

Agnieszka Mączyńska

Were Spinning Bowls Used in the Predynastic Period? Findings from Tell el-Farkha

The spinning bowls and the spinning process

The spinning bowls were usually made of pottery (less frequently of stone), had one or two loops placed inside the vessel (identical in form to loop handles that would normally be placed on the outside of a vessel), usually at the bottom (Allen 1997: 20-21). Originally some scholars suggested that they might have been lamps or even lids (MacAlister 1912: 145-146; Peet and Woolley 1923: 137). Actually, they are associated with the spinning process (Allen 1997; Vogelsang-Eastwood 2000: 272-274).

Distaffs used commonly in draft flax spinning were unknown in Egypt before Roman times. Egyptians used different technology for making flax thread. They had two methods, including spinning, that is twisting together fibers into a strong, continuous thread (Allen 1997: 19; Vogelsang-Eastwood 2000: 271-2). When we focus on this subject we can find two different explanations of how the spinning bowls were used and to which stage of spinning they belong. Some scholars associate them to the beginning of spinning i.e. twisting of the flax fibers or roves to make a single length of thread. During this process the bowls contained water, because moisture was very important in setting the twist of newly-spun thread. Linen thread was premoistened in the bowl before it reached the spindle. Additionally the newly spun thread had to be stretched until the twist was set permanently. The bowls were elements of tension (Allen 1997: 19).

Other scholars associate them to plying - the latest stage of spinning and in this case „spinning bowl” is an inaccurate name for this kind of vessels. Spinning bowls were used for twisting together of two or more previously spun threads in order to make a plied yarn. In the spinning process semi spun or fully spun threads were passed through loops in order to keep them separate and to exert some tension on the thread (Vogelsang-Eastwood 1987: 84-87).

Neither theory excludes a possibility that spinning bowls could be used at both stages of spinning.

The spinning bowls have been found on many sites in Egypt (Abu Ghalib, Deir el-Medineh, Amarna, Abydos, Mendes, Memphis) but also in Israel (Beth-Shean, Tell Jerishe) (Allen 1997: 25-26; Vogelsang-Eastwood 1987-1988: 78). First spinning bowls were excavated by W. M. F. Petrie in Kahun in 1890 (Petrie 1890: 25, pl.XIII: 58). Petrie did not associate them with the spinning process.

The spinning process and the use of spinning bowls are known from various tomb paintings dated to the Middle Kingdom and the New Kingdom: the Middle Kingdom tomb of Khnum-hotep II at Beni Hasan, the Middle Kingdom tomb of Thuthotep at Deir el-Bersha, the New Kingdom tomb of Thunefer at Thebes and the Middle Kingdom Tomb of Kethy at Beni Hasan. Spinning bowls are also shown in wooden models – eg. the model from Tomb of Meketra (12th Dynasty). They appeared in the Middle Kingdom and their use is regarded as a contemporary innovation in the spinning process. No examples and representations of them had been known before that period. It seems that spinning bowls were invented in the Middle Kingdom period

Findings from Tell el-Farkha

The excavations at Tell el-Farkha have brought to light many interesting objects, which help us explain and understand many aspects of the Predynastic period in Egypt. Since the beginning of the excavations in 1998 we have found many pottery fragments with holes made before firing which were difficult to define. For a few years they had belonged to a group “undetermined objects”. They could be fragments of pots, parts of handles or parts of other pottery objects. In 2002 we found a complete bowl with a loop with four holes placed on the interior of the vessel, at the bottom (Fig.1-3). Other complete vessels of this type were found in 2008. All fragments and complete vessels are simple bowls with flaring walls, with 2 to 4 holes in loops. They are made of Nile clay tempered with medium sized sand and straw and belong to rough ware (Fig.4-8). All of them are dated to the first part of Nagada III period and were found in various trenches of Western, Central and Eastern Koms.

In terms of form complete vessels resemble spinning bowl known from the Middle Kingdom. They have loops with holes, typical for the Middle Kingdom spinning bowls. Additionally, on some fragments of the loops grooves worn on the inside of holes were registered (Fig.6:1-4; 9-10). These grooves are also visible on bowls from the Middle Kingdom period. Scholarly opinions about how they were made vary. According to all who suggest that the spinning bowls were used to make plied yarn, these grooves could be caused by hard, already spun linen thread rubbing against the fired pottery surface (Vogelsang-Eastwood 1987-1988:85-86). On the other hand spinners could have cut grooves into the loops so that they better guide the thread (Allen 1997: 27-28).

