

Elise Jenny Baumgartel 1892-1975 by Renee Friedman

To those who knew her, if only near the end of her life, Elise Baumgartel is remembered as a distinct presence. A woman of strongly held beliefs, she found great pleasure in sharing her opinions in animated discussions in the library at the Griffith Institute, Oxford, especially with young students whose open-mindedness she relished. While many of the idiosyncratic convictions about the Predynastic period in Egypt which she published in her influential monographs *The Cultures of Prehistoric Egypt I, II*, have not withstood the test of time, she was a keen observer with an original mind who freely gave of her time and encouraged those around her to question received wisdom. Unfortunately little is known about her early life and the influences which motivated her inquiring mind. What information is available illustrates a wide variety of interests and an apparently insatiable desire to see and judge for herself which led to a peripatetic existence of travel and work within the important archaeological collections and sites of Europe, the Middle East and the United States.

Elise Baumgartel was born on October 5, 1892 in Berlin. The daughter of the successful architect Rudolf Goldschmidt, she was received her early education at home with a French governess. Her initial interest at the University of Berlin was medicine, but she later studied Egyptology under two of the greatest Egyptologists of the time, Adolf Erman and Kurt Sethe. The sound philological training she received from these two leaders in the field was to be of great use to her later. Continuing her studies at the University of Konigsberg, she was encouraged to pursue a combination of conventional

Egyptology and archaeology which gave direction to her future work in a subject which had benefitted little from rigorous analysis of the material culture. Indeed, she found the heavily text-based and ethnocentric approach of Egyptological studies, especially in Berlin, too restrictive. Her insistence that the origins of Egyptian civilization could only be properly understood within a wider context led her to concentrate on related materials in North Africa and the Mediterranean. Specializing in Prehistory with Egyptology and Ancient History as subsidiary subjects, she received her PhD in 1927 with a thesis on the Neolithic period in Tunis, Algiers and neighboring countries entitled *Tunis (Algier und Nachbargebiete) Neolithikum*.

Her first publication, *Dolmen und Mastaba* (1926) combined her two areas of interest. In this brief contribution, she sought to demonstrate that Egyptian funerary architecture of Dynasty I was derived from the dolmen graves of North Africa. In a manner that would become characteristic of her, she refuted the then fashionable hyper-diffusionist school of Elliot Smith which proclaimed that all cultural developments, especially with regard to tomb architecture, were invented first in Egypt and were then spread throughout the world by Egyptian merchants. Although her arguments faltered under chronological scrutiny, she did show that with exactly the same set of data, the exactly opposite conclusions could be reached, both of which being equally questionable. She subsequently abandoned this particular theory. However, similar concerns, especially with regard to the comparative study of stone implements, were to occupy her for the next ten years.

Blessed with a sharp and thorough intelligence and apparently boundless energy and determination, she completed her studies while raising a young family of three daughters. Her marriage to Hubert Baumgartel, an art historian, at the age of 22 in 1914,

however, did not last. Family considerations initially kept her close to home, working in the museum at Berlin and cataloguing the quantities of lithic artifacts which had been collected and excavated during this heyday of archaeological research. The scant notations regarding find-spot and the usually summary record of excavation were a constant frustration to her. It was her keen need to understand an object within its context, which now seems so obvious, that was to lead to her greatest contributions to the archaeology of several countries.

Her ability and energy were recognized soon after attaining her doctorate. In 1927 she received a scholarship to study lithic technology under Breuil in Paris and Toulouse. This led to a permanent subsidy by the Notgemeinschaft der Deutschen Wissenschaft enabling her to continue her work on the chronology of lithic artifacts of southern Mediterranean lands, an honor rarely bestowed on female archaeologists. These studies took her on short trips throughout Europe to study flint mines, both modern and ancient, and a special grant in 1930 allowed her to direct a small expedition to the flint mines at Wady Sheykh in Middle Egypt while taking part in the German excavations at Hermopolis.

