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From Residence to Early Temple: the Case of Tell el-Farkha

Nine years of excavations at Tell el-Farkha revealed numerous structures and architectural remains unknown till now from Northern Egypt. Most important things were discovered on the Western Kom. The enormous quantity of artefacts (chiefly pottery), extensive evidence of settlement structures and a stratigraphic complex of layers reaching 4-5 m below the present ground surface provided sufficient evidence to distinguish five main chronological phases of occupation of the Western Kom at Tell el-Farkha (Ciałowicz & Jucha 2003). The beginning of human presence at Tell el-Farkha is connected with the middle stage of Lower Egyptian civilisation which is contemporary with Naqada (IIb?) IIC-d1 according to Kaiser (1957), or IIC-IID1 according to Hendrickx (1996).

The Western Kom was abandoned during our Phase 5, which is characterized by an assemblage typical of transitional Naqada IIIb/IIIc1 (terminal IIIB-IIIc1), that is, the rule of Dynasty 0 and early 1st Dynasty. Central and Eastern Koms were occupied longer, until the beginning of the Old Kingdom.

Already present in the lowermost strata are numerous round and oval pits (measuring 1.2 – 2.2 m. in diameter), often intersecting each other, containing a black fill with a modest amount of small potsherds. These are probably the remnants of storage pits. Bigger pits, sometimes lined with silt, may have served as dwellings. Very characteristic are concentrations of small, round or oval pits (0.2 – 0.3 m in diameter) lined with silt, occasionally fired red. Very similar settlement features found at other Lower Egyptian sites are explained as either cooking installations or as postholes (van den Brink 1992; von der Way 1997). Both interpretations seem likely, though in some instances the pits in question may have served as holders for large storage vessels with pointed ends.

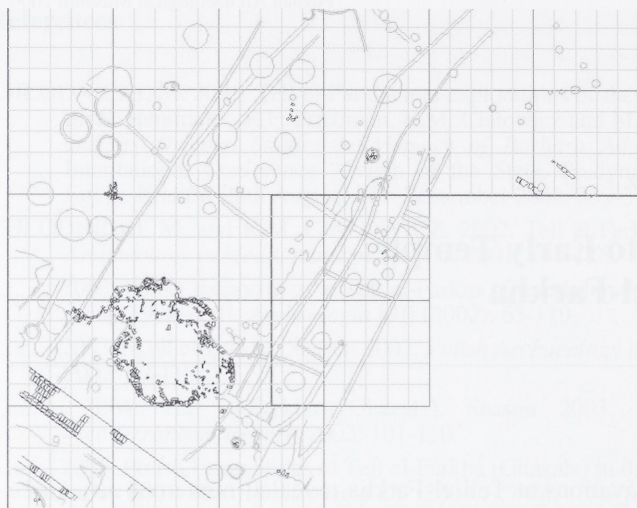


Fig. 1. Plan of a Lower Egyptian building (in the middle the youngest brewery).

Higher up the stratigraphic sequence, in layers still dating from phase 1, a series of furrows (0.1 – 0.2 m wide) forming rectangular ground plans were recorded next to the aforementioned pits. These most probably represent the remains of structures built of organic materials.

The discoveries belonging to phase 1 at Tell el-Farkha are surprising and unparalleled on the whole. While fragmentary structures of the kind discussed above are known from other sites in Lower Egypt (e.g. Maadi or Buto), nowhere have they been preserved in such a good condition and nowhere are they just as big. The traces of a Lower Egyptian (Fig. 1) structure were discovered extending over practically the entire excavated area (ca 500 m²). They were covered with a thick layer of silt, which hindered explorations considerably, but which is proof of relatively frequent flooding of the gezira at Tell el-Farkha (before human activity resulted in a significant raising of its level) and of periods, difficult to estimate in length, when the site was abandoned. The building, which like all the later ones was oriented to the northeast, must have had walls of organic materials. All that remains of the structure are relatively narrow furrows (from 0.12 – 0.3 m wide) filled with a brown soil or silt (perhaps from a Nile flooding). Explorations revealed two or even three phases of rebuilding. The interior division into many small compartments is noteworthy (the smallest was 1.4 x 0.8 m in size), as well as the many pits lined with mud (from 0.2 to 1 m in diameter). Some of them, especially those within the outline of the furrows, must have been of

structural importance, serving to mount the posts that had once supported the walls and roof. Others found inside the rooms could have served as vessel stands. The biggest of these pits, sometimes bearing obvious evidence of burning through and yielding D-shaped bricks, could have been used as fireplaces. The complex interior division may be due to the fact that parts of the house, clearly of a domestic character, could have been separated away from the other areas by low walls made of organic substances or silt.



