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Tell Farama: Preliminary Report on a Season of Polish-Egyptian Excavations

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TELL FARAMA

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON A SEASON OF POLISH-EGYPTIAN EXCAVATIONS

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At the initiative of Dr Mohammad Abdel Maqsood, Director General of Lower Egyptian Antiquities, a team from the Polish Center of Archaeology in Cairo undertook a short campaign (11-28 August 2003) at the site of the theater of Farama (ancient Pelusium).¹⁾

The theater was discovered and partly explored in 1992/93 by Ahmad Taba'i for the SCA. It was surveyed in May 1993 by Dr. Wojciech Kotłataj, then architect of the Polish Center, Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek, and Dr. Mohammad Abdel Maqsood.

1) The team included, beside the present writer, Dr. Krzysztof Jakubiak, archaeologist; Mr. Michał Smoła, architect; and Mr. Dominik Elkowicz, a scholarship holder of the Center. The SCA was represented by the inspectors Mr. Mohammad al-Bayoumi al-Shaqra and Mr. Osama Ahmad. We were accommodated at the SCA premises in Qantara East, and enjoyed the helpful company of its employees. Our work was made easier by the assistance and advice of Dr. Mohammad Abdel Samie, Director of Antiquities of North Sinai.

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The theater measures c. 80 m in diameter. It was the third ancient theater ever found in Egypt after the discovery of yet another theater in Pelusium, partly excavated and published by a team directed by H. Jaritz.²⁾ In spite of advanced destruction, the theater at Farama West preserved about half the length of the outer circular wall, which can be followed on the ground. This wall, as well as the foundations of the stage building, were made of red brick. However, it could be ascertained that the stage building itself had been in limestone masonry. Regrettably, the walls of the stage have disappeared entirely, leaving only a trace on the brick foundation surface.

These traces were carefully recorded by Dr. Kołataj. He could not see, however, any remains of the *pulpitum* or *orchestra*. Likewise, both *parodoi*, as well as *cavea* were buried entirely.

Several broken shafts of granite and marble columns of various dimensions, together with granite architraves were found near the center of the monument. These architectural members apparently belonged to the original layout of the *scenae frons*.

A commission of the then EAO, headed by Messrs. Kamal Fahmy Ibrahim and Hassan Shehata, decided in May 1993 to proceed with the restoration of the



Fig. 1. *The stage building, looking west*
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)

2) H. Jaritz et al., Pelusium. Prospection archéologique et topographique de la région de Tell el-Kana'is, 1993 et 1994, *Beiträge zur Ägyptischen Bauforschung und Altertumskunde* 13 (Stuttgart 1996).

monument. Our experts stressed the need to excavate further to elucidate the exact form of the theater.

Later on, the expertise of Dr. Peter Grossmann was called upon by the EAO, resulting in a new and independent record of the remains. Thanks to the kindness of Dr. Grossmann I was able to consult both his report and the plan he had made.³⁾ The

outline of the stage building differs significantly on the two plans available. We were not able to check this as some consolidation work had been done in the meantime on the brick platform of the stage building, covering in effect the faint traces of its superstructure. It is to be hoped that these traces have survived under the protecting layer of modern brick.

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As it appeared to us upon arrival, the theater is a monument hardly understandable to an unprepared visitor. As a result of partial excavations, the outer semi-circular wall of the *cavea* now emerges from the ground to the height of about 1 m. The stage building

presents a flat surface restored to a uniform level nearly even with the present ground around it (*Figs. 1, 2*). About a dozen architectural members of Aswan red granite were reassembled in the middle and protected with sand.



Fig. 2. The stage building, looking east
(*Photo M. Gawlikowski*)

3) A. el-Taba'i, M. Abdel Maqsoud, P. Grossmann, The Great Theatre of Pelusium, in: *Hommages Fayza Haikal* (Le Caire 2003), 271-283.

As already observed in 1993, any restoration needs to be preceded by excavation, the objective being to determine the ancient level and to make the form of the theater apparent. Consequently, clearing work was begun in an old trench situated in the northwestern recess of the stage building. The trial pit was enlarged to 8 by 5 m, uncovering part of the *pulpitum*, and later linked to a new trench, 11 m long and 4 m wide, revealing the western entrance to the theater (*Fig. 3*). This proved to be 2.35 m wide. Another excavation was opened in the opposite, northeastern recess.

The brick surface of the stage platform proved to have been plastered once and at least partly painted, but only minor fragments of painted plaster were found. Likewise, only a few white marble fragments of revetment were found, mostly as limekiln refuse. The red-brick core of the theater was very extensively dismantled for reuse elsewhere, possibly in the walls of the nearby late Roman camp.