Baumgartel had published Berlin's holdings of lithic material from Wady Sheykh, one of many collections from the site donated to museums throughout Europe by its discoverer the British explorer H. Seton-Karr. The limited amount of documentation which accompanied with donation left her with many questions regarding the mine's exact location, its date and associated industry. The over-night expedition to the mine is related by Baumgartel (1930) as a colorful adventure. It required eight camels supplied by the local mayor, who in addition offered other native hospitality. After a four hour ride through the desert, Baumgartel and her two male companions (there were no other

women present at the dig) reached the wadi. They made the steep but rapid ascent to the top of the plateau from whence they finally caught a view of the piles of tell-tale mining refuse. The expedition successfully relocated the mines, placed them on the map for the first time and found the answer to many of her outstanding questions.

Subsequently she was asked to join the excavations at Monte Gargano in north Italy where she directed the work within a funerary cave which contained over 4 meters of stratified remains ranging from about 600 BC to the Hellenistic period. In 1933, she also carried out a small excavation near Sarajevo in hope of discovering evidence of a connection between the Monte Gargano culture and the Balkans. In the male dominated preserve of archaeology in Germany and Italy, her commission to direct an excavation appears to be almost unique. Although her name does not appear on the by-line of the Monte Gargano excavation, her contribution to the preliminary reports is sizable. It is highly likely that her characteristic tendency to argue with her colleagues about date and cultural affiliations resulted in her being side-lined. These arguments, not always polite, spilled into print on more than one occasion.

In 1933, the year Hitler seized power, all of her grants from the German government were withdrawn and she was compelled to discontinue her work. A year later she fled to England with her family; a 41 year old single parent, suddenly bereft of stipend, family home and personal wealth. It is a testament to her standing in the field that numerous scholars clamored to find maintenance for her and continued to do so as the situation in England became progressively more difficult. Professor Sir John L. Myres of Oxford (tutor to Gordon Childe) secured monetary support for her to compile a bibliography of prehistoric discoveries in Italy and Malta for the International Congress of Pre- and Protohistory; a task which occupied her one day a week. She supplemented

this with senior courses in Egyptian language in the evenings which she taught for University College London. This dependence on the charity of scholarly and refugee organizations for a means of support was to remain a constant source of anxiety to her for some time to come.

In 1936 she approached the Petrie Museum at University College London with the request that she might be allowed to work with its collection in her spare time in order to keep up with her own studies. This request was happily granted, for the offer of her knowledge and expertise could not have come at a more opportune time for the Petrie Museum and its collection.

During 42 years of phenomenal archaeological activity in Egypt, Flinders Petrie amassed a select personal collection of artifacts. While the majority of finds were distributed as dividends to financial subscribers, unusual pieces and those of particular interest to Petrie were retained for further study. A large part of his collection was composed of material from the numerous and rich cemeteries of the Predynastic period which he was the first to discover and excavate in 1896. The result of his interest in this newly discovered period of Egyptian history was his justly famous system of stylistic seriation called Sequence Dating which placed the wealth of Predynastic material in a relative order. In addition to a series of brief excavation reports, he wrote a summary of the period entitled *Prehistoric Egypt* only while grounded during the First World War, which was to remain the only synthesis of the period in the English language until the work of Baumgartel herself. Thereafter, Petrie's active interest in the period and the objects ceased, but his obstinate refusal to let anyone touch his material remained.

When Petrie sold his personal collection to University College London, it was uncatalogued and unlabeled. Before he left England for Palestine in 1934 where he

finished his life, he was asked to identify the objects. Now a very old man, this was partly accomplished by oral identification, by his marking them with blue chalk, not always accurately, and by placing strips of paper over the edge of the pots which had an annoying habit of falling off at the slightest vibration. Yet, the newly appointed Head of Department Stephen Glanville was determined to catalogue this collection and immediately realized his luck at having the services of Baumgartel to this end.

