

Krzysztof M. Ciałowicz

Tell el-Farkha 2000. Excavations at the Western Kom

In the first season (1998) the work on the Western Kom of the Tell el-Farkha site concentrated on the southeast, badly damaged, edge of the kom. In the second season (1999) the work focused at its centre. Here an area of 150 m² was designated for excavation (N–S axis 10 m; E–W axis 15 m). Large quantity of artefacts, numerous settlement features and a complex stratigraphic record measuring over 4 m in depth resulted, so that the work was completed only in the eastern section of this pit. The western half of this pit was excavated in 2000. In the same year three new squares, each of 5 x 5 m, were also opened to the north of the eastern part of this pit (Fig. 1).

Large quantity of artefacts (chiefly pottery), extensive evidence of settlement structures and a stratigraphic complex of layers reaching up to 4 m below the present ground surface provided sufficient evidence already in the previous seasons to distinguish five main chronological phases of occupation of the Western Kom at Tell el-Farkha. The 2000 season, while suggesting certain minor revisions, generally confirmed this picture. Yet in view of the importance of the finds made in the 2000 campaign, this season should be considered as the most significant one of all three so far conducted at Tell el-Farkha.

Before this season's key findings are discussed, a brief recollection of the settlement history at Tell el-Farkha should be made (Chłodnicki and Ciałowicz 2000: 61).

Phase 1 occupation probably covered the middle stage of the Lower Egyptian culture (Ciałowicz 2001: 15), which was contemporary with the Naqada (I Ib?) IIc–d1 according to Kaiser's (1957) system or to IIC-IID1 according to that of Hendrickx (1996). Phase 1 at Tell el-Farkha 1 was contemporary with Buto (Ib?) II (von der Way 1997: 79–80) and it started to exist a little earlier than Tell Ibrahim A wad 7 p phase (van den Brink 1992:53). This is evidenced not only by pottery finds but also by the characteristic settlement features.

Phase 2 continued to manufacture the Lower Egyptian pottery, but it started to be complemented with Naqadian forms. The same may be said of the architecture of the phase which shows structures typical of the Delta appearing next to mudbrick buildings which are believed to be characteristic for settlers originating from the south of Lower Egypt.

This seems to be a transitional stage, showing the coexistence of these two assemblages at a time more or less contemporary with the end of Naqada II - probably Naqada IId2 or beginning of IID2. This phase should be considered as a terminal stage of the Lower Egyptian Culture in this region and at the same time the earliest one when the first settlers from the south may have made their presence at Tell el-Farkha (Ciałowicz 2001: 17). Phase 2 at Tell el-Farkha is contemporary with Buto IIIa (von der Way 1997: 81).

Phase 3, already fully Naqadian in character, can be dated to the end of Naqada II and beginning of Naqada III period [probably Naqada IId2/IIIa1 – beginning of Naqada IIIa2 (?) or the end of IID2 – beginning of IIIA1(?)]. A similar cultural situation can be seen in Buto IIIb-c (von der Way 1997: 126) and at the beginning of the Tell Ibrahim Awad 6 phase (van den Brink 1992: 52).

Phases 4 and 5 seems to be characteristic for the period of state formation in Egypt. Phase 4 is distinguished by changes in the ceramic assemblage and it is suggested that it is to be dated to Naqada IIIa2, its end placed somewhere during the Naqada IIIb (or IIIA1-IIIb). Phase 4 is roughly contemporary with Buto IIId-f and with the later layers of Tell Ibrahim Awad 6 (van den Brink 1992: 52). Most of settlement features of this phase have close parallels to features in Buto layers IIIc – IIIf (von der Way 1997: 118).

Phase 5 is characterized by an assemblage typical of transitional Naqada IIIb/IIIc1 (terminal IIIb-IIIc1), i.e. is dated to 0 and early 1st dynasty. As this youngest pottery was found encountered only on the surface of the Western Kom, it is suggested that this part of the site had been abandoned by the early First Dynasty. Phase 5 could be roughly compared with Buto IV (von der Way 1997: 136) and Tell Ibrahim Awad 5b (van den Brink 1992: 50). There was no distinct gap between phase 5 and 4.

