

TELL EL-MURRA (NORTHEASTERN NILE DELTA SURVEY) SEASONS 2012–2013

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Abstract: Excavations of the site of Tell el-Murra in the northeastern part of the Nile Delta in 2012 and 2013, following up on surveys in 2008 and in 2010–2011, uncovered settlement structures from the Old Kingdom in the northeastern part of the site (trench T5). Excavations in the adjacent cemetery (trench S3) cleared more graves, which were dated to the Early Dynastic period based on pottery and stone vessel evidence.

Keywords: Tell el-Murra, Egypt, Nile Delta, Predynastic, Early Dynastic, Old Kingdom, cemetery, settlement

Tell el-Murra in the northeastern part of the Nile Delta (Jucha et al. 2013: Fig. 1), about 100 km northeast of Cairo and 1 km to the south of the modern village of Abu Umran, has been excavated regularly since 2012 by a Polish team from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, working under the aegis of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw. The site was first surveyed in 2008 and 2010–2011 when geophysical prospection and geological core drillings were carried out. Test trenches S1, S2, S3 and S4 were also opened (Jucha 2009: 86–88, Figs 40–41; 2010; Jucha and Buszek 2011; Jucha et al. 2013; Jucha, Bąk-Pryc, and Czarnowicz 2014). In the two years reported here the explored area was enlarged and new trenches were opened.

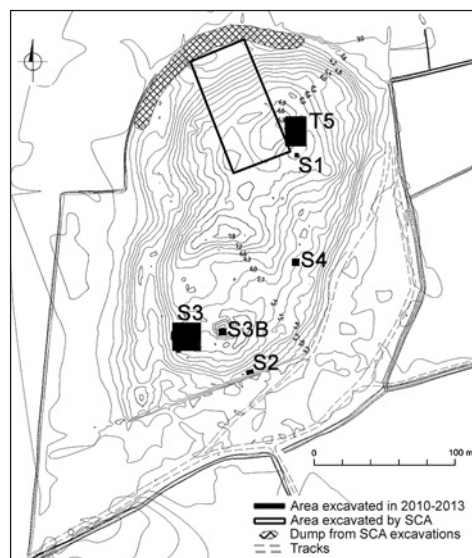


Fig. 1. Plan of Tell el-Murra with the location of trenches (Drawing A. Buszek)

TRENCH S3

Trench S3 in the southwestern part of the tell followed up on the first test trench (3 m by 3 m) opened in 2010 (Jucha et al. 2013: 110–113, Fig. 2). It was enlarged in 2011 to the size 10 m by 11 m (Jucha, Bąk-Pryc, and Czarnowicz 2014: Fig. 1). Excavations involved then primarily the exploration of two graves, Nos 1 and 2, discovered within an area enlarged to the north and west (Jucha, Bąk-Pryc, and Czarnowicz 2014: 141–146, Figs 2–5).

RESEARCH IN 2012

The borders of the original trench were extended to the south, north and east, re-

sulting in a 20 m by 20 m excavation area [Fig. 1]. Exploration of the western part (within the scope of the area explored since 2011) uncovered fragments of two mud-brick walls. The first (S3-59), oriented NE–SW, was slightly curved. On the north, it adjoined the other wall (S3-57), which followed a nearly circular plan [Fig. 2]. The eastern part of the latter was disturbed. A light-colored and cohesive layer that could represent the remains of a destroyed structure of later date (identified as grave 23 in the 2015 season, see Jucha et al. forthcoming) was distinguished there.

Grave 4 was cut into wall S3-59 [Fig. 3 left]. Fragments of stones, irregular

Team

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in shape, were also discovered in the vicinity. The outline of the grave, oriented NW–SE and measuring 1 m by 0.60 m, was identified on Level 14 (altitude 4.90 m). The body of the deceased was placed tightly contracted, lying on the left side, the head to the northwest. The bones were poorly preserved. Burial goods consisted of a few beads that were found close to the body. The remains of an organic mat lining the sides of the grave pit were also traced.

