



Title: Symbolic faunal remains from graves in Tell el-Farkha (Egypt)

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SYMBOLIC FAUNAL REMAINS FROM GRAVES IN TELL EL-FARKHA (EGYPT)

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Abstract: The paper considers faunal remains found in human graves from Tell el-Farkha. The majority of the bones have been interpreted as offerings symbolizing food for the dead, consumed ritually during the funeral. Other remains, like corneal horns, could have reflected status or had symbolic function.

Keywords: Tell el-Farkha, Eastern Kom, burials, faunal remains, burial offerings

Archaeozoological research, conducted on the site of Tell el-Farkha since 1998, has yielded not only evidently post-consumptional animal skeletal material (from the Western and Central Koms), but also faunal remains that can be interpreted as reflecting the customs and beliefs of the resident population. The latter category comprises faunal material from human graves recorded in a burial ground existing on the mound designated as the Eastern Kom.

The graves form three groups, chronologically related with the last phases (5, 6, 7) of occupation in the settlement at Tell el-Farkha (for a discussion of the burials, see Dębowska-Ludwin 2011, in this volume). Faunal remains were identified in 15 of the 33 examined human burials. They were present in all ten of the graves assigned to the oldest group dated to phase 5 (end of Dynasty 0 and beginning of Dynasty I) and in five of the 12 graves dated to phase 6 (end of Dynasty I). No animal remains were noted in the most

recent of the graves attributed to phase 7 (end of the Early Dynastic period). The quantity of animal remains from phase 6 internments was observed to be markedly smaller compared to the earlier phase. Moreover, the bones came almost exclusively from the fill of the grave pit and not, as was the case of phase-5 burials, from beside the human skeleton.

The collection comprises altogether 1402 fragments of vertebrates and a single piece belonging to an invertebrate represented by a mollusk shell (Grave 7).

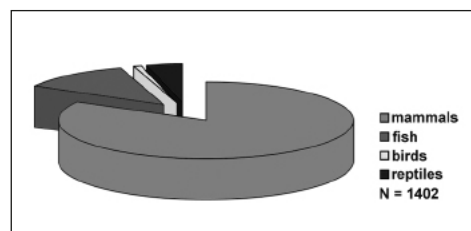


Fig. 1. Shares of vertebrates in the faunal material from graves in Tell el-Farkha (N=1402)

The overwhelming majority of the first group is made up of mammals (83.1%), followed by fish (12.1%), reptiles (4%) and an insignificant number of birds (0.8%) [Fig. 1]. Mammal and fish remains were noted in all of the graves (with the exception of Grave 29 in which no mammals were found and Grave 1 from which fish were absent). Bird bones were recorded in two cases (Graves 4 and 5) and identified only in the case of Grave 5 as belonging to a bird of undefined species from the order of large, long-legged wading birds *Ciconiiformes*. Bone fragments of reptiles were classified in five burials (Graves 5, 6, 7, 8), and in all cases they proved to belong to the Egyptian cobra *Naja haje*.

Species and anatomical attribution was determined for 1048 osteological units, which makes for 90% of the collection. Identification of animal remains proved

impossible for the finds from grave 20. The predominant species was pig (97.2% of all identified bones). Other species, whose presence in the collection was established, included goat/sheep, cattle, dog, hare, rodents; their presence was often marked by single bones and the share of these species in the collection ranged from 0.4% to 1%.

The biggest number of individual animals in a single grave, nine, was recorded for Grave 7. Eight individual animals were identified in Grave 5 and six each in Graves 3 and 4 [Fig. 2]. Determination of individual age at death of the animals deposited with human burials was possible only with regard to the pigs. They represented specimens from six months to five years old with a definite majority (approximately 50%) being 10–12 months of age.

