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PHASE 5 (NAQADA IIIB–IIIC1) IN TELL EL-FARKHA. THE PEAK OF DEVELOPMENT OR THE BEGINNING OF DECLINE?

Abstract: The research at Tell el-Farkha provides new opportunities to reconstruct the processes of Egyptian state formation. Seven main chronological phases are distinguished. One of the most important periods in the city's history is phase 4 (Naqada IIIA–Naqada IIIB; ca. 3350–3200 BC). An administrative-cultic centre, a monumental warehouse, and the oldest Egyptian mastaba were created during this time. The inhabitants of Tell el-Farkha owed their prosperity to the trade with the Southern Levant. During phase 5 (Naqada IIIB to Naqada IIIC1; ca. 3200–3000 BC) several phenomena are evident that portended the gradual decline of the city, eventually leading to its abandonment. No evidence of major storage facilities has so far been discovered at Tell el-Farkha from phase 5, and imported pottery is also absent in this period. It seems that at the beginning of the Protodynastic period the Egyptians gradually abandoned the trade routes running through the eastern Delta and used new ones leading via Wadi Tumilat or across the Red Sea. The engravings in Wadi Ameyra (Sinai) with the names of Iry-Hor, Ka, and Narmer suggest that exploration of the natural resources of the Sinai and the maritime routes to Egypt were highly important. In this situation only a few imported products would have reached cities like Tell el-Farkha, which may explain the lack of both central warehouses and imported ceramics. Natural disasters also contributed significantly to the decline of Tell el-Farkha. The abandonment of the Western Kom, at the end of phase 5, clearly followed a major catastrophe caused by natural forces. The collapsed walls may

be the result of this cataclysm. Evidence of a natural catastrophe that struck the settlement at the turn of our phases 5 and 6 can be found at the Eastern Kom as well.

Keywords: Egypt; Tell el-Farkha; Naqada; Protodynastic; Iry-Hor; Narmer

The site of Tell el-Farkha is located in the Eastern Nile Delta, on the northern outskirts of the modern village of Ghazala, about 14 km east of El-Simbillawein and 120 km northeast of Cairo (Pl. 1: 1). The site occupies an area of about 45,000 sq. metres along the southern side of the Ghazala Drain, rising to a maximum of approx. 4.5 m above the surrounding cultivated plain, and it is composed of three koms (Western, Central, Eastern).

The site was discovered by the Italian Archaeological Mission to the Eastern Nile Delta in 1987. The Italian expedition, directed by R. Fattovich, carried out test excavations at the site between 1988–1990, and later the works were stopped (e.g. Chłodnicki *et al.* 1991). With the kind permission of Italian colleagues, excavations at Tell el-Farkha were resumed in 1998 by the Polish Archaeological Mission to the Nile Delta, a joint enterprise of the Poznan Archaeological Museum and the Institute of Archaeology of the Jagiellonian University (c.f. e.g. Chłodnicki *et al*. 2012; Ciałowicz *et al*. 2018).

The research at the site constantly provides new opportunities to reconstruct successive stages of the city's development, and thus to retrace the processes of Egyptian state formation. Tell el-Farkha existed for a period spanning over 1,000 years, from the Lower Egyptian culture to the beginnings of the Old Kingdom. Its development has been divided into seven main chronological phases (Ciałowicz 2018a).

Phase	**Chronology**
Tell el-Farkha 1	Naqada IIB – IIC (ca. 3700–3500 BC)
Tell el-Farkha 2	Naqada IID1 (ca. 3500–3450 BC)
Tell el-Farkha 3	Naqada IID2/IIIA1 (ca. 3450–3350 BC)
Tell el-Farkha 4	Naqada IIIA1 – IIIB (ca. 3350–3200 BC)
Tell el-Farkha 5	Naqada IIIB – IIIC1 (ca. 3200–3000 BC) (Iry-Hor–Djer)
Tell el-Farkha 6	Naqada IIIC2–IIID (ca. 3000–2700 BC) (Djet–Khasekhemwy)
Tell el-Farkha 7	Dynasty III/IV (ca. 2700–2600 BC)

