



Gold from Tell el-Farkha Conservation Project at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo

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Source: *PAM 20 (Research 2008)*, 171-175

ISSN 1234-5415 (Print), ISSN 2083-537X (Online)

ISBN 978-83-235-0821-2

Published: Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (PCMA UW),
Warsaw University Press (WUP)

www.pcma.uw.edu.pl - www.wuw.pl

GOLD FROM TELL EL-FARKHA

CONSERVATION PROJECT

AT THE EGYPTIAN MUSEUM IN CAIRO

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Abstract: Remains of two gold-sheet figures were discovered in 2006 on Kom W in Tell el-Farkha. The conservation and restoration of the figures was carried out in stages, starting immediately after the discovery. They were continued subsequently in two stages at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

Keywords: Tell el-Farkha, golden figurines, conservation

Polish excavations at Tell el-Farkha, a site in the Eastern Nile Delta concealing remains from the times of the Lower Egyptian Culture through the Old Kingdom (Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2002; 2004), have brought a number of discoveries expanding and changing our understanding of the beginnings of Ancient Egyptian civilization. One of these was the discovery in 2006 of the remains of two figures made of sheet gold (Ciałowicz 2007: 72; Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2008: 147–150).

The hoard was uncovered in a unit marked as no. 205 on the Eastern Kom, in layer 30/31. The room was open from the south and the objects had been deposited in the northwestern corner, parallel to the north wall. Beside the gold figures, the hoard also contained two flint knives and a necklace of beads made of ostrich eggshell and carnelian. The objects must have been wrapped together or placed in some kind of container presumably of an organic substance. The archaeological

context indicated a date in the Naqada IIIB period (approximately 3150–3100 BC, corresponding to Tell el-Farkha phase 4). The excavators do not believe the findspot of the hoard to be where the objects had been displayed and it is more than likely that the objects themselves are older than the context in which they were discovered (Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2007: 8–13). The set was certainly of a ritual nature and it must have been hidden during some local infighting (Ciałowicz 2007: 72).

Upon discovery the sheet gold was fragmented and displaced [*Fig. 1*]. Careful registering of the pieces, which had to be smoothed and laid out, led to the provisional reconstruction of the find. This stage of the documentation and preservation work took place on site in 2006 and lasted one week, after which the gold was convoyed to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

Preliminary documentation of the find indicated two figures depicting men,

approximately 60 cm and 30 cm high respectively. Both were shown standing and both were naked. They had been made of an organic material, wood presumably, which has been lost entirely. The sheet gold covering had encased the wooden core of the figures (Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2007: 13). Small rivets found with the gold confirm this idea as sheet gold is too soft and plastic as a material to be mounted on a corpus of some hard material.

Further conservation and restoration of the figures took place at the labs of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, where the objects were being prepared for display at the *Seventy Years of Polish Archaeology in Egypt* exhibition, which opened on 21 October 2007. The exhibition was organized by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (Majewska 2007: 17–21).

The complexity and singularity of the find and the degree of damages that the gold images had incurred demanded more work than was envisaged at first. Therefore, during the preparations for the exhibition attention was paid primarily to the smaller figure. The gold pieces were fitted

together and mounted on a papier-maché corpus. The legs, arms, head and face were modeled, making place for the eyes made of lapis-lazuli. The figurine was mounted vertically in a metal stand. For lack of time the sheet gold of the bigger figure was mounted on a provisionally modeled head and corpus. The remaining fragments were straightened and restored to their original shape and the figure recomposed lying flat on an appropriate base [Fig. 2].

The second stage of the conservation project organized by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology took place in 2008 and was carried out in association with the conservation lab of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo with full support and cooperation from the Museum Director, Dr. Wafaa El Saddik. The gold objects were taken under police escort from their place of display in the main hall of the museum to the conservation lab.

The conservation and reconstruction treatment comprised work on the actual fragments of sheet gold and on reconstructing the shape of the two figures.

Repairing the sheet gold required the restoration the original shape of the

Team

Dates of work: First stage, September–October 2007; second stage, 17 April–15 May 2008

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Conservator: Władysław Weker (State Archaeological Museum, Warsaw)

Photographer: Robert Słaboński (Institute of Archaeology, Jagiellonian University)

Acknowledgments

Joint project of Jagiellonian University and Poznań Archaeological Museum, in association with the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw, carried out since 1998 and directed by Prof. Krzysztof M. Ciałowicz and Dr. Marek Chłodnicki from the respective organizing institutions.

fragments and the inventorying of all the pieces, matching elements found and subsequently fitted together.

