

THE CASEMATE BUILDING IN TELL EL-MASKHUTA: REASSESSMENT OF DATA AND COMPARISONS

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The casemate building in Tell el-Maskhuta may be listed with several casemate platforms found in Upper and Lower Egypt, and it seems to be especially comparable to casemate buildings in Delta sites, whose interpretation has been questioned since they were first unearthed.

Keywords: Casemate buildings; Delta; religious-ritual architecture; administrative-defensive architecture; *temenos*

1. INTRODUCTION

When E. Naville started the first archaeological excavation in 1883, Tell el-Maskhuta was covered by sand and mainly known for a Ramesside monolith representing Ramses II between two deities, described by the French engineers working on the Ismailia Canal. In fact, the Arabic name of the site means “the mound of the statue”, and it is located about 15 km West of Ismailia. Naville had the chance to discover most of the buildings placed inside the great enclosure still visible on the ground, and he published a report of his work with the first plan of the site. Following the debate of the time,² he focused more on the identification of the town with a Biblical place than on the record of his archaeological activities, briefly described. Of course, this still affects the understanding of his findings, as it is the case of a large casemate³ building that brought Naville to title his book *The Store-City of Pithom*.⁴ The following pages offer a description of that building and a summary of the interpretation of casemate platforms, focusing on the comparison with Delta sites.

¹ Special thanks to G. Capriotti Vittozzi and A. Angelini, respectively founder and director of the Multidisciplinary Egyptological Mission, for allowing me to present this note on the site. For the activities carried out by the Multidisciplinary Egyptological Mission in Maskhuta, see Angelini 2015; Capriotti Vittozzi - Angelini 2017; Capriotti Vittozzi - Angelini - Iacoviello 2018; 2019; Angelini *et al.* 2020.

² A summary on this point in Yoyotte 1996, 27-29. The focus of the debate was the identification of Eastern Delta sites with cities and towns mentioned in the Bible. The discussion was especially intense regarding the identification of Maskhuta, see Naville 1885; 1924; Gardiner 1918; 1924. This is still an interesting point: some Scholars identified Maskhuta with Pithom (Ex. 1.11), see Redford 1996, 53; Yoyotte 1996, 29; some with Succoth (Ex. 12.37), see Kitchen 1998, 35; Collins 2008, 135-149; Van Seters 2014, 116-123.

³ The term “casemate” has a military implication, but it is largely used in the archaeological literature, v. Spencer 1999; Malecka-Drozdz 2014a; 2014b. For this reason, it has been adopted in this paper. Nevertheless, it is possible to find other names for this construction technique, such as cellular construction, v. Spencer 1979a; 1979b; Arnold 2003, 49, and *bâtiment à caissons*, v. Leclère 2007, 99.

⁴ The title is related to the interpretation Naville gave to the building, see further.

2. THE CASEMATE BUILDING IN TELL EL-MASKHUTA

Naville excavated a mudbrick casemate building located in the south-western area of the site, inside the great enclosure, and called it *magasins*. He described the building as having thick walls and being formed by a grid of closed chambers. He also noticed the presence of regular, aligned holes in the walls, «about 2 yards from the bottom [...] where timber beams had been driven on» and «about 1 yard higher there is a recess in the wall at the same level in all the chamber which I excavated to that depth», that he interpreted as the trace of «an awning or some kind of ceiling». Above that, the walls were plastered. Naville interpreted the structure as a storehouse or granary and affirmed that the Romans filled up the chambers with «whatever came first to hand», which brought him to excavate only a few chambers. Naville did not doubt that those «store-chambers [...] extended over the greater part of the space surrounded by the enclosure».⁵

Unfortunately, neither Naville nor J. Clédat, who worked in Maskhuta in '900, published a complete and detailed layout of the building. They both represented it attached to the temple, on its side wall⁶ (figs. 1-2).

In the '80ies, the Canadian mission led by J.S. Holladay found part of Naville's *magasins* and labeled it "Warehouse III". The building has 2 m thick walls, deep foundations, and it is formed by chambers made of black mud bricks. As Naville, Holladay observed regular holes in the walls, and interpreted them as the trace of a wooden pavement, placed about 7 m from subfloors. He hypothesized that a ramp was built on the southern side of the building, where he also found the entrance (figs. 3-4) and reported the presence of plaster made of limestone or gypsum, as Naville did. In his opinion, the building is dated back to the II-I century BC, and it is comparable to casemate buildings in Naukratis and Tell Dafana.⁷

⁵ Naville 1885, 9-11.

