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MULTI-CHAMBER GRAVES
FROM THE TELL EL-FARKHA
CEMETERIES

Abstract: *The Tell el-Farkha cemeteries demonstrate the typical burial customs of their periods. From the 120 burials discovered so far, one can distinguish two main types of graves, namely a simple grave pit or a pit lined with mud bricks. The latter has various subtypes including multi-chamber graves. This interesting group, small in number, reveals unusual funeral practice, which was probably connected with the social position of the deceased. In this paper, the multi-chamber group is presented with all its differences and similarities.*

Keywords: *Burial custom; Tell el-Farkha cemetery; Proto- and Early Dynastic Egypt; tomb architecture*

Tell el-Farkha, located 120km northeast of Cairo on the edge of Ghazala village, is a site which has been examined by Poles since 1998. Over the course of 15 years of extensive research, it has revealed remains which clearly indicate various activities in different parts of this site and the three mounds represent diametrically diverse occupation patterns.

The occupation of the Western Kom has been confirmed from the times of Lower Egyptian culture (Naqada IIB) until the 1st Dynasty. The oldest stratum on the Western Kom shows traces of a simple habitation area which quickly transformed for industrial purposes. In this place, the oldest brewery in the Nile Delta region was detected (Ciałowicz 2012a, 149-162) and the last existing small brewery here is connected to a large sized edifice called the Naqadian residence. Since both the Naqadian residence on the Western Kom and Lower Egyptian residence on the Central Kom

are coeval, one can make the assumption that there was peaceful coexistence between the autochthonous people of Lower Egyptian culture and newcomers from the South – the Naqadians. Further evidence of Western Kom occupation suggests the establishment of a large sized administrative and cultic centre (Ciałowicz 2012b, 163-189) and the greatest discovery derives from one of the two confirmed shrines in this centre – a deposit of over 60 small artefacts including numerous figurines made of hippopotamus tusk.

Over its more than a thousand years of existence, the Central Kom always performed the function of a settlement. From the very beginning of Lower Egyptian habitation, a clear arrangement of huts and pits was established. This division into zones separated with fences and the presence of a large sized building called the Lower Egyptian residence suggest that the Central Kom must have been the focal point of the first villagers who settled on the site in this period. In the next period, the layout of the settlement completely changed, although the main axis of foundations (NE-SW) was preserved. At this time, the Central Kom was not only a habitation zone, but also a part of it must have been a kind of industrial area, since seven flint workshops were discovered. This part of the site was continuously inhabited until its final abandonment at the beginning of the Old Kingdom (Chłodnicki 2012, 105-113).

On the eastern tell, a multiphase cemetery was found, which alternated with periods of settlement. This discovery of repeated alternation between burial and habitation is unique in Lower and Upper Egyptian ancient history.

After 12 seasons of examining the cemeteries, over 120 graves have been discovered (Pl. 1: 1). Their chronology covers the period from Naqada IIIB to the Old Kingdom. To date, no burials from Lower Egyptian culture have been uncovered on this site, but three distinct cemeteries used during the Protodynastic, Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom periods have been located (Dębowska-Ludwin 2009, 459-489; Dębowska-Ludwin 2012, 53-75). Traces of a poor settlement were also recorded, mainly in the northern part of the Eastern Kom, but also in the cemetery area. Extraordinary findings in the form of two male figurines made of gold foil, which probably covered a wooden core, originate from this part of Tell-el-Farkha.

Chronology is not the only dividing factor. Of the graves discovered, with few exceptions, most are graves dug into the ground up to about 2m deep. Most of their walls were supported by at least one row of mud bricks after being dug out. They were probably covered by a wooden roof

(or some other perishable material) and this was in turn covered by a mud brick superstructure. The deceased was buried in such a construction with or without grave goods. The number of grave goods varied and as a result there is even a group of graves with a separate chamber meant solely for the stored equipment.

Graves with more than one chamber constitute only 7.5% of all examined graves to date from the Tell el-Farkha cemeteries, which makes them an exceptional group worthy of consideration. To be exact, only nine of the 120 graves possessed additional chambers. Four of them are from the Protodynastic and the other five from the Early Dynastic periods.