The grave was cut into the northwestern part of another rectangular structure, **grave 3** [Fig. 3], oriented NE–SW and measuring 2.50 m by 2.00 m. The outline of the burial chamber (S3-48) of the latter grave was clearly visible, as it was lined with a mud-brick wall (S3-55). Remains of an organic mat were found covering, among others, a pottery coffin with human bones.

The body was tightly contracted, placed on the left side, the head to the northeast. Burial goods included five ceramic vessels (Kazimierczak 2014a: 102–104, Fig. 1) and one vessel of basalt.

The outline of another small rectangular pit, identified as **grave 5** [Fig. 4], was discovered to the east of grave 3. Its northwestern corner adjoined the east wall of grave 3. It was oriented NW–SE and measured 1.10 m by 0.80 m. The pit held a pottery coffin that had the bottom pierced with numerous holes [Fig. 5]. Inside the coffin were very badly preserved bones belonging to a human skeleton. Their location indicated however that the body of the deceased may have been tightly contracted, laid on the left side, the head to the northwest. Burial goods included two ceramic vessels (Kazimierczak 2014a:



Fig. 2. Trench S3, western part (squares J22A and J22C)
(Photo G. Bąk-Pryc)



Fig. 3. Trench S3: left, graves 3 and 4; right, grave 3
(Photos G. Bąk-Pryc)



Fig. 4. Trench S3, western part (squares J22A and J22C)
(Photo G. Bąk-Pryc)

115, Fig. 6:3–4), two stone vessels, a bone bracelet and a rounded token. The items were placed close to the body, along its eastern side.

The outlines of two other rectangular pits (S3-126 and S3-61), identified as **graves 8** (Jucha et al. forthcoming) and **9** (see below) respectively, were discovered to the east of grave 5 [Figs 4, 8].

Grave 11 was identified to the north of these graves [see Fig. 4]. It was oriented N–S and measured 0.70 m by 0.60 m. The body of the deceased was placed in an oval pit, tightly contracted, on the left side, head to the north. A characteristic feature in this case was a complete lack of burial goods.

The northern sections of trench S3 (in additional squares opened in 2012, on a higher level than the structures described above) were also explored. Layers in the upper levels, heavily disturbed by animal burrowing, included a light-colored cohesive layer with few artifacts, and a dark-

brown, loose layer with a larger number of artifacts and a prevalence of potsherds, animal bones, stone objects and flint tools.

Architectural remains were identified in the northeastern part of the described area [Fig. 6]. These included among others fragments of several walls made of bright yellow, sand-tempered bricks (Spencer 1979: 3; Kemp 2000: 80). A wall (S3-43), oriented NE–SW, was recognized across two squares (K21C and K22A). Its southern part marked the western edge



Fig. 5. Pottery coffin from grave 5 (Photo M.A. Jucha)

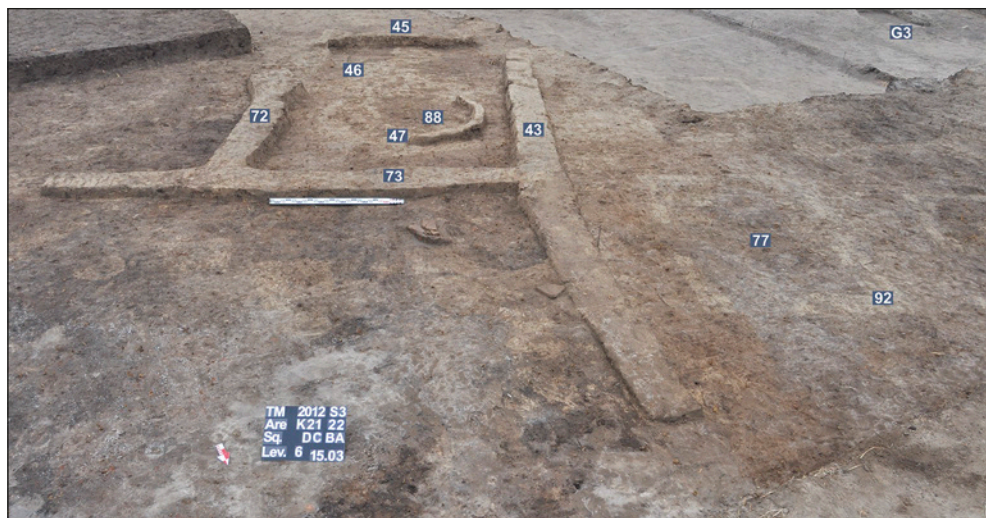


Fig. 6. Trench S3, northeastern part (squares K21C, K21D, K22A and K22B) (Photo G. Bąk-Pryc)

