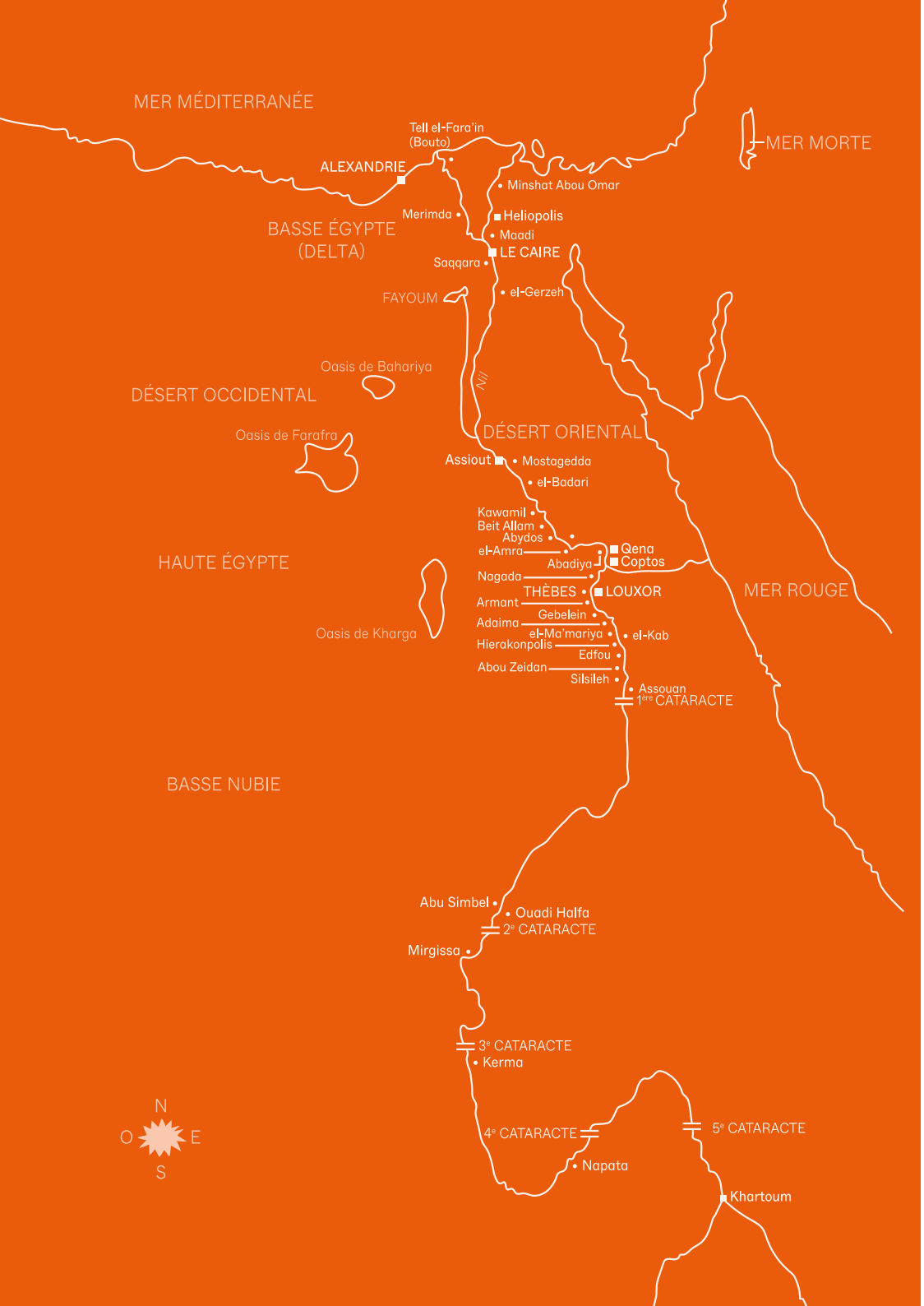
14 octobre 2023
– 8 janvier 2024

Musée d'Archéologie nationale
Saint-Germain-en-Laye

TERRES DU NIL

L'ART DES POTIERS AVANT PHARAON



Lands of the Nile

Pottery artcraft before Pharaohs

In the collective image, Egyptian civilization takes shape in the silhouettes of its temples, cities, and necropolises along the Nile. The archaeological discoveries of the late nineteenth century added a new preface to this story, revealing objects of remarkable virtuosity before the appearance of the first pharaonic dynasties and the birth of a centralised state. Research conducted on the organisation of such artisanal productions reveals the ways of life in prehistoric Egyptian society.

