

Mariusz A. Jucha

Jagiellonian University
Cracow

TELL EL-MURRA. THE PRE-DYNASTIC – OLD KINGDOM SITE IN THE NORTH-EASTERN NILE DELTA

The results of surveys and excavations in the Nile Delta continuously increase our knowledge about that area in the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods. In the light of new finds, especially from Tell el-Farkha (see this volume), it seems that sites situated here had great significance both in developing contacts between Egypt and Canaan as well as in the process of the state formation in Egypt. The data obtained from the archaeological work prove that a great quantity of sites are dated to the mentioned periods (Hendrickx, van den Brink 2002: 348-349, 370-371; Tab. 23:1, 23.2; Tristant 2005). Especially the North-Eastern Delta seems to have been quite densely populated. The sites which developed here were probably situated alongside the former Tanitic branch or/and its distributaries and the trading route leading from Egypt, through Northern Sinai to the Southern Canaan (van den Brink 1993: 294-297; Oren 1973: 203-204). Their existence and prosperity must be related to increasing commercial relations between both regions.

Although the number of Predynastic/Early Dynastic sites in the Nile Delta seems to be significant, the list of these presently excavated is limited to only a few. These include especially the work at Tell el-Farkha (see this volume), Tell el-Iswid (Tristant; De Dapper, Aussel, Midant-Reynes 2008), Buto (Hartung 2008; Köhler 1998; von der Way 1997) and Tell el-Murra (Jucha 2009b). Several other sites were also explored in the past, unfortunately the published evidence of these research is in most cases still limited to only a few publications and preliminary reports.

Further data concerning the early history of the Nile Delta have been obtained recently (since 2008) during the Polish Archaeological Survey in Ash-Sharqiyyah Governorate.¹ The area under the survey was situated to the east of

¹ Archeological Expedition of the Institute of Archaeology in Cracow (Jagiellonian University).

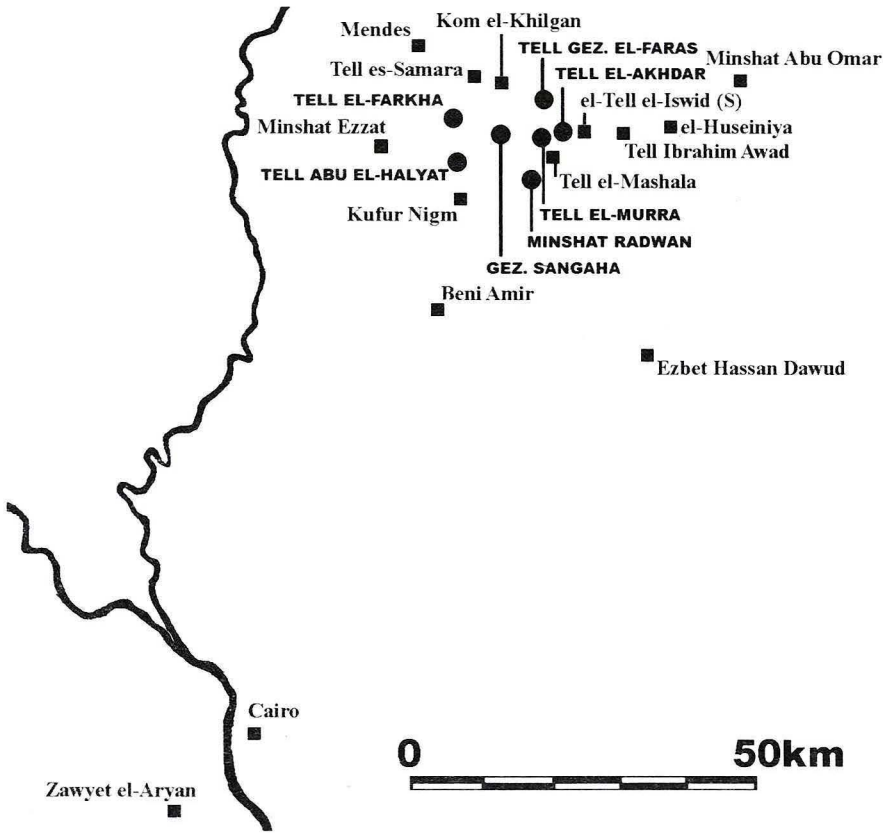


Fig. 1. North-Eastern Nile Delta (After: Hendrickx – Brink 2002: 366, Fig. 23.2).

