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Author(s): Krzysztof M. Ciałowicz

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ENIGMATIC BUILDING FROM TELL EL-FARKHA
PRELIMINARY STUDY

Krzysztof M. Ciałowicz
Institute of Archaeology, Jagiellonian University

Abstract: Tell el-Farkha is one of the most important Pre- and Early Dynastic sites excavated presently in the Nile Delta. A monumental building dated to Naqada IIIA/B was discovered on the Eastern Kom. The inclination of the outer walls, the niches in the facades (at least in the eastern one), a regular and very concentrated plan without any passages between rooms, compact fill inside the chambers and, last but not least, the dimensions (at least 300 m^2) give rise to the assumption that it is the oldest Egyptian mastaba. In the Naqada IIIB period a settlement was erected on top of the mastaba and even later, on the same spot, Early Dynastic graves appeared. Another settlement and burials were located in the same place at the end of Early Dynastic Period. This complex archaeological situation reflects the extended, multi-phase character of the processes by which Naqada culture colonized the Delta.

Keywords: Naqada Culture, Protodynastic, Early Dynastic, Tell el-Farkha, cemetery, mastaba

The site of Tell el-Farkha lies in the Eastern Delta of the Nile, about 120 km from Cairo, part of a fairly dense network of prehistoric and Early Dynastic remains found in the region. It occupies three mounds, covering altogether more than four hectares, and has been the object of regular excavations by a Polish expedition since 1998. On the Western and Central Koms, as the mounds have been designated, the archaeological situation appears sufficiently clear, but on the Eastern Kom the interpretation of both the stratigraphy and the function of the discovered buildings leads to tentative conclusions that are astounding in the light of current research on the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods in the Nile Delta and perhaps even more broadly in Egypt of the times.

The Western Kom was occupied by a succession of large building complexes, made first of organic materials and then of mud brick, apparently official and residential in character and serving the settlement as a whole (Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2002; 2004a; 2004b) [*Table 1*]. Remains of a monumental structure from the Naqada IID/IIIA period discovered on this mound have been attributed tentatively to the first Naqadan settlers, whose chief task was presumably to organize and supervise trade with the Near East (primarily Palestine and Sinai). On the same spot but later, at about the time that Dynasty 0 faded out, making way for the First Dynasty, an administrative–cultic center was erected. It was a large complex of rooms, presumably invested with a variety of functions.

Two deposits of undoubtedly votive character, more than 100 objects in all, were uncovered inside this complex. Some of the figurines, of stone and of hippopotamus tusks, are artistically unique, comparable only to the deposits uncovered earlier in Hierakonpolis, Elephantine and Tell Ibrahim Awad. Nevertheless, all of the structures uncovered to date on the Western Kom are quite evidently habitational and part of the settlement. Moreover, the mound's specific role in the life of the ancient inhabitants of Tell el-Farkha is further confirmed by the fact that it was the first to be abandoned. This event took place in the first half of the First Dynasty when the status of the settlement dramatically declined for whatever reason. It can only be assumed that the first to leave were members of the local elite who moved, voluntarily or under compulsion, to another locality with better connections to the centers of power of the emerging Egyptian state. A similar phenomenon has been recognized in Upper Egypt, where cemeteries of the Protodynastic period were abandoned and huge necropolises sprang up instead, mainly in the Memphite region.

The Central Kom, at least in the light of current excavations (Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2002; 2004), remained an ordinary settlement throughout the existence of the locality. The houses in successive phases did not change much. They were quite extensive, yet nothing about them, whether building technique or wall thickness, was comparable to the architecture revealed on the Western Kom. The same is true of the inventory found in the fill of these structures. These were mostly numerous flint workshop remains, furnaces and hearths, grain silos and a variety of objects that represented the daily life of the ancient inhabitants in Predynastic and Early Dynastic times. Most of the animal and plant remains found at Tell el-Farkha originated from the layers on this particular mound. Even so, some of the finds have proved surprising, testifying to the important, if only menial and subsidiary role filled by the inhabitants of the Central Kom in the life of the locality during Proto- and Early Dynastic periods. Suffice it to mention ornamented clay rings, a few dozen centimeters in diameter, found on top of the hearths, clay figurines, numerous impressions of cylindrical seals as well as the actual seals.