One of the most important periods in the city's history is phase 4, beginning at the close of Naqada IIIA1 and lasting until the middle of Naqada IIIB. Within this phase the oldest stage of the administrative-cultic centre at the Western Kom was erected (Ciałowicz 2012b, 171–180). At the Central Kom, the monumental warehouse constructed during Phase 3 was rebuilt, and it remained in use until the middle of Naqada IIIB (Chłodnicki and Mączyńska 2018, 81–87).

One of the most significant achievements of the inhabitants of Tell el-Farkha during phase 4 was a mastaba at the Eastern Kom, built at the turn of Naqada IIIA2/B1. It is a monumental, almost square (16.9 × 18.1 m), mud-brick structure with five rooms surrounded by massive walls, usually 1.50–2 m wide. The almost square main chamber (6.6 × 8.1 m) was placed in the north-western part of the mastaba (Dębowska-Ludwin 2018, 22).

To the south-east of this monumental structure, a few smaller mastaba graves, from the first part of Naqada IIIB, were uncovered (Dębowska-Ludwin 2012, 53–61). They were built in a similar fashion, with the burial chamber dug into the ground and the superstructure, 1–3 meters high, erected above. At least one (eastern) façade was decorated with niches. It is evident that the mastaba as a grave type was quickly adopted and used by the Tell el-Farkha community.

Remains of two golden figures, together with two large flint knives and a necklace of ostrich egg shells and carnelian beads, were discovered at the Eastern Kom in layers from the middle of Naqada IIIB (Ciałowicz 2012a, 201–206). The treasure was discovered in a building which had already been ruined when the treasure was hidden. The poor archaeological context suggests that this building was not where the artefacts had previously been stored or exhibited. On the basis of the ceramics encountered directly over the golden statuettes and in adjacent rooms, the time when the objects were deposited can be determined as the middle of Naqada IIIB. However, the analysis of both the figurines and the items accompanying them in the hoard suggests that the figurines were created during Naqada IIIA or even at the end of Naqada IID (Ciałowicz 2018b, 15). This means that they were probably connected with the people living at Tell el-Farkha during our phase 4.

Trade with the Levant was maintained in phase 4, with its role even increasing. Southern Levantine sherds are present at Tell el-Farkha, but pottery fragments from Northern Canaan also appear (Czarnowicz 2012, 247–251), testifying to contacts reaching far beyond the area of Southern Canaan where the major Naqada trade centres were located during Early Bronze IB.

In the same layers, dated to the first half of Naqada IIIB, tokens and plain seals with cloth impressions were present in abundance. Impressions of cylinder seals were also discovered. It is thus possible that at least from the beginning of Naqada IIIB, Tell el-Farkha maintained contacts with one of the Upper Egyptian proto-kingdoms. This could be also indicated by the discovery of a badly made clay cylinder seal dated to this period, bearing *Horus* and *Nebti* names (Ciałowicz 2011, 22–23). The seal belonged to a lower-ranking official associated with an important political centre. It also means that as early as in Naqada IIIB period both titles were popular enough and even such a poorly made seal enabled one to identify the addressee.

The facts presented above should be viewed against the backdrop of large and powerful political centres developing at that time and even earlier in Upper Egypt, such as Hierakonpolis or Abydos. Their position is manifested by remains of ceremonial structures (Friedman 2009) and by elaborated tombs, the most important of which is grave U-j discovered in Abydos (Dreyer 1998). It is therefore highly likely that the city at Tell el-Farkha, closely connected with Upper Egyptian centres, held considerable political and economic importance reaching beyond the Eastern Delta.

