

A few Remarks about Cosmetic Palettes from Tell el-Farkha¹

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Tell el-Farkha is a Predynastic site in the Eastern Delta. Among the artefacts unearthed during twenty years of excavations one of the most important groups is composed of the cosmetic palettes, discovered in the graves as well as in the settlement. During Naqada IIIB, palettes were still important elements of the equipment of graves, but in general only geometrical shapes with characteristic incised frame were used. Zoomorphic or shield-shaped palettes were very rare. At Tell el-Farkha cosmetics palettes are known also from the settlement layers. A few bird-shaped cosmetic palettes from the Western Kom are connected with the older stage of the administrative-cultic centre, which can be dated to the beginning of Naqada IIIB. The dimensions of palettes and their distribution in the area suggests that such palettes were connected in some way with the early cult.

KEY-WORDS: Tell el-Farkha, Naqada culture, cosmetic palette, grave, administrative-cultic centre

Tell el-Farkha is located next to the northern outskirts of the modern village of Ghazala, along the southern side of the Ghazala Drain, about 14 km east of El-Simbillawein and 120 km to the northeast of Cairo. The site occupies an area of about 45,000 sq. m, with maximum height of *c.* 4.5 m above the level of the cultivation plain. It is composed of three koms (Western, Central, Eastern).

The site was discovered by the Italian Archaeological Mission in the Eastern Nile Delta in 1987. The Italian expedition directed by R. Fattovich carried out test excavation at the site between 1988–1990, and later the work was stopped (see, e.g., Chłodnicki *et al.*, 1991). In 1998, excavations at Tell el-Farkha were resumed by Polish Archaeological Mission to the Nile Delta, with the kind agreement of Italian colleagues (see, e.g., Chłodnicki *et al.*, 2012; Ciałowicz *et al.*, 2018).

From the beginning of the excavation, it was clear that all three koms contained the remains of houses and workshops, as well as graves. The stratification confirmed that the site was occupied for more than a 1000 year-long span, starting many centuries before the foundation of the pharaonic state, and divided into seven chronological phases

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¹ The article is a result of research financed by the National Science Centre (UMO-2017/27/B/HS3/01225).



Fig. 1. Tell el-Farkha. Eastern Kom. The bottom level of grave no. 94 and the red layer (ochre) on its east side. Photo: R. Słaboński.

(Ciałowicz *et al.*, 2018: 7). Phase 1 can be correlated with Naqada IIB – C (c. 3700–3500 BC), phase 2 is related with Naqada IID1 (c. 3500–3450 BC). In both phases, the site was occupied by the Lower Egyptian culture, but while in phase 1 the residents were only autochthonous inhabitants of the Delta, in phase 2 traces of the first settlers from Upper Egypt, connected with the Naqada culture, become evident. They gradually gained predominance over the autochthonous inhabitants of Tell el-Farkha and, probably due to the assimilation and acculturation processes, Lower Egyptian culture disappeared. The apogee of development of Tell el-Farkha occurred during phases 3–5 (Naqada IID2 – Naqada IIIC1, c. 3450–3000 BC). In the middle of the First Dynasty, the prosperity collapsed, but the inhabitants of Tell el-Farkha continued to live on the site into the early 4th dynasty.

During Polish research a lot of important discoveries have been made (see, e.g., Chłodnicki *et al.*, 2012). It is enough to mention the big buildings from the time of the Lower Egyptian culture and monumental Naqadian magazines on the Central Kom, the oldest brewery centre in the Nile Delta, the huge Naqadian buildings and Early Dynastic cultic-administrative centre with two votive deposits on the Western Kom, as well as golden figurines representing a Predynastic ruler, a monumental mastaba and a cemetery on the Eastern Kom.

A lot of artefacts were unearthed during twenty years of excavations. One of the most important groups is composed of the cosmetic palettes, discovered in the graves as

