



BUILDING A PREDYNASTIC: THE CONSTRUCTION OF PREDYNASTIC GALLEYS

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ABSTRACT

In the mid-1890s, William Matthew Flinders Petrie put forth interpretations for the decorations on late prehistoric Egyptian ceramics, one motif of which he understood as a “galley.” This interpretation was soon thereafter questioned by naval specialist Cecil Torr who instead interpreted the motif as an enclosure. Despite intense debate between Petrie, Torr, and other colleagues, Petrie’s galley interpretation became solidified in mainstream Egyptological thought at the beginning of the 1920s. However, a fresh look at Petrie’s arguments and the evidence on which they are based, reveals some problems with his galley interpretation, rarely questioned in modern scholarship. Study of the discussion’s historiography reveals that Petrie’s interpretation became established based not on evidence, but rather on the personalities of the key players in the debate. Modern anthropological frameworks such as Peircean semiotics can instead offer new possibilities for approaching these decorations.

INTRODUCTION

In the first half of the 1890s, British archaeologist William Matthew Flinders Petrie identified two classes of painted decorated ceramics, dated to the fourth millennium BCE and found in abundance around the area of Naqada. In their first extensive publication, Petrie commented on these Predynastic ceramics and their decorations, and one particular motif (found on D-Ware, see below) in particular:

That the object seen in 45 [Fig. 1] represents a large boat cannot be doubted. The curved branch at one end must be the shelter of the look-out. The large steering-oars are shewn in one case. Amidships are two cabins, on one of which a man is standing. On the side of one cabin is a mast with standard and pennant. [...] Where two or three boats are shewn on one pot, each has a different standard. These, however, were rare.¹

Some twenty-five years later, Petrie again wrote about the decorations, as “the most important class of remains for the detail of the second period, as it shows so much of the products of which no other

traces are left.”²

Over the twenty-five years separating these extracts a debate had emerged, between Petrie and some colleagues, regarding the interpretation of these decorations and their further value to understanding Egypt’s prehistoric past. Reference to this debate is alarmingly absent from current scholarly discourse. Nowadays the existence of large Predynastic galleys, as purportedly shown by D-Ware decorations, still seems a reasonable assumption to many in the field, while the alternatives to Petrie’s interpretations, vigorously debated in the early 20th century, are hardly ever discussed. In this paper, I argue that the existence of large Predynastic rowed Nile-ships is in need of critical reflection since the ramifications of this situation are severe: as ideological vessels, the galleys have been characterized as processional boats,³ boats used in transport of priests,⁴ and ritual barges,⁵ while more mundane and economical interpretations include merchant ships⁶ and fishing boats;⁷ current larger archaeological narratives incorporate both characterizations of Petrie’s galley without question.⁸

In what follows, I first outline our conceptualization of the Predynastic period. Then I



FIGURE 1: D-Ware vase with typical representation of a galley, modern drawing (Payne 2000, fig. 41: no. 864). From Naqada (grave 1873); currently in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (1895.577). Image © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

will explain Petrie's "galley" motif, and subsequently focus on the debate between Petrie and some of his contemporaries, with the specific aim to not only outline the two directly opposing views of what this motif could represent, but also to reflect on the nature of the debate and the personalities involved. The direct goal is to show that—although Petrie's views cannot be simply ignored, and he will always stand at the forefront of the intersection between anthropology and Egyptology—our current interpretation of Predynastic motifs rests as much on early 20th century social networks of scholarship as on actual archaeological evidence. The last section returns discussion to some of the actual D-Ware material and explores new options for interpretation through Peircian semiotics to show that interpretation of Predynastic imagery is still open for debate.

DEBATING TIMES

The Predynastic period is the final stage of Egypt's prehistory and its interpretation largely indebted to Petrie's discoveries in the first half of the 1890s at the cemeteries of Naqada and Ballas, where he encountered a large assemblage of material that was unlike anything he had ever seen. At first, Petrie mistakenly believed the remains to be of First Intermediate Period date, representative of a foreign invading and violent "New Race,"⁹ but the increasingly apparent indigenous nature of the finds

made him begrudgingly accept his error.¹⁰ However, at the time Naqada and Ballas had been sent to print, it already stated his erroneous "New Race" theory and interpretations, in paragraphs "96. Expulsion of Egyptians" and "97. Characteristics of the Invaders."¹¹ An addendum to the volume also mentions "that the people there [in the book] described are *predynastic* [my emphasis], and constituted the oldest civilized people of the land, about 7000–5000 B.C."¹²

The *predynastic* placed Naqada at the forefront of Egyptological literature as the forerunner to Egypt's historical dynasties, a suggestion made originally by Jean-Jacques de Morgan.¹³ In 1901, Petrie confirmed De Morgan's "predynastic" proposition through Sequence Dating.¹⁴ Despite its shortcomings, Sequence Dating greatly increased spatial and temporal understanding of Egypt's deeper past and currently forms the basis of the modern tripartite Naqada chronology (Table 1).¹⁵ This chronology is not entirely set in stone and is best considered a rough and flexible index to account for micro-level complexity inherent in Predynastic material culture, both temporally and spatially. The two distinctly painted Predynastic ceramic classes, Cross White-lined Ware (C-Ware) and Decorated Ware (D-Ware), provide a clear illustration of this complexity. C-Ware predated D-Ware by a century and D-Ware outlived C-Ware by a couple of centuries. C-Ware is usually taken as indexical of Naqada I and larger parts of Naqada II, whereas D-Ware with Petrie's galley motif first appears at the very end of Naqada I and is mostly typical of Naqada IIC/D. To the best of my knowledge, the latest D-Ware piece with (remains of) a "galley" motif comes from Tomb B19 (Hendrickx' Naqada IIIC),¹⁶ which is dated to Aha (one of the first rulers of the First Dynasty).