But the situation at the beginning of human occupation on the site must have been entirely different. Excavations in the

Table 1. Stratigraphic sequence in the southwestern part of the Eastern Kom on Tell el-Farkha

Settlement and cemetery	Late Early Dynastic / Early Old Kingdom
Cemetery	Early Dynastic
Settlement	Naqada III B
Monumental sepulchral building	Naqada III A/III B
Naqadan occupation	Naqada II D–early IIIA(?)
Lower Egyptian occupation	Naqada IIB(?)–II C

2008 season (presented in this volume in the Reports section) have proved that a Lower Egyptian elite was connected with the Central rather than the Western Kom. Everything changed rapidly when the first settlers from the south decided (or were granted permission) to stay permanently at Tell el-Farkha. Concluding, at the present stage of the excavations all the evidence collected from the Western and the Central Koms clearly indicates that the architecture on both mounds is mostly of the rural and urban type and was undoubtedly habitational in function.

The situation on the Eastern Kom proved much more complicated. Initially, based on the results of the Italian expedition which had investigated the site in the beginning of the 1990s (Chłodnicki *et alii* 1991), the features discovered on this spot were also believed to represent settlement architecture. Geophysical prospection in 1999–2000 revealed the presence of nothing but some small brick structures of unclear function (Herbich 2002). Consequently, excavations on the Eastern Kom started a few years later than in other parts of the site. The first test trench was just 2 m by 3 m, but the results triggered broad-scale operations that have opened more than 20 ares by now. This obviously resulted in the same stratigraphical levels being reached in different years in successive extensions of the trench. Another evident difficulty draws from the slope location, resulting in the markedly different state of preservation of layers of the same date and origin in various parts of the trench.

From the beginning of excavations on the Eastern Kom, the character of the finds differed from that observed in other parts of the site. A few burials dating from the early First Dynasty were discovered, but it was the situation below the graves that attracted attention. The orientation and arrangement of the uncovered bricks was completely different. Also, while all the graves had very thin walls, no more than 8–9 cm thick (Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2004a; 2004b), there was one feature that was distinguished by massive walls, reaching 50 cm in width, cut into a layer of brown earth.

It turned out that the graves were for the most part superimposed on the corner of a massive brick wall where a few vessels had been deposited [***Fig. 1***]. The fill here bore distinct traces of burning. The next excavation season brought the handle of a dagger, made of hippopotamus tusk and decorated with a geometric pattern, and a stone pendant engraved with the *serekh* of an unknown ruler [***Fig. 2***]. Both objects were found evidently inside the uncovered walls, among bricks lying every which way, bonded in rubble and earth.

Extending the trench to the southwest and north in the next seasons of fieldwork revealed further sections of this feature. To the south, the outlines of a big structure appeared, surrounded by walls and including partitions [***Fig. 3***] forming chambers, a few of which measured approximately 7 m by 3 m. The thickest walls, both inner and outer, from 1.50 m to 2.00 m in width, were constructed using different building material: gray bricks in one case and yellow bricks in the other, the difference owing to the sand added to the silt fabric. The chambers were filled inside with dried brick laid in all and sundry directions. The bricks with their considerable sand content were unlike the more common mud bricks occurring in Tell el-Farkha; bricks of the same kind (with sand) have been recorded on the site in layers connected with the beginnings of Naqada culture.

Fig. 1. Corner of mud brick walls and Early Dynastic graves (All photos R. Słaboński)