The predynastic Egyptian collection at the Musée d'Archéologie nationale (MAN), which bears witness to the recognition of prehistoric phases in Egypt, provides an insight into the technical mastery of the 4th millennium potters.

Although the use of ceramics is attested in the central Sahara as early as the 9th millennium, it was from the 5th millennium onwards that the gradual increase in population and the existence of environmental conditions favourable to agriculture in the Nile Valley and the Fayum, gave rise to new forms of social organisation. The first domesticated species –sheep, goats, pigs, wheat and barley of Eastern origin– were first recorded in the Nile valley and the Fayum. Dwellings were built on soil fertilised by the Nile floods. The Nile was an ideal river for the development of the irrigation system, and settlements were built close to the supply routes for raw materials. Elegantly shaped pottery was used to store, transport and preserve products.

Jacques de Morgan (1857–1924) and the recognition of Egyptian Prehistory

Photograph of J. de Morgan by Abdullah Brothers, Istanbul-Cairo, 1891 (modern print of the original kept at the BnF, Société de Géographie)

Between 1892 and 1895, Jacques de Morgan looked for prehistoric occupation levels in the Nile Valley, in addition to his activities as director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service. In his *Recherches sur les origines de l'Égypte* (1896), he explains their difficult recognition by the opposition between Egyptologists, rather epigraphists and historians, and pre-historians trained in the natural sciences and convinced of the autonomy of Egyptian prehistory.

Morgan promotes a methodological approach to excavations, under scientific supervision, and condemns those carried out "for the sole purpose of obtaining objects and texts". He also advocates a multidisciplinary and international conception of research and surrounds himself with several collaborators: Daniel Fouquet for Anthropology, Gustave Jéquier for Egyptology and Alfred Wiedemann for the study of funerary rites and the royal tomb of Naqada. His brother Henry (1854–1909) would have worked with him between 1895 and 1897; living in the United States, Henry conducted two campaigns in Upper Egypt for the Brooklyn Museum of Art between 1906 and 1908.

Morgan praised Flinders Petrie's scientific rigour, but their relationship deteriorated after Morgan published the second volume of *Recherches sur les origines de l'Égypte* (1897). Petrie, initially in favour of attributing the Naqada and Ballas discoveries to an invasive settlement, recognized them in 1920 as local prehistoric productions, a theory supported by Morgan.

William Matthew Flinders Petrie (1853–1942), pioneer of the Egyptian Predynastic Chronology

Portrait of Flinders Petrie in 1892, when he became professor of Egyptian archaeology and epigraphy at University College London. With the permission of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology, UCL.

In the winter of 1895 – 1896, Petrie excavates a cemetery in Naqada of almost 3,000 graves of which he knows no parallel. After dating the material of the Pharaonic period, he attributes it to the prehistoric phases by comparing it with the discoveries of Morgan (El Amra, Naqada), Amélineau (Abydos), and his own excavations in 1899 (Abadieh, Hu). Using a rigorous method in the field and in recording of the material, Petrie develops the first ever attempt at serial dating in archaeology.

This chronological approach is based on a classification of terracotta vases according to their type and relative position within groups of tombs. The archaeologist divides them into 9 classes and over 700 types. These are ordered according to 50 "sequence dates", numbered from 30 to 80, in order to allow the possibility of incorporating older cultures discovered later (1 to 30).

Petrie's chronology was refined over the course of the 20th century with the support of spatial distribution of funerary sites and then with dating methods based on laboratory analysis of materials. The three main periods of the Naqada culture are better delineated and their subdivisions clarified by re-examining the context. Over the last few decades, local chronological sequences have been defined in Abydos, Adaima, Gerzeh and Tell el-Farkha.

