

**TELL EL-FARKHA. THE CHANGES IN SPATIAL
ORGANISATION OF THE SETTLEMENT – FROM THE
PRE-DYNASTIC TO THE EARLY DYNASTIC PERIODS**

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After 15 seasons of research at Tell-el Farkha we can discuss in some detail the problem of spatial organisation of the site and the changes taking place in about a thousand-year history of the settlement. The remains of architecture, from the Lower Egyptian Culture to the beginnings of the Old Kingdom times, show characteristics of considerable dynamics. In this paper we want to focus only on crucial changes, which resulted from functional changes of whole parts the settlement. We can distinguish five main phases in the organisation of the site: early Lower Egyptian, late Lower Egyptian, Naqadian, Late Protodynastic – Early Dynastic and late Early Dynastic – early Old Kingdom. Although only a small percent of Tell el-Farkha has been investigated so far, we can formulate some preliminary conclusions.

Tell el-Farkha seem to have fitted perfectly into the urbanisation processes taking place in ancient Egypt. Probably from its very beginnings the settlement met the criteria of the definition of urban center as a “geographical and cultural central place exercising regional political control, with a relatively large and dense population, a complex division of labour and internal social stratification” (HOFFMAN *et al.* 1986: 175; WILKINSON 1999: 324).

According to a widely held theory the urbanisation processes took place first in Upper Egypt, where the formation of the Egyptian state was initiated. Settlements, which had been built initially with the use of organic materials such as wood and reed, evolved relatively fast into “urban” organisms with mudbrick architecture, additionally surrounded by defensive walls. Similar urbanisation processes occurred in the Nile Delta. According to the current state of knowledge mudbrick architecture was known in Upper and Lower Egypt at the same time (Naqada IIC). However, only from Naqada IIIA period, in which the use of mud bricks for the construction of residential buildings



Figure 1. Extent of the settlement in the early Lower Egyptian phase (S – settlement).

became common in the Delta, the development of Upper and Lower Egypt proceeded probably in a similar way, definitely with the influence of local factors (KEMP 1995: 687; WILKINSON 1999: 325). The evidence of that is provided, among others, by Tell el-Farkha.

One of the most important characteristics indicating the advanced stage of urbanisation of a given site is the existence of a dense residential area additionally surrounded by a wall. The features we should take into consideration while investigating the problem of urbanisation involve: the size of the settlement, its functional differentiation, and the density of residential area.

Urbanisation processes can be influenced by various factors; usually there are at least a few, depending on local conditions. It is often believed that in the Predynastic period this process may have been affected by defensive reasons or by state authorities exercising control over local communities (TRIGGER 1984: 103; SEIDELMAYER 1996: 113). There is no doubt that urbanisation processes reflect social processes taking place in a given period. One of the conditions that had an impact on urbanisation was undoubtedly an increase in social stratification associated with the production of food surpluses and their redistribution by local elites, which led to the separation from the society of a group of people who were not engaged in agriculture. The emergence of specialized crafts on

the one hand, and the development of a class of scribes employed in the administration on the other, allowed a more efficient management of agricultural products. Another important urbanisation aspect was the appearance of cult centres (TRIGGER 1972: 590-591; BIETAK 1979: 103; HOFFMAN 1980: 307-308; WILKINSON 1999: 324).

Among the factors that influenced the location of sites in the eastern Nile Delta was undoubtedly the existence of large sandy mounds (*gezira*, *turtle-back*), which were not inundated by the periodic flooding of the Nile. Furthermore, the situation of settlements on long-distance trade routes allowed their inhabitants to exercise control over trade. Such settlements often played the role of economic centres of a larger area. Additionally, they were ideal places for the redistribution of wealth. The next important location factor was the availability of agricultural areas, including cultivable alluvial soils or lands suitable for animal husbandry. At this point it should be noted that the exploitation of marshland was of great economic significance in the beginning of the Egyptian state (HERB 2007: 96-97).

Centralizing tendencies that can be observed already in the early Egyptian state, particularly redistributive economy, had a strong impact on the urbanisation process and the nature of early towns (WILKINSON 1999: 326). The function of redistribution of goods, so characteristic for the organisational system of the Egyptian state, must have resulted in the building of protected centralised storage facilities, in which the products were kept before their further redistribution or transfer. These regional urban centres were in fact a kind of state foundations inhabited by officials employed in administration, craftsmen working in the royal's workshops, or priests (WILKINSON 1999: 327). Settlements located in strategic places could evolve into logistic centres, often described by Egyptologists as „domains”. These were small urban organisms with streets and buildings, specialised workshops, bakeries, breweries, granaries and storage facilities (JACQUET-GORDON 1962).