The results of the 2000 season

In 2000 the work concentrated primarily on the oldest phases of the Tell el-Farkha settlement i.e. on phases 1-3. The finds made included not only an abundance of pottery, but also architectural structures which seem to be unique not only for the Delta but for the whole Predynastic Egypt. The discovery of these structures has led to a considerable modification of currently held views on many issues. It should be noted, however, that because of the monumental size of some of these structures, large parts of these buildings remain still unexplored. A

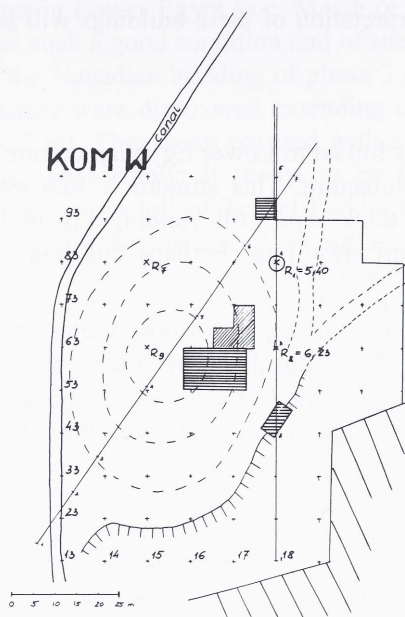


Fig. 1. Western Kom of Tell el-Farkha. Pits excavated during 1998-2000 seasons.



Fig. 2. Pits and traces of furrows from Tell el-Farkha phase Ib.

final description and interpretation of these buildings will be possible only after next several seasons.

Phase 1

This oldest phase is linked to Lower Egyptian culture and is marked by its typical ceramics and architecture. This stratum is followed by a thin, only a dozen or so centimetres thick layer still yielding Lower Egyptian pottery but yielding no remains of any dwellings. Perhaps this is a result of a temporary abandonment of the site.

A characteristic content of the lowermost strata are numerous round and oval pits (measuring 1.20–2.20 m in diameter), often intersecting each other and 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 also the clusters of small, round or oval pits (20–30 cm in diameter) lined with silt, occasionally fired red. Most of these smaller pits did not contain any artefacts, only isolated fragments of pottery occurred sporadically in some of them. Exceptional in this respect was the discovery of a half of a small vessel in one of these pits and a pointed bottom of a storage vessel in another. Similar features found at other Lower Egyptian sites are explained as either cooking installations (van den Brink 1992: 53) or postholes (von der Way 1997: 65). Both interpretations seem likely, although in some instances the pits in question may have served as holders for large storage vessels with pointed ends.

Layers of phase 1 also yielded distinctive brick supports known as “fire dogs”. They are roughly D-shaped in cross-section. Bricks of a similar shape have been found at Abydos (Peet 1914: 7) and Hierakonpolis (Hoffman 1982: 14). The same type of brick is also known from Buto. The earliest examples appeared in Buto II, with further occurrences also noted in later layers (von der Way 1997: 73, 120). In Abydos and on Loc. 29 at Hierakonpolis they served as supports for a large vessel; in Loc. 11 they were used in the construction of a pottery kiln.

Higher up in the stratigraphic sequence but in layers still dating to phase 1 a series of furrows (10–20 cm wide) forming rectangular ground plans were recorded next to the aforementioned pits (Fig. 2). They probably are the remains of structures built of organic material. The differences seen between older and youngest layers in phase 1 in Tell el-Farkha could suggest the practicability of dividing this phase into two subphases: 1a (older) and 1b (younger), which could be dated to the period contemporary with Naqada IIc and Naqada II d1.

