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**Tell El-Farkha: Explorations, 1998**

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# TELL EL-FARKHA

## EXPLORATIONS, 1998

Marek Chłodnicki, Krzysztof Ciałowicz

*The site of Tell el-Farkha is situated north of the village of Ghazala (Markaz el-Simbillawein). It consists of three tells covering a total area of c. 400 x 110 m and rising to 4.50 m above the surrounding fields. Located in 1987 by an Italian archaeological expedition of the Centro Studi e Ricerche Ligabue in Venice, it was explored archaeologically in 1988-1990. A predynastic settlement was identified, as well as mud-brick architecture from Late Predynastic to Old Kingdom times.<sup>1</sup>*

*Work was renewed in 1998,<sup>2</sup> the purpose of the campaign being a comprehensive survey of site geology and stratigraphy, intended to provide the necessary data for a comprehensive planning of the next and more intensive season in the field. Three archaeological survey methods were applied: test trenches, geological core sample drilling and geophysical surveying.*

<sup>1</sup> M. Chłodnicki, R. Fattovich, S. Salvatori, Italian Excavations in the Nile Delta: Fresh Data and New Hypotheses on the 4th Millennium Cultural Development of Egyptian Prehistory, *Rivista di Archeologia*, vol. 15 (1991), pp. 5-33; id., The Nile Delta in Transition: A View from Tell el-Farkha, [in:] E.C.M. van den Brink (ed.), *The Nile Delta in Transition: 4th-3rd Millennium B.C.* (Tel Aviv 1992), pp. 171-190; id., The Italian Archaeological Mission of the C.S.R.L.-Venice to the Eastern Nile Delta: A preliminary report of the 1987-1988 field seasons, *CRIPPEL* 14 (1992), pp. 45-62.

<sup>2</sup> Funds for the present campaign came from the Poznań Prehistoric Society; the work, which lasted from May 3 to May 31, was carried out in association with the Institute of Archaeology of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and the Polish Center of Archaeology of Warsaw University. The expedition, directed jointly by Dr. Marek Chłodnicki and Assist. Prof. Krzysztof Ciałowicz, included: Dr. Jacek Kabaciński, Mariusz Jucha, archaeologists; Tomasz Herbich, geophysicist; Prof. Dr. Maciej Pawlikowski, geologist; Maciej Jórdeczka and Halina Żarska-Chłodnicka, documentalists. The Supreme Council of Antiquities of Egypt was represented by Chief Inspector of Mansura, Mr. Salem el Baghdadi.

## EXCAVATION WORK

## TRENCH W01/98

The first test trench WO 1/98, measuring 6x3 m, was dug in the southeastern corner of the partly eroded western tell, near the present village confines. The principal objective in digging this trench was to study the tell stratigraphy and set up a provisional chronology for the finds. An abundant ceramic and flint assemblage, practically not in evidence on the surface, appeared already in the topmost layers. The corner of an architectural structure (1A1) made of very compact silt turned up in the middle of the north trench wall, about 50 cm below the surface. The corner of another unit (1A2) was discovered to the west and clearly underlying the first one, at a depth of 90 cm below the surface. To the east of unit 1A1 and at the same depth another struc-

ture (1A3) was identified with walls running longitudinally.

In the underlying layers (c. 90-120 cm), the archaeological assemblage is not as abundant. Apart from the pottery, the flint artifacts deserve special attention (including the so-called Canaan sickle blades and knife fragments). Just by the east wall of 1A1, at a depth of 120 cm, three cylindrical vessels were found lying one on top of the other; the vessels were decorated with a degenerate version of the wavy-handle design and a net ornament [Fig. 1]; they can be attributed to the Nagada IIIa2 period.

The level of a much destroyed silt floor was reached at 130 cm below the surface inside unit 1A3. The floor was strewn with very small pieces of pottery. Two semicircular pits (3B1 and 3B2) filled with brown soil that clearly differs from the surround-