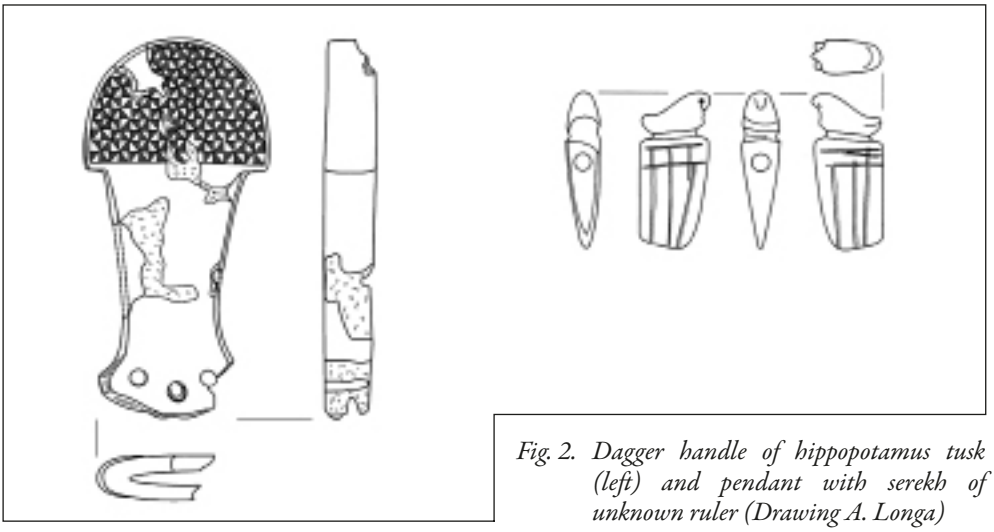

Fig. 2. Dagger handle of hippopotamus tusk (left) and pendant with serekh of unknown ruler (Drawing A. Longa)

The situation in the freshly opened northern part of the trench was more complicated. Outlines of First-Dynasty brick tombs were uncovered just below the surface. Some of them undoubtedly cut through earlier and poorly preserved walls [*Fig. 4*]. Further to the north and nearer to the top of the mound, the complexity of the sequence grew, with remains of a poor settlement from the end of the Archaic Period and the beginning of the Old Kingdom emerging just under the topsoil [*Fig. 5*]. Below these remains there were some poor pit graves with no inventory and in the layers underneath the same architecture (in chronological terms) that had been cut by the Early Dynastic tombs elsewhere in the trench. This settlement was formed of houses made up of relatively small and narrow rooms [*Fig. 6*]. The details of the layout, however, were difficult to reconstruct in view of the damages effected by the later graves. The walls were thin (25–30 cm), very poorly made and traced, mostly crooked, seldom forming a right angle in the corners. The material from particular rooms consisted of typical settlement pottery and large numbers of querns, grinders, flint tools and fireplaces. But the only really noteworthy find was a group of eight alabaster vessels, upended in a kind of basket. Of these the most interesting was a small vessel imitating a type characteristic of Early Bronze Age

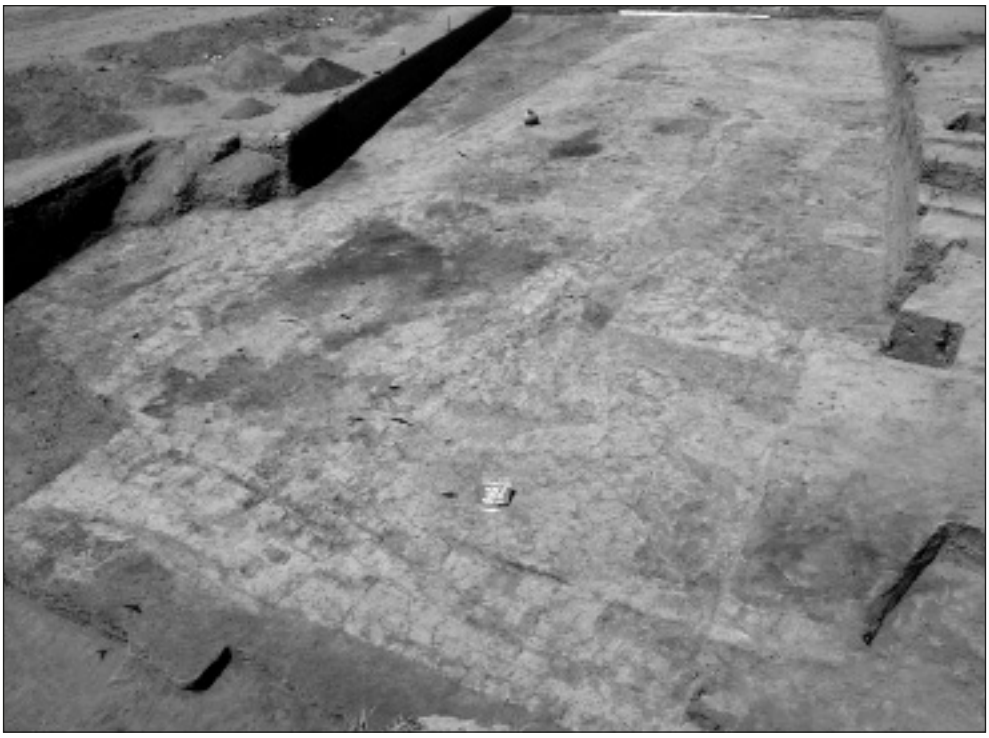

Fig. 3. Southern part of monumental structure; remains of Early Dynastic graves on the right

Fig. 4. Early Dynastic graves cut through earlier settlement remains (Naqada IIIB)

Fig. 5. Poor settlement from the Archaic period and the beginning of Old Kingdom period

Palestine (Van den Brink, Braun 2006: 818). In consequence of these finds, it can be concluded that a very modest settlement, even poorer than that on the Central Kom, functioned in this part of the site just prior to the oncome of the First Dynasty.