In the expert's eye

To study the terracotta vases and objects discovered on Predynastic sites, the ceramologist can now combine several observation methods and analysis techniques. On the one hand, he can identify their pottery fabric precisely and, on the other hand, classify them according to their shape and size.

A– Nile clay is a product of erosion transported by the river as it floods from the mountains of Ethiopia to Egypt. As raw material, it varies from grey to almost black colour. It contains large quantities of silicon and iron oxides and turns red to brown when fired in a kiln with an oxidising atmosphere.

B– Calcareous or Marl clay is available rather at the mouths of ouadis, irregular-flowing rivers. Yellowish to white coloured, this clay contains a low percentage of silicon and a higher proportion of calcium carbonate. It turns creamy or white colour when fired in an oxidising atmosphere. Its cross-section may show pink or orange areas.

More rarely, some vases are made from a clay with fibrous temper or a temper made of tiny platelets.

Ovoid vase with two wavy handles in relief (type of late pottery – L) © RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Archéologie nationale) / Gérard Blot

The classification system based on the work of W. M. F. Petrie, covers 9 classes of containers, the first 5 of which are made of Nile silt.

1 – Black-topped (B): red polished pottery with a black top (rim)
2 – Red polished (P): red polished pottery
3 – White cross-lined (C): red polished pottery decorated with creamy or white paintings
4 – Incised (N): black pottery with incised decoration, sometimes encrusted with white material
5 – Rough (R): pottery with a "coarse" or rough surface, made from silt mixed with a vegetable temper which, after firing, leaves vacuoles on the surface
6 – Decorated (D): pottery with a regularised surface, beige, buff to orange-pink in colour, with red to brown ochre painted decoration
7 – Wavy-handled (W): vases with applied wavy handles, the evolution of which leads to a simple line
8 – Late (L): marl clay pottery
9 – Fancy (F): pottery in fancy or animal shapes

Large bottle (type of red polished pottery – P) © RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Archéologie nationale) / Gérard Blot

Summary table of terracotta vessel types from the Predynastic period

PERIODS	TYPES OF POTTERY (BY SHAPE AND FINISH) ACCORDING TO W. M. F. PETRIE'S NOMENCLATURE	SEQUENCE DATES (SD) ACCORDING TO PETRIE	DATATION
Naqada IA	B (black-topped, most of the production) P (red polished) C (cross-lined, Naqada IC) F (fancy, Naqada IC)	SD 30 – 38	3800 – 3500
Naqada IB			
Naqada IC			3500 – 3400
Naqada IIA	R (rough, first occurence) B (black-topped) C (cross-lined) F (fancy) D (decorated, first occurence) N (Nubian, first occurence)	SD 38 – 45	
Naqada IIB	B (black-topped) P (red polished) F (fancy) C (cross-lined, disappearing) D (decorated) R (rough, production increase)		
Naqada IIC	B (black-topped) P (red polished) F (fancy) N (Nubian) R (rough) L (late, first occurence) W (wavy handles, first occurence) D (decorated, spirals and scenes with boat)	SD 45 – 63	3400 – 3300
Naqada IID	B (black-topped, disappearing) D (decorated, simplification of motifs) P (red polished) F (fancy) N (Nubian) W (wavy handles) R (rough) L (late)		3300 – 3200
Naqada III	D (décorated, disappearing) B (black-topped, disappearing) F (fancy, production increase) P (red polished) R (rough, disappearing) L (late, most of the production) W (wavy handles, evolving into cylindrical vessels)	SD 63 – 80	3200 – 3050

← Reproduction of the off-texte plate showing the most common types of predynastic vases, published by William Matthew Flinders Petrie in his book *Diospoplis Parva. The cemeteries of Abadiyeh and Hu* (1898 – 1899), London, The Egypt Exploration Fund, 1901.