The geographical parameters of the sourcing of raw materials, production, and distribution for Predynastic ceramics are also not entirely clear. C-Ware has a predominantly "open" character (e.g., bowls and plates), made from a Nile silt paste that resulted in a red fabric, which was polished and decorated with white-yellow ocher-based slips (see for example Fig. 7). Unlike C-Ware, D-Ware was

TABLE 1: The Naqada chronology, see Hendrickx 2006, 92: table II, 1.7.

	cal. BCE	
Naqada IIID	from ca. 2920 onwards	[Semerkhet]/Qa-a—Dynasty 2
Naqada IIIC2	ca. 3000–2920	Djed – Adjib
Naqada IIIC1	ca. 3150–3100	Narmer–Djer
Naqada IIIB		U-t, Irj-Hor–Ka
Naqada IIIA2	ca. 3350–3150	U-g,h,s,u,v
Naqada IIIA1		U-a,k,o,r,qq–Scorpion I
Naqada IIC–IID2	ca. 3600–3350	
Naqada IA–IIB	ca. 4000/3900–3600	

made from marl-rich clays, had handles, and exhibited predominantly “closed” shapes (such as bottles, vases, and jars). Modern marl-rich clays sources appear mostly further north, but the ancient clay landscape may have been very different and locally sourced marl clay ceramics have been reported as far south as Hierakonpolis.¹⁷ Marl clay pastes result in a yellow-brown “dull” or “buff” fabric, which in the case of D-Ware were adorned with red/purple painted slip decorations (Fig. 2), presumably based on red ochers. In terms of production and distribution, no specific C-Ware or D-Ware production facilities have been identified. However, D-Ware seems to have been a large-scale workshop item, whereas C-Ware is more likely to have been a household product.¹⁸ The geographical distribution of C-Ware and D-Ware overlapped greatly, falling roughly between Abydos and northern Sudan, though D-Ware is found further afield as well.¹⁹ Nevertheless, further connections between these two ceramic types are still puzzling.

DEBATING GALLEYS

In the monograph *Naqada & Ballas*, Petrie identified a peculiar painted D-Ware motif as a galley, describing it as follows: “The boats or galleys which are shewn on so many of these paintings are of one type,

with very slight variations; there is a high rise fore and aft; a bough is placed at the stern to shade the look-out man; two cabins stand amidships; an ensign on a tall pole stands either between the cabins—or more generally—at the hinder cabin; and in the most complex examples there is a tying-up rope in front, and three large steering-oars at the stern. These last effectually shew

that this object is a boat, and not any sort of palisade or enclosure, as might be supposed.”²⁰ These galleys, Petrie argued, carried Punic settlers from the Mediterranean Sea who had come down the Nile, sailing into the heart of Egypt where they established Egypt’s first historical dynasties. When



FIGURE 2: D-Ware vase with typical decorations, 3D model export by author © DECOR 2017. Unknown provenance; currently in the British Museum, London (EA. 22435).

he realized Naqada represented an indigenous (rather than foreign), pre-pharaonic cemetery, Petrie abandoned the greater part of his theory.

Regardless, Petrie persistently held on to his identification of the motif as a galley, which was first challenged in 1898 by Cecil Torr, a Cambridge-based specialist on Mediterranean naval practices. This critique led to two strains of interpretation and indirectly established Petrie's idea among Egyptologists, but the adoption of Petrie's interpretation over Torr's should, I argue, be understood in a much broader context of the ongoing relationship between Petrie and Torr. The roots of this relationship date to 1890—if not before—when Petrie published a brief article in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, exploring possibilities for violent episodes of culture-contact between Egypt and other entities around the Mediterranean basin, based on data from his excavations at Naukratis, Daphnae, and Illahun.²¹ Torr strongly reacted to Petrie's ideas and indeed on other occasions seems to have gotten into public disputes.²² Petrie—who according to his former student Margaret Drower was not one to easily admit his own mistakes²³—is unlikely to have responded well to Torr's hostilities.²⁴ Although Torr had some valid criticisms (see below), his rancor is likely to have insulted Petrie at this first encounter. Their relationship and personal enmity, therefore, would have partly shaped how Egypt's Predynastic period was conceived, perceived, defined, and subsequently invented. The consolidation of the D-Ware motif as a galley thus sits within the context of an already

bitter and hostile battle of egos and begs the question why a *naval* specialist argued *against* Petrie's identification of the motif as a boat.

Turning to the arguments themselves, a brief review of Petrie's evidence shows that in 1896 he was only able to draw out two artifacts in direct support of his argument. The first artifact is a so-called boat-model, currently in the Ashmolean Museum, which derives from a secure context at Naqada.²⁵ It may represent a boat or canoe with images of men holding oars on its side (Fig. 3). Petrie did not suggest an explicit connection between this artifact (or its decorations) and the D-Ware galley, but instead argued that it belonged to a people "accustomed to rowing with many oars on each side."²⁶ This first piece of evidence is thus not a very strong one, since it does not directly confirm identification of the D-Ware "galley" as such. The second artifact is a D-Ware decorated vase, currently also in the Ashmolean Museum and from a secure context at Naqada (Fig. 4).²⁷ This vase formed the main source for Petrie's argument. Its shape is typical of late Naqada II date and relatively common in the Predynastic ceramic repertoire, but its decorations are somewhat problematic. The spatial arrangement of the decorations on this vase is unmistakably similar to that of other D-Ware specimens, but the decorations themselves are completely idiosyncratic in all other aspects. Compared to 390 other D-Ware specimens with galleys (see below), every iconographical element on this pot is unique in terms of type and style, such as the humanoid figures, the so-called Naqada-plants in between and under the galleys, the elephant-emblem, the cabins and sprigs on top of the galleys, and the peculiar objects above the galleys including a stretched-out skin(?) and the odd leaf-shaped figures. Even the birds—be they ostriches,²⁸ flamingoes,²⁹ both,³⁰ or something entirely different—are anomalous in their depiction. In fact, if no provenance accompanied this piece, stylistic analysis such as that by Guy Brunton and Crowfoot Payne et al. would have almost certainly called the authenticity of this vase into question.³¹ Regardless, Petrie's decisive argument in favor of interpreting the motif as a galley was based on this piece, and specifically on the three lines to the rear of each

