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Lower Egyptian culture from the central Tell at Tell el-Farkha (Nile Delta)

1. Introduction

Tell el-Farkha is one of the few sites in the eastern Nile Delta where continuous occupation from Predynastic until the early Old Kingdom period is recorded. Since 1998 the excavations at this site have been carried out by the Polish expedition headed by M. Chłodnicki from the Poznań Prehistoric Society and Poznań Archaeological Museum and co-headed by K. M. Ciałowicz from the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. Their results have been published in preliminary reports (Chłodnicki and Ciałowicz 1999; 2000; 2001).

In this paper I would like to focus on the oldest phase of the settlement at Tell el-Farkha associated with the Lower Egyptian Culture. Lower levels of underground water have made possible to excavate the Lower Egyptian layers at this site without difficulty. During five seasons of fieldwork (1998 - 2002) a large pottery assemblage of this culture was collected. On this basis it was possible to distinguish two main occupational phases of the Lower Egyptian culture at Tell el-Farkha. Pottery of Phase 1 is typical for this culture, while ceramic material from Phase 2 has features characteristic for both the Lower Egyptian and Naqadan pottery tradition. The appearance of non-local elements in pottery in Phase 2 was undoubtedly caused by the expansion of the Naqada culture from southern to northern Egypt during the late Naqada II and Naqada III periods. It is, however not clear if groups of Upper Egyptians arrived in the Nile Delta in this early period or only elements of the Naqadian cultural tradition were transmitted from south to north without any movement of humans.

2. Lower Egyptian architecture

This paper comprises results of excavations carried out in 1998 - 2002 on

the Central Kom at Tell el-Farkha where four trenches were located - on its southern, northern and western slopes. In each trench layers of the Lower Egyptian culture were reached. However, at this stage of our research it is possible to present only a partial picture of the development of the settlement architecture of Lower Egyptian community on the Central Kom. This results from the small size of the trenches. In most cases only small parts of structures were recorded. In 2000 excavations on the top of the Central Kom were started and the pit of 22.5 by 22.5 m makes possible to observe architecture structures over a bigger area. In 2002 levels dated back to Nagada IIIa2-IIIb/IIIc1 were found in this pit, still above the expected Lower Egyptian layers.

a/ Phase 1

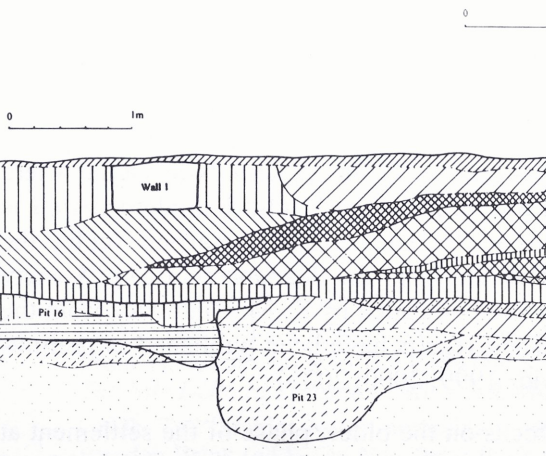


Fig. 1. Tell el-Farkha. Trench C49. Cross section of the south trench wall (drawn by E. Mrowiec).

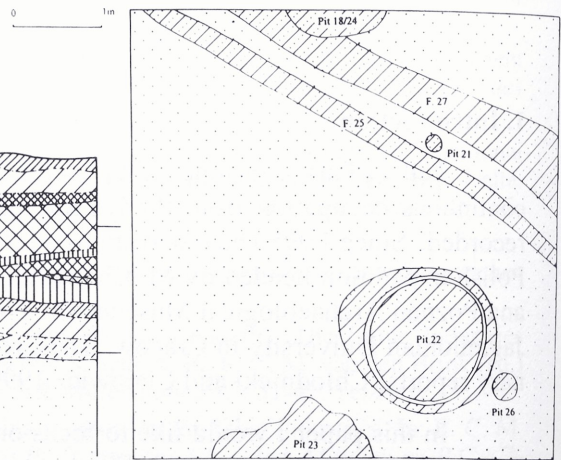


Fig. 2. Tell el-Farkha. Trench C49. Level 1 (3.90-4.00) (drawn by E. Mrowiec).