It was observed that after the monument had been abandoned, the hollow of the theater was filled progressively with garbage, which now forms a very hard,



Fig. 3. The western parodos overlying earlier brick structures
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)

black soil, rich in organic material. Potsherds embedded in this dump include some Hellenistic forms, such as black slipped bowls, Rhodian stamped amphora handles, some Eastern sigillata, fragments of terracotta figurines, and some Late Roman pottery, all mixed and by no means reflecting a corresponding stratigraphy.⁴⁾ Some pockets of clear sand on top mark the disuse of the building even as a garbage dump, and are followed with several levels of loose bricks and white powdered plaster, corresponding to operations of removing the building material. The robber trenches cut neatly into the compact dump and

contain in turn Late Roman pottery and some poorly preserved coins, all apparently not later than the 5th century AD.

It was found that the stage was flanked, as is common elsewhere, by two larger, nearly square foundations (c. 12 by 14 m), that had once supported the *versurae*, i.e., the buildings serving as the backstage during performances. On each side, the inner angle is cut off, forming a narrow recess. In between, the stage recedes even more, being only 7 m wide between the front and a long corridor at the back that runs parallel to the building's facade.

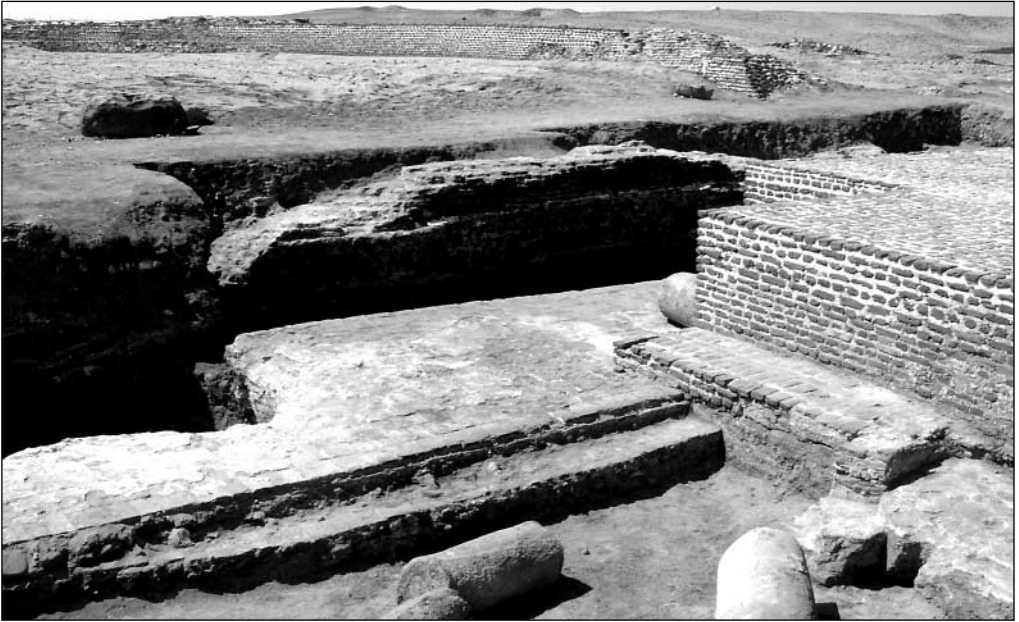
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The theater at Farama is peculiar in more respects than just being built in red brick. It is striking that contrary to the norm, of which I can recollect no exception, the *pulpitum* floor is considerably lower (1.13 to 1.30 m) than the platform of the stage and practically even with the threshold of the *parodos*. This lower level is marked already at the entrance by a narrow ledge along the wall supporting the stage building. The *pulpitum* itself was 3.10 m wide, filling a narrow recess in the platform, and extending all the way to the opposite entrance (Figs. 4, 5). It has a 40 cm ledge along the inner side, which corresponds to a similar ledge along the central part of the platform: it could be that wooden planks covered the distance (some 5 m) between the two. However, the area between the *pulpitum* and the stage should be excavated first to determine the level of the original floor. At present, it is

filled with a deposit of black soil and covered with a thin layer of clean sand, just as outside the *pulpitum*.

While the rows of seats in the *cavea* are all gone (we can expect to find no more than the foundations), parts of the original surface of the *pulpitum* are still in place, and so is the threshold of the entrance. In spite of the lamentable state of preservation, it should be possible to restore at least the outlines of the monument and to suggest its original appearance. However, an extensive clearing operation is a prerequisite. This largely exceeds our own means and we are counting on the Egyptian party to proceed with it some time later this year, so that our next season could be entirely devoted to the restoration project. The ancient level is found some 1.60 m below the present surface at the entrance, and the pavement of the *orchestra* should be at least as deep.

4) Cf. remarks by K. Jakubiak in this volume.



*Fig. 4. The pulpitum at the inner end of the western parodos, looking west
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)*



*Fig. 5. The pulpitum at the inner end of the western parodos, looking north
(Photo M. Gawlikowski)*