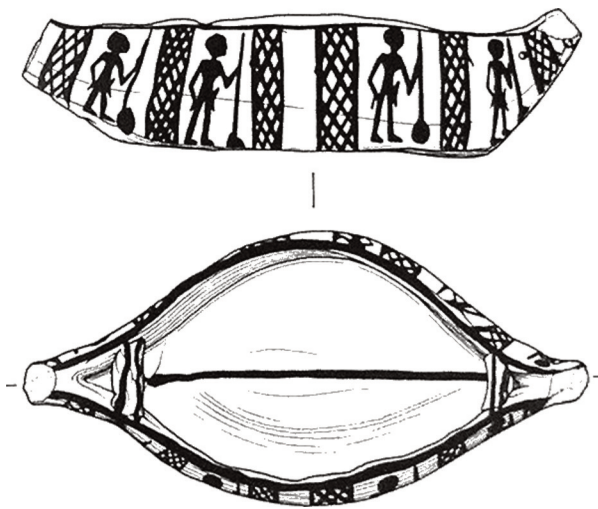


FIGURE 3: D-Ware model possibly of a boat, modern drawing (Payne 2000, fig. 17: no. 88). From Naqada (grave 566); currently in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (1895.609). Image © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

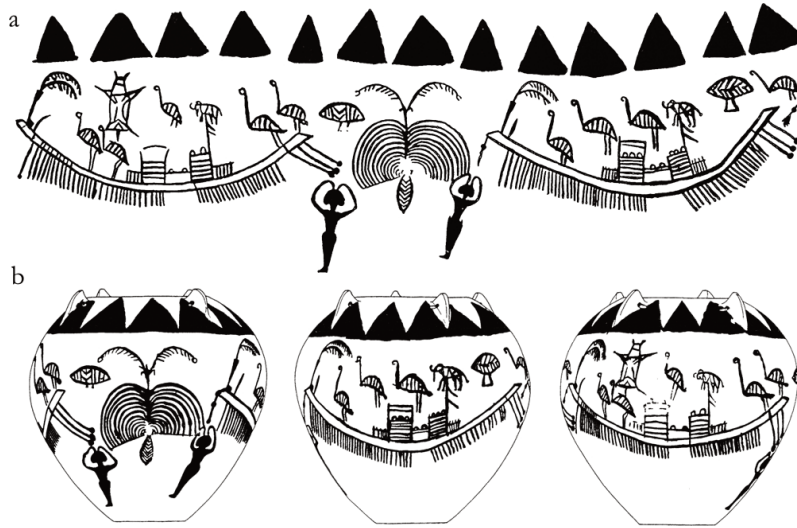


FIGURE 4: D-Ware vase with idiosyncratic representation of a galley, (a) old drawing (Petrie and Quibell 1896, plate 67: no. 14) and (b) modern drawing (Payne 2000, fig. 42: no. 865). From Naqada (grave 454); currently in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (1895.584). Image © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

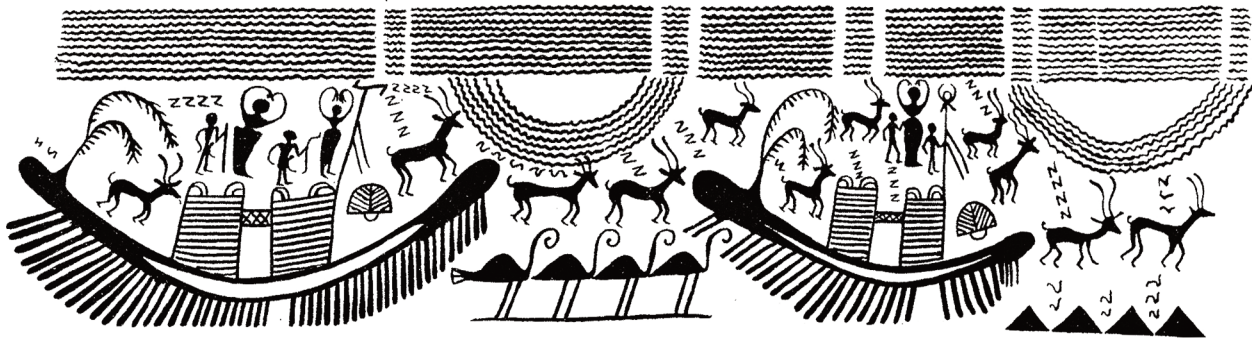


FIGURE 5: D-Ware vase with typical representation of a galley, old drawing (De Morgan 1896, plate X: nos. 2a-b). Allegedly from Abydos; currently in the Cairo Museum (CG2083).

galley — not unlike the oars on the earlier presented boat-model — which he identified as steering-oars.³²

