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# POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION AS REFLECTED BY BURIAL RITES OBSERVED IN THE PROTODYNASTIC PART OF THE CEMETERY IN TELL EL-FARKHA

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**Abstract:** Graves associated with the Protodynastic period from Tell el-Farkha belonged to a wealthy community, members of which were buried as a rule in diversified structures with well arranged sets of offerings. Typical features of these graves enabled a classification into three categories reflecting social differentiation. The distribution pattern of these burials describes the political and economic transformation within the Protodynastic community which inhabited the settlement of Tell el-Farkha and, in a broader sense, all of early Egyptian society at the origins of its history.

**Keywords:** Tell el-Farkha cemetery, Protodynastic graves, social differentiation

Polish research on the site of Tell el-Farkha, ongoing since 1998 (Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2002), has revealed seven phases of occupation on the three mounds. The last three phases are of significance for burial rites, as they correspond to the layers of graves recorded on the Eastern Kom. And so, human activity on the Western Kom (W) terminated in phase 5 attributed to the Naqada IIIB/IIIC1 period, while the youngest phases 6 and 7 were found only on the eastern (E) and central (C) mounds. Phase 6 is dated through the end of the Early Dynastic period and the ultimate abandonment of the site in the beginning of the Fourth Dynasty is reflected in phase 7 (Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2003).

Research at the site has demonstrated the residential function of the Western Kom, the industrial character of the Central Kom and a more compound role of the Eastern Kom, which was used as a cemetery, interchangeably in some periods with a pauperized settlement (Ciałowicz 2008: 511). In general, the graves are dated from Naqada IIIB to the Old Kingdom and represent three distinct cemeteries. The first of them belongs roughly to the Proto-dynastic period and includes graves dated to Naqada IIIB and Naqada IIIB/C1–C2. The second cemetery represents the Early Dynastic period, while the third one is composed of the simplest graves found at the site, dated to the Old Kingdom.

Excavations up to 2005 revealed tombs spread over an area of approximately 800 m<sup>2</sup> [Fig. 1]. All burials but one (that is 28 excavated graves<sup>1</sup>) represented a younger phase of the so-called Protodynastic cemetery,<sup>2</sup> which is quite homogeneously dated to Naqada IIIB/C1–C2. This considerable group was made up of burials demonstrating different general characteristics of construction and typical grave inventory, the diversification seen as representing the social stratification of people buried at the site at the end of Dynasty 0 and the beginning of the First Dynasty. To facilitate description of the material particular graves were classified in three categories discussed below.

The first category of Protodynastic graves (which were numbered sequentially in the order of discovery) [Fig. 2] appear to have belonged to wealthy representatives of the middle ranks in the Tell el-Farkha society. The differentiated character of the grave goods in particular tombs is proof of the high economic status of the deceased. These rather big brick structures were raised with considerable effort, lined with mats and frequently protected with well preserved solid superstructures. Some tombs were distinguished by special storage compartments added onto the main burial chamber, a system of ‘annexes’, a lower burial chamber or exceedingly massive walls.

Of the 13 burials attributed to this group (their vast majority was found in undisturbed condition), Tombs 4, 6, 7 and 26 will be described as illustrative of this category.

**Grave 4** was a big (4.13 x 2.00 m) two-chambered structure. Grave goods included 36 ceramic vessels (medium-size jars and fairly small bowls<sup>3</sup>) deposited in the smaller storage compartment to the north. The skeleton was found in the main chamber to the south, partly disarticulated with the skull bones not in anatomical position and the vertebrae and digits scattered about. The burial and grave goods were covered with a mat, which was preserved in the form of white fibers. Nothing to indicate the presence of a superstructure was discovered, but the tomb was located very close to the present surface of the mound. In this situation any brick superstructure could be easily decomposed simply due to natural weather conditions.

**Grave 6** was rectangular (3.45 x 2.56 m), which made it different from the other tombs. The walls were a massive 0.50 m thick, covered with a brick top, also up to 0.50 m thick, making it quite impermeable. The burial was of a child, which was laid to rest on a kind of brick bed. Deposited around this catafalque were 20 ceramic vessels and the entire burial was covered with reasonably well-preserved mats. Judging by the potential value of the grave goods, the dead child must have belonged to a well-to-do family, which could afford a fine necklace composed of carnelian and limestone beads and a pendant of sheet gold.