Tell el-Farkha and to the west of Tell el-Iswid, Tell Ibrahim Awad and Minshat Abu Omar. During the survey several sites were visited. These include: Tell el-Murra, Tell Akhdar, Gezira Sangaha, Tell Gez. el-Faras, Tell Ginidba, Tell Abu Umran, Tell Abu el-Halyat, Minshat Radwan, Mantiqat el-Qala'a, Kafr el-Hadidi. Two of them (Tell Ginidba, Tell Abu Umran) were excavated by the Egyptian Archeological Expeditions, therefore these were excluded from our project. Other are presently overbuilt by the settlements and cemeteries (Tell Gezira el-Faras, Minshat Radwan, Gezira Sangaha, Mantiqat el-Qala'a, Kafr el-Hadidi), what excludes the possibilities of further research. Two other sites are very badly disturbed (Tell Akhdar, Tell Abu el-Halyat). The material (mostly fragments of pot-sherds) found on the surface of these sites and dated to Naqada III period occurred at: Tell el-Murra, Tell el-Akhdar, Tell Abu el-Halyat, Tell Gezira el-Faras and probably also Minshat Radwan. Moreover, at Tell el-Murra

a number of Old Kingdom potsherds was also collected in contrast to other sites where only a few potsherds could probably indicate that period (Tell el-Akhdar, Tell Gezira el-Faras, Tell Abu el-Halyat).

Among all the above-mentioned sites, Tell el-Murra (Fig.1) is the most promising archaeologically. It is almost undisturbed (only fragments were leveled by field activity) and it still rises several meters (c 3m - 4m) above the field level. Due to these conditions, further research was focused on that site. It includes geophysical research and geological core drillings. Test trenches were also opened in the north-eastern (S1) and south-western (S3) part of the site. The remains of mudbrick structures occurred in both. The material (mostly pottery) collected during the work makes it possible to establish a preliminary chronology of that site.

The uppermost strata of trench S1 contains forms which are characteristic mostly of the Late Old Kingdom. These include especially Meidum bowls with a rounded shoulder, a carination situated very high and the rim diameter equal or greater than the diameter measured on the shoulder (Fig. 2:11-12; cf. Bader 2009: 30, Fig. 9:a-g; Forster-Müller & Raue 2008: 136, Fig. 5:1; Op de Beeck 2004, Fig. 10:35, 39, 44; Rzeuska 2006: 408, Pls. 130-131; Wodzińska 2009: 130/36). There were also found examples with angular shoulders and an out-turned rim (Fig. 2:13; cf. Bader 2009: 30, Fig. 9h-j; Forster-Müller & Raue 2008: 131, Fig. 3:3). Bowls with incised parallel lines or raised ribs in the outer part of the rim zone (Fig. 2:7-8; cf. Bader 2009: 32, Fig. 10c-d; Forster-Müller & Raue 2008: 133-138, Figs. 4:1, 5:4, 6:3; Kaiser, 1969: 65, Type XXIX:165; Rzeuska 2006: 248-249, 407, Pl. 103, Wenke et al. 1988: Fig. 11g) occur also quite frequently. Other forms include: bowls with a rounded rim (Fig. 2:9; cf. Kaiser 1969: 67, Type XXXII: 176; Rzeuska 2004: 219, Pl. XCVII:86; Wodzińska 2009: 136/51; Vereecken et al. 2009: 201), with an internal lip-rim (Forster-Müller & Raue 2008: 136-138, Figs. 5:2, 6:2) as well as bowls (Fig. 2:10; cf. Rzeuska 2006: 407-408; Pls. 100:500-503, 125:626) and platters (cf. Rzeuska 2004: 218, Pl. XCVI:74; Rzeuska 2006: 398-399, Pl. 72:312-315), both with incised horizontal lines on the inner part of the walls. Most of these forms are characteristic especially of the 6th Dynasty, although some of them are known also since the 5th Dynasty.

