

THE PREDYNASTIC FIGURINES OF UPPER EGYPT

Rosalind Joan Relke

**B.A. University of Regina, Canada
B.A. Hons. University of New England, Australia**

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THE
PREDYNASTIC
FIGURINES
OF
UPPER EGYPT

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.


.....
Rosalind Joan Relke

ABSTRACT

Approximately 250 anthropomorphic and therianthrope grave figurines have been found in Predynastic Egyptian graves dating from c4000 BCE to c3000 BCE. Early interpretations favoured the popular Mother Goddess theory, for the predominance of female figurines seemed to early archaeologists and historians to support prevailing theories on the matriarchal origin of civilisation and a universal pre-state worship of a supreme female deity. In the 1960s, Peter Ucko turned the Mother Goddess theory on its head with his publications on the Egyptian and Near Eastern figurines. He concluded that neither ethnographic parallels nor the physical appearance of the figurines indicated that they represented any divine being. Rather, he stated that the figurines were probably used for other purposes, such as dolls, twin substitutes, concubine figurines, initiation figurines, and sorcerers' agents.

This thesis uses Ucko's four-stage methodology to examine specifically the Egyptian figurines in light of:

1. Their physical appearance.
2. Their cultural, environment, and archaeological contexts.
3. The religious systems of contemporary, similar societies in Nilotic Africa.
4. The historical religion of the Egyptian Dynastic period following the Predynastic.

Subjecting the figurines to these four perspectives leads me to conclude that some of the figurines conform in many ways to typical historic Egyptian iconography and can be seen as precursors to some of the Egyptian female divinities, in particular those most intimately connected with after-life beliefs. The ethnographic material on the Nilotic peoples of the Sudan seems to place Egyptian religion firmly among other African systems, rather than Near Eastern systems, and testifies against the figurines as representatives of supreme deities and the existence of a monotheism focusing on one supreme female divinity.

This thesis draws on material from archaeology, anthropology, and Egyptology, but is not based on a specialisation in any of these disciplines. Rather, it is written from within the discipline of Studies in Religion and attempts to illuminate the possible religious significance of the figurines by drawing together relevant information from various sources.

THE PREDYNASTIC FIGURINES OF UPPER EGYPT

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For the theoretical framework of this thesis, I have to thank Peter Ucko, Kathryn Bard, and Janet Spector, even though I have never met them. Peter Ucko's study of the figurines of Neolithic cultures of the Near and Middle East provided me with the bulk of raw data about the Egyptian figurines and a four stage methodology with which to analyse figurines as a whole. Kathryn Bard's work on two cemeteries from Predynastic Egypt established the criteria with which I evaluated the data obtained from original excavation reports from many other cemeteries. Janet Spector's unconventional work on a North American aboriginal site provided me with a loose analogy with which to explain my treatment of archaeological, historical, and ethnographic material. I have to thank archaeologist, Dr. Wendy Beck, for making Spector's work available to me, and for recommending certain discussions on current theoretical thinking in archaeology. I am grateful also to Dr. Beck's colleague, Dr. Claire Smith, for her positive comments on my use of archaeological data in my earlier work.

Continuing scholarship rests on the shoulders of those who have gone before, and this thesis rests on those of hundreds of researchers in many fields. My research for both the Mesopotamian (Relke 1996) and the Egyptian figurines revealed a high proportion of prominent women in early archaeology. While this is to be expected for recent research, the high achievements of women at a time when relatively few women came to the fore in other areas delighted and encouraged me. Unfortunately, in many publications, authors are referenced simply by their initials, and at first, I assumed all important early researchers were male. Since my topic is particularly relevant to a controversial area in women's

studies, I have endeavoured to acknowledge the contributions of women, both past and current, by supplying given names in the text and bibliography wherever known.

I am grateful for the patient and knowledgeable help of the staff of the University of New England's Dixson Library in smoothing the tangles of detailed sleuthing for relevant and sometimes obscure research materials. Also, the support staff of the School of Social Science and the School of History, Classics, and Studies in Religion eased my way through the myriad of administrative details demanded of students.