The mix was fortunate for both parties. Working with this collection, Baumgartel's various fields of interest, Egyptology, Neolithic cultures and flints coalesced into what was to become her life's work-- the study of the Predynastic period in Egypt. She wrote that when she began this work it was "only then did I begin to understand what Egyptian Prehistory is and how little I had known of it previously.

Glanville arranged for Baumgartel to be subsidized by Sir Robert Mond, whose generosity had made it possible to purchase Petrie's collection for University College London. When Mond died and this subsidy ended, Glanville fought to have her retained stating "her services would be the first I should ask the college to pay out from whatever funds may be available for the Department of Egyptology". As an Honorary Research Assistant, she spent three days a week in the museum working through the Prehistoric and Early Dynastic material, arranging it in new cases and preparing a card index. She also taught tutorial and seminar classes from 1936-8 on the subject.

Among those whom she instructed was Anthony Arkell, destined to become Honorary Curator of the Petrie Museum years later. Baumgartel's thought-provoking discussions and at the time novel conviction that the origins of the earliest Predynastic cultures were to be found to the south (rather than the east) of Egypt subsequently stimulated Arkell to make the first prehistoric excavations in Sudan with important

results, earning him the title of "Father of Sudanese Prehistory".

In 1939 when Glanville was called up for service, Baumgartel was assigned to teach many of his classes for the duration of the war with a promotion to Temporary Assistant in the Department of Egyptology, despite her advanced degree and experience; a victim of the glass ceiling still firmly in place in the University level teaching of Egyptology in Britain. Her awareness of this situation is clear from her response to the apologetic letter which finally reached her in Oxford informing her that due to the decision to evacuate the college on October 18, 1940, her teaching responsibilities which were to begin on October 1 were suspended, but she could still collect her salary. She politely wrote back that she was unaware of this appointment and the University could keep its money as she had no intention of taking up the position were it still available, having found a more congenial (and safer) billet at Somerville College, Oxford.

Her years at Oxford were very productive ones. At Somerville College she enjoyed the company of many refugee scholars from Europe and the hospitality of Dame Lucy Sutherland who was to be close friend to her for the rest of her life. Her daughter, also resident at the women's college enriched her time there. However, reading the modern subjects of Politics, Philosophy and Economics meant that she was not going to follow in her mother's footsteps.

Baumgartel's original intention was to write a catalogue of the unique holdings of the Petrie Collection. When the war reached England and the collection was sent into exile for safe keeping, she modified her plans and began work on a series of short articles. A grant from the Griffith Institute in Oxford allowed her to enlarge these papers into a full-sized monograph on the Predynastic period and include important

unpublished antiquities from various museums.

The first edition of *The Cultures of Prehistoric Egypt (I)* appeared in 1947 and within one year was reprinted due to the unanticipated interest in the subject. In spite of further economic hardship following the end of the war which caused her to divide her time between Oxford, Manchester and London, a revised edition of volume I appeared seven years later. It was not until the bulk of the Petrie Museum's artifacts were finally released from their wartime packing crates in 1951, that she could prepare the long-awaited second volume of her monograph. Although completed by 1955 and intended to appear in conjunction with the revised edition of the first volume, for a variety of reasons it was not published until 1960.

More than a catalogue or a synthesis, the volumes of *The Cultures of Prehistoric Egypt* were a thorough reappraisal of the period. She began in characteristic fashion by refuting the then popular theory for a Delta origin of Egyptian culture. This theory was based on Kurt Sethe's influential interpretation of the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts as an encapsulation of actual pre-historical events. The predominance of the theology of the sun-god Re of Heliopolis (near Cairo) in these Pyramid Texts led Sethe to conclude that the peoples of the north, although poorly attested archaeologically, must have conquered those of the less advanced Upper Egyptian valley at the beginning of Egyptian history. Baumgartel was at pains to combat this theory with all the archaeological data she could muster, providing full bibliographic citations which were to be of great use to future students. She remained an eloquent opponent of the projection of literary sources backwards, arguing that it was better to let the material stand on its own and project forward. Nevertheless, she fell prey to the same temptation against which she railed on more than one occasion.