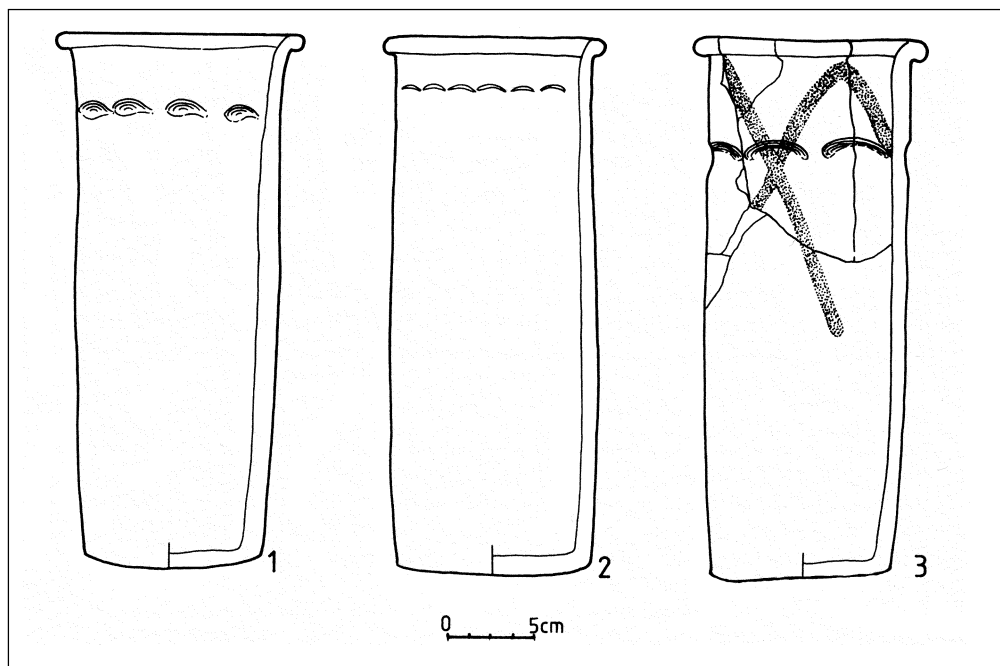


Fig. 1. Cylindrical vessels  
(Drawing M. Jucha)

ing steely-gray colored silt, were found adjoining unit 1A3 on the east.

Under the silt floor, a homogeneous brownish layer came to light, yielding abundant pottery material but few flint artifacts.

A distinct change was observed at a depth of c. 220 cm. The color of the soil changed to a paler shade and an obvious discoloration was noted repeatedly (including a clear black pit, designated as B2, with pottery), most of them characterized by sizable concentrations of pottery.

A sand layer of dark gray color begins at 230 cm depth. Several black pits of irregular shape occur in it, especially in its SW part. At 240 cm depth these pits combined to form one of a rectangular shape with the outer perimeter marked by a band of black soil lined with abundant pottery on the inside; the soil filling the center is obviously lighter in color and contains little archaeological material. This pit, designated as B2, ended at 270 cm, at which point two pits of a diameter of c. 30 cm appeared in the W corner. These pits were lined with tamped silt and contained no material. The rest of the trench yielded small amounts of pottery, occasional flint objects – obviously production waste, and infrequent animal bones.

The yellow sand underneath made the objects found in it appear very distinct. At c. 330 cm, evident pits were observed: B5 – a semicircular pit disappearing under the NW trench wall, and B6 – a more oval one disappearing under the northeastern trench wall. Both pits revealed a steely-gray fill with a distinct framing of the walls, darker in the case of B5 and a steely-bluish color in B6. Pit B6 is cut by a dark, almost black pit (B7) disappearing under the northwestern trench wall. Between B5 and B6 there was an irregular darker shape, resembling in color the fill of both pits (perhaps a passage?). In all the pits pottery was

relatively abundant, accompanied by some bones. A sherd decorated with red-painted bands was found in B5. Pit B5 ended at 360 cm depth, B6 at 355 cm and B7 at 375 cm. In the last case, exploration of the last 10 cm was greatly hindered by water seeping into the trench. This occupational level should be assigned to the Lower Egyptian Culture.

Once the trench had been completed and documented, it was extended 1.50 m to the southwest. The extension, designated as W01a/98, was explored following the natural stratigraphy; 21 layers were distinguished.

#### TRENCH W02/98

A second trench designated as W02/98 (3 x 5 m) was traced to the northwest of the first one. The finds from the topmost layer were few and indistinct. Further down there was more pottery and flint tools, mainly flakes and sickle blades [Fig. 2].

In the western part of the trench, at a depth of c. 55 cm, a recessed brick wall (2A1) came to light; it followed an N-S orientation with a slight deviation to the east. A transversal wall, oriented more or less E-W, appeared at 60 cm; joining structure 2A1, the wall divided the space into two units: 2A1a (north) and 2A1b (south). A single course of bricks is all that remains of the two walls. The entire area of the trench at this level yielded abundant pottery and flint artifacts (sickle blades, knife fragments, flakes and chips), and a considerable quantity of animal bones.