To the phase 1 is dated a surprising discovery of a building of a still unknown function. While fragmentary structures of the kind discussed above are

known from other sites in Lower Egypt (e.g. Maadi or Buto), but nowhere have they been preserved in such a good condition and of such a big size. About 0.6 m below the bottom of the Naqadian building of phase 3 (see below), remains of a Lower Egyptian structure were discovered extending over practically the entire excavated area (10 x 7 m). They were covered with a thick layer of silt which hindered explorations considerably; it seems to be the remains of relatively frequent flooding of the gezira hill of Tell el-Farkha (before human settlement activity resulted in a significant raising of its surface) of a period 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 made of organic material. All what remains from this structure are relatively narrow furrows (from a dozen to 30 cm wide) filled with a brown soil or silt (perhaps from a Nile flooding). Explorations revealed two or even three phases of its rebuilding. The principal part of the youngest phase of this structure was at least 11 m long and 4.50 m wide (Fig. 3). The interior division of this building into many small compartments is noteworthy (the smallest one was 1.40 x 0.80 m in size) as well as many pits lined with mud (from 0.20 to 1.00 m in diameter). Some of these, especially the ones 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 room could have served as vessel stands. The biggest of these pits, sometimes bearing obvious evidence of burning and yielding D-shaped bricks, could have been used as fireplaces. The complex interior division of this building may be due to the fact that parts of the house, clearly of a domestic character, could have been separated from other areas by low walls made of organic material and silt.

To the west of this building there was a kind of a big room or courtyard with a wall of similar material in the north, but without the interior division. The rest of this structure is to be uncovered presumably in the still unexplored part of the site.

Reduced dimensions on both the eastern and southern side characterize the older phase of this building. It now measures ca. 8 m in length and 3.20 m in width, although its northern end is still unexplored. The number of mud-lined pits drops significantly, and their place is taken by storage pits filled with black soil and dissected by furrows (as mentioned above these pits are characteristic for the oldest occupational phase at Tell el-Farkha). It should also be noted that in this level we are probably dealing with two buildings located next to each other. One is open to the east and divided into at least two rooms. The other, open to the west, bears no evidence of division but yielded a considerable, if shapelessly scatter of D-shaped bricks burned a bright red - obvious evidence of a fireplace or perhaps some kind of other domestic activity carried out on a bigger scale.

Phase 2

This phase yields only little evidence for buildings. The most commonly encountered traces of them consist of successive layers of flooring with barely visible outlines of walls. The best preserved wall was discovered in one of the oldest strata belonging to phase 2. This 9.5 m long and 50 cm wide wall was built of mud-brick on a NE-SW axis. Its northern extent links up with a semicircular construction bordered by a broad band (30-40 cm) of compacted silt. Inside the structure several layers of compacted silt floor containing small fragments of pottery were recorded.

Indubitably connected with phase 2 at Tell el-Farkha is a structure related to some domestic activities requiring the use of fire (Fig. 4). The highest level of the construction was found on the same absolute height as the deepest layer of the Naqadian building discussed below. The 4 x 4 m structure was comprised (as it turned out in the lower layers) of three adjacent circles. Its edges were surrounded by stacked D-shaped bricks (similar to these found in the phase 1) inconsistently burned through from mud-coloured examples to ones which are red and even entirely black. It is noteworthy that mudbricks constitute a significant majority in the lowermost layer, suggesting that the firing was quite accidental. Outside the circles three post-holes were recorded, the posts presumably supporting the roof. Numerous flat pieces of clay, thin and baked, with impressions of plants and human fingers, coming from the layer of ashes and burnt earth inside the structure suggest the existence of a roof that had been made of organic material and was coated with mud.

Below the burnt earth a layer of D-shaped bricks in different arrangements was uncovered. But it was the next level which yielded conclusive evidence of a circle (0.40-0.60 m in diameter) of D-shaped bricks inside each of the circular elements of the structure. A flat brick lay in the centre. Around there was a number of bricks set into the ground at an angle, intended as a support for the big, relatively narrow-bottomed vats that had stood on the round construction (some sherds of thick-walled vessels of this variety were found in the fill).

