
Mariusz A. Jucha
Krakow

TELL EL-MURRA – RESULTS OF SURVEY
AND PROSPECTS FOR RESEARCH

Abstract: *Tell el-Murra, located in the northeastern part of the Nile Delta, was one of several sites investigated by the Polish Archaeological Expedition during the surveys of 2008 and 2010-2011 at which excavations are still ongoing. It was selected for further research mainly due to good state of preservation of the Tell and the results of preliminary analyses of the archaeological material found there. The main objective of the initial work was to establish the stratigraphy and chronology of the site. In order to accomplish this goal, the first test pits were opened and analysis of the data obtained here then confirmed the existence of a settlement dating from the Predynastic – Lower Egyptian culture until the end of the Old Kingdom. It still remains unclear, however, as to whether representatives of Naqada culture appeared there as early as the second half of Naqada II period or only during Naqada III. The research also demonstrated that both a settlement and a cemetery were present here. The latter was located in the southwestern part of the site. Among the graves, several contained pottery coffins with or without lids and in one case with hollows made in its bottom.*

Keywords: *Tell el-Murra; Nile Delta; Naqada III; Predynastic; Protodynastic; Early Dynastic; Old Kingdom; settlement; cemetery*

Tell el-Murra, located c. 10km to the east of Tell el-Farkha (northeastern Nile Delta; Pl. 1: 1), was one of several sites investigated by the Polish Archaeological Expedition during the surveys of 2008, 2010 and 2011. Research on this site involved the collection of surface finds, geological

core drillings, geophysical prospection, as well as the exploration of test trenches (Jucha 2009; Jucha 2010; Jucha and Buszek 2011). The tell (Pl. 1: 2) had been visited previously by the Amsterdam University Survey Expedition to the northeastern Nile Delta. The occurrence of forms dating to the Old Kingdom was noted among the pottery collected from the surface at this time (van den Brink 1987, 23, tab. 2; van den Brink 1988, 75, fig. 7). The area was subsequently explored by an Egyptian expedition and the outline of their trench, located in the northern part, is still visible.

The material obtained during the Polish work provided new data concerning the site's history. The pottery collected from the surface during the first visit in 2008 established that Tell el-Murra was inhabited during the Naqada III period. Furthermore, it was observed that whilst pottery of the Old Kingdom occurred in the northern and northeastern part of the site, it was absent in the southwestern part, where Naqada III forms were dominant (Jucha 2009, 87-88, figs 40-41; Jucha and Buszek 2011, 178-181, figs 2-3). At this time, pottery of Naqada III and the Old Kingdom was also discovered from another site, namely Tell Gezira el-Faras (Jucha 2009, 86-87, fig. 39).

The survey continued in 2010. At this time, the presence of Naqada III pottery was confirmed at several of the sites under investigation: Tell el-Murra, Tell el-Akhdar, Tell Abu el-Halyat, Tell Gezira el-Faras and probably also Minshat Radwan (Jucha 2010; Jucha 2011). Tell el-Murra was selected for further research from among these sites, mainly due to its well-preserved nature and the results of preliminary analyses of collected surface finds, geological core drillings and geophysical prospection. The main objective of the work at Tell el-Murra was to establish the stratigraphy and chronology of the site, for which reason the first test pits were opened. The data obtained from sondages located in the northeastern, topmost located part of the site (trench S1) and the southwestern part (trench S3) confirmed our previous observations based on surface finds.

Trench S1

The main goal of the work within sondage S1 was to precisely establish the chronology of that part of the site and the period until which the site was inhabited. It seemed to be the proper place for such an investigation as the latest types of pottery, dating to the Late Old Kingdom had been found there. However, the level of the oldest

archaeological layers was estimated at up to *c.* 6.5m below the present surface based on the initial core drillings and this depth would have been difficult to reach within only a small test trench. As a result, a further sondage (S3) was opened in the part where the thickness was estimated at only *c.* 4.5m and where the surface finds suggested that the latest settlement layers could belong to the Naqada III period. This seems to suggest that still older layers could be reached within the latter test trench.