The monumental building described above emerged in the layer under this settlement [*Fig 7*]. Its outer walls on the south and east were more than 2 m thick. The facades receded slightly toward the top and the walls were oblique in cross-section; at the foot on the outside there was a kind of bench. A row of niches was in evidence at least in the eastern façade; they were not so evident in the southern one. The discovered structure in this form may be preserved fragmentarily or it may have never been finished (although it could be argued that this was the intended final shape, see below). The plan is completely symmetric in the southern and eastern parts: two rectangular units on each side, surrounding an almost square "central chamber". Excavations to date have not reached the end of the south wall which continues on to the west.[1] The situation north of the "central chamber" is more difficult to interpret.

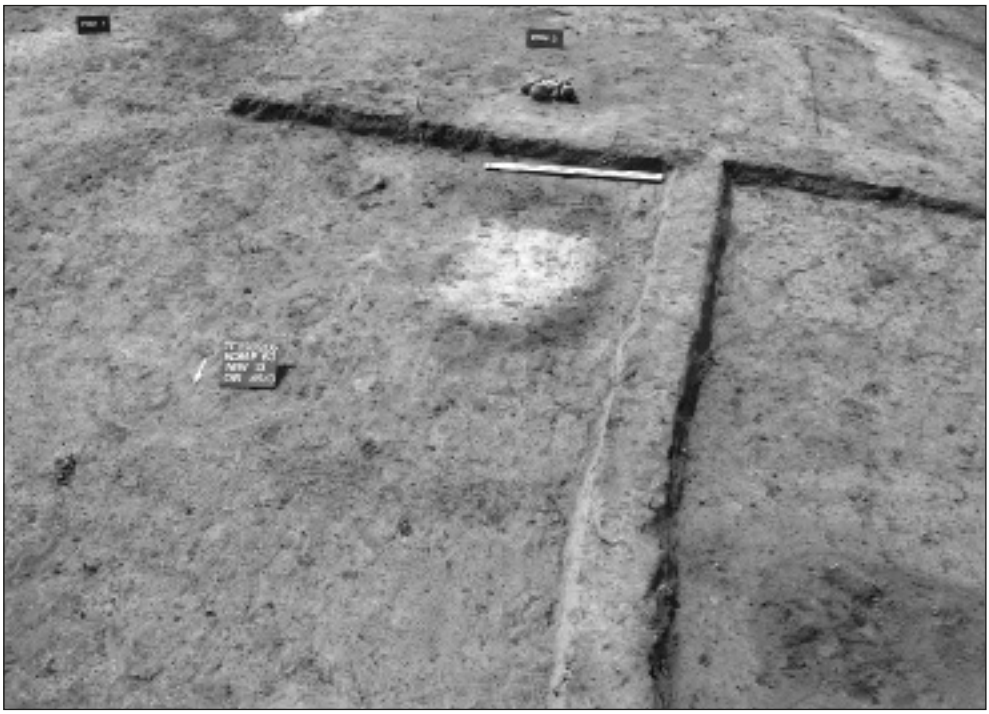

Fig. 6. Remains of a settlement dated to the Naqada IIIB

[1] After fieldwork in the 2010–2011 seasons, it became clear that the east wall was constructed in very similar fashion and continued far to the north and away from the main part of the building. It is possible that both walls were meant to separate the building from the cemetery or settlement.