⁶ Clédat 1921, 185, plan; Interestingly, Clédat described the pylon of the temple as a structure made of fired bricks and covered by stone, whose remains were still in place at the base of the walls when he was working in Maskhuta. He believed the pylon was rebuilt by the Romans.

⁷ Holladay 1982, 30-32. He also suggested the presence of two more warehouses. They are "Warehouse I", in his Field M, dated back to the second half of the III c. BC, and "Warehouse II", dated back to the first half of the II c. BC, and cut by Warehouse III (Holladay 1982, 31-32).

3. REMARKS ON THE INTERPRETATION OF CASEMATE BUILDINGS

Casemate buildings have been discovered in Upper and Lower Egypt⁸ and interpreted as storehouses, as the building in Maskhuta, or left unexplained.⁹ However, their interpretation as storehouses has soon been questioned since the inner chambers were always found filled up.¹⁰

In more recent times, the function of those buildings has been discussed by Egyptologists who have pointed out that they are mudbrick foundation platforms for buildings with different purposes, placed on an elevated position for hygienic, defensive, and religious reasons.¹¹

Some attempts towards a classification of the buildings placed on casemate foundations have been made but they cannot be taken as definitive. Spencer distinguished between religious-ritual buildings, such as peripteral temples, barque stations, and *Sna wab*, “pure storehouse”,¹² and larger administrative-defensive buildings, whose main example is the Palace of Apries in Memphis.¹³ Also, the platforms in Naukratis, Tell Dafana, and Tell

⁸ Casemate buildings in Egypt show some common features but may have different dimensions. In all cases, elevated mudbrick platforms have been unearthed, internally divided as a grid of closed chambers, filled by sand and rubble, sometimes roofed by domes or vaults. The platforms have deep foundations, and wooden beams are regularly placed in the walls, forming an inner skeleton for the structure. Sometimes the walls have a concave profile and ramps have been found, granting access to the top, as in Tanis, Medamud and Karnak, Spencer 1979a, 132; Kemp 2000, 91-92, with further bibliography; Leclère 2007, 100, fn. 20, with further bibliography. For a general discussion on casemate buildings, Spencer 1979a 132; 1979b, 120-122; Arnold 2003, 49-50; Leclère 2007, 100; Malecka-Drozd 2014a, 70-75. For the outline of the history of casemate buildings, Arnold 2003, 49; Malecka-Drozd 2014a, 76-78, 80-88; 2014b, 150-155. Giving a complete list of casemate buildings in Ancient Egypt is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is possible to cite some of them, such as the one in Tanis, see Montet 1933, 76-88, pls. XXXV-XXXVII, where the connection between the casemate building and the temple is underlined; Montet suggested that the casemate platform was the base of a *ziggurat* built by the Hyksos (Montet 1933, 166). The casemate platforms in Tuh el Qaramus, Tell Belim, Kom Firin, and Abou Rawash, plus some examples in the Theban region, are interpreted as “pure storehouses”. Also, the *sanatorium* in Dendara, the *Wabet* of Apis in Memphis, the *Wabet* of the Falcon in Athribis, and the Ptolemaic sanctuary in the fortress of Tell el-Herr may be listed as casemate platforms. On a larger scale, there are the “Palace of Apries” in Memphis and the platforms in Naukratis, Tell Dafana and Tell Balamun, v. Leclère - Spencer 2014, 21, with further bibliography. Some casemate buildings are in Sudan, Leclère - Spencer 2014, note 232, with further bibliography. In Ptolemaic and Roman times, casemate platforms served as the foundation for tower-houses, Spencer 2014, 172-174, with further bibliography.

⁹ Spencer 1979a, 132.

¹⁰ Leclère 2007, 101.

¹¹ The religious meaning of the elevated platforms must be found in the reference to the emergence of the primeval mound from the *Nun*, according to the Heliopolitan cosmogony, Leclère - Spencer 2014, 21, fn. 233 for further bibliography; Malecka-Drozd 2014a, 80-88.