Other pieces of evidence were quickly slotted into this new interpretative framework, and subsequent publications, for example by De Morgan, followed Petrie’s identification. De Morgan presented a few objects through which he understood the D-Ware galley motifs as canoes with fishing spears (Figs. 5–7).³³ However, each of these pieces came from a different regions and sub-period in the Naqada date sequence and presents its own set of problems. The vase represented in Figure 5 is currently in the Cairo Museum and is ascribed to Abydos or Semaineh, but its provenance is then in fact unknown. It has not been properly studied or published since 1897, but

based on the drawing shown in Figure 5, the “bridge” between the cabins as well as the birds are somewhat idiosyncratic and stylistically quite probably date to end of Naqada II. The boat-model in Figure 6 comes from a secure context at Abadiyeh,³⁴ is currently located in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology in London,³⁵ and has been assigned a Naqada I date.³⁶ The boat-model in Figure 7 is currently also located in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology in London and has no equal.³⁷ Since this model also has no known provenance, its authenticity has been questioned,³⁸ yet, when published, this particular piece actually formed a pillar for Petrie’s theory who reconstructed an “oarsman” from the messy lines on the far left.³⁹

In short, all artifacts presented by Petrie and De Morgan as evidence for the existence of Predynastic galleys are idiosyncratic and often originate from different temporal, spatial, economic, political, and social contexts. Many of these pieces have not been restudied, or their archaeological contexts and dates revisited. Consequently there is no reason to group them together as directly corresponding to each other in attempts to understand the entirety of the Predynastic period. Rather, each of these pieces can only be held representative for the specific contexts to which they belong. When other pieces of Predynastic evidence, such as rock carvings and more typical examples of D-Ware iconography, are drawn into the debate, an even more complicated image emerges. For example, typical D-Ware

“galleys” such as those shown in Figure 2 are actually found only occasionally in the rock carving repertoire, which is actually characterized by many other, different types of boats. A brief examination of the rock art repertoire suggests a distinctly varied boat repertoire that emerged over the course of the Naqada period.⁴⁰ The emergence of such a variety in rock art boat representations also suggests that relationships between images and their referents were unstable and open to reinterpretation, introducing problems for understanding relations between D-Ware decorations and their referents, as well as between decorations, the form of their ceramic container, and their associated functions. For example, it is easy to see a direct correspondence between form, decorations, and function for the



FIGURE 6: A boat model, photo by author. From Abadiyeh (grave B182); currently in the Petrie Museum at University College, London (UC10805).

FIGURE 7: A boat model(?), photo by author. Unknown provenance; currently in the Petrie Museum at University College, London (UC15319).



model in Figure 6, since the lines on the side are easily interpreted as lashing (see below) and thus allow for easy reconstruction of the ceramic form as a canoe model. However, the figures depicted on the side of Figure 3 do not facilitate such a clear connection between decorations and ceramic form. Other objects, such as for example a small D-Ware ceramic box (“sarcophagus”) with a galley on its side in the British Museum,⁴¹ present even more difficulty to understand image-object relationships. The fluidity of these relationships also draws into question the reliability of objects and their decorations as static representations for the whole of the Predynastic period.

Torr did not point out any of these problems. Instead, he drew attention to the fact that Petrie’s published lithograph-based drawings were inaccurate, raising five points of contention to Petrie’s interpretation.⁴² Firstly, aquatic species are conspicuously absent from the decorative scheme, while terrestrial animals are represented. Nor are lashings for bundling reeds (as Torr suggested were indicated on the side of the model in Figure 6) or individual rowers depicted. Also, the “oars” always appear in two groups and are systematically separated by an empty space; the space usually corresponds to the spacing in between the cabins, which can be found not only in depictions of the “galley” but also in other D-Ware motifs. This direct relationship between the “oars” and the “cabins,” as well as the fact that these cabins appear in places other than on the galleys, may suggest that the cabins were not specific to boats and hence the galley itself not necessarily a boat.⁴³ Torr’s first criticism was entirely correct in that not a single D-Ware decoration scheme I have seen to date features aquatic animals, though his second through fifth criticisms seem less well founded. They particularly do not apply to some later and more unusual D-Ware examples, commonly dated to Naqada IID or later.

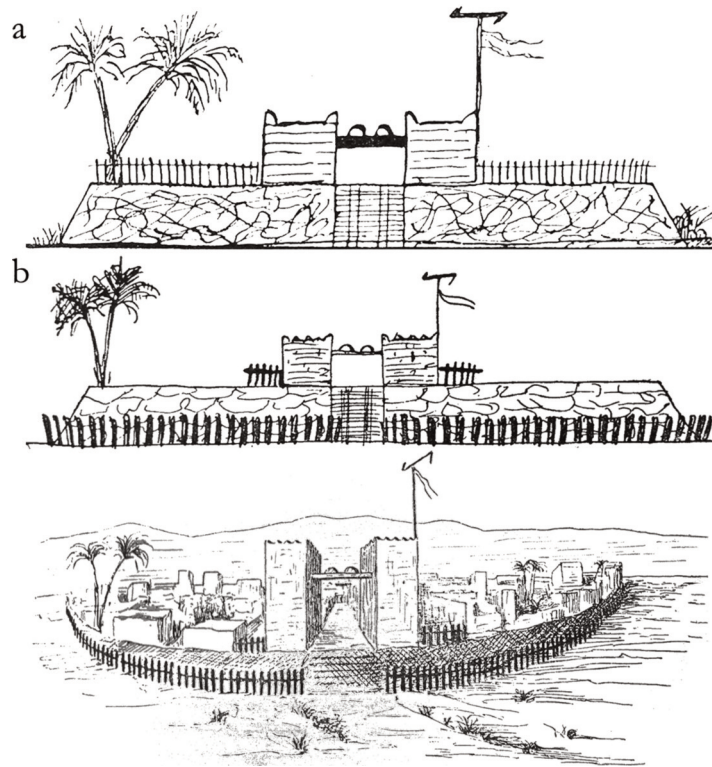
Torr interpreted the iconography as a palisade or enclosure, an interpretation that Petrie had already voiced and refuted a few years earlier (see the quote above).⁴⁴ To back up his interpretation, Torr presented drawings of two stylistically typical D-Ware examples, both in the British Museum, with one presented here (Fig. 2).⁴⁵ He argued that the two rows of oars represented palisades that enclosed a defensive rampart (glacis), while the cabins functioned as turrets guarding a supposed entrance, an interpretation reliant on the strong curve of the