The most numerous structures recorded during the exploration of the Lower Egyptian layers were round and oval storage 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 (Fig. 1, pit 23; Fig. 2-pit 18/24, 22, 23). Other characteristic features were furrows about 10-20 cm wide, filled by brown soil or flood silt, with rectangular ground plans, probably remains of structures built of organic material above the ground (Fig. 2, F. 25, 27). There were also concentrations of small, round pits (20-30 cm in diameter), probably post-holes lined with silt (Fig. 2, pit 21, 26). They contained sporadically only isolated fragments of pottery. In 2002 during the exploration of one of such post-holes a fragment of a big clay plate belonging to the rough ware (made of Nile clay tempered with a

conspicuous amount of medium and coarse sand and straw) was found. The plate is flat, measures 29 x 18 cm and is ca 3 cm thick. It had to be used in the vicinity of fire or directly in the fire because the preserved fragment was very brittle and its colour was bright red. Although its function remains uncertain, it is likely to be connected with some kind of food-processing. In one of the opened trench remains of a round shelter (Fig. 1, pit 16; Fig. 3, pit 16), with a diameter of about 3.5 m, and dug to a depth of ca 40-50 cm were found. Inside this shelter there was a hearth of ca 70 cm lined with D-shaped mudbricks (Fig. 3, pit 15).

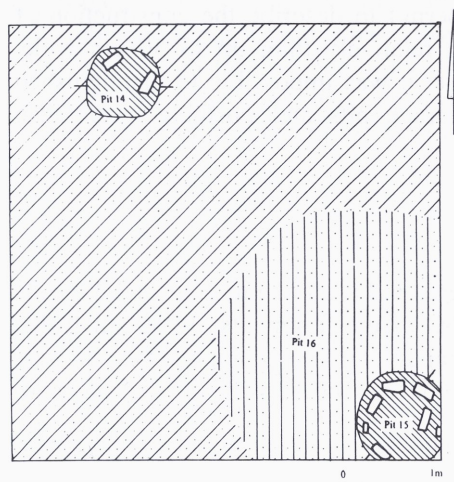


Fig. 3. Tell el-Farkha. Trench C49. Level 2B (4.25-4.35) (drawn by E. Mrowiec).

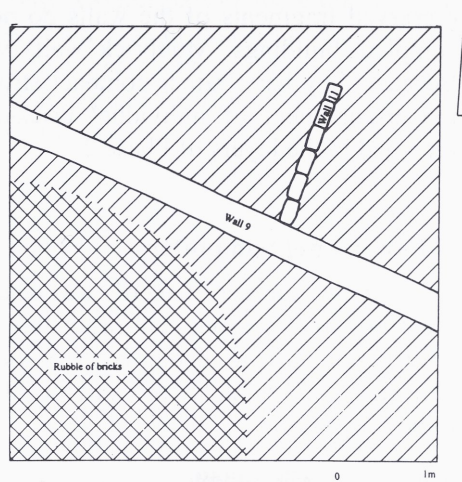


Fig. 4. Tell el-Farkha. Trench C49. Level 4-5 (4.60-5.00) (drawn by E. Mrowiec).

Taking into consideration the stratigraphy of the recorded structures, the construction data and comparable material from other sites of Lower Egyptian sites it seems to be possible to present an outline of the architecture of the oldest settlement of Tell el-Farkha. It seems, therefore, that in the oldest levels of Phase 1 the Lower Egyptian social group lived in small round shelters build of organic material with a hearth inside. Around such structures numerous pits were located. In most cases they were used for storing. During the 2002 season an archaeobotanical analysis of the fills of Lower Egyptian pits carried out. In the younger layers of Phase 1 typical structures are the rectangular buildings with walls constructed of organic material, probably covered by mud; a light roof was supported by posts driven into the floor. In some cases posts were lined by silt. Numerous storage pits in its vicinity were also recorded. Similar architecture was recorded during exploration of the Lower Egyptian layers on the Western Kom at Tell el-Farkha (Chłodnicki and Ciałowicz 2001).