of a rectangular space (S3-46) delimited by a parallel wall on the east (S3-72) and two perpendicular walls, oriented NW–SE, on the north (S3-73) and south (S3-45). A rounded structure (S3-47/S3-88) was located in its northern part.

Deposits of loosely scattered sand-tempered bricks were noted to the north and east. Other rooms could have been located there, but the layout and dimensions could not be traced. Several small rounded structures were also located there. A roughly regular structure (S3-116) was distinguished at the northeastern end of the trench. Potsherds were discovered in that area along with animal bones and parts of stone and flint objects.

Other discoveries included distinctive sand-brick walls (S3-92, S3-93), outlining a rectangular structure, S3-92/S3-77 (pro-

ved in 2015 to be the superstructure of grave 6, see Jucha et al. forthcoming), and S3-93/S3-78 [Fig. 7]. In the course of further research, the latter turned out to be the superstructure of **grave 7**, oriented NE–SW and measuring 2.30 m by 1.40 m. Part of the external wall (S3-93), in particular its eastern section, was ruined and the fill inside the pit located below was partly intermixed. Single fragments of human bones and ceramic vessels were found inside. The two-chambered structure, of external dimensions 1.50 m by 1.00 m, was constructed at the bottom of a pit [Fig. 9 top left]. The pottery coffin, with semi-cylindrical two-part lid was located in the northern chamber. A significant part of the lid was crushed and fell into the coffin. The body of the deceased was placed in tightly contracted position,



Fig. 7. Trench S3, grave 7 (structure S3-93/S3-78) and grave 6 (structure S3-92/S3-77) (Photo G. Bąk-Pryc)

on the left side, the head to the northeast. Inside the coffin, a stone vessel was placed close to the back of the head. The grave goods consisted of five ceramic vessels (Kazimierczak 2014a: 113–115, Fig. 6: 1–2), five stone vessels and a flint knife.

The outline of a round structure (S3-147) was discovered farther to the west of grave 7. It was filled with a loose dark brown layer. A wall (S3-95) adjoined the structure on the southwest and to the south of it, a small-sized brick structure (S3-89) of rectangular shape was discovered.

The outlines of rectangular structures, assumed as burial pits, were discovered to the south of the discussed group of graves 5, 8 and 9. These included among others **grave 12** (explored in 2013, see below). Loose fragments of human bones were found furthermore in the layer between the graves. Diverse archaeological features

were noted at the southern end of the trench, but the outline of structures in most cases was hardly visible. Fragments of several walls and a small rectangular structure (S3-110), later identified as grave 14, were distinguished there.

RESEARCH IN 2013

Investigations in 2013 continued in the western and southern parts of trench S3 [Fig. 8]. Work commenced with the exploration of **grave 12** [Figs 8, 9 top right] from the previous season. The uppermost layer on Level 14 (altitude 4.90 m) was cleaned and the distinct outline of an external wall demarcating the grave was traced. It was oriented N–S and measured 2.20 m by 1.40 m. In the southern part, a crossing wall was observed, dividing the inside of the grave into two chambers. The southern chamber was small-sized. The inner dimensions were 1.10 m by 0.50 m, while the size of the burial chamber was 1.20 m by 0.80 m. The fill of the latter chamber was a homogeneous layer with numerous but slight discoloration marks. Traces of an organic mat were observed. Eleven stone vessels belonging to the grave goods set were found in the eastern part, between the skeleton and the outer wall. Red-colored remains, possibly ochre, were noted during exploration of the skeleton. The bones were poorly preserved. However, diagnostic fragments and the location of bones allowed us to assume that the deceased may have been placed on the left side with the head to the north. The southern chamber yielded altogether four ceramic vessels with traces of an organic mat on their surface.

