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EN COUVERTURE
Trois figurines d'ivoire de site prédynastique de Tell el-Farkha

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CONTENU

To Readers and co-Authors of „Recherches Archéologiques” 7

FOUILLES ARCHEOLOGIQUES EN POLOGNE

Bolesław Ginter, Marta Połtowicz-Bobak: <i>Dzierżysław 35 – an open-air Magdalenian site in Upper Silesia (part III)</i>	11
Paweł Valde-Nowak: <i>Early farming adaptation in the Wiśnicz Foothills in the Carpathians. Settlements at Łoniowa and Żerków</i>	15
Piotr Godlewski: <i>Rescue excavations at the multi-cultural site 1 in Grodowice, Kazimierza Wielka district, season 2005</i>	37
Tobias L. Kienlin, Paweł Valde-Nowak: <i>Bronzezeitliches Siedlungswesen im Vorfeld der polnischen Westkarpaten: Geomagnetische Untersuchungen und Geländebegehungen im Bereich des Dunajectals</i>	49
Wojciech Blajer: <i>Die Ausgrabungen an der Fundstelle 5 in Lipnik, Kr. Przeworsk (Siedlung der Trzciniec-Kultur, Gräberfeld der Tarnobrzeg-Gruppe), in den Jahren 2004–2006 (7.–9. Grabungssaison)</i>	73
Anna Gawlik, Piotr Godlewski: <i>Rescue excavations at site 1 in Witów, Proszowice district. Seasons 2004–2006</i>	83
Ułana Zielińska: <i>Bone material from the Lusatian culture settlement in Witów</i>	101
Karol Dziegielewski, Urszula Bąk, Tomasz Kalicki, Barbara Szybowicz: <i>Investigations in 2004–2006 at the Bronze Age cemetery (site 3) at Zbrojewsko, district Kłobuck, voiv. Śląskie</i>	109
Agnieszka Klimek, Łukasz Oleszczak, Zbigniew Robak: <i>Forschungen an der Fundstelle der Lausitzer Kultur in Sufczyce, Fst. 8, Kr. Staszów, im Jahre 2005</i>	141
Marcin S. Przybyła: <i>Sondierungsausgrabungen auf der Siedlung aus der Bronzezeit und der römischen Kaiserzeit in Markowa, Kr. Łańcut, Fst. 85</i>	157
Marzena J. Przybyła: <i>Bericht von den Rettungsausgrabungen in Lipnik, Fst. 3, Gde. Kańczuga, Kr. Przeworsk, Woiv. Podkarpackie. Saison 2003–2004</i>	171
Michał Grygiel, Jacek Pikulski, Marek Trojan: <i>The research on the multicultural site no. 1 in Zagórzycze, com. and distr. Kazimierza Wielka, voiv. Świętokrzyskie during the years 2003 to 2004</i>	199
Michał Grygiel, Jacek Pikulski, Marek Trojan: <i>Rescue excavations on the Late Roman period settlement on site 3 in Zagórzycze, com. and distr. Kazimierza Wielka, voiv. Świętokrzyskie</i>	277
Renata Madyda-Legutko, Judyta Rodzińska-Nowak, Joanna Zagórska-Telega: <i>Prusiek, Fst. 25, Gde. und Kr. Sanok, Woiv. Podkarpackie – das erste Gräberfeld der Bevölkerung der Przeworsk-Kultur in den polnischen Karpaten</i>	295
Renata Madyda-Legutko, Elżbieta Pohorska-Kleja, Judyta Rodzińska-Nowak: <i>Pakoszkówka, Gde. und Kr. Sanok, Woiv. Podkarpackie, Fst. 1 (Siedlung aus der Römischen Kaiserzeit)</i>	311
Marcin Biborski: <i>Abschließende Grabungsuntersuchungen an der Fundstelle 8 in Mokra, Gde. Miedźno, Kr. Kłobuck, Woiv. Śląskie</i>	321

Jacek Poleski: <i>Results of excavations conducted on the stronghold at Damice, commune Iwanowice, district Kraków, in the years 2004 – 2006</i>	327
Dariusz Niemiec: <i>Fragment der städtischen Wehrmauer des Krakauer Kazimierz, freigelegt 2005 an der Podgórska-Straße im Bereich des Spitals der Barmherzigen Brüder</i>	341
Dariusz Niemiec: <i>Archäologische Grabungen im Bereich des Wróblewski-Collegium der Jagiellonen Universität in Kraków in den Jahren 2003–2005</i>	347
Dariusz Niemiec: <i>Archäologisch-architektonische Untersuchungen im Hof des Collegium Novum der Jagiellonen-Universität in Kraków in den Jahren 2005–2006</i>	363