According to Allen (1997: 29) spinning bowls have to be heavy enough to pull against and provide tension, stable enough to stay put and not tip over and impervious enough to retain their contents. It seems that all items from Tell el-Farkha meet all these conditions. Required weight and impenetrability are provided by material they were made of (Nile clay tempered with a medium sized straw and sand), while stability is provided by a wide and flat base.

However, the small quantity of findings from Tell el-Farka is striking. To the excavation season 2007 only 30 fragments of spinning bowls were found. Is this enough for the entire settlement over some 200 years? It is difficult to answer this questions without data concerning organization of textile production in the predynastic period. On the other hand we have to remember that spinning bowls were tools and not vessels and therefore their life span was completely different from that of storage or cooking and serving vessels. They could be used for a long time. Moreover only fragments that actually have a loop or at least a piece of it can be properly identified as spinning bowls. Other sherds can be misinterpreted as fragments of bowls which so frequently occur in the ceramic assemblages of Tell el-Farkha.

The spinning bowls in the Predynastic period

Taking into consideration the similarity of vessels and their fragments discovered at Tell el-Farkha and the spinning bowls known from the Middle Kingdom period we hit on important questions linked to each other. Were the findings from Tell el-Farkha used in the spinning process and are they the oldest spinning bowls in Egypt? And going further – is the use of spinning bowls rooted in the Predynastic period?

Although we are very near to give a positive answer to all these questions, it is obvious that the problem of the spinning bowls in the Predynastic period needs more researching, not only focusing on bowls, but also on the spinning process of the time.

Acknowledgment

I wish to thank to Michał Rozwadowski for inspiring me to write this paper and for Mariusz Jucha and Magda Sobas for providing me with materials and facts from the Western Kom.

REFERENCES

- ALLEN, S. J. 1997. Spinning Bowls: Representation and Reality. In: J. Phillips, L. Bell, B. B. Williams (eds), *Ancient Egypt, the Aegean and the Near East. Studies in Honour of Martha Rhoads Bell*: 17-37. San Antonio.
- MACALISTER, R. A. S. 1912. *The Excavations of Gezer*. London.
- PEET, T. E. and C. L. WOOLLEY. 1923. *City of Akhenaten*. vol. 1. London
- PETRIE W. M. F. 1980. *Kahun. Gurob and Hawara*. London.
- VOGELSANG-EASTWOOD, G. 1987-1988. A note on the So-Called Spinning Bolws. *Jaarbericht van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptish Genootschap (Gezelschap) "Ex Oriente Lux"* 30: 78-88
- VOGELSANG-EASTWOOD, G. 2000. Textiles. In: P. T. Nicholson, I. Shaw (eds), *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*: 268-298. Cambridge.

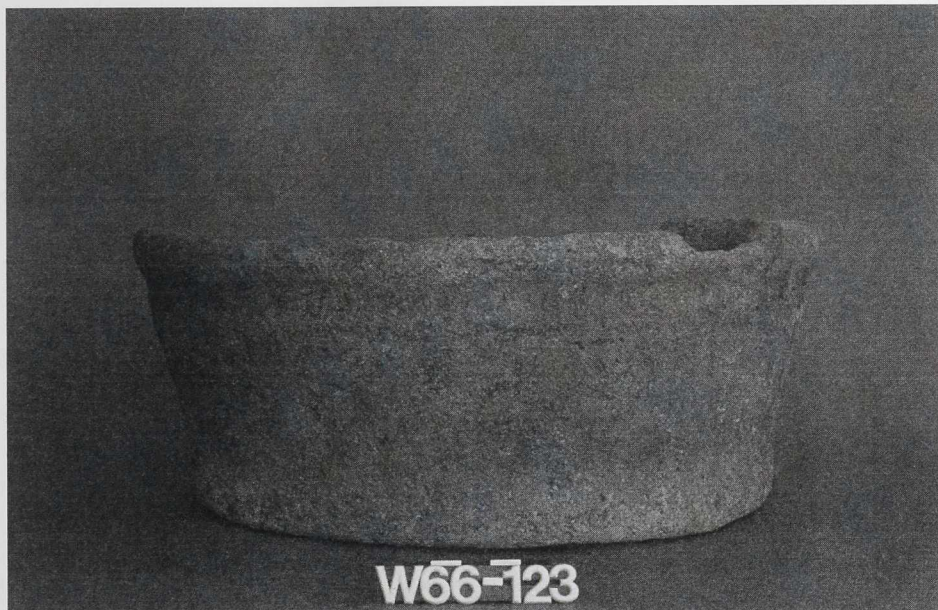


Fig. 1. Tell el-Farkha. Complete spinning bowl. Western Kom (photo by R. Słaboński).