A concentration (S3-100) of numerous skull fragments was uncovered to the east of the discussed grave. Bone remains lay

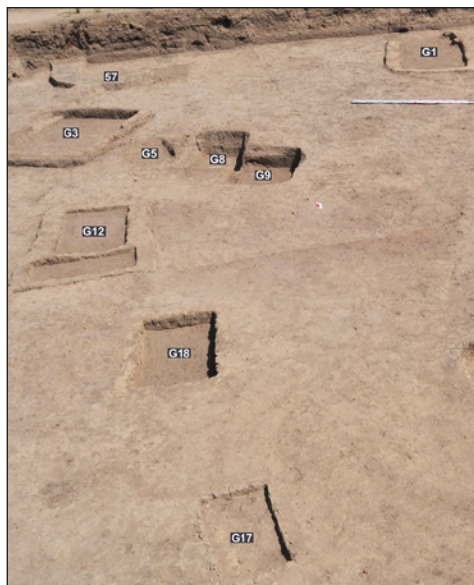


Fig. 8. Location of graves in the western part of trench S3 (squares J22A, J22C, J23A) (Photo G. Bąk-Pryc)



Fig. 9. Graves explored in trench S3: top left, grave 7; top right, grave 12; bottom left, grave 9; bottom right, grave 18 (Photos G. Bąk-Pryc)

inside an oval pit identified as **grave 13**. Its size was 0.90 m by 0.60 m, and it was oriented N–S. The body was placed in tightly contracted position, on the left side, the head to the north. The skeleton was quite poorly preserved. Traces of an organic mat lining the pit and covering the body were revealed. The burial contained no grave goods.

Further graves explored to the north of grave 12 included **grave 9** [Figs 8, 9 bottom left], discovered already in the 2012 season [see Fig. 4]. The size of the grave pit was 1.40 m by 0.90 m; it was oriented NE–SW. Traces of an organic mat lining the pit were noted. The body of the deceased was found in tightly contracted position, on the left side, the head to the northeast. Grave goods comprised two ceramic vessels and a small fragment of a seal impression.

The outline of a shallow pit (**grave 15**), oriented N–S, was discovered further to the north. Its borders were not distinct but its shape was close to an oval, measuring 0.70 m by 0.45 m. The body of the deceased was found in tightly contracted position, on the right side, the head to the south. Traces of an organic mat which may have been used to line the pit and a few potsherds were recorded in the grave.

In the southern part of trench S3, work continued to the south of grave 12 where the upper layers had been examined in the previous season. Level 11 (altitude 5.20 m) was the first to be explored. Structures from the higher levels were observed to continue down. One of these was a rectangular structure (S3-110) oriented N–S, which appeared to be a small-sized burial (**grave 14**). It consisted of a shallow pit measuring 0.60 m by 0.40 m with a mud border on the outside. It contained a body

lying in tightly contracted position on the right side, the head to the south. Burial goods comprised several faience beads found close to the neck of deceased.

The outline of another burial pit (**grave 17**), also with a distinct mud border [see Fig. 8], was traced to the south of the above grave. The external dimensions of the pit, which was oriented N–S, were 0.80 m by 0.55 m. The interior was filled with a homogeneous layer of loose composition with numerous discoloration marks. During the exploration, very scarce and poorly preserved remains of human bones, which may have belonged to two persons, were found. There were no grave goods.

Grave 18 was discovered to the east of grave 14 [see Fig. 8]. It consisted of a rectangular burial chamber lined with distinct light sand-colored walls of cohesive consistency, oriented N–S on the longer axis and measuring 1.40 m by 1.00 m. A pottery coffin with a semi-cylindrical two-part lid was placed inside. Fragments of the lid were found collapsed into the lower part of the coffin [Fig. 9 bottom right]. The body of the deceased was laid in tightly contracted position, on the left side, head to the north. Burial goods comprised four ceramic and four stone vessels.

Another structure (S3-163) made of mud bricks was uncovered to the east of grave 17. Its shape at the excavation level (Level 12B, altitude 5.05 m) was close to an oval, measuring 1.50 m by 1.00 m; it was oriented NE–SW.