The damages to the object had obliterated practically all evidence of the original shape of the figures. Pieces of different size (a few dozen larger ones and more than a hundred smaller fragments, often less than 5 x 4 mm in size) were much bent, folded, mechanically deformed, torn apart and cracked. Each fragment needed to be straightened out, the creases and folds removed while retaining any original modeling of the figures. This task demanded extreme care and diligence as the gold tended to tear at any incautious move. Fortunately, the plasticity of the sheet metal was still good, allowing deforma-

tions to be removed with the use of professional jeweler's tools. Matching fragments were reconnected using Japanese tissue to underglue the pieces. An acryl resin solution in acetone was used as adhesive. The process of matching and joining pieces required also modeling of the original form. Several such smaller parts could then be put together to restore the whole figure. A model of the core figure was prepared, first of easily modeled jeweler's wax, later replaced with papier-maché and gypsum. This model figure was corrected over and over again as work on the sheet gold progressed, ultimately reconstructing the complete shape of the original figure.

Once the sheet gold was restored to its original form, it was mounted on a gypsum



*Fig. 1. Fragments of the gold figures upon discovery
(All photos R. Słaboński)*

corpus painted brown in imitation of dark wood. The two figurines were displayed in standing position on metal stands [Fig. 3]. The last stage of the process, will be to transfer the gold shapes to properly prepared wooden models.¹

The two gold figures from Tell el-Farkha constitute an excellent example of figural art from the Early Dynastic period. They demonstrate the artisan's proficiency in producing and modeling gold sheet. The attention to details is particularly

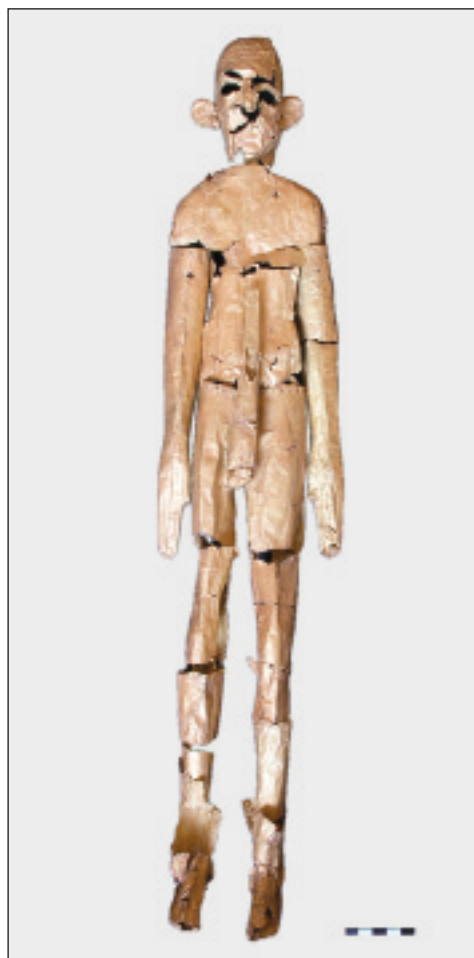


Fig. 2. The larger figure following preliminary conservation measures

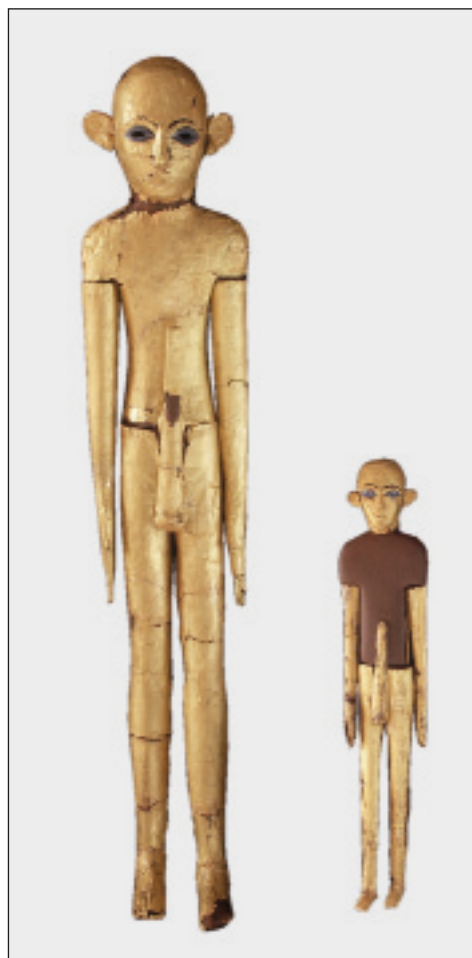


Fig. 3. The two gold figures, larger and smaller, after conservation and reconstruction

¹ The bigger figure was transferred from the gypsum core to a wooden one (prepared earlier in Poland), in 2010 and the same will be done with the smaller figure in 2012.

impressive. Both figures had eyes made of imported lapis-lazuli. The brows were filled with some organic material, now lost, either bitumen or ebony. The figures are believed to be images of the ruler and his

son/heir (Ciałowicz 2007: 70; Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2008: 148). Once the reconstruction work is completed, the two figures will have contributed significantly to our understanding of Early Dynastic art.