At 80 cm depth an evident occupational layer of a brownish color was noted; it contained potsherds, flint tools (including a short knife, sickle blades and numerous animal bones, but no archaeological structures. Only at 135 cm below the surface was an oval oven uncovered,

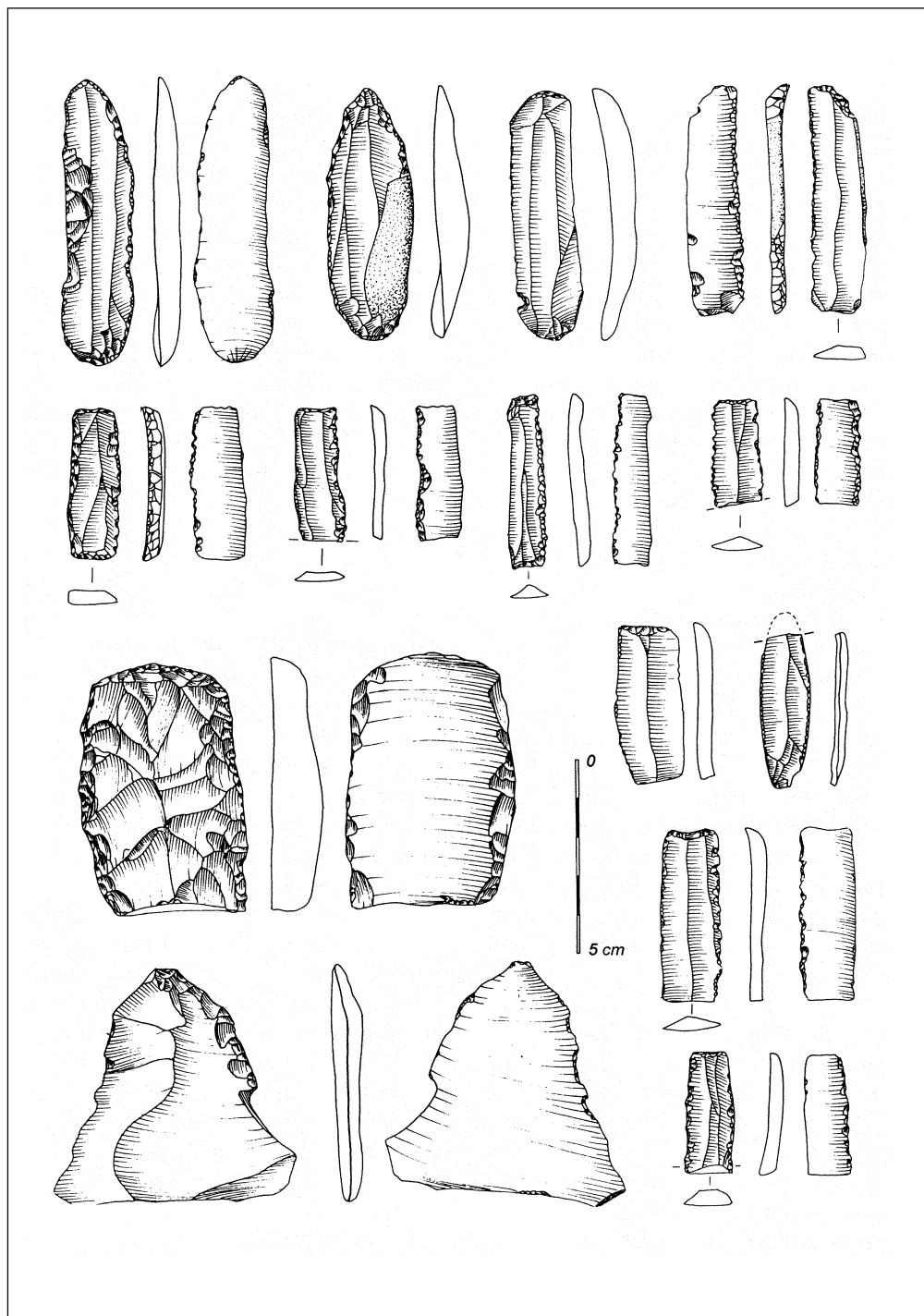


Fig. 2. Flint tools  
(Drawing J. Kabaciński)

faced with a thin layer of burnt silt and pottery (B2).

At a depth of 150 cm in the eastern end of the trench, a thick wall appeared running SW-NE and adjoined at right angles by a thinner wall (c. 100 and 50 cm thick respectively). The structure was designated as 2A2, the unit on the north side as 2A2a and the unit on the south as 2A2b. Outside the wall, in the western end of the trench, there is a layer of tamped silt, while inside the units the soil is brown.