At first glance, Tell el-Farkha continued to flourish during the next phase. Even then, however, at least several phenomena are evident that portended the gradual decline of the city, eventually leading to its abandonment. Phase 5 at Tell el-Farkha is dated from the middle of Naqada IIIB to Naqada IIIC1 (ca. 3200–3000 BC). According to S. Hendrickx (2006, 92), this is the period contemporary with the reign of Dynasty 0 and the early First Dynasty (from Iry-Hor to Djer). In that phase, the administrative-cultic centre at the Western Kom was rebuilt, reaching its ultimate form towards the end of that period (Ciałowicz 2012b, 175–180). A vast settlement at the Central Kom, inhabited by farmers, craftsmen, and traders, also dates from Phase 5 (Chłodnicki 2012, 110–112), and the same applies to numerous small mastabas in a cemetery at the Eastern Kom (Dębowska-Ludwin 2012, 62–65).

Therefore, it may come as a surprise to see the abandonment of the administrative-cultic centre and the whole of the Western Kom with the end of phase 5. The abandonment of the aforementioned large warehouses at the Central Kom towards the end of phase 4 (middle of Naqada IIIB) and replacement of them with regular houses can be read as a foreshadowing of these events. No evidence of major storage facilities have so far been discovered at Tell el-Farkha from phase 5. Such structures are known from Phases 3–4 (Naqada IIIA1–middle of Naqada IIIB),

and again from Phase 6 (Naqada IIIC2–IIID; Chłodnicki and Mączyńska 2018). Of course, as the site has not been fully excavated, the warehouses from Phase 5 may be there somewhere, awaiting discovery, although this seems unlikely.

Nevertheless, the numerous tokens, impressions of cylinder seals and plain seals dating from this period prove that trade relations were still maintained. It is somewhat surprising that virtually no imported pottery was discovered from Phase 5. Only imitations of Southern Levantine vessels are present. Probably in those times the Egyptians used their own, better made, vessels for transporting goods from the Southern Levant (Czarnowicz 2012b, 257 ff.).

Perhaps Tell el-Farkha played a slightly different role during Dynasties 0 and I. It may have been a place of trans-shipment for goods arriving by land from the Sinai or the Southern Levant before they were sent to recipients in Upper Egypt.

What seems more likely, however, is that in the second half of Naqada IIIB the Egyptians gradually abandoned the trade routes running through the eastern Delta and instead directed imported goods and raw materials straight to the major cities of Upper Egypt or the newly established strong political centre at Memphis. In this situation only a few imported products would have reached settlements/cities like Tell el-Farkha, which may explain the lack of both central warehouses and imported ceramics. The presence of imitations may merely reflect the reproduction of patterns seen somewhere else.

The shift in trade routes is evidenced by research at Kafr Hassan Dawood. This site lies in Wadi Tumilat, which runs directly from the Memphis area to the Southern Levant. This important trade route, virtually bypassing the eastern Delta, was very popular in the Pharaonic era, but its use can be traced back to the Predynastic period. Although the settlement itself is not inaccessible for archaeological study, it is the information obtained from the cemetery, where more than 700 graves have been discovered, that allows more important conclusions to be drawn. The oldest graves at Kafr Hassan Dawood are dated to Naqada IID1. Most burials, often equipped with copper objects, are associated with the Naqada IIIB-C period (Rowland 2014, 270–271), contemporary with phases 5 and 6 at Tell el-Farkha. This clearly points to the relatively late establishment of the settlement, perhaps by migrants from the south of the country, and its fairly rapid development during the reigns of Dynasties 0 and I.

It also seems that from Dynasty 0 onwards Egyptians were more directly involved in exploration of natural resources, primarily those in the Sinai, and shipped them directly to craft centres, probably linked to the courts of early rulers. Rock inscriptions from Wadi Ameyra (Tallet and Laisney 2012) confirm that, at least during Dynasties 0 and I, the southwestern Sinai was explored by expeditions sent by early Egyptian kings. This is corroborated by an analysis of copper objects from that period discovered at Tell el-Farkha. It clearly shows that the raw material for their manufacture came from the Sinai (Rehren and Pernicka 2014, 250).

