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GAZELLES AND OSTRICHES
FROM TELL EL-FARKHA

A few years ago S. Hendrickx published two articles regarding animal scenes in Predynastic and Early Dynastic art. The first one was dedicated to bird representations on pottery¹, while the second one concerns representations of bovines². The author included comprehensive annexes comprising a register of objects with representations of animals of his interest in both articles.

In his opinion birds represented on D class pottery are ostriches rather than flamingos - and undoubtedly this idea is correct. Bovine representations in early Egyptian art are in many cases equally unquestionable and relatively common, especially during the Late Predynastic period. In some cases, however, either the appearance of the animal or the shape of its horns not only render a certain identification impossible, but also allow to make a statement, that the representation in question is rather of gazelles, or broadly hartebeest³. On some objects bovines and gazelles were depicted together, examples of those include the Narmer mace head, the Hieraconpolis painting or the Oxford palette. An ostrich is also represented on the two latter objects.

It is worth to consider some objects discovered during excavations in Tell el-Farkha in this context. The site, consisting of three koms (West, Central and East) situated on the outskirts of the Ghazala village, since a few years

¹ S. Hendrickx, *Autruches et flamants – les oiseaux représentés sur la céramique prédynastique de la catégorie Decorated*, Cahiers Caribéens d'Égyptologie 1(2000), p. 21-52.

² S. Hendrickx, *Bovines in Egyptian Predynastic and Early Dynastic Iconography*, [in:] F.A. Hassan, *Droughts, Food and Culture. Ecological Change and Food Security in Africa's Later Prehistory*, New York 2002, p. 275-318.

³ S. Hendrickx, *Bovines...*, p. 279.



Fig.1. Naqada vessel depicting a gazelle (?). Tell el-Farkha. Storeroom in Mendes.
Phot. Robert Słaboński

has been providing some spectacular discoveries⁴. During the first seasons of research conducted at that time by an Italian team⁵, M. Chłodnicki discovered a vessel (Fig. 1) used as a flower pot in a house they had rented. That cylindrical vessel is undoubtedly ancient, and by its shape and a single rope pattern under the rim we may date it to the Naqada IIIB/IIIC1 period. A depiction of a herbivorous animal with a large head, long horns and tail was engraved on the vessel. The rite is very schematic and it is difficult to decisively determine what species the animal belongs to. It may either be a depiction of a bovine or a gazelle, however, if horn arrangement is taken into consideration (see below), the second option seems more plausible.

A small (1,5 cm in length) serpentine amulet depicting a reclining herbivore (Fig. 2) was discovered in 2003 in a settlement on the Central Kom⁶. Attention is drawn to a relatively long neck and a manner in which the tucked

legs of the animal are depicted, characteristic of herbivore representations in Pre- and Early Dynastic art. The silhouette is schematic and a majority of details were not emphasised. Nevertheless, the form of the animal is legible enough to identify it as a depiction of a gazelle.

⁴ See eg. M. Chłodnicki, K.M. Ciałowicz, *Tell el-Farkha*, Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean (PAM) X-XVII, Warsaw; K.M. Ciałowicz, *Ivory and Gold. Beginnings of the Egyptian Art*, Catalogue of the exhibition, Kraków-Poznań 2007.

⁵ See e.g. M. Chłodnicki, R. Fattovich, S. Salvatori, *The archaeological mission of the C.S.R.L. – Venice to the Eastern Delta: A preliminary report of the 1987-1988 field seasons*, CRIPPEL 14, 1992, pp. 46-53; M. Chłodnicki, R. Fattovich, S. Salvatori, *Italian Excavations in the Nile Delta: fresh data and new hypothesis on the 4th millennium cultural development of Egyptian prehistory*, RdA 15, 1991, pp. 5-33.

⁶ M. Chłodnicki, K.M. Ciałowicz, *Tell el-Farkha*, Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean XV, Warsaw 2004 p. 105; M. Chłodnicki, K.M. Ciałowicz et al., *Polish excavations at Tell el-Farkha (Ghazala) in the Nile Delta. Preliminary report 2002-2003*, Archeologia LV, 2004, pp. 47-74.