¹² After having suggested the interpretation of buildings on top of casemate platforms as peripteral temples (Spencer 1979a, 132-133; 1979b, 120-121), Spencer (1999) agreed with C. Traunecker on the idea that they bore pure storehouses instead, built inside the *temenos* to keep provisions for the temple: Spencer 1999, 296; Leclère 2007, 101, with further bibliography. According to Spencer (1999) the platforms for pure storehouses are about 25 m². Spencer 1999, 297: examples in Saqqara, 21 × 11 m, 18 × 16 m, and 16 × 13 m, Martin 1973, 7, fig. 1; Diospolis Parva, 13,97 × 13,69 m, Petrie 1901, 56; Medamud, 23 × 21,5 × 3,14 m, Bisson de la Roque - Clère 1928, 8. Spencer (1979b) also suggested that the building in Maskhuta served as the foundation for this kind of religious-ritual architecture: Bisson de la Roque - Clère 1928, 120, fn. 18.

¹³ Petrie 1909; Spencer 1999, 298-299; also D. Arnold believed that casemate buildings are foundations for palaces and fortresses: Arnold 2003, 49-50, and F. Leclère pointed out that often those platforms supported royal and government palaces: Leclère 2007, 101. See also the so-called Qasr el-Kebir in Sais, Leclère 2003, 18.

Balamun show huge dimensions, as the building in Memphis, plus vaulted underground chambers.¹⁴ According to Leclère, those vaults might have created some insulation between the foundation and the building on top, pointing towards a storage function for the platform.¹⁵ Despite this classification, the platforms in Karnak and Tanis, serving as temple storehouses, also have large dimensions, respectively 55×45 and $30 \times 49 \times 3-3,50$ m.¹⁶

Based on this categorization, the dimensions of casemate buildings seem a point of special interest. Even if they cannot indicate the function of buildings on top, they may be useful for comparisons. The dimensions of the casemate building in Maskhuta have never been published in the archaeological reports. However, it appears very noticeable in the plans of the site. To enhance the knowledge of the building and offer more data for comparison, an attempt to obtain the dimensions of the casemate platform has been made. In the context of the dimensional relations among the published layouts of the buildings in Maskhuta, the proportion method has been applied to measure the casemate building, considering the different scales of the published layouts and the intrinsic error of the method.¹⁷ The results are remarkably interesting: in Naville's layout, the "magasin" is $74 \times 69,5$ m; in Clédat's layout it is 53×41 m; in Holladay's, it is 86×86 m and the Warehouse III is 77×20 m. The difference among the dimensions of the building in the three layouts is remarkable and it must be considered when trying to compare it with similar buildings. Of course, this difference may also depend on graphic errors, made when the layouts were drawn, many years ago.¹⁸ However, it seems possible to follow Holladay's suggestion and compare the building in Maskhuta with the huge casemate foundations of Naukratis and Dafana, excavated by W. M. F. Petrie, plus the one in Balamun.¹⁹ The casemate building in Naukratis, named "Great Mound" by Petrie, measures $55 \times 55 \times 10$ m;²⁰ the "casemate building A" in Dafana is $43 \times 43 \times 8$ m;²¹ the one in Balamun is $61,10 \times 54,15$ m.²² Petrie interpreted the platform in Naukratis as a fort²³ and the one in Tell Dafana as a palace-fort, with some space

¹⁴ Spencer 1999, 299.

¹⁵ Leclère 2007, 100, especially fn. 21.

¹⁶ For the latter see Montet 1933; see also Spencer 1999, 297, where he pointed out that those platforms are less elevated than the larger platforms in Naukratis, Dafana, and Balamun.

¹⁷ For example, in fig. 3, 1 mm corresponds to about 4.5 m. Special thanks to dr. Andrea Angelini, director of the Multidisciplinary Egyptological Mission, for measuring the casemate building in Maskhuta and adding an explanation of the proportion method to this note.

¹⁸ Holladay did not publish a new layout of the enclosure and the buildings excavated by Naville. He only re-published Naville's layout adding the trenches made by the Canadian mission. For this reason, one of the goals of the Multidisciplinary Egyptological Mission in Maskhuta is drawing a new layout of the great enclosure, see Angelini *et al.* 2020.

¹⁹ The platform in Balamun was not mentioned by Holladay but it shows almost identical features with the one in Naukratis, Spencer 1999, 296-197.

²⁰ Petrie 1886, 24-26, pl. XLIII.