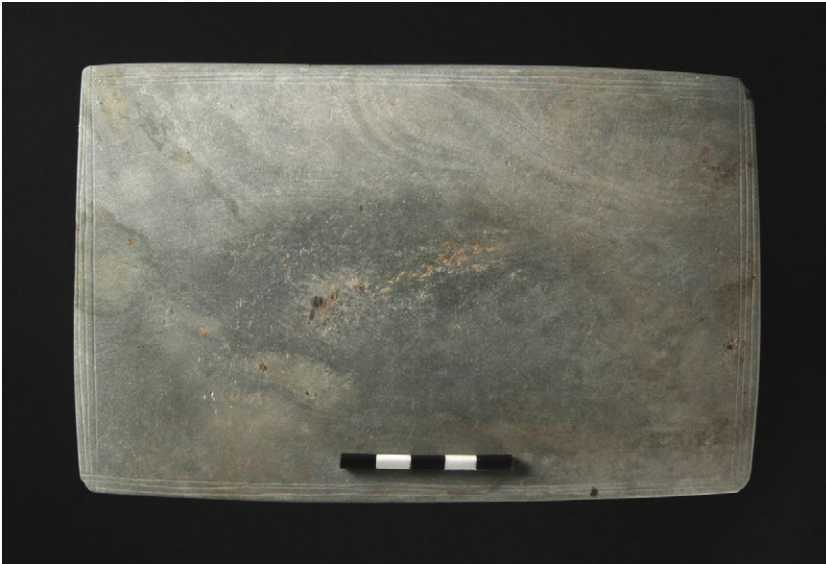


Fig. 2. Tell el-Farkha. Eastern Kom. Rectangular palette from grave no. 94. Greywacke.
Photo: R. Słaboński.

well as in the settlement layers. Until now, 77 palettes and their fragments have been discovered. Part of them has been published earlier (Buszek 2012), but some should be treated separately.

Grave no. 94, dated to the first half of Naqada IIIB, was a small mastaba preserved to a height of about 2.5 m. Just to the east of the grave (Fig. 1) and at its bottom level, an oval pit was discovered filled with a thin layer of red substance, possibly ochre, which was probably used for covering the bottom of the burial chamber during funerary ceremonies (Chłodnicki and Ciałowicz 2015: 193). The deceased was equipped with 15 pottery and 3 stone vessels, a necklace of 141 carnelian beads and two cosmetic palettes with a grinder. Unfortunately the condition of bone preservation did not allow for any anthropological analyses and the sex and age of the deceased remain unknown (Dębowska-Ludwin 2012: 59). The bottom of the chamber was covered with pure sand and red ochre. The palettes were lying over the head of the deceased together with a basalt bowl and a travertine cylindrical jar. One of the palettes is rectangular with incised decorated edges (Fig. 2), the second is shield-shaped with two figurines of animals – possibly lions – modeled on its upper part (Fig. 3). The rectangular palettes with incised rectangular frame around the edges are characteristic for the Naqada III period (Ciałowicz 1991: 32) and the presence such item in a grave dated to Naqada IIIB is not a surprise. Much more unusual is the presence in the same grave of a shield-shaped palette, these are almost exclusively represented during the Naqada II period (Ciałowicz 1991: 30). Schematic representation

of animals or birds on top of palettes are also characteristic of the Gerzean period. It is therefore possible that the example from Tell el-Farkha was produced earlier, but for an unknown reason was put into the grave many years after its creation.

Grave no. 99 is also dated to the first half of Naqada IIIB. It is also a small mastaba surrounded by massive walls with a very deep burial chamber. A male aged 30–35 was buried with 11 pottery vessels, 3 stone vessels, 3 greywacke cosmetic palettes (Fig. 4), a string of carnelian and serpentine beads. A layer of red ochre (Fig. 5) covered the body



Fig. 3. Tell el-Farkha. Eastern Kom. Shield-shape palette from grave no. 94. Greywacke.
Photo: R. Słaboński.



Fig. 4. Tell el-Farkha. Eastern Kom. Three rectangular palettes from grave no. 99. Greywacke. Photo: R. Słaboński.

(Dębowska-Ludwin 2012: 60). The position of the palettes was different from those known from grave no. 94. In grave no. 99, they were laid near the feet of the deceased together with four pottery cylindrical jars and a basalt bowl. The palettes are rectangular and surrounded by incised frames consisted of three lines. Traces of use are clearly visible on all of them.

The next small mastaba no. 130 is dated to the very beginning of Tell el-Farkha phase 5 (Naqada IIIB/C1), which means it was built during Dynasty 0 (Chłodnicki and Ciałowicz 2016: 246). At Tell el-Farkha, Early Dynastic graves, from the second half of the Naqada IIIC2/D (second half of the First – Second Dynasty) were often embedded in the small Protodynastic mastabas. Such a situation was observed also in this case. On top of the grave no. 130 was built grave no. 126 (Fig. 6). In the northern chamber the deceased man (25–35 years old) was lying, in a typical position.² He was wealthy, and equipped with 12 stone pots and one bead as well as 11 clay vessels (mainly beer-jars) in the southern chamber. Similar to other graves dated to this period, no cosmetic palette was deposited in grave no. 126. This confirms the earlier supposition,

² Anthropological analysis of graves 126 and 130 by Katarzyna Mądrzyk, Institute of Zoology and Biomedical Research, Jagiellonian University, Cracow.