First question we should to answer is whether Tell el-Farkha could function as an important economic and administrative centre in this part of the Delta? The settlement is located on a vast *gezira* that was not flooded during periodic inundations of the Nile (except for disastrous floods). The area was characterised by the availability of cultivable land, and we have evidence for the exploitation of water environment. At the same time, raw stone material for the production of various items had to be imported, as it did not occur in the Delta. We also have a significant body of evidence for the existence of a long-distance trade both with Upper Egypt and the Levant (MACZYŃSKA 2007; CHŁODNICKI 2008; CZARNOWICZ 2012). It seems that the settlement may have functioned as a place of redistribution of goods both at a local and at a long distance level.

If Tell el-Farkha was a logistic centre, could it serve the function of a domain or a small urban organism, with the seat of local administration, specialised workshops, and perhaps also a place of cult, and in later stages of its existence, a kind of a state foundation? The answer to this question can be provided by the spatial analysis of the settlement, which involves identifying potential areas of various functions (public places,

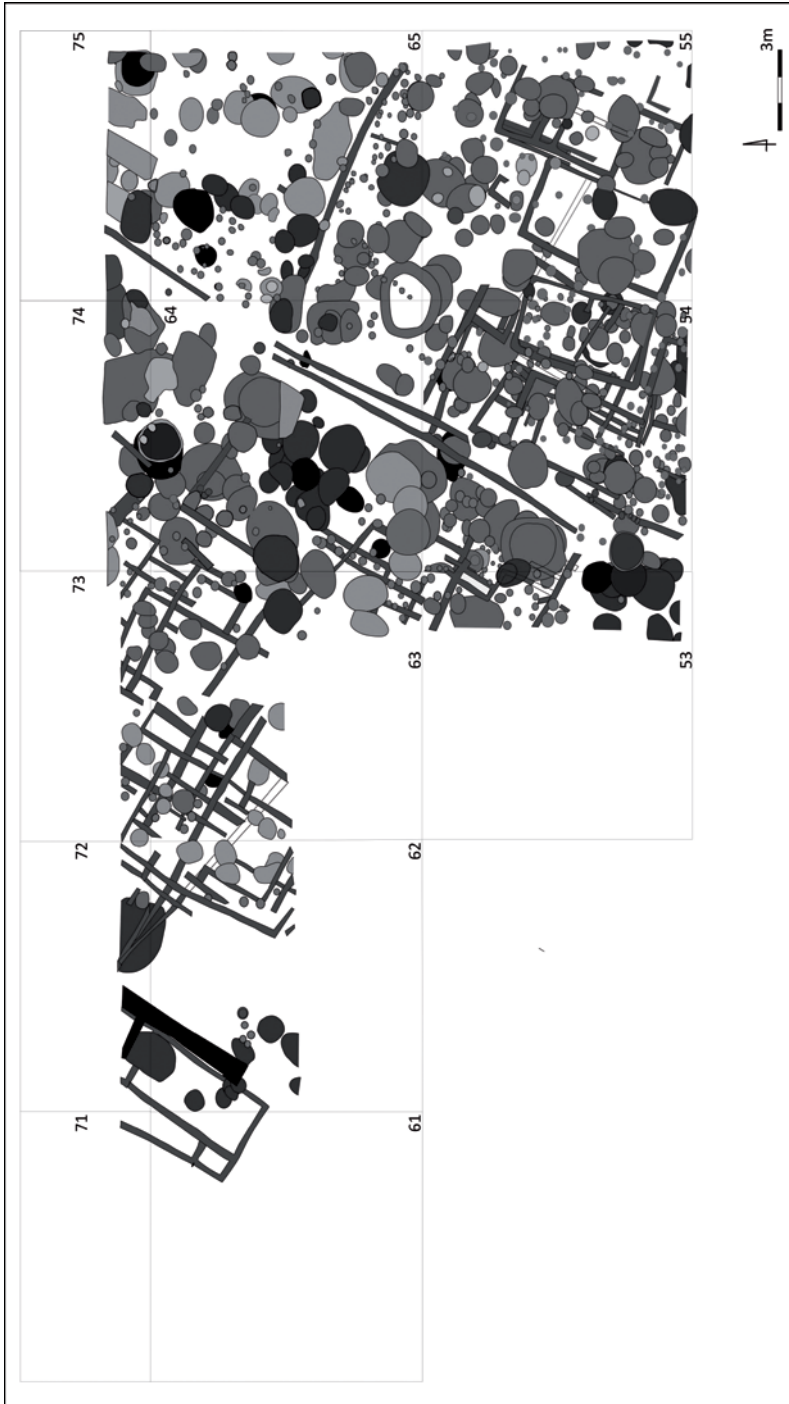


Figure 2. Central Kom. Plan of the constructions of the early phase of Lower Egyptian settlement.

built-up residential areas, and a separate economic zone) and may give us the information on whether the changes in spatial organisation were associated with the changing role of the settlement.

