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Tell Farama (Pelusium): Preliminary Report on Second Season of Polish-Egyptian Excavations

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TELL FARAMA

(Pelusium)

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON SECOND SEASON OF POLISH-EGYPTIAN EXCAVATIONS

Krzysztof Jakubiak

The second campaign of fieldwork at the site of the theater at Tell Farama (ancient Pelusium) was carried out between July and August 5, 2004.¹ The work was generally a continuation of the first season's efforts, focusing particularly on the orchestra area. The latter was greatly aided by the cleaning of a big part of the structure, carried out in the spring season by Dr. Ahmed Taba'i from the SCA. Further trenches were located in the western and northern parts of the monument, exploring respectively the entrance to the theater parodos and the area between the scenae frons and the pulpitum (Fig. 1)

¹ The work was undertaken at the initiative of Dr. Muhammad Abdel Maqsood, SCA Director of Lower Egypt Antiquities. The team, directed by Prof. Dr. Michał Gawlikowski, included the present writer and Mr. Szymon Maślak, archaeologists. The SCA side was represented by inspectors, Messrs Said Alim and Osama Ahmad. We were accommodated in the SCA camp Qantara East, and enjoyed the helpful attention of its employees. Our work was made easier also thanks to the help of Dr. Muhammad Abdel Samie, SCA Director of Antiquities of the North Sinai.

WORK IN THE THEATER AREA

Following the combined Egyptian and Polish clearing work in 2004, the entire area of the *orchestra* has been cleaned and studied [Fig. 2]. It is now evident that the stratigraphy of the site is completely disturbed and some parts of the red brick substructures have been damaged by heavy equipment. The damages seem to have been incurred during the Israeli occupation of the area. Missing marble and limestone slabs from the original pavement reflect an earlier phase of destruction, when the ruins were used locally as a ready source of building material.

In view of the swampy ground in this area, the use of red brick for the substructure of the theater was evidently meant as a way of reinforcing the setting of the building. Repairs made to the brick substructure were noted in several places. Moreover, reparations in brick were noted between the limestone slabs of the pavement. Unfortunately, the limits of the *orchestra* could not be traced precisely because of the scope of destruction.

While we decided not to uncover the *cavea* structure this season, we could tell from sections that the mud-brick con-

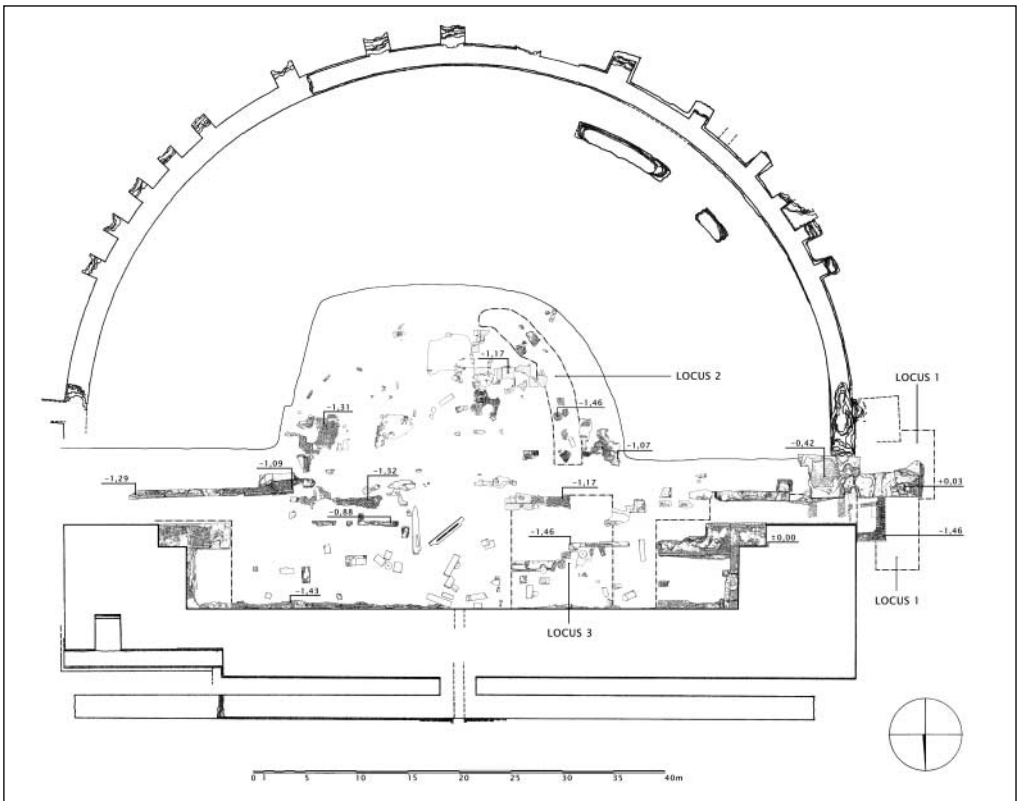


Fig. 1. Plan of the theater at Tell Farama (Pelusium) after the 2004 season (Drawing M. Smoła, S. Maślak, K. Jakubiak)

struction consisted of five sectors with the main entrance being on axis. Four other entrances were located, two on each side of the central one. A fragment of red-brick threshold was cleaned in the first entrance from the east *parodos*.