Fig. 5. Tell el-Farkha. Eastern Kom. Burial chamber in grave no. 99 with a layer of red ochre on the body. Photo: R. Słaboński.



Fig. 6. Tell el-Farkha. Eastern Kom. Graves nos. 126 and 130. Photo: R. Słaboński.

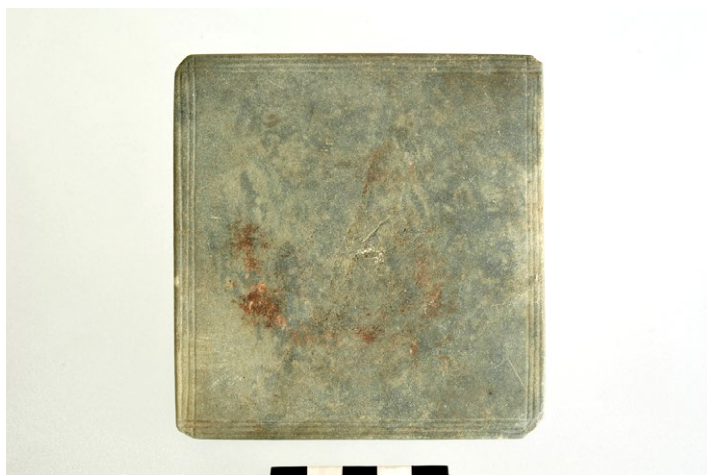


Fig. 7. Tell el-Farkha. Eastern Kom. Square palette from grave no. 130. Greywacke.
Photo: R. Słaboński.

that such items disappeared from grave goods after the middle of the First Dynasty (Ciałowicz 1991: 38–40).

The superstructure of grave no. 130 was at least 1.5 m high. Below a roof of the burial chamber was partially preserved. It was a kind of mat made of reeds and twigs. Further down, a burial chamber with rounded corners was found. There, a woman 30–39 years old was found lying in a contracted position on her left side, with the head to the north. She was equipped with 4 stone and 17 clay pots, a square greywacke cosmetic palette (Fig. 7), and a necklace of 139 carnelian beads and a lapis-lazuli one. The palette was almost square (10.5 × 11 cm) and surrounded by an incised frame consisting of three lines. On one side, traces of red substance (ochre?) are visible.

The superstructure of grave no. 153, from the Naqada IIIB period, was also preserved to the height of more than 1.5 m. The deceased (a man, about 40–50 years old) was on the left side with head to the north and in a typical, contracted position.³ Because the burial chamber was covered (intentionally) by a thick layer of mud, most of the pottery vessels forming the equipment were destroyed. Together in this grave, twenty-five pottery vessels (19 cylindrical jars and 6 storage jars), one travertine cylinder and one rectangular greywacke palette (Fig. 8) were discovered. The palette is decorated with 3 incised lines on all sides.

³ Anthropological analysis of graves 153 and 154 by dr hab. Anita Szczepanek, Department of Anatomy, Collegium Medicum, Jagiellonian University, Cracow and Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology Polish Academy of Sciences, Cracow.



Fig. 8. Tell el-Farkha. Eastern Kom. Rectangular palette from grave no. 153. Greywacke.
Photo: J. Skłucki.

In grave no. 154, also dated to the Naqada IIIB period, the first example at Tell el-Farkha of a pottery coffin was discovered. The badly preserved skeleton belong to a young person (20–25 years old), probably a woman. The deceased was equipped with 2 stone bowls (basalt and travertine), a bracelet composed of 127 beads of different stones, and 4 pottery vessels. Between them were a wine-jar with inscription (a boat and two birds – probably herons), two cylindrical jars with rope decoration and one grain storage jar. Also a small rectangular greywacke palette (Fig. 9) was put into the grave. It is not decorated, only a little hole was drilled near one of the shorter edges.

At Tell el-Farkha cosmetics palettes are known also from the settlement layers. One of the most important is a big palette (28 cm long) in the shape of a falcon (Fig. 10). The falcon is presented in a very schematic way, but the species can be conclusively confirmed on the basis of the features of the head. The palette was discovered in the Western Kom set in an upright position dug into the ground outside eastern wall of the older stage of the administrative-cultic centre (Chłodnicki and Ciałowicz 2004: 48). This fact, coupled with the impressive dimensions allow us to assume that this palette was of great importance and it could have been an element of some kind of religious and political practices (Buszek 2012: 317).