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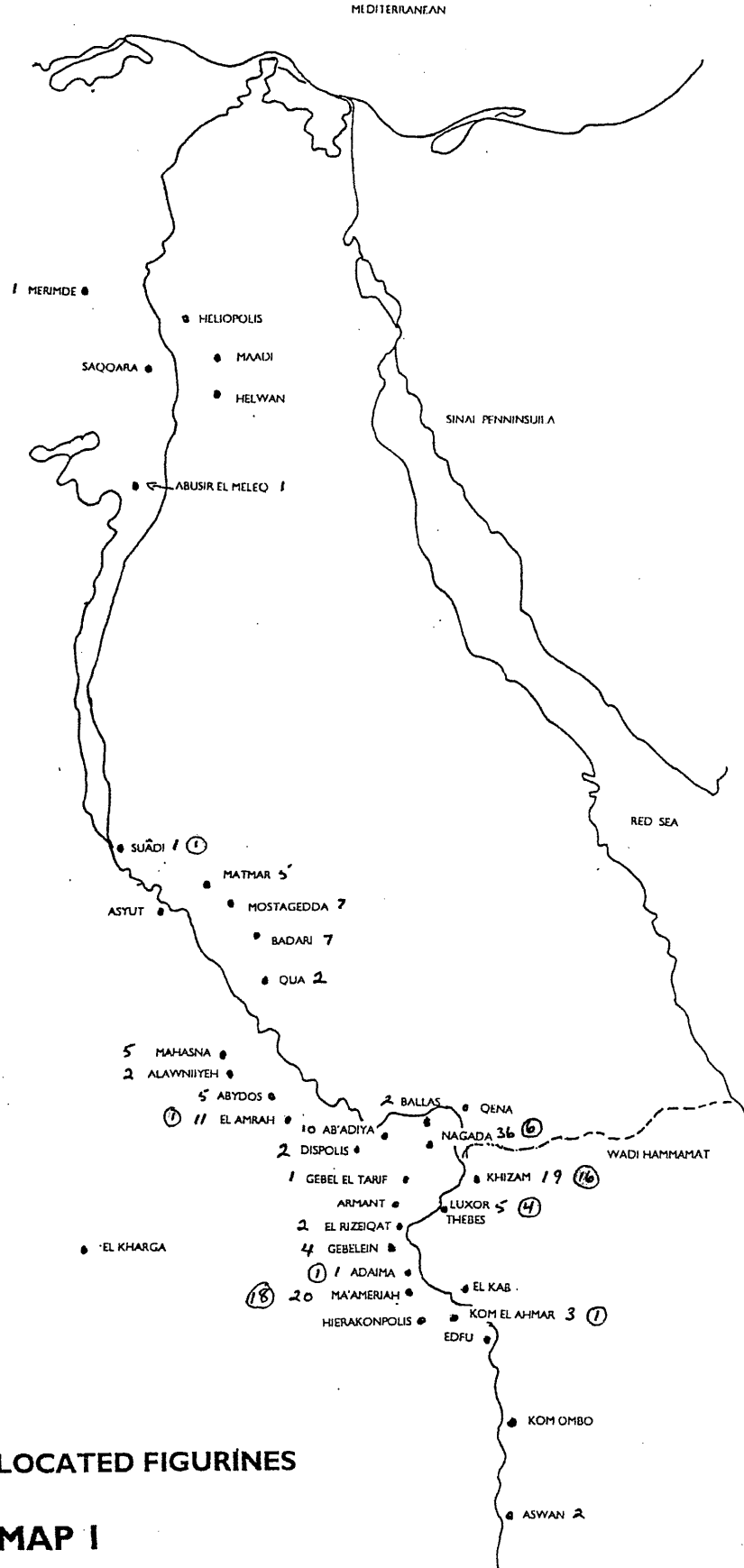
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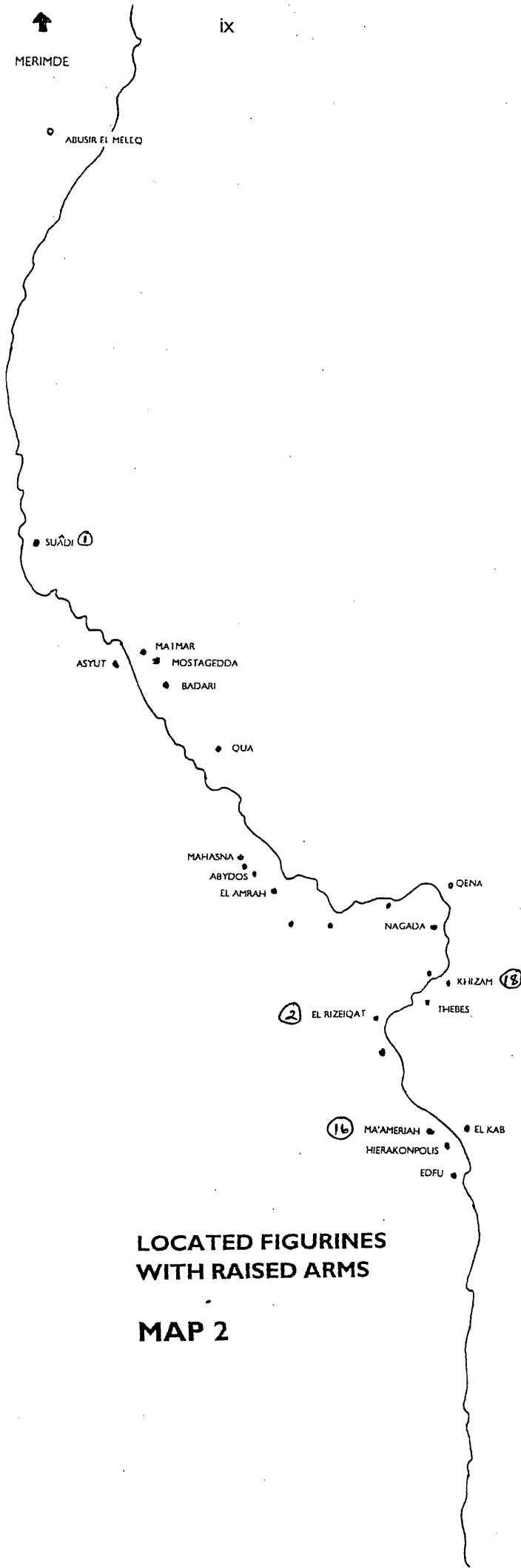
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LOCATED FIGURINES

MAP I



**LOCATED FIGURINES
WITH RAISED ARMS**

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