An unfortunate by-product of her rejection of Sethe's thesis but the denial of any early cultures in the Delta. She believed that the Lower Egyptian Delta was an unimportant cultural backwater which post-dated Upper Egypt in all of its developments. This view, which she held until the end of her life despite the growing evidence of Carbon-14 dating and strong criticism, has served to obscure the value of her works and the variety of useful insights they still contain. Given her great familiarity with the material culture of Upper Egypt, it is much to be regretted that even a visit to examine the Lower Egyptian sites and artifacts of El Oman, Maadi and Merimde in 1953 could not convince her of their early place in time and persuade her to bring her expertise to bear on the still much debated topic of interaction between these two cultural spheres.

The first volume dealt mostly with pottery, concentrating on the more unusual aspects of the ceramic corpus which had been retained by Petrie and thus generally overlooked. Her main interest was in making comparisons with Mesopotamian parallels and looking for connections in line with the diffusionist school of her day. Before the advent of independent means of dating such as C-14, such associations were key to the chronology of the mute eras of prehistory. The second volume was a much more measured discussion of a range of Predynastic objects and today still contains a wealth of useful observations. Although her approach was essentially typological, she knew that the key to understanding lay in the context. Through an examination of a wide range of artifacts she portrayed the interplay of tradition and innovation within which dynastic society developed. Her rigorous scrutiny of the context of each object by class and individually led her, much ahead of her time and for which she was often criticized, to delve into what we would call today their cognitive aspects, or what these objects meant to the people who made them. Gender related issues were also important to her and

remained so in her later writing. In this she anticipated much of present-day anthropological writing about early Egypt; presenting the same statements without the trendy jargon and dogma and based on a personal familiarity with the material that is today lacking. Whether her conclusions have stood the test of time or not, her assemblage of facts contain much valuable food for thought

Perhaps the most important thing to emerge from her study was the specific discovery of significant errors in Petrie's Sequence Dating system, the relative dating system for the Predynastic period which had been problematic for sometime.

Examination of the records revealed that the vessel which Petrie had placed first in the stylistic sequence of Wavy-handled jars, which lay at the heart of the entire system, was in reality a purchased piece with no datable context. Clearly the system was in need of substantial modification, but this could not be accomplished without a thorough review of the tomb groups on which it was based, the majority of which derived from the cemetery of Nagada.

In 1895 Petrie excavated the vast Predynastic cemetery at Nagada, still the largest cemetery and perhaps the richest of that date known to us. The site report, published rapidly in 1896 even before he realized the actual date of the strange objects he uncovered, gave hardly more than an inkling of the site's real importance. Although excellent for the period, the volume did not provide the details of grave groups essential for subsequent research on the internal chronology of the period of which he was the champion. Out of 2200 excavated graves, Petrie published details of only 136 and many of these were incomplete.

A chance meeting with Margaret Murray, the former Assistant Professor of Egyptology at University College and chief assistant to Petrie, assured her that a search

for Petrie's excavation notebooks was futile. Baumgartel relates the tale, later found to be apocryphal, that after Petrie left England for good, Murray was asked to sort out the mammoth piles of papers he had left behind. "She worked through them with some students who showed her the papers. She said "published, destroy; unpublished, keep. Well Nagada was published". Thus began a 30 year odyssey to locate and examine afresh the many thousands of objects from Nagada dispersed throughout Europe and the United States in order to reconstruct as much as possible the grave groups on which Petrie's work was based. She had hoped to publish this record as an appendix within the second volume of *Cultures*, but its size by that time was prohibitive.