Exploration of Level 14 (altitude 4.90 m) in the southern part of the trench revealed the outline of a wall (S3-167), oriented NE–SW. It ran to the northeast (it had been noted already in a part of the trench explored in 2011) and southwest.

The outline of a rectangular structure (S3-168) was observed farther to the east of this structure.

Altogether 12 graves were explored and several others were located in trench S3 in the years 2012–2013. Pottery found in six of these graves dated the cemetery to the end of the Protodynastic and Early Dynastic periods. A grave of Dynasty 0–Naqada IIIB period (grave 3) and graves of Naqada IIIC2/D (graves 7, 12 and 18) were among the burials that were dated more precisely (Kazimierczak 2014a). The chronology of further graves was not as obvious for lack of sufficient grave goods, but a preliminary analysis by Magdalena Kazimierczak led to the tentative assumption that grave 9 could be dated to the First Dynasty (Naqada IIIC) and that grave 5 was of the second part of the Second Dynasty. The lack of assemblages

(graves 11, 15, 13, 17) or presence of only beads in others (e.g., graves 4 and 14) made it difficult to date these graves.

Some of described graves were cut into the mud-brick walls of architectural structures of undoubtedly older chronology. A precise dating and function analysis of the latter remain uncertain prior to the completion of the excavation, but it is possible that we are dealing here with the remains of settlement structures. It seems to concern also some of the structures of undoubtedly later chronology, explored in 2012 in the northeastern part of the trench. If so, the presence of both earlier and later settlement remains and superimposed graves would mirror an observation made also at other Nile Delta sites, including Tell el-Farkha (Ciałowicz 2008: 511, Table 1) and Tell Ibrahim Awad (van den Brink 1992: 50).

TRENCH S3B

With the exploration of the main trench S3 being extended in time due to the presence of graves and the resulting enlargement of the excavated area, a test trench S3B, sized 5 m by 5 m, started to be explored in 2012 [Fig. 1]. It was situated to the east of the main trench, within a small depression. The objective was to define the extent of the cemetery in this direction and to obtain a stratigraphic sequence and data suitable for establishing the chronology of this part of the site.

Artifacts included mainly fragments of ceramic vessels, fragments of flint tools, stone objects and animal bones. Most of them were found in a layer of loose composition and brown color, situated in the western part of the trench.

A small section of a wall (S3-135) oriented NW–SE was recorded on Level 18 (altitude 4.50 m). The pottery material obtained from this area was mostly of Naqada III chronology (preliminary pottery analysis by M. Kazimierczak).

TRENCH T5

Trench T5 was situated in the north-eastern part of the tell, north of trench S1 (Jucha et al. 2013: 109–110) and east of a trench excavated earlier by Egyptian archaeologists [Fig. 1]. Its surface fell from

the southeast (Levels 1 and 2, altitude respectively 7.60 and 7.50 m in the south-eastern part in square S8C) to the north-west (Level 13, altitude 6.40 m in squares R7AC). The material collected from the

surface as well as from strata explored in 2010 in trench S1 to a depth of approximately 1.70 m below the surface level contained mostly Old Kingdom and Early Dynastic pottery (Jucha 2009: Figs 40–41; 2010: Fig. 2; Jucha et al. 2013), hence it was assumed that this part of the site had been inhabited at least until the Old Kingdom period.

Moreover, a magnetic map of the area (Jucha and Buszek 2011: 181–182; Jucha et al. 2013: 113–114) revealed the presence of some structures there. It was also assumed, based on the results of initial work, that all the successive phases of occupation could be represented, starting from the Lower Egyptian Culture, seeing that among others coring by Michał Wasilewski had indicated the presence of accumulations 5.50–6.00 m thick.

Work which started in 2012 on are R7 (10 m by 10 m) was extended in 2013 to 15 m by 21 m (full size of the trench in ares R7 and R8, squares S7AC and S8AC, and the southern ends of squares R6CD and S6C). Differences in surface altitude within the trench area focused the excavation mostly on the northeastern and southern parts. Layers up to approximately 1.10 m below the surface of the tell (Level 12, altitude 6.50 m) were explored, yielding material that confirmed the preliminary chronology established during earlier fieldwork (Jucha 2010: 381–883; Jucha et al. 2013: 108–110).

