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## Gold from Tell El-Farkha Conservation Project at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo

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# GOLD FROM TELL EL-FARKHA CONSERVATION PROJECT AT THE EGYPTIAN MUSEUM IN CAIRO

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**Abstract:** Remains of two gold-sheet figures were discovered in 2006 on Kom W in Tell el-Farkha. The conservation and restoration of the figures was carried out in stages, starting immediately after the discovery. They were continued subsequently in two stages at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

**Keywords:** Tell el-Farkha, golden figurines, conservation

Polish excavations at Tell el-Farkha, a site in the Eastern Nile Delta concealing remains from the times of the Lower Egyptian Culture through the Old Kingdom (Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2002; 2004), have brought a number of discoveries expanding and changing our understanding of the beginnings of Ancient Egyptian civilization. One of these was the discovery in 2006 of the remains of two figures made of sheet gold (Ciałowicz 2007: 72; Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2008: 147–150).

The hoard was uncovered in a unit marked as no. 205 on the Eastern Kom, in layer 30/31. The room was open from the south and the objects had been deposited in the northwestern corner, parallel to the north wall. Beside the gold figures, the hoard also contained two flint knives and a necklace of beads made of ostrich eggshell and carnelian. The objects must have been wrapped together or placed in some kind of container presumably of an organic substance. The archaeological

context indicated a date in the Naqada IIIB period (approximately 3150–3100 BC, corresponding to Tell el-Farkha phase 4). The excavators do not believe the findspot of the hoard to be where the objects had been displayed and it is more than likely that the objects themselves are older than the context in which they were discovered (Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2007: 8–13). The set was certainly of a ritual nature and it must have been hidden during some local infighting (Ciałowicz 2007: 72).

Upon discovery the sheet gold was fragmented and displaced [*Fig. 1*]. Careful registering of the pieces, which had to be smoothed and laid out, led to the provisional reconstruction of the find. This stage of the documentation and preservation work took place on site in 2006 and lasted one week, after which the gold was conveyed to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

Preliminary documentation of the find indicated two figures depicting men,

approximately 60 cm and 30 cm high respectively. Both were shown standing and both were naked. They had been made of an organic material, wood presumably, which has been lost entirely. The sheet gold covering had encased the wooden core of the figures (Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2007: 13). Small rivets found with the gold confirm this idea as sheet gold is too soft and plastic as a material to be mounted on a corpus of some hard material.

Further conservation and restoration of the figures took place at the labs of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, where the objects were being prepared for display at the *Seventy Years of Polish Archaeology in Egypt* exhibition, which opened on 21 October 2007. The exhibition was organized by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (Majewska 2007: 17–21).

The complexity and singularity of the find and the degree of damages that the gold images had incurred demanded more work than was envisaged at first. Therefore, during the preparations for the exhibition attention was paid primarily to the smaller figure. The gold pieces were fitted

together and mounted on a papier-maché corpus. The legs, arms, head and face were modeled, making place for the eyes made of lapis-lazuli. The figurine was mounted vertically in a metal stand. For lack of time the sheet gold of the bigger figure was mounted on a provisionally modeled head and corpus. The remaining fragments were straightened and restored to their original shape and the figure recomposed lying flat on an appropriate base [Fig. 2].

The second stage of the conservation project organized by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology took place in 2008 and was carried out in association with the conservation lab of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo with full support and cooperation from the Museum Director, Dr. Wafaa El Saddik. The gold objects were taken under police escort from their place of display in the main hall of the museum to the conservation lab.

The conservation and reconstruction treatment comprised work on the actual fragments of sheet gold and on reconstructing the shape of the two figures.

Repairing the sheet gold required the restoration the original shape of the

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#### Team

*Dates of work:* First stage, September–October 2007; second stage, 17 April–15 May 2008

*Archaeologist:* Anna Longa (Institute of Archaeology, Jagiellonian University)

*Conservator:* Władysław Weker (State Archaeological Museum, Warsaw)

*Photographer:* Robert Słaboński (Institute of Archaeology, Jagiellonian University)

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fragments and the inventorying of all the pieces, matching elements found and subsequently fitted together.