Through sieving of the soil samples the seeds of barley were collected. Analysis carried out by Lucyna Martens-Kubiak from *Onderzoeksbureau voor Biologische Archeologie en Landschapsreconstructie BIAx* in Amsterdam, is in progress.

b/ Phase 2

The new architecture features are mudbrick buildings believed to be typical for Nagadian settlers from Upper Egypt. Because of the big size of these buildings, they have been explored only partially within excavated trenches. The preserved fragments of the walls do not permit to describe the construction of complete buildings. Mudbrick walls were relatively thin, up to 50 cm wide. Because they have rather compact structure, it was impossible to distinguish the arrangement of individual bricks. Storage pits and postholes were also recorded in the layers of Phase 2.

3. Lower Egyptian pottery

A big number of sherds was discovered in layers of Phases 1 and 2 during the 1998-2002 seasons. Unfortunately, most of the fragments are so small that they do not allow to recognize the vessel shapes. Only few complete vessels were collected. Additionally, the surface of sherds was covered by a thick layer of mineralized soil.

3.1 Pottery technology

There are no considerable technological differences between the pottery from Phase 1 and 2. All Phase 1 pottery and the large majority of Phase 2 pottery is made of an alluvial Nile clay. Among pottery of Phase 2, only 0,79 % is made of a marl clay. Sand and straw were added to an alluvial clay as temper. The marl clay was tempered with sand which can be either a natural component or intentionally added by potters. All pottery is hand made and fired in uncontrolled oxidising conditions. As a result, the vessels have soft, thick and uneven walls and their colour is not solid, with many stains and a mottled surface colouration. Three different fabrics of local pottery can be distinguished. Vessels belonging to the first fabric are made of a paste with fine to coarse sand and conspicuous amount of straw or chaff (2–5 mm in size). The second fabric comprises pottery made of a paste with fine to medium sand and fine organic temper. Sometimes a very fine and long organic temper with the appearance of hairlines was added to the clay. This is most characteristic for Phase 1, although some sherds having a fibrous temper were also found in layers of Phase 2. The post-firing colour of pottery in these two fabrics is brown, brownish-red, brownish-grey and brownish-black. Pottery of the third fabric type is made of a marl clay, sometimes tempered with very fine sand.

A few groups of ceramics can be distinguished by fabric type and surface treatment: pottery with a rough or slightly smoothed external surface, and pottery with its surface covered by slip red to brownish-red in colour. A surface of vessels made of a marl clay was well smoothed. The most abundant group is a rough ware, having a coarse chaff and straw temper (Rough ware amounts to about 98% in Phase 1, and in Phase 2 to about 97%). Its characteristic rough appearance is provided by the voids of burnt-out organic temper, clearly visible on the vessel surface. Sometimes the upper parts of these vessels were slightly wet-smoothed. Pottery covered with a slip is only a small part of the entire ceramic assemblage (about 2 % in Phase 1 and less than 3 % in Phase 2). It is made of finer paste with fine to medium sand and fine straw temper. Its surface can be smoothed or sometimes even burnished. Sometimes the fibrous temper can be seen on the surface in form of very long and thin gaps.

The fabric, modes of production and conditions of firing of the Lower Egyptian pottery at Tell el-Farkha indicate a lack of specialised pottery production. E. Ch. Köhler (1997) termed this stage as "household production". Potters in this period were not economically dependent on their craft. The production was connected with just a few technical and economical expenses and had seasonal character due to climate conditions of the Delta; because of cold winter period lasting from October till March with rains, high humidity pottery production could be possible only during summer period, when dry and warm climate made good conditions for production, drying and storage of pots (E. Ch. Köhler 1997:82). Additionally, agricultural character of the Lower Egyptian society, requiring in periods of the highest activity (e.g., harvest) the engagement of every man to work, may have created the situation in which pottery could have been made only by women staying at home in order to take care of children and perform other household duties.