Fig. 2. Lower Egyptian breweries and traces of construction.

West of the main building is a large space with the walls made of similar materials. Almost all of the area excavated was covered by furrows forming rectangular spaces in which lots of post holes, mud stands for pots and other features were found. On the west section of the trench four breweries were discovered (Fig. 2).

Of greatest importance is the fact that they form a distinct chronological sequence. The earliest brewery was at some point destroyed by Nile flooding. It has to be borne in mind that the gezira on which the inhabitants lived at the time

did not rise greatly above the level of the river. The annual flooding of that Nile would thus have resulted in the relatively frequent destruction of many settlements in the Delta. Following a period which is difficult to assess unequivocally a second structure was built, and when this was in turn submerged beneath Nile silt deposits another building was raised. In the last building a vat was preserved as well as some mineralized residues representing different stages in brewing process.

The Tell el-Farkha structures represent the oldest breweries ever to be found in the Nile Delta, and are probably contemporaries of the brewery discovered several years ago in Hierakonpolis (Geller 1992). These are probably the oldest breweries in the world. However, unlike the discovery at Hierakonpolis, the Tell el-Farkha excavations revealed an entire complex of successive breweries, suggesting that this site must have been an important beer production centre during the second half of the 4th millennium BC

The discovery of this complex defies the previously held beliefs that prior to the emergence of the Naqada culture the inhabitants of the Nile Delta represented a largely unstratified society, living in primitive, sunken-floored dwellings or shelters. The above described building seems to be a very large house. Maybe it is a proof that Lower Egyptian society was much more stratified than was supposed until now, and that this place was connected, for instance, with a local chief.

Exactly on the same spot the next inhabitants of the Western Kom at Tell el-Farkha raised the most fully developed of all the buildings excavated to date in this area. At a depth of ca. 2.10 m below ground level (ca. 5 m a.s.l.) the outlines of a mudbrick structure became evident under two layers, of which the bottom one was undoubtedly a layer of burning with black, occasionally red burnt soil and lighter ashes. On top of this was a layer of steel-grey clay practically sterile as regards archaeological artefacts; its thickness varies from a few centimetres in the south to over 20 cm in the north. The layer is indubitable proof of the structure having been burnt at some point and then flooded by the waters of the Nile.

The building had at least two constructional phases. To judge by the preserved ceramic evidence, the older stage starts some time in the end of phase 2 and lasts into phase 3 (terminal Naqada IID2- IIIA1/IIIA2). The later stage is to be dated to phase 3, while the catastrophic fire and the flood should presumably be placed at the end of this phase or in the early part of phase 4 (probably during Naqada IIIA2). The younger structure has a size that may be termed almost monumental and comprises a wall 2.5 m thick following a NE-SW direction as is common for Tell el-Farkha (Fig. 3). At the southern extreme it ends in a big roun-