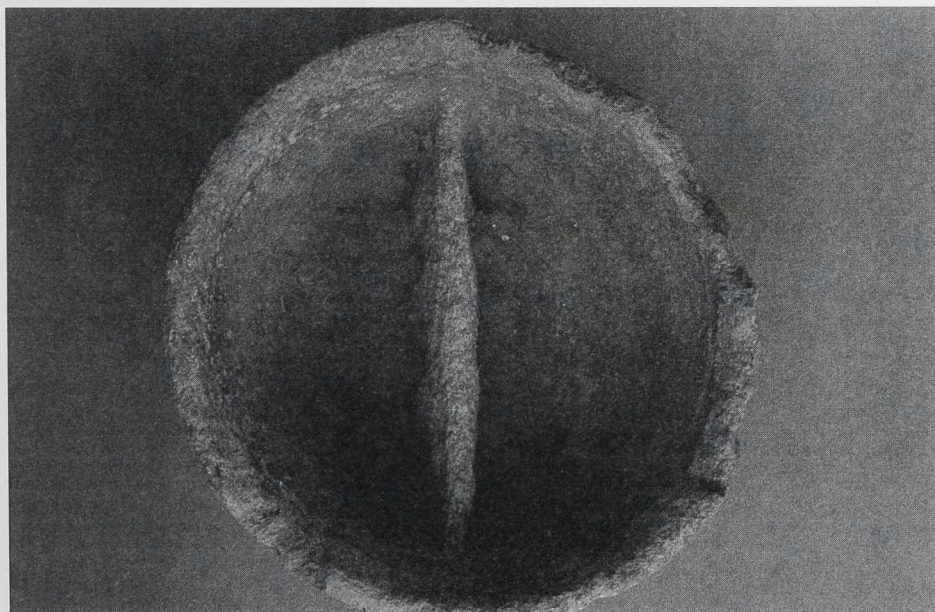


Fig. 2. Tell el-Farkha. Complete spinning bowl. Western Kom (photo by R. Słaboński).