Characteristics of multi-chamber graves

Grave no. 4

This grave represents the Protodynastic group of graves from Tell el-Farkha and is dated to Naqada IIIB/C1-C2. It was discovered undisturbed and it takes the form of a rectangular pit lined with mud bricks, oriented along a NE-SW axis. The inside of this grave is divided into two rooms which are completely separated by a brick wall. The first one is the main burial chamber where the deceased was placed and measures 2.4 x 1.48m. A few pottery vessels were added to this chamber alongside a middle-aged male. The chamber to the north was filled with 36 grave goods made of pottery, one stone vessel, one stone bead and part of a stone cosmetic palette (Dębowska-Ludwin 2009, 459-489). The smaller chamber measures 0.9 x 1.5m (Pl. 2: 1).

Grave no. 5

This grave is also a Protodynastic one and is dated similarly to the previously discussed tomb. Its layout is not as regular, but it more or less resembles a rectangular pit. The walls of the grave are covered with mud bricks, which create a two-chamber structure. In contrast to grave no. 4, the larger main burial chamber is the northern one and measures 2.7 x 1.9m. This room has a slightly different form and consists of both burial space and some kind of ledge. There is also some irregularity in the layout of the upper part. The northeastern corner of the grave is clearly marked and a group of grave goods was located in close proximity. The smaller chamber measures 1.3 x 1.54m and is separated from the other by a mud brick wall. Interestingly, this dividing wall is not of uniform height across its length. There is a gap more or less in the middle of it where some

pottery vessels were collected. In total, this grave was furnished with 34 pottery vessels, one bead and one flint knife or sickle. Unfortunately, it was discovered having already been disturbed (Dębowska-Ludwin 2009, 459-489) (Pl. 2: 2).

Grave no. 7

This tomb also dates to Naqada IIIB/C1-C2 and forms a part of the group of Protodynastic graves. This very interesting tomb was built in the form of a rectangular pit lined with mud bricks without any division. The grave gains its multi-chamber status thanks to the addition of two shallow chambers connected to the main grave at the northeastern corner. These added rooms are connected to each other by a partially open dividing wall. A set of grave goods was deposited in at least one of them. The practice of including additional storage rooms, which were probably built in the final construction phase, is unusual and makes grave no. 7 an extraordinary example. The grave was discovered as disturbed. Its burial chamber measured 3.4 x 1.4m, while the additional northern chamber was 1.3 x 0.6m and the southern one 1.2 x 0.76m. The assemblage of grave goods consisted of 39 pottery and one stone vessel, a fragment of a cosmetic palette, a gaming piece, carnelian beads and gold foil (Pl. 2: 3).

Grave no. 50

This tomb belongs to the Early Dynastic graves and is dated to Naqada IIIC2-IIID. This fairly large burial represents a rectangular shaped type with mud brick walls. It is divided by a wall of the same material into two chambers. The northern one is the place where the deceased was buried and contained no goods. The southern one served as a storage room for numerous items including 37 pottery vessels, 11 stone vessels, two seal impressions, a faience object, a pottery counter and a deposit of five pottery granary models (Dębowska-Ludwin 2009, 459-489). Both rooms are similar in size, which is in contrast to the previous examples in which the storage chambers were much smaller than the burial one. The burial chamber measures 1.5 x 0.8m and the other 1.2 x 1.1m. (Pl. 3: 1).

Grave no. 55

Grave no. 55 is dated to Naqada IIIC2-IIID and is an exceptional example of a multi-chamber grave from Tell el-Farkha. It consists of a main burial chamber with a size of 1.1 x 1m and three additional rooms (measurements: 0.5 x 0.54m, 0.5 x 0.58m, 0.5 x 1.3m) fully filled with pottery

and stone vessels (Pryc 2009). All the chambers are separated with mud brick walls and the whole pit is demarcated in the same fashion. The burial chamber is the northern one. Two small storage rooms are located further to the south and another room is found even further south. The smaller rooms contained stone vessels, while the bigger one was full of pottery beer jars. The grave was very richly equipped with at least 51 pottery vessels, over 20 stone vessels and a couple of items suggesting the deceased occupied a high position in society, namely two copper harpoons. This grave is also exceptional for another reason. With two other graves (nos 62 and 64), which can be considered subsidiary burials, it forms a sepulchral enclosure surrounded by a kind of a fence with rounded corners (Dębowska-Ludwin and Rosińska-Balik, forthcoming) (Pl. 3: 2).