The lower strata explored until now in trench S1 comprise pottery which shows affinity to forms known from the earlier part of the Old Kingdom. There are among them Meidum bowls with a maximum diameter at the angular shoulder (Fig.2:14; cf. Op de Beeck 2004: Fig. 3:16,22; Raue 1999: 182-183, Abb. 38:1) and bowls with an internal ledge (Fig. 2:15; cf. Köpp 2009: 65, Abb. 4:Z244; Raue 1999: 183-184, Abb. 39:5-6; Rzeuska 2004: 203, Pl.LXXXIX:5). Only a few fragments were found which may belong to beer jars with a collar (cf. Raue 1999: 183-184, Abb. 39:12; Rzeuska 2004: 203-204, Pl.LXXXIX:5; Wodzińska 2009: 118/5). Other forms include different types of jars with a simple (Fig. 2:1) or lip rim (Fig. 2.2-3) as well as red-polished bowls with a simple rim (Fig.

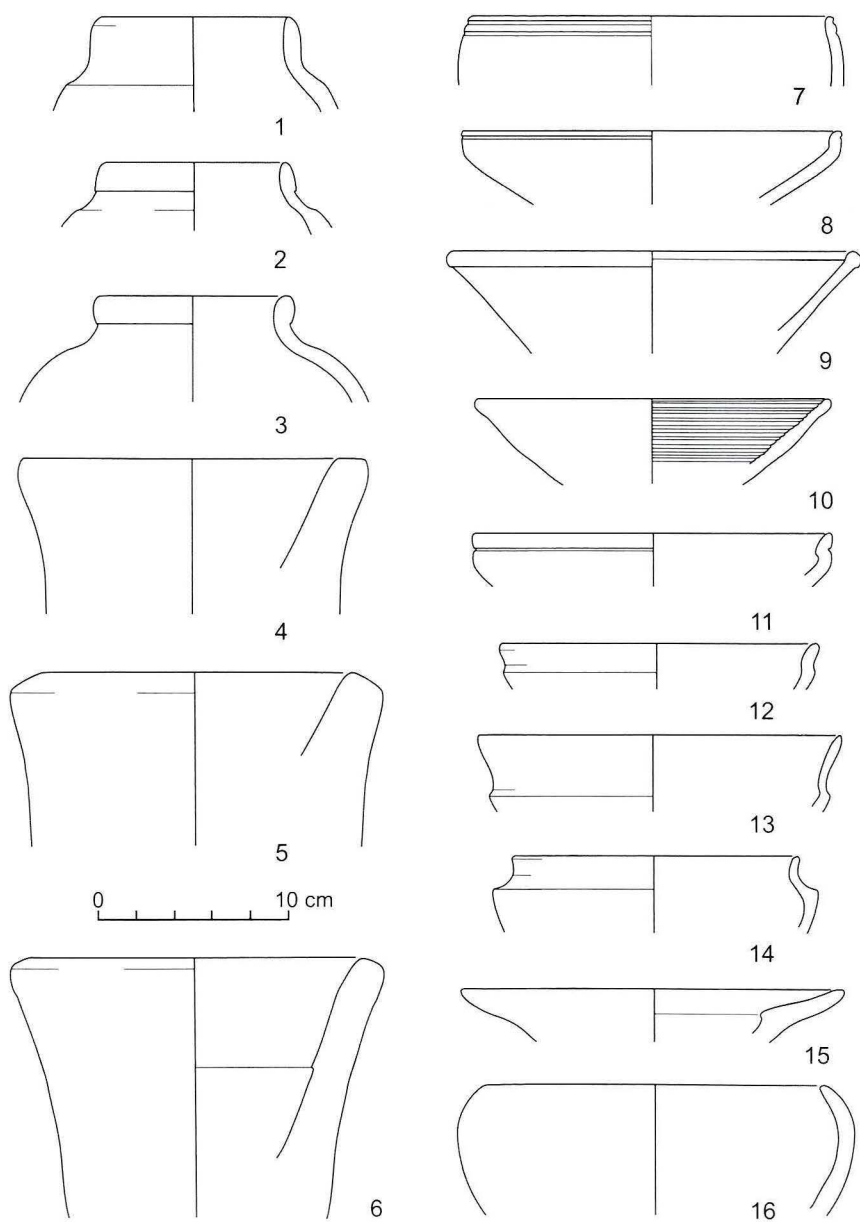


Fig. 2. Tell el-Murra. Old Kingdom Pottery.

2:16). Sporadically, red-polished bowls were also found with an angular inner edge of the rim (cf. Jucha, in press: Fig. 3.21; Köhler 1998: 23, Taf. 28.9–16) as well as flat plates with a red-coated and polished interior and uncoated, only smoothed, outer surface (Jucha, in press: Figs. 2.17; 3:24; 4:21). Among the bread moulds occur: forms with an angular transition dividing the body into two zones and a thickened internal part of the rim (Fig. 2:6; cf. Jucha, in press: Figs. 2:30, 3:37, 4:27, Köhler 1998:27, Taf. 45.2–4; Raue 1999: 174–175, Abb. 34.3; Wodzińska 2000: 154–155, Abb. 10.1) as well as examples with a flat rim top (cf. Jucha, in press: Figs. 1.28, 3:32, 4:25) or with a diagonal outer part of the rim of a flat contour (cf. Jucha, in press: Figs. 1:32; 2:28; 3:35; Köhler 1998:27, Taf. 46.4). The discussed pottery assemblage in most cases show affinity to forms known especially from the 4th Dynasty, although it contains also forms which appeared for the first time during the 3rd Dynasty or even during the Early Dynastic period.