Inside both units (2A2a and 2A2b), ovens were uncovered at a depth of 160 cm, partly under the trench walls (E wall in 2A2a, S wall in 2A2b). Between the outer wall of 2A2 and oven B2, traces of a brown layer with abundant pottery sherds were noted at this depth. In the western end of the trench a layer of silt was distinctly visible, and in the NW corner another oven. In the layer 160-180 cm the number of flint artifacts diminished, while pottery continued to be abundant. Structure 2A2 ended at a depth of 180 cm, as did oven B2. Inside the oven, the finds included pottery in large quantities and one flint flake. Of special interest are four practically whole vessels set up in a rectangle inside the oven. All four are devoid of the bottom and are positioned in a distinct silt layer which surrounds each one of them with a band at least 5 cm thick. The fill inside the oven is made up of a number of layers, indicating consecutive phases of use.

Below structure 2A2, at a depth of 180 cm, a zoomorphic cosmetic palette (fish) was discovered; typologically, it is linked with the Nagada IId/Nagada III phase.

Another architectural structure (2A3) was uncovered at 190 cm depth. It was made up of a wall of distinct bricks, each measuring c. 32x16 cm, and about 5 cm below a floor made of similar bricks. Pot-

tery continues to be abundant, but flint artifacts are totally absent. The structure was explored down to a depth of 220 cm. Walls were observed in outline at 210 cm; upon clearing, they turned out to be connected with the wall of structure 2A3. At 215 cm, part of a wall with a similar bond was found to run parallel to the first wall of 2A3 and perpendicular to the second one. In the biggest of the units thus delimited, a silt floor was found at the same depth and below it a layer several centimeters deep, made of potsherds and whole vessels – globular and with pointed bases, and a few pieces with a purple-black slip [Fig. 3].

This layer is undoubtedly earlier than structure 2A3; most probably from the beginning of the Nagada settlement at the site and terminal Lower Egyptian culture. By the end of the season, the trench had been explored to a depth of 230 cm. The lowermost reached level was protected and after documenting it, the trench was filled in. It will continue to be explored in the coming season.

#### TRENCH C01/98

The trench was situated on the southern slope of the central tell. It was traced in a place of the site where the upper layers had been disturbed by farmers in search of seabed and sand. The trench measured 8x4 m and was divided into two separate squares, the difference in levels between the northwestern corner (best preserved part) and the southeastern one being about 2 m. The northern, upper square was explored to a depth of 160 cm, distinguishing eleven cultural layers (I-XI), of which the lowest was identified as belonging to the Late Predynastic period. Nine cultural levels were identified in the southern, lower square (IX-XVII). The site had been largely destroyed by modern digging, but even so part of the trench preserved the

