



LONG BEFORE THE PHARAOHS

An archaeological find in Egypt is providing a major breakthrough in understanding the people of the New Stone Age.

On a fertile oasis in northern Egypt, in ground that in recent years had been used to grow grapes, archaeologists from UCLA and the University of Groningen (RUG) found the earliest evidence of an ancient Egyptian agricultural settlement—a farming society that flourished more than 7,000 years ago.

“By the time of the pharaohs, everything in ancient Egypt centered around agriculture,” said Willeke Wendrich, the excavation’s co-director and an associate professor of near eastern languages and cultures at UCLA. “What we’ve found here is a window into the development of agriculture some 2,000 years before the pharaohs. This work will help us answer basic questions about how, why and when ancient Egypt adopted agriculture.”

Just inches below the surface of the site, which is located about 50 miles southwest of Cairo, the UCLA-RUG team excavated domestic wheat and barley and found the remains of domesticated animals, along with evidence of fishing and hunting, beads and pendants, pottery, tools, pits for cooking, and even hearths and clay floors for what appear to be dwellings.

“These discoveries have uncovered a new chapter in the prehistory of mankind,” said dean of humanities Tim Stowell. “Willeke is one of the stars in a dynamic group of humanistic archaeologists at UCLA whose research shines a light into the past using the research tools of the 21st century.”

The latest findings date to the Neolithic period, a stage of human development that occurred at various times around the world, beginning in 8,600 B.C. Sometimes called the New Stone Age, the period is characterized by the introduction of farming, animal husbandry, and a movement away from hunting and gathering and toward a less nomadic way of life, with pots, tools and settlements.

The work by the UCLA-RUG team is a new step in scholarship that began more than 80 years ago in an area of Egypt called the Faiyum Depression. In the 1920s, archaeologist Gertrude Caton Thompson found traces of domesticated grains less than a mile from the current site. After the advent of carbon-dating technology, the grain was dated to 5,200 B.C., making the discovery the earliest evidence of agriculture in ancient Egypt.



To this day, no earlier evidence of agriculture has been found in Egypt. But because no surrounding settlement was ever excavated, many questions remained about the context in which agriculture began to unfold in Egypt.

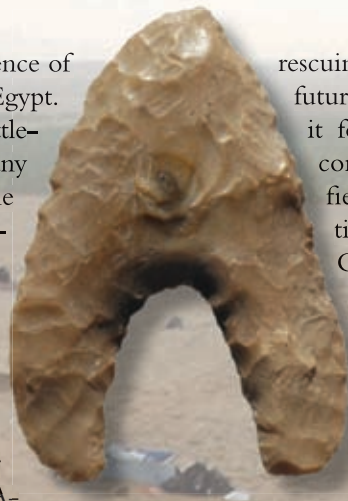
Few clues to Egypt's Neolithic past had been found in the Nile Valley, possibly because they were either buried under silt from the Nile or wiped away when the river changed its course. The UCLA-RUG excavation site is located just outside the river valley in what is now a desert region.

The oasis was surrounded by other prehistoric sites, but generations of archaeologists had written off the area, until the UCLA-RUG team decided to re-explore the site. The research there was funded by the National Geographic Society, UCLA, RUG and private donors on the Directors Council of the UCLA Cotsen Institute of Archaeology.

"We knew that the settlement existed, but the site had been under cultivation since the 1960s, so archaeologists assumed it had been destroyed," Wendrich said.

Modern farming techniques were about to annihilate the site in 2006, but the archaeological team succeeded in

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rescuing the six-acre plot for future research by renting it for a year while they conducted their initial fieldwork. In the meantime, Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities has taken steps to permanently protect the site.

"We got to this site in the nick of time," said Wendrich.

With more than three feet of undisturbed layers at the site, the team expects to be able to piece together the evolution of domestication in the area between 5,200 B.C. and about 4,200 B.C.


"The arrival of the entire Neolithic package in ancient Egypt has always been treated as a moment in time, but we're finding layers that will allow us to tease out the development of agriculture in this area as it developed over the course of hundreds of years," said Wendrich, who is one of the core faculty members at UCLA's Cotsen Institute of Archaeology. "Rather than seeing the Neolithic as one period (about 8,500 B.C. to 4,000 B.C.), we can begin to understand its time depth and discern different periods and developments."

The wealth of new evidence will finally bring into focus how Neolithic society fit into the larger mosaic of Egyptian history, according to Bruce Smith, an archaeobiologist and a member of National Geographic's Committee for Research and Exploration.

"It's a missing link filling in a very important and poorly known phase of the development of agricultural systems, which led to the pyramids and later civilizations," Smith said.

Wendrich added that the discovery could alter the prevailing notion that the Neolithic period was primitive and disconnected from later and more sophisticated stages of ancient Egypt.

"The most important thing is that we don't look at this very early period of Egyptian history as something foreign to what happens later in the period of the pharaohs," Wendrich said.

"It's clear that this was not a bare existence that people had here. They made a pretty good life for themselves." 



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Willeke Wendrich: "What we've found here is a window into the development of agriculture some 2,000 years before the pharaohs. We hope this work will help us answer basic questions about how, why and when ancient Egypt adopted agriculture."