3.2. Vessel forms

a/ Phase 1

The most distinctive shapes for rough ware in the oldest phase, about 36 %, are rather small globular jars with a rolled rim, an undistinguished neck and an irregular surface. The most typical decoration for jars of this period is a continuous incised zigzag made by means of the rocker technique, and a dotted zigzag (Fig. 5:1-6). Some globular jars are decorated by oblique lines. Jars decorated with zigzags appear in the same period on other sites in the Nile Delta, such as Tell Ibrahim Awad (van den Brink 1992:53ff. fig.10), Tell el-Iswid (van den Brink 1989:70, pl.10-11, 12:15-21) and Buto (von der Way 1997:96f. pl. 39-41). The zigzag pattern is also present on sherds from Middle and Upper Egypt at Harageh, Matmar, Badari, Hamammiya, el-Tarif/Thebes, Armant (van den Brink 1989:71, n. 26) and Hierakonpolis (Adams and Friedman 1992:323, fig.3a).

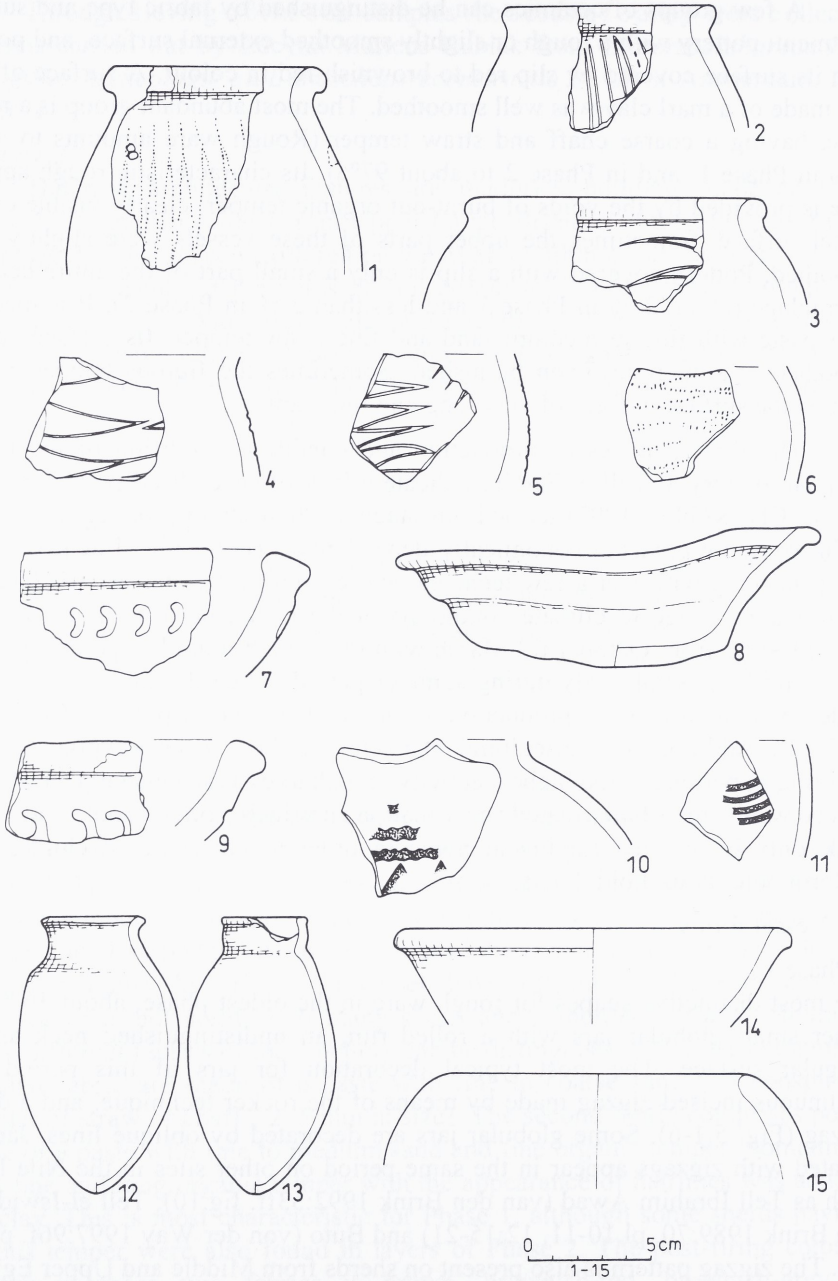


Fig. 5. Tell el-Farkha. Pottery of Phase 1 (drawn by A. Mączyńska).

Another characteristic vessel with a rough surface is the jar with an almost vertical or concave neck and a rolled or simple rim as well as a small jar with an out-turned neck (about 19 %). Their base is flat or rounded, but lemon-shaped bases also were noted (Fig. 5:12-13). These jars appear in the ceramic assemblage of Tell el-Iswid in context of Phase A dated to Naqada IIc-d1 period (van den Brink 1989:67, fig. 9:1-4) and in the Level II in Buto dated to Nagada IIc-d1 (von der Way 1997:89, Taf.1).

Hole-mouth jars with simple rims are another closed forms (Fig. 5:15). Sherds belonging to these vessels occur at Tell el-Farkha in Phase 1 to 5; hole-mouth jars probably should be treated as an element of the local pottery tradition. They can be compared to Petrie's types R89p, R100, 83g (Petrie 1921:pl.XLII, XLIV).