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CONTENTS

CONTENTS

<i>PAM RESEARCH</i> — NEW FORMULA: NOTE FROM THE EDITORIAL BOARD...	11
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	13
OBITUARIES	
<i>Stanisław Medeksza</i>	15
<i>Eliza Szpakowska</i>	17
<i>Hanna Szymańska</i>	19
ABBREVIATIONS AND STANDARD REFERENCES	21

PAM REPORTS

PCMA FIELD MISSIONS AND PROJECTS IN 2008 (WITH MAP)	25
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EGYPT

ALEXANDRIA

ALEXANDRIA: KOM EL-DIKKA EXCAVATIONS AND PRESERVATION WORK. PRELIMINARY REPORT 2007/2008	
<i>Grzegorz Majcherek</i>	35
THE ISLAMIC GRAVEYARD ON KOM EL-DIKKA IN ALEXANDRIA. EXCAVATION SEASON 2007/2008	
<i>Emanuela Kulicka</i>	52
GLASS FROM AREA F ON KOM EL-DIKKA (ALEXANDRIA). EXCAVATIONS 2008	
<i>Renata Kucharczyk</i>	56
NUMISMATIC FINDS FROM KOM EL-DIKKA (ALEXANDRIA), 2008	
<i>Adam Jegliński</i>	70

MAREA

MAREA: EXCAVATIONS 2008	
<i>Hanna Szymańska</i> , <i>Krzysztof Babraj</i>	81
MAREA 2008: POTTERY FROM EXCAVATIONS	
<i>Anna Drzymuchowska</i>	97

CONTENTS

MARINA EL-ALAMEIN

MARINA EL-ALAMEIN. POLISH–EGYPTIAN RESTORATION MISSION:
CONSERVATION WORK IN 2008

Stanisław Medeksza, Rafał Czerner 103

TELL EL-RETABA

TELL EL-RETABA 2008: EXCAVATIONS AND GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

Sławomir Rzepka, Jozef Hudec, Tomasz Herbich 129

TELL EL-RETABA 2008: THE POTTERY

Anna Wodzińska 146

TELL EL-FARKHA

TELL EL-FARKHA (GHAZALA), 2008

Marek Chłotnicki, Krzysztof M. Ciałowicz 153

GOLD FROM TELL EL-FARKHA. CONSERVATION PROJECT AT THE EGYPTIAN
MUSEUM IN CAIRO

Anna Longa, Władysław Weker 171

TELL EL-MURRA

TELL EL-MURRA (NORTHEASTERN NILE DELTA SURVEY), SEASON 2008

Mariusz A. Jucha, Artur Buszek 177

SAQQARA

SAQQARA 2008: INSCRIBED MATERIAL

Kamil O. Kuraszkiewicz 183

DEIR EL-BAHARI

TEMPLE OF HATSHEPSUT AT DEIR EL-BAHARI, SEASON 2007/2008

Zbigniew E. Szafrński 193

BUILDING *DIPINTI* IN THE TEMPLE OF HATSHEPSUT. DOCUMENTATION WORK,
SEASON 2007/2008

Dawid F. Wiczorek 203

TEMPLE OF HATSHEPSUT: POTTERY FROM EXCAVATIONS IN THE ROYAL
MORTUARY CULT COMPLEX, SEASONS 2004–2008

Ewa Czyżewska 212

SHEIKH ABD EL-GURNA (WEST THEBES)

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN THE HERMITAGE IN TOMB 1152
IN SHEIKH ABD EL-GURNA (WEST THEBES)

Tomasz Górecki 225

DAKHLEH OASIS

DAKHLEH OASIS PROJECT. PETROGLYPH UNIT, ROCK ART RESEARCH, 2008

Ewa Kuciewicz, Michał Kobusiewicz 237

CONTENTS

SUDAN

OLD DONGOLA

- THE 12 NUMMLA COIN FROM OLD DONGOLA
Barbara Lichocka 245

BANGANARTI

- BANGANARTI AND SELIB: TWO FIELD SEASONS IN 2008
Bogdan T. Żurawski 251
- APPENDIX 1: REVITALIZATION PROJECT AT BANGANARTI
Bogdan T. Żurawski 261
- APPENDIX 2: BANGANARTI CONSERVATION REPORT
(JANUARY–FEBRUARY AND NOVEMBER–DECEMBER 2008)
Dorota Moryto-Naumiuk, Bogdan T. Żurawski 262
- APPENDIX 3: OVERVIEW OF CERAMIC STUDIES AT BANGANARTI IN 2008
Dobiesława Bagińska 264
- INSCRIPTION WITH LITURGICAL HYMN FROM THE LOWER CHURCH
IN BANGANARTI
Agata Deptuła 267
- BANGANARTI FORTIFICATIONS IN THE 2008 SEASON
Mariusz Drzewiecki 273