**Grave 7** was of considerable dimensions (3.80 x 1.60 m), meriting attention because of its construction. It comprised

<sup>1</sup> By 2011 the total number of graves at the site had reached 120 and is expected to grow as field research proceeds. The group of Protodynastic graves now counts 48 burials, of which eight represent the older part of Naqada IIIB. For details, see Dębowska-Ludwin 2009 and 2011.

<sup>2</sup> For more details considering the site in general and the cemetery in particular, see Chłodnicki *et alii*, in press.

<sup>3</sup> For more details on pottery from the discussed graves, see Jucha 2004 and 2006.

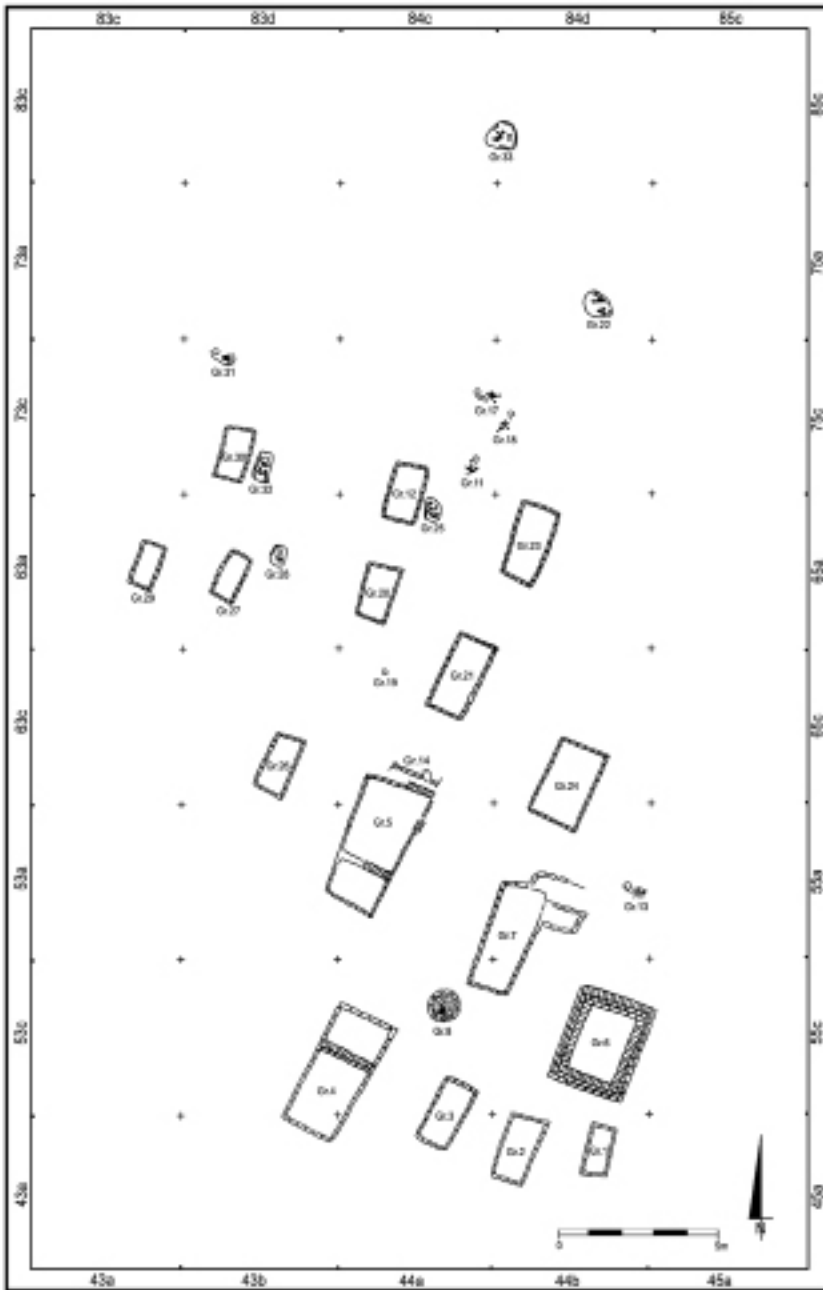


Fig. 1. Plan of the cemetery explored on the Eastern Kom in Tell el-Farkha, 2005  
(All drawings in the text J. Dębowska-Ludwin)