The question for which we cannot find an answer now is whether the settlement had defensive walls. This difficulty is caused by the fact that most of the edges of the tell are damaged. In the south and east, the destruction was caused by the modern day village Ghazala, and in the west by cultivation fields. In the north and north-west we are able to record only the extent of the Lower Egyptian settlement. Probably at the end of the Early Dynastic Period this part of the site had been destroyed by a flood, and the present shape of the tell in this place was formed in the Old Kingdom. Also the area between the Eastern and Western Koms has been transformed substantially in the modern times.

The only remains of supposed external strengthening structures are situated on the watercourse-side. However, they may have served as the protection of the river bank as well. These structures, associated with the Lower Egyptian phase of the site, are placed immediately to the west of a so called Lower Egyptian residence (CHŁODNICKI & CIAŁOWICZ 2012: 145). It should be noted, however, that these walls, over 1 meter thick, protected the access to all economically important parts of the settlement (CHŁODNICKI & GEMING 2012: 96).

The results of previous studies do not allow for a clear determination of the degree of settlement organisation at the beginning of its existence. It seems that the settlement covered mostly the area of the culmination of the gezira and its north-western slope which led to the river (Fig. 1). Communities of the Lower Egyptian culture built their houses applying traditional techniques, with the use of wood and reed. If not immediately, certainly very early the settlement was divided into zones, which can be observed in the western part of the tell (Central and Western Koms). At the edge of the settlement, by the water, a so called Lower Egyptian residence was erected; it was a large internally complex residential structure surrounded by a wooden defensive wall (CHŁODNICKI & GEMING 2012: 91-95). It needs to be added that due to the direct access to water and the winds blowing in the area it was the most privileged part of the settlement. Most likely, the residence was the seat of a local chieftain. To the south and west of it, there was a residential area with densely situated small buildings (Fig. 2; CHŁODNICKI 2010; CHŁODNICKI & GEMING 2012: fig. 7). At that time, most likely the entire western part of the Central Kom served to provide economic base for the settlement.

During the development of the Lower Egyptian culture some changes in the organisation of the site can be observed. An important one was the use of mud brick to erect thick walls within the settlement (Fig. 3; CHŁODNICKI 2011: 45-46; CHŁODNICKI & GEMING 2012: 95-96; *in press*). The project of encircling the residence with a large brick wall is a clear indicator of economic efficiency and a proof of the society having surpluses that allowed for the employment of people to do the task. A similar wall surrounded the brewery centre. Houses situated in the vicinity of the residence were moved to another area, and in their place a small brewery was erected. At the Western Kom, in turn, a large brewery centre was built (CICHOWSKI 2007; 2008; CIAŁOWICZ 2012a).

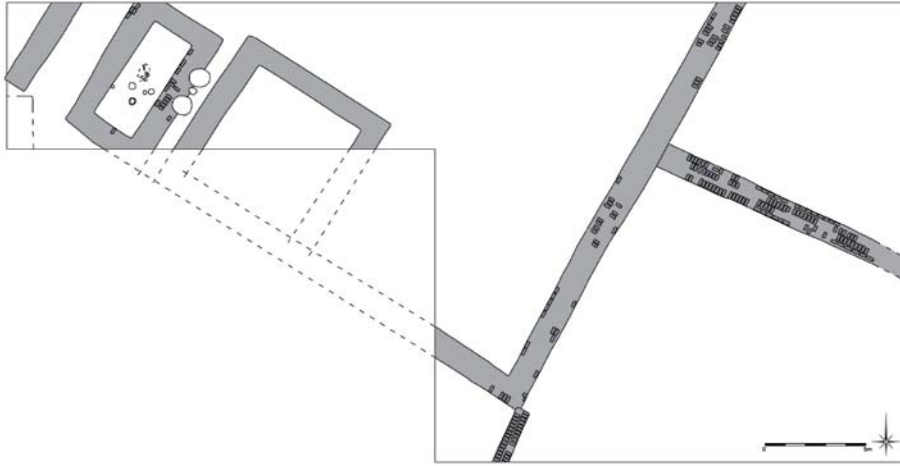


Figure 3. Central Kom. Plan of the early mudbrick construction.