A half of a cylindrical seal, chipped from the other part along a vertical axis, was discovered in the same layer (Fig 3). The seal (2,1 cm in length) is made of marlstone. The carving of the depiction was deep (Fig. 4). In the centre of the preserved part a long-legged bird with short wings, a long neck and a small beak was represented. This manner of depiction allows us to assume that the author intended to portray an ostrich. A hind part (leg and tail) of an ungulate is depicted in front of the bird,

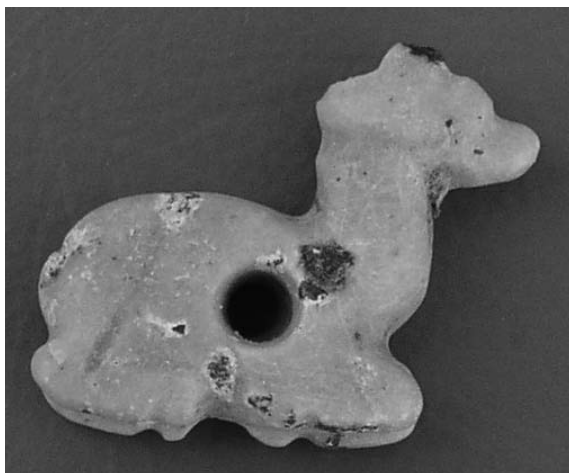


Fig.2. Gazelle-shaped amulet. Serpentine. Tell el-Farkha Central Kom. Storeroom in Mendes
Phot. Robert Słaboński.

while behind the bird an unidentified fragment of another figure is visible. Both above described objects were discovered in a layer dated to Naqada IIIB/C1. A seal impression with a fragmentally preserved depiction of two herbivores, probably gazelles, also originates from that context (Fig. 5).

In 2006 discoveries were made in Tell el-Farkha that were not only sensational, but also very important from a scientific point of view. Two figures portraying standing naked men (57 and 30 cm in height), probably a ruler and his successor, were found on the East Kom. Both figures consisted of a probably wooden core (not preserved) covered in gold foil that survived almost intact, allowing a reconstruction of both figures⁷. The figures were found together with two flint knives (including one of the ripple flake type) and necklace beads, which probably adorned the larger figure. The beads (Fig. 6⁸) were made of carnel (56 pieces) and ostrich egg-shells (326 pieces). The entire group was discovered in a layer dated to Naqada IIIB. We are not able to precisely estimate, however, how long before the group was hidden had the individual objects been made. It seems that they are indeed much older and originate at least from between the beginning of Naqada IIIA and the half of Naqada IIIB⁹.

The second spectacular discovery in the 2006 season was made on the West Kom. In the western part of the so called administrative-cultic centre, dated to

⁷ M. Chłodnicki, K.M. Ciałowicz, *Golden figures from Tell el-Farkha*, [in:] J. Śliwa (ed), *Studies in Ancient Art and Civilization 10*, Kraków 2007, pp. 7-21.

⁸ A picture of the reconstructed necklace. In: Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz, *Golden figures...*, fig. 10

⁹ Chłodnicki, Ciałowicz, *Golden figures ...*, pp. 20-21.



Fig.3. Half of a cylindrical seal depicting an ostrich and a gazelle (?). Marlstone. Tell el-Farkha Central Kom. Storeroom in Mendes.
Phot. Robert Słaboński

the end of Dynasty 0 and the beginning of Dynasty I, a room was discovered that certainly served a cultic purpose. Among other objects a small jar (23 cm in height) covered by a bowl (Fig. 7) was discovered there. Inside the jar 62 votive objects were found¹⁰. Human representations are dominant among them. Animal depictions are relatively scarce and there are neither ostriches nor gazelles among them. The vessel itself was decorated with impressed dots and incised, schematic pictures of two herbivores and a bird. A fragment depicting paws of an unidentified figure is preserved before the latter. The frieze probably circled the vessel, so it is difficult to definitely establish where it started. Most zoomorphic representations features birds and herbivores in separate registers. Among exceptions from this rule we may count a giraffe depicted among long-legged, probably marsh birds on the handles of the Brooklyn and Carnarvon Knives and the Davis Comb¹¹ as well as the below described scene from the Hammamiya vessel. In our case we may start with the depiction of the bird, or rather a fragmentally preserved figure in front of him, or a depiction of a smaller horned animal.