RECHERCHES ARCHEOLOGIQUES A L'ETRANGER

Valery Sitlivy, Krzysztof Sobczyk, Margarita Koumouzelis, Panagiotis Karkanis: <i>The New Middle Palaeolithic Human Occupations in Cave 1 in Klissoura, Greece. The Investigations in 2004–2006</i>	377
Małgorzata Kaczanowska, Janusz K. Kozłowski, Adamantios Sampson: <i>Results of investigations into the Early Mesolithic site of Maroulas on the island of Kythnos (Western Cyclades)</i>	397
Marek Nowak, Magdalena Moskal-del Hoyo, Maria Lityńska-Zajac, Tomasz Kalicki, Janusz K. Kozłowski, Georgiy I. Litvinyuk, Marian Vizdal: <i>A settlement of the early Eastern Linear Pottery Culture at Moravany (Eastern Slovakia) – Preliminary report on seasons 2004 and 2006</i>	407
Krzysztof M. Ciałowicz: <i>Excavations of the Western Kom at Tell el-Farkha in 2006</i>	429
Joanna Dębowska-Ludwin: <i>The catalogue of graves from Tell el-Farkha</i>	457
Ewdoksia Papuci-Władyka, Eugenia F. Redina, Jarosław Bodzek, Wojciech Machowski: <i>The Koshary Project (Ukraine, Odessa province), seasons 2004–2006</i>	487
Wiesław Koszkuł, Jarosław Żralka, Bernard Hermes: <i>Archaeological Investigations at Nakum, Peten, Guatemala: New Data on the Site's Development and the Discovery of a Royal Tomb</i>	509
Radosław Palonka, Kristin Kuckelman: <i>Goodman Point Pueblo: Research on the Final Period of Settlement of the Ancestral Pueblo Indians in the Mesa Verde Region, Colorado, USA. The Preliminary Report, 2005–2006 Seasons</i>	543

THESES DE DISSERTATIONS

Jacek Poleski: <i>Frühmittelalterliche Burgen am Dunajec</i>	569
Grażyna Bąkowska: <i>Oriental elements in the iconography of magical gems (1st – 3rd centuries A.D.)</i>	579
Marcin Biborski: <i>Schwerter aus der jüngeren und spätrömischen Kaiserzeit sowie der Frühphase der Völkerwanderungszeit aus dem Gebiet des europäischen Barbaricums und des Römischen Kaiserreichs. Typologie, Chronologie, Identifizierung römischer Erzeugnisse</i>	587

Mikołaj Budzanowski: <i>The cult niches on the upper court of the temple of Hatshepsut in Deir el-Bahari. Royal cult aspects in the Temple of Millions of Years Djoser-Djeseru during the reign of Queen Hatshepsut</i>	599
Joanna Dębowska-Ludwin: <i>Burial custom in Lower Egypt in the Pre- and Early Dynastic period</i>	601
Anna Gawlik: <i>Scythian influences on the western and north-western borderlands of Great Scythia</i>	605
Dorota Gorzelany: <i>Burial form vs. ideologia funeraria. Formation of monumental tombs in Macedonia in the Classical and Hellenistic periods and their impact on the funerary complexes of Alexandria</i>	613
Wojciech Machowski: <i>Kurgans in the necropoleis of ancient cities on the Black Sea northern coast</i>	623
Jacek Pierzak: <i>Mittelalterliche Topfhelme auf polnischem Boden im Hinblick auf Westeuropa</i>	629
Aleksandra Zięba: <i>The Middle Palaeolithic in Kraków region: Piekary IIa and Kraków ul. Księcia Józefa sites, in European context</i>	641
Leszek Zinkow: <i>Legacy of the Ancient Egypt in Polish literature (until 1914)</i>	655
Jarosław Żrałka: <i>Terminal Classic Occupation in the Maya sites located in the Triangulo Park area and the problem of their collapse</i>	657
Ewdoksia Papuci-Władyka, Wojciech Machowski, Marta Kania: <i>Black Sea links: exhibition and conference in Cracow</i>	659

