

SOME NOTES ON THE GREAT ENCLOSURE WALL
OF TELL EL-MASKHUTA*

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Tell el-Maskhuta, investigated by the archaeological expedition from the National Research Council of Italy ISPC, is characterised by a huge enclosure wall. The recent research raises the issue of its purpose. The problem is analysed in light of the Egyptian tradition and other enclosure walls known in the Delta. Some cases are presented and compared.

Keywords: Tell el-Maskhuta; Wadi Tumilat; enclosure wall; fortresses; Egyptian Delta

1. COMPARATIVE NOTES ON THE ENCLOSURE WALLS OF THE DELTA

The study and reflection on the data collected by the CNR expedition on the enclosure walls led to a revision of previous assumptions, also on the basis of comparative data available on other sites. The research started from sites known as border fortresses in the Northeast¹, and then expanded to other sites, particularly in the Delta, which have large enclosure walls. A number of northern sites, in fact, have this characteristic and, in the past, some of them were often considered as fortresses/citadels. The Delta has preserved several enclosure walls: in addition to Tell el-Maskhuta, one can for example mention Tell Dafana, Tuh el-Qaramus, Tell el-Balamun, Tell Belim, Tell Tebilla, Tell el-Daba, Tell el-Retaba, Kom Firin and Naukratis,² as well as great sites such as Buto,³ Tanis⁴ and Mendes.⁵

The case of the Tell Dafana site, in the eastern Delta, along the Pelusiac branch of the Nile, a little north of Tell el-Maskhuta, is a rather emblematic case study: excavated by F. Petrie in 1886,⁶ the site covered a considerable importance along one of the major routes of contact between Egypt and the Levant. The English archaeologist, engaged in those years to investigate sites in the Delta, at Tell Dafana as at Naukratis was strongly impressed by the large presence of foreign materials, of Greek environment, and influenced by the stories of

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¹ For a brief and recent reference bibliography: Hoffmeier 2013, 163-194; Smoláriková 2013, 101-111. On Tell el-Retaba: Hudec *et al.* 2018. On Tell Hebua: Abdel-Maksoud 1998; 2011, 1-39. On Tell Herr: Valbelle 2011; Valbelle - Nogara - Defernez 2011, 627-628, 634-635, pl. 1-2; 647, pl. 1. On Tell Khedwa: Hussein - Abd el-Aleem 2013.

² On the enclosure walls found in these sites, see in the text.

³ In the north-western Delta, the important site of Buto has significant walls, also dating back to the Late and Ptolemaic periods, the characteristics of which are not yet fully known: Von Der Way 1999, 211-212; Ballet - Marouard 2021, 14-17; Hartung *et al.* 2007, 69-165; Hartung *et al.* 2009, 84-190; Ballet - Mazou 2018, 33-36; Ballet *et al.* 2011, 75-100.

⁴ A.J. Spencer 1979, 70; Brissaud 2010, 614-615; N. Spencer 2009, 520.

⁵ On Mendes: Redford 2004. For an analytical and overall view regarding the sites of the Delta: Leclère 2008. The excursus presented here does not claim to be complete but represents the current stage of a work-in-progress. A data table on enclosure walls, built on a very large database, is found in Mumford 2013, 55-56.

⁶ Petrie 1888.

Herodotus: he interpreted the site of Dafana as a citadel of Greek mercenaries, Daphnae, Saite foundation, of which the Greek historian writes. In Tell Dafana, as in Naukratis, Petrie unearthed a remarkable and massive building called ‘a casemate’ and also read this in a military key.⁷ Similar buildings, within the enclosure wall, have also been found elsewhere, for example in Tell el-Balamun and in Tell el-Maskhuta itself, where É. Naville documented it close to the western wall, in its southern part, just north of the temple.⁸ Recently, the Tell Dafana site was reconsidered, re-excavated and therefore subject to revision.⁹ F. Leclère concludes that, without neglecting the quantity of Greek pottery in its enclosure wall and related buildings, Tell Dafana presents itself as «a classical temple town functioning as a frontier-post».¹⁰ The impressive Tell Dafana enclosure measures approximately 350x600m with a thickness at the base of about 15m. Although, unfortunately, it is not preserved in the elevation, this enclosure could probably be dated to the Saite era, at least in part, but it could be, in the currently known measures, the result of the expansion of a previous structure.¹¹ Leclère observes that, due to its size and the absence of bastions, the enclosure wall of Tell Dafana does not seem comparable to the known Egyptian fortresses, but to the temple walls.¹² Excavations carried out on the site in recent years by the Supreme Council of Antiquities have revealed a long section of the southern part of the eastern wall, 13.40m thick, characterized by projecting buttresses for 60cm (therefore up to 14m of wall thickness). The southern wall was also investigated and found to be 14.5m thick. At the corners adjacent to this, the presence of two towers was detected.¹³