CYPRUS

NEA PAPHOS

- NEA PAPHOS: SEASON 2008
Henryk Meyza 283

LEBANON

ESHMOUN

- ESHMOUN VALLEY: PRELIMINARY REPORT AFTER THE THIRD SEASON
OF THE POLISH-LEBANESE SURVEY
Krzysztof Jakubiak 295

SYRIA

TELL ARBID

- TELL ARBID: ADAM MICKIEWICZ UNIVERSITY EXCAVATIONS IN SECTOR P,
SPRING SEASON OF 2008
Rafał Koliński 303

CONTENTS

TELL QARAMEL

TELL QARAMEL: EXCAVATIONS 2008

Ryszard F. Mazurowski 321

PAM STUDIES

INTRODUCTION 345

ENTRE LA II^E ET III^E CATARACTE: SEDEINGA, UNE ÉTAPE SUR LA RIVE
OCCIDENTALE DU NIL

Catherine Berger-el Naggar 349

FOOD AND FUNERALS. SUSTAINING THE DEAD FOR ETERNITY

Salima Ikram 361

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

Renata Abłamowicz 373

THE NECROPOLIS AT TELL EDFU: AN OVERVIEW

Joanna Aksamit 379

THIRD INTERMEDIATE PERIOD CEMETERY IN THE HATSHEPSUT TEMPLE
AT DEIR EL-BAHARI. RECENT RESEARCH

Miroslaw Barwik 387

ENIGMATIC BUILDING FROM TELL EL-FARKHA. PRELIMINARY STUDY

Krzysztof M. Ciałowicz 399

FUNERARY TEXTILES FROM THE MEDIEVAL CEMETERY OF NAQLUN

Barbara Czaja-Szewczak 413

GRAECO-ROMAN TOWN AND NECROPOLIS IN MARINA EL-ALAMEIN

Wiktor Andrzej Daszewski 421

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION AS REFLECTED BY BURIAL
RITES OBSERVED IN THE PROTODYNASTIC PART OF THE CEMETERY
IN TELL EL-FARKHA

Joanna Dębowska-Ludwin 457

IN THE SHADE OF THE NEKLONI MONASTERY (DEIR MALAK GUBRAIL, FAYUM)

Włodzimierz Godlewski 467

REMARKS ON THE TYPOLOGY OF ISLAMIC GRAVES FROM THE CEMETERIES
ON KOM EL-DIKKA IN ALEXANDRIA

Emanuela Kulicka 483

BEADS AND WARRIORS. THE CEMETERY AT HAGAR EL-BEIDA 2 (SUDAN)

Anna Longa 499

CONTENTS

MATS AND BASKETS FROM CEMETERY A AT NAQLUN IN FAYUM OASIS <i>Anetta Łyżwa-Piber</i>	509
TOMB BUILDING TRADITION IN LOWER NUBIA FROM THE MEROITIC AGE TO AFTER CHRISTIANIZATION <i>Artur Obłuski</i>	525
ANIMAL REMAINS IN POST-MEROITIC BURIALS IN SUDAN <i>Marta Osypińska</i>	541
CEMETERY A IN NAQLUN: ANTHROPOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF THE BURIALS <i>Karol Piasecki</i>	549
ORNAMENTS ON FUNERARY STELAE OF THE 9TH–12TH CENTURIES FROM EGYPT — JOSEF STRZYGOWSKI’S PUBLICATION ANEW <i>Małgorzata Redlak</i>	561
NON OMNIS MORIAR. REFLECTION ON “RITE DE PASSAGE” IN THE OLD KINGDOM <i>Teodozja I. Rzeuska</i>	575
BURIALS IN THE COMPLEX OF THE GREAT AMIR QURQUMAS (No. 162) IN CAIRO’S “NORTHERN NECROPOLIS” <i>Maciej G. Witkowski</i>	587
BURIAL CUSTOMS AT TELL ARBID (SYRIA) IN THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE. CULTURAL INTERRELATIONS WITH THE NILE DELTA AND THE LEVANT <i>Zuzanna Wygnańska</i>	605
GIFTS FOR THE AFTERLIFE: EVIDENCE OF MORTUARY PRACTICES FROM THE NECROPOLIS IN MARINA EL-ALAMEIN <i>Iwona Zych</i>	619
INDEX OF SITES	633