Numerous rough ware bowls were also found. The most abundant are small, irregular conical bowls with flaring straight walls and rims rounded or formed into a small lip (about 40 %) (Fig. 5:8,14). This type of vessel is present in the assemblages from all phases at Tell el-Farkha and at other sites such as Tell el-Iswid (van den Brink 1989:68, fig.9:5-10), and Buto (von der Way 1997:92-93, Taf. 27:1-4, 28:6-8). Medium-depth bowls with a rounded rim and concave walls also occur in assemblages of this phase (about 5 %). Some are decorated with impressed semicircles typical of Lower Egyptian culture (van den Brink 1989:74, fig. 12:7-8; von der Way 1997:100, Taf. 29) (Fig. 1:7, 9).

Simple bowls with a burnished surface and jars with a rolled rim belonging to the group covered by red slip (ok 3 %) are found in addition to rough ware shapes, as are also the dark red slip bowls and jars with a distinct neck and with a fabric similar to that used for rough ware (ok. 3 %).

A few examples of D-ware imported from Upper Egypt are noted among the decorated pottery of Phase 1. They are made of a marl clay and their surface is smoothed in almost all cases. Unfortunately, the painted decoration is unreadable on the majority of them. Two different patterns have been recognized on sherds so far: a spiral and a wavy line pattern with triangle (Fig. 5:10-11). The spiral pattern appears very often on vessels dated as early as the Naqada IIc-d period (Hendrickx 1996:72-73; Kaiser 1957:Taf.22-23; Petrie 1921: pl.XXXIII: D31-35, XXXVI: D67), e.g. at Minshat Abu Omar (Nagada IIc-d1; Kroeper 1985: 12-13, fig.24; Kroeper and Wildung 1994:65:grave 52, 92; grave 69; 2000:148; grave 194) or Buto (Nagada IIc-d1; Köhler 1998:35, Taf. 63:4-6). The wavy line pattern with triangles below occurs on pottery from the second half of the Naqada II period (Petrie 1921:pl.XXXV).

The range of vessel shapes in Phase 1 is quite limited when compared with later phases. Additionally, vessel shape recognition sometimes is quite difficult

due to their very small fragments. In most cases, sherds do not originate from distinctive vessel parts. This also is true for vessel decoration in this period. Only 15% of pottery from the Lower Egyptian culture at Tell el-Farkha was decorated.