LATE OLD KINGDOM

It was tentatively assumed that the uppermost strata contained pottery forms characteristic mostly of the late Old Kingdom, especially of the Sixth Dynasty, although some of them are also known from the Fifth Dynasty (Jucha and

Bąk-Pryc forthcoming; Kazimierczak 2014b).

The strata provided, among others, modest remains of very thin walls (about 0.12 m) built of bright-yellow, sand-tempered bricks (Jucha and Bąk-Pryc forthcoming; Małecka-Drozd forthcoming). The structures were about 0.15–0.20 m below the surface and mainly in the south and southeastern part of the exposed area (squares R8BD and S8AC). Extensive animal burrowing, among others, had made the architecture practically unrecognizable, but a N–S/E–W orientation (NE–SW in a few cases, however) could be assigned to the said period. Walls belonging to older structures were uncovered in some cases on the same level as the lower parts of late Old Kingdom walls (Levels 7 and 8, altitude respectively 7.00 and 6.90 m).

Several rounded structures (storage pits or silos), were excavated. Those in the southeastern part of the trench (T5-6A/T5-6B; T5-50/T5-63; T5-51/T5-62) were sunk below the base of late Old Kingdom walls (Jucha et al. forthcoming), but late Old Kingdom pottery indicated their attribution to this chronological phase. Their bottom was not reached during the reported seasons. The structures were encased in a layer of silty grey mud approximately 0.10 m thick. Similar or even darker and siltier grey mud, which crumbled upon drying, was found inside at least one structure (T5-6A/T5-6B). No traces of distinct bricks were noted.

EARLY OLD KINGDOM

Strata below yielded pottery that showed an affinity to forms characteristic of the earlier phases of the Old Kingdom. These in most cases were similar to forms known from the Fourth Dynasty, although forms

first appearing during the Third Dynasty or even the Early Dynastic period were also present (preliminary pottery analysis by M. Kazimierczak). Remains of rectangular structures, which contrary to the later period shared a NW–SE orientation, were exposed mainly in the southern (R8, S8AC) and northeastern (R6D, R7B, S6C, S7A) parts of the trench.

Walls were wider than the later ones, from about 0.25 m to 0.60 m (Jucha and Bąk-Pryc forthcoming; Małecka-Drozd forthcoming), but the same kind of bright yellow, sand-tempered bricks was used for the most part. Mud bricks were used occasionally. Most bricks were of a conventional size: averaging 0.12–0.15 m by 0.25–0.30 m. A different type of brick was identified in some structures: of the same length more or less, but narrower (approximately 0.10 m wide).

Although animal burrowing and later construction had disturbed the layers in question, a clear housing arrangement was distinguished. It comprised entrances, corridors, rectangular rooms and probably courtyards. Furthermore, in several cases, rounded structures were also found within the rectangular ones; these were interpreted as remains of silos. Better preserved walls, rising to about 0.50 m above the level explored during the 2013 season, were exposed in the southern part of the trench, but even here the extent of disturbance by later activities made it difficult to establish separate buildings, rooms and location of entrances.

Nevertheless, at least in the case of one building, two rectangular spaces: T5-32/T5-57 (7.20 m by 2.90 m) on the east and T5-43 (4.80 m by 2.80 m) on the west, were distinguished [Fig. 11]. The former could be a small courtyard. Between them was

a narrow corridor (T5-40D), disturbed in its southern part by a later rounded structure (T5-50/T5-63). A fragmentarily preserved clay figurine of a naked, pregnant woman was found in this passage (Level 9; see also below) [Fig. 10].