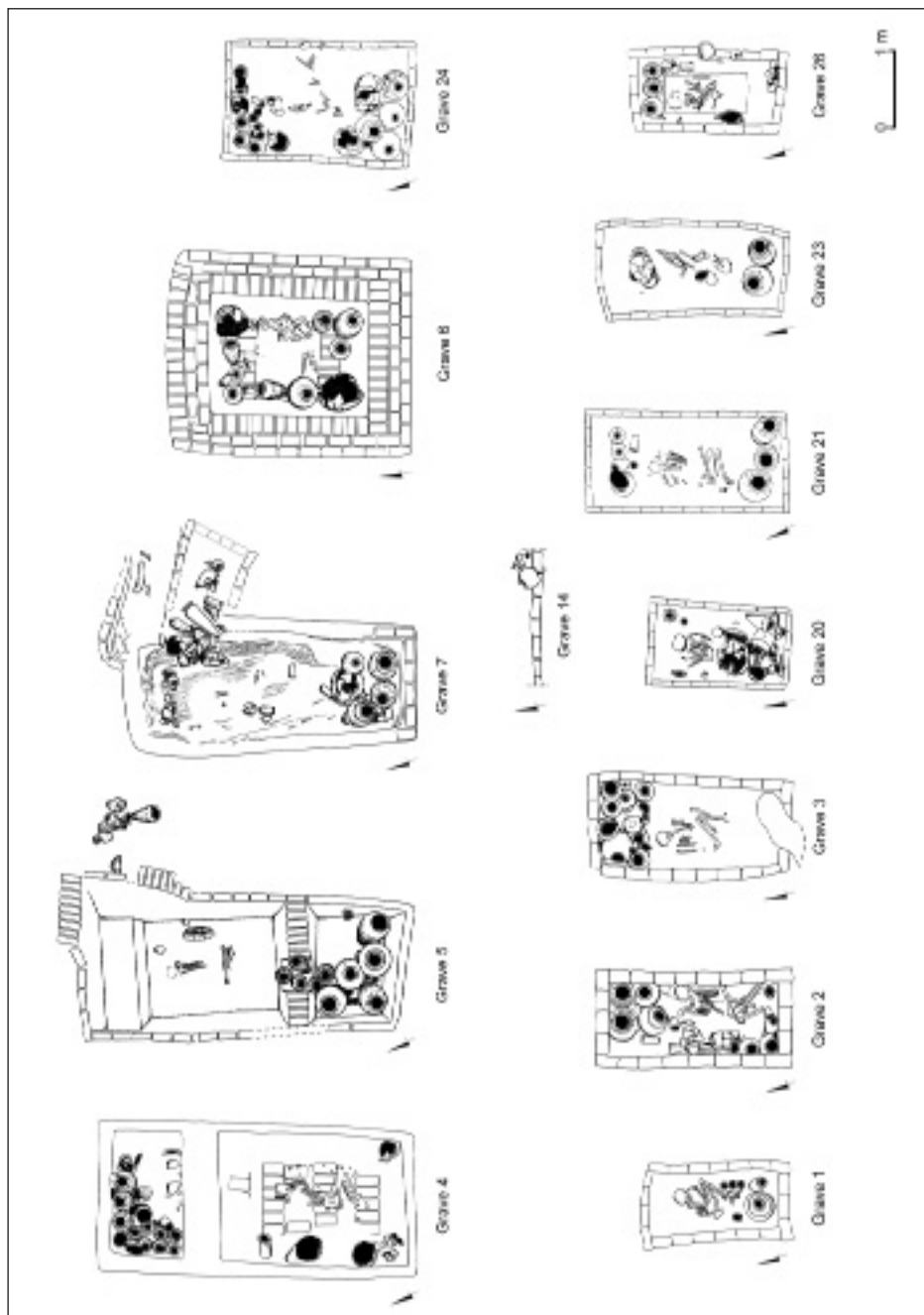


Fig. 2. Graves representing the first category investigated at the Tell el-Farkha Protodynastic cemetery