In the 2002 season during the exploration of one of storage pits associated with the Lower Egyptian occupation a fragment of the Palestinian jar with wavy handle was found. Its clay was different in matrix and colour from the alluvial Nile or a marl clay. It was light yellowish brown in colour (10YR6/4 in the Munsell System). As a temper medium round grains of quartz were added (ca 20 %). Because of the size of the temper and its amount in the paste, the fragment in question was very brittle and its surface was rough. In R. Amiran's classification of the Palestinian ledge handles, wavy handles from Tell el-Farkha belong to type 2 and to the group of "thumb-indented ledge handles", typical for Early Bronze Age EBI I in Palestine (Amiran 1969:38; pl.8:11-13). Analogous ledge handles are known from numerous Early Bronze sites such as Ai (Marquent-Krause 1949: pl.XXXVII:1432), Beth Shan (Fitzgerald 1935:pl.II:5), Jericho (Garstang 1935: pl. XX) and Lachich (Tufnell 1958:149, pl.11:28-32). This new find together with well known imported Palestinian pottery from other Lower Egyptian sites such as Maadi, Heliopolis and Buto form a strong evidence for contacts between the Lower Egyptian and Palestinian social groups in this early period.

The oldest pottery from Tell el-Farkha is similar to the ceramic assemblages from other Lower Egyptian sites. The most distinct similarity exists between sites of Tell el-Farkha (Phase 1), Tell el-Fara'in/Buto (Level II) (von der Way 1997:81-101, Taf.5, 31, 39), Tell el Iswid (Phase A) (van den Brink 1989:67-71, fig.8-12) and Tell Ibrahim Awad (Phase 7) (van den Brink 1992:53-5, fig.10). Pottery from these sites has similar fabric and surface treatment (the most numerous pots belong to rough ware), vessel forms (bowls and jars) and decoration (zigzags, semicircles). The Lower Egyptian layers at Tell el-Farkha can be dated to Naqada IIc-IIId1. This chronology is confirmed by the Palestinian ledge handle from Tell el-Farkha dated back to Early Bronze Age I. According to the chronological correlation between Lower Egypt and Southern Canaan during the EBI period proposed by R. Amiran and R. Gophna (1992:357-360, tab.1) EBI is parallel to Nagada IIb-d period in Egypt (EBIa - NIIb; EBIb early - NIIc-d).

b/ Phase 2

The frequency of different pottery groups in assemblages of this phase is similar to Phase 1. The majority of vessels are made of an alluvial Nile clay with fine to medium sand temper and fine to medium straw temper, and they are considered to be a rough ware (ca. 97%). Main forms of vessels known from Phase 1 as well as new forms are found in the assemblage. Lemon-shaped jars, hole-mouth jars and conical bowls occur among elements representing the Lower

Egyptian pottery tradition. No globular jar sherds with zigzags and bowls decorated with impressed semicircles were recorded in this layer. New forms are represented by a range of different types of jars with a undistinguished neck. They all have a wide mouth but their body diameters differ. Their rims are rolled or slightly everted and bases can be flat or pointed; in Petrie's (Petrie 1921:pl. XLI-XLIII) classification they belong to R76, R81, R84-86 (Fig. 6:3-4). These jars are known from the Upper Egyptian and Delta sites (e.g., Hierakonpolis, Buto) in layers dated to the end of Naqada II and the beginning of Naqada III periods (Adams and Friedman 1992:324-326, fig. 7:2a; Köhler 1998:17-18, 112-113, Taf. 8). Another kind of a jar typical for Phase 2 has a distinguished neck narrowed towards a rolled rim and a wide body (Fig. 6:5). Quite numerous groups of small jars with globular body, rounded or pointed base, an undistinguished neck and an everted rim are found in assemblages of this phase (Fig. 6:10-11). These jars are typical for the second half of Naqada II and the beginning of Naqada III period (Kaiser 1957:Taf. 23,24; Wilkinson 1996: P074) and are similar to Petrie's type R65 (Petrie 1921:pl.XL). Different types of shallow conical bowls with straight walls and simple, thickened or slightly everted rims are recognised among the open forms (Fig. 6:1-2). Fragments of larger bowls and basins with a thickened rim also occur in these layers.