The whole building, with walls 0.30–0.50 m wide, was oriented in line with the main axes of the period. The east wall of the area T5-32/T5-57, located to the east of the corridor, was disturbed in its southern and northern parts, whereas the west wall at its southern end by the said rounded structures of presumed later date. A round brick structure (about 2.20 m



Fig. 10. Figurine of a pregnant woman (early Old Kingdom, Third–Fourth Dynasties) (Photo M.A. Jucha)

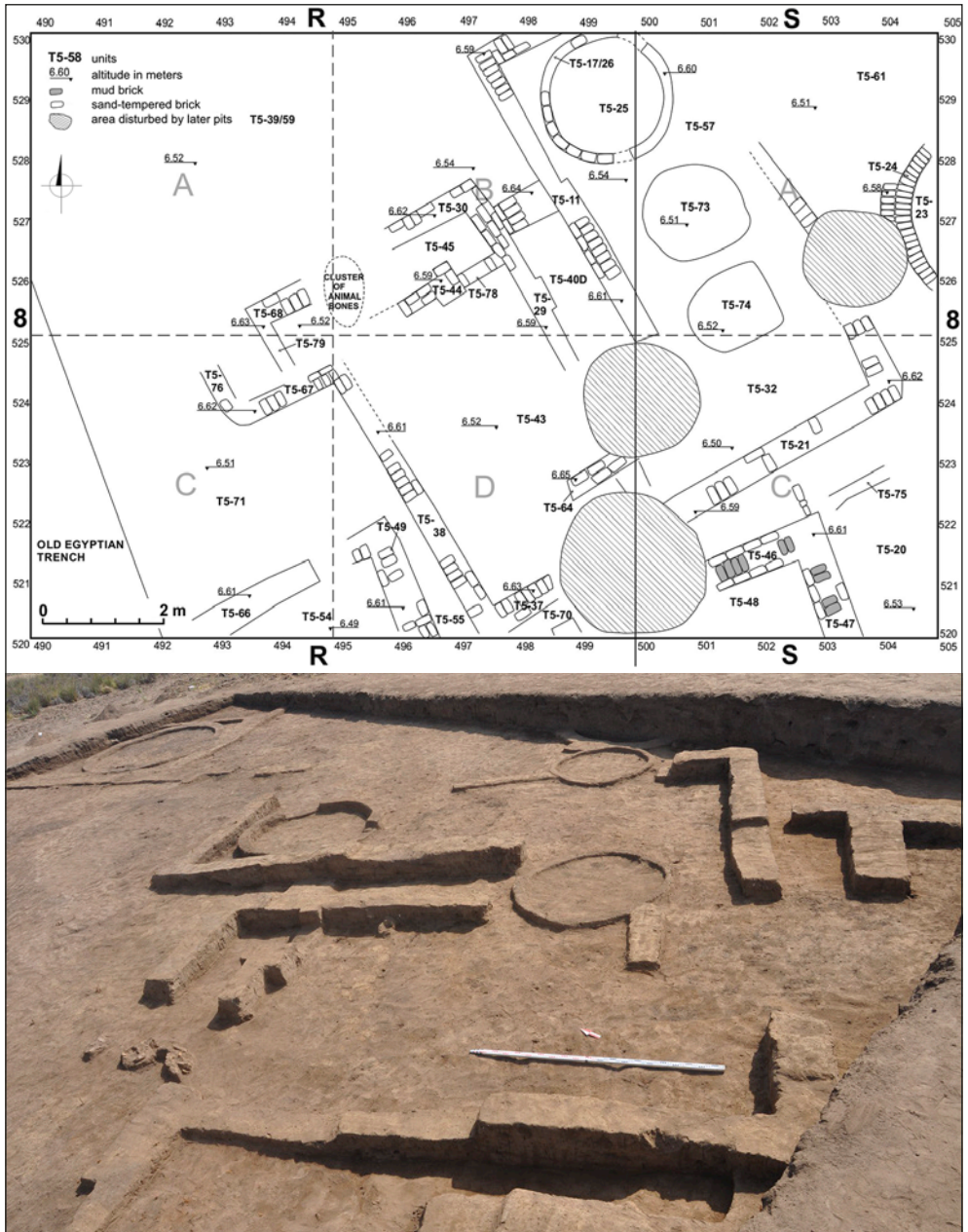


Fig. 11. Trench T5: top, plan of early Old Kingdom (Third–Fourth Dynasties) structures in the southern part of the trench, Levels 11–12; bottom, view from the southwest (Digitizing N. Malecka-Drozd; photo M.A. Jucha)

in diameter), probably a silo (T5-17/26/T5-25), was situated in the northern part. Two openings in the bottom parts of the wall identified it as the most popular type of Old Kingdom granary (Badawy 1954: 58–59; Roik 1988: 186–191, Figs 279–304; Chłodnicki 2012: 29–31, Fig. 21).