an elongated burial chamber combined with a system of 'annexes'. Despite being plundered in antiquity, the grave still contained 39 ceramic vessels. The mess left by the robbers was evident in the 'annexes' where 16 broken vessels of medium size had been left behind along with fragments of a travertine vessel and two corneal processes of domestic cattle preserved with part of the skull. The bodies of a young woman and child of a few years of age appear to have been decked in jewelry as suggested by flakes of sheet gold and four carnelian beads retrieved from the fill. The grave also contained a deposit of animal bones, including the skeleton of a cobra *Naja haje* (Ablamowicz *et alii* 2004: 412–419). The entire burial was covered with protective mats, which were preserved in excellent condition. No evidence of a superstructure was discovered. Had it existed (which is plausible considering our general knowledge of brick burial structures at the site), it was destroyed in the course of later activity: natural decomposition once the cemetery was abandoned or intentional destruction, since the grave was badly plundered.

Grave 26 proved to be a rectangular pit with brick lining and a kind of lower niche for the actual burial. The structure was fairly small (2.06 x 1.10 m) but quite carefully executed, so the lack of a registered superstructure may be due to its high, nearly superficial stratigraphic position. The grave goods comprised, beside 19 ceramic vessels, some beads of steatite, a flint knife and animal bones. The body must have filled the burial niche completely, while the grave goods were placed on a kind of shelf above and around it.

Graves of the second category [Fig. 3] were furnished with only innumerable grave

goods, usually pottery vessels. They have been interpreted as belonging to a poorer class of the Protodynastic society from Tell el-Farkha. Despite evident pauperization, the tombs made an effort to meet standards in the form of a rectangular pit lined with bricks, differing from the larger tombs also in execution, meaning they were smaller and the walls were often crooked and uneven with no evidence of superstructures. The lack of superstructure may be due to preservation issues because these burials were found in superficial layers or beneath remains of a rather poor settlement. On the other hand, the very simplified form of these graves could suggest that they had actually never had any brick superstructures.

This category comprised six excavated graves and three burials in this category were found undisturbed. Graves 8, 27, 30 and 33 are counted among the best illustrations of what this group of graves looked like.

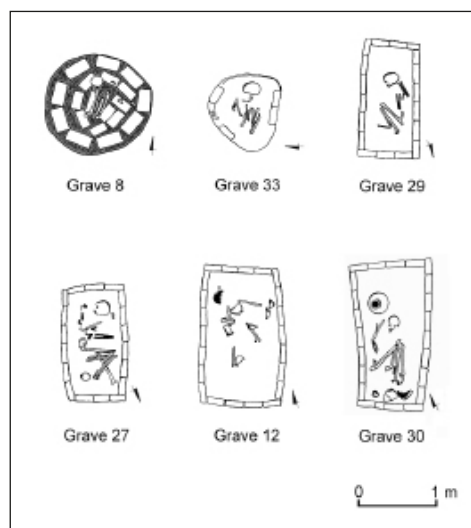


Fig. 3. Graves of the second category from the Protodynastic burial mound on Tell el-Farkha

**Grave 8** was situated in a small space between the southwestern corner of grave 7 and the northeastern corner of grave 4, almost immediately below the present surface. The grave consisted of a simple round pit (1.30 m in diameter), the bottom of which was lined with two layers of sand-tempered mudbricks. The tight contraction of the skeleton can be explained plausibly only if the body had been tightly wrapped and bound. Remarkably, no grave goods of any kind were found with the deceased, assuming the one ceramic cone found right above the grave is not considered.

**Grave 27** was a rectangular pit (1.50 x 0.86 m), brick-lined, furnished with a single ceramic vessel and fragments of a jar lid with textile impression. The skeleton was disturbed in part, although no evidence of plunder was noted.

