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LOWER EGYPTIAN CULTURE IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEW RESEARCHES

The first Egyptian Predynastic and Early Dynastic site to be investigated by Polish archaeologists on a large scale is Tell el-Farkha in the Eastern Nile Delta. It is composed of three mounds (koms): Western, Central and Eastern, which rise about 5 m above surrounding fields and lay at the edge of Ghazala about 120 km to the northeast of Cairo. Since 1998 the site is investigated by Archaeological Museum in Poznan and Institute of Archaeology of Jagiellonian University in cooperation with the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of Warsaw University (Ciałowicz 2010).

During fifteen years of researches a lot of important discoveries was made, which changed radically our view on the beginnings of Egyptian state. Among the most crucial are those referred to the Lower Egyptian culture, which developed in the Delta during the first half of fourth millennium BC. At Tell el-Farkha two oldest chronological phases distinguished at the site were connected with the mentioned culture. Phase 1 can be correlated with Naqada IIB/C – IID1 (ca 3700-3500 BC). Phase 2 is related to the Naqada IID2 period (ca 3500-3450/3400 BC). In both phases, the site was occupied by the Lower Egyptian culture, but while the first one is generally connected only with autochthonous inhabitants of the Delta, in the second phase more traces of Naqadian influences are visible.

In the bottom layers of the Western and Central Koms poorly preserved remains of different structures were noted. Layers correlated with this period contained an extraordinary assemblage of architectural forms. The entire area was covered by constructions made of organic material, like wood and reed, set directly into a *gezira*. The remains of these constructions were visible only as numerous furrows. Most of them were 10-15 cm, but also wider 30-50 cm occurred. Almost all of them were oriented north-west to south-east. The most



1. Remains of Lower Egyptian „residence“. View from the South

characteristic feature of this phase is the presence of many small and bigger compartments attached to one another, forming a very regular pattern. The houses were accompanied by numerous postholes and storage pits, sometimes plastered with mud. Those rooms seem to be parts of bigger buildings or other architectural structures. It is really difficult to define the purpose of such rooms. Many of them were empty. In many others, small or bigger oval holes were discovered.

Very soon the settlement at Tell el-Farkha was divided into zones playing different functions and separated one from another by wooden fences. The western part of the Central Kom was used for the residential purposes. To the south-east of it an ordinary settlement with small houses was located. The north-eastern part was a periphery without any solid constructions. About the same time, the first brewery was established at the Western Kom. A wooden fence separated it from few houses located at the eastern edge of the mound.

The so-called Lower Egyptian “residence” at the Central Kom was surrounded by a double fence (Chłodnicki, Gering 2012: 92). It was at least 20 m long and 25 m wide (Fig. 1). Within, a construction with complicated interior was located. The residence was lined with furrows filled with brownish soil, very well visible on the sand, constituting remains of the timber structures. In many