For the pigs, it was also found that parts of consumption value had a small

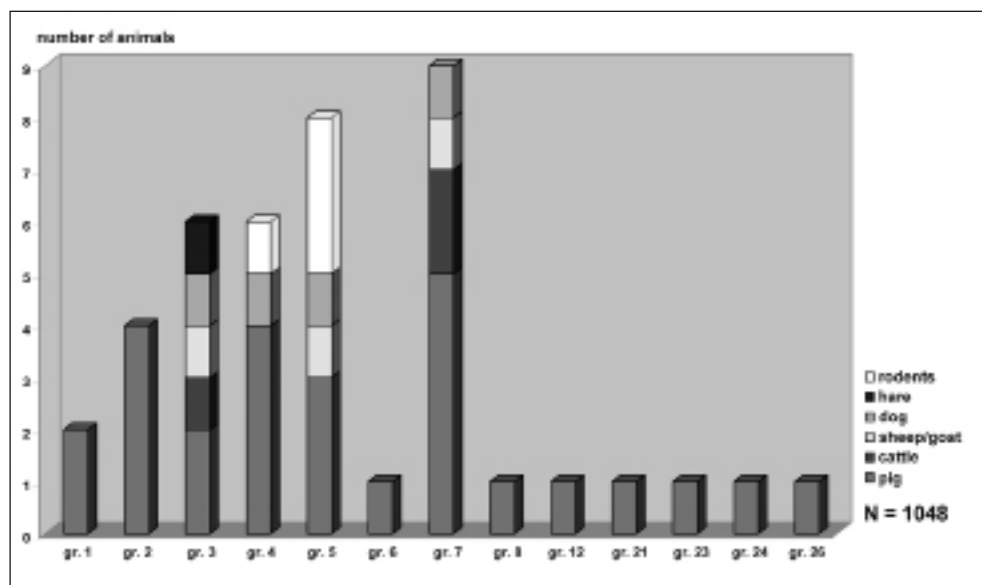


Fig. 2. Diagram illustrating the differentiation by species of the faunal remains from the graves (N=1048)

advantage over bones from the less valued parts and butchering scraps.

Gender was identifiable for only one specimen of cattle from Grave 7. Based on the size of the horn, the animal was determined to be a male.

Overall, the animal remains under discussion were located in the fill of grave pits, next to human skeletons, in or near vessels (constituting the grave goods) and in sections of the grave pit distinguished from the rest (so-called annexes). For the most part these remains were burnt or bore evidence of having been in a fire.

The following description of four graves exemplifies the nature of finds from the period dated to the close of Dynasty 0 and beginning of Dynasty 1 (phase 5 in the Tell el-Farkha stratification).

Grave 2 [Fig. 3] belonged to a woman aged 40–50 years at death. The faunal

matter consisted of pig remains coming from at least four different specimens. The bones were found in the central part of the grave pit, inside three different vessels lying to the west of the woman's burial. The first pot (no. 17 on the plan) contained a pig aged 12 to 16 months. The second vessel (no. 20) held the remains of two specimens aged, one 10–12 months and the other, around 3.5 years. Several bones of yet another pig, no more than six months old, were found in a third pot (no. 21). Isolated pig bones were recorded separately in the fill near the vessels and in the northern part of the grave pit, scattered among the vessels grouped in the corner, where also four fish fragments were discerned.

Grave 3 [Fig. 4] held the burial of a male, whose age at death was determined as being over 20 years. The faunal remains identified from this grave belonged to at

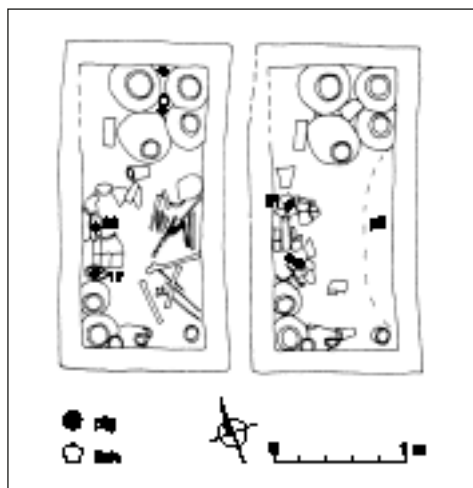


Fig. 3. Grave 2. Plan of disposition of grave goods at two different depths: flush with the human skeleton (left) and below. Numbers indicate vessels containing pig bones (Drawing J. Dębowska-Ludwin)