The uppermost strata of trench S1 contained forms which were mostly characteristic of the Late Old Kingdom, especially of the 6th Dynasty, although some of these were present from the 5th Dynasty onwards. The lower strata (explored up to *c.* 1.7m below the surface) comprised of pottery which showed an affinity to forms characteristic of the earlier part of the Old Kingdom. In most cases, they showed an affinity to forms known from the 4th Dynasty, although there were also forms which appeared for the first time during the 3rd Dynasty or even during the Early Dynastic period. In addition, a fragment of pottery with a zigzag decoration, characteristic of Predynastic – Lower Egyptian culture, was found, albeit in strata of a later date. Although it was undoubtedly out of place, it still allows for the assumption that the site could have been founded as early as the Predynastic period (Jucha 2010, 385-386, fig. 4: 3).

Trench S3

The pottery material from trench S3, in contrast to the results of the research in trench S1, comprised of forms dating to the Naqada III period. In addition, a preliminary assumption was made that the south western part of the site had been used as a cemetery. This was based on the presence of a thin white layer, which was probably the remnants of a mat, found within a small fragment of a structure discovered in 2010.

The exploration of sondage S3 continued during the following season of 2011 when it was enlarged to the north and west. The structure, of which a fragment had been found in the northwestern corner in 2010, was completely exposed, proving that we were dealing with a grave (no. 2; Pl. 2: 1-2). Another grave (no. 1; Pl. 3: 1) was discovered to the north of grave 2. The remains of mats were found together with fragments of other structures, among them those rectangular in shape (probably other graves), which continued under the unexplored area. As a result, only the exploration of the graves continued, leaving the older levels unexamined. More graves

were discovered there during the subsequent excavation season of 2012, when the initial test trench was enlarged to 20 x 20m.

The results of this research proved our hypothesis, made in 2010, that the discussed part of the site had been used as a cemetery, at least during the Naqada III – Early Dynastic period. Altogether, seven graves dating to the Naqada III – Early Dynastic period were explored up to 2012. Of these, four were oriented along the NE-SW axis. One of them (grave no. 3; Pl. 3: 2) dated to the end of Dynasty 0/the beginning of the 1st Dynasty, while the three others (graves nos 1, 2, 7) dated to the 1st Dynasty/the beginning of the 2nd Dynasty. The assemblage of these graves mostly comprised of pottery and stone vessels. Other objects were sporadically included, among them copper tools and a fragment of a bone object, probably a spoon handle (grave no. 1), as well as a flint knife (grave no. 7). Other graves were preliminary dated to the second half of the 2nd Dynasty (graves nos 4, 5, 11). One of them (no. 4) was cut into the NW corner of the older grave, no. 3. The bodies had a completely different orientation (northwest to southeast) as against to the previously mentioned graves. Furthermore, the number of goods was restricted to only a few objects.

It should be noted that, although there were similarities between the 1st Dynasty/beginning of the 2nd Dynasty graves (nos 1, 2, 7) from Tell el-Murra and the graves of Naqada IIIC2/IIID from Tell el-Farkha (Jucha 2012, 84-86), some differences were also observed. These concerned the graves' orientation as well as their assemblages. A further difference could be observed in the occurrence of pottery coffins at Tell el-Murra (graves nos 2, 3, 5, 7),¹ among them one with hollows made in its bottom (grave no. 5; Pl. 4). The latter type is only rarely found at cemeteries, with Tura and Abusir el-Meleq being two examples of such sites (Junker 1912, 21-22, 64, pl. 19; Möllers and Scharff 1926, 12, pl. 8: 3). At Tell el-Farkha, on the contrary, although more than 120 graves were explored, no pottery coffin was found.

The preliminary results of research within the test trench demonstrate that the continuation of the excavation at the Tell el-Murra necropolis could lead to the gathering of further data useful in studies concerning regional differentiation, which seems to have still existed after unification. It would also be helpful in studies on social differentiation and the chronology of Egypt at the beginning of the Egyptian state. In addition, the occurrence of graves probably dating to the second half of the 2nd Dynasty could

¹ Yet another grave with a pottery coffin was explored in the 2013 archaeological season.

provide later data to that from Naqada IIIC2/D graves from Tell el-Farkha and Tell el-Murra. This would make it possible to extend our present studies on the Nile Delta chronology and burial customs to a later period, specifically the end of the 2nd Dynasty.

The remains of architectonical structures in trench S3 also contained mud-brick walls which were probably older than the explored graves. However, their chronology as well as their function is currently difficult to determine, since at the time of writing this paper these structures remain unexplored. However, it seems that we are probably dealing with the remains of a settlement structure. If so, it would mirror the situation at Tell el-Farkha (among others), where Protodynastic and Early Dynastic graves were located in the part of the site previously occupied by a settlement (Ciałowicz 2008, 511), as well as the situation at Tell Ibrahim Awad, where an Early Dynastic cemetery cuts into the underlying Protodynastic settlement remains (van den Brink 1992, 50).