Although little preserved in the elevation, the enclosure wall of Tell Dafana does not seem to have been built with the undulating technique, frequently seen in the temple walls of the Late Period.¹⁴ This aspect coincides with what was clearly observed at Tell el-Maskhuta. There is certain literature on this particular aspect of Egyptian architecture: the great wall was not built in regular parallel rows, but in panels that were separated and later “sewn” together. The course of these panels, made up of convex bricks, has a pattern that gives its masonry the characteristic undulating appearance. R. Pirelli has studied these characteristic walls arguing that the choice doesn’t depend on static reasons, instead she recognizes in them a symbolic and mythological intent: undulating walls built to protect the temple areas would have had the purpose, in addition to separating the sacred space, of evoking the Nun, the primordial ocean on which the temple rises, as a primordial island.¹⁵ Such a feature would obviously be linked, therefore, only to the temple walls. However, it should be noted that this issue is still under debate.¹⁶

⁷ On the area, recently Leclère 2014, 12-22.

⁸ Naville 1885, 9-11. On these ‘casemate’ buildings, see Iacoviello in this volume.

⁹ Leclère 2008, 507-540; 2014.

¹⁰ Leclère 2014, 9.

¹¹ Leclère 2014, 11.

¹² Leclère 2014, 11.

¹³ Abdel-Maksoud *et al.* 2014, 130.

¹⁴ Leclère 2014, 11.

¹⁵ Pirelli 1999, with preceding bibliography; in particular A.J. Spencer 1979, 114-116.

¹⁶ For example, the great wall of El-Kab, attributed to the XXX dynasty, built with the undulating wall technique, has sometimes been considered a city wall: see the recent study by Hendrickx - Huyge - Newton 2010 of an adverse opinion, who believes the great wall of El Kab relative to a huge temple area. Smoláriková still considers it a protective wall: Smoláriková 2013, 109.

The colossal undulating walls are generally attributed to the XXX dynasty, however, it is not clear when the oldest ones date back to, often due to the lack of precise documentation. According to Leclère, the beginning of this style should be attributed at least to the XXVI dynasty.¹⁷

The proceeding of the investigations in the sites of the Delta, such as Tell Dafana, would attest to the presence of temple walls built in parallel courses and with slightly projecting buttresses. This creates a wall characterized by recesses, which evokes the typical niche constructions known in Egypt in more ancient periods.

Another interesting case, for the evaluation of Tell el-Maskhuta, is Tell el-Balamun, where a large enclosure wall was also found, attributable to a temple area. The first enclosure, of smaller dimensions, was dated between the XIX and XX dynasty and enclosed a temple. A later larger enclosure (400 × 400 m) would have been built in the XXVI dynasty and at the southern corner there was a large-scale building probably used for defence. Finally, a further large-scale wall was built by the XXX dynasty.¹⁸

The site of Tell Belim, in the eastern Delta, is of interest due to the presence of a large enclosure wall, more than 200m on each side, divided into two parts, as in the case of Tell el-Maskhuta. The wall would be datable to the XXVI dynasty. The northern part, the greater of the two, is further divided into two parts: the eastern part includes the temple and a 'casemate' building. On the site, the existence of an older wall was also found, probably dating back to the New Kingdom or the III Intermediate Period.¹⁹

In the same eastern Delta, another noteworthy case is that of Tell Tebilla, where traces of a Ramesside temple, an enclosure wall of the XXVI dynasty and one of the XXX dynasty have been found. The case of Tell Tebilla, recently studied, appears of particular interest: G. Mumford underlines how the importance of the city had developed during the Late Period due to its position along the branch of the Delta on which Mendes was located, a little further north of this which was the capital during the XXIX dynasty, and close to the coast, a position that made it an access port to the eastern Delta. The Canadian expedition found abundant traces of a large enclosure wall covering the extension of 235 × 280 × 352 m, with 10.50/11.50m thick walls and equipped with internal and external buttresses;²⁰ it was probably razed to the ground in the Persian era; the few traces of subsequent eras allow us to deduce that the importance of Tell Tebilla had declined, due to a change in environmental conditions, in an area, along the coast, subject to rapid morphological changes.