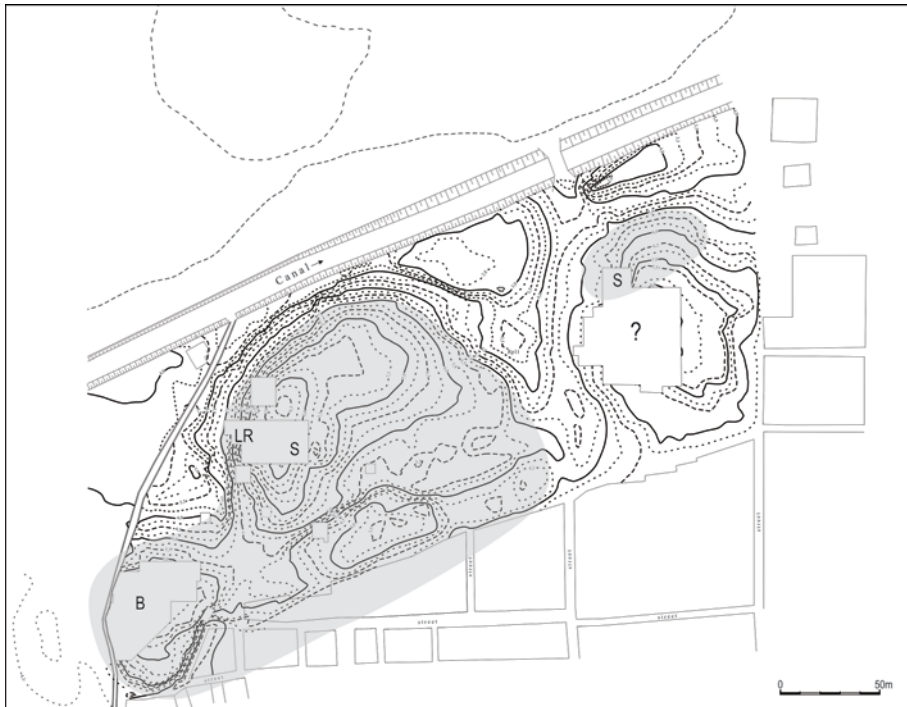


Figure 4. Extent of the settlement in the late Lower Egyptian phase (S – settlement, LR – Lower Egyptian residence, B – brewery).

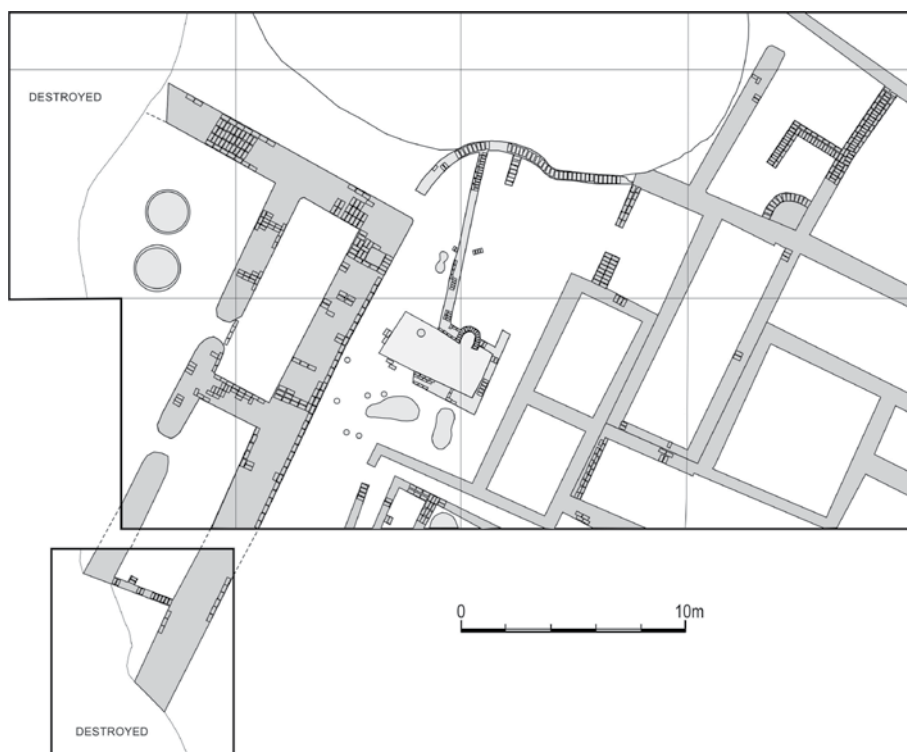


Figure 5. Central Kom. Plan of the Naqadian constructions.