Grave no. 69

This grave represents the Protodynastic group of burials at this site. Its form is almost a regular rectangle and, with two chambers separated by a mud brick wall, it resembles grave no. 4. The similarities are visible not only in the number of rooms, but also in their arrangement. The smaller room, with a size of 0.76 x 1.1m, was filled with offerings and is located to the north as was the case with grave no. 4. The difference is observable in the positioning of the human skeleton. The deceased was deposited in a non-anatomical position, which was not common practice in this cemetery. The burial chamber measured 1.75 x 1.36m and the deceased was equipped with 20 pottery vessels (Pl. 2: 4).

Grave no. 71

This tomb belongs to the Early Dynastic group of graves and, as with most burials in this group, is oriented almost exactly along a north to south axis. The grave pit is lined with solid mud brick walls. The burial chamber measures 0.88 x 0.56m and included only human remains, while the offerings were gathered in a separate storage room (0.5 x 0.54m) and on top of its walls. It is a similar situation to that of grave no. 55, where grave goods were not only present in three specially prepared chambers, but also on the topmost part of the walls as well. The buried person was only equipped with 16 pottery and four stone vessels (Pl. 3: 3).

Grave no. 73

This grave represents the Early Dynastic group. Its structure is more or less regular and rectangular. The inner structure of this burial is divided

into two chambers. Both rooms are rectangular, while the northern burial chamber is slightly distorted in relation to the whole structure and measures 1.04 x 0.51m. The southern storage room has a size of 0.24 x 0.74m and was filled with offerings, as were the top of the walls. Besides the grave goods gathered inside the storage chamber, there were some additional offerings above the burial chamber. The goods amounted to 20 pottery and seven stone vessels in total (Pl. 3: 4).

Grave no. 111

This grave is dated to the Naqada IIIC2-IIID period and belongs to the Early Dynastic graves. As most of the burials from this group, it is located along an NS axis. The position of the burial chamber matches the previously described examples and adheres to the rule of a northern locus for the room where the deceased was placed. In this case, the burial chamber measures 1.12 x 0.64m and the storage one 0.3 x 0.73m. The offerings were deposited in the smaller southern chamber and, similarly to many other burials, on top of the walls of the grave as well. The offerings consisted of ten pottery and seven miniature stone vessels, one stone grinder and two carnelian beads (Pl. 3: 5).

Conclusions

The multi-chamber graves from the Tell el-Farkha cemeteries seem to be an important group of burials, even though they are few in number. Indeed, the fact that they form such a low percentage (7.5%) of the total recorded graves is certainly meaningful. The rarity of multi-chamber graves in both groups (see Fig. 1) suggests that such an arrangement within a grave structure could be explained by the social status of the grave occupant. This theory is strongly supported in the two cases of graves nos 50 and 55. These two burials are not only of a significant size, but in both cases they were also clearly demarcated on the surface by a massive superstructure. No. 55 even possessed a whole burial enclosure. The situation of a low percentage of multi-chamber graves at the Tell el-Farkha cemeteries is comparable to the Pre/Early Dynastic cemetery of Minshat Abu Omar. Here, graves of this type, which were considered tombs of the elite, constituted a mere 2% of the total graves examined (Kroeper 1992, 127-150).

All the multi-chamber graves of Tell el-Farkha we have mentioned were quite richly equipped, sometimes with luxury items such as copper harpoons (Czarnowicz 2012, 345-355) and stone vessels (Pryc 2009, 55-65) amongst

	Grave number	Chronological period	Grave group	Sex of the deceased	Position of the burial chamber
1	Grave no. 4	Naqada IIIB/IIIC1-C2	Protodynastic	male	South
2	Grave no. 5	Naqada IIIB/IIIC1-C2	Protodynastic	male	North
3	Grave no. 7	Naqada IIIB/IIIC1-C2	Protodynastic	2 x female	West
4	Grave no. 50	Naqada IIIC2-D	Early Dynastic	male	North
5	Grave no. 55	Naqada IIIC2-D	Early Dynastic	???	North
6	Grave no. 69	Naqada IIIB/IIIC1-C2	Protodynastic	female	South
7	Grave no. 71	Naqada IIIC2-D	Early Dynastic	male	North
8	Grave no. 73	Naqada IIIC2-D	Early Dynastic	???	North
9	Grave no. 111	Naqada IIIC2-D	Early Dynastic	male	North

Fig. 1. Chronological and typological comparison of the multi-chamber graves from Tell el-Farkha

other objects. Significantly, most graves of the multi-chamber type belonged to a deceased male adult. However, it must be emphasized that this is only a very small group and that some remains have yet to be identified.