A test trench measuring 13.5 by 4 m in the western part of the building was later enlarged in its southern part. It provided a follow-up of last year's work in this area, the main purpose being the investigation of the entrance to the theater *parodos*. The foundations were discovered to stand on a thin leveling layer of sand. They are larger than the walls, obviously in order to compensate for the swampy ground prevalent in the region of Pelusium. This is a structurally sound building technique and one can only wonder why it was

executed so sloppily. Only the western part of the *parodos* substructure was wider, the rest being irregular and narrowing toward the bottom. Cracking of the walls, clearly visible during the excavations, could possibly be attributed to uncontrolled processes of subsidence which must have put a strain on the building as a whole. It would explain the presence of red-brick structures observed east of last year's trench, which should now be interpreted as buttressing the upper parts of the entrance and the structure as a whole.

Moreover, a late Hellenistic or early Roman structure [Fig. 3] was discovered in the spot where an entrance from the earlier phase had been assumed. The building technique (red bricks and concrete pavement) suggested a date for the structure in



Fig. 2. Orchestra area, view from the west. After excavations
(Photo K. Jakubiak)

the early 1st century AD. Obviously, the theater was built in place of earlier structures, but it is still premature to decide whether the choice of site under the theater was determined by the fact that it lay abandoned or whether the project was part of more extensive urban planning activities.

A third area explored in 2004 was located in the northern part of the theater, where the purpose of opening excavations was to see how the area between the *scenae frons* and *pulpitum* had been organized. The trench measured 9.50 by 10.50 m [Fig. 4]. Quantities of bronze and iron nails found here supported the idea of wooden planks being used here. This year's excavations concentrated on the foundation of the *scenae frons* wall, revealing a similar

building technique as described above for the *parodos* entrance. Installations present at the foundation level between the *pulpitum* and *scenae frons* were also revealed, permitting a look at layers underlying the theater ruins. It was also discovered that following the abandonment of the theater, the ruins were reused for some kind of industrial activity (lime processing?), as suggested by the remains of two water-supply channels constructed with the use of pieces of architectural decoration, which could have been retrieved from the decoration of the *scenae frons* [Figs. 5,6]. Relevant pottery finds from a layer containing lime and crushed red bricks indicated a date not earlier than the late 4th and early 5th century for these late installations.



Fig. 3. Hellenistic or early Roman structure under the eastern *parodos*
(Photo K. Jakubiak)



Fig. 4. Trench in the northern part of the theater, view from the east/southwest
(Photo K. Jakubiak)



Fig. 5. Reused cornice block in situ in a late channel installation built into the theater ruins, view from the east (Photo K. Jakubiak)



Fig. 6. Decorated cornice presumably from the scenae frons decoration
(Photo K. Jakubiak)

REMARKS ON THE STRATIGRAPHY

Based on a study of the stratigraphy, especially in the northwestern part of the theater, it now seems that the Roman building was erected on a layer of eroded mud brick, leveled in places – under the *parodos* entrance, for example – with a thin layer of pure sand. The second stratigraphic phase was connected with the existence of the theater. Upon abandonment of the building, the third phase began, during which the theater was destroyed. In the northern part of the theater, this was reflected by a layer of brown soil, possibly eroded mud-brick, mixed with lime and crushed red brick. The late installations there (lime kilns?) would have been connected with this phase.

In the northwestern part of the theater, where the *parodos* was explored, evidence of this phase included two mud-brick structures, quite solid in appearance, although hardly well-built. The accompanying deposits of eroded bricks, black ashes, animal bones and pottery found between the structures suggested a connection with the rubbish dump that had evidently developed in

the ruins. Perhaps the mud-brick structures were used as some kind of platform during the demolishing of the theater building. The layers lying against the structures on the outside were characteristic of a process of dilapidation and destruction: crushed bricks, ashes, potsherds, fragments of lime and painted wall plaster.