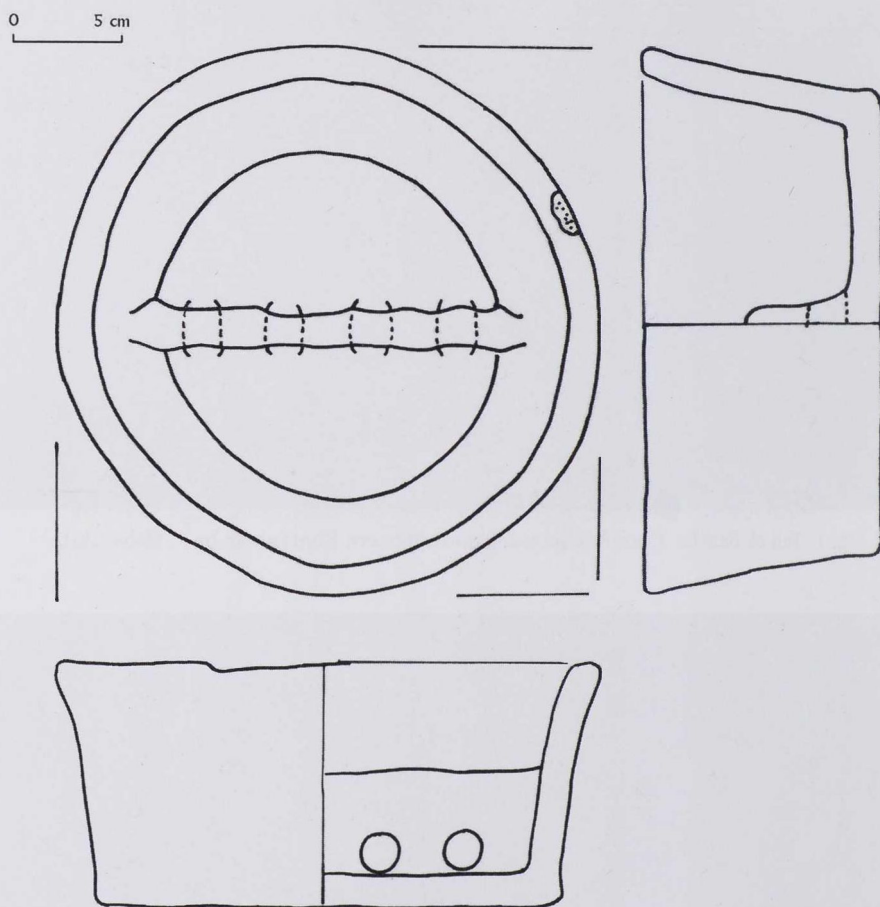


Fig. 3. Tell el-Farkha, Complete spinning bowl. Western Kom (drawn by M. Jucha).

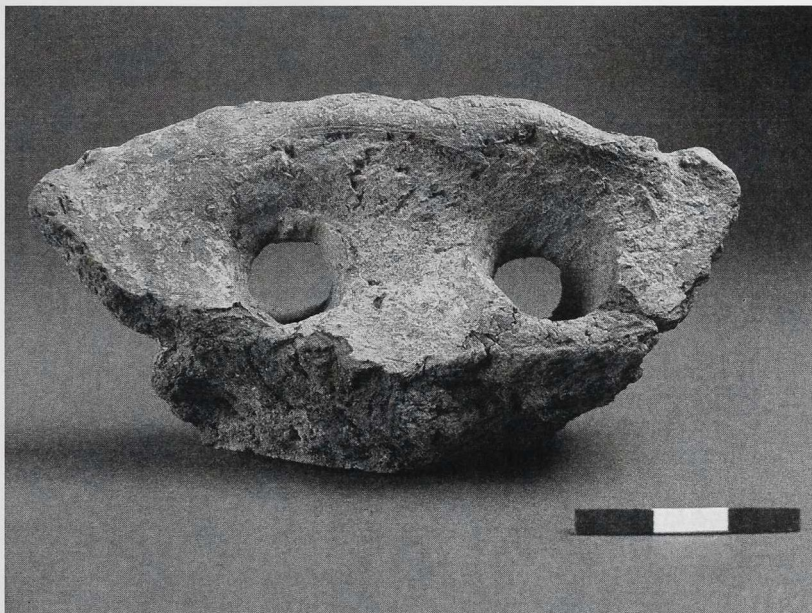


Fig. 4. Tell el-Farkha. Loop of the spinning bowl. Western Kom (photo by R. Słaboński).



Fig. 5. Tell el-Farkha. Loop of the spinning bowl. Western Kom (photo by R. Słaboński).