The difference in brick shapes should also be emphasized. Some were simple pieces (of different length) with sections ranging from practically semicircular to trapezoid and even almost triangular form. Others, which are also of different length, were flatter and evidently concave at one of the ends, the depression having been made carelessly with finger impressions clearly visible on the side walls. The two kinds of bricks can be put together so that the convexities of ones fit the concavities of the other. The flat bricks presumably either lay on the ground or were dug into it, and the convex ones lying in the depressions stuck out upwards supporting the vat or vessel.

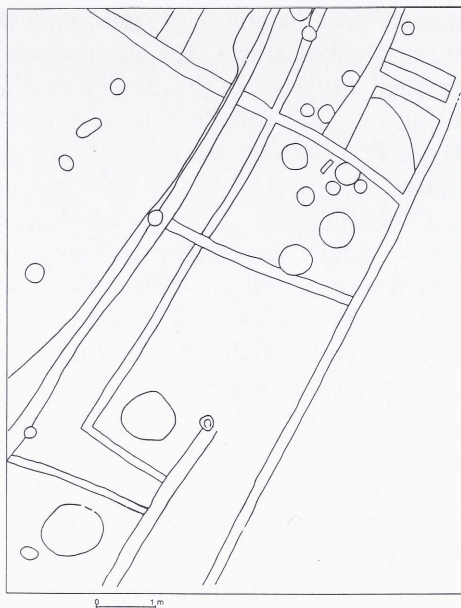


Fig. 3. Younger phase of the Lower Egyptian building.

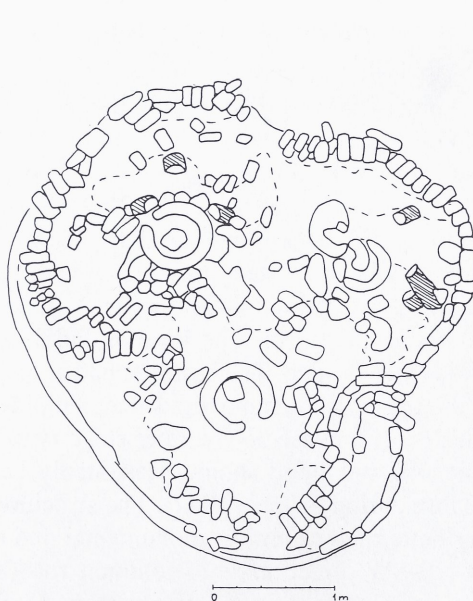


Fig. 4. Brewery from Tell el-Farkha

The aforementioned construction was associated with some form of domestic activity requiring the use of fire. The absence of any significant quantity of pottery sherds, particularly wasters, precludes its use as a pottery kiln. Fire was undoubtedly used inside these structures to heat whatever was inside the vats. This could not, however, have been grain, as the temperature generated here was too high and would have resulted in the grain being burned. The narrow bases of the vats and the wide angle at which they were tilted (as can be deduced from the position of the supports which survived *in situ*) seems to indicate that these vessels held a liquid which probably required regular stirring. It was presumably a place for brewing beer. If this conclusion is correct, then what we have here is the oldest known brewery from the Delta, the only older one in Egypt being a brewery found at Hierakonpolis (Geller 1992).

Phase 3

This period is characterised by the occurrence of homogeneous Naqada type pottery and it seems that this cultural tradition from the south of Egypt had been now fully adopted at Tell el-Farkha. The oldest surviving architectural feature comprises the relict remains of a large rectangular room measuring 2.75 m in width and at least 6 m in length. Its longer walls are built of mud-brick with generous sand inclusions (brick size ca 30 x 15 cm) and are on a NE-SW axis. Their thickness amounts to almost 70 cm, whilst the shorter walls are nearly 90 cm thick. The construction in question is very poorly preserved, surviving to a height of barely a few centimetres.