Her relocation to America in 1955 allowed her to make more additions to the Nagada register with visits to the museums in Chicago, New York, Boston and Toronto. At the same time she spent time with her family and helped to put the family candy kitchen on a firm financial footing. Qualifying for social security payments as well as compensation from the German Government for property losses, she was finally relieved of the financial worries which plagued much of her earlier life.

Tempted by the opportunity to assist in the cataloguing the Ashmolean Museum's collection of flints, her first love, Baumgartel returned to Oxford in 1964. Financially comfortable, she purchased a small house which she shared with her grandson and embarked on a period of great productivity. Here she put the final touches on her chapter for the *Cambridge Ancient History* (1965). Savagely criticized for her continued denial of an early date for the Lower Egyptian cultures and her resolute refusal to mention counter arguments, she nevertheless proved herself to be an unrefuted and profound expert on the Predynastic period of Upper Egypt. She also continued her investigation of Early Dynastic art and artifacts. Earlier, she had rightly stressed the ritual

nature of the carved ceremonial mace-heads and palettes and warned against using them for reconstructions of political events. By questioning the blanket early dating proposed for the ivory figurines from the Hierakonpolis Main Deposit, Baumgartel again brought these neglected treasures to the attention of Egyptologists and engendered a renewed interest in the formative periods of Egyptian art. Even today, her controversial statements are still quoted, if only to refute them.

For many years, Baumgartel's colleagues in Oxford had urged her to make the Nagada card index available to a wider audience. When, in the late 1960's, several of Petrie's Nagada notebooks were miraculously rediscovered in a box under a telephone in University College, it seemed an appropriate opportunity to publish both her tomb registry and the new information found in these notebooks. A room was set aside for this work at the Ashmolean Museum and with the help of a small grant from the British Academy, a typist was employed to transcribe the record into register form. Once a week, Baumgartel and Joan Crowfoot Payne would meet to check the work and prepare the next batch for the typist. These meetings were a source of great stimulation and pleasure for both parties. The results were published in 1970 in *Petrie's Nagada Excavations: a Supplement*. With its publication, it became clear that Petrie's work at Nagada deserves all the acclaim it has received over the years. Her revelations about the wealth and architectural diversity of the tombs at Nagada led to a major revision in the perception of social complexity and the development of the dynastic state.

It is indeed much to be regretted that she did not live to witness the discovery of the remainder of the notebooks in 1982. One can only imagine the result had she not been put off the search in the beginning. Whether it was due to a faulty memory or bitterness at having been forced to retire at the age of 70, Margaret Murray's story about

the disposal of the notebooks was totally untrue. As a result, a comprehensive report on the Nagada excavations is yet to be written. With her personal familiarity with the multitude of objects retrieved from Nagada, as well as many other sites, the contribution that Baumgartel could have made to such a treatise would have been a major addition to scholarship. Instead, Baumgartel dedicated the final years of her life to a third revision of both volumes of *Prehistoric Cultures* which was to be called *Egypt's Beginnings*. The manuscript still preserved at the Griffith Institute, Oxford is very much a cut-and-paste affair. Unfortunately, by the time it was tendered for review in 1975, new interest in the formation of early civilizations resulted in a new and different set of questions being asked. Further, the beginning of renewed archaeological activity at Predynastic sites meant that a quantity of new information required synthesis. Wisely, but with regret, the Griffith Institute declined to publish. Shortly thereafter, Elise Baumgartel died in Oxford on October 28, 1975.

A guide to the Predynastic period for two generations of English speaking Egyptologists, Baumgartel's work succeeded in the aim she state for it, "This is not written to be believed, but to be argued about, and especially corrected where I have misrepresented the facts, or overlooked, some evidence. Only that way can be acquire some safer knowledge."

While many of her conclusions have not withstood the test of time, the debate she provokes led to a great deal of fine scholarship which has greatly advanced the field of Predynastic and Early Dynastic research. Some of it might even have convinced her to change her mind.

The majority of information on the life of Elise Baumgartel was derived from the following sources:

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