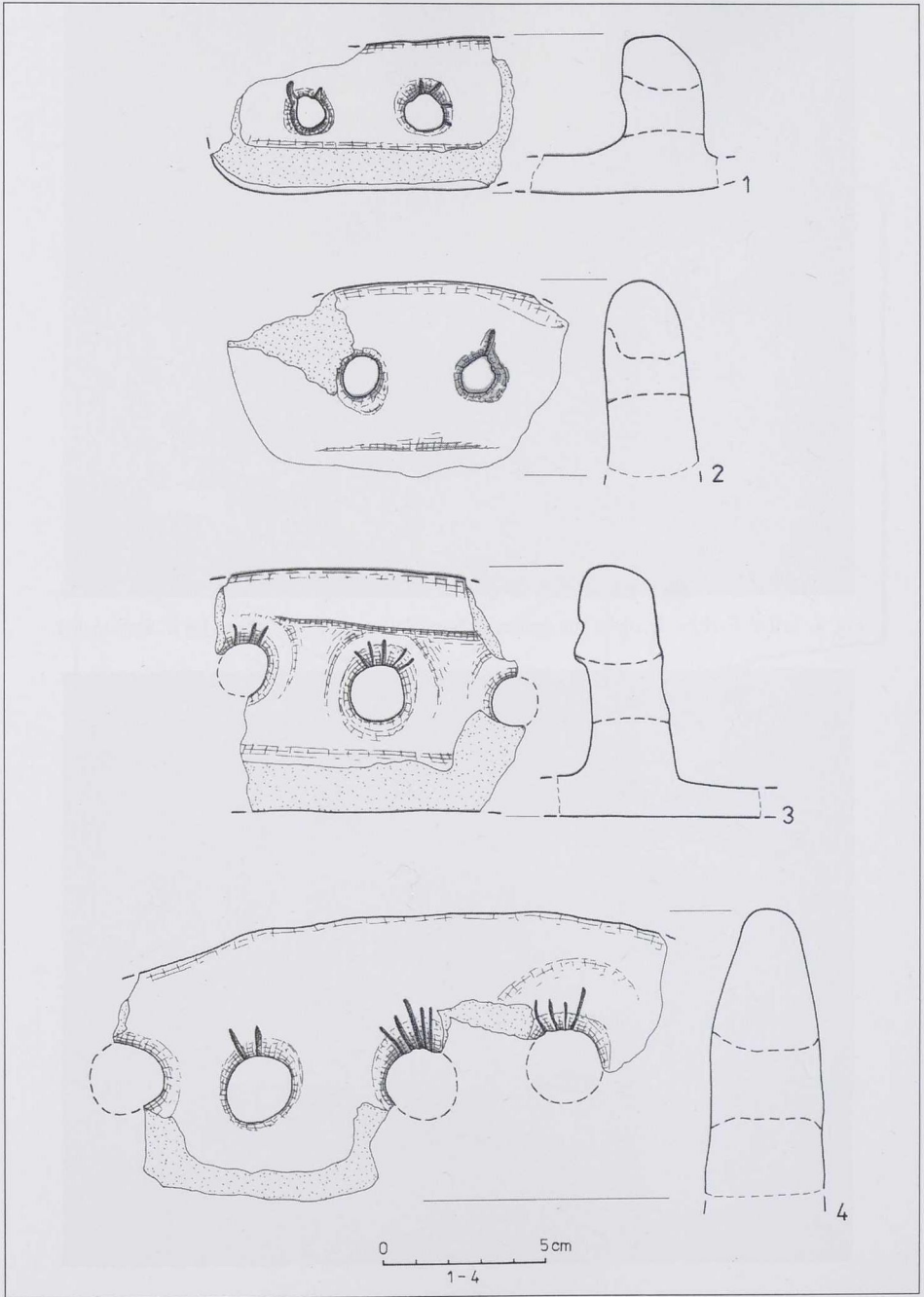


Fig. 6. Tell el-Farkha. Fragments of the spinning bowls. Central Kom (drawn by A. Longa).