²¹ Leclère - Spencer 2014, 12; the mission from the British Museum working in Tell Dafana has re-evaluated Petrie's notes about the casemate buildings he discovered. Those are named "casemate building A", measuring $43 \times 43 \times 8$ m, and "casemate building B", measuring $21,75 \times 22,75 \times 6,25$ m, and they are connected, Leclère - Spencer 2014, 12, 15; for the detailed description of the casemate buildings in Dafana, see Leclère - Spencer 2014, 12-18.

²² Spencer 1996, 59-62.

²³ Petrie 1886, 24-26, pl. XLIII; on the chronology of the casemate building in Naukratis see Muhs 1994, especially 104, and Spencer 2011, 38, with further literature. As in Maskhuta, Petrie noticed holes for wooden

for storage in the underground.²⁴

In recent years, the interpretation of those buildings left by Petrie has been revised, especially after reconsidering the meaning of the great enclosures where the platforms are located. A.J. Spencer from the British Museum Naukratis Project pointed out that the great enclosure in Naukratis is the *temenos* for an Egyptian temple, which stood in the city before the arrival of the Greek mercenaries. Unfortunately, Petrie did not recognize it as what it really is and ended up interpreting the enclosure as the *Hellenion*, following Herodotus' description of Naukratis.²⁵ Therefore, the casemate building has been seen as a fort. Once the enclosure was identified as a *temenos*, the casemate building in Naukratis has been interpreted as a military redoubt, temple treasury, fortified residence, secured official administrative center, and even ritual royal palace.²⁶

The same process of revisiting Petrie's interpretation was applied to Dafana. According to the archaeologists from the British Museum,²⁷ «the fact that there are many small rooms in the platform should point towards a storage function rather than military, residential or palatial purpose». In fact, the presence of a central corridor, dividing the platform into two areas with small and almost uniform rooms does not match with a residential building that should have more differentiated and specialized areas.²⁸

Lastly, the casemate platform in Tell el-Balamun has been interpreted as a citadel²⁹ (figs. 5-6).

What has been said shows that the debate on the function of buildings on top of casemate platforms is still open. Of course, the lack of remains does not allow any firm conclusion about their purpose. Additionally, dimensions cannot be used to group the buildings and suggest their function, as the platforms in Tanis and Karnak show, and the use of underground chambers for storage is still a possibility.³⁰

Therefore, the debate can be moved to the context where casemate platforms are found. It has been underlined that these platforms are a regular component of temple complexes and placed into *temenoi*, as the platforms of the mentioned Delta sites show. Furthermore, Spencer pointed out that the presence of a casemate building agrees with the interpretation of the enclosure as a *temenos*.³¹

This point is especially interesting. In fact, the casemate platform in Maskhuta is located inside a large enclosure and close to the temple. Even the ramp, hypothesized by Holladay on the southern side, looks at the temple. In many cases, including Naukratis and Balamun, casemate platforms are placed close to temples,³² which is one of the reasons why they were

beams, regularly arranged about 5,5 m from the bottom, hypothesizing the presence of pavement and door thresholds. The chambers were totally filled with rubble and stone chips, including some sculptural remains, Petrie 1886, 24-26. According to Muhs, the casemate platform in Naukratis served as the foundation for a peripteral temple, Muhs 1994, 112-113.

²⁴ Petrie 1888, 53.

²⁵ Spencer 2011, 35.

²⁶ Leclère - Spencer 2014, 20, especially notes 229-230 for further bibliography.

²⁷ From the research project "Egyptian-Greek Relations at Daphnae (Nile Delta) in the Seventh Century BC".

²⁸ Leclère - Spencer 2014, 21-22, with further bibliography.

²⁹ Spencer 1996, 59-62.

³⁰ Leclère 2007, 100.

³¹ Spencer 2011, 36-37.

³² Many examples in Spencer 1979a, 134-136, figs. 1-3.

originally interpreted as religious-ritual buildings.³³ Furthermore, the casemate buildings of Naukratis, Balamun, and Dafana show similar layouts, almost identical in Naukratis and Balamun, characterized by the presence of a long corridor dividing the platform into two equal parts with cells. It is not possible to see the same feature in the platform in Maskhuta since it was never completely excavated. However, according to Holladay, the enclosure in Maskhuta should be dated back to the saite dynasties, as the platforms in the 3 Delta sites,³⁴ showing a common chronology for complexes with similar features.