Trench S4

In 2011, while work in trench S3 focused in on the discovered graves, a new trench (S4) was opened in the eastern part of the site. The geological core drillings made before in that part of the site allowed the level of the oldest settlement layers to be estimated at *c.* 3.5m below the present surface. This seemed to be a depth possible to reach within a test trench and this was therefore a place where the chronology of the site could be established within one trench. The exploration of the trench provided material dating from Predynastic – Lower Egyptian culture (confirming our assumption concerning the presence of layers of that culture made after the 2010 season) until the end of the Old Kingdom.

Conclusions

The results of the survey as well as data obtained from the test trenches at Tell el-Murra allow us to establish an overall chronology of the site and prove that both a settlement and a cemetery were located here.

The pottery found in the lowermost levels of trench S4 proves that the settlement which existed here had been initially inhabited by people of the Lower Egyptian culture. Therefore, the site could in future provide more data of the abovementioned period that could be used as comparative material for that obtained from Tell el-Farkha.

The site was subsequently inhabited by people of the Naqada culture. At present, however, it is difficult to determine with certainty if they arrived here in the second half of the Naqada II period (as at Tell el-Farkha and Buto) or during Naqada III. The preliminary analysis of pottery obtained from the Naqadan layers in sondage S4 shows that most of the forms should be dated to Naqada III and that only a few pots sherds could belong to forms which might have appeared during Naqada II. However, it should be noted here that only a small area within one of the sondages was investigated and thus the number of diagnostic pots sherds collected from the layer directly above that associated with the Lower Egyptian culture was very limited. As a result, at present it is still unclear as to whether we have proof of site abandonment for a short period of time (Naqada IIc-d) between the end of the Lower Egyptian culture and the beginning of Naqada III or not. It could also be possible that only the part where trench S4 was located was uninhabited during the mentioned period, but that settlement structures connected with a new Naqadan settlement from the end of Naqada II could have been located elsewhere, possibly in parts located higher in the site. Such changes in settlement reach and the location of inhabited parts, which could probably have been caused by climate change or Nile flooding, has been confirmed in later periods of the site history, probably during both the Early Dynastic period and the Old Kingdom. The occurrence of Naqada II layers cannot be ruled out, as in other parts of the site (trench S3), several layers with cultural material up to *c.* 3m below the already explored Naqada III levels were confirmed through geological drillings. Therefore, only further research involving the exploration of a larger area within the settlement could provide more data that would help us to answer the above questions.

The research also confirmed the presence of the Naqada III – Protodynastic and Early Dynastic layers. However, it seems that, at least during the Early Dynastic period, the habitation area was probably yet again reduced and that the southwestern part of the site (confirmed in trench S3) was then used as a cemetery. The diminishing settlement size in that period could quite possibly have been caused by several overlapping factors, such as climate change, changes in the height of the Nile floods, as well as the decreasing importance of the trade route leading from the Nile Valley through the Nile Delta to southern Canaan.

The reduction in the range of the habitation area also concerns the subsequent Old Kingdom as the material of that period (until the end of the 6th Dynasty) was found only within trenches located in the northeastern

(trench S1) and eastern (trench S4) parts of the site as well as the northern part of the tell (surface finds). No settlement remains of this period have yet been found in the southwestern part of the site (trench S3).

At the end of the Old Kingdom, the site was finally abandoned for unknown reasons and thus far no finds from later periods have been discovered. The abandonment could have been connected with events that led to the collapse of the Old Kingdom, which could have been partially brought about by another change in climate. It is worth noting that the results of surveys in the area also confirm a reduction in the number of sites between the Old Kingdom and the 1st Intermediate period. In the latter, only a few sites remain represented of those which flourished during Naqada III and the Old Kingdom.