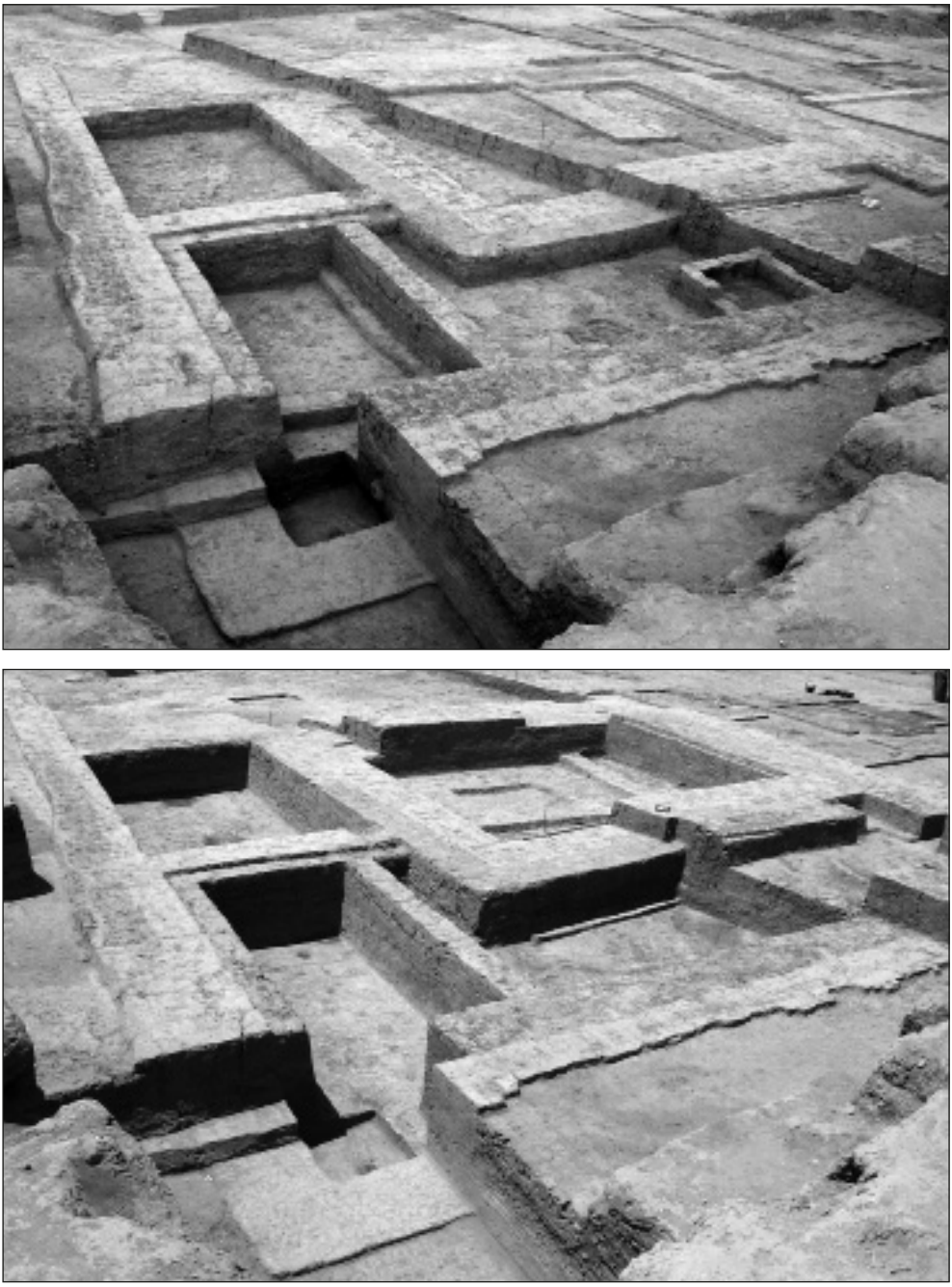

Fig. 7. Monumental building, first (top) and next stage of exploration

The relatively modest and apparently later settlement extended here, too. It may have caused the destruction of the northern end of the above described feature. As excavations have not been completed as yet, it is to be expected that proof of the existence or absence of this monumental structure will also be found in this area.

The main chamber of the structure is almost square with walls 2.50 m thick around it [*Fig. 8*]. The walls were actually made up of two different walls built of different kinds of brick. Three corners, the two on the northern side and the southwestern one, were rounded in shape. Only then were they cased with walls forming the northern and western facades of the uncovered part of the construction. The southeastern corner of the central chamber was rectangular, but on this side there were external rooms adjoining it. This manner of building could suggest that the structure had been designed this way and executed according to plan. Inside the main chamber, but not exactly in the center, a relatively thin wall was first discovered, followed by a kind of a wooden espalier. Below it, yet another wide wall emerged, forming a kind of shaft. The area outside it was filled with bricks set in soil. Exploration inside the shaft, which went down almost 1.50 m and was carefully lined with bricks on the inside, also failed to identify the function of this building. The shaft, like the lateral rooms, contained nothing but considerable quantities of small potsherds and a few shattered vessels, which upon reconstitution proved to be virtually complete.