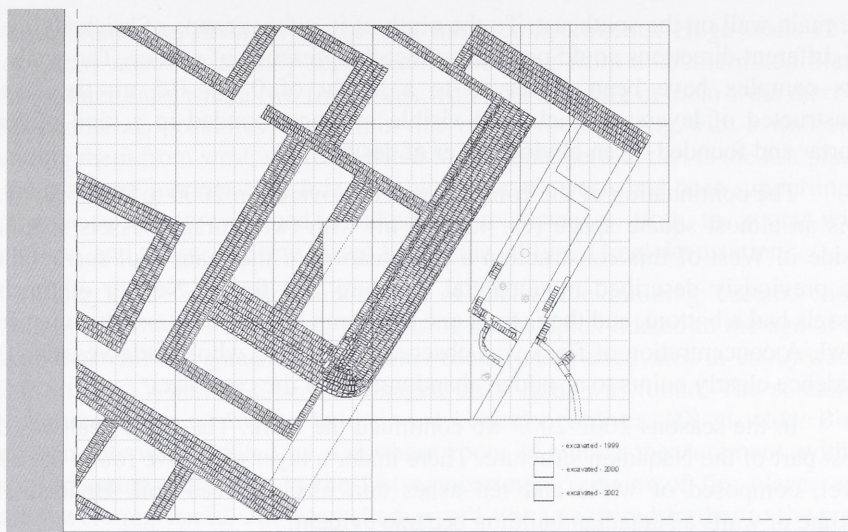


Fig. 3. Plan of a Naqada residence.

ded corner. The wall was actually made of two differently constructed sections. The inside part was erected of yellowish brick with an obviously considerable amount of sand, set in a dark-grey mud mortar. The outside face is definitely of mudbrick bonded in a light yellowish mortar tempered with sand. Inside the building there was a much damaged floor of bricks.

The structure in question should be considered in connection with a building discovered in 1999, featuring a considerable concentration of finds and storage vessels found standing still in place. Not only were the two structures recorded on the same absolute height, but also parts of the earlier excavated building have been noted in the pits opened in 2000.

A rectangular space was found to adjoin a thick (0.8 m) wall running NE-SW for 11.7 m in its northwestern part. This room was almost 7 m long and had 0.5 m-thick walls on the west and south. Successive floors were made of clay and most probably covered with a kind of lime mortar. Inside this space, especially in the southern part, there were considerable quantities of artefacts – numerous potsherds, but also two complete storage vessels with conical bottoms, standing in pits lined with thick coatings of mud. A third vessel was fragmentarily preserved and there were six small vases, two with fish bones, lying on the floor, next to a flint knife and the flat ledge of a big stone vessel. A structure with rounded corner (1.2 x 1.5 m) abutted the room on the south; it was surrounded with a low brick wall equal in width to the thickness of one length of brick (ca. 0.3 m). A similar wall surrounded a semicircular space (ca. 4.6 x 4 m) adjoining

the main wall on the southeast. To the north of it, a few groups of bricks lying in all different directions could perhaps reflect the presence of a floor. The walls of this complex have been preserved to a height of 0.4 – 0.5 m; they were constructed of layers of brick well visible in place, bonded in a kind of lime mortar and founded on an obvious layer of destruction.

The continuation of the complex was discovered in 2000 to the north of it. It is an almost square space (ca. 4.5 x 5 m) with two storage vessels standing inside it. West of this construction a continuation of the main wall surrounding the previously described monumental structure was found. Neither of the big vessels had a bottom, and they stood one in a lump of pure clay and the other in a bowl. A concentration of finds was observed, including whole little vessels. The evidence clearly points to a sudden abandonment of the complex.

In the seasons 2002-2003 we continued the work. The main goal was the west part of the Naqadian structure. There under a layer of silt we found the next level, composed of white and red ashes and black burned soil. Beneath the outline of walls a Naqadian building became evident.



Fig. 4. Western part of a Naqada residence.

Regular arrangements of mudbricks forming a clearly visible outline of a building appeared underneath the layers of destruction (Fig. 4). The edifice was

of significant size, divided into several inner compartments. Huge walls (2 m thick) draw attention as they separated the building from a southern additional room of later date, where two fire places with pots standing in them were discovered. Numerous postholes dug within one of the rooms along with a wall surrounding them from west, are to be dated to the same period, that is the last phase of the structure's occupation. It is very likely that the posts had been supporting a roof or an upper storey ruined in unknown circumstances. Both, the rooms with fire places and the posts, were raised before the edifice's final devastation.