Interestingly, most of the pottery from the layers between the mud-brick structures appeared to be of Hellenistic date (see below for a more detailed specification). A spattering of late 3rd or early 4th century AD material was found only in the surface layers. Obviously, the only explanation for the appearance of such early material within what is evidently a Roman-period structure is that the pottery must have come here together with relatively late rubbish, having been removed from ruined buildings of Hellenistic date, perhaps in the course of some extensive urban works in the immediate vicinity. The ruins of the theater would have provided a ready dumping place for unwanted rubbish.

THE POTTERY AND OTHER FINDS

Evidence of painted plaster decoration came from trenches in the northwestern and northern part of the theater, attributed respectively to the *parodos* or corridor decoration and the stage constructions. The former consisted of mainly red, black and light brown painted surfaces and a few fragments with red stripes painted on light red or pink background. The latter in the majority were painted red on various reddish backgrounds.²

Most of the 36 coins discovered during the season were corroded beyond identification. The majority were bronzes of Roman and Late Roman date with a spattering of Hellenistic examples. Of special merit was a silver Ptolemaic piece (possibly Ptolemy IV or V, 222-180 BC) discovered within the *pulpitum* structure.

Only about 5% of the pottery assemblage from the theater was actually of Roman date, including six pieces of

2 See K. Jakubiak's report in *PAM XV, Reports 2003* (2004), 74.

terracotta oil lamps, dated roughly to the 1st–4th centuries AD. An absolute majority of Roman sherds belonged to storage wares (LRA 4), possibly in connection with the late industrial activities known to have been carried out in the northern part of the building after its abandonment.

The remaining pottery material dated roughly from the 2nd century BC to the 1st century AD and included a representation of both fine tableware and plain and cooking wares, as well as some amphorae, although these were relatively few (e.g. P.04/250, cf. *Fig. 8*).

Meriting attention among the fine wares [*Fig. 7*] were the black-gloss goblets, both local and imported. A cup of the 2nd century BC could be an import from

Cyprus. Also, plates and bowls from this period were of very good quality (P.04/143, P.04/214, P.04/332, P.04/333, P.04/338). Among the Roman-period pottery, one should mention a Cypriot-sigillata bowl (P.04/137) and an unguentarium, dated to the 1st century AD.

Examples of cooking ware included cooking pots and casseroles (e.g. P.04/86, P.04/135, cf. *Fig. 8*), both dated to the late 1st century BC, and cooking pots, most of which were of Hellenistic date, except for a few, like P.04/259 or P.04/315 (*Fig. 8*), which could have been either Late Hellenistic or Early Roman. Of approximately the same period were the coarse wares, including two fragments of overhanging rim kraters (*Fig. 8*: P.04/145 and P.04/223),

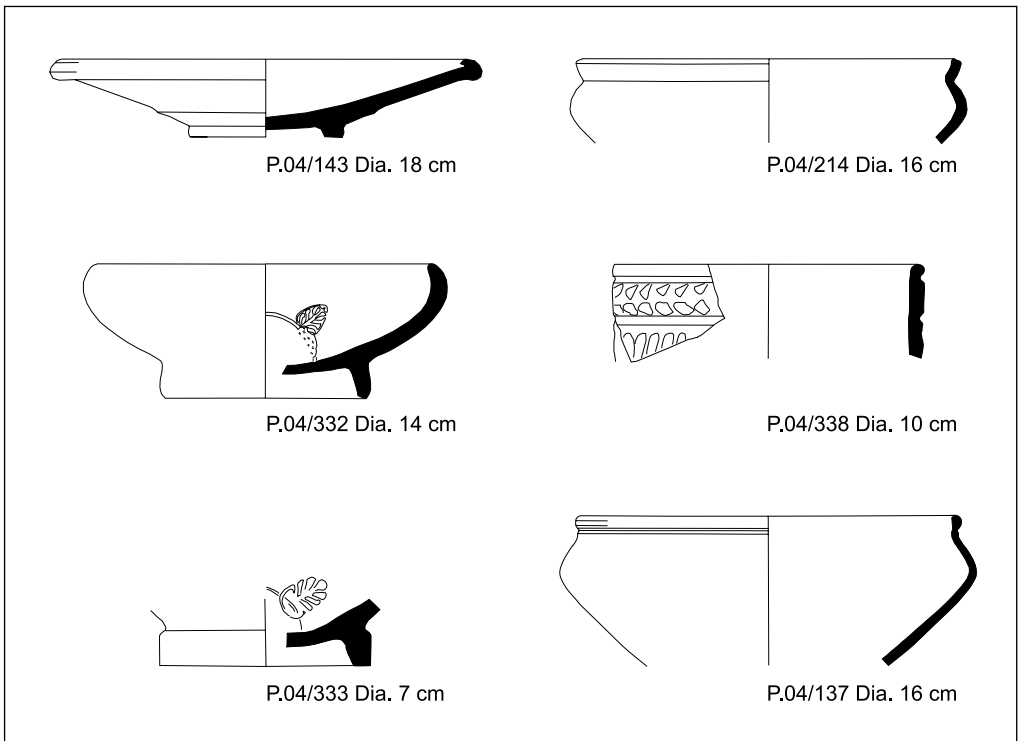


Fig. 7. Examples of Hellenistic and Early Roman fine tablewares from the dump (Drawing K. Jakubiak)

which could be dated to the 1st century AD, again confirming the mixed nature of the deposit. Bowls were the most popular form of coarse ware.