Of particular importance at Wadi Ameyra are inscriptions containing the names Iry-Hor and Ka (Tallet and Laisney 2012, 384–387), since later documents provide no information about the activities of the first rulers of Egypt. The historicity of both kings is confirmed by their graves at Umm el-Qaab (Kaiser and Dreyer 1982, 221–225; Dreyer *et al.* 1996, 49). Among other archaeological sources the most important is the highly schematic notation of their names. The reading of these names is controversial, and the actual existence of these rulers still sparks considerable debate today (cf. e.g. Wilkinson 1999, 55–56). New discoveries, including an inscription with the name of Iry-Hor from Wadi Ameyra and three records of his name on vessels from Tell el-Farkha (Ciałowicz 2018b, 16), mean that the historicity of this most important king of Dynasty 0 now seems unquestionable. The relief from Wadi Ameyra features a representation of a boat (1 m long), with a small cabin placed in the back. Above the boat there is a bird (falcon) sitting on an oval (*r*), forming the name Iry-Hor. Above them, a very clear engraving shows city walls and a pear-shaped mace. The discoverers (Tallet and Laisney 2012, 385) correctly read this as White Walls *(jnb ḥd*), the name used to refer to Memphis in the Early Dynastic period.

The relief not only confirms Iry-Hor's interest in exploring the Sinai, but also suggests his links with Memphis, a centre which must have been active since at least Dynasty 0 (Jeffreys and Tavares 1994; Wilkinson 1999, 58). This may prove the existence of a trade route bypassing the East Delta and leading from the Sinai directly to Memphis. It may have run overland around the Gulf of Suez or crossed the Red Sea. Representations of boats in engravings containing the names Iry-Hor, Ka, and Narmer suggest the maritime route.

The exploration of the Sinai was apparently not the only focus of Iry-Hor's interest. He most likely also subjugated the eastern Delta. This is evidenced by the situation recorded at Tell el-Farkha. The hiding of the golden figurines and the building of new tombs over the monumental

mastaba and the walls surrounding it suggest the arrival of new settlers, and the available data point unambiguously to the reign of Iry-Hor (Ciałowicz 2018b, 15–16), the time marking the beginning of phase 5 at Tell el-Farkha.

The context in which the name of this ruler appears at Tell el-Farkha is very telling. Grave 2, where the name of Iry-Hor was first discovered (Jucha 2012, 82), was dug into the south-eastern corner of the monumental mastaba, which was separated from the rest of the settlement by thick walls. In the middle of Naqada IIIB two graves were built on top of the southern wall. One of them, grave 69, is precisely dated to the reign of Iry-Hor, because his name was found on one of the jars (Pl. 2: 1). Another jar from the same grave featured a mace standing on a boat, apparently a pure symbol of power and dominance. In the case of grave 69 the name of the king and the mace appear together as a symbol of power.

Little information survives in later written sources about the first two rulers of Dynasty I, Narmer and Aha, who reigned contemporaneously with our phase 5. Very significant, therefore, is the appearance of numerous *serekhs* with the name Narmer over a wide area stretching from the Southern Levant (Tel Erani – Yeivin 1960; Tell Arad – Amiran 1974; Nahal Tillah – Levy *et al*. 1995), across the eastern Delta (Minshat Abu Omar – Kroeper 1988, Fig. 141; Tell el-Farkha – Pl. 2: 2; cf. Jucha 2012, 82) and the Memphis region (Wilkinson 1999, 69), to Upper Egypt (Hierakonpolis: Adams 1995, 123). *Serekhs* of Narmer have also been found in Wadi Qash in the eastern desert (Emery 1961, 47, Fig. 6) and in Wadi Ameyra in the Sinai (Tallet and Laisney 2012, 387).

From the reign of Aha we have several year labels, with brief information (Helck 1987, 144–149) showing that he claimed, at least symbolically, to rule over the Libyans and Nubians and may have even organised military expeditions in those directions. The labels also confirm the existence of extensive trade contacts with the Southern Levant and, according to some scholars, even with Byblos (Wilkinson 1999, 71).