Most likely around the same time, people started to settle in the northern part of the Eastern Kom. The settlement covered only the northern edge of the gezira. Perhaps this was associated with the need to move people to the expanding economic zone in the western part of the gezira (Fig. 4). At that time the houses were still built in a traditional way with the use of wood and reed. Excavations in the southern part of the Kom have not confirmed the existence of Lower Egyptian architecture (CHŁODNICKI 2012a: 19-21).

We have no information about the location of the cemetery in that period but it cannot be excluded, that it had been situated in the southern part of the Eastern Kom, which was the place used as a burial ground in subsequent periods (DĘBOWSKA-LUDWIN 2012).

In the third phase of Tell el-Farkha, along with the appearance of the Naqadian settlers, fundamental changes occurred in the spatial organisation of the site. Then, in place of the breweries a residence with thick walls and additional storage rooms was built. It became an administrative seat of the settlement – the seat of a governor or important person of local elite (CIAŁOWICZ 2012b: 163-170).

At the same time the Lower Egyptian residence on the Central Kom ceased to exist. However, it remained a public area, and in place of the residence a large building was erected with thick walls and elongated rooms which could be entered through narrow

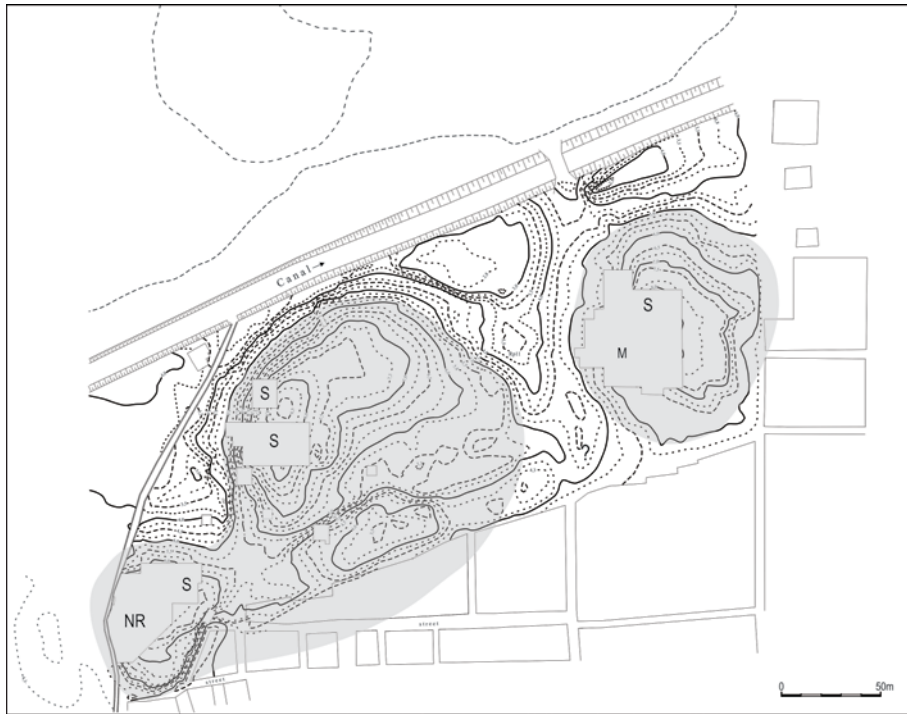


Figure 6. Extent of the settlement during the Naqadian phase
(S – settlement, NR – Naqadian residence, M – mastaba).

entrances leading from the courtyard situated in front of them. Unfortunately due to the fact that the building was destroyed from the side of the tell's edge, we know its structure only partially. This building could play the role of a protected storage facility connected with the residence on the Western Kom.

At that period the rest of the settlement buildings located in the vicinity of the abovementioned structure were moved to another area. Bigger houses of the settlement, much larger than in the Lower Egyptian culture, were characterised by rooms arranged around rectangular courtyards (Fig. 5). Also the settlement complex seems to have been slightly larger than in the previous time (Fig. 6).

From the end of this phase we know the oldest traces of a cemetery on the Eastern Kom. This is a large mastaba built together with a burial complex surrounding it from the north (CIAŁOWICZ 2007; 2011b). Notably, the buildings located to the north of that complex were oriented according to the points of compass, in N-S and E-W direction (CHŁODNICKI 2012a: 21), while all the other structures of the settlement in NE-SW direction. The latter way of orientation was typical at the site from the Lower Egyptian culture occupation until the end of existence of the settlement.

