

Krzysztof M. Ciałowicz

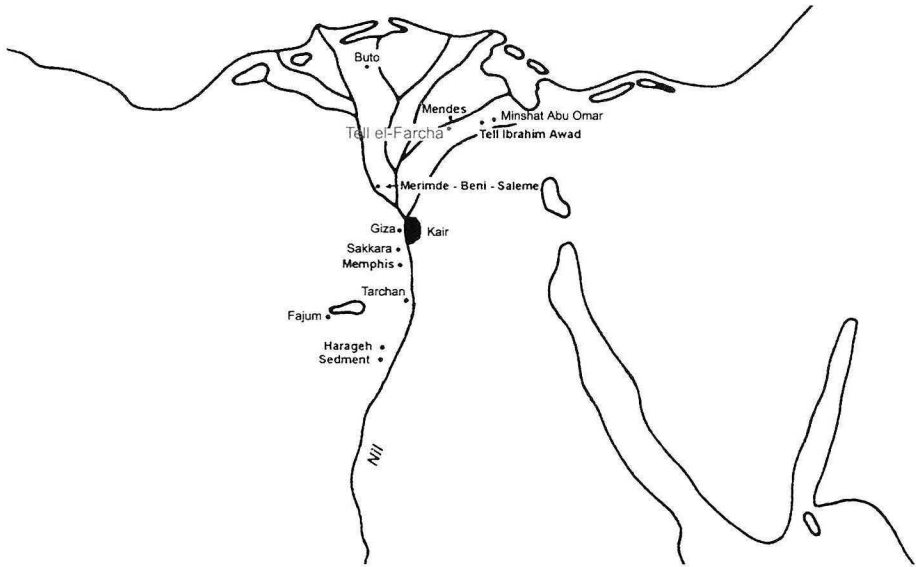
Jagiellonian University
Cracow

THIRTEEN YEARS OF POLISH EXCAVATIONS AT TELL EL-FARKHA

The first Predynastic and Early Dynastic site to be investigated by Polish archaeologists on a larger scale is Tell el-Farkha in the Eastern Nile Delta (fig. 1). It is composed of three mounds (Western, Central, Eastern), called *koms* in Egypt, lying at the edge of the village of Ghazala about 120 km to the northeast of Cairo. The mounds rise about 5 m above surrounding fields, occupying an area of more than 4 ha. An Italian expedition of Centro Studi e Ricerche Ligabue in Venice, headed by Prof. R. Fattovich discovered Tell el-Farkha in 1987, but despite of many interesting scientific results they desisted from excavations after a few brief seasons (Chłodnicki et al. 1991). The Polish Expedition to the Eastern Nile Delta, established by the Archaeological Museum in Poznań and the Institute of Archaeology of Jagiellonian University in cooperation with the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of Warsaw University, cut the first trenches in 1998. The present author and Dr. M. Chłodnicki have been in charge of the work right from the start.

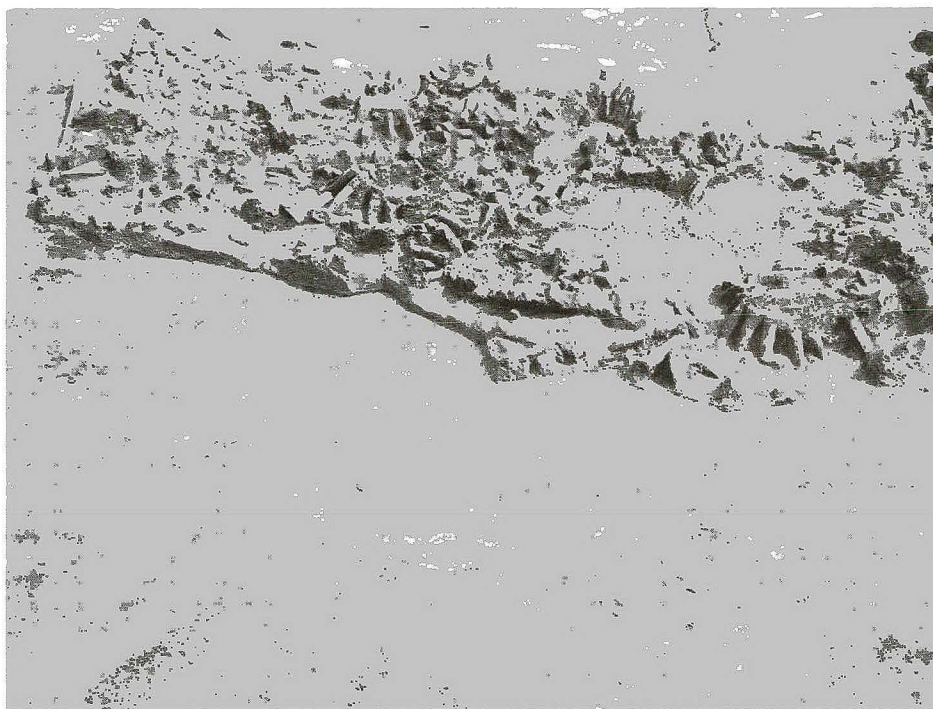
The importance of the site for a new understanding of the processes leading to the emergence of Pharaonic civilization left no doubt practically from the first season. The early art and architecture of ancient Egypt offers little in the way of parallels for both buildings and finds, and the discoveries of the last few seasons are truly unprecedented. Interest has been worldwide in a deposit of figurines of unmatched artisanship, and golden-sheet figures depicting a Predynastic ruler and his son and heir, believed to be the oldest known from Egypt.