Black-topped vases

Black-topped vases, the first class of vessels according to Petrie, represent more than 50% of the funerary assemblages of the Naqada I period (3900 – 3500 BC). Numerous in the tombs until the Naqada IIC phase (3400 – 3300 BC), they gradually disappear and are only exceptionally attested in Naqada III (3300 – 3050 BC).

Made of silt clay from the Nile mixed with a temper, the vases are engobed, dried and carefully polished. They are then placed, with the opening facing downwards, in a simple pit kiln and in a layer of very fine fuel compacted under the action of fire (oxidising firing). A coarser fuel, added on top, causes a reductive firing of the upper part of the vases. The distinction between the two colors is more to do with the desire to make the walls as impermeable as possible through this oxidising firing than an ornamental effect.

To specify the use of these pots remains complex. At first, they may have been used for domestic purposes. In the southern part of the Adaïma settlement, a pot, closed by a plant lid, preserved the remains of barley and wheat. Some “cornet-shaped” specimens, found near the head or arms of the deceased, were used to preserve and display products needed for survival in the afterlife.

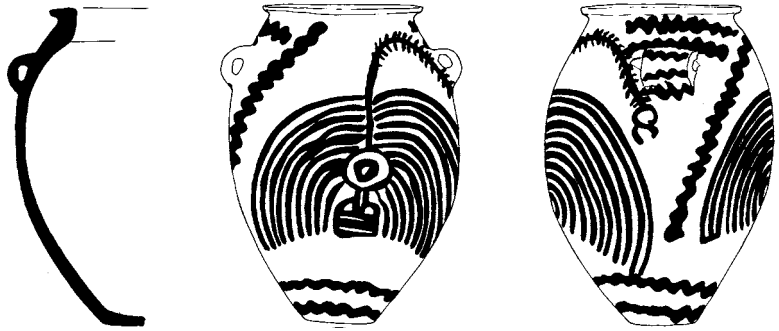
→ Drawing MAN / Sylvie Eliès

Reading painted vases

Around 3500 BC, a new type of pottery appears, made of light-coloured clay. As this clay can withstand higher firing temperatures, potters produce series of more solid vases with less porous walls.
The decoration on these vases forms a highly standardised visual language with no correlation to the function or content of the vessels. While the significance of these scenes has been lost over time, the study of their frequency, internal organisation and combination within a single object suggests that they are more likely to refer to the idea of the renewal of life after death.

Most often, a single scene is depicted, sometimes repeated on the surface of the vase. The most comon themes represent local animals (ibex, antelope, scorpion, snake, giraffe, etc.) or plants. The latter appear on their own or sometimes in association with other simple geometric signs or geographical features: a solid triangle to suggest a desert plateau, or parallel wavy lines for an aquatic environment.

Each figurative element contributes to the representation of a coherent world in which the inhabitants of the Nile evolve and the powers to which they refer. Boats are a recurring motif, representing power in the context of the regeneration of life in the afterlife. They could foreshadow the funerary or divine boats of Pharaonic Egypt.



TECHNOPREGYPT:
Learning from ancient collections

The mission of the Musée d'Archéologie nationale (MAN) is to study, display its collections and disseminate current scientific knowledge. Involved in the TECHNOPREGYPT project, supported by European funding, the MAN's partnership is part of this framework: by studying the production methods of pottery in predynastic Egypt (4th millennium BC), the program aims to understand how technological choices have been affected by the state formation process and help to move current research on this very process.

The technological approach makes it possible to study the social dimension of pottery production. Manufacturing methods are indeed transmitted from generation to generation and are strictly linked to the cultural identity of a group: technological limits overlap the delimitation of social groups. The project tries to identify the "chaînes opératoires" within the Naqada culture and, for the first time, within the Nubian culture and any other groups in the Nile Valley.

This study is carried out on the archaeological material of the Aswan-Kom Ombo Archaeological Project (Egypt), the Egyptian Museum in Turin (Italy), as well as those of the MAN and the Archaeological Museum in Krakow (Poland). Originating from Middle and Upper Egypt, these collections are dated between the 4th millennium and the early 3rd millennium BC. The study involves reconstructing the entire manufacturing process and comparing it with current typologies. Observation of the traces on the surface of the vessels and on the cross-sections of sherds enabling them to be interpretated by comparison with ethnographic reference data and experimental data. This scientific method is complemented by innovative use of X-ray microtomography.