While the dots were certainly made before the vessel was baked with a stamp of some sort, the animal frieze was carved later. Hard surface may be responsible for a slight chip on the surface of the vessel that had probably appeared during the time the first figure was being carved. Judging by the preserved fragments: two legs, a larger part of the body and one of the feathers symbolizing a tail the author intended to depict another bird. The chipped surface made him abandon this intention, which is also proofed by the

¹⁰ M. Chłodnicki, K.M. Ciałowicz, *Tell el-Farkha 2006*, PAM XVIII (in press); K.M. Ciałowicz, *Excavations of the Western Kom at Tell el-Farkha in 2006*, *Recherches Archéologiques de 2004-2006* (in press).

¹¹ K.M. Ciałowicz, *La naissance d'un royaume. L'Égypte dès la période prédynastique à la fin de la I^{ère} dynastie*, Kraków 2001, pp. 173-176.

fact that this part of the picture was very shallowly carved - other figures were made with deep rites (fig. 9), probably achieved by making multiple carvings of the surface. It also needs to be stressed that very little room was left between the above described figure and the bird behind it. The remaining figures were arranged at larger and roughly equal intervals, so that each was separately visible on one side of the vessel. This may be a proof that the artist intended to portray one bird and two horned animals and the current appearance of the frieze was caused by a failure to carve the first figure. By accepting this view we also need to assume that the frieze on our vessel starts with the depiction of a bird. It has an oval body, long neck and legs, a small head with no beak and three quite long feathers for a tail. It seems to portray an ostrich. Behind the bird a smaller horned animal is depicted. The body and neck are symbolized by a horizontal line ending with a relatively long, upwards curled tail on one side and an oval head with straight horns on the other. Four lines run from the body downwards, representing legs. A triangle is carved between the hind legs of the animal, which undoubtedly is a schematic depiction of udders. Second figure is similar, but without udders. A female and a male of some horned species are therefore portrayed on the vessel. We may assume that the animals in question are bovines or gazelles or antelopes. On the basis of such a schematic drawing it is hard to unambiguously state what species the animals belong to. Due to the presence of an ostrich we may assume, however, that the author intended to show a desert scene rather than a row of domestic animals. In this case we may take either gazelles or wild bovines into consideration. The latter (just as their domesticated relatives) are usually depicted with semicircular horns, commonly bent forward¹². Our depiction features straight horns, and even slightly curved backwards in case of the first quadruped. The schematic representation does not allow full certainty, however we may assume that the intention was to depict gazelles. In this case the shape of horns may point to oryx or gazelles with lyre-shaped horns, commonly

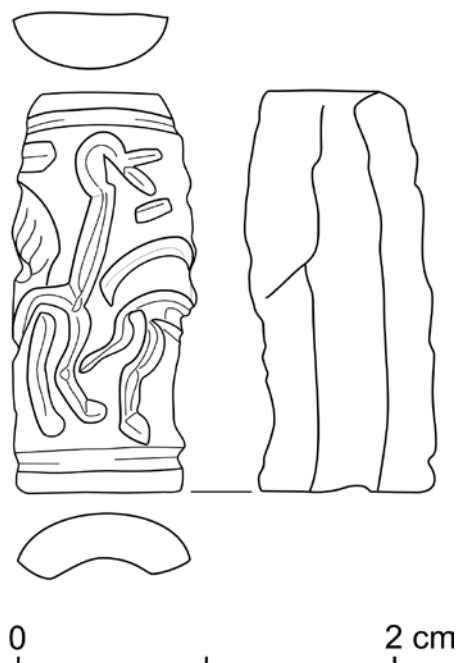


Fig.4. Cylindrical seal depicting an ostrich and a gazelle (?).