A comprehensive geophysical survey and geological drillings carried out on the site in the first season revealed remains of houses, workshops and graves concealed under the three inconspicuous mounds overgrown with cutting grass. Stratigraphical trenches in different places confirmed the thousand-years history of the site, starting many hundreds of years before the emergence of



the pharaohs' state and clearly divided into several phases. The oldest period is connected with the Lower Egyptian Culture of the autochthonous inhabitants of the Delta, who inhabited the settlement at Tell el-Farkha from c. 3700/3600 to c. 3300 BC. They were followed by Naqada settlers from the south, probably associated with the first political centers emerging in Upper Egypt at the time. The apogee of development came in Protodynastic times and during the rule of Dynasties 0 and I (c. 3200-2950 BC). A slump occurred about the middle of the First Dynasty, but settlement continued off and on into the early Fourth Dynasty (Old Kingdom, c. 2600 BC). It was not until the archaeologists appeared that life returned to the forgotten of the Chicken Hill (for that is the name of the site in translation).

The oldest levels on all of the mounds have revealed large domestic structures, not recorded previously in Egypt, constructed of posts and wattle-and-daub walls. They were divided into numerous rooms of different functions. The discovery contradicts a widely-held opinion about low socio-economic development of the Lower Egyptian people. Of much greater importance in terms of features connected with the Lower Egyptian Culture horizon were the remains of the world oldest brewing centre (c. 3500-3350 BC). It is composed from at least 5 breweries. The earliest from these breweries was at some point destroyed by Nile flooding. The *gezira* on which the inhabitants lived at the time did not rise greatly above the level of the river and the annual flooding of the Nile would thus have resulted in the relatively frequent destruction of many settlements in



the Delta. Following a period which is difficult to assess unequivocally a second structure was built, and when this was in turn submerged beneath Nile silt deposits another building was raised.

All served the same purpose and all were similarly built (fig. 2). Each building consists of several circular features, surrounded by fire-dog type bricks. Some of these bricks were inserted diagonally into the ground and supported thick-walled vats with wide rims and narrow bases (Cichowski 2008). The plant material recovered from these features played an important role in their interpretation. Palaeobotanical analysis clearly demonstrated that the plant remains came from two successive phases in the process of beer-making (Kubiak-Martens, Langer 2008). Because the Tell el-Farkha excavations revealed an entire complex of successive breweries, it is clear that this site must have been an important beer production centre during the second half of the 4th millennium BC. It should be stressed that beer production had been already known in Tell el-Farkha before Naqadian settlers from South arrived there.

Very significant was the statement that inhabitants of Tell el-Farkha since their settlement very beginning were highly involved in trade exchange what is certified by the presence of objects imported from the Near East and Upper Egypt. First of them are known from other Loweregyptian sites, but abundance of

imports from Southern Egypt is surprising. It allows to assume that the relations between Eastern Delta and Upper Egypt were at the beginning of second half of fourth millennium BC much closer than were supposed up to now.

Tell el-Farkha's position on the trade route leading east made it highly attractive for the Naqadians penetrating into the Delta from the south with the express purpose of taking control of trade. There was a demand among the Naqada elites for luxury goods imported from the Levant on one hand and Nubia on the other, to emphasize status and rank.