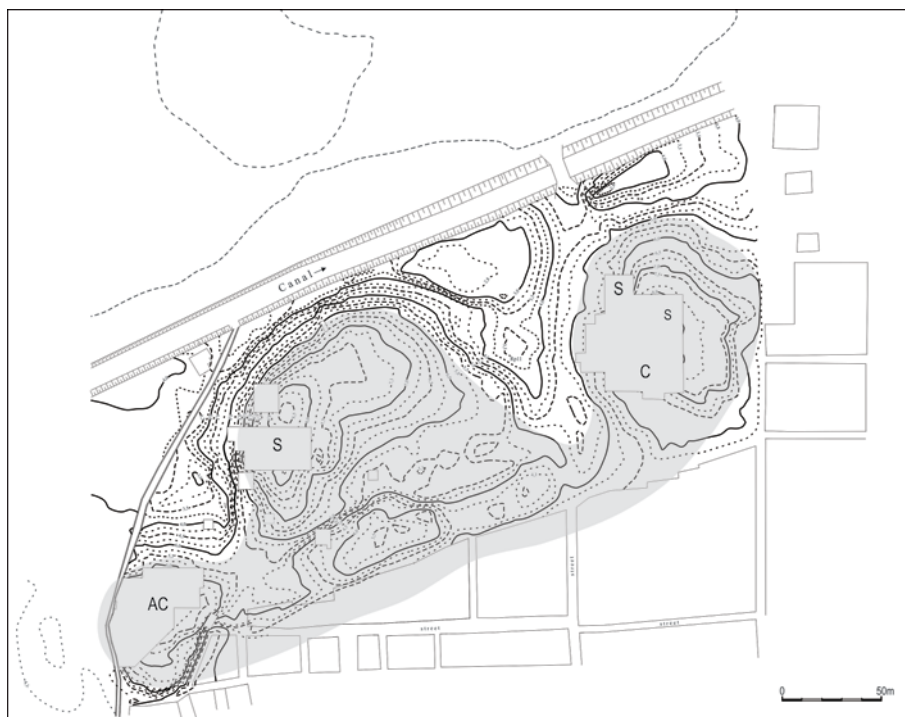


Figure 7. Extent of the settlement during the Early Dynastic times (S – settlement, AC – administrative and cultic center, C – cemetery).

Burials dated from the Naqada III B to the Early Dynastic period were placed on the mastaba and to the south and east of it (DEBOWSKA-LUDWIN 2012). To the north of the cemetery, by the canal bank, functioned a settlement (CHŁODNICKI 2012a: 21-26). In late Early Dynastic burial activity was interrupted at that place and the settlement extended to the south and later again retreated northward (CIAŁOWICZ 2008: 511).

At the Western Kom important changes occurred at the end of the Protodynastic and in the Early Dynastic periods. In place of the burnt Naqadian residence a complex of buildings was erected. They were arranged around a large courtyard, which is thought to have been an administrative-cultic centre (CIAŁOWICZ 2011a; 2012b: 171-180).

At the same time on the Central Kom dwellings and workshops were built. In the houses rooms were situated around small courtyards, as had been the case during the Naqadian period (CHŁODNICKI 2011: 48; 2012b). The settlement expanded and houses were built also in place of previous storage facilities. The area on the western edge of the Central Kom lost the distinct role it had played in the Lower Egyptian and Naqadian times. The buildings dated to that phase are very well visible on the geophysical map on the southern slope of the Central Kom (HERBICH 2012: fig. 3). Probably the settlement was of the same size as in the earlier, Naqadian times (Fig. 7).

