups of Mesopotamia and the Ostrich in Ancient and Modern times. Field Museum of Natural History.Chicago. 1926, p.17

Upper Palaeolithic site mentioned above (near Nazlet Khater in Middle Egypt), the fragments of ostrich eggs were buried in a grave with an incomplete skeleton⁴⁴.

On the other hand, not only was this practice attested in A-Group sites in Nubia, in burials belonging to adults, but it was also witnessed in others in which children were buried⁴⁵. It is noteworthy that this custom is confined to these Nubian graves, since there is no evidence for a similar practice in other parts of Egypt⁴⁶. Nordström has pointed out to the fact that the presence of pottery strainers with the eggs in these child burials in Nubia might be indicative of a religious or social custom connected with childhood⁴⁷.

The general practice of burying ostrich eggs with the dead in their graves might have been based on a religious concept. This is reinforced by the fact that some tombs contained models of ostrich eggs which were made of clay or wood⁴⁸. At Abadiyah, grave B101 (S.D.34) six whitened clay models of ostrich eggs were found, of which one had painted motifs in the form of black zigzag lines that imitate cords. The other examples were painted with white spots⁴⁹. Also, an undated wooden model of an egg found in Upper Egypt was decorated with horizontal rows of cross-hatched triangles and a zigzag band⁵⁰. These models show that there was a need to place ostrich eggs inside the tombs, real eggs were probably replaced by models when it was not possible to get the real ones. Moreover, grave 1480 at Naqada had offered a significant example of a real

⁴⁴Midant – Reynes, *op. cit.*, p.43.

⁴⁵Nordström, *op.cit.*, p.122 (site277/ 30:2 ; site 277/ 11:5; site 277/56:1).

⁴⁶*Ibid*, p.122

⁴⁷*Ibid*, p.122

⁴⁸Capart, *op. cit.*, p.39 ; Rizkana and Seeher, *op. cit.*, p.20

⁴⁹Petrie, F., Diospolis Parva (The Cemeteries of Abadiyeh and Hu), the Egypt Exploration Fund, 1901, p.33, cf. Laufer, *op. cit.*, p.17.

⁵⁰Rizkana and Seeher, *op. cit.*, p.20

ostrich egg which was used as a substitute for the missing head of a skeleton⁵¹.

The aforesaid examples might indicate that ostrich eggs were not deposited in Ancient Egyptian graves as a sort of food for the deceased⁵². They probably served a religious function. In the Ancient Egyptian religion, the ostrich was one of the creatures that had connotations with the sun. The Ancient Egyptians had considered the movements produced by this bird at dawn as a dance.

The bird is known to run around at sunrise, spinning and flapping its wings. This activity was seen as a dance by which the bird greeted the sun⁵³. Such dance is mentioned in a text dating back to the New Kingdom⁵⁴. Although it is a late document that might refer to the relation between ostriches and the sun, and consequently to the concept of rebirth, it is possible to assume that such connotations had their origin since Prehistoric times.

On the other hand, disc – beads made from ostrich eggs were also among the earliest objects from Ancient Egypt⁵⁵. Eggshell jewellery including disc-beads, pendants and amulets, was manufactured from Badarian Period onwards⁵⁶. Some disc-beads were even discovered in Upper Egyptian sites which date back to the Palaeolithic Period.

At Wadi Kubbaneya, some 12 Kilometers to the north of Asswan, disc-beads made of ostrich eggshells were found at site

⁵¹Petrie, F. and Quibell J.E., Naqada and Ballas, London, 1896, p.28. The egg was decorated with two deer

⁵²Phillips, *op. cit.*, p.332

⁵³Houlihan, *op. cit.*, p.4-5; Behrens, *LÄ VI*, col.73.

⁵⁴Kuentz, Ch. « La danse des Autruches » BIFAO 23, 1924, p.87 (Cairo Museum. Stela no. 34001).

⁵⁵Lucas, *op. cit.*, p.59.

⁵⁶Phillips, *op. cit.*, p.332

E78-4⁵⁷. According to Midant-Reynes, this is considered an interesting find at that early period, since it introduces « an aspect of human activity which was unrelated to subsistence »⁵⁸. There are also other examples of disc-beads which were found at sites dating back to the Neolithic Period⁵⁹.

Small disc-beads were shaped drilled and stung as necklaces or bracelets⁶⁰ (fig. 10). The Ancient Egyptians probably followed a particular technique to obtain beads: blanks for beads were sometimes roughly shaped by clipping the edges until the approximate outline was formed. They were then drilled, most probably with a perforator⁶¹.