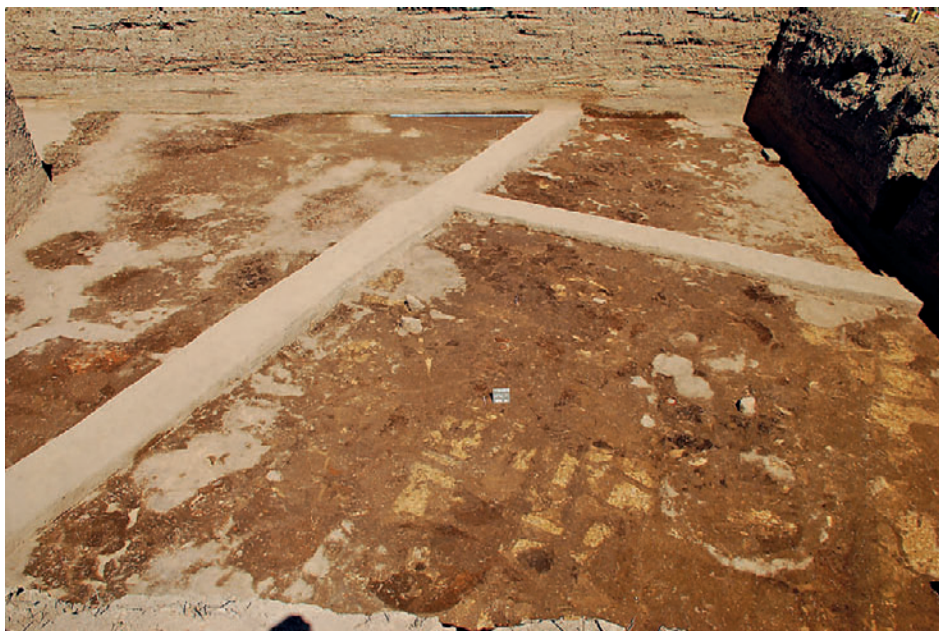


2. Remains of Lower Egyptian houses. View from the South

cases it was possible to ascertain that timber beams were half round, placed flat side up. The width of the beams was usually not larger than 20 cm, although a number of them was 30 cm wide. The beams run parallel or perpendicular to each other and spaces between them were small. It seems that not all of the furrows correspond to partition walls of individual rooms – it is difficult to ascertain the size and amount of the separate rooms. This complicated structure had different construction than other simple single small houses found on the site and most probably we have recorded only structures lying under the floor of that large building.

In the area of this “residence” we can observe higher amount of postholes and less amount of pits than in other part of the settlement. It is also noteworthy that there was no animal bones in their content, whereas outside residence they were fairly frequent.

To the south-east of the residence, separated from the north by a single fence, a range of small houses was discovered (Fig. 2). The rectangular constructions were approximately 3 m wide and from 5 to almost 7 m long with the surface around 14 sq. m (Chłodnicki, Geming 2012: 98). Their dimensions were similar to that known from Maadi (Seeher 1990: Abb 3.1). Some of them had divided interiors with the postholes and pits inside. Some of the pits had



3. Mud brick walls on the Central Kom. View from the South

a layer of ashes suggesting that they could have been used as fireplaces. The size of the buildings suggests that they could have served as houses for single families, which were rebuilt a number of times. It should be mentioned here that these houses from the Central Kom were contemporary to the early phase of the brewery at the Western Kom. To the north from the houses an area around 6 x 10 m was separated. This area could have been used for keeping the animals.

Characteristic constructions in the form of rectangular rooms made of organic material were already known from other parts of the site, as well as from some other Lower Egyptian settlements (Rizkana, Seeher 1989: 43-49), but never were so well organized.

By the end of phase 1, most certainly in the Naqada IIC period, the wooden fence was replaced by a massive mud brick wall (Fig. 3). The wall was 1.6 m thick at the base and 1.2 – 1.3 m at the top with slightly oblique sides.

The construction on the western border of the Central Kom, which at first was surrounded by a double fence and later by the mud brick wall, we have called a “residence” not only because of the unique architectural remains, but also because of the important items found inside. Among them are fragments of Near Eastern pottery and their imitations, what is not surprising, since from the beginnings of research connected with the Lower Egyptian culture strong



4. Mace-heads from the Central Kom

relations with the Levant were evident (Seeher 1990: 151). Much more important are proofs for significantly closer connections with Upper Egypt, visible not only in quite numerous potsherds but also in flint tools, cosmetic palettes or stone vessels. Among them are also two mace-heads, which were found in the northwestern part of the residence (Fig. 4). The first one, made of basalt, bears traces of impacts on its surface. The second, made of bone, must have been purely of symbolic character. These mace-heads are the oldest items of this kind found in Tell el-Farkha, and, moreover, the bone object belongs to very rare finding.

Other valuable items are a collection of 27 beads found in a concentration, forming probably a necklace (Fig. 5). Four of beads were made of a thin golden foil. They are of different size, but the same barrel shape. It is the first example of using gold by the Lower Egyptian societies. The stone beads have different shapes and were made of different raw materials – agate, carnelian, rock crystal and steatite. Judging by the material and the shape of the beads, the entire collection was imported from Upper Egypt.

In the residence was also found a fragment of a copper knife, Hemmamiyah type flint knife and a stone vessel with a flat base, conical sides of a type already known from the Maadi (Seeher 1990: 141, Abb. 9:6-7). It is noteworthy to



5. Stone and gold beads from the Central Kom



6. Remains of the oldest brewery form Western Kom. In upper left corner traces of wooden fences. View from the West



7. Mud brick walls surrounding the brewery at the Western Kom. View from the South

mention that outside this “residence” any valuable items, dated on the Lower Egyptian culture, were found.