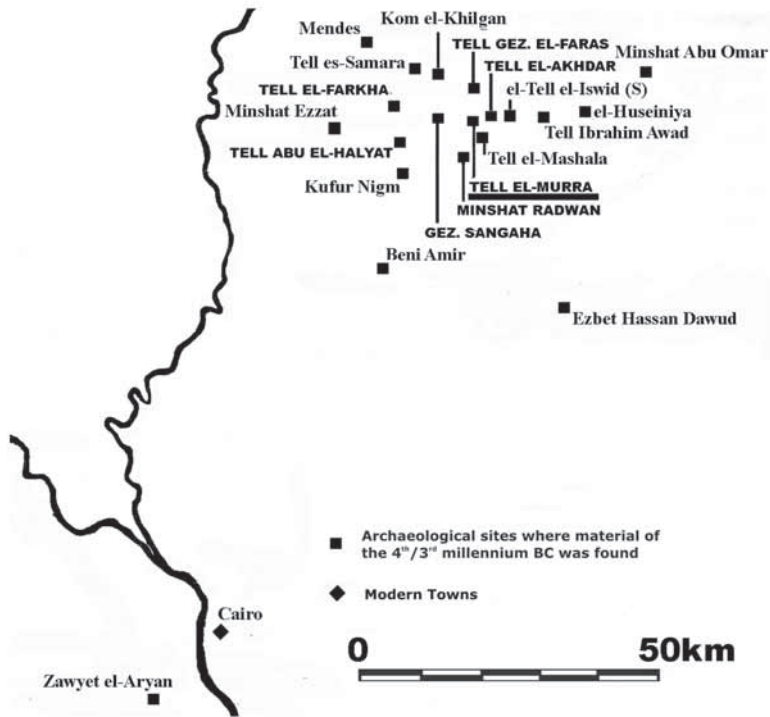
The observable reduction in the settlement dimensions during the Early Dynastic period and the Old Kingdom, as well as the final site abandonment, reflect the observations from Tell el-Farkha, where on the Western Kom material later than the beginning of the Early Dynastic period was not found and where the Naqada III cemetery was located in the southern part of the Eastern Kom (Chłodnicki 2006, 914-915; Ciałowicz 2006, 917). Both sites undoubtedly decreased in size. The difference concerns only the period of their final abandonment, namely the 3rd or 4th Dynasty in the case of Tell el-Farkha and the 6th Dynasty in the case of Tell el-Murra. The presence of layers dating from the beginning to the end of the Old Kingdom at the latter allows for the possibility of study into events that had an impact on the development of the Nile Delta settlements during that period. Furthermore, the occurrence at Tell el-Murra of well-dated strata belonging to the 1st Dynasty and 4th to 6th Dynasty layers, with assemblages that are well known and comparable to those found at other sites, could lead to possible research on the data from the settlement layers located between them, which could be attributed to the 2nd and 3rd Dynasties. This highlights the importance of research here as the material from these two dynasties has not yet been examined in sufficient detail.

References

- Brink E. C. M. van den 1987.** A geo-archeological survey in the north-eastern Nile Delta, Egypt; the first two seasons, a preliminary report. *MDAIK* 43, 7-31.
- Brink E. C. M. van den 1988.** The Amsterdam University Survey Expedition to the north-eastern Nile Delta (1984-1986). In E. C. M. van den Brink (ed.), *The Archaeology of the Nile Delta. Problems and Priorities*, 65-110. Amsterdam.
- Brink E. C. M. van den 1992.** Preliminary report on the excavations at Tell Ibrahim Awad, seasons 1988-1990. In E. C. M. van den Brink (ed.), *The Nile Delta in Transition; 4th-3rd Millenium BC*, 43-69. Tel Aviv.
- Chłodnicki M. 2006.** Tell el-Farkha – stratigraphy of the Eastern Kom (N). In K. Kroeper *et al.*, 909-916.
- Ciałowicz K. M. 2006.** From Residence to Early Temple: the case of Tell el-Farkha. In K. Kroeper *et al.*, 917-934.
- Ciałowicz K. M. 2008.** The nature of the relation between Lower and Upper Egypt in the Protodynastic period. A view from Tell el-Farkha. In B. Midant-Reynes and Y. Tristant in collaboration with J. Rowland and S. Hendrickx, *Egypt at its Origins 2. Proceedings of the International Conference 'Origins of the State. Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt'*, Toulouse (France), 5th-8th September 2005, 501-513. (*Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 172). Leuven, Paris.
- Hendrickx S. and Brink E. C. M. van den 2002.** Inventory of Predynastic and Early Dynastic cemetery and settlement sites in the Egyptian Nile Valley. In E. C. M. van den Brink and T. E. Levy (eds), *Egypt and the Levant. Interrelations from the 4th through the Early 3rd Millennium B.C.E.*, 346-399. London, New York.
- Jucha M. A. 2009.** The north-eastern part of the Nile Delta – research perspectives. Polish Archeological Survey in the Ash-Sharqiyyah Governorate. In J. Popielska-Grzybowska and J. Iwaszczuk (eds), *Proceedings of the Fifth Central European Conference of Egyptologists. Egypt 2009: Perspectives of Research*, Pułtusk 22-24 June 2009. 83-88, figs 33-41. (*Acta Archaeologica Pultuskiensia* 2). Pułtusk.
- Jucha M. A. 2010.** Tell el-Murra. The Predynastic – Old Kingdom site in the north-eastern Nile Delta. *FoOr* 47, 379-390.
- Jucha M. A. 2011.** Tell Abu el-Halyat. The new Naqada III – Old Kingdom (?) site in the northeastern Nile Delta. *SAAC* 15, 65-76.