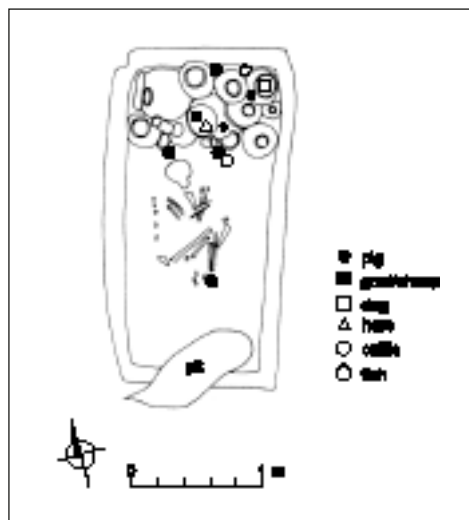


Fig. 4. Grave 3. Plan of disposition of grave goods and animal remains. Numbers indicate pots containing faunal matter (Drawing J. Dębowska-Ludwin)

least two pigs, single specimens of cattle, goat/sheep, dog and hare. Fragments of a pig mandible were found under the legs of the human skeleton and between the vessels grouped in the northern end of the grave pit (tooth fragment, parts of elbow and metacarpal bones). A single carpal bone identified as belonging to cattle was also found among the vessels. Moreover, animal remains were discovered inside two pots: a dog's elbow bone in one (no. 3) and fragments of the humeral and femoral bones of a hare in another one (no. 9), the latter also containing fragmentary bones (digit and talus) of goat/sheep. Additionally, there were five pieces of fishbones dispersed between the vessels.

Grave 5 [Fig. 5, left] contained the burial of a man who died at the age of

30–35. The faunal remains belonged to a minimum number of three pigs, single specimens of goat/sheep, dog and three separate rodents. Other remains included fish (23 fragments), birds (10 fragments) and three vertebrae belonging to a snake.

Fragments of more or less unidentified fish and bird bones were found in the fill of the grave pit. Lying scattered next to the human skeleton in the central burial chamber were the remains of an almost complete pig aged 10–12 months (possibly cut up at the moment of deposition) and fragments of two other specimens, one aged 10–12 months and the other around two years old. Other remains recorded near the human bones included a single goat/sheep vertebra, a digit from a dog and three vertebrae of a snake identified as Egyptian

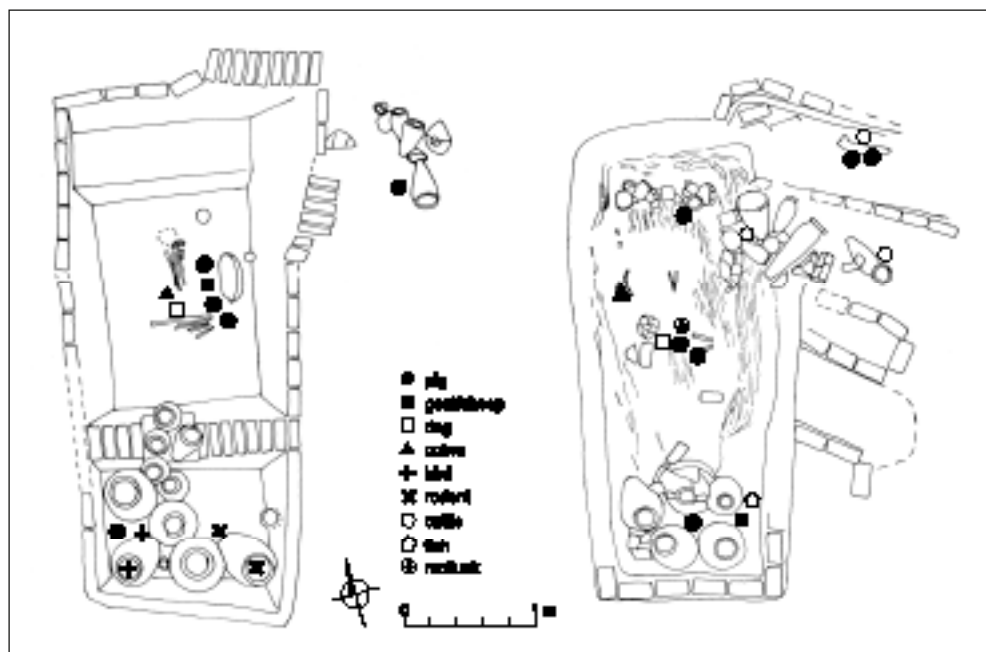


Fig. 5. Grave 5, left, and Grave 7. Plan of disposition of grave goods and animal remains (Drawing J. Dębowska-Ludwin)