4. CONCLUSION

The brief note presented here does not mean to give a definitive interpretation about a building excavated long ago, whose knowledge is partial. However, it tries to offer more data for the archaeological debate and the re-evaluation of monumental buildings in Tell el-Maskhuta. After Naville, the site has been mainly read as a fortified center, dependent on the Saite canal, with large areas devoted to storage, as the *magasins*. It is probably time to mitigate this one interpretation of the site and accept a more differentiated reading of the entire complex, where the casemate building may have held a building with several functions.

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³³ As in Tanis, see Montet 1933, 80.

³⁴ Spencer (2011, 39) pointed out the similarity among the pottery in Maskhuta, Naukratis, and Balamun.

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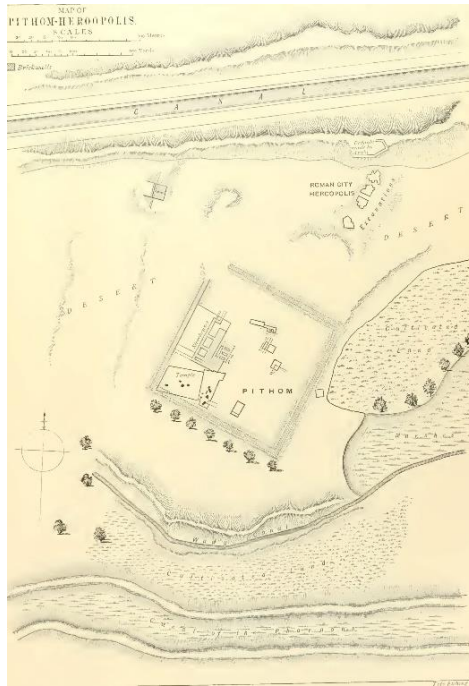


Fig. 1 - Navelle's plan of Tell el-Maskhuta (Navelle 1885).

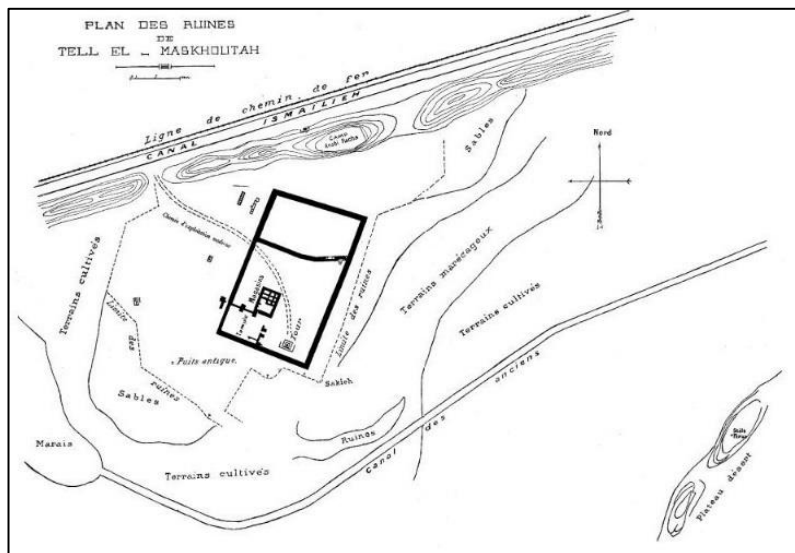


Fig. 2 - Clédât's plan of Tell el-Maskhuta (Clédât 1921).

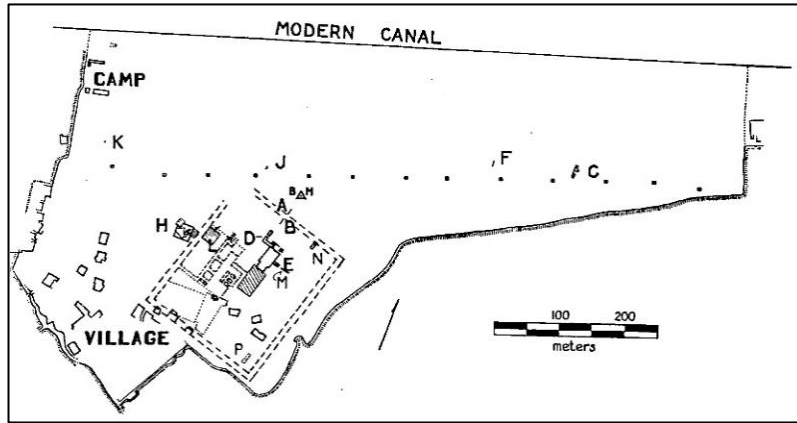


Fig. 3 - Holladay's plan of Tell el-Maskhuta (Holladay 1982, pl. 37, reproduced by permission of the American Research Center in Egypt, Inc. (ARCE)).