Drawing by Anna Longa.

¹²Hendrickx, *Bovines...*, p. 279.



Fig. 5. Seal impression of a seal depicting gazelles (?).
Tell el-Farkha Central Kom. Storeroom in Mendes.
Phot. Robert Słaboński

depicted in Predynastic art. In 2007 works were continued in the same room of the administrative-cultic center on the West Kom, where the above described vessel was discovered¹³. Further ceremonial vessels as well as further figures depicting humans and animals, models of various objects and hundreds of beads made of various materials were discovered.

A storage jar covered with a bowl, identical to the one covering the above described vessel containing a deposit (fig. 10), was discovered hidden in the northern wall of the room. Except for a few beads an ostrich egg (fig. 11) was discovered inside the jar together with a small, partially damaged faience cylindrical seal (fig. 12). The egg was undecorated and only had a small opening (1,8 cm in diameter) cut in its upper part. The seal was covered with a figural pattern (fig. 13) consisting of two gazelles with large curved horns bent backwards. Despite the fact that the images are very schematic and poorly preserved we may assume with considerable certainty that they should be identified with the Nubian ibex¹⁴. Above the animal figures is a silhouette that resembles a schematic depiction of a falcon and below them - a mark X, which may be a very simplified rosette symbol. Behind the second animal the seal is chipped downwards, whereas in the upper part there is a quite illegible symbol resembling a line broken at sharp angles or a schematic depiction of a falcon and a boomerang carved right next to each other (which therefore seem one symbol). Below two X marks are carved.

Representations of gazelles and ostriches from Tell el-Farkha are not a numerous group, but an important one. Depictions of gazelles and an ostrich egg also appeared in one group. Furthermore, beads made of ostrich egg-shells found together with golden figures emphasize how much an ostrich was worth to the inhabitants of Tell el-Farkha. All of the above described objects, together with a cylindrical jug discovered in the village, date to the end of the Predynastic period and the very beginning of the I Dynasty. It is worth to stress

¹³ M. Chłodnicki, K.M. Ciałowicz, *Tell el-Farkha 2007*, PAM XIX (in press).

¹⁴ S. Hendrickx, *Une scène de chasse dans le desert sur le vase prédynastique Bruxelles*, *M.R.A.H. E. 2631*, CdE 67, 1992, p. 12.

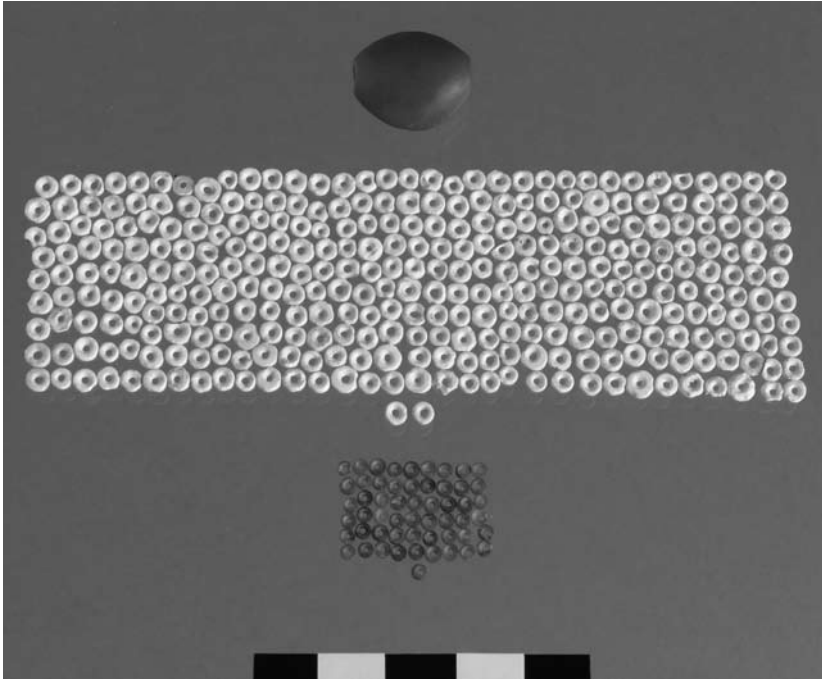


Fig.6. Beads of ostrich egg shells and carnelian discovered with golden figures. Tell el-Farkha East Kom. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Phot. Robert Słaboński

that until now no objects of this type have been discovered in a few dozen graves in Tell el-Farkha, also dated to this period.