The Naqadians lived briefly side by side with the Lower Egyptian Culture population, most certainly interacting with the autochthonous inhabitants, and then they gained predominance. There is no evidence of strife or destruction that could be connected with an invasion of settlers from the south. The more likely scenario is a gradual process of assimilation and acculturation with the native population of the Delta adopting the more attractive and modern southern models.

The first undertaking of the newcomers once they had settled in was to erect a huge building on top of the forgotten breweries. No bigger complex than this is known from Egypt of the day (c. 3300-3200 BC). Till now only eastern part of it was excavated. It measured some 25 by 25 m and consisted of an inner courtyard and a number of rooms separated by massive walls. The western part will be the main goal of a few next campaigns. The objects found inside it are proof of the role of trade in the life of the inhabitants. The building may have been a residence connected with stores, belonging to a Naqadian official from the south of Egypt charged with control over the trade between Palestine and the Delta on one hand and Upper Egypt on the other. He would have been associated with one of the early Egyptian rulers residing per example in Abydos or Hierakonpolis, whose rule extended over all or a considerable part of Egypt. Ultimately the building burned down in a huge conflagration, which may have been the effect not so much of intentional torching as a cataclysmic earthquake or flood. Were it indeed destroyed in an act of warfare, it could be construed as evidence of a growing rivalry between the various centers of power emerging in Upper Egypt at the time.

Another monumental complex was raised on top of the torched building. It was composed of two early shrines and several other chambers separated by walls of varying thickness. In mentioned shrines two votive deposits were found. The first of these, discovered in 2001, contained small figurines of baboons and a representation of a prostrating man, whose attitude and nakedness suggested that he was most probably a captive. There were also five rattles decorated with engravings, models of mace heads, miniature vessels of stone and clay, game counters and a number of beads (Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz et al. 2002).

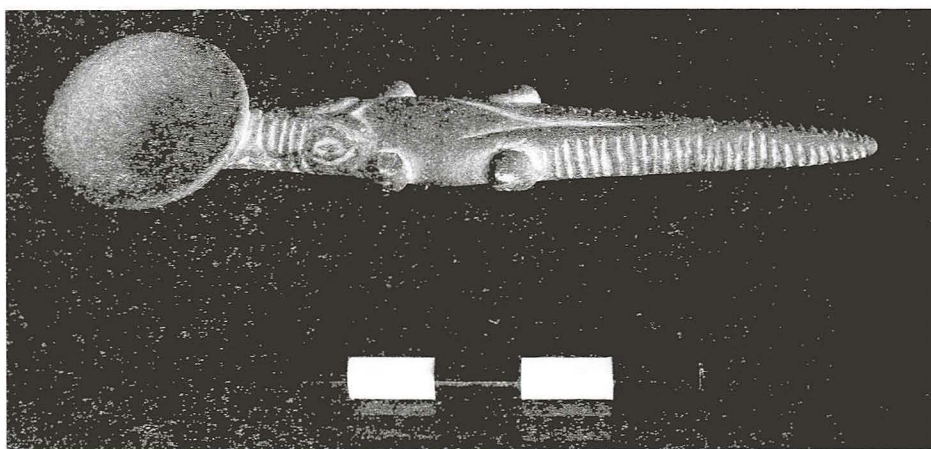
Further excavation in the western part of the complex in 2006 revealed in second of the shrines a number of ritual vessels, including a small jar, just 23



cm high, covered with a bowl. The jar turned out to be full of miniature objects, altogether 62 pieces (fig. 3). Figurines, many of which have never before been recorded for such early periods in Egypt's history, were crafted of hippo tusks, which were equally precious as ivory. They depicted men, women, fantastic creatures and animals, models of various objects made of stone, faience and bone, and miniature vessels of stone (Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2008). Special attention should be pay on the 13 figurines of dwarves (one man and 12 women) from Tell el-Farkha. It is the largest concentration of such statuettes ever found in a single location in Egypt (Buszek 2008). At present, about 30 figurines of dwarves are known from different sites of the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods; however, the level of workmanship evident in many of the examples from Tell el-Farkha, particularly in their expressive faces and the realistic way in which their deformed bodies are shown (fig. 4), are without equal in other, hitherto known representations of dwarves.

More unique figurines were discovered during next campaigns, including a small spoon of greywacke with a crocodile-shaped handle (fig. 5), models of weapons and hundreds of beads made from a variety of materials, such as faience and semi-precious stones.