motif. Torr offered no explanation for other, elements such as the palm-frond, and he could provide no archaeological settlement evidence to support his identifications. Yet Petrie could not prove his identification either: up to this day no remains of plank-built or reed-bundled Predynastic rafts, boats, ships, or galleys have been found in the Nile valley. In any case, after the turn of the century, a few scholars toyed with Torr’s idea and came up with truly imaginative renderings of how such an enclosure may have appeared (Fig. 8),⁴⁶ while others sought to explore Petrie’s train of thought from more historical perspectives. Curiously enough, neither camp used actual Predynastic material to reinforce their interpretations, and having already decided on Petrie’s or Torr’s interpretation, they employed case-studies, data, and ideas all the way from the Pyramid Texts, Old Kingdom tomb painting, New Kingdom papyri, Roman historical sources to contemporary African cultures, to expand on the implications of these ideas for our understanding of the Predynastic.

A few other Predynastic artifacts entered the discussion between Petrie and Torr at a relatively late stage.⁴⁷ In particular, the debate started to heavily rely on three pieces: the infamous wall paintings from “Tomb 100” at Hierakonpolis, a large vase in the British Museum (EA35324), and a vase currently in the Petrie Museum (Fig. 9). The iconography of the Hierakonpolis Frieze is not well understood and is widely believed to date to Naqada IIC, though it may date later.⁴⁸ The British Museum vase had previously been considered a modern vessel, though is currently on display and has (in my view correctly) now been assigned an early Naqada III date and provenience from somewhere around the important cemetery of Qustul in northern Sudan.⁴⁹ The Petrie Museum vase has also been marked as a modern production and is (unfortunately for Petrie) also the most clear illustration of all the galley motifs, with a number of individuals engaged in a steering, spearing, or punting-like activity (Fig. 9).⁵⁰ Other important pieces of evidence, such as the remarkable decorated cloth from Gebelein or numerous rock art tableaux, had not yet been discovered or studied in the 1910s and 1920s.

The most important point of this excursion is not to illustrate yet again the ambiguous nature of the material, but rather to demonstrate the pitfalls of interpretation. Petrie did not present evidence drawn from typical D-ware motifs, but rather cherry-picked the most unique and telling examples

FIGURE 8: A series of visual interpretations of a Predynastic village based on Torr's ideas, by (a) Victor Loret (1906, 25: fig. 2) and (b) Eduard Naville (1911, 196: fig. 2; 1911, 197: fig. 3). Naville's image was supposedly a copy of Loret's, but note the differences between them.



in favor of his ideas, while Torr conversely utilized those few examples lacking any iconicity. Effectively, none of the original evidence used in the debate unequivocally confirms either Petrie's or Torr's ideas; the "galley" could be either, both, or neither. However, after publication of Petrie's groundbreaking Predynastic ceramics corpus in 1921 any subsequent publication on shipping in Egypt quickly advocated Petrie's view.⁵¹ I suspect that as the discussion abated nearer the 1920s, the dispute was soon forgotten, a battle that Torr was bound to lose against a personality as giant as Petrie's. Elsewhere I have argued for other theoretical possibilities to interpret these images, since some of Torr's observations and criticisms remain valid:⁵² why are fish never depicted, and how should we understand principles of organization and the structural integrity within the scenes? How do variability and style complicate possibilities of direct interpretation? In the next section, I do not necessarily want to revisit these questions, but will argue that we should move away from static models of explanation in the context of state formation dynamics and urbanization as they are currently understood.

DEBATING PREDYNASTIC GALLEYS

As argued above, discussion of the Predynastic period was in the first place made possible by Petrie. However, his discoveries and interpretations did not just facilitate many discussions, but also provided and established a baseline for such discussions. Once a baseline interpretation for D-Ware motifs was established, Petrie's initial arguments and evidence were no longer critically evaluated. Continued attention to the "galley" motif over the past decades has raised further interesting possibilities for



FIGURE 9: D-Ware vase with idiosyncratic representation of a galley, 3D model export by author © DECOR 2017. Unknown provenance; currently in the Petrie Museum at University College, London (UC15343).

interpretation, though none that may be considered final and very few that have deviated from Petrie's galley.⁵³ In this final section, I want to highlight the thorny issue of interpreting the galley motifs and argue for a different attitude and approach to both the "galley" motif and other Predynastic imagery at large. In particular I will draw out Peircian semiotics and pragmatism to argue three main points: (1) our current understanding of D-Ware does not allow for far-reaching conclusions to be drawn based on analysis of its iconography; (2) D-Ware needs to be considered within the broader context of state formation in which its motifs developed, a context that may have been in constant flux resulting from and responding to continuous changes in Predynastic communities; and (3) the use of similar motifs in different contexts—be it temporal, geographical, functional, or social—does not imply that such a motif had a constant, unchanging meaning for the peoples who employed it.