The damages to the object had obliterated practically all evidence of the original shape of the figures. Pieces of different size (a few dozen larger ones and more than a hundred smaller fragments, often less than 5 x 4 mm in size) were much bent, folded, mechanically deformed, torn apart and cracked. Each fragment needed to be straightened out, the creases and folds removed while retaining any original modeling of the figures. This task demanded extreme care and diligence as the gold tended to tear at any incautious move. Fortunately, the plasticity of the sheet gold metal was still good, allowing deforma-

tions to be removed with the use of professional jeweler's tools. Matching fragments were reconnected using Japanese tissue to underglue the pieces. An acryl resin solution in acetone was used as adhesive. The process of matching and joining pieces required also modeling of the original form. Several such smaller parts could then be put together to restore the whole figure. A model of the core figure was prepared, first of easily modeled jeweler's wax, later replaced with papier-maché and gypsum. This model figure was corrected over and over again as work on the sheet gold progressed, ultimately reconstructing the complete shape of the original figure.

Once the sheet gold was restored to its original form, it was mounted on a gypsum



*Fig. 1. Fragments of the gold figures upon discovery  
(All photos R. Staboński)*

corpus painted brown in imitation of dark wood. The two figurines were displayed in standing position on metal stands [Fig. 3]. The last stage of the process, will be to transfer the gold shapes to properly prepared wooden models.<sup>1</sup>

The two gold figures from Tell el-Farkha constitute an excellent example of figural art from the Early Dynastic period. They demonstrate the artisan's proficiency in producing and modeling gold sheet. The attention to details is particularly



Fig. 2. The larger figure following preliminary conservation measures

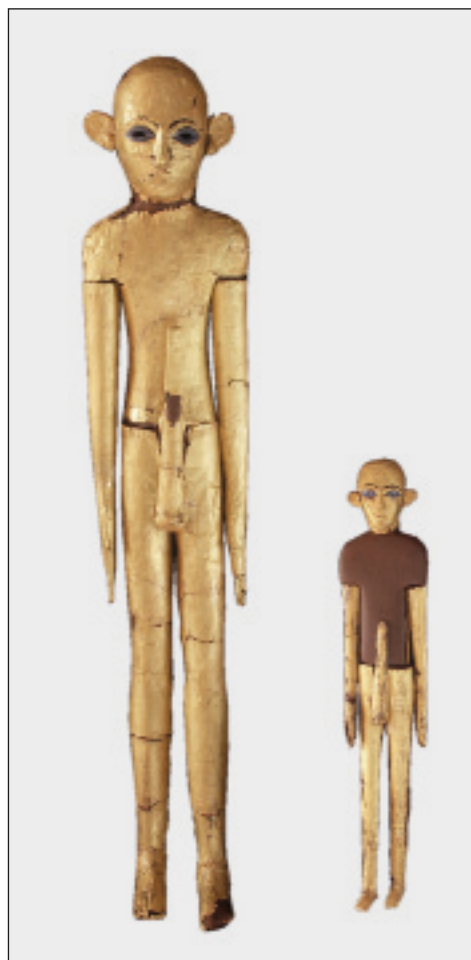


Fig. 3. The two gold figures, larger and smaller, after conservation and reconstruction

<sup>1</sup> The bigger figure was transferred from the gypsum core to a wooden one (prepared earlier in Poland), in 2010 and the same will be done with the smaller figure in 2012.

impressive. Both figures had eyes made of imported lapis-lazuli. The brows were filled with some organic material, now lost, either bitumen or ebony. The figures are believed to be images of the ruler and his

son/heir (Ciałowicz 2007: 70; Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2008: 148). Once the reconstruction work is completed, the two figures will have contributed significantly to our understanding of Early Dynastic art.

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