The east and south walls of room T5-43 were also disturbed by rounded structures. A dark, burnt layer was recorded in the southwestern corner of the room. The entrance (with a mud threshold) may have been located in the northeastern part of the room. A narrow corridor (T5-45) parallel to the north wall led to the room. To the west the situation is unclear, but it was assumed that the entrance to the corridor and also to the described part of the building was located on the northwest. The two parts of the building could have also communicated via the corridor T5-40D, but it is impossible to be sure owing to the disturbed layers here.

Another silo (T5-24/T5-23) explored to the east of the building had the bottom part of its interior filled with silty dark grey mud, crumbling when dry. A fragmentarily preserved mill-stone and a complete grinder were preserved nearby.

Fragments of two walls (T5-46, T5-47) with slightly shifted orientation compared to the building described above formed the corner of a room (T5-48) in the southeastern part of the trench (Square S8C). The interior was filled with a characteristic dark, burnt deposit. Loose reddish soil was found between the room and the building to the north. Both structures were disturbed, however, by a circular feature (T5-6A/T5-6B) of later date.

The northeastern part of trench T5 (squares R7BD, S7AC, and the southern

ends of squares R6D and S6C), where the surface sloped from the south down to the northwest, did not provide any remains from the later part of the Old Kingdom. The set of structures, which appeared almost directly below the surface, yielded pottery of the earlier part of the Old Kingdom. One of these features was a large silo (T5-5/T5-4, about 3.20 m in diameter) situated at the southern end of a rectangular area (room or courtyard) [Fig. 12]. Part of it continued in the unexplored area to the north. The wall (T5-56) located to the west of the silo may have been the western boundary of the building.

Fragments of walls in the northeastern corner of the trench, to the east of a narrow wall (T5-12A) delimiting the area with

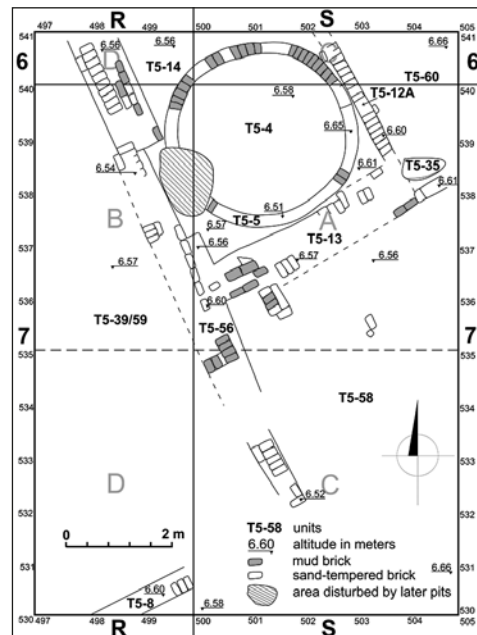


Fig. 12. Trench T5: early Old Kingdom structures in the northern part of the trench, Level 11 (Third–Fourth Dynasties) (Digitizing N. Małecka-Drozd)

a silo on that side, could belong to yet another room. Possibly also the remains beside the south wall (T5-13) should be considered as further rooms. Since the area to the south of these structures was heavily disturbed by animal burrowing, the relationship between the northern layout and the southern set of buildings was difficult to recognize.

Pottery was the most abundant category of finds from the trench. Several complete or reconstructable pots were found. Flint artifacts occurred also in large quantity. They included mostly sickle blades, but the

presence of a few knives and fragments of knives was noted. A number of grinders and millstones was also found. Personal adornments, among them faience or bone beads, were attested in lesser quantities. The finds included also the abovementioned fragmentarily preserved figurine of a pregnant woman [see above, *Fig. 10*] made of clay, with genital features marked by dots within a frame made by an incised line. The way in which it was marked clearly refers to similar finds dated to the Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom periods in Egypt (Ucko 1968; Adams 1974: Pls 44–45).

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