Among ostrich depictions on D class paintings discussed by S. Hendrickx the one most important for our deliberations is the painting from Hammamiya¹⁵. The scene is divided into three registers divided by rows of triangles, probably symbolising rocky ground. In the uppermost one an antelope or gazelle is shown in front of a row of birds, most probably ostriches. In the middle register three gazelles were depicted (each with different horns) and behind them a dog in a pose suggesting attack and two further gazelles. The lowest row begins with three gazelles with different horns with two birds behind them, each with short spread wings - undoubtedly ostriches. Below there are three figures hard to interpret on the basis of the drawing.

One of the best depictions of an ostrich is on the Manchester palette dated to phase IIC-D¹⁶. A hunter wearing a bird mask is depicted there, approaching three ostriches, and the palette itself seems to have a connection with hunting magic. On

¹⁵Hendrickx, *Autruches...*, p. 40 fig. 8.

¹⁶K.M. Ciałowicz, *Les palettes égyptiennes aux motifs zoomorphes et Sans decoration*, Kraków 1991, p. 43.



Fig. 7. Vessel in which the votive deposit was discovered. Tell el-Farkha West Kom. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Phot. Robert Słaboński

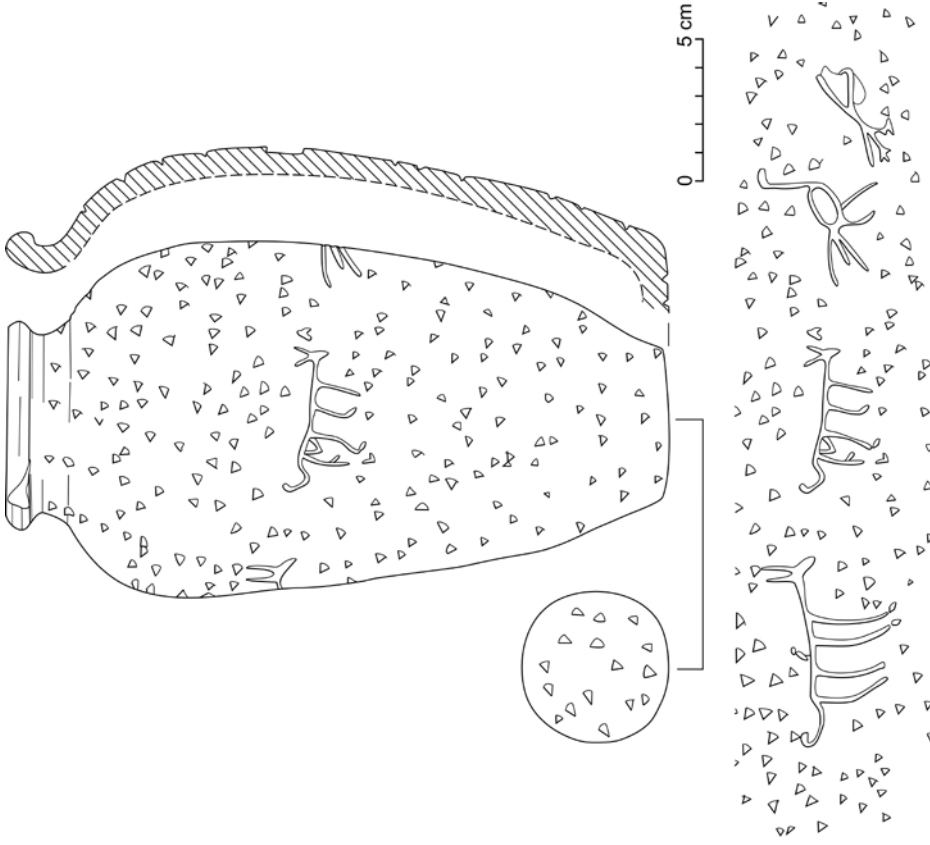


Fig. 8. Vessel in which the votive deposit was discovered.