As for the smoothing of the beads, it was presumably carried out by stringing the beads on a fiber or thong. They were pressed tightly together, and then by rubbing them on the surface of a rubbing stone, the smoothing was achieved⁶². Beads made of ostrich eggshells were common in Ancient Egypt throughout the periods except for the 18th Dynasty which witnessed a decline in the use of ostrich eggshells as bead material⁶³.

To conclude, remains of ostrich eggs are abundant in many sites all over Egypt, in particular in settlements which date to the Predynastic Period. The potential value and uses of the eggs were varied. Ostrich hunting was recorded on Prehistoric rock-drawings.

⁵⁷Midant-Reynes, *op. cit*, p.54

⁵⁸*Ibid*, p.54

⁵⁹Needler, *op. cit*, p.18 ; Menghin, O. and Amer M., The Excavations of the Egyptian University (in the Neolithic site at Maadi), Cairo, Misr-Sokkar Press, 1932, p.51, PL. LXXVII, 9-10 ; Wendorf, F. and Schild, R., Report on site E-79-8, in: Wendorf, F., Schild, R., and Close, A., Cattle-Keepers of the Eastern Sahara : The Neolithic of Bir Kiseiba, 1984, p.247

⁶⁰Objects from the Petrie Museum : UC1078, UC2526a, UC70183.

⁶¹Wendorf and Schild, *op. cit*, p.247; Rizkana and Seeher, *op. cit*, p.20.

⁶²Wendorf and Schild, *op. cit*; Rizkana and Seeher, *op. cit*, p.20.

⁶³Lucas, *op. cit*, p.49 ; Säve-Söderberg, T. and Troy, L. New Kingdom Pharaonic Sites (The Finds and the Sites), The Scandinavian Joint Expedition to Sudanese Nubia (vol.5:2), p.81

These developed into hunting scenes painted or carved on tomb walls during the Dynastic Period. In these representations, ostriches figured among other animals in fenced-off enclosures to serve for the hunting pleasures of tomb owners⁶⁴. These tombs also included scenes in which ostriches, their feathers and eggs were brought to Egypt as tribute from foreign countries⁶⁵.

Emptied eggs which were used and decorated by the Ancient Egyptians during the Prehistoric Period were also in use throughout the Egyptian history⁶⁶. Disc-beads, bracelets and pendants made of ostrich eggshells were manufactured from the Predynastic Period onwards⁶⁷.

⁶⁴Houlihan, *op.cit.*, p.3; cf. Newberry, P. Beni Hassan, Archaeological Survey of Egypt Memoir 1, 1893, vol. 1, plate 4 (Tomb of Baket III); Davies, N.de G. The Tomb of Rekh-mi-Re at Thebes, PMMA 10, New York, 1935, vol.II, pl.XLI-XLII.

⁶⁵Darby, *op.cit.*, p.318; Davies, *op.cit.*, pl.XVII.

⁶⁶Eggshells UC59777/ UC59778 dating to the Second Intermediate Period-Petrie Museum, London.

⁶⁷Examples of beads dating to the Middle Kingdom: UC 31583, UC 6413; necklaces from the 18th Dynasty: UC 6744-6745-Petrie Museum, London.

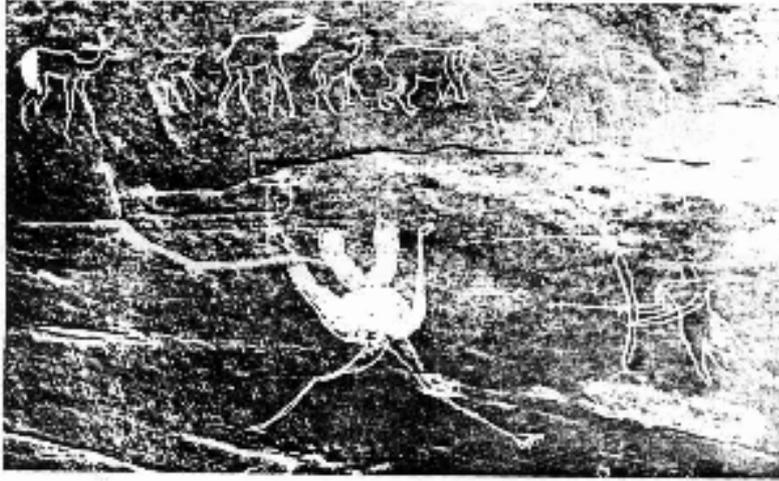


Fig. 1. Rock-drawing at Silwa Bahari
Houlihan, P., *The Birds of Ancient Egypt*.
The American University in Cairo Press. 1998, fig.2.