Another category of objects meriting consideration are the pottery stamps. Added to our 12 amphorae stamps from a rubbish dump in front of the western *parodos*, is an interesting set excavated earlier in the orchestra area by the Egyptian team of

Dr. Mohammad Abdel Samie. All of the stamps appeared to be of 3rd and 2nd century BC date and the readable ones proved to be of Rhodian origin. Obviously, they must have shared the fate of the Hellenistic pottery assemblage from the theater, meaning that they had been discarded in the ruins along with other rubbish, presumably from some kind of earthworks being carried out in the vicinity in late Roman times.

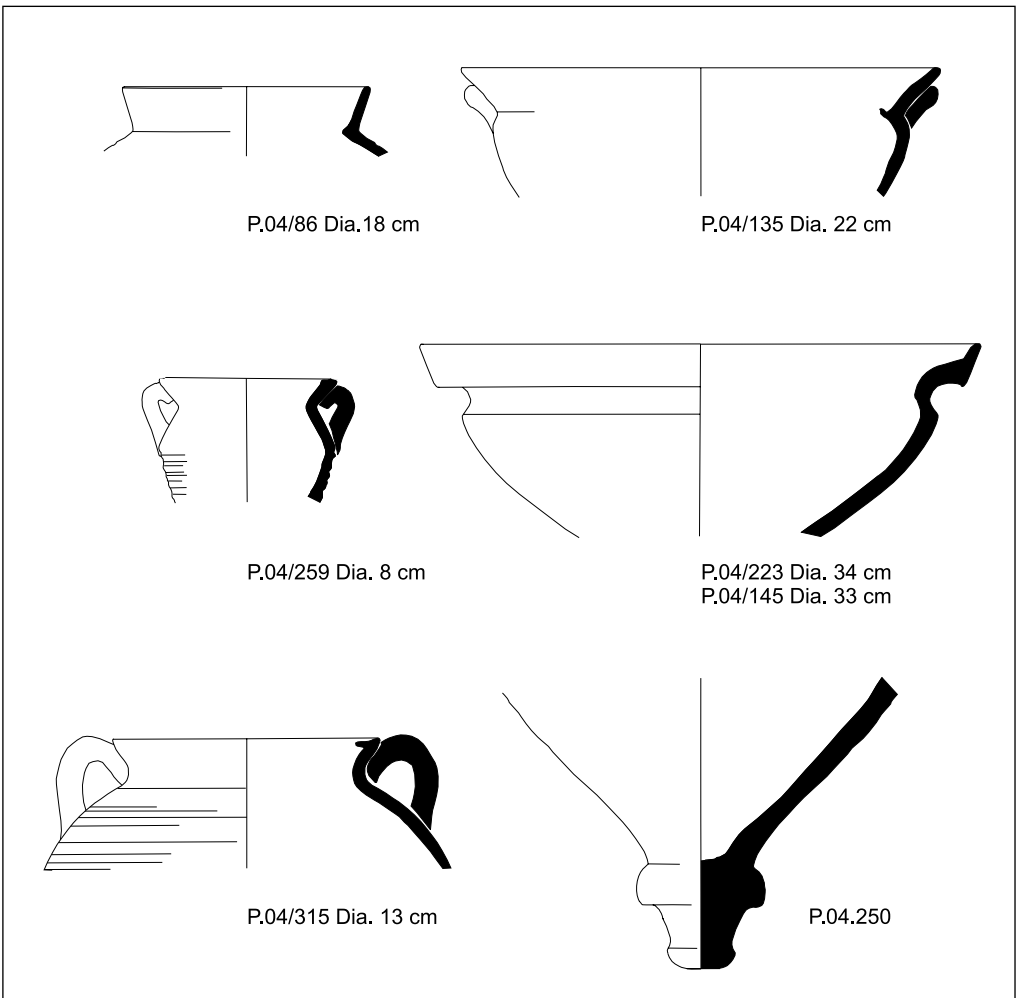


Fig. 8. Examples of Hellenistic and Early Roman plain and cooking wares, and storage containers from the dump (Drawing K. Jakubiak)