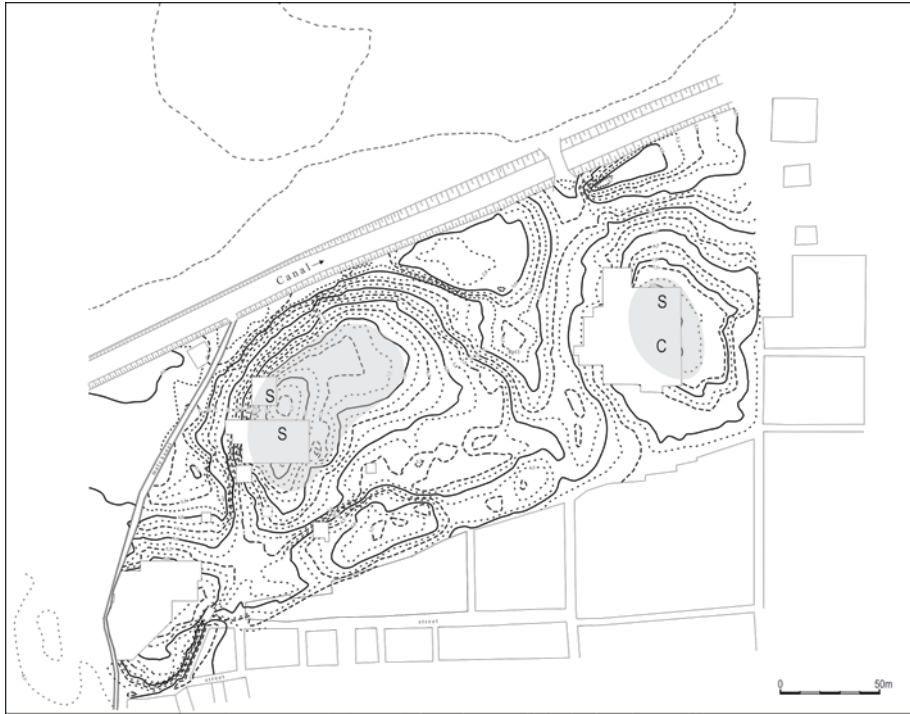


Figure 8. Extent of the settlement during early late Early Dynastic/early Old Kingdom times (S – settlement, C – cemetery).

Other major changes took place in the middle of Dynasty I. The administrative-cultic centre ceased to exist and the eastern part of the settlement was abandoned. The settlement still existed in the area of the Central Kom, as well as in the northern part of the Eastern Kom (Fig. 8). The architecture was much more modest than before, with circular silos being its important elements.

At the end of the Early Dynastic period Tell el-Farkha lost its importance and became an impoverished village functioning only on the Central and Eastern Koms. At that time a huge circular building with a double, 2m thick wall, was erected at the settlements' edge (Fig. 9). What was the reason for building such a huge structure at the settlement, in which the majority of the buildings were silos or storage rooms? The building stood alone and it had no connection to other walls. The existence of structure of this size would have had a reasonable explanation only if it had been an element of a royal domain associated with the provincial administration referred to in the texts as *hwt* (MORENO GARCIA 1999).

The oldest texts concerning provincial administration seem to indicate that in the Early Dynastic Period in the Delta functioned an administrative structure called *hwt*, which allowed the royal court to exercise direct control over local agricultural resources. In the