Contrary to the results of the research in the north-eastern part of the Tell, the pottery material from the trench S3 situated in the south-western part comprises forms well-known from other sites of Naqada III period. The similarities are visible especially when we make a comparison with phases 5 (end of Protodynastic/beginning of Early Dynastic) and 6 (Early Dynastic), distinguished at Tell el-Farkha, the site which is situated only a few kilometers to the west.

The ceramic assemblage includes different types of fine-ware jars (Fig. 3:1,3-4), among them forms with a concave neck and a lip-rim (Fig. 3:4), which are especially characteristic of Tell el-Farkha phase 5, although they appear already in phase 4 and continue into the beginning of phase 6 (Jucha 2005: 44, Pls. 31:6–7, 32:5–6; Jucha, in press: Fig. 1:4; cf. Köhler 1998: Taf. 11:8,10; 53:14–15). The same concerns also fragments of jars with a concave neck and a rim with an angular lower edge (Fig. 3:3; cf. Jucha 2005: 43, Pl. 29:5–6; Jucha, in press, Fig. 2:3; Köhler 1998: 30, Taf. 53:2–3). Fragments of cylindrical jars with an impressed decoration pattern situated beneath the rim were also found. These comprise examples with the cord impression (Fig. 3:5; cf. Petrie 1953: Pl.IX:47,48s-t), which are especially characteristic of Naqda IIIB period (Hendrickx 1999:31, Fig. 9; Köhler 1996: 55–56, Abb. 17:1). In such dated context, they occurred also at other Nile Delta sites, e.g. Buto (Köhler 1998: 33, 49, Abb. 24:7, Taf. 58:9–10), Tell el-Farkha, the oldest graves of the first group (Dębowska-Ludwin et al., in press) and Minshat Abu Omar, graves of group III (3b) (Kroeper 1988: 14; Kroeper, Wildung 2004: 27:881/1; 40:866/20,23; 105:109/9; 162:415/6). There are also fragments of jars with a rope band pattern (Fig. 4:1; cf. Petrie 1953:pl.XXII) which appeared at the end of the Protodynastic and continue into the Early Dynastic times (Jucha 2005: 60, Pls.101; 102:1–2; Jucha 2008b: Figs. 1:1a; 2:IIa; Köhler 1998: 34, Abb. 24:13, Taf. 60:13,16; 61:1–2,5–6). Moreover, a potsherd was found with two incised signs, probably a *serech*,