Several labels have also survived from the reign of Djer, Aha's successor. However, for this ruler the major source of information is the most important document relating to the reign of the first dynasties, the Palermo Stone. It was created during Dynasty V and repeats information probably recorded earlier in royal annals (Helck 1982). The Cairo fragment of the stele contains information on the major events of years 1–9 and 20–28 of Djer's reign (Helck 1987, 150–151). We also know that the king certainly celebrated a *heb-sed* jubilee in the 30th year of his reign (Hornung and Staehelin 1974,

16). However, claims attributing a reign lasting 50 or even 55 years to him (Helck 1987, 124; Vercoutter 1992, 210) do not seem to have a firm basis. The record from the 23rd year of his reign speaks of the conquest of the country of Setjet. This name was probably used in Djer's time to refer to the Sinai (Edwards 1971, 23). This is possibly confirmed by the *serekh* of Djer discovered by a French expedition in Wadi Ameyra (Tallet and Laisney 2012, 387–389). The royal annals suggest continued Egyptian interest in the regions to the north-east of Egypt, which is also evidenced by fragments of several Levantine vessels discovered in the tomb of Djer at Abydos (Bourriau 1981, 128).

The next king, Djet, reigned for a relatively short period of about 10 years (Vercoutter 1992, 213). Trade with the Levant is evidenced by imported vessels discovered in tombs dating to his time. His *serekh* discovered about 25 km east of Edfu confirms Egyptian activity in the eastern desert (Edwards 1971, 25).

One of the most important rulers of the First Dynasty was Den, and his long reign is relatively well known from records preserved on the Palermo Stone from years 18–22 and 28–41 of his reign (Helck 1987, 156–158) and from numerous ivory and wooden annual labels (Godron 1990). Some of the latter refer to the king's military activity in the Southern Levant. It is difficult to determine unequivocally today whether these were real expeditions or their symbolic/ritual substitutes. Records on the Palermo Stone report actions against nomads in the Sinai and cities in Asia (Vercoutter 1992, 216). Again, new discoveries provide evidence for the presence of an expedition of Den in the Sinai: three reliefs bearing his name were discovered at Faras Um al-Zuebin, a site located in the immediate vicinity of the aforementioned Wadi Ameyra (Tallet and Laisney 2012, 390).

More than 30 large mastabas belonging to the elite and located at Saqqara, Abu Rawash, and Abusir are known from the time of Den. This may be related to both his long reign and fundamental changes in state governance (Wilkinson 1999, 76). Changes in administrative structures may reflect the decline of some centres and the growth of others.

For the consideration of the decline of Tell el-Farkha and its gradual loss of importance, it is worth noting the information found on the Palermo Stone about the flooding of the Nile in the 30th year of Den's reign. It was the highest flooding known from the Thinis period, with the water level rising by over 4 metres (Helck 1987, 128).

Such high Nile floods were not unusual. Towards the end of the Lower Egyptian culture, contemporary with the phase of Naqada IID1, Tell

el-Farkha was considerably damaged by a major flood of the Nile. Parts of the site were rebuilt by the local community, but elsewhere people of distinctly Upper Egyptian origin appeared. This is evidenced by the first major Naqadian building erected on a layer of silt of alluvial origin (Ciałowicz 2018b, 11). Thus, it seems that the flooding of the Nile may have intensified contacts between Upper Egypt and the Delta and even contributed to the permanent settlement of newcomers from the south.

Evidence of a catastrophic flooding of the Nile destroying at least the eastern Delta has also been discovered at Tell el-Murra, where relics dating to the Lower Egyptian culture are buried under a thick and homogeneous layer of silt (Jucha 2020, 86).