The inside plan and dimensions of the whole building became more visible in the lower strata hiding remains of the complex related to the age of its maximal extend and splendour. The inner room (partly excavated in 2000) was 7 x 2 m in size. Within it a badly damaged brick floor was found. The so-called "western room" was situated to the west behind a wall ca. 0.8 m wide. Both compartments were limited by a northern room of similar measurement, with a thick separating wall, too. In the last compartment remains of fire places and hearths were registered. An internal courtyard was uncovered further to the west and it was enclosed by several rooms. Nevertheless, their size and mutual relation are difficult to estimate as long as partd remain unexcavated. The monumental dimensions of the edifice are particularly significant, since (including the sectors examined during former campaigns) it covered an area over 500 m². Huge mudbrick walls (2.5 – 1 m wide) separate most of the compartments.

Judging by the hitherto collected data the complex constitutes the largest construction of this type, which has ever been discovered in Egypt in Naqada context. The edifice's significance as well as its inhabitants is – at least currently – difficult to unequivocal evaluation. Probably, the works' completion at the western part of the kom will make it possible. However, one should emphasize some potential solutions. Numerous findings like so-called counters, fragments of clay undecorated seals and also some pieces of foreign (Palestinian) pottery vessels were discovered, likewise in season 2000, within the characterized structure. That seems to produce evidence that the people of Tell el-Farkha were considerably engaged in commercial activities. Furthermore, it indicates that we are dealing here with a residence combined with stores, of a Naqadian supervised trade between Upper Egypt and the Delta and Palestine. The building, as it has already been mentioned, was destroyed in a fire. It is hard to estimate whether it was a result of natural catastrophe (flood, earthquake) or an intentional human action. Taking into consideration the latter one should stress that it is scarcely provable. However, the epoch when the disastrous fire happened deserves a closer look. The catastrophic event is to be dated to Naqada IIIA2, the period when existence of earliest proto-kingdoms in Upper Egypt can be assumed. The

first richly equipped burials recorded in southern necropolises demonstrate the final stage of the elites' formation process.

The largest and most significant tomb (U-j) was found in Abydos. Its outstanding features clearly support the dignity and royal power of the person who had been buried in it (Dreyer 1998). The oldest hieroglyphs which were found there suggest not solely a considerable development of social organization but administrative and bureaucratic control over many aspects of life. The discovery of over 400 vessels though originating from Palestine, but clearly ordered by Egyptians and then deposited in tomb U-j, supports the postulated crucial importance of goods imported from the Levant that is the role of trade itself. More or less contemporary, although almost completely plundered, are the tombs recently unearthed in Hierakonpolis (Adams 1996). There is other evidence uncovered at the latter site which indicates its colossal significance for the formative processes of the Egyptian state (Adams 1999). It is very likely that both centers were competing in various fields, the substantial one could be the issue of controlling trade routes leading to the Sinai and Palestine. Located along this route, Tell el-Farkha presumably was an important place for commercial exchange and supervised and controlled the north-eastern trade route itself. It is possible that the final destruction of the described complex found in Tell el-Farkha was a result of conflict between the two centres of emerging kinship, but this is unfortunately rather hard to specify. Accepting this theory, it should be strongly stressed that it remains also in close relation to a conflict on a regional scale, but connected to the Naqada culture, and can therefore, not be taken as evidence for an Upper Egyptian conquest of the Nile Delta.

When considering the reasons of the devastation of the Naqada building at Tell el-Farkha, natural factors also should be noted. The fire could have started accidentally or as a result of regional earthquake. Evidence confirming the latter possibility was found in layers dated to the terminal (fifth) occupational phase at the Western Kom and while uncovering the structure in question, as well. The space stretching out to the south and north-east from the main building was covered with pieces of collapsed walls frequently lying on their side and covering numerous small artefacts. In this context crushed pottery storage vessels and table ware can be mentioned as well as flint or stone tools and fragments of cosmetic palettes. One of the most interesting finds is a skeleton of a pig, undoubtedly killed by a falling wall.