This is hardly surprising, as the most fully developed of all the buildings excavated to-date was constructed not much later on the same spot. 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 remains of a fire with black, occasionally red burnt-through soil and lighter ashes. On top of this was a layer of steel-grey clay which was 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 a proof that the structure was burnt and then flooded. The building had at least two constructional phases. To judge by the preserved ceramic evidence, the older stage started in the end of phase 2 and lasted into phase 3. The later stage is to be dated to phase 3, while the catastrophic fire and flood should presumably be placed in the early part of phase 4 (probably during Naqada IIIa2). The structure of the younger date has a size which may be termed as almost monumental and comprises a wall 2.5 m thick following a NE-SW direction as is common for Tell el-Farkha. At the southern extreme it ends in a big rounded corner (Fig. 5). Since sections of the same wall have been identified in one of the new pits abutting the explored trench on the northeast, it may be presumed that the structure measured at least

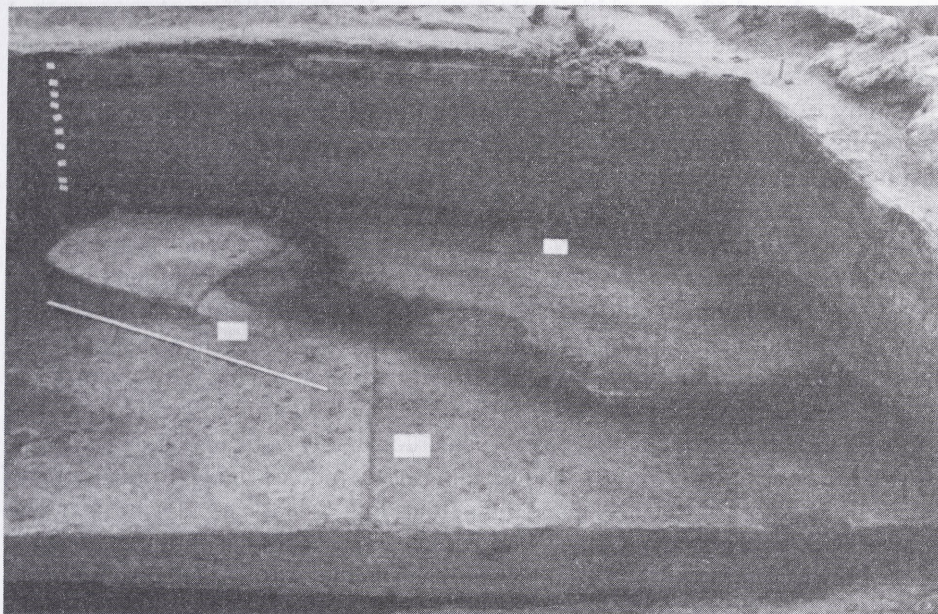


Fig. 5. An early Nagadian building from Phase 3.