Semiotics (and pragmatics in extension) has recently found its way into Egyptological discussion, but often seems infused with impenetrable language and highly abstract ideas.⁵⁴ In brief, the modern field of semiotics (the study of meaning-making) was founded by Charles Sanders Peirce, who provided a tripartite relationship between the "Interpretant" as interlocutor to define the relationship between the "Sign" (the material thing) and the "Object" (the conceptual thing).⁵⁵ Peirce defined Signs as indivisible and infinitely dimensional and simultaneously functioning in all of these three capacities, producing new Signs, a process he called *synechism*.⁵⁶ In our case, any D-Ware element—from pot to handle, from "galley" to single stroke, or just even the idea of these things—are all Signs and Objects. Individuals (Interpretants) will interpret these Signs and Objects differently, and so both in material and immaterial form, D-Ware decorations then make for codified representations of *personal* realities. Peirce also lies at the foundation of pragmatics, an impossible to define philosophical understanding that generally connects theory to practice; Preucel defines pragmatism as "the theory that the meaning of an idea or action can be determined by considering what idea or action it routinely generates."⁵⁷ Like Peirce's Sign relationships, pragmatic thinking states that theory and its underpinnings are fluid and dynamic. Simply put, at no point in time is anything morally, practically or theoretically the same.

Both semiotics and pragmatism could offer fresh

perspectives and a better understanding of Predynastic imagery, and D-Ware iconography specifically, but only recently have scholars attempted to examine these images with new approaches.⁵⁸ A recent inventory of D-Ware with galleys has resulted in close to 390 unique specimens, spread over collections worldwide.⁵⁹ Based on this corpus, notions such as an "absence of regularity in spatial composition"⁶⁰ can now be safely discarded; Table 2 outlines a general regularity in spatial composition among these 390 D-Ware ceramics that come from different areas and span across the late Naqada I to the early Naqada III periods. Notably, this spatial composition seems to have been present at least from early Naqada II times, and may indeed have resulted from earlier Naqada I developments; ceramic vessels with decorations of later date (Naqada IID) seem to move away from this system, introducing a seemingly unpredictable flexibility, though a comprehensive and systematic study of Naqada III imagery from this perspective is lacking and some elements of this compositional structure may well have continued (e.g., the earlier-mentioned EA35324). In the Naqada II D-Ware iconography system, galleys are always placed on the upper part of the vessel, spatially separated by the handles, while the so-called Naqada-plant and the "skins" are always found lower on the vessel. This overall structure seems ubiquitous, even on vessels without a galley, and painters may have extracted a selection of elements (horizons) from the overall template to form new compositions; this system would have provided them with a flexible schema by which they could vary smaller elements, but still structurally communicate general content.

The contents unfortunately remain obscure: that is, what do D-Ware scenes aim to show? Do they depict ceremonies, festivities, journeys, or mythological tales, combinations of these, and how do these translate to their chronological, social, and economical timeframes? Through semiotics and pragmatism, I reach my second and third points, and argue for cautious interpretation of D-Ware scenes and any of the underlying spatial semantics such as those outlined above within the context of Predynastic urbanizing societies. Recent models of state formation and urbanization, neatly summarized by Stevenson,⁶¹ characterize the fourth millennium BCE as an eventful period during which the areas and times under consideration (that is, northern Sudan and southern Egypt during Naqada

TABLE 2: Structuring of D-Ware scenes; see Uildriks 2012.

		ACT				
		On the vase	1	2	3	4
HORIZON	G	Top	Stripes, checker patterns, wavy lines, straight lines			
	F	Shoulders	Humanoids, "fans"	S-shapes, birds, "fans," wavy lines	Humanoids, "fans"	S-shapes, birds, "fans," wavy lines
	E	Upper belly	galleys	HANDLE	galleys	HANDLE
	D	Middle belly	S-shapes, birds, "fans," wavy lines			S-shapes, birds, "fans," wavy lines
	C	Lower belly	Naqada-plant, "skin"		Naqada-plant, "skin"	
	B	Foot	Wavy lines, straight lines			
	A	Bottom	Stripes, checker patterns, spiral, wavy lines, straight lines			

IC–Naqada IIIA) were not yet unified in political and economical terms. Consequently, the ontologically different semiotic systems in which images formed, even produced in the same region, area or village, or perhaps even by the same hands, should then also not automatically be assumed to represent the same thing in relation to each other or to similar images from other areas. Likewise, images that are set apart a hundred years, a decade, or that were produced on the same day should, *pragmatically*, also not automatically be assumed to show the same thing.

In fact, at each passing to a new set of hands, from producer to consumer to next consumer, D-Ware images may have opened up to reinterpretation. As such, rather than static representations of Predynastic society, these images took part in a cyclical process that shaped and molded new narratives, which at each iteration would find their way onto ceramic and other painted surfaces.⁶² This reasoning sets up the impossibility of knowing to what degree the visual representation of a D-Ware "galley," painted at a specific time by person X in place Y on pot Z, corresponds to that of a galley painted on the same day by the same person in the same locale on a similar ceramic shape. However, from the homogeneous nature of Naqada material culture, and the underlying D-Ware structure highlighted above, we can at least infer that the area from Abydos to Hierakonpolis, and quite possibly into Sudan, was somewhat *culturally* unified since

the early Naqada II period, though was flexible enough to allow for innovation, change, and long-distance communication of ideas along the Nile valley.