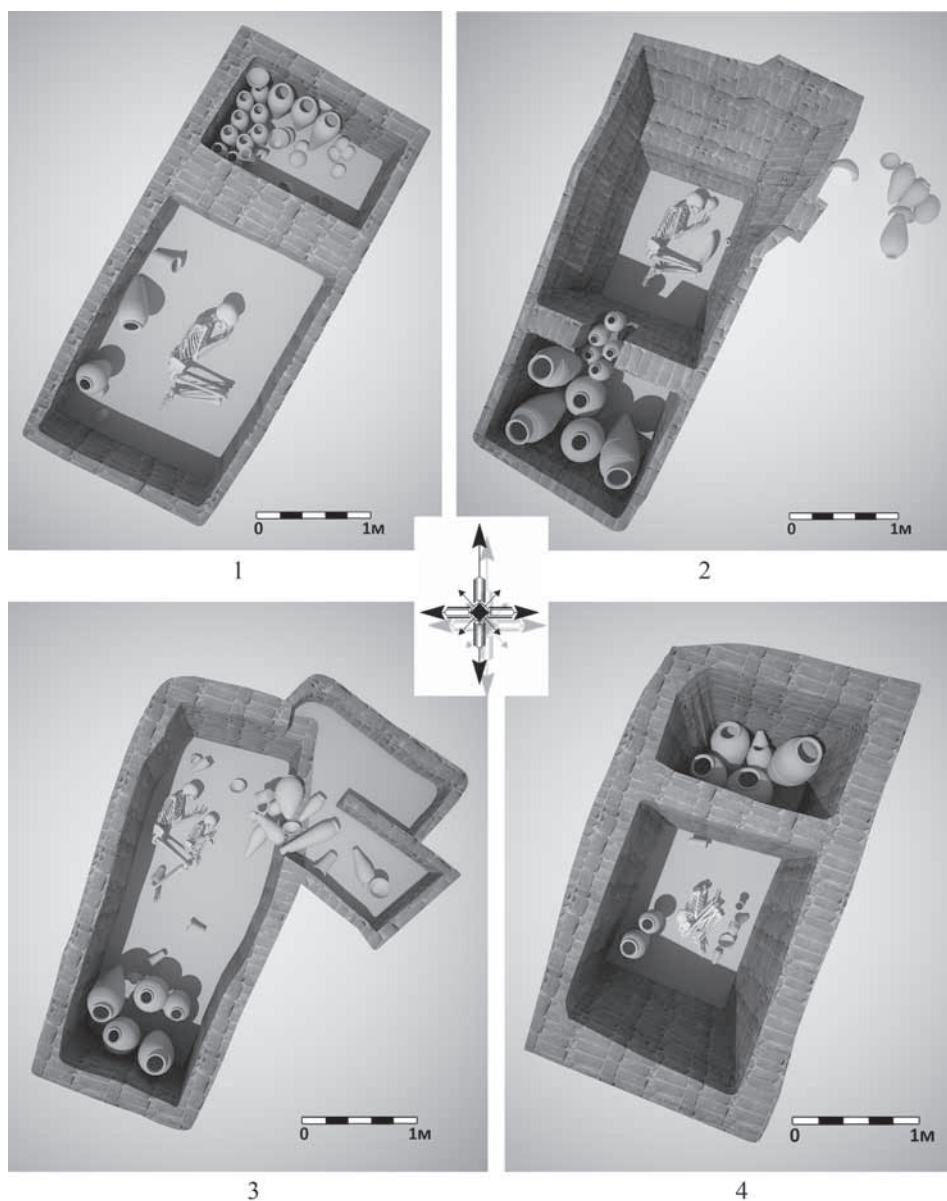
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Pl. 1. General layout of the Tell el-Farkha cemeteries. (All the numbers of the graves mentioned in the text are presented in rectangles). Archive of the Polish Archaeological Expedition to the Eastern Nile Delta



