Understanding the Predynastic

the beginnings of ancient Egyptian civilization
The development of agriculture may have been promoted by climate changes that began around 7000 BC.

Settled agricultural communities appeared in the Nile Valley late 6th millennium BC or so.

This is an important phenomenon as it marks the first of the so-called Predynastic cultures in the Nile Valley.
WARNING:
archaeology stuff ahead
The term **culture** (used in the context of archaeology) refers to similar artifacts and features from a specific time frame and within a consistent geographical area.

These artifacts & features are usually used to refer to a distinct group of people in a distinct area.
NEOLITHIC VS PREDYNASTIC
• The Predynastic is not simply a time period before the foundation of the Egyptian state and the beginning of the dynastic chronology (ca. 4000-3050 BC)

• The Predynastic refers to a specific population that had specific characteristics:
  - a non-nomadic (settled) lifestyle
  - drew the vast majority of its subsistence from agriculture and herding activities.
  - Characterized by specific types of material culture
PROBLEM WITH THE PREDYNASTIC
The later archaeological phases of ancient Egyptian history have the advantage of written records to provide a basis for absolute dating (as discussed).

But for the Predynastic, however, which (mostly) predated the emergence of writing, this option wasn’t available.
Sequence Dating
The solution came courtesy of an archaeologist named Flinders Petrie.
The process that Petrie devised involved grouping Ceramics in perceived order based on the visible changes in style.

Petrie called this **Sequence Dating**
WARNING: archaeology stuff ahead
- **seriation** - a relative dating method in which artifacts from numerous sites, in the same culture, are placed in a relative chronological order.

- **relative dating** - a method to determine the order in which a series of events occurred, not when they occurred
Flinders Petrie
Sequence Dates of Predynastic Ceramics
The Origins of Agriculture in the Nile Valley
The general argument has always been that early agricultural practices entered Egypt through a process of *diffusion* from southwest Asia, and subsequently replaced the existing hunter-gatherer subsistence economy.
WARNING:
archaeology stuff ahead
• **Diffusion**: the spread of cultural items — such as ideas, styles, religions, technologies, languages etc. — between individuals, whether within a single culture or from one culture to another.
The earliest occupations in the Fayum, one of the first truly “Neolithic” populations in the Nile Valley, date from around 6000 BC.

The oldest radiocarbon dates for Neolithic sites from within the Nile Valley were obtained on the Delta margins at Merimde (ca. 5500 BC).
WARNING: archaeology stuff ahead
Radiocarbon Dating: an absolute dating method that uses the naturally occurring isotope carbon-14 to determine the age of carbonaceous materials up to about 60,000 years.
WARNING:
(more) archaeology stuff
- **Neolithic**: a period in the development of human technology that is traditionally the last part of the Stone Age. Usually associated with the transition from nomadic hunting and gathering communities, to agriculture and settlement.
WARNING:
(even more) archaeology stuff
- **Absolute Dating**: the process of determining a specific date for an archaeological site or artifact.

- Some archaeologists prefer the terms *chronometric* or *calendar dating*, as use of the word "absolute" implies a certainty that is rarely possible in archaeology.
**QUESTION:** do these 5\textsuperscript{th} Millennium dates indicate that the Nile Valley lagged culturally and technologically behind Southwestern Asia, and whether agriculture was diffused into the Nile Valley?
Agricultural Evidence Outside the Nile Valley
Grinding stones have been uncovered at sites in the Western Desert (Wadi Kubaniya, Nabta Playa) dating as far back as 12,000 BC.

Sickle blades with sheen have been uncovered in the Western Desert dating as far back as 12,000 BC.

Excavations at Nabta Playa have revealed both domesticated animals (sheep/goat & cattle) and plants as early as 7500 BC.
There is adequate evidence that the appearance of agriculture in Egypt is far earlier than ever thoughts before - and certainly far earlier than in Mesopotamia.
So, how did the Agricultural Revolution happen in Egypt?
The Agricultural Revolution happened in the Western Desert - which was much wetter around 12,000 BC

Climatic shift (starting ca. 7000 BC) - Western Desert starts getting much dryer.

Populations in the Western Desert move into the Nile Valley - become what we recognize as Predynastic cultures.
The End