Based on the same corpus (see note 60), we should also account for a flexible variability allotted to the painter that may have resulted in scenes and individual images that appear the same, and perhaps even share spatial or temporal parameters, but do not necessarily represent the same concept or idea. Meta-cognitive techniques such as visual emphasis could have allowed painters to utilize similar looking images to express different ideas. These personal and spatial specifics sit within a chronologically specific framework. The shapes of unusual D-Ware vessels—that have in the past often been marked as forgeries, such as Petrie’s vase with "punting" men (Fig. 9)—all seem to be of late Naqada II or early Naqada III date.⁶³ Regardless of their narrow date-range or their idiosyncratic style, each of these objects was a product of an ontologically and semiotically different system of meaning-making, either in ancient or modern times. Therefore each of these pieces constitutes a new version of the Predynastic past; if they were produced over the last centuries, they were pragmatically made to look distinctly different from usual types, perhaps to fetch a higher price on the market, and may even have been an attempt to play into a demand at the time: decorations to resemble



FIGURE 10: D-Ware vase with typical representation of a galley and elaborate scenery, photos provided under the Creative Commons Zero license by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Unknown provenance; currently in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (MMA20.2.10).

galley that confirmed reigning scholarly beliefs. On the other hand, if their imagery and semiotics do belong to the remote past, and indeed to the Predynastic period itself, the imagery takes on a completely new meaning within the corpus of Predynastic imagery and our understanding of Predynastic societies at large. Such images could have constructed and influenced infinite fluid semiotic systems within and beyond the Nile valley, and this cross-bleeding could have easily introduced and accommodated foreign ideas and sign systems, slowly weaving them into the Predynastic fabric. These then would have consolidated and become themselves part of the then-present Predynastic. In other words, foreign decorations could have caused atypical interpretations of these decorations, either in modern or ancient times, and cause stories to branch off or set up entirely new ones.

This point of view then emphasizes the significance of Torr's first criticism of why aquatic animals are absent in D-Ware imagery: do they not fit the narratives that these decorations conveyed, or are they absent precisely because the narratives demanded them to be? Of equal importance is the variability among iconographic elements, such as the mid-ship "pennants":⁶⁴ did such elements that seem distinctly different actually convey different meanings, or does their form simply mask alternative renditions of similar semiotics? Within the context of changing semiotic systems throughout the entire Predynastic sequence, should we then expect all D-Ware galley motifs to actually represent the same thing? Whatever narratives and oral histories the galley motif may have supported, combinations and interchangeability of

iconographical elements would have allowed the creation of new meaning, much like the workings of any writing system that combines symbols to create new ones until these images finally crystallized during the Naqada III period into symbols that formed the earliest hieroglyphic writing system. Therefore, although these images are one of the main graphic sources available for the whole of the Predynastic period, without understanding the relations among these images, they cannot form a reliable index to understand the whole of the Predynastic period. Nonetheless, some form of narration and story-telling may well have been encapsulated by these images, perhaps as suggested by the vase in Figure 10 in which each scene could have conceivably portrayed a sequence within a larger narrative. Could the simpler, more common renderings of D-Ware scenes with galley motifs, such as that in Figure 2, have worked in a similar but perhaps more abbreviated way, as a communicative device for narration?

CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued against the existence of Predynastic "galley," an interpretation put forward by Flinders Petrie over a century ago, but still adhered to by many scholars. No remains of Predynastic boats have been found, and a personal vendetta between Petrie and Torr influenced and consolidated Petrie's idea in mainstream Egyptological thought, effectively ending discussion as to the interpretation of the "galley" that to my mind should still be ongoing. Other late nineteenth and twentieth century scholarly ideas may also have been affected by personal relationships between

these and other protagonists, for example between Petrie and Naville, and Petrie and Loret, who both, incidentally, took Torr's side in the galley debate.⁶⁵ In short, the social networks underlying the construction of the Predynastic period, in the Predynastic past and the Egyptological present, should not be underestimated.

As for the images themselves, no exhaustive C-Ware and D-Ware catalogs yet exist. After Petrie's final publication in 1921, these ceramics were already globally scattered, which still prevent scholars from bringing these objects in conversation with each other. This scattering naturally led to misconceptions, misunderstandings, and an inability to approach the spatial mechanics that underlay the decorations. The present author's recent unpublished catalog with some 390 D-Ware specimens (with galley) illustrates an underlying system of horizons and registers, defined by handles and shape of the ceramics (in turn governed by function and interaction with the pot) that may very well have been a significant building block for earlier hieroglyphic systems. Based on Peircian semiotics and pragmatics, I do not expect these images to be static reflections of Predynastic communities, but rather active participants in the construction of meaning through narration and iconographical experimentation, by individuals belonging to an already *culturally* unified Upper Egypt. Since the identification of D-Ware motifs then seems a theoretically fraught undertaking, as some of the images could represent boats while others may not (even though they may look the same), perhaps more attention should be given to understanding the mechanics that underlie these decorations. Rather than asking why Predynastic peoples were obsessed with boats, I argue for a return to epistemological questions: how can we approach these images not knowing or understanding what they represent, and what social functions did they fulfill other than as representations of Predynastic thought?

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NOTES

- ¹ Petrie and Quibell 1896, 12.
- ² Petrie 1920, 16.
- ³ See Foucart 1905.
- ⁴ Newberry 1913a; Newberry 1913b; Newberry 1914 builds on Boreux 1908.
- ⁵ See Read 1917; see also El-Yahky 1985.
- ⁶ Petrie and Quibell 1896; Petrie 1914; 1920; 1921; Thomas 1923; Edgerton 1923.
- ⁷ De Morgan 1896; 1897; 1920.
- ⁸ See for example Broodbank 2013, chapter 7.
- ⁹ Petrie built the New Race theory on his ideas of Punic invaders, see Petrie 1894. See also his work on Koptos in 1894, published in Petrie 1896.
- ¹⁰ According to Drower 1995, 244 and Thompson 2016, Petrie eventually abandoned his New Race hypothesis. See also Challis 2016.
- ¹¹ Drower 1995, 241 suggests the whole of chapter eight, but that chapter seems to describe (rather than interpret) the material from Naqada.
- ¹² Petrie and Quibell 1896, addendum. Note that not all editions have this addendum. Jean-Jacques de Morgan linked prehistory to the historical dynasties through the Predynastic, see De Morgan 1896.
- ¹³ De Morgan 1896, 1897.
- ¹⁴ Petrie and Mace 1901.
- ¹⁵ Petrie devised "Sequence Dating," a cross-typological system to organize objects by style and put them in relative relation to each other, see Petrie 1888; Petrie 1899; Montelius 1899; Petrie and Mace 1901. This system provides *relative* (i.e. *ante quem* or *post quem*) date estimates and showed continuity between the Early Dynastic period and the Predynastic period. However, one of its major shortcomings was its local applicability, recognized by Werner Kaiser and Stan Hendrickx, who included Armant among other places and introduced the current Naqada system, see Kaiser 1956; Kaiser 1957. Subsequent revisions included Elkab amongst other places, but some problems still persist, see Hendrickx 1984, Hendrickx 1989a; Hendrickx 1989b; Hendrickx 1989c; Hendrickx 1996;