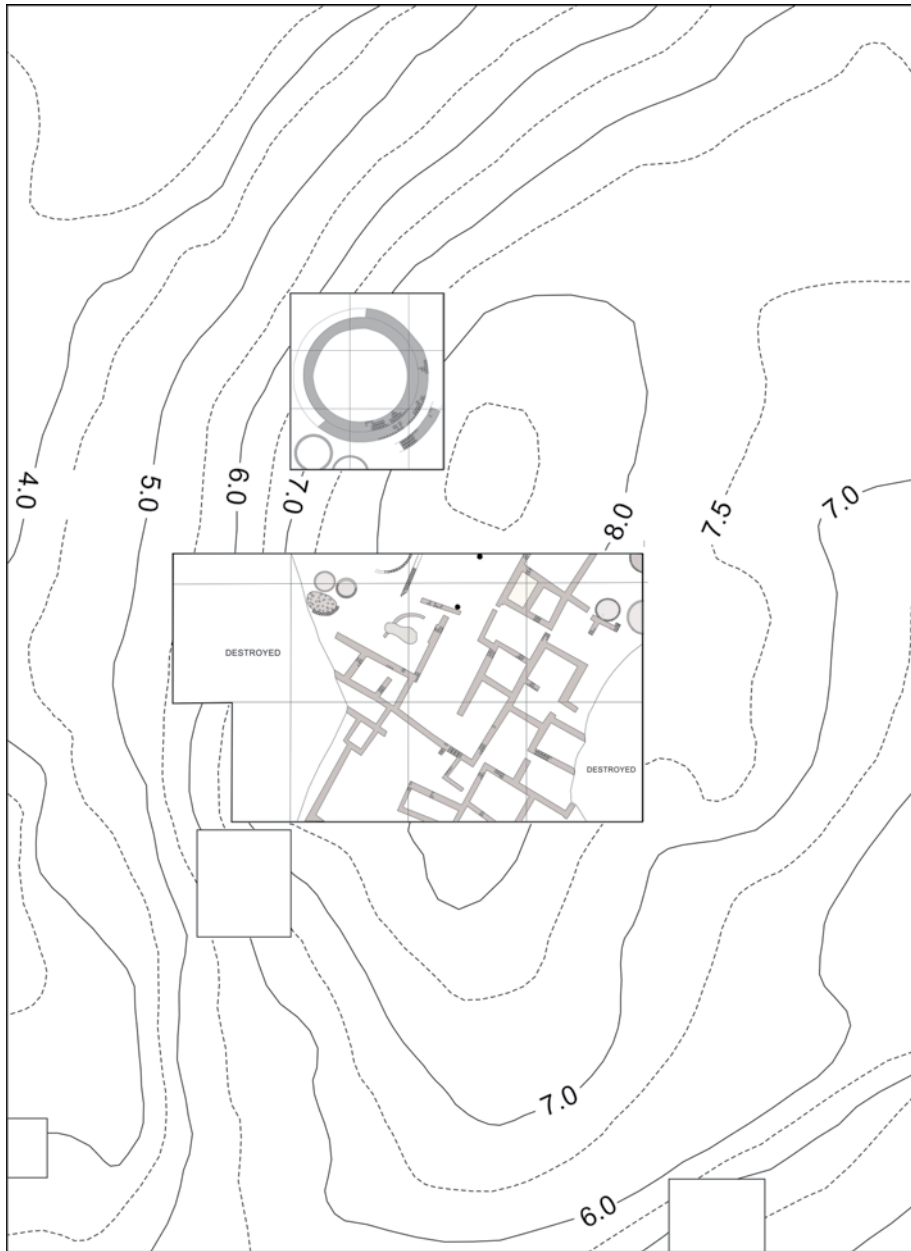


Figure 9. Central Kom. Plan of the late Early Dynastic/early Old Kingdom constructions.

beginnings of Dynasty I the term *hwt* was used almost exclusively for the sites located in the western Delta, where the majority of royal estates were situated. At that time, the eastern part of the Delta, which had been more developed during the Predynastic period, with its own elite and the advanced economic system, was not a favourable place to locate a royal estate (WILKINSON 1996: 96; MORENO GARCIA 1999). This also applied to Tell el-Farkha, which had been of great importance from before the time of its incorporating into the system of the unified Egyptian state until the middle of Dynasty I. However, at that very time, when this administrative-cultic centre abandoned by the local elites ceased to exist, the conditions may have been created for the royal court to exercise the direct control over the settlement. A large part of Tell el-Farkha, particularly on the Eastern Kom, was covered at this time only by silo buildings.

At the beginning of Dynasty III the huge rounded building, and soon the whole settlement ceased to exist. The role of Tell el-Farkha decreased along with the changes in the course of trade routes. Mendes, situated on one of the main arms of the Nile, just a few kilometres westward, dominated already then over the whole this Delta region. Perhaps economic pressures caused the last residents of Tell el-Farkha to move to another location. It is also possible that the end of the settlement was more dramatic. The youngest graves – associated with the last phase of the settlement – the beginnings of the Old Kingdom – are very shallow and do not contain any equipment. Interesting in this context are also scattered human bones recorded within the cultural layer on the culmination of the Central Kom, among the remains of the Old Kingdom settlement.

Although a large part of the settlement has not been investigated yet, it seems that the most important elements of its spatial structure have been captured. For a complete recognition of the problem it is still necessary to open the trenches in the eastern part of the Central Kom and in the northern part of the Eastern Kom. Undoubtedly, as indicated in the previous research at Tell el-Farkha, the site was urban in character from its beginnings to the middle of Dynasty I and played a vital role as a centre of power and trade, as well as a place of cult. In later periods it lost its significance and became probably only an agriculture domain.

Tell el-Farkha was an important element of a relatively dense network of the settlements located in the Eastern Nile Delta. The processes of development of this settlement show the same patterns as the majority of sites excavated in the Nile Delta, including Buto, Tell el-Iswid, Tell Ibrahim Awad and Tell el-Murra (VAN DEN BRINK 1992; 1993: 291-299; VAN HAARLEM 2000; HARTUNG 2008; JUCHA 2010; TRISTANT *et al.* 2011). Our knowledge about spatial organisation of the early settlements is still limited because most of the sites are excavated only in small parts. We can distinguish their dwelling areas, storage places and dumping spaces. Sectors for specialized craft activities (breweries) have also been recognized (TRISTANT 2004: 125-128).

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