- Jucha M. A. 2012.** Pottery from the cemetery. In M. Chłodnicki, K. M. Ciałowicz and A. Mączyńska (eds), *Tell el-Farkha 1. Excavations 1998-2011*, 77-86. Poznań, Krakow.
- Jucha M. A. and Buszek A. 2011.** Tell el-Murra (north-eastern Nile Delta survey). Season 2008. *PAM 20 (Research 2008)*, 177-182.
- Junker H. 1912.** *Bericht Über die Grabungen der Kaiserl. Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien auf Friedhof in Turah. Winter 1909-1910.* (*Denkschriften der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien Band 56/1*). Vienna.
- Kroeper K., Chłodnicki M. and Kobusiewicz M. (eds) 2006.** *Archaeology of Early Northeastern Africa. In Memory of Lech Krzyżaniak.* Poznań.
- Möller G. and Scharff A. 1926.** *Die Archaeologischen Ergebnisse des Vorgeschichtlichen Gräberfeldes von Abusir el-Meleq.* Leipzig.

Mariusz A. Jucha
Institute of Archaeology
Jagiellonian University
jucha_m@hotmail.com

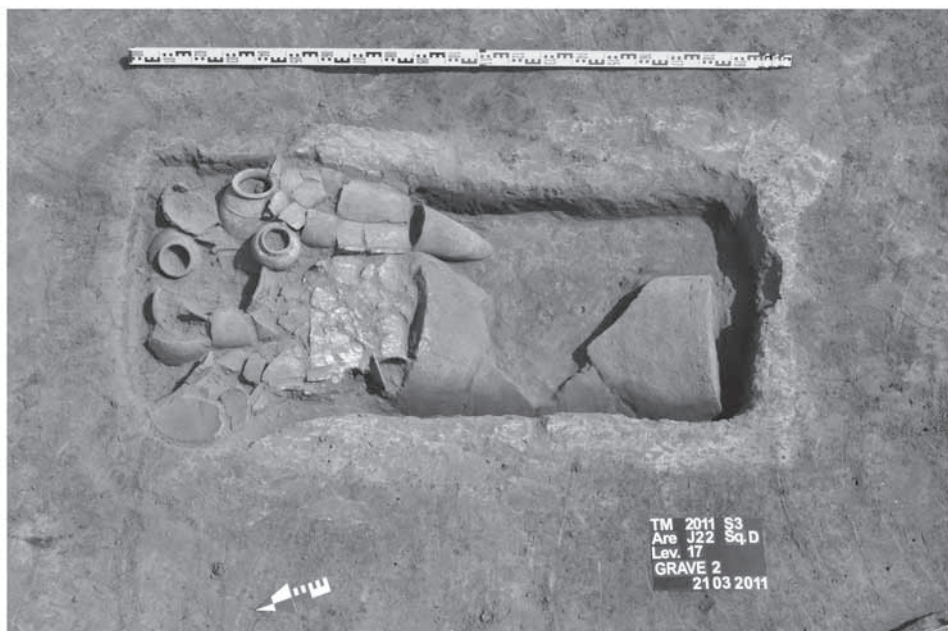


1



2

Pl. 1. 1 – Northeastern Nile Delta.
Reproduced from S. Hendrickx and E. C. M. van den Brink 2002, 366, fig. 23: 2
2 – Tell el-Murra. Photo by the author



1



Pl. 2. 1 – Tell el-Murra. Grave no. 2. Photo by G. Pryc
2 – Tell el-Murra. Grave no. 2. Pottery coffin. Photo by the author



1



2

Pl. 3. 1 – Tell el-Murra. Grave no. 1. Photo by G. Pryc
2 – Tell el-Murra. Grave no. 3. Photo by G. Pryc



Pl. 4. Tell el-Murra. Grave no. 5. Pottery coffin. Photo by the author