- Hendrickx 1999; Hendrickx 2006.
- ¹⁶ Tomb B12, dated to the reign of Aha (see British Museum EA.75154).
- ¹⁷ See Butzer 1974; Friedman 1994, 705–706.
- ¹⁸ Uildriks Forthcoming; Finkenstaedt 1981.
- ¹⁹ See Cox 2013, 2017.
- ²⁰ Petrie and Quibell 1896, 48.
- ²¹ For Daphnae, see Petrie 1888; for Naukratis, see Petrie 1890a; for Illahun and Kahun, see Petrie 1891.
- ²² For a particularly explicit example, consider and compare William Ridgeway’s review of Torr’s *Ancient Ships* (see Torr 1894), published in 1895 (see Ridgeway 1895b). Torr did not receive this review well, see Ridgeway 1895a. More examples of Torr’s direct language can be found in Torr 1894.
- ²³ Drower 1995, 215.
- ²⁴ See Torr 1892; cf. Petrie 1890b; see also Gange 2013.
- ²⁵ Grave 566 at Naqada; see also Petrie and Quibell 1896, plate 36: 80.
- ²⁶ Petrie and Quibell 1896, 48.
- ²⁷ Grave 454.
- ²⁸ Petrie and Quibell 1896, 12, 40.
- ²⁹ Schweinfurth 1897.
- ³⁰ Raphael 1947, 142; Boessneck 1988, 27.
- ³¹ Brunton 1934; Crowfoot Payne et al. 1977.
- ³² Petrie and Quibell 1896, 48.
- ³³ De Morgan 1896, 90–91: figs. 235–237; see also De Morgan 1897.
- ³⁴ Tomb B182.
- ³⁵ UC10805.
- ³⁶ Petrie 1921, plate 37: D81d.
- ³⁷ UC15319.
- ³⁸ Adams 1988, 48.
- ³⁹ Petrie 1933, 12: fig. 47.
- ⁴⁰ Lankaster 2013; Merriman 2011.
- ⁴¹ See EA.32639.
- ⁴² See Torr 1898.
- ⁴³ This does not seem to hold true, particularly for later D-Ware galleys.
- ⁴⁴ To my knowledge, Petrie and Torr did not discuss interpretations of D-Ware designs outside the two publications given here (i.e. Petrie and Quibell 1896; Torr 1898). I have not been able to find any further documentation on direct correspondences between Petrie and Torr and I know of no earlier publication that devoted serious attention to this idea. Read also points out this curious situation, see Read 1917.
- ⁴⁵ The other D-Ware example is registered under EA.26636.
- ⁴⁶ Most recently Monnet-Saleh 1983, whose ideas were severely beaten down by El-Yahky 1985; in turn, El-Yahky based his ideas on those of Foucart 1905. Other recent approaches include Graff 2009a; Graff 2009b; Graff et al. 2011; Graff 2016.
- ⁴⁷ Petrie 1914.
- ⁴⁸ For an overview of the dating issue, see Case and Crowfoot Payne 1962; Wengrow and Baines 2004, 1091–1092.
- ⁴⁹ For an overview, see Huyge and Darnell 2010.
- ⁵⁰ See Brunton 1934.
- ⁵¹ See Petrie 1921; for followers, see for example Thomas 1923; Boreux 1925; Hornblower 1930.
- ⁵² Uildriks 2011a; Uildriks 2011c; Uildriks 2012.
- ⁵³ Wengrow and Baines 2004; Graff 2009a.
- ⁵⁴ See for example Angenot 2015.
- ⁵⁵ Preucel 2006. In this respect, Peirce differs from Saussure’s structuralist bi-partite semiological Sign-Object distinction.
- ⁵⁶ See Preucel 2006, 49.
- ⁵⁷ See Preucel 2006, 45.
- ⁵⁸ Graff 2009a; Uildriks 2011a; Uildriks 2011c.
- ⁵⁹ See Uildriks 2011b. This corpus should not be considered complete.
- ⁶⁰ Wengrow 2006, 102. Wengrow follows work by Tefnin 1993.
- ⁶¹ Stevenson 2016. See also Moeller 2016.
- ⁶² These observations may have broader implications for understanding the chronological positioning of other key pieces of evidence such as the Gebelein linen, the Hierakonpolis Tomb 100 wall paintings, and rock art, all much debated.
- ⁶³ A number of such vessels exist, see Brunton 1934; Crowfoot Payne et al. 1977; Lupton 1992.
- ⁶⁴ See for example Capart 1904, 1905; Newberry

1913a, 1913b.

- ⁶⁵ Naville 1911; Loret 1906. For another example of personal relationships, consider the reaction of El-Yahky to Monnet-Saleh (cf. n. 46 above).