Directly on top of the described construction, on the layer of destruction mentioned above, the remains of another large building, dated to our phases 4 and 5 (Naqada IIIB-IIIC1) were found. Just below the surface a small deposit of figurines and vessels made of faience, clay and stone was discovered. Of special interest are two figurines of baboons and a representation of a prostrate man with

long hair and beard and wearing a penis-sheath; the features of his face are distinctly archaic (Fig. 5). Another clay figurine found nearby represents a naked standing man, long-haired and bearded. The manner of execution of this figurine points to its Predynastic origins. Another group deserving emphasis is a set of five egg- and barrel-shaped clay rattles with engraved decoration. One should also mention models of piriform maces, miniature vessels made of different materials, a zoomorphic vessel representing a water bird (duck or goose), clay double-vases, faience beads, part of a faience figurine of a crocodile and objects that are game counters in all likelihood. Some objects of the deposit, like the baboon figures and the prostrate man, were deposited presumably in the last phase of the building's use, at the very end of Dynasty 0 or the beginning of Dynasty I. Others date to earlier periods, with the oldest being the zoomorphic vessel and the figurine of a standing man.

The deposit was uncovered within massive walls (Fig. 6) marking off a relatively small room that was part of a building of considerable size (at least 25 x 15 m). The said structure is made up of a series of rooms, which grew over a certain period of time or were rebuilt and developed after natural disasters of cataclysmic consequences. One such event may have been a fairly mild earthquake which resulted in the collapse of walls of part of the rooms lying southeast and northwest of the area where the deposit was discovered. The debris covered many items, including large storage vessels, thin-walled red bowls and cosmetic palettes of greywacke. To judge by the geometric forms of these palettes, they were made in the third phase of the Naqada culture.

The differences in the material used to produce bricks deserve note. It is either silt with sand or considerable amounts or silt practically devoid of sand. Varied care was put into the execution of the walls, presumably due to different room function. Brick size remains more or less constant at ca. 0.15 x 0.3 m throughout the period. In a few cases the bones of wild cattle (shoulder and long bones) were found set into the wall instead of bricks.

Another observation that should be emphasized is the functional differentiation of particular rooms and the related differences in the thickness of walls and wall execution techniques. The main walls and those surrounding the deposit are the thickest, reaching ca. 1.2 m. The NW corner of the space with the deposit and the west wall had been intersected by a trench excavated by the Italian expedition in 1988-89. Walls either one, one-and-a-half or two bricks thick (from 0.3 to 0.6 m) surround other rooms that are of distinctly domestic character. Small hearths were discovered chiefly in the small units, enclosed by thin walls that separated them from the neighbouring spaces. An especially large concentration



Fig. 5. The figurines from the first deposit: baboons, prostrate man and fragment of a crocodile.

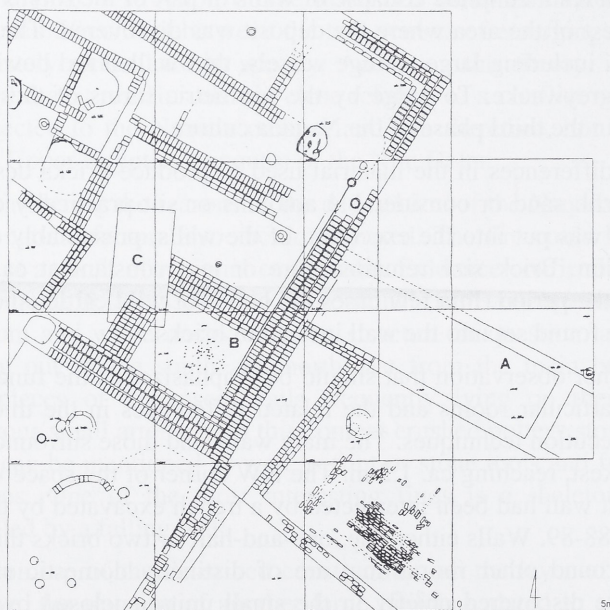


Fig. 6. Plan of an administrative-cultic centre (part discovered in 2001).

of these hearths was discovered in the north-western part of the complex. Occasionally, bottomless vessels were found standing in the hearths.

In the 2006 season the area on the West of the building was opened. The most important discovery made in this area was a long room (8 x 3.3 m) in the north-western corner of the new trench (Fig. 7). The space was surrounded by



Fig. 7. Room with deposit - discovered in 2006.