Very interesting observations were made on the base of other items discovered in the direct vicinity of the shrine. During the excavations many stone and flint tools were found. Most of them were used in stone vessels manufacturing process. It is clear that the stone vessels workshop was strictly connected with



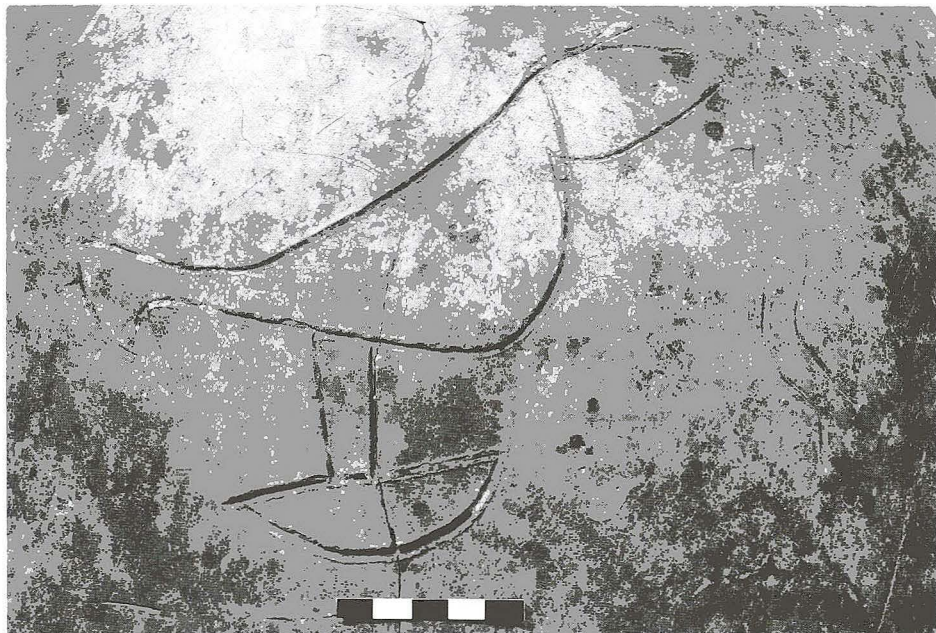
the cultic shrine, discovered in 2006. Analysis of animal remains gave other important information. All over the site in Tell el-Farkha (the settlement as well as the cemetery) bones of pigs are predominant, but in the previously mentioned area almost only cattle bones were found. A large flint knife was found with several cattle ribs alongside three storage jars hidden under the floor of shrine. This knife could have been used for ritual killing of cattle. Both hints confirm the exceptional role of the shrine in the Proto- and beginning of Early Dynastic period.

The importance of Tell el-Farkha as an administrative and cult center has thus been confirmed (Ciałowicz 2008; 2009). Before the middle of the First Dynasty the complex and the entire western part of the site was abandoned. The settlement that continued on the central and eastern of the mounds obviously lost its status and gradually diminished in importance.

The excavations made on the Eastern Kom also provided a few surprises. In the southwestern part of the mound a cemetery was mixed with small and poor settlement. The repeated change of function of this area, from settlement to burial and back to settlement again, quite exceptional in Egyptian conditions, is currently interpreted as reflecting a population change. It seems less probable at this point that it would be justified by the changing size of the inhabited area. The oldest of the almost 120 graves uncovered so far are dated to the times of Dynasty 0 and I, the youngest to the beginning of the Old Kingdom. The Early Dynastic burials range from rich to poor, while those from the Old Kingdom belong (at least until now) exclusively in the latter category. The medium-rich and rich tombs had chambers lined with mud brick and many featured massive brick superstructures reaching a height of 1.5 m. The biggest of the tombs measured 9.25 by 6.70 m. The richest of the burials in terms of grave goods included up to 50 clay and 30 stone vessels, ornaments of semi-precious stones and gold, clay figurines, cosmetic palettes, models of granaries, tools, weapons and offerings of meat and grain as food for the dead (Dębowska 2008).