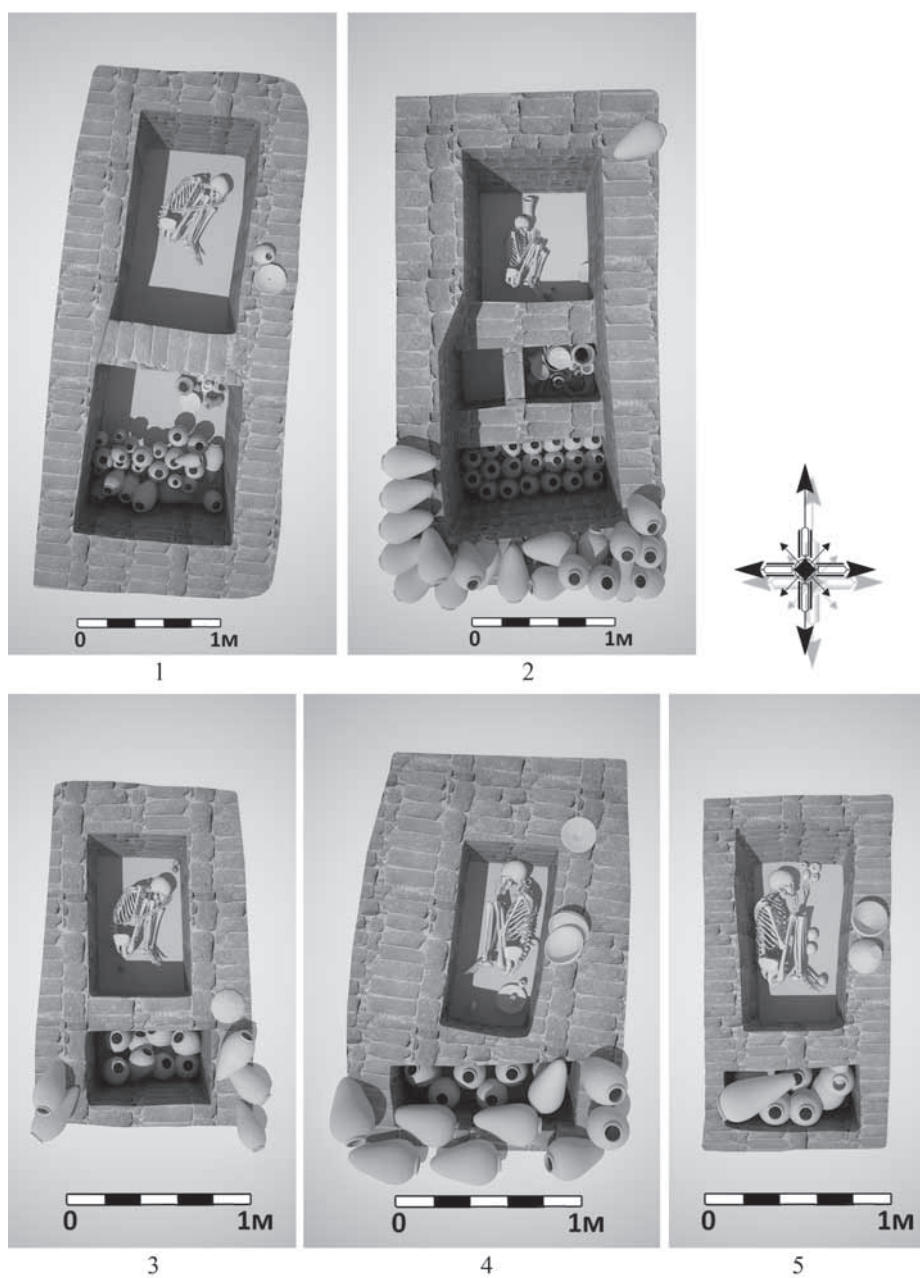
Pl. 2. Three-dimensional reconstruction of Protodynastic multi-chamber graves from the Tell el-Farkha cemeteries created by the author.

1 – Grave no. 4

2 – Grave no. 5

3 – Grave no. 7

4 – Grave no. 69



Pl. 3. Three-dimensional reconstruction of Early Dynastic multi-chamber graves from the Tell el-Farkha cemeteries created by the author.

- 1 – Grave no. 50
- 2 – Grave no. 55
- 3 – Grave no. 71
- 4 – Grave no. 73
- 5 – Grave no. 111