Drawing by Magdalena Sobas

the Hierakonpolis painting¹⁷, dating to phase IIC, an ostrich was probably depicted once. The condition of the painting does not allow full certainty, but probably this bird was depicted in the centre of the picture in front of a black boat. There are numerous gazelles on this painting belonging to various species. Both oryx, ibex and gazelles with lyre-shaped horns are visible. Probably their meaning is equally manifold. For instance an ibex is being attacked by dogs in the upper right corner of the painting. An oryx and three ibex lie calmly over the biggest of the depicted boats, on which the ritual sed run is shown. A gazelle with lyre-shaped horns caught on a lasso together with five similar ones captured in a trap are painted in the lower left corner together with other scenes of triumph over men (a man killing three captives with a mace) and animals (a hero strangling two lions and a man taming a bull).

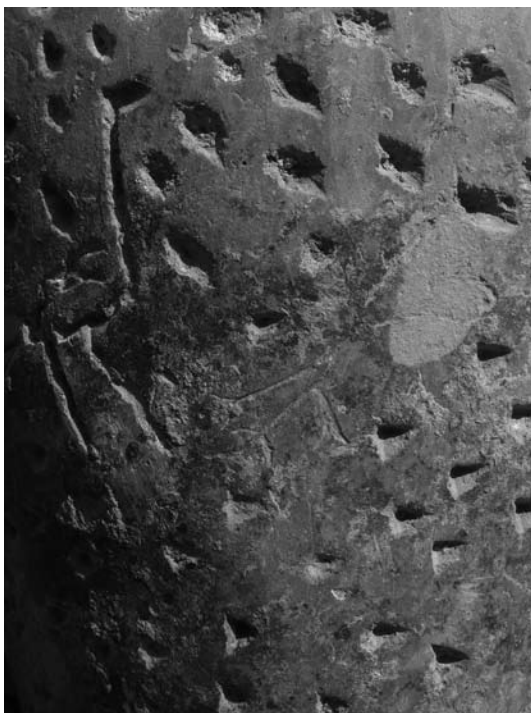


Fig.9. Decoration of the vessel with the votive deposit. Fragment. Phot. Robert Słaboński

An ostrich and gazelles also appear in the centre of the Hunters Palette¹⁸, which is difficult to date, yet it is most probably connected with phase Naqada IID-III A. Showing an ostrich as an object of hunt links this palette with the previously mentioned Manchester one. Quadrupeds mostly have lyre-shaped horns, however a deer and even a hare was spotted. A separate place is occupied by lions. Animals are hunted with bows and lassoes. Hunters wear feathers in their hair, possibly ostrich. On the top of the palette a per-nu chapel is shown together with a double bull protome, with an undoubtedly symbolic meaning, yet hard to reconstruct¹⁹. Besides, the interpretation of the entire palette is controversial up to date.

An ostrich and gazelles were pictured among other animals on a small palette from Hierakonpolis (in Oxford)²⁰. Here, however, the symbolic me-

¹⁷ Ciałowicz, *La naissance...*, pp. 157-163.

¹⁸ Ciałowicz, *Les palettes...*, pp. 55-56; *La naissance...*, pp. 189-191

¹⁹ Hendrickx, *Bovines...*, p. 280.