→ Ovoid vase with double body and tubular handles (type of decorated pottery – D)

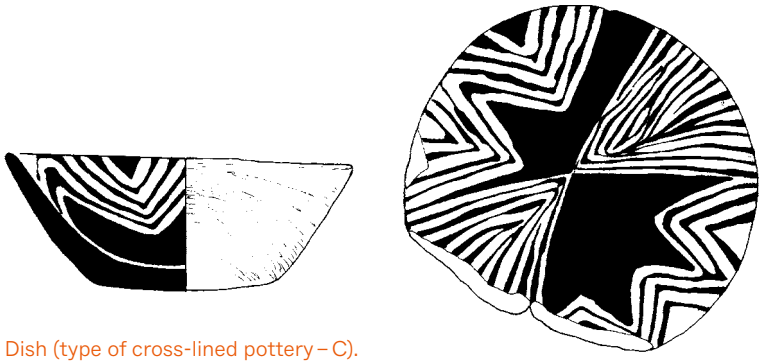
Cultural programme

LECTURE • Saturday 14 October 2023, 10.30 am (auditorium)
Pottery production in Egypt before the pharaohs.
How craft traditions can help us learn more about ancient societies
Jade Bageot, Technopregypt Project – IKSIO PAN (Poland), Associate member UMR – 5608 TRACES University of Toulouse 2 – Jean Jaurès.
This conference is organised by the SAMAN (Society of Friends of the National Archaeology Museum)

MURDER PARTY • Sunday 15 October 2023, 2pm / 3.30pm
Public: adults
This murder party is organised by the Young Friends of SAMAN (Society of Friends of the National Archaeology Museum)

LECTURE • Wednesday 8 November 2023, 6.30pm (auditorium)
The universe in a bowl. Understanding the paintings on Nagada I pottery (Egypt, between 3900 and 3700 BC)
Gwenola Graff, research fellow at the French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, IRD), director of the archaeological mission of the Abu Subeira wadi (Aswan, Egypt)

WEBSITE
archeologie.culture.gouv.fr/jacques-morgan



Dish (type of cross-lined pottery – C).
Dessin MAN / Sylvie Eliès

Cultural programme

WORKSHOP
The mysteries of Egypt
(Excavation bin)
Public : children (6–7 years old) – Duration : 1h30

WORKSHOP
In the footsteps of Champollion
(The history of hieroglyphs and how to decrypt them)
Public : children (8–12 years old) – Duration : 2h

WORKSHOP
The use of clay in the Neolithic period: ceramics
(Making ceramics using Neolithic techniques)
Public : children (8–12 years old) – Duration : 2h

Legends of the vases on the following page (from left to right) :
• Goblet known as a “horn vase” (red pottery with black rim – B)
RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d’Archéologie nationale) / Gérard Blot
• Bowl in the shape of a truncated cone (red pottery decorated with cream lines and crosses – C) MAN / Valorie Gô
• Polished red vase with double neck, Naqada (type of red polished pottery – P)
RMN-Grand Palais (Musée d’Archéologie nationale) / Gérard Blot
• Ovoid vase with tubular handles (type of decorated pottery – D)
MAN / Loïc Hamon

Drawings: MAN / Sylvie Eliès & MAN / Perrine Le Corre
Graphic design: MAN / Léa Pradine

You can find all our regular programming on our website and social networks

For further **information**, call 01 34 51 65 36
For **booking**, click on the following link :
https://affluences.com/musee-darcheologie-nationale/reservation
or send an email to: reservation.man@culture.gouv.fr

MINISTÈRE DE LA CULTURE
Liberté Égalité Fraternité

MUSÉE D’ARCHÉOLOGIE NATIONALE
Domaine national de Saint-Germain-en-Laye

musee-archeologienationale.fr