To the south of the administrative-cultic centre, another important and quite big (21.3 × 14.4 cm) palette was discovered. It also represented a schematic image of bird,



Fig. 9. Tell el-Farkha. Eastern Kom.
Rectangular palette from grave no. 154.
Greywacke.
Photo: J. Skłucki.

but probably a water bird (Fig. 11). Unfortunately the beak is not preserved. Traces of use are visible as well as red stains, probably from the grinding of ochre.

Another bird-shaped cosmetic palette (Fig. 12) is also connected with the administrative-cultic centre. In this case, it is probably a schematic representation of a lapwing (*rechit*) bird. The palette (18.5 × 14.0 cm) was discovered in the northern part of the edifice, in a storage jar together with a small (7.8 cm long) flint knife.

All the described palettes from the Western Kom at Tell el-Farkha are connected with the older stage of the administrative-cultic centre (Ciałowicz 2012a: 171–175), which can be dated to the beginning of Naqada IIIB. They are almost contemporary with the palettes discovered in the oldest graves from the Tell el-Farkha cemetery.

A little bit later, but still from Naqada IIIB, is a small (8.7 × 4.4 cm) fish-shaped palette, hidden in a storage jar discovered on the floor of the second stage of the western chapel of the administrative-cultic centre (Ciałowicz 2012a: 175, Fig. 22). A shallow relief on both surfaces illustrates the anatomical details of the fish, and both eyes are emphasized by drilled holes (Buszek 2012: 317). The general shape of the body resembles the tilapia, one of the most characteristic Nile fishes. The figurine of tilapia is also known from votive deposit discovered in the same chapel (Ciałowicz 2012b: 217). It was made of hippopotamus ivory and the details were carefully executed.

After twenty years of excavations, it is evident that at least from the time contemporary with Naqada IIB, until the middle of the First Dynasty, Tell el-Farkha was one of the most important towns in Lower Egyptian culture, not only in the Eastern Delta (Ciałowicz 2018).

Analysis of cosmetic palettes allows the addition of new arguments. It is necessary to stress that during Naqada IIIB, palettes were still important elements of the equipment of graves, but in general only geometrical shapes with characteristic incised frame were used. Zoomorphic or shield-shaped palettes were very rare. The above-mentioned shield shaped palette from grave no. 94 is an exception, and it is possible that this palette was used during a long period and was put into the grave many years after its creation.

In the same time in the administrative-cultic center at Western Kom, zoomorphic palettes were still popular. Significantly three of them were schematic representations of birds. The dimensions of palettes and their distribution in the area suggests that such palettes were connected in some way with the early cult.

It is very possible, that palettes in the shape of a falcon are directly connected with the royal cult. Under the northern wall of the western chapel of the administrative-cultic centre a storage jar with foundation deposit was discovered (Ciałowicz 2012a: 175). Especially interesting is a faience cylinder seal with depictions of ibexes and crosses. Above one of the crosses is a very schematic representation of a Horus-falcon. The crosses may be a schematic rosette, similar to that which appears on objects related to the kings Scorpion and Narmer, and at the end of the rows of animals decorating the Brooklyn knife-handle and the Davis comb. Such rosettes should probably also be associated with the iconography of rulers (Ciałowicz 1992: 254). All these symbols may then point to a connection with a ruler and his symbolism. This is also confirmed by some of the figurines from the votive deposit: a king in coat, griffin or falcon.

The palettes in the shape of water-birds may refer to symbolic representation of the people of the Delta, often depicted as a lapwing (*rechit*) in early Egyptian art (see for example on the Scorpion Macehead). Also in the votive deposit a figurine of water bird (goose or swan) is preserved.



Fig. 10. Tell el-Farkha. Western Kom. Palette in the shape of a falcon. Greywacke.
Photo: R. Słaboński.



Fig. 11. Tell el-Farkha. Western Kom. Palette in the shape of a water bird.
Photo: R. Słaboński.



Fig. 12. Tell el-Farkha. Western Kom. Palette in the shape of a lapwing.
Photo: R. Słaboński.

To summarize it should be emphasized that the results of the excavations at Tell el-Farkha confirmed that zoomorphic, as well as shield shaped, palettes during Naqada IIIA-B had a symbolic and ceremonial meaning connected with royal and divine cult. Earlier they were used in everyday life and used as grave goods (Ciałowicz 1991: 28–32). These functions during Naqada IIIB were served by geometric palettes.

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