0.45 m thick brick walls (1.5 brick) and was oriented NW-SE. In the middle of the room a concentration of eight vessels was found (Fig. 8). Of special interest is a so called Nubian vessel – a bowl decorated with punctured dots and incised triangles and a pot-stands with triangles cut in its body. Both vessels (and probably other found together) are considered (by many scholars) as connected with cult or some rituals. Few centimetres below (but still in the same level and in the same room) two stone vessels and a kind of container for ink were found. The latter was a thin pottery slab, 7 cm wide, with three round containers (about 4.5 cm in diameter) filled with a black substance, probably a scribe's palette.



Fig. 8. Cultic pots discovered in 2006 (in situ).



Fig. 9. The jar with deposit in situ.



Fig. 10. A few objects from the deposit discovered in 2006.

Just at the Eastern wall of this room a small jar (23 cm high) was found (Fig. 9). It was decorated with punctured dots and incised decoration: 2 quadruped animals (gazelles?) and an ostrich. It was covered by a small bowl. Inside the jar 62 small objects were found (Fig. 10), evidently a deposit of cultic items. The deposit was composed from two figurines of children, seven figurines of women (Fig. 11), five figurines of men (Fig. 12), six figurines of dwarfs (Fig. 13), 12 figurines of different animals. Especially interesting are four cobra-snakes, the oldest known uraei until now. All of them were made from hippopotamus tusks. In the jar were also 19 models of different items (p. ex. knife, boats, mirror, pieces of games, cylindrical seal, tablets, boxes), and 10 miniature vessels, made of different materials: hippopotamus tusks, stones, Nile silt, faience and copper. Both deposits (connected undoubtedly with the Dynasty 0 and beginning of Dynasty I) and other items found in the building allow to interpret it as an administrative-cultic centre. It probably played a great role not only for Tell el-Farkha itself, but also for the region (at least part of the Eastern Delta) at the beginning of Dynasty I.

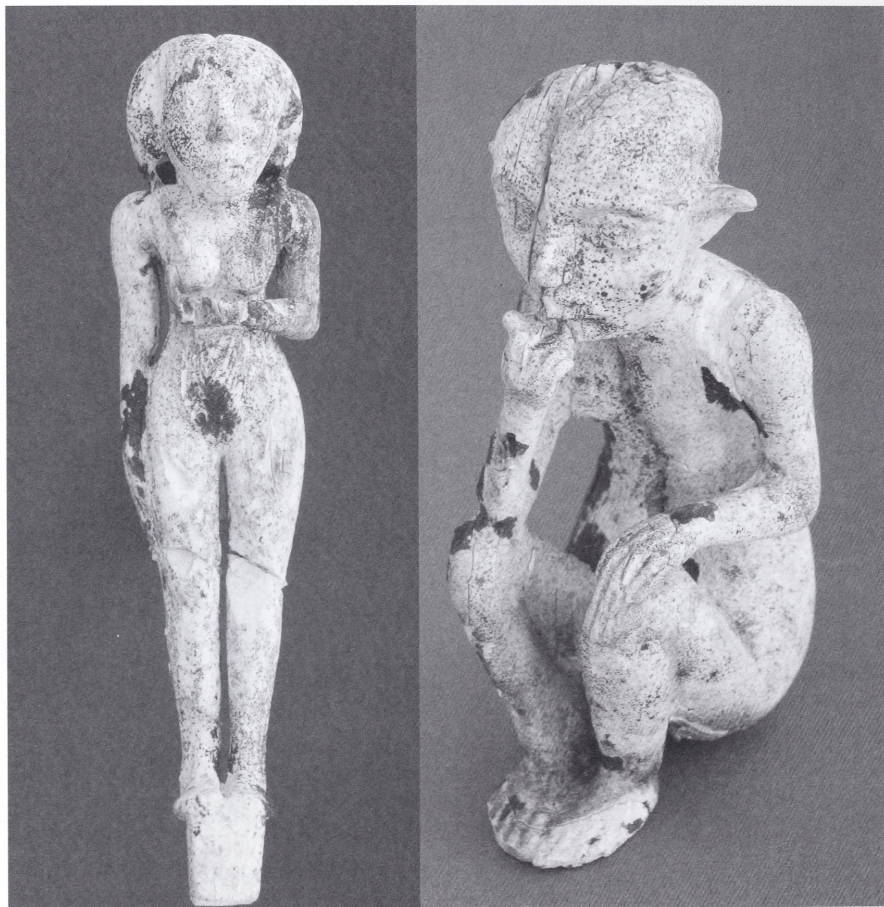


Fig. 11. The figurines of a woman and a child.