At the Western Kom at the same time the brewery centre was established. The oldest of the breweries can be dated on Naqada IIB. The first structure was seriously destroyed by a younger construction and only its general shape was recognizable. Two parallel rows of vats formed an L-shaped structure, composed of 13 circular remains of seats. The whole productive area was surrounded by wooden fences (Fig.6), which were made of long wooden beams (10-20 cm in diameter) placed approximately 1 m one from one another. Perpendicularly to both of them, traces of thinner wooden beams were clearly visible. Spaces between them were so small that it is hardly possible to interpret them as workshops, houses, etc. It is then probable that these small beams were only of structural character. Similar fences were also built on all other sides. As a result, the breweries were evidently separated from the rest of settlement. Outside, small houses and storage rooms were probably placed. The relicts of such constructions are preserved north-east and east of the fences.

The wooden fences also here were very soon (during the Naqada IIC period) replaced by mud brick walls (Fig. 7). An almost square space was

enclosed by these walls. Inside, earlier organic material constructions and big round/oval holes were replaced by the breweries. The walls were about 1.40 m thick and were made mainly of mud bricks, but bricks with sand admixture were also used, especially in the western wall. The existence of these solid mud brick walls in the Lower Egyptian strata is of great importance. After a detailed examination of the building process, size and location it is possible to say with confidence that the discovered walls belonged to the enclosure system, which surrounded the entire brewery area.

It seems obvious that all the divisions of the production area were precisely planned in advance. The building itself, as well as the organic enclosures and the regular big holes, were created exactly to the plan and all designated parts of this area were used for different purposes. In that case the surrounding fences and enclosures could be considered as devices used also during the brewing process and the brewery itself could be located in one of those enclosures intentionally.

Excavations conducted up till now, allowed to distinguish several features of the Lower Egyptian construction found at Tell el-Farkha. Although the knowledge of these early levels is still limited, some general architectural concepts are obvious. The older phase of the construction seems to be the simplest. We deal here with reed and wood architecture, which was placed directly on the *gezira* sand. The size and sophisticated internal divisions of each building and the whole layout of a particular area are much more elaborate than in Maadi (Rizkana & Seeher 1989: 43-49) or Buto (von der Way 1997: 64-73). In Tell el-Farkha all structures are much more complex. Long and extremely regular external walls of the huge structures or even single buildings are very common. Everything was planned in advance. Organic walls of buildings were reinforced with wooden posts placed in the corners and at the beginning of each wall. The wooden posts were sometimes very numerous and incorporated densely in the wall and sometimes only in the extreme parts or in the places, where the wall was weak. All big buildings were rectangular in shape and no oval shapes were encountered. Apart from complete structures, some other characteristic features were common as well, such as round/oval pits of different sizes, either attached to or separated from rectangular structures. Some of them had an external mud border and other smaller holes inside. They probably were storage pits or in some cases a kind of storage hut – a hollow covered by an organic roof or a superstructure made of reed. Some other much smaller pits were also observed. There were two types of these finds. The first one had a brown soil filling and in some of them storage jars, occasionally covered by a bowl, were discovered. The other type had a brown soil filling as well, but the outer part was made of or filled with mud. Both types were probably used also as post-holes. Many of them were placed in one line forming the outer part of some compartments of bigger structures or single storage rooms or shelters.

Also the builders of breweries knew exactly how the whole structure must be erected to be ready to start the process of beer brewing immediately after construction works. The shape of bricks, the regular line of the external brick walls, the form and location of ovens attached one to another and, finally, the brick foundations for large clay vats, all this was precisely planned before installation. Such a huge construction and production project is something really unusual at Lower Egyptian sites. This discovery should change the way of thinking about the stage of development of this culture and about its potential and importance in Predynastic Egypt. The early use of mud bricks in wall construction moves back the chronology of this knowledge to the times preceding the Naqadian presence in the Delta. However, it might be the proof for early connections between the Lower Egyptian and Naqada culture in that period. It is worth remembering that both, the mud brick architecture and the brewing of beer, were known in the Naqadian centres much earlier than in the Delta region. According to Geller (1992) the earliest construction of this type found so far in Egypt should be dated to Naqada IB – IIA. The discovered breweries from Tell el-Farkha were established later, but from the beginning they were well organized and fully developed. So far no traces of experiments or initiation stage were discovered. It means that such remains could be found in another part of the site, or that beer making was introduced from the outside and the Lower Egyptians had borrowed these skills for example from Upper Egypt. The question about why the enclosure of mud brick walls was built remains unanswered. One explanation might be linked to frequent Nile floods noted in many layers at the site. Maybe the high and solid walls were built to protect brewing installations from destruction, because wooden fences were not strong enough for this purpose. However, even mud brick walls were not a sufficient obstacle against high Nile floods. Another explanation is then possible. Such walls are definitely the evidence for the importance of this production facility. They helped to protect the area from outside dangers and were used also as a method of controlling the production.