**Grave 30** exemplified a more solid structure (1.90 x 1.06 m), although it was not as well-built as tombs from the first category. The grave goods comprised three ceramic vessels and a fragment of seal impression.

**Grave 33** was found on a relatively low level and quite far to the north relative to the other graves recorded in Tell el-Farkha. Equally puzzling is the context of the burial surrounded by mud-brick structures of apparent ordinary everyday use with no relation to the cemetery itself. The deceased had been placed in a rather large pit (1.00 x 0.90 m) partly lined with mud bricks and partly plastered with a thin layer of mud; this constitutes a transition of sorts from brick structures to simple pits. Its filling was unusually compact. The whole burial had been covered with mats. No grave goods except for a few pottery sherds in the fill were recorded.

The third category of burials [Fig. 4] represented the poorest strata of society

inhabiting the settlement on Tell el-Farkha in the Protodynastic period. This group consisted of simple pit graves, sometimes oval, but mostly roughly irregular, seldom lined with mats and devoid of any grave goods whatsoever. Nine graves were accounted for in this category. They were found largely undisturbed, probably because they contained nothing to plunder. Indeed, those that were damaged had not been robbed, but had suffered from later building activity on the spot. In this group we have, among others graves 19, 25 and 32.

**Grave 19.** The solitary skull of an adult male was recorded, lying face up on a mat in a dusty pit (0.20 x 0.16 m). The mat rested on a compact brick level which filled the entire area of the trench.

**Grave 25.** The burial was in pretty poor condition, although the edges of the pit (0.88 x 0.56 m) were quite well marked and the bottom lined carefully with mats. The mat covering the body was particularly well preserved.

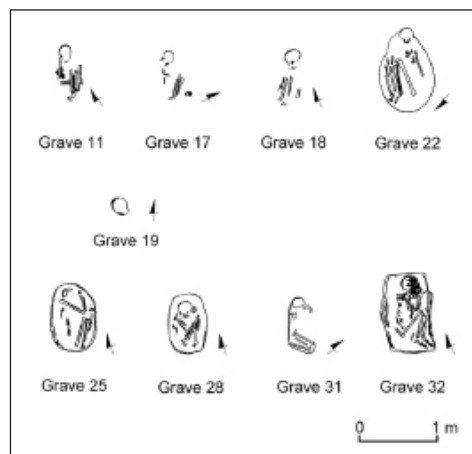


Fig. 4. Graves of the third category from the Protodynastic cemetery on Tell el-Farkha

**Grave 32** was a simple pit, roughly rectangular (1.02 x 0.65 m) and lined with well-preserved mats on the bottom. More mats were used to cover the body. The atypical shape merits attention, for it is rarely encountered in simple pit burials at the site. No grave goods of any kind were recorded.

Most of the graves from the Protodynastic cemetery at Tell el-Farkha represented individual burials. Double burials, mainly of women with children, were registered in only four cases. All of the dead were buried in contracted position mostly on the left (17 individuals) or right side (4 individuals), in the remaining cases skeletons were found unsatisfactorily preserved or dislocated. Body orientation differed considerably with the dead being laid to rest with the head to the south, east and west, and most frequently (16 individuals) to the north. Meriting note is the fact that despite recorded cases of grave plundering (e.g. part of the goods thrown outside the pit of grave 5, see Dębowska 2004: 67) 18 of the Protodynastic tombs from Tell el-Farkha were found in undisturbed condition.

An interesting issue is the case of horizontal stratigraphy of the Protodynastic cemetery. The oldest burial activity discovered at Tell el-Farkha is probably reflected by a large mastaba (no. 10) dated to the turn of Naqada IIIA2 and Naqada IIIB1 (Ciałowicz 2006). Regardless of its actual function, it was abandoned quite quickly and a new cemetery was started to the southeast of it. This was the discussed Protodynastic cemetery<sup>4</sup> which expanded northward to cover the remains of a modest settlement and also the old mastaba which

became a solid foundation for some diversified and carefully planned burials.