The Upper Egyptian tradition manifests itself in Phase 2 by the presence of a few sherds having painted decoration (D-ware). An 'ss' decoration pattern and a wavy line pattern have been distinguished so far (Fig. 6:8-9) (Jucha 2001:39-45). These decorative elements occur on vessels dated to the Naqada IIc-d period (Hendrickx 1993:71-73; Payne 1993:106-108, 114:no. 849, 856, 858-860, 869, 932, 935, fig.39-40, 43, 51; Petrie 1921:pl. XXXIII-XXXIV), e.g., at Minshat Abu Omar (Group I) (Kroeper 1988:13-14, fig.23-25) or in Buto (Level I, IIIa) (von der Way 1997:193-194, Taf. 47). Dated to this same period is an aloe pattern present on one Phase II sherd (Fig. 6:7) (Payne 1993:106, no. 847, 854, fig. 39; Petrie 1921:pl.XXXIII:D36, D41-42, D44D, D45B; Regner 1998:98-99, Kat.76, Taf.14)

Few sherds with wavy handles (W-ware) are recorded in the ceramic material of Phase 2 at Tell el-Farkha (Fig. 6:6). These handles should be treated more as a decoration than real handles due to their more stylistic than functional character. This type of wavy handles is typical of the late Naqada II period, but they sometimes occur also on vessels dated to the beginning of Naqada III (Hendrickx 1993:84; Kaiser 1957:Taf. 23-24). W-ware vessels can be found in assemblages from other sites in the Nile Delta, e.g., at Tell el-Fara'in/Buto (Level II, IIIa) (von der Way 1997:192-194, Taf. 45-47; Köhler 1998: 34, Taf. 60) and Minshat Abu Omar (Group I) (Kroeper 1988: 13-14, fig. 27-28, 59-61).