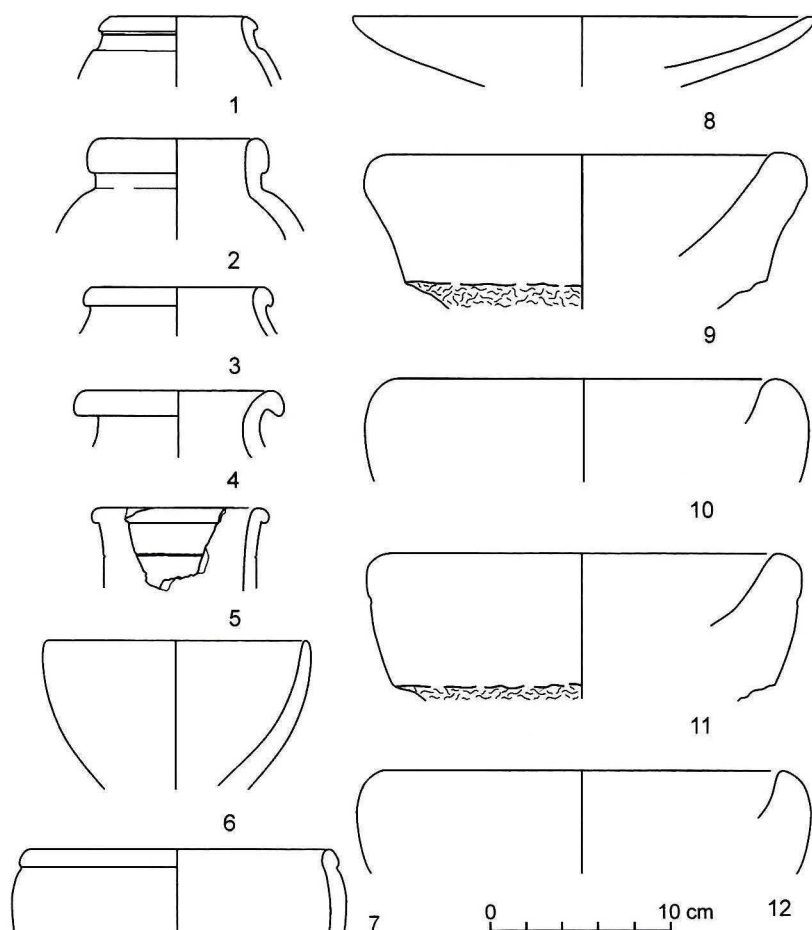


Fig. 3. Tell el-Murra. Protodynastic – Early Dynastic Pottery.

and a straight line with diagonal strokes (both unfortunately only fragmentarily preserved) (Fig. 4:2). The red-polished bowls comprise forms with convex sides and a simple rim (Fig. 3:6; cf. Jucha 2005: Pls. 59-64; Jucha in press: Figs. 1:15-17, 2:17-18, 3:22-23, 4:19-20; Köhler 1998: 22-23, Taf. 27:1-2,7-9; 28.1,3,5) or a thickened external lip-rim (Fig. 3:7; cf. Jucha 2005: Pls. 54; 55:1-4; Jucha in press: Figs. 1:13, 3:18-19, 4:17-18), which are known from both discussed periods. The finds include also flat plates with a red-coated and polished interior and the uncoated, only smoothed, outer surface (Fig. 3:8; cf. Jucha in press: Figs. 2:17, 3:24, 4:21), which seem to become typical since the second half of