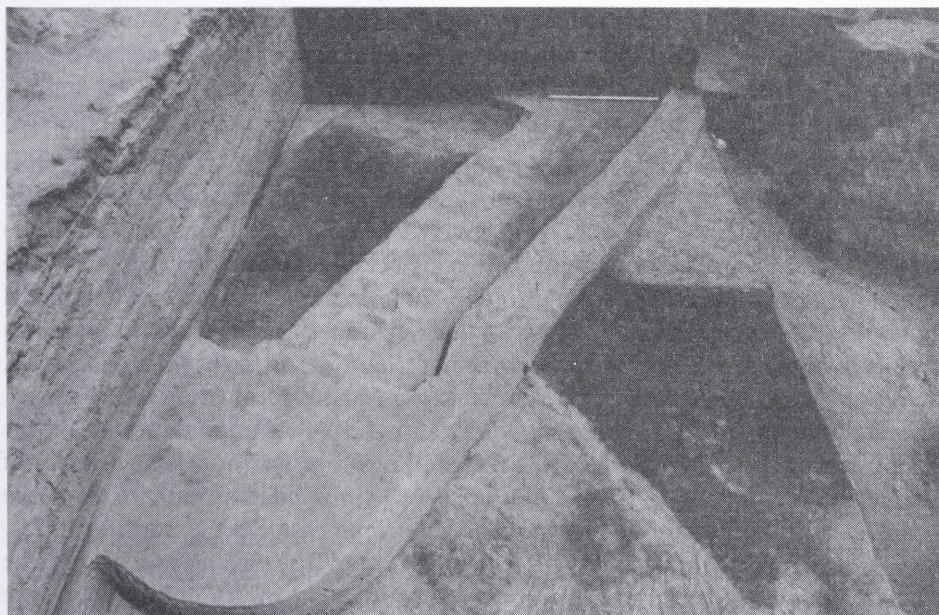


Fig. 6. Brick structures of building from Phase 3.

17m in length and 12m in width. Its wall was made of two differently constructed sections. The inside part was constructed of a yellowish brick with considerable amount of sand set in a dark-grey mud mortar. The outside face of this wall is definitely of mudbrick of a light yellowish mortar tempered with sand. Within the wall, at the junction of the inner and outer part, three round pits were distinguished (1m in diameter), spaced regularly next to each other, the distance between them being 1.25m and 1.00m. As the same layer of burning and mud which covered the building lay on top of these pits, they must have been integrally connected with the structure. Small potsherds and ashes found in these pits do not help in the identification of their function, which could have been just as well structural or a place for putting big storage vessels. In the latter case, however, the wall would have been of different width in the top part - from 0.5 to 1.00m. This seems fairly unlikely, especially as its bottom part makes the impression of being quite homogeneous, constructed, as has been described above, of two kinds of bricks (Fig. 6). The building has a much damaged floor made of bricks. The layer of ashes yielded numerous thin "slabs" of clay, baked red-brown, with impressions of plants and human fingers (similar to the ones found in the brewery). These "slabs" are probably what is left of the mud coating of the roof.

The structure described above should be seen in connection with the building discovered in the 1999 season, featuring a considerable concentration of storage vessels found still standing up (Fig. 7). The two buildings were recorded on the same absolute height and parts of the earlier excavated one have been noted in the pits opened in 2000.

A rectangular room was found to adjoin a thick (80cm) wall running NE-SW for 11.70m in its north-western part. This room was almost 7 m long and had 50 cm-thick walls on the western and southern side. Its successive floors were made of clay and most probably were covered with a kind of lime mortar. Inside this room, especially in its southern part, considerable quantities of artefacts were found - numerous potsherds, but also two complete storage vessels with conical bottoms standing in pits and lined with thick coating 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 a flat ledge of a big stone vessel. Another structure with rounded corner (1.20 x 1.50m) abutted the room on the south; it was surrounded by a low brick wall equal in width to the thickness of one length of a brick (ca 30cm). A similar wall surrounded a semicircular space (ca 4.60 x 4m) adjoining the main wall to the southeast. To the north of it, few groups of bricks lying in different directions could be remains of a floor. The walls of this complex have been preserved to a height of 40-50 cm; they were constructed of layers of brick, bonded by a kind of lime mortar.