It can therefore be assumed that the beginnings of what was once believed to be the Naqadian expansion into the Delta (cf. e.g. Kaiser 1990, 288) were influenced to some extent by environmental causes and the destruction of at least some of the settlements by natural forces. The appearance of larger numbers of southerners in these settlements should come as no surprise. The importation of various raw materials and processed products from the Sinai and the Southern Levant was necessary for the political elites developing in Upper Egypt to ensure adequate prestige and high position.

Just as natural causes may have underpinned the development of Tell el-Farkha in phases 3–4, the information about the flooding during the reign of Den may indicate the circumstances under which this centre begins to lose its importance. The abandonment of the Western Kom clearly followed a major catastrophe caused by natural forces. Whether this was an earthquake or an abnormally high flood of the Nile remains uncertain. The collapsed walls (Pl. 2: 3) lying on broken vessels may be the result of either of these cataclysms.

Evidence of a natural catastrophe that struck Tell el-Farkha at the turn of our phase 6 can also be found at the Eastern Kom. The great, possibly cultic building (no. 128) erected at the eastern border of the cemetery at the beginning of our phase 5 was also destroyed at the turn of phase 6 (Ciałowicz 2021, 178). The fallen walls (Pl. 2: 4) and the layer of silt on the surface of the ruined building suggest a natural catastrophe, the same one that led to the destruction of the administrative-cultic centre in the Western Kom. Around the same time, small mastabas, dating to the entire Naqada IIIB period (Tell el-Farkha Phases 4–5) were flooded by a layer of silt (Pl. 3: 1–2). As a result, both the destroyed building and the silt-flooded graves, probably no longer visible on the surface, were cut by burials from the end of the First and the Second Dynasty (Tell el-Farkha Phase 6).

For instance, burial no. 71 was dug into the south-western corner of grave no. 63. Grave no. 100 is intersected by grave no. 108 (Pl. 3: 3). It comes from the second half of Dynasty 1, which confirms that at that time the two-meter-high grave no. 63 as well as grave no. 100 must have already been invisible on the surface of the cemetery.

Another example is grave no. 126, built on top of graves nos. 104 and 130 (Pl. 4: 1). The two-chamber grave 126 dates from the First/Second Dynasties (Naqada IIIC2/D), while mastabas nos. 104 and 130 are older and date from the very beginning of Tell el-Farkha Phase 5 (middle of Naqada IIIB), which means they were built during Dynasty 0. The northern wall of grave 126 was erected on the southern wall of mastaba no. 104. Its burial chamber and other walls were cut into the superstructure of grave no. 130.

Many poor graves dating to the turn of Dynasties I and II were also dug into the above-mentioned ruins of building no. 128 (Pl. 4: 2).

The subordination of the eastern Delta to the Abydos-based rulers of Dynasty 0 may have resulted in a considerable decline in significance of the previously most important centres. The weakening of Tell el-Farkha's position was undoubtedly also influenced by changes in trade routes. These now bypassed the eastern Delta and ran directly from the Memphis region through Wadi Tumilat to the Southern Levant or through the Red Sea to the Sinai. The next blow to the city came from the forces of nature: a flood and/or an earthquake. They ruined the most important buildings and led to the complete burying of tombs, which had already been at least partially buried.

It is therefore possible that in the middle of the First Dynasty the local elite, and other members of society connected with them, moved from Tell el-Farkha to another centre – Mendes seems to be the best candidate. They were, at least partially, replaced by new settlers, from other places in the Delta, or even from Middle and Upper Egypt. The basis of their economy was agriculture. The crops, before being sent away, were collected in a big tower silo at the Central Kom. It was built in the Tell el-Farkha phase 6 (Naqada IIIC2–IIID) and supervised by a high ranking official, as evidenced by a large stamp seal with a hieroglyphic sign discovered in the direct vicinity of the silo (Chłodnicki and Mączyńska 2018, 88–90).