Fig. 2. The Ostriches Palette (Manchester Mus. 5476)
Crompton, W.M., "A Carved Slate Palette in the Manchester Museum", *JEA* 5, no. 1,
1918, Pl. VIII



Fig. 3. The Hunters Palette (The British Museum-EA 20790)
Davis, W.G., *Masking the blow: the scene of representation in Late Prehistoric Egyptian Art*. University of California Press. Oxford. 1992, fig. 28.

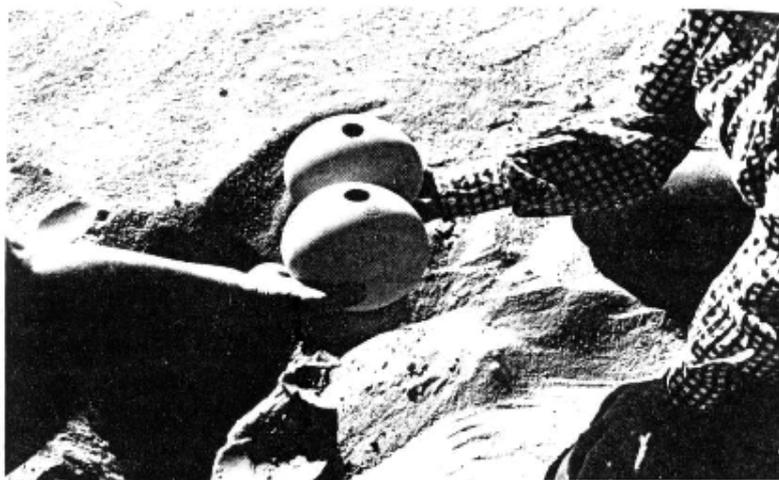


Fig.4. Emptied ostrich egg
Wendorf, F., Schild, R., and Close, A., *Cattle-Keeper of the Eastern Sahara : The Neolithic of Bir Kiseiba*, 1984. Fig. 10.2: b.

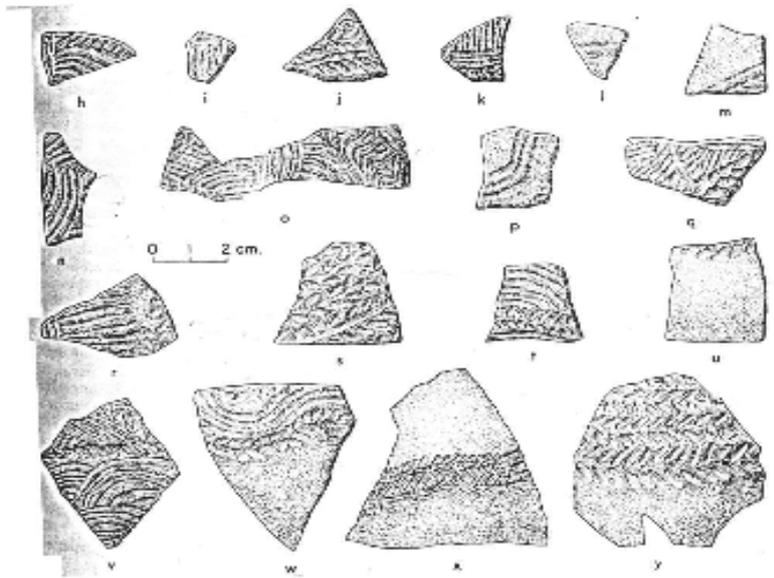


Fig. 5. Decorated eggshell fragments-Neolithic Period
Wendorf *et al.*, *op.cit.*, p. 245, fig. 11-16.

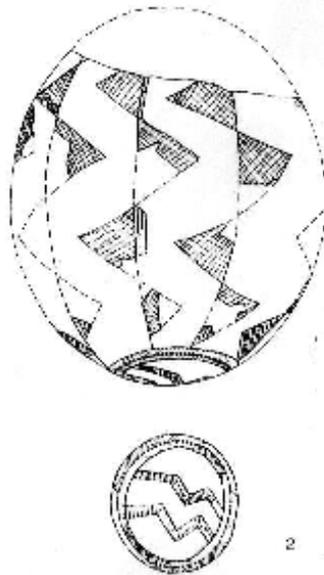


Fig. 6. Ostrich egg decorated with geometric incisions Maadi-Naqada II-
Rizkana, I. and seeher, J. Maadi III. The Non-lithic Small Finds and the Structural
Remains of the Predynastic Settlement. Mainz am Rhein, 1989, pl. 5, 2.