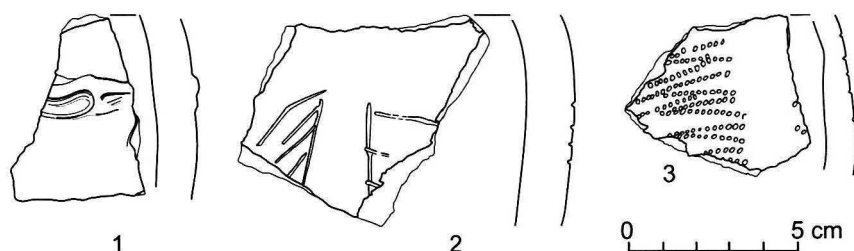


Fig. 4. Tell el-Murra. Pottery with decoration.

the 1st Dynasty (though they sporadically were attested also earlier). Such occur together with beer jars in the second group of graves at Tell el-Farkha, dated to above-mentioned period (NIIC2/D) (Jucha 2009a: 50-52). At Minshat Abu Omar, they are among the new forms that appear in similarly dated graves of group IV (Kroeper 1988: 16, fig. 177). Among the bread moulds (Fig. 3:9-12) there are shallow and wide forms or slightly deeper examples without or, in a few cases, also with an angular transition dividing the body into two zones (Jacquet-Gordon 1981: Fig. 1:1-4). These include examples with a rounded (cf. Jucha 2005: Pls. 68, 69:1-4; Jucha in press: Figs. 1:24, 2:22; Köhler 1998:27, Taf. 42:2-5), flattened (cf. Jucha 2005: Pls. 69:5, 70:1-4) and concave rim top (cf. Jucha 2005: Pls. 72:1-2; Jucha in press, Figs. 1:30; 2:26; 3:33; 4:26). The excavated forms comprise also those with a diagonal outer part of the rim of a flat (Jucha in press: Figs. 1:32; 2:28; 3:35; Köhler 1998: 27, Taf. 46.4) or rounded outer contour (Fig. 3:12; cf. Jucha in press, Figs. 1:27, 2:24, 3:30; Köhler 1998: 27, Taf. 42.1). Moreover, the bread moulds consist of forms with a diagonal and wavy formed external contour of the rim, which seems to be especially typical since the beginning of the Early Dynastic period (Jucha in press: Figs. 1:31,33; 2:27, 29; 3:34-36; Köhler 1998: 27, Taf. 44:2,4-5).

Tell el-Murra is the most suitable site for further research due to the good state of preservation, the results of geophysical research and geological core drillings as well as the chronology of the material. The occurrence of potsherds dated to the Protodynastic, Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom periods points at the fact that the latest occupation should be dated to the latter. Moreover, the geological core drillings indicate that the bottom layers with pottery material were situated to the depth of more than 4m – 5m (in different parts of the Tell) and still below the Protodynastic strata explored until now. That shows that some older occupation layers of the Predynastic period should be expected. It seems to be further confirmed by the occurrence of a potsherd decorated with a zig-zag pattern (Fig. 4:3) (though found in the strata dated to later periods), which is quite characteristic of the Predynastic – Lower Egyptian Culture. Similar examples at