Joanna Dębowska-Ludwin

**Burial custom in Lower Egypt
in the Pre- and Early Dynastic periods¹**

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Burial custom in the formative period of the pharaonic civilization is one of the crucial and most interesting problems of Egyptian archaeology. Unfortunately, there is a clear and constantly existing disproportion in the state of research on Upper and Lower Egypt. Intensive archaeological research are bringing more and more reports or monographs with every passing season, but still there is no general synthesis of northern burial customs. This concerns mostly the times of the Lower Egyptian culture, the period of its gradual giving way to the Naqada culture that was pressing forward from the south, or even the younger period when Lower Egypt was absorbed by the Naqadians having resulted in formation of a country-wide-monarchy. The aim of the presented thesis was an attempt to supplement the gap by systematic arrangement of information on burial custom from architecture to miscellaneous side elements dated to respective periods. The comparison of the number of cemeteries used in particular periods with the one of burials having

been funded there reflects the direction of changes into the Egyptian society. So, 64 archaeological sites of sepulchral character, that fit in the chronological and geographical frame, were analyzed and included into the Catalogue.

The geographical range of the dissertation is the Nile Delta with a part of the Nile Valley to the Fayum Oasis. The Delta consists a clearly separated region with natural borders, more problematic was how the southern border of the area in question should be defined. It was finally accepted that it is situated not far to the south from the Fayum Oasis and is marked by the most southerly located site of north Egyptian features. From the chronological point of view the thesis is limited by the oldest burials of the cultures of Merimde and Omari (from ca. 4400 BC), then the more numerous cemeteries of the Lower Egyptian culture and necropolis of Naqadian character. The youngest burial grounds in discussion are dated to Dynasty I and II (till ca. 2686 BC).

The oldest burials in the area belong to the cultures of Merimde and Omari. They

¹ Dissertation defence in 2006.

provide materials basing on which it is impossible to unambiguously state whether deceased were actually buried within settlements' borders or the fact that graves were found there results from later shifting of the inhabited area. The undoubtedly extramural burial custom was introduced by the Lower Egyptian culture and from its times on it became a commonly followed rule. Then, it was the Naqada culture that brought complicated burial structures and rich offerings.

The general rule, during the whole period in question, seems to be putting the dead into single burials. Examples of double burials form the minority, mostly belonging to young women with little children. Graves with a few skeletons are also known as well as tombs with two burial chambers. However, they form a highly marginal phenomenon in every epoch. The most commonly followed were rules concerning the preferred position of the deceased, the building materials and offerings.

During the whole Pre- and Early Dynastic periods, one rule was universal. It was interring the dead in a contracted position on one side. Differences appearing in particular periods lie in greater popularity of the right or left side and in orienting the deceased with their heads to the chosen point of the compass. At first, it is difficult to talk about general tendencies since the dead were buried equally often on their left and right side, their head pointing to the north or south. In the Lower Egyptian culture, a clear change happens when the way of burying people begins to be formalized and the most popular position is the right side with the head to the south. The next and last change came with the Naqadian expansion and the preferred position became left side, head to the north. Nevertheless, these changes were not introduced with a single act but step by step, what is attested by data from cemeteries used in the transitional period.

The idea of graves' furnishing came out so long ago as in the oldest Northern Egyptian cultures. Among various objects comprising for offerings the most popular was always pottery. At the beginning, it represented only functional types and from the Naqadian expansion on also intentionally produced to satisfy sepulchral needs. Many traces of food offerings are known, too, chiefly in the form of animal and plant remains. To another objects found in graves belong also: ornaments, personal things, tools, stone vessels and their models, imports, gaming pieces etc. Their amount and quality was changing in time, denoting social status of the owner and reflecting changes in the early Egyptian society structure. It seems, that the custom of giving rich offerings do not belong to the native Lower Egyptian tradition and appeared with the Naqadian expansion.

Types of burial structures are highly differentiated. The least complicated and the most popular were simple pits, chiefly oval or round, rarely oblong and rectangular. They were shallow, rather small in size (just as big as to tightly fit a contracted body in) and contained the poorest burials. When the offerings were becoming more and more numerous, the pits' measurements were also growing to fit the whole burial set.