cobra. Finally, more pig bones (fragment of rib, metatarsal bones, digit and tarsal bone) were discovered among the vessels deposited in the southern chamber. One of the pots (no. 3) contained the bones of a long-legged wading bird, while remains of three specimens of rodent were located in and around another of the vessels (no. 2). A single piece of pig pelvis bone was recorded in the said annex.

Grave 7 [Fig. 5, right] belonged to a woman over 20, who was buried together with a child of eight or nine years. The distinguished mammal remains were identified as pig (at least five animals), cattle (two?), also goat/sheep and dog. Also found were snake vertebrae, fish bones and a piece of mollusk shell. Faunal matter was noted in the fill of the grave pit, immediately next to the human skeletons and in vessels deposited in groups in the southern and northern ends of the pit.

The incomplete skeletons of two pigs aged 10–12 months were identified immediately next to the human bones, along with the digits of a dog, presumed remains of two different Egyptian cobras and a mollusk fragment. Scattered among the vessels in the southern end of the grave pit were further fragments of pig (piece of mandible, tibia, femur), goat/sheep (radial bone) and fish. More faunal matter was identified in the northern end of the grave pit, near and under vessels deposited there (nos 32, 33, 34); it belonged to a pig aged around two years. Scattered cattle bones were also discovered in this grave: two pieces of horns of the same specimen (a male) and a rib. One of the horns was found in the northern end, between vessels (nos. 22 and 24), base down, while the other one was placed with the base up between two other vessels (nos. 18 and 21).

A rib piece lay to the north of the horns (but with no way of telling whether it was part of the same specimen), along with two pig mandibles (from specimens aged 2–3.5 and 3.5–5 years).

In recapitulation, one should emphasize the not always obvious or easily identifiable role of faunal matter in grave contexts. The position of animal bones inside a grave, the number of these bones and the body parts they represent frequently support an identification of such remains as offerings symbolizing food for the dead. This is definitely the case with regard to some of the faunal assemblages from the described Graves 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7. Single bone fragments originating mostly from the fill of grave pits or else discovered in or near pots should be viewed as remains of ritual meals consumed during the funeral which took place at the grave. This is most certainly the case with regard to all the examined burials containing faunal matter (Graves: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 20, 21, 23, 24, 26, 29). The circumstances of deposition of the corneal horns of the cattle specimen identified in Grave 7, as well as the snake remains (assuming they are not secondary in this context) point to the offering-giver's different intentions, exceeding the interpretations presented above. These remains could have reflected either social or material status of the buried person, or else they could have served some symbolic function.

Naturally, some of the bone matter could have entered the grave context by accident, i.e. bones of rodents and reptiles (Graves 5, 6, 7, 8), and need not have had any connection with funeral ceremonies.

Further to the remarks above, it should be observed that pig predominated among the meat left as an offering in the

graves in Tell el-Farkha. The same species is prevalent in the post-consumption faunal material. Data on age distribution, showing a preference for younger animals, and the share of different body parts, demonstrating the superiority of cuts of meat intended for consumption, point to the existence of specific funerary customs.

The presence or complete absence of faunal matter in graves reflects changes occurring in the burial rites during this period. The situation presented above is presumably connected with the gradual decline of the importance of the settlement on Tell el-Farkha and the related pauperization of the resident population (for

a discussion of evidence of political and economic transformation observed in burial rites at the site, see Dębowska 2011, in this volume).

Further analysis of osteological material from graves discovered in upcoming seasons, combined with comprehensive anthropological analysis, should lead to a verification of these results and interpretational suggestions. Nevertheless, the examples presented in this article are a convincing demonstration of the role faunal analysis can have in studies of behavioral patterns in ancient societies viewed through the prism of broadly understood spirituality.

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