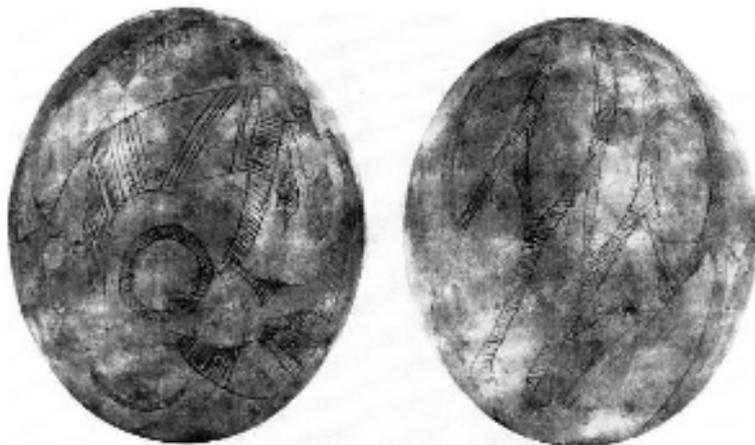


Fig.7. The Oriental Institute decorated egg (no. 12322).
Kantor, H., "A Predynastic Ostrich egg with incised decoration", JNES 7, no. 1, pl. IV.

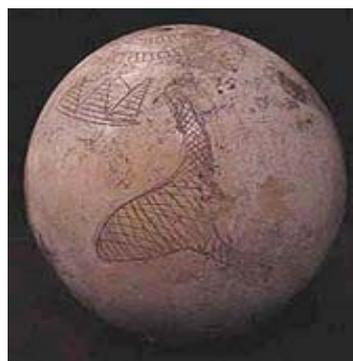
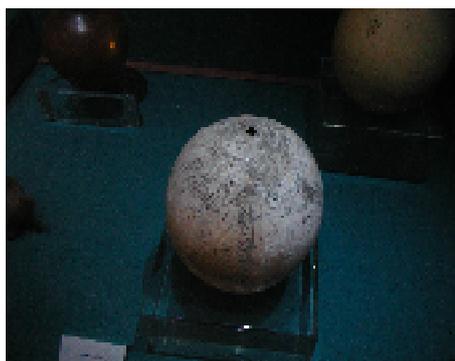


Fig. 8. An engraved ostrich egg from Dakka-Cemetery 102-Late Predynastic Period-Now in the Nubian Museum-Egypt website. Firth C.M. The Archaeological Survey of Nubia – Report for 1909-1910, Cairo.1915, pp.60-61, pl. II, d-e (1-2)
http://www.numibia.net/nubia/artefacts.asp?p_Name1=Vessel&p_Numb=40



Fig. 9. Ostrich egg with deceased in cemetery 102, grave 96-Dakka. Late Predynastic Period. Firth. *op.cit.*, Pl. II, a.



Fig. 10. Disc-beads Petrie Museum-UCL [UC2565-UC70183]
www.petriecat.museums.ucl.ac.uk.

بيض النعام في مصر في عصر ما قبل التاريخ

♦ د.دينا محمد عز الدين

ملخص البحث :

قام المصريون بصيد النعام منذ أقدم العصور و قد تم تسجيل ذلك من خلال رسوم الصخور التي تنتمي لعصور ما قبل التاريخ. كان بيض النعام يستخدم لأغراض مختلفة في هذه الفترة. كان محتوى البيضة يمد الانسان بالغذاء؛ بينما كان البيض الخالي أو المفرغ يستعمل كإناء. بالإضافة لذلك استخدم قشر بيض النعام في صناعة و تطعيم أدوات الزينة منذ فترة البداري حيث صنعت الحليو الخرز و التمايم باستخدام قشر بيض النعام.

من جهة أخرى، كانت بعض النماذج من البيض الكامل تحمل زخارف متميزة سواء منقوشة أو مرسومة. و كانت هذه الزخارف تأخذ أشكالاً هندسية أو أشكال طيور و حيوانات. و لذلك يعتبر هذا البيض المزخرف ذا قيمة تاريخية و أثرية عظيمة و يساعد في إلقاء الضوء على فترة من أهم فترات حضارة مصر القديمة.

♦ كلية السياحة والفنادق - قسم الإرشاد السياحي - جامعة الإسكندرية .
-القى البحث في مؤتمر الاتحاد العام للآثاريين العرب الثالث عشر بالجماهيرية الليبية ولم يقدم في الموعد المحدد للنشر بكتاب المؤتمر.