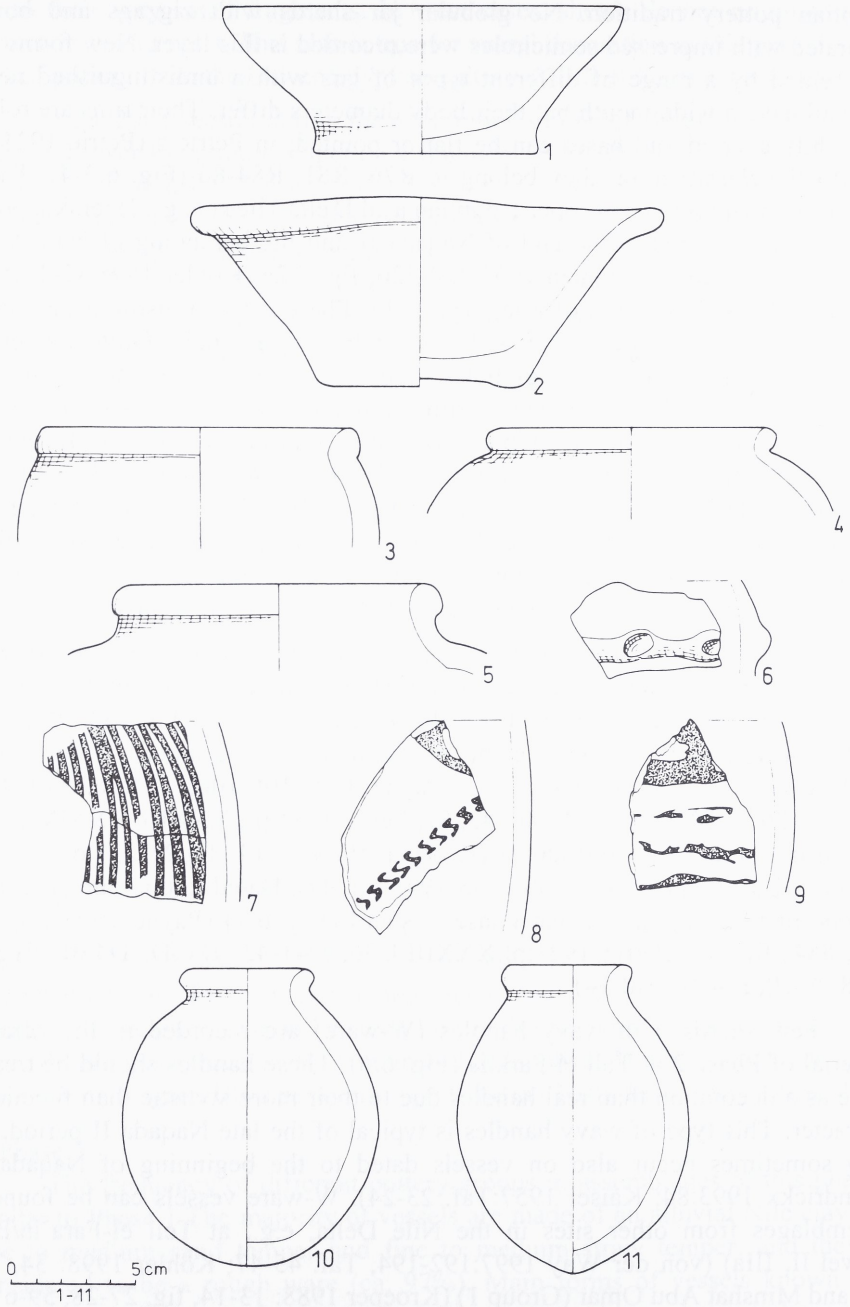


Fig. 6. Tell el-Farkha. Pottery of Phase 2 (drawn by A. Mączyńska).

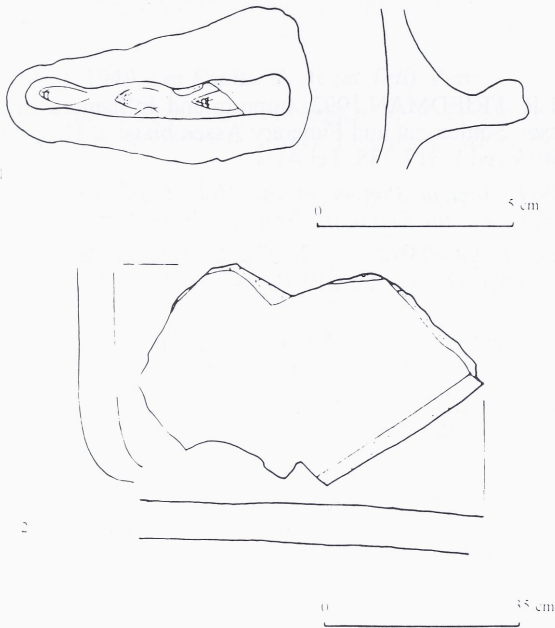


Fig. 7. Tell el-Farkha. 1. Palestinian Ledge Handle (Trench C16). 2. Clay plate (Trench C16) (drawn by A. Mączyńska).

Considering all available information, the Phase 2 at Tell el-Farkha should be dated to the Naqada IID2 period and more exactly, to the first half of Naqada IID2. This was the period of transition between the Lower and Upper Egyptian pottery tradition in the Delta, well in line with the complex process of expansion of the Naqada culture from the south to the north at the end of Naqada II and during the Naqada III period.

4. Conclusion

The pottery tradition and the architecture when compared with other sites show that the oldest inhabitants of Tell el-Farkha were the bearers of the Lower Egyptian culture. This was a vast cultural complex which spread over the Nile Delta and as far as Fayum in the south in the early Predynastic period. However, more information is needed to learn about other aspects of life of the Lower Egyptian social groups. One such aspect is the exchange and other relations to the neighbouring areas such as Palestine and Upper Egypt.

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