The biggest issue, at least at this stage of the explorations, is to determine the function of the building. The dwellings

Fig. 8. Central chamber of the structure

known from Tell el-Farkha, even those of the most developed character from the Western Kom, whether from a slightly earlier or later period, demonstrated some similarities in execution (walls of different kinds of brick, rounded corners), but the layout was completely different and not so compact, and the finds there clearly pointed to a residential function. The village on the Central Kom was even more different.

The inclination of the outer walls, the niches in the facades (at least the eastern one), a regular and very concentrated plan without any passages between rooms, compact fill inside the chambers and last but not least, the dimensions (at least 300 m^2) were suggestive of mastabas from Archaic times. No direct parallels have been recognized, but a comparison with the central part of mastaba 1060 from Tarkhan (Petrie 1913: 13–20) justifies the conclusion. Examples exist of mastabas that were completed but never used, e.g. tomb 27.w.1 in Tura, discovered by Junker (1912: 25–26). The structure from Tell el-Farkha has not yielded conclusive evidence arguing in favor of its interpretation as a mastaba. One of the outer chambers (the southeastern one) did yield some human bone fragments and the said pendant with the *serekh* of an unknown ruler, as well as a dagger handle (in the same chamber), but with no evidence of plunder this can hardly be perceived as sufficient proof.

On the other hand, there is more evidence arguing in favor of the structure's sepulchral function than its being an ordinary dwelling or even a kind of "palace". For one thing, all of the uncovered chambers of the described structure were filled with bricks interspersed to a lesser or greater extent with soil and also with ashes in one of the eastern rooms. This was clearly not a layer of rubble but intentional filling. Layers of destruction have been identified at Tell el-Farkha and they are easily distinguishable, quite unlike what was found here. In this case, the filling was about 1.50 m deep and was contained between walls. It could not have been made without a reason. Sieving of the fill yielded numerous potsherds, a few very poor vessels and isolated flint tools. It is quite unlikely that the Protodynastic inhabitants of the site went to the effort of erecting this gigantic building only to fill it with rubbish, use it as an ordinary house or as a platform under what looks like a very modest settlement discovered above it.

The investigations of the southwestern part of the Eastern Kom have not only uncovered this mysterious monumental feature, but have also stimulated new ideas on the processes that triggered the emergence of the Egyptian state.

Current theories concerning the relations between Lower and Upper Egypt can be described in brief as a natural expansion of Naqada Culture into the Delta, replacing the autochthonic Lower Egyptian Culture. The two cultures had been in contact before, as indicated by finds from Maadi, for example (Seeher 1990: 140ff.) as well as recently from Tell el-Farkha, too, where evidently Lower Egyptian structural features yielded pottery that was identified as Naqadan and other imports from Upper Egypt (see Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2011, in this volume). These contacts had been considered as relatively rare before the recent discoveries at Tell el-Farkha. It now seems that relations between Lower Egyptian and Naqada Culture were much more developed. The Lower Egyptian community has also proved to be much more stratified

than earlier supposed. It is also possible that Lower Egyptian authorities granted permission for the first huge Naqada building to be built on the Western Kom in place of the earlier breweries, which was a place outside of the Lower Egyptian town centre, still inhabited probably by local elites. The common belief is that the change occurred between the Naqada IID and IIIA periods, when the Naqadans practically overran the Delta. The process, according to these opinions, must have proceeded relatively swiftly and in one strong push. There were surely several reasons for Naqadan expansion northward, but control of trade routes should be deemed among the most important ones.

Based on current knowledge from Tell el-Farkha, the process arbitrarily referred to as 'union' appears to have taken a different turn and the role of the Delta in it was not what it has been believed so far. It should be kept in mind that it did not last more than about 100–150 years and similar phenomena may have taken place also at the end of the Second Dynasty.

