



TELL EL-MURRA 2008-2015. EXCAVATION OF THE NILE DELTA SITE FROM THE IVTH – IIIRD MILLENNIA BCE

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The site of Tell el-Murra is situated in the northeastern part of the Nile Delta, about 100 kilometres northeast of Cairo. Tell el-Murra has remained virtually undisturbed, with only certain sections having been levelled by agricultural activity. As a result, it still rises about three to four meters above field level. After an initial survey in 2008,¹ a Polish expedition of the Institute of Archaeology at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków began to conduct archaeological research on the site.² The first test trenches opened in 2010 were located in the site's northeast (trench S1) and southwest (trench S3), as well as on its southern slope (trench S2). Yet another test trench (S4) was opened in the eastern part of the tell in 2011. The area of exploration expanded over subsequent archaeological seasons, and, at present, work is mainly focused on the southwestern part of the tell, within trench S3 (further enlarged in 2012 up to 20 m by 20 m) and additional test trench S3B, as well as on the northeastern part of the site, where trench T5 (15 m by 21 m), located north of the test trench S1, was opened in 2013. The cemetery and settlement remains are now respectively explored within trenches S3 and T5. Most of the graves were dated, on the basis of pottery and stone vessels, to the Early Dynastic period. The settlement layers explored until now contained Predynastic (Lower Egyptian Culture), Naqada III and Old Kingdom material.³

The oldest settlement remains, dated to the Lower Egyptian Culture, have only been found thus far in one of the test trenches (S4). These consist of postholes and furrows, indicating that organic materials (such as wood and reed) were used at the time. Discovery of remains associated with that culture may also be anticipated in other parts of the site, at which the lowermost levels still remains unexplored. Trench S4 has provided also material from the subsequent Naqada III and Old Kingdom periods, until the end of the 6th Dynasty.

At the present state of research, settlement remains from the Early Dynastic period still remain relatively scarce, as these have been explored only in test trench S4. It

is worth noting however, that within the lowermost levels explored until now within trench T5, the pottery material showing affinity not only to that of earlier part of the Old Kingdom (3rd and 4th Dynasties) but also to that of Early Dynastic have already been found. Thus, at least in case of some structures, their older chronology can be tentatively assumed. However, only further exploration could confirm that preliminary assumption. Still older layers are to be expected there, as geological core drillings in the area has confirmed that approximately at least 3.7 m still remains to be investigated before reaching the *gezira* sand level.

The Old Kingdom layers have been explored within test trench S1 and trench T5 (Figure 1). The lowermost strata reached there so far contain pottery that in most cases shows an affinity to forms characteristic of the earlier part of the Old Kingdom (3rd–4th Dynasties). The remains of rectangular dry-brick structures that shared a NW-SE axis (unlike those from later periods) have also been uncovered. The walls of these structures were from ca. 0.25 m up to 0.50 m. The presence of stone elements, including a threshold and probably a yoke, has also been noted. A clear housing arrangement can be distinguished, including entrances, corridors, rooms and probably courtyards. Furthermore, in several cases rounded structures were also found within the rectangular ones, which could be the remains of silos.

The uppermost strata within trenches S1, S4, and T5 contain forms mostly characteristic of the late Old Kingdom, especially of the 6th Dynasty, although some are also known from the 5th Dynasty. These strata, which undoubtedly come from the period of decline of the settlement, contain (trenches S1 and T5) the modest remains of very thin walls (ca. 0.12–0.16 m thick) made of dry bricks. However, it is impossible to distinguish any buildings, mainly due to their very bad state of preservation. Several rounded objects, possibly the remains of storage pits or silos, have also been uncovered (trench T5). These modest architectural remains altogether seem to reflect the diminishing importance of the site, which

overall size also reduced between the Early Dynastic period and the Old Kingdom, being in the later time inhabited only in its northern and eastern parts.

The most numerous of the settlement finds are potsherds, but several complete or reconstructible pots have also been identified. Flints also occur in large quantity and include several examples of flint knives, although most are sickle blades. Mill stones and grinders have also been found. Copper objects and personal adornments, faience and bone beads, and fragments of a stone bracelet have been attested in smaller quantities. The finds also include a figurine of a pregnant woman made of clay and a frog made of a bone, as well as the head of a baboon made of faience.