Many of the vessels bore so called pot-marks which are in essence the oldest known hieroglyphic signs presumably intended as a means of identifying the origins of a pot or the export destination of the goods inside it. The names of some rulers of Dynasty 0, Iry-Hor and Ka, and that of king Narmer of Dynasty I have been deciphered among the signs. Name of Iry-Hor (fig. 6) were found in two graves, which seems to confirm the historic validity of this ruler (contra Wilkinson 1993). Abstracting from the proper pronunciation of the name this is an important proof, that Iry-Hor, known mostly from the Abydos region where his grave was discovered, extended his rule at least into the eastern Delta.

Some of the graves were dug into a huge structure covering more than 300 m² and dated to c. 3200-3100 BC. The regularity of the shape made up of a number of chambers separated by massive walls, 2.5 m at the thickest, surrounding an almost square main chamber furnished with an evident shaft



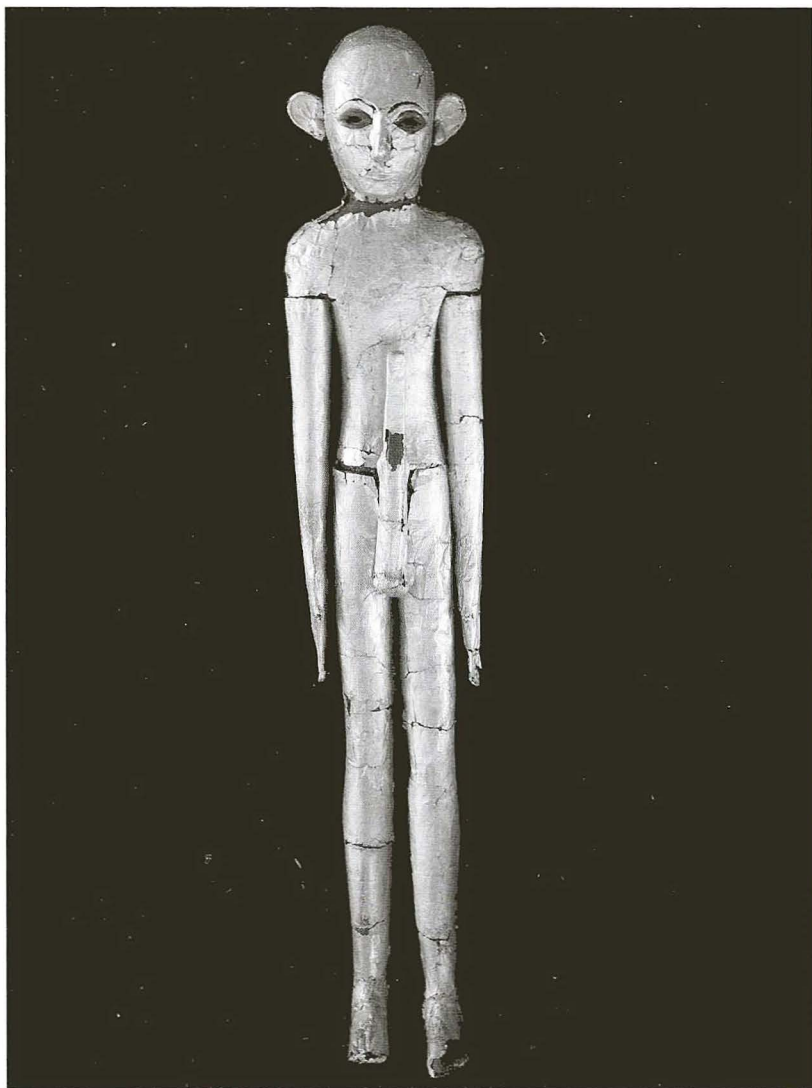
gives credit to the early architects and builders. It also throws new light on the beginnings of Ancient Egyptian architecture. Funerary mastabas of the kind were typical of Dynasties I-II and especially of the Old Kingdom. Assuming that the structure discovered at Tell el-Farkha was indeed a monumental grave, it would be earlier than Dynasty I and thus the earliest of its type known from Egypt. It will take researchers several seasons to complete the investigations of this structure, but even now the finds, which include a stone pendant with a *serekh* schematically carved with the name of some ruler and a dagger handle with geometric ornament crafted of a hippo tusk, suggest that the mastaba should be associated with someone of rank in the power hierarchy of the day.