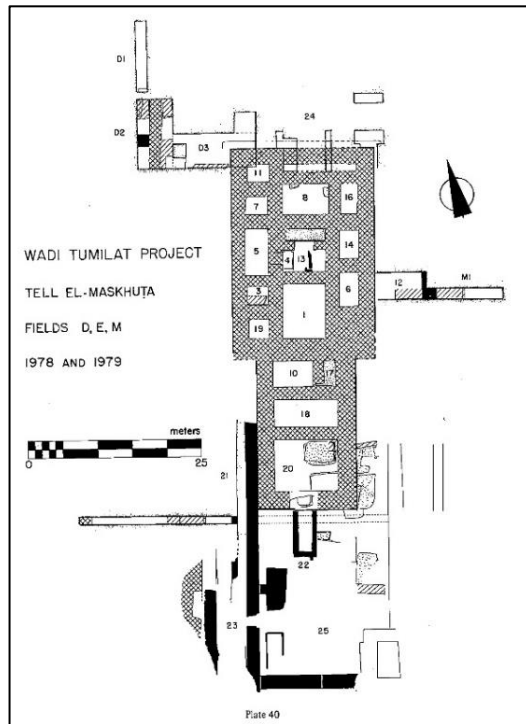


Fig. 4 - Holladay's layout of the warehouses (Holladay 1982, pl. 40, reproduced by permission of the American Research Center in Egypt, Inc. (ARCE)).

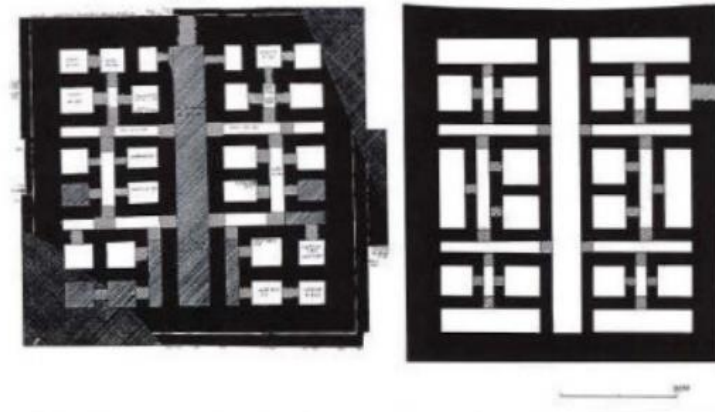


Fig. 5 - Layouts of the casemate buildings in Naukratis (left) and Balamun (right) (Spencer 1999, fig. 4; courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society).

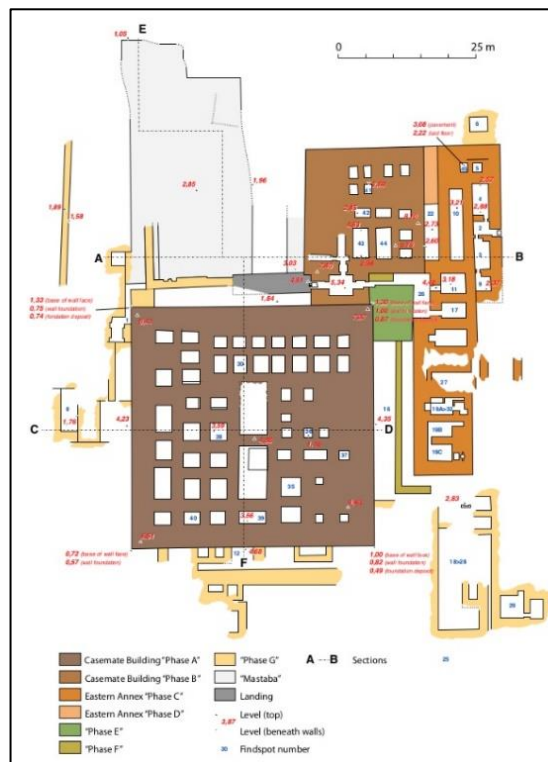


Fig. 6 - Layout of the casemate buildings in Tell Dafana (Leclère - Spencer 2014, pl. 5, courtesy of F. Leclère).