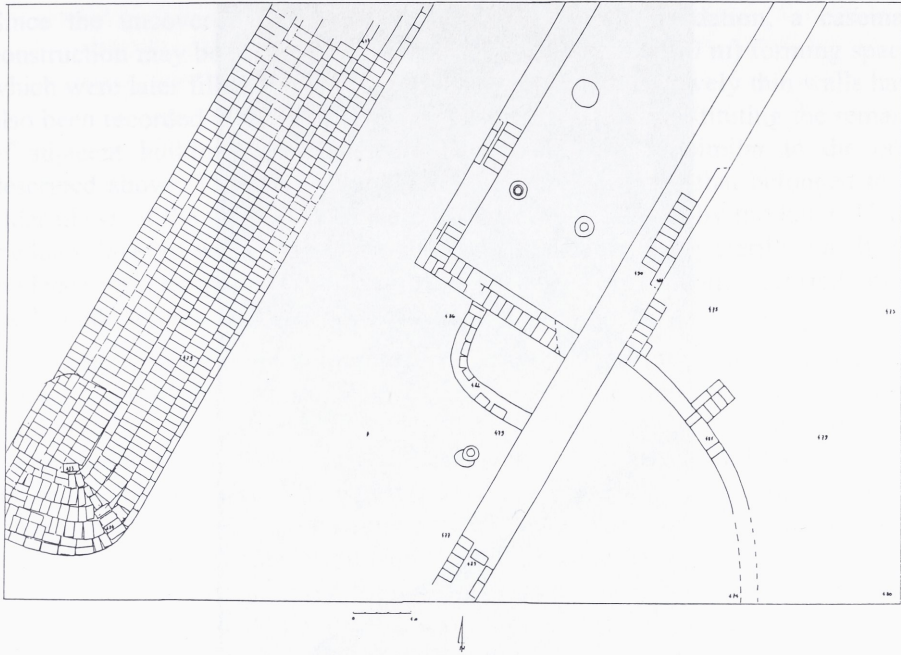


Fig. 7. Building from Phase 3 with intact vessels still in situ.

Other parts of the above described complex was found in the season 2000 (Fig. 8). It is an almost square space (ca 4.5 x 5 m) with two storage vessels standing in them. Neither had a bottom; one stood in a lump of pure clay and the other one in a bowl. Accompanying them was a concentration of finds including complete small vessels. The evidence points to a rather sudden abandonment of this complex. It should also be noted that to the west from above described construction a continuation of the main walls surrounding the previously described monumental structure was found.

The form of the main building underwent fundamental changes in its lower layers. A clear level of destruction appeared under the southern part of the semicircular corner, broadening gradually under the outer section of the wall. In effect, the inner part made of sand bricks forms a rectangular corner in the south, while the mudbrick part has been reduced to just one row of bricks. The width of the wall here is 1.60 m.

These are not all the changes noted in the buildings structure (Fig. 9). The phase here described is characterized by a further reduction of the thickness of the main wall and a clear division of the building into smaller compartments evident just under the layer of destruction.

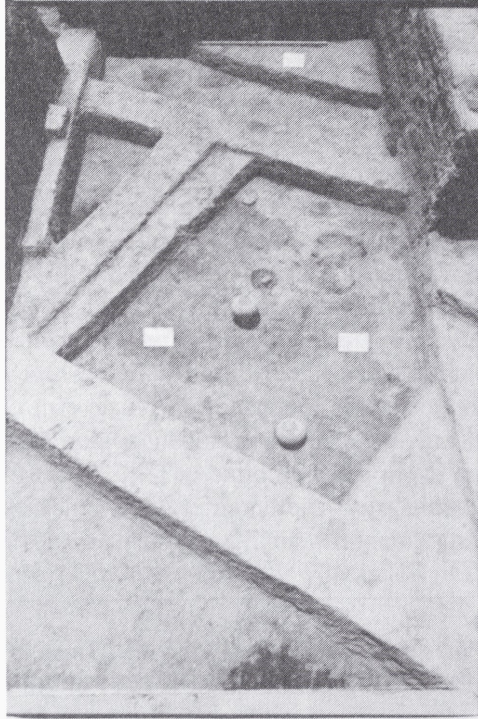


Fig. 8. Vessels in the Nagadian building.