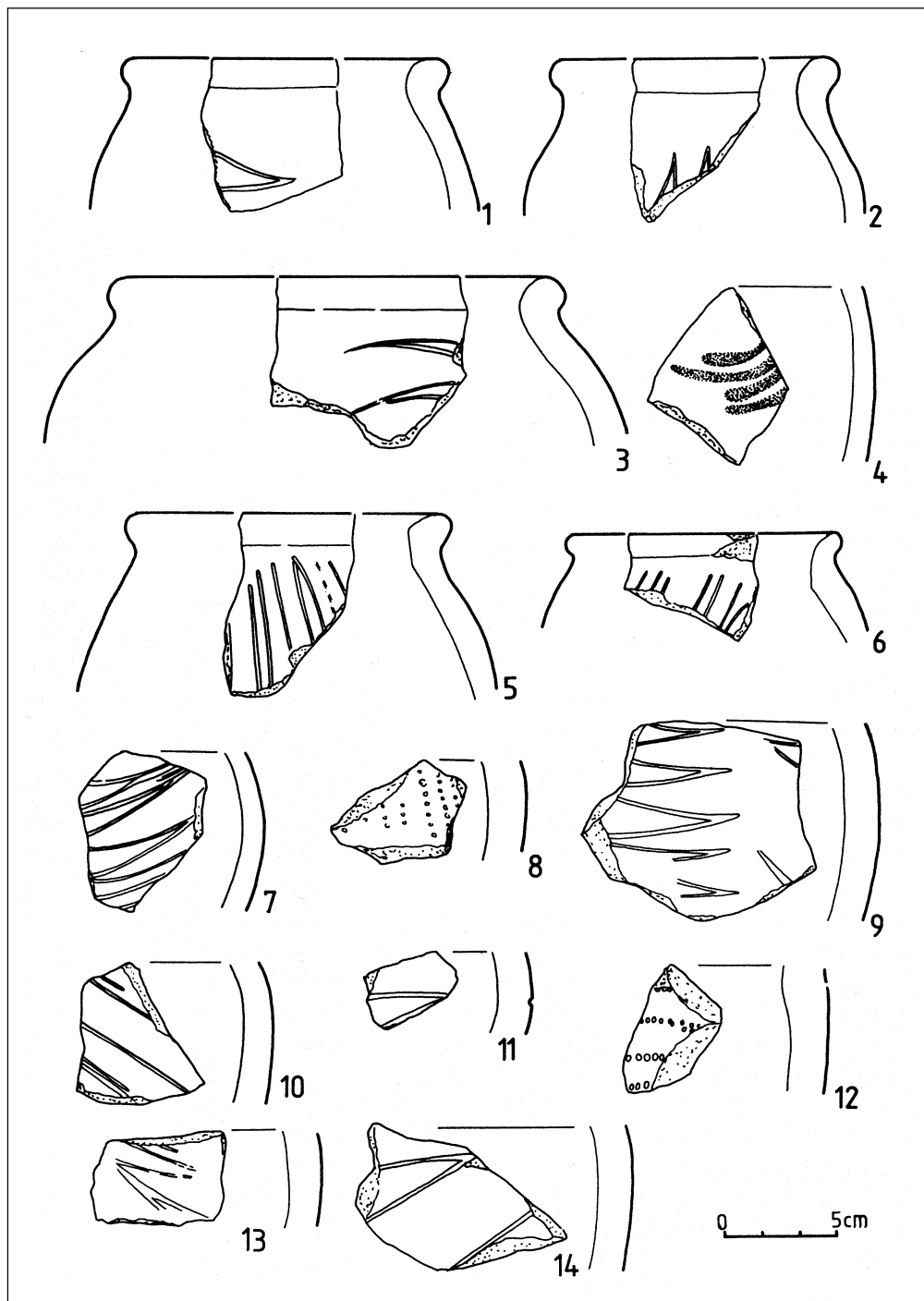


Fig. 3. Pottery of the Lower Egyptian Culture pottery  
(Drawing M. Jucha)

original appearance of the *gezirah*. Six small pits were discovered here; they can be attributed to the Lower Egyptian culture. They yielded potsherds, as well as three complete vessels [Fig. 4].

The trench was filled in after the archaeological documentation had been completed. Further exploration of the northern square is anticipated in the coming season.

### GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

A magnetic survey of the site was carried out over an area of about 0.5 ha located on the southern slopes of the central and western tells. A 0.5 m-grid fluxgate magnetometer was used. The resultant plan reveals the outlines of walls forming rectan-

gular units, occasionally of considerable size, particularly well visible on the central tell. Some of the strong anomalies might be interpreted as the remains of furnaces. The survey determined the extent of architectural relics occurring at the edges of the site.