Fig. 12. Two figurines of men.



Fig. 13. Figurines of dwarfs.

The deepest layers of the building-plan is much simpler, but probably it is still a place of ceremonial importance. In one of the last layers a large (almost 0.3 m long) falcon shaped greywacke palette was found. The main walls are still very thick and rooms narrow and long. It is possible that in the centre was a kind of inner courtyard.

The layers excavated in this area have yielded a noticeable quantity of small finds, including the objects from the deposit just mentioned. Other objects connected with the temple area are worth mentioning: cosmetic palettes, some examples of wavy-handled pottery or imported pottery with lug handles, whole vessels, mostly of small size, sickle blades and fragments of flint knives, flint scrapers, numerous pieces of querns, stone grinders and pestles, mud-seals used to close all kinds of containers (some with impressions of cylindrical seals), stone pendants (amulets) in the shape of a duck and of a stylized female figure. A highly schematic figurine of a ram was discovered north of the deposit, but within the thick wall surrounding the complex. One of the most interesting finds was a cylindrical jar with 187 fin-bones of fish, some with the thicker end broken

off, others whole. Even without further processing, the fin-bones with their sharp serrated edge constituted excellent material for making harpoon heads (e.g. for fishing) or even arrowheads for bird hunting. The bones may have been collected as valuable raw material or deposited in the sacred area. Immediately next to the jar half of a clay boat model was discovered.

To summarise: at the Western Kom at Tell el-Farkha we deal with three large buildings, erected at the same place but from different chronological periods. First, the older one was evidently a house; the second connected with the Naqada culture was probably a residence of important men, maybe the governor of one of the earliest Egyptian princes or even kings. The third was probably an administrative-cultic centre, raised on the same spot as the earlier residences. It is worth to stress that it is much bigger than for instance the Satet temple at Elephantine. Most probably the different spaces (rooms) served different functions. Both rooms with deposits could be some kind of chapels or sacred places, others seems to be connected with daily life. In some of them could have been workshops in which the cultic objects were produced; in another the local chief (king's administrator?) could have resided. He probably had a strong relation with the first Egyptian kings (serekhs of Iry-Hor, Ka and Narmer were found at the cemetery).

The complexity and monumental character of the administrative-cultic centre and the Naqada residence becomes evident especially when we compare these buildings with houses known from the Central Kom. Excavation of the central tell in 2001 enabled the uppermost extent of settlement from Dynasty I, contemporary with the last layers of temple from Western Kom. A layout of buildings different from that in younger phases was noted here, although the NE-SW orientation of these buildings is still the same. Exploration revealed a compact group of architectural features consisting of a number of small rooms (from 2 x 2.5 m) and larger ones with corner stoves. Walls are constructed with three or four parallel lines of bricks.

Work on the Central Kom yielded a considerable amount of finds, predominantly potsherds, though a number of complete vessels were also found. Other materials included a large tool assemblage, among others a deposit of flint sickle blades – a harvester's kit – concealed within a wall.

In the deepest, older layers we still can observe simple settlement structures, with narrow and long rooms located around courtyards, sometimes constructions supported by posts with many traces of ovens – inside and outside of walls and next to silos at the courtyard.

The situation is almost the same in the deepest levels dated to our phase 4 (contemporary with the beginning of the administrative-cultic centre and with the

destruction of the Naqada residence). There are many relatively small compartments, long and narrow, grouped around the courtyards forming the rests of quite big houses with many ovens and workshops.

The data acquired thus far clearly indicate that in the Late Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods the Central Kom functioned as a utility area serving the residential and temple sectors of the settlement located on the western tell.

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