The people buried there were clearly of Naqadan origin and represented a wealthy but diversified society. It is significant that the majority of the discussed Protodynastic graves belonged to people of apparent affluence. These structures seem to be concentrated in the southeastern part of the excavated cemetery, which is composed of a Protodynastic core dated to Naqada IIIB, surrounded by slightly younger and less massive tombs from the Naqada IIIB/C1–C2 period (discussed above). The younger phase of the Protodynastic cemetery encompassed more diversified burials reflecting a more stratified society but with the wealthy graves still in dominance. There is no doubt, however, that despite significant differences in the pottery assemblage, the younger and older Protodynastic tombs belonged to the same cemetery used over a longer period of time.

The graves can be considered as a link in the long process of the evolution of burial rites from predynastic to pharaonic times, an assumption made particularly clear when the Protodynastic cemetery is juxtaposed with the younger, Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom cemeteries discovered in Tell el-Farkha. The builders of these Protodynastic structures also appear to have been experimenting on their way to the perfect grave form, hence the presence of so many “strange” structures (e.g. graves nos 7, 8, 26 and 33) and variations in the position of the deceased. Yet there are also numerous elements of burial customs typical of the early Dynastic (such as general body position, use of mud bricks, presence of superstructures, social stratification).

<sup>4</sup> The oldest examples dated to Naqada IIIB were excavated in 2009 and 2010.



Although only a part of the Protodynastic cemetery has been excavated and the southern and eastern limits have yet to be established, it seems that these graves were arranged circularly around a central core composed mainly of tombs dated to Naqada IIIB, but also some younger examples belonging to our first category. Furthermore, tombs in the central zone were built at rather regular distances from one another and aligned with the north–south axis visibly veering consistently to the east. The poorer brick graves described above as the second category followed the same pattern of regular distribution and typical orientation, but placed generally farther away from the cemetery core. Finally, the poorest burials in simple pits (the third category) seem to have been dispersed irregularly in the northern sector of the excavated cemetery. There is no visible care for proper distances or axis of their orientation, as if they were accidentally located in any accessible empty space.

This observed pattern of grave distribution may reflect social stratification of the community or horizontal development of the Protodynastic cemetery. If it corresponds to social and/or economic differentiation, we would be dealing with a wealthy community predominated by owners of rich tombs. If the pattern represents temporal changes, then it captures a gradual pauperization of society culminating in the abandonment of the cemetery. In both cases, the relatively low number of the simplest burials is highly puzzling and best explained by the possibility that the poorest sector of the necropolis has not been discovered

as yet. Relevant settlement data from the site suggest that the Protodynastic community inhabited and buried at Tell el-Farkha was a wealthy middle class whose affluence depended on trade with the Levant and Upper Egypt and who appear to have rapidly lost their significance. The differentiated Protodynastic graves from Tell el-Farkha appear to illustrate very well this compound process.

Massive multi-room structures of brick from an age contemporary with the Protodynastic graves have been explored on the site, particularly the impressive structure on Kom W interpreted as an administrative center and cult place with small shrine (Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz 2002: 73–75). Such an interpretation of the structure has been confirmed by a deposit of stone and faience figurines, miniature vessels of travertine and other colored stones, beads and counters. There can hardly be any doubt that to build a structure like this, the local community must have had high political as well as economic status. Unfortunately, the said shrine is also the last vestige of the splendor of early Tell el-Farkha. The settlement and the local dignitaries shared the fate of many communities in the Delta, which lost importance with the presumably sudden shift of political power to Memphis. The process is well evidenced, among others by the establishment in the reign of Aha of a necropolis of state dignitaries in North Saqqara and the simultaneous decline of centers which had flourished until then.

The community on Tell el-Farkha witnessed its share of catastrophes like conflagrations, floods and earthquakes, but

<sup>5</sup> In 2006, a second shrine was registered in the same sector of the site, including a cache of exquisite figurines made of hippotamus tusk. For details, see Ciałowicz 2011.

it must have been a political debacle that undercut its prosperity. It is unlikely that in any other circumstances the impressive administrative and cult center on the Western Kom would have been abandoned and not, like previously, rebuilt and refur-

bished. In this new situation all activity on the Western Kom ceased and life continued, albeit in changed form, on the other two mounds, where small structures of utilitarian nature were raised, some of them even on top of the Protodynastic graves.

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