The stratigraphical sequence in the investigated part of the Eastern Kom is noteworthy for it suggests that successive phases in the occupation of this mound could be linked to different and unrelated groups of settlers. The changeover from Lower Egyptian to Naqadan settlement is expectable in this context, but surprising to say the least, when it appears to take place during a period of confirmed Naqadan occupation. It is hardly imaginable that the same community first built a monumental sepulchral structure and then raised a modest village with very poorly executed houses right on top of it. Then a burial ground appeared on the ruins in the Early Dynastic period and on top of it yet another village with graves dated from the beginning of the Old Kingdom. The contemporaneity of the settlement and cemetery, which occupied part of the old village, can be explained by the far-going decline of Tell el-Farkha in this period. Not only was the entire Western Kom and at least part of the Central Kom abandoned, but the poorness of the graves compared with earlier periods is astonishing.

These arguments cannot be applied to the earlier period when Tell el-Farkha was clearly one of the important political and administrative centers in this part of Egypt. The apparently monumental sepulchral structure could not have been imaginably followed by a modest village and a burial ground on top of it, if the place had been in the possession of the same group of inhabitants all the time. Judging from the size and shape of the tombs, as well as the fairly rich inventory of grave goods, they were owned by what can be termed a middle class on Tell el-Farkha. No other Egyptian site has offered similar evidence to date. It seems that Naqadan settlement in the Delta could have occurred in more than one wave, steered by different and mutually competing political centers. This possibility is further confirmed by the layers of destruction identified on the Western Kom. Nonetheless, the Western and Eastern Koms differed in key ways and new arrivals must have been aware that the western mound was occupied by buildings belonging to a local elite and therefore they settled their own elite there as well. In the case of the Eastern Kom, the same dependence did not arise, as the ruins of the sepulchral building were, either intentionally or by accident, covered by hastily built housing for the poorest classes. Once these new settlers improved their

material standing, they abandoned this poor village, establishing a cemetery on the ruins instead. Further changes of function of the Eastern Kom could be linked, as discussed above, with the growing pauperization of the inhabitants or else the arrival of a new group of settlers at the end of the Second Dynasty, a possibility not to be excluded at the present stage of the investigations. The Second Dynasty and particularly its terminal years continue to be a blank page in ancient Egyptian history; political strife, noted in written and iconographic sources, cannot be excluded. The archaeological record from the Eastern Kom on Tell el-Farkha provides new arguments in favor of there being more than one wave of settlers streaming into the area. The stratigraphy of the mound also confirms that at the end of the Second Dynasty, the spot directly above the said sepulchral structure constituted the highest point on the site, while the modern peak has been recorded as being shifted a few dozen meters to the east. In 2006, two statuettes of gold sheet were discovered in the settlement extending north of the sepulchral building. The archaeological context of the find gives a date in the Naqada IIIB period. Nonetheless, the statuettes were clearly not in original context. It is unlikely that objects of some material value, and evidently of ritual importance as well, could have belonged in modest architecture typical of a not very affluent village. It is also hard to resolve unambiguously whether it is proof that they had been hidden by the inhabitants of Tell el-Farkha because of impending danger or, quite the opposite, that they were booty taken by these same inhabitants on some other competing city. The fact that the treasure had not been dug out in the past seems to point to the first possibility. Probably those who hid it never returned to Tell el-Farkha. This confirms the instability of the political situation in Egypt in the Protodynastic period. The winner in this rivalry for power must have laid the foundation for the kingdom of the Pharaohs.

Current research in Tell el-Farkha has demonstrated that the process of colonization of the Delta by the Naqadans and the emergence of the Egyptian state was not an effective, single-phase event. Moreover, it appears to have taken place already in the Naqadan period. The old theory of completely different Upper and Lower Egyptian Kingdoms, developed on the basis of ancient written histories, cannot be upheld in the face of these new archaeological facts. The proto-kings of Naqadan origin competed for power and influence, centering much of their attention on control of the Delta and the important trade routes that passed through it. Based on data from excavations in Upper Egypt, it is assumed that the greatest rivalry in Protodynastic times existed between Hierakonpolis and Abydos. Consequently, these two centers could have played a significant role in the events revealed by the archaeological record on Tell el-Farkha.

Prof. Krzysztof M. Ciałowicz
Institute of Archaeology, Jagiellonian University
31-007 Kraków, Poland
ul. Gołębia 11
e-mail: krzysztof.cialowicz@uj.edu.pl

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

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