Research in the southwestern part of the site (trench S3) has confirmed that the area was used as a cemetery, at least during the Protodynastic and Early Dynastic Periods (Fig.

2). Over the course of research between 2011 and 2015, a total of thirty graves were explored and several others located.

The burial assemblages contained mostly pottery and stone vessels, which allow the graves to be more precisely dated. Other objects sporadically appear, including a bone bracelet, what seems to be a spoon handle, stone bracelets, beads, and a flint knife with a handle, as well as copper tools and weapons. The lack of assemblages and the presence of only a few beads in others makes the dating of such graves difficult. However, in case of some of the latter their chronological proximity to the graves of the second half of the 2nd Dynasty was tentatively assumed. The presence of yet another type of object must also be noted. Pottery coffins (Figure 3) had already been found in nine graves by the end of the 2015 season.



Figure 1: Tell el-Murra. Trench T5. Old Kingdom structures (photo by Mariusz A. Jucha).



Figure 2: Tell el-Murra. Trench S3. Grave no. 1 (photo by Grzegorz Bąk-Pryc).



Figure 3: Tell el-Murra. Trench S3. Grave no. 2. Pottery coffin (photo by Mariusz A. Jucha).

NOTES

- ¹ Mariusz A. Jucha, "The North-Eastern Part of the Nile Delta - Research Perspectives. Polish Archeological Survey in the Ash-Sharqiyyah Governorate," in Joanna Popielska-Grzybowska and Jadwiga Iwaszczuk (eds), *Proceedings of the Fifth Central European Conference of Egyptologists. Egypt 2009: Perspectives of Research, Pułtusk 22-24 June 2009*, Acta Archaeologica Pultuskiensia II, (Pułtusk: The Pułtusk Academy of Humanities, 2009), 83–88, figs. 33–41.
- ² The excavations between 2010 and 2012 were financed by funds from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Poland, and the National Science Centre, Poland, grant no. 2195/B/H03/2009/36. Since 2014, the project has been financed by funds from the National Science Centre, Poland, which were allocated on the basis of decision number DEC-2013/09/B/HS3/03588.
- ³ Mariusz A. Jucha, "Tell el-Murra. The Predynastic–Old Kingdom Site in the North-Eastern Nile Delta," *Folia Orientalia* 47 (2010): 379–390; Mariusz A. Jucha, "Tell el-Murra—Results of Survey and Prospects for Research," *Studies in Ancient Art and Civilization* 17 (2010): 53–61;

Mariusz A. Jucha and Artur Buszek, "Tell el-Murra (North-Eastern Nile Delta Survey). Season 2008," *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean* 20, *Research 2008* (2011): 177–182; Mariusz A. Jucha, Katarzyna Błaszczuk, Artur Buszek, and Grzegorz Pryc, "Tell el-Murra (Northeastern Nile Delta Survey). Season 2010," *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean* 22, *Research 2010* (2013): 105–120; Mariusz A. Jucha, Grzegorz Bąk-Pryc, and Marcin Czarnowicz, "Tell el-Murra (North-Eastern Nile Delta Survey) Season 2011," *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean* 23/1, *Research 2011* (2014): 141–152; Magdalena Kazimierczak, "Meidum Bowls from Tell el-Murra Trench T5 (Season 2013)," in Mariusz A. Jucha, Joanna Dębowska-Ludwin and Piotr Kołodziejczyk (eds), *Aegyptus Est Imago Caeli. Studies Presented to Krzysztof M. Ciałowicz on His 60th Birthday*, (Kraków: Archaeologica Foundation and Institute of Archaeology, Jagiellonian University in Kraków, 2014), 161–166; Magdalena Kazimierczak, "Pottery from Tell el-Murra Graves. Seasons 2011–2012," *Studies in Ancient Art and Civilization* 18 (2014): 101–118; *Archaeological site in Egypt—Tell el-Murra*, [http:// www.murra.pl](http://www.murra.pl).