The conclusion, confirmed by the results of excavations at the Central Kom can be only one: mud brick constructions were known to the autochthonous inhabitants of the Delta before Naqadian occupation. But it is still an open question whether or not the introduction of bricks was connected to Naqadian influences and any contacts with the south of Egypt, or – to the contrary – whether it had been introduced on some scale in Lower Egypt and the Naqadians during their early contacts with the Delta adopted and fully developed this idea.

The fact that such kind of architectural planning in the Lower Egyptian strata was noted is also proof that the society was much more stratified than it was earlier supposed. Probably, the breweries at the Western Kom were controlled by the elite who lived in the “Lower Egyptian residence” at the Central Kom. It is worth to stress that position of the Lower Egyptian elite is visible in settlements, and not at the cemeteries like on the South. Close trade relations between Lower



8. Fragment of Naqadian building and brewery dated on Naqada IID2.
View from the West

Egypt and the South and Near East are confirmed by tokens found in the Lower Egyptian layers. The beer produced at the Western Kom at a large scale was one of the most important goods exchanged for raw materials and products from the South and North-East. To sum up, we can suppose that the base of commercial relations between Egypt and the Near East was established by the Lower Egyptians. In the end, Naqadian settlers at Tell el-Farkha had a clear way and could rise the relation on the higher level.

In some moment the breweries at the Western Kom and the Lower Egyptian residence at the Central one were destroyed by very high flow of the Nile and all the area was covered by mud. The residence was rebuild, and its inhabitants probably gave a permission for the first Naqadian settlers to build their own house in the location earlier occupied by the breweries, that is in the place outside the Lower Egyptian town centre, where local elites continued to live. It is connected probably with increased contacts between the Delta and Upper Egypt, which required permanent presence of a representative of the Naqada culture in Tell el-Farkha.

The first huge Naqadian building at the Western Kom was erected on these layer of mud (Fig. 8). East of it a small brewery, dated on Naqada IID2, was established. In the same time at the Central Kom the Lower Egyptian “residence”



9. Fragments of brewery from the Central Kom and wall separating the Lower Egyptian “residence”. View from the West.

was rebuilt. East of it, in a place formerly occupied by houses, a small brewery, similar to those from the Western Kom, was erected (Fig. 9). At the beginning a hypothesis arose that the beer from both mentioned breweries was used by the inhabitants of the Lower Egyptian “residence” and Naqadian building.

After discoveries made in 2013 also other explanations could be considered. During last excavations a small brewery, dated on Naqada IIIA1, was discovered. It was erected on the ruins of the mentioned above huge Naqadian building, but it is evidently older than the administrative-cultic centre, which was later build at this spot (Fig. 10). In this situation next supposition comes to mind. Possibly, the new discovered brewery, as well as those dated on Naqada IID2 from the Western and Central Koms, were established during construction of monumental edifices: the Naqadian building and the administrative-cultic centre at the Western Kom and rebuilding the Lower Egyptian “residence” at the Central hill. In such situation it is justified to speculate that all the three youngest breweries should be treated as a part of workers’ supplies. It means that people working on the monumental constructions were at least from Naqada IID



10. Youngest brewery from Western Kom. On top of it walls of administrative-cultic centre. View from the East.

provided with beer and the organization of work, at least in the Delta, had to be in those times on a very high level.

To sum up, it is necessary to stress some points, which confirmed that contribution of the Delta in formation of the Egyptian state is much deeper than it was earlier supposed:

1. The Lower Egyptian society was much more stratified than it was previously believed. At the head of it stood local elites, which supervised trade with East and South and established the base for future relations. Position of those people can be recognized at settlement, not at cemeteries as in Upper Egypt.

2. The first Naqadians came to Tell el-Farkha as tradesmen or settlers, but with permissions granted by the Lower Egyptian elite. Interesting is, that in Tell el-Farkha the Naqadians were settled in the western part of the site. Similar situation is known from Maadi, where subterranean constructions, related with the Southern Levantine newcomers, were also discovered in western outskirts of the settlement (Rizkana, Seeher 1989: 49-55).

3. In the Delta, people working on monumental constructions were at least from Naqada IID provided with beer, so the organization of work had to be on a high level.

4. From the Lower Egyptian culture, at least from the time contemporary with Naqada IIB, Tell el-Farkha was one the most important towns not only in the Eastern Delta.

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