²⁰ Ciałowicz, *Les palettes...*, pp. 43-46; *La naissance...*, pp. 191-19



Fig.10. Container jar with a cylindrical seal and an ostrich egg in situ. Tell el-Farkha West Kom. Phot. Robert Słaboński.

aning of both species is more clear. The ostrich is shown only once, but in a deeply meaningful way: between the heads of two serpopards on the face of the palette. The fantastic creatures are devouring a gazelle with lyre-shaped horns that was killed during the hunt. Perhaps the bird was to symbolise a place where the offering was placed - a chapel or an early temple. We may observe a clear change of meaning. On the above mentioned objects an ostrich was depicted as an object of the hunt, here he becomes a symbol. A change of this type is however nothing new in Egyptian art. An obvious example is a bull (e.g. the Hierakonpolis Painting and the Bull Palette) or a lion (e.g. the Hunters Palette and the Battlefield Palette). Both species first appeared as objects of hunt to become clear ruler symbols later.

Oryx, ibex and gazelles with lyre-shaped horns are being hunted on both sides of the small palette from Hierakonpolis. However only the latter animal was depicted killed or sacrificed by a ruler, probably symbolised here by lions in the upper part of the reverse. Sacrificing gazelles is also confirmed by the scene from the Narmer mace head. Three dead gazelles with lyre-shaped horns are depicted there in a distinct hollow spot. The sanctuary where the sacrifice was made is not indicated by an ostrich, however, but by a long-legged marsh bird standing on the roof of a chapel. Nevertheless, its role as a symbol of a place or gods/powers worshipped there is unquestionable. A forked pole and a jar on a characteristic pot-stand with triangular notches on the sides were discovered within the boundaries of the wall encompassing the sanctuary. It is worth to recall that a similar holder with a matching bowl were found in the middle of the room containing the votive deposit on the West Kom in Tell el-Farkha.



Fig.11. Ostrich egg in situ. Tell el-Farkha West Kom. Storeroom in Mendes.
Phot. Robert Słaboński

The discovery from Tell el-Farkha is a proof of a significant symbolic role of ostriches and gazelles from the end of the Predynastic period until the rule of the I Dynasty. The objects discovered on the West Kom are especially important in this case. It can be no accident that in a room that undoubtedly served as an early sanctuary/chapel votive objects were discovered in a vessel decorated with depictions of an ostrich and gazelles. We may however consider the difference in artistic quality between the figures inside the jar, which mostly can be counted among the outstanding works of early Egyptian art, and the rite decorating the vessel from the outside. Presumably it was not made by an exceptional artist, the creator of the deposited sculptures, but rather by the person who packed these figures into the jar and hid it by the eastern wall of the room. Reasons for doing so may have been various: the need to make space for new votive gifts; the need to hide them from incoming danger or even a situation when this early sanctuary had to be abandoned, probably for economic reasons, just like the entire western part of the city in Tell el-Farkha. In this case the relatively primitive drawing is unsurprising, however the combination of motifs it comprises of remains significant. A further link between gazelles and ostriches is the discovery of a jar containing an ostrich egg and a cylindrical seal depicting gazelles in the northern wall of the same room. We may treat it as



Fig. 12. Cylindrical seal depicting gazelles.
Tell el-Farkha West Kom. Storeroom
in Mendes. Phot. Robert Słaboński

a foundation deposit, probably placed at that spot at the time the chapel walls were raised. A small sign is visible on the seal except the gazelle that resembles a schematic depiction of a falcon - Horus, while a cross below may be a schematic rosette, which appears on objects related to King Scorpio, Narmer and at the end of some rows of animals decorating the handle of the Brooklyn Knife or Davis Comb. Probably rosettes should also be associated with the iconography of a ruler²¹.

The appearance of this group of objects and the decoration of the jar containing the deposit seem to point to a strong relation between the inhabitants of Tell el-Farkha with the two discussed species. They may have had a cultic-symbolic meaning, especially

that both were not present in the Delta at that time. The ostrich egg must have been brought from the south and placing it in a foundation deposit instead of using it to produce beads proves a symbolic significance of such a deposit. A cylindrical seal depicting gazelles that was placed nearby demonstrates a symbolic-cultic significance of those animals. Perhaps the egg and the seal were a sacrifice placed at the time the shrine was founded to substitute for a “real” sacrifice of ostriches and gazelles. Yet another possibility is that both animals were somehow connected to rituals or cult or even were symbols of gods or powers worshiped in the shrine in Tell el-Farkha²². As mentioned above, except for the gazelles the seal also contains a depiction of falcon-Horus and perhaps rosettes. Both those symbols may point to a connection with the ruler and his symbolism. The fact that they were discovered in a cult chapel may only strengthen and emphasize this relation. It is worth to remind that among figures