Few smaller mastabas, dated on the reign of Dynasty 0 were also discovered. One of the most important is grave no. 100 (fig. 7), probably earlier than the reign of Iry-Hor. It is a free-standing mastaba measured ca. 5 x 4 m. and surrounded by walls of different thickness (Dębowska et al. 2010). The thickest one was in the North and was 2m wide, the eastern and southern walls were over 1m wide while the western wall was less than a meter. It may result from the fact that the western wall was the only devoid of niches. In case of the remaining ones niches were perfectly preserved – clearly and with no doubts. After the deceased and offerings were placed in the tomb the burial chamber was poured over with a thick layer of mud that crushed almost all the grave goods. But it is possible, that the main function of this layer of mud was protection against robbery. The



assumption is proofed by a clearly visible robbery trench running from the top of the construction. The robbers, however, were not able to cut-through the mud and did not reach the chamber. The skeleton of a 30-35 year-old male had been deposited in the northern part of the chamber, while the majority of his goods (36 pottery and 6 stone vessels and pottery ladle decorated with four small lion figurines) had been put in the central part of the chamber and by the deceased feet or even exactly over them.

The houses found in the northern part of the Eastern Kom were small in size and thin-walled. Rectangular rooms yielded a fairly typical assemblage of objects found in settlements: numerous ovens, tools, stone and clay vessels and their fragments. Once again, however, Tell el-Farkha gave an unexpected discovery. One of the rooms contained a few dozen pieces of gold foil accompanied by a hoard of ostrich-eggshell and carnelian beads and two large and perfectly crafted flint knives, 30 and 50 cm long respectively, undoubtedly of ritual function. This deposit proved to be a hundred years older than the origins of the Egyptian state. Judging by the archaeological context of the deposit, it must have been hidden away here, possibly in fear of an approaching invasion or perhaps as loot pillaged by the inhabitants of Tell el-Farkha elsewhere. Whatever the reason, the owners did not live to recover what they had hoarded here. It is tempting to think that the objects were saved from the raiders who burned down the residence on the Western Kom, but this is only one of the possible explanations. What was



clear from the moment of discovery was that the hoard was even older than the structure in which it was found.

Arduous reconstruction and conservation works of golden fragments resulted in separating rests of two distinct figurines. Both consisted of a core made of some perishable material (probably wood) that is completely unpreserved. Then the core was covered with a thin golden plate attached with small golden rivets. The figurines represented standing naked men – one 57 cm high (fig. 8),

second 30 cm. Eyes of both statues were made of lapis-lazuli. Eyebrows of our statues were also inlaid with a material other than gold. Since it was not preserved we may only assume that it was bitumen or ebony. The statues' stylistic and some accented details – like large sticking out ears, unnaturally big phalluses, detailed modeled fingers and toes – fit very well into the art of predynastic Egypt. Thus far, there is no other discovery of figurines presumably representing an early ruler and his son and successor made of so valuable materials (Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2007).

Last but not least, there is the central mound which has been identified as an ordinary settlement of farmers, herders, fishermen and artisans, subordinated to the elites residing on the western mound. Even so, the jewelry found here, the copper artifacts, imported pottery and seals and impressions of seals leave little doubt regarding the affluence of this population and their avid participation in long-range trade. Excavations have uncovered a number of architectural phases, each ending in destruction. The traditional alignment of all buildings across layers is NE-SW. In most cases, walls from 45 to 60 cm thick surrounded rooms grouped around rectangular courtyards and containing numerous ovens and hearths, often still with pots standing in them. Flint workshops were also identified. The first brewery in this part of the site was discovered in 2007. Studies of the faunal and botanical remains have provided a rich documentation of the everyday life of the ordinary inhabitants of Tell el-Farkha.

Looking back at thirteen seasons of work at the site, one cannot but perceive the site's uniqueness. The zonal division into the residential and cultic complex on the Western Kom, the domestic and economic quarter on the central mound and the cemetery and settlement on the eastern one has provided an exceptional opportunity to trace the origins, rise and fall of an important administrative center existing at the time of the emergence of the pharaoh's state. The size and elaborateness of the complex is comparable practically only with Hierakonpolis. It has also been disproved once and for all that the Lower Egyptian Culture of the Delta disappeared in effect of an armed invasion from the south. The Naqadians appear to have infiltrated slowly into northern Egypt, settling in empty areas as well as in existing centers, and introducing a civilizational model that the local population adopted quickly and freely. The same phenomenon has been observed on other sites excavated recently in the Delta. The most important reason seemingly for this expansion was control of the eastern trade routes, necessitated by the ever-growing demand for luxury goods coveted by the power elites of Upper Egypt.

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