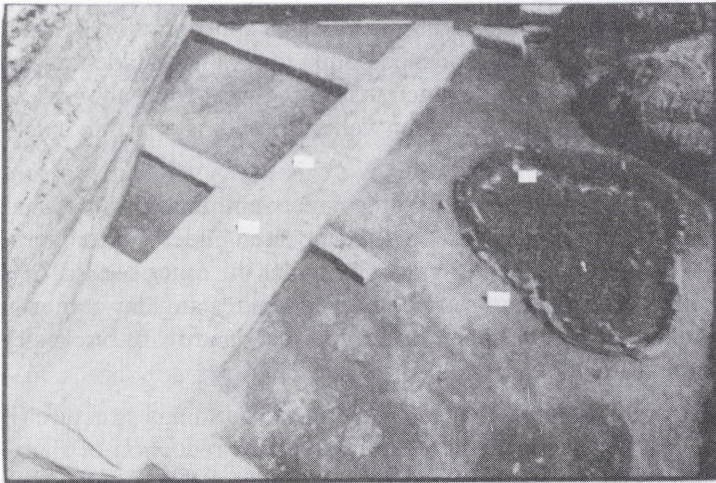


Fig. 9. Part of the Nagadian building and to the right, a Lower Egyptian brewery.

Since the uncovered part obviously constitutes the foundation, a casemate construction may be assumed: relatively thin walls (0.30-0.60 m) forming spaces which were later filled with earth. It is noteworthy that relatively thin walls have also been recorded to the east of the main wall, possibly constituting the remains of adjacent buildings which should have been looking similar to the ones described above. They had abutted from the east buildings that belonged to an older phase of the complex and were presumably destroyed by the latter. Under the latest layer of the building a level of mud, archaeologically sterile, may be the evidence for a temporary abandonment of the site. This flooding occurred before the Naqada settlers arrived at Tell el-Farkha.

The interpretation of this complex cannot be fully undertaken at the present stage of the research. The size of the building and the thickness of the main wall are not striking. It seems that it is the biggest Naqadian structure discovered in Egypt so far. One wonders what role it had served and who were the people inhabiting it. Why was it erected in a place which presumably was not an important centre of the emerging state? The undecorated seals found in the building, numerous other small finds (small perforate pellets of clay and clay cones, which may have served for counting purposes), and potsherds of probably Palestinian origin may be the evidence of the considerable role played by commerce in the life of the inhabitants of this building. Perhaps we are dealing here with a residence combined with store rooms, owned by a Naqadian individual supervising trade between Upper Egypt and the Delta and Palestine.

References

- CHŁODNICKI, M. and K. M. CIAŁOWICZ 2000. Tell el-Farkha (Ghazala) Explorations 1999. *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean XI. Reports 1999*: 59-76. Warsaw.
- CIAŁOWICZ, K. M. 2001. *La naissance d'un royaume. L'Égypte dès la période prédynastique à la fin de la Ière dynastie*. Kraków.
- GELLER, J. 1992. From prehistory to history: beer in Egypt. In: R. Friedman and B. Adams (eds), *The Followers of Horus. Studies Dedicated to M.A. Hoffman* : 19-26. Oxford.

- HENDRICKX, S. 1996. The relative chronology of the Naqada culture: problems and possibilities. In: J. Spencer, (ed.), *Aspects of Early Egypt*: 36-69. London.
- HOFFMAN, M. A. 1982. *The Predynastic of Hierakonpolis – An Interim Report*. Giza-Macomb, Illinois.
- KAISER, W. 1957. Zur inneren Chronologie der Naqadakultur. *Archaeologia Geographica* 6: 69-77.
- PEET, T. E. 1914. *The cemeteries of Abydos II*. London.
- VAN DEN BRINK, E. C.M 1992. Preliminary Report on the Excavations at Tell Ibrahim Awad. In: E. C. M. van den Brink (ed.), *The Nile Delta in Transition: 4th-3rd Millennium BC*: 43-68. Tel Aviv.
- VON DER WAY, Th. 1997. *Tell el-Fara'in. Buto I*. Mainz.