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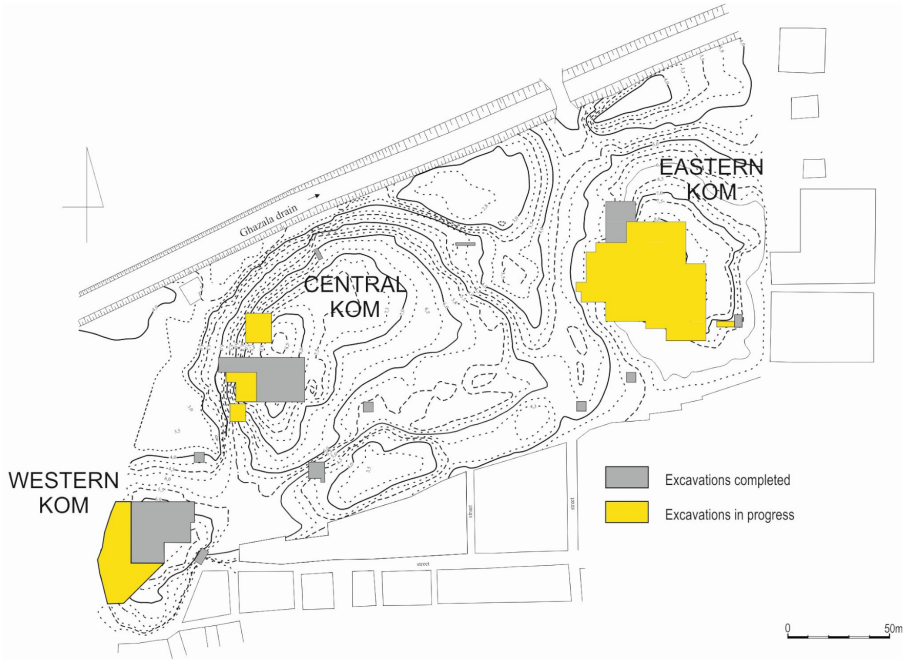
1

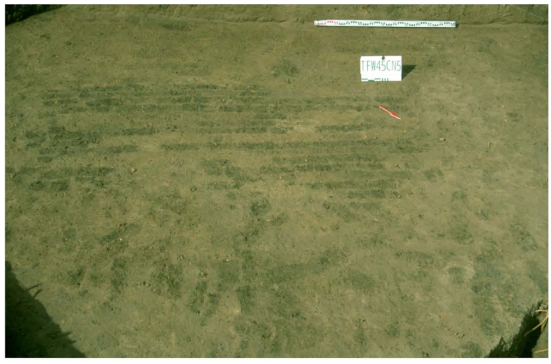


2

Pl. 1: 1 – Location of Tell el-Farkha
Pl. 1: 2 – Tell el-Farkha. General map of the site with the area of excavations.
Drawing M. Chłodnicki

1

2



3

4

Pl. 2: 1 – Tell el-Farkha. Name of Iry-Hor on the jar from grave no 69. Photo archives of the expedition

Pl. 2: 2 – Tell el-Farkha. Serekh of Narmer on the jar from grave no 9. Photo archives of the expedition

Pl. 2: 3 – Tell el-Farkha. The collapsed walls of administrative-cultic centre at Western Kom. Photo archives of the expedition

Pl. 2: 4 – Tell el-Farkha. The fallen walls and the layer of silt on the surface of the ruined building no 128. Photo archives of the expedition

1

2

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Pl. 3: 1 – Tell el-Farkha. The outline of grave no 63 under layer of Nile mud. Photo archives of the expedition

Pl. 3: 2 – Tell el-Farkha. Northern wall of grave no 100 (view from inside). On top layer of Nile mud. Photo archives of the expedition

Pl. 3: 3 – Tell el-Farkha. The graves nos. 100 and 108. Photo archives of the expedition

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Pl. 4: 1 – Tell el-Farkha. The graves nos. 126 and 130. Photo archives of the expedition
Pl. 4: 2 – Tell el-Farkha. The grave no 123 dug into the ruins of building no 128. Photo archives of the expedition