Tell el-Farkha occur in phase 1, dated to the middle phase of the Lower Egyptian Culture and contemporary with Naqada IIB/C-D1 phases of Naqada Culture in Upper Egypt (Jucha 2006: 79, Fig. 3:1; Mączyńska in press). Moreover, the water level (in the grater part of the site) occurs below the lowermost settlement layers, which means that these are accessible archeologically.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the discussed site is situated only several kilometers (c 10 km) to the east of Tell el-Farkha and most probably also along the main trading route leading from West to East towards Canaan. Yet another site – Tell el-Iswid – is situated on the same line further to the East (c 6 km). Such location of Tell el-Murra, between both above-mentioned sites, makes it a suitable place to search for comparative material and data useful in studies of the relations between Egypt and Canaan as well as between settlements of that part of the Nile Delta. The recent research seems to confirm that several centres of the same significance and size existed in Lower Egypt during the period of the state formation (Ciałowicz 2006:924; van den Brink 1993: 301-302). It is now worth answering whether smaller villages existed in the vicinity of Tell el-Farkha, which could depend on that site, or there were more, similarly important, centres which developed independently.

On the basis of present research at Tell el-Murra, it seems also that at least the south-western part of the Tell was abandoned at some point during the Early Dynastic period. Continuation of the Early Dynastic settlement until the Late Old Kingdom (6th Dynasty) was observed at least in the north-eastern part of the site. As the excavation at Tell el-Murra has just begun, it still remains to be investigated if that reduction in the range of the settlement concerns only the above-mentioned part of the site. Anyway, it seems that its size decreased between the Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom periods. In that case, it is comparable with Tell el-Farkha, where the Western Kom (one of three which constitute the site) was also abandoned at the beginning of the Early Dynastic period, but the others (the Central and Eastern Koms) were still inhabited and partially used as a cemetery (the Eastern Kom) until the beginning of the Old Kingdom (3rd / beginning of the 4th (?) Dynasty).

It is quite possible that the gradual depopulation of both sites during the later part of the Early Dynastic and their final abandonment during the Old Kingdom was connected with the diminished importance of the trading route, leading through the North-Eastern Nile Delta and Northern Sinai to the Southern Canaan. Their inhabitants benefited previously from the location of their settlements alongside that road, which was in use especially at the beginning of the Egyptian state, when Egyptians most probably settled also in Canaan (Gophna 2000; Hendrickx, Bavay 2002: 73-74; van den Brink 1993: 291-297). However, after the early 1st Dynasty, Egyptian activity in that region started to decline. Although the trade relations may have been continued also later, their scale was undoubtedly limited. In Egypt, Canaanite objects are still being found

(e.g. in the tombs of the 1st Dynasty), but the number and diversity of Egyptian finds in Canaan has diminished significantly. Towards the end of the 2nd Dynasty, there was a further decrease in the intensity of trade with Canaan and the process continued during the Old Kingdom, when Egyptian relations with Lebanon gained more importance (Ben-Tor 1991: 4-5; Hendrickx-Bavay 2002: 70-72; Wilkinson 2001: 158-160). Presumably already at the end of the 1st Dynasty, along with the improvement of ship construction and navigation, it became possible to bring products by sea from Syria and Lebanon. That means of transportation probably made it easier and faster to ship more goods, as compared with the capabilities of merchant caravans which travelled by land (Brandl 1992: 448; Ward, C. 2006: 118-125; Ward 1991: 14; Wilkinson 2001: 161-162).

It is possible that one of the reasons leading to the abandonment of the Egyptian settlements in Canaan and several sites in the North-Eastern Nile Delta was the development of the afore-mentioned maritime trade which reduced the importance of the old land route and of Canaan as a source of products that started to be imported from other regions (Hendrickx, Bavay 2002: 75; Ben-Tor 1991: 5; Brandl 1992: 448; Ward 1991: 14; Wilkinson 2001: 161; Oren 1973: 204). As a result, the inhabitants of those settlements, among them Tell el-Farkha and possibly also Tell el-Murra, lost one of their livelihoods and gradually began to abandon their sites and move to other centres. That phenomenon probably concerns also several other sites, situated in the same region, which became no longer necessary (Brandl 1992: 448; Oren 1973: 203-204).

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