²¹ K.M. Ciałowicz, *La composition, le sens et la symbolique des scènes zoomorphes prédynastiques en relief*, [in:] R. Friedman, B. Adams, *The Followers of Horus. Studies dedicated to M.A. Hoffman*, Oxford 1992, p. 254.

²² Both possibilities may be confirmed by a discovery of gazelle horn in the 2008 campaign. It was located under the northern wall of the shrine near the discussed vessel containing an ostrich egg.

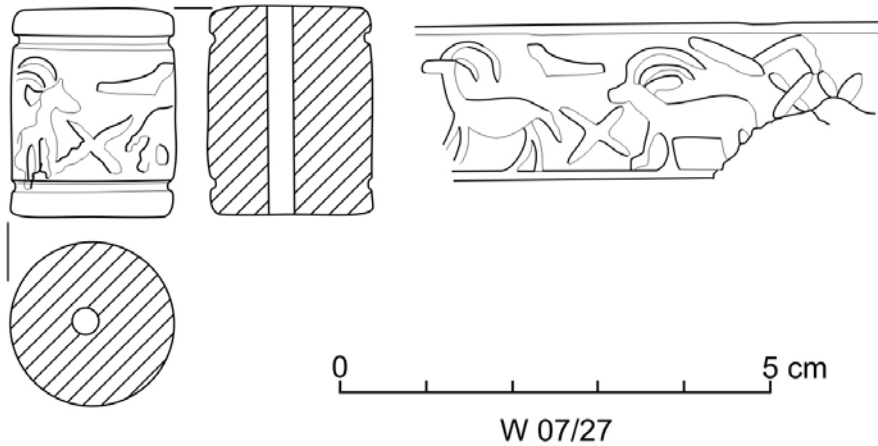


Fig.13. Cylindrical seal depicting gazelles. Drawing by Anna Longa.

of the deposit are among others²³: a man in a characteristic coat - probably a representation of an anonymous ruler during the sed festival, a woman with a child on her lap sitting in a palanquin (perhaps the mother of the ruler - reput²⁴) as well as a schematic figure of a falcon.

Also an appearance of a carving depicting an ostrich and probably gazelles on the vessel from the deposit may not have been a coincidence. Combining the same animals as the ones from the foundation deposit only emphasises their role and even allows us to presume that they were somehow connected to the name of the place - city in Tell el-Farkha or a shrine built there. Such a conclusion may be considered too improbable, but should be considered nevertheless.

An amulet in the shape of a gazelle and a seal depicting an ostrich and a gazelle (?) from the Central Kom date to the same period as the administrative-cultic centre from the West Kom. While the shape of the amulet may be coincidental, the set of animals on the seal on the other hand is undoubtedly intentional. Such a seal may have been used to mark goods sent from Tell el-Farkha in various directions. This would be yet another proof of a link between ostriches and gazelles with the name (symbolic/protective forces) of the cult shrine on the West Kom or the settlement itself, which at that time may have been the same thing anyway.

A considerable role of beads made of ostrich egg-shells is also confirmed by the fact that they were discovered together with golden figures from Tell

²³ Ciałowicz, *Excavations...*

²⁴ W. Kaiser, *Zu den ⤵⊃⦿ der älteren Bilddarstellungen und der Bedeutung von rpw.t*, MDA-IK 39 (1983): 261-96.

el-Farkha. Their worth is also proofed by the fact that they were used together with gold and lapis lazuli imported from distant lands. Equipping the figure of the ruler with a necklace made of egg-shells and carneol may not have served just to decorate it. Their meaning was probably more symbolic - for instance they served to emphasis some kind of relation with the chapel on the West Kom or generally with the ancient city of Tell el-Farkha.

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