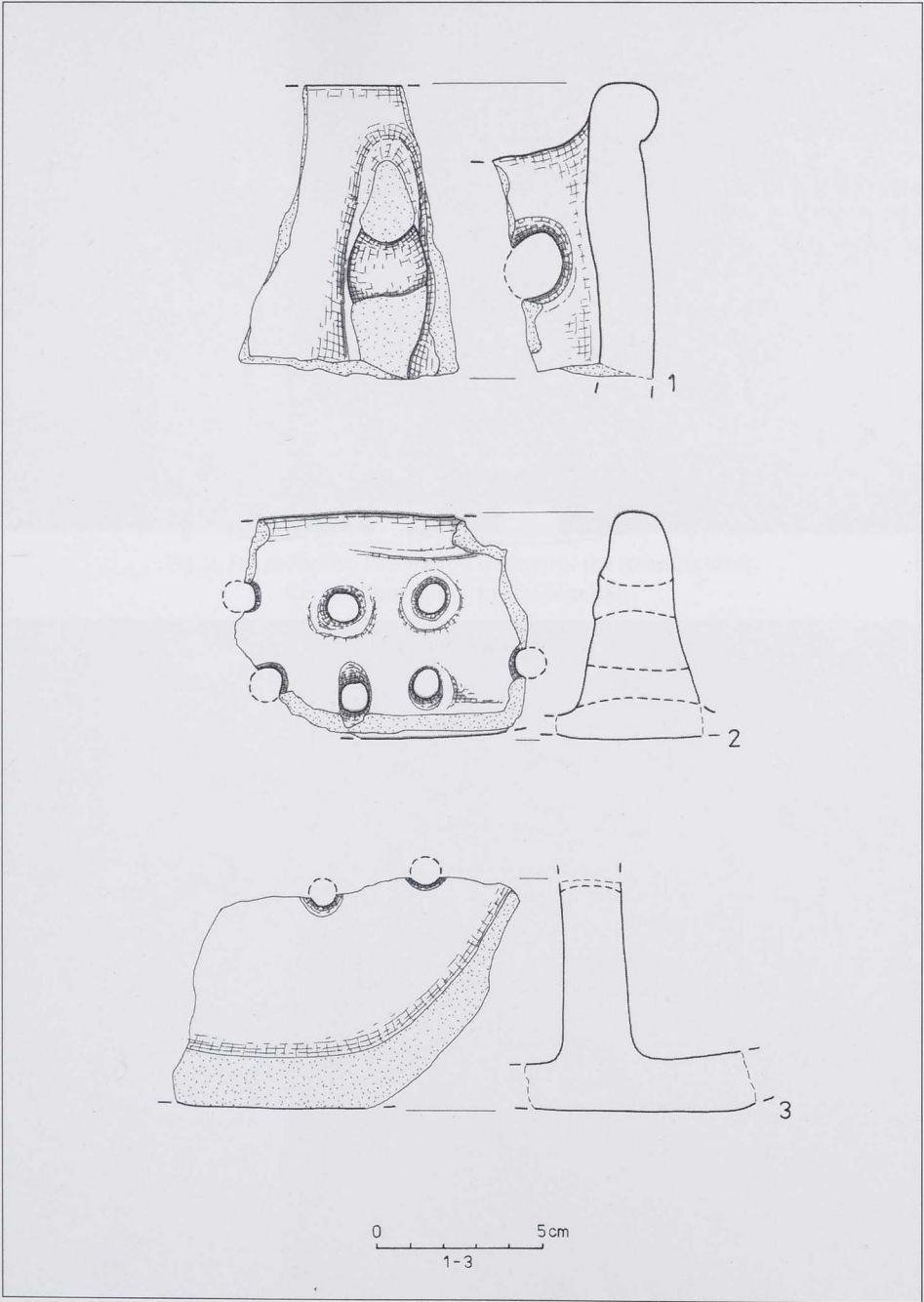


Fig. 7. Tell el-Farkha. Fragments of the spinning bowls. Central Kom (drawn by A. Longa).