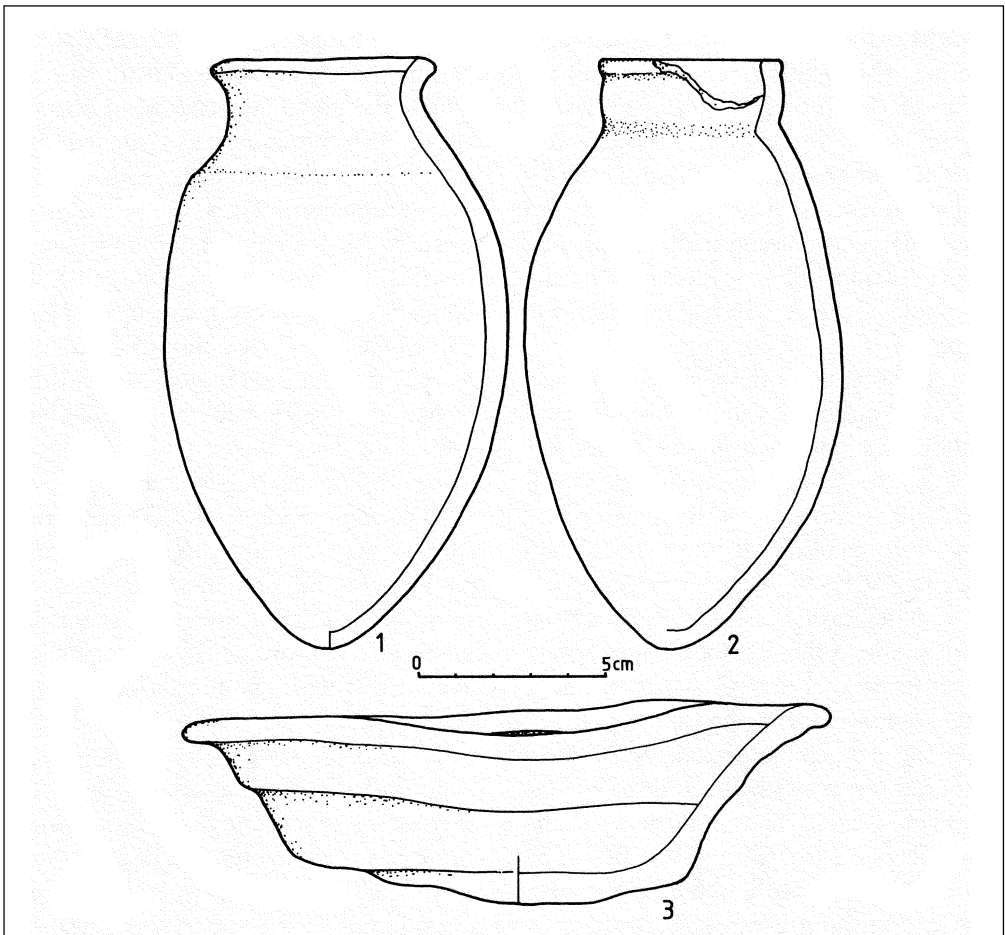


Fig. 4. Vessels of the Lower Egyptian Culture  
(Drawing H. Żarska-Chłodnicka)



## GEOLOGICAL DRILLING

Two geological shafts were drilled in the disturbed area south of the central tell and a series of drillings was made along a N-S line, cutting across the western tell and between it and the central tell. Ten shafts were spaced every 20 m and drilled to a depth of 4.5-5 m, starting at the edge of the village and ending in the fields

north of Tell el-Farkha. The drilling revealed the level at which sand, the original surface of the gezirah, appeared and the thickness of superimposed cultural layers. An important discovery consisted of identifying, already outside the confines of the tell, three layers rich in sherds, separated by thick layers of pure silt.

## THE FINDINGS

In terms of diagnostics, the present campaign has served its purpose admirably. Geological drilling has made it possible to determine the geological-archaeological structure of the gezirah, while geophysical surveying has identified architectural remains on part of the site. The site stratigraphy has been studied in test trenches and a provisional chronology established. The major occupational phases, identified by the earlier work of the Italian expedition, have been confirmed.

The first occupation of the site is linked to the Lower Egyptian Culture, as indicated not only by the pottery from the lowermost layers, but also the habitation and domestic quarters in the form of dwellings, the outlines of which were traced in the lowest layers of trench WO 1/98. A more exact chronology and identification of Tell el-Farkha with a specific phase in the development of Lower Egyptian Culture is not yet possible, but it is beyond doubt that the phases uncovered in the present season are chronologically at least contemporary with the origins of settlement at Buto, corresponding to the Nagada IIB phase (c. 3500-3400 BC). The next phase undoubtedly reflects Nagadan settlement, beginning most probably contemporarily with Nagada IID (c. 3300-3200 BC) and lasting throughout the third period in the existence of this civilization.

No traces of violent events (invasion) have been found so far to mark the moment of cultural change in the settlement at Tell el-Farkha. Neither is there a clear phase during which the site may have been abandoned, although some layers have yielded strongly eroded material possibly indicating such a phenomenon. These remains, however, seem to be later (although insignificantly) than the appearance of evident traces of Nagadan civilization in the area. Also in the Early Dynastic Period the site seems to have remained in uninterrupted use and the termination of settlement on the western tell should be dated to the end of the 2nd and beginning of the 3rd Dynasty.

The settlement on the site remains to be studied even though the present campaign has already provided answers to many questions. The role of the settlement is still unclear, its importance in the region, as well as its links with the formation processes of the Egyptian state. The geological and geophysical surveys seem to indicate that especially in Late Predynastic and Early Archaic times the site was one of the most important centers of Pharaonic civilization in the Delta. The cemetery of this population, undoubtedly somewhere in the near vicinity, remains to be localized. Future exploration should uncover more of the site and lead to better documented conclusions.