With the Naqadian expansion to the Northern Egypt, mud-bricks came in use, that were giving new opportunities to built more complicated structures with numerous inner chambers arranged into elaborate arrangements. This mud-bricked structures were as a general rule furnished in more diverse set of offerings. Simple pits were more and more commonly lined with a standard-shape-and-size-brick, first partially, then thoroughly forming a chamber. The chamber was covered with a kind of roof of plaitings or mats, sometimes of wood and later even of stone. The majority of pit graves lined with bricks had only one chamber up

to ca. 2.5 m long. It seems probable, that the growing amount of offerings forced the necessity of internal division of larger pits into burial chambers, where the deceased was buried together with the smallest and the most valuable objects from his grave set and store chambers, often tightly packed with pottery.

Around the first half of Dynasty I on sites situated within the Nile Valley, structures with a staircase or a shaft appeared. They are characterized by the presence of a staircase, at first straight, then turning along the right angle, or a vertical shaft leading to a burial chamber, mostly preceded by a small vestibule. The chamber itself was cut into stony background or had its walls lined with mud-bricks. It was single or supplied with additional niches and store chambers, while the main entrance to the substructure could be blocked with portcullis or a bricked wall.

The most impressive burial form known from early Egypt are mastabas. The oldest were composed of a complex superstructure and a relatively shallow substructure, where there was a burial chamber sometimes accompanied with a few small store chambers, whereas it was the superstructure where the building effort was focused on. The superstructure was divided into numerous rooms, where the majority of offerings was stored. From around the reign of Den, mastabas were beginning to be provided with staircases. Burial chambers were often secured with brick-walls or massive portcullises blocking the passage. A new element that, appeared in the half of Dynasty I were also shafts leading to deep substructures and ramps known from the times of Qa'a. Outer walls of a mastaba's brick body were decorated with a so-called recess façade (starting from the period of Qa'a, this custom was gradually falling into disuse in favour of plain façades and single recesses), sometimes

painted or surrounded by a bench with bulls' heads shaped in mud as well as equipped with beams and poles. A tomb composed of these elements was as a general rule closed by a wall, what gave the impression of a burial enclosure with a small corridor going around the grave itself and enclosing some additional elements such as side burials, boats or a chapel. A significant part of a tomb were granaries found also in a form of their models, funded inside the structures or even outside the enclosing wall.

Tombs in the type of a gallery constitute the crowning achievement of the process of substructures' extension, being characteristic for royal burials of Dynasty II. They consist of complicated arrangements of numerous corridors, vestibules and chambers covering the area of even a few hectares. The entrance to these deeply dug into the ground structures led through a shaft or a staircase.

Social inequality is well reflected in sepulchral material and visible in the example of more and more numerous burials standing out because of their construction and offerings against the background of the rest of structures from a particular site. The archaeologically perceptible social inequality appears not earlier than with the Naqadian expansion, when tombs surpassing other ones on account of the quality and number of their grave goods are registered. This phenomenon is known also from later times, from the end of the Predynastic period, then it flourishes as so-called elite burials, characterized by more complicated construction and far more numerous offerings, rich especially in luxurious objects. They came into particular popularity during the times of Dynasty 0 with its climax in the form of great mastabas having belong to state officials and finally, royal burials funded in Saqqara since the period of Dynasty II. Interesting is a situation noted in the Delta on

the turn of Dynasty 0, when we deal with data pointing to the period of local societies' overall prosperity. Those societies were based on wealthy middle class, whereas local elites funded for themselves graves in typical and common forms, only developed and enlarged. There is no any largest structures in the type of mastaba, then, that were built for elites in other parts of Northern Egypt. A unique, presently isolated and very early case is created by grave 10 from Tell el-Farkha.

To sum up the rich material and numerous issues creating the general idea of burial custom, it is necessary to draw special attention on its significant cognitive value. In the

structure of numerous necropolis, there is reflected both the cultural rivalry of the native Lower Egyptian unit with the expanding northern culture of Naqada and the evolving image of the Egyptian society in its formative period. Other political processes undergoing in the young state are also reflected in the material. These are: the Delta independence during the time of Dynasty 0 and the first half of Dynasty I, periods of central authorities instability as between the reigns of Aha and Den. These changes are perfectly illustrated by evolving graves from Tell el-Farkha and that is why a complete catalogue of burials from the site has been attached to the thesis.