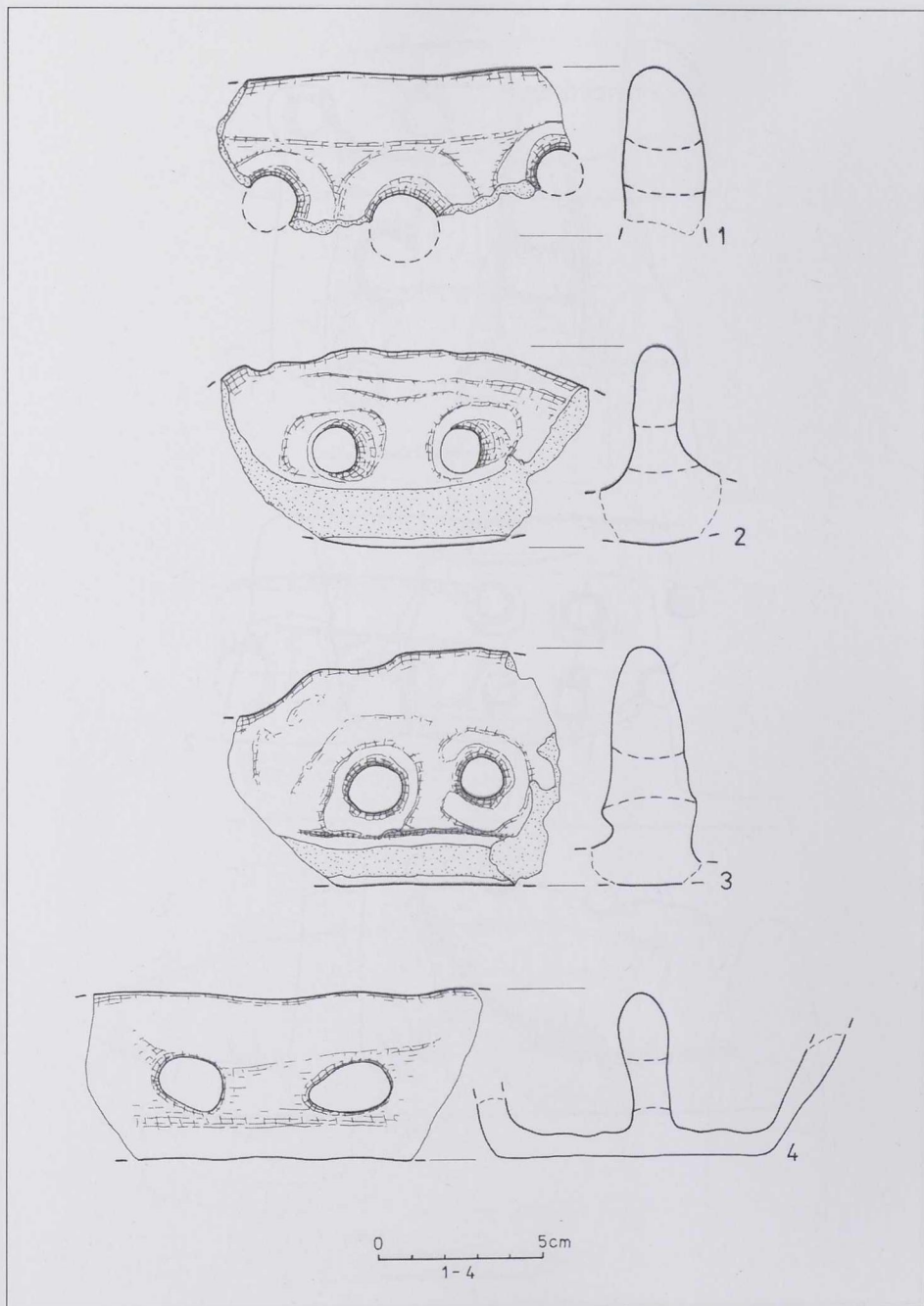


Fig. 8. Tell el-Farkha. Fragments of the spinning bowls. 1-2 Western Kom; 3-4 Central Kom (drawn by A. Longa).



Fig. 9. Tell el-Farkha. Grooves on the loop of the spinning bowl.
Central Kom (photo by R. Słaboński).

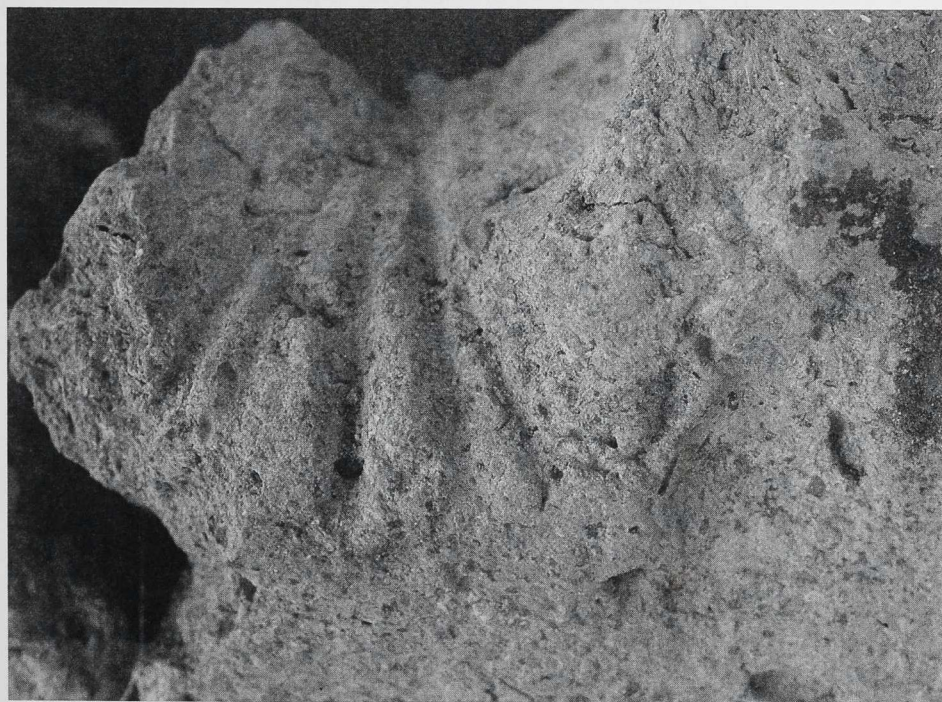


Fig. 10. Tell el-Farkha. Grooves on the loop of the spinning bowl.
Central Kom (photo by R. Słaboński).