Tukh el-Qaramus too, also in the eastern Delta, has a large enclosure wall divided into two parts by an intermediate wall: in the southern space, resulting from the division, a further enclosure wall surrounds the temple from the time of Filippo Arrideo. The site has been identified as a fortified town.²¹

Dating back to a more ancient period, Avaris (Tell el-Daba), the Hyksos capital, was equipped with a city wall, that can be considered as a defence system.²²

¹⁷ Leclère 2014, 11.

¹⁸ Spencer - Herbich 2008; A.J. Spencer 2009; 2010; Herbich - Spencer 2009; Herbich 2009.

¹⁹ A.J. Spencer 2002.

²⁰ Mumford 2013, in particular 40-43.

²¹ Naville - Griffith 1890, 53-55, pl. 9. On the site, see also Aufrère - Golvin 1991, 320; Quie 1999; Acquaro - De Salvia - Savio 2006; De Salvia 2017. It is considered as a temple enclosure in A.J. Spencer 1979, 77.

²² Forstner-Müller 2013.

In recent years, the excavations of the earlier Egyptian expedition and then of the Polish-Slovak one, have brought to light the defensive walls at Tell el-Retaba, dating back to between the XIX and XX dynasty.²³

In the Western Delta, not far from Naukratis, Kom Firin also has an enclosure wall from the Ramesside era,²⁴ which surrounds a temple. Kom Firin also has a wall from the Late Period, about four times larger (480 × 390 m), as well as another notable feature: the space inside the large wall is divided in two by a further north-south wall.²⁵

The case of Naukratis has been the subject of extensive investigations, from the excavations of Petrie to recent years; an imposing enclosure wall, within which a ‘casemate’ building was documented by Petrie, who already saw a *temenos* in the walls. Currently, the imposing enclosure wall, of which very little remains on the ground, is considered a temple wall from the Ptolemaic period, but it is assumed that more ancient monuments existed in this site.²⁶

As noted, with regard to Kom Firin and Tell Tebilla, several sites in the Delta have common characteristics in the existence of a large temple wall of the Late Period, even in larger sites, such as Tanis and Mendes.²⁷ G. Mumford also recalls how, according to Diodorus Siculus, the XXX dynasty would have built fortresses at the mouth of the branches of the Delta, before the Persian invasion: in particular, the city located at the mouth of the Mendes branch, would have had a wall and a fortress.²⁸

The case of Tell el-Maskhuta fits well into this picture, in which we can observe further recurring aspects: the presence of a ‘casemate’ building not far from the temple, the addition of a greater enclosure in the Saite era compared to a pre-existing Ramesside temple, further expansions and additions to the walls between the XXX dynasty and the Ptolemaic period. Recurring data can be observed: a diffusion of Ramesside temple structures, which would then be enclosed in larger walls during the Saite era and integrated with further extensions and additions to the walls during the XXX dynasty up to the Ptolemaic period.²⁹

2. THE ENCLOSURE WALL OF TELL EL-MASKHUTA: WHAT IS ITS PURPOSE?

The site of Tell el-Maskhuta, as regards the enclosure wall, which is quite well preserved at least in some parts, offers useful data for the comparative study of cities in the Delta and in particular those not far from the eastern border. Inside a square enclosure, which has been attributed to the Saite era, there was a temple that has returned important Ramesside artifacts and testimonies of the XXX dynasty and the Ptolemaic period. Recent investigations along the western wall have shown that the enclosure wall north (NEW) of the square (SEW) must

²³ Hudec - Stopková - Fulajtár 2015; Hudec *et al.* 2018; Smoláriková 2019. The research, duly published, by the Polish-Slovak expedition, has dated the three defensive walls found in Tell el-Retaba to the XIX and XX dynasty, noting an uncertainty regarding the dating of the third wall (Smoláriková 2019). On Tell el-Retaba, see also Monnier 2010, 89.

²⁴ N. Spencer 2014, 17-18.

²⁵ N. Spencer 2008, 25; 2009.

²⁶ Petrie 1886, 23-34; A.J. Spencer 2011; Villing - Thomas 2015, with preceding bibliography.

²⁷ N. Spencer 2009, 517, note 40; Mumford 2013. The latter also presents a wider range of cases.

²⁸ Diodorus Siculus XV 5. Mumford 2013, 63, fn. 45-46.

²⁹ On the role of the XXX dynasty, see also Mumford 2013.

be a later extension that could be dated most probably to the Ptolemaic era or maybe to the XXX dynasty.

The debate about the existence, or lack thereof, of a Ramesside temple in Tell el-Maskhuta is not intended to be extensively addressed here: most of the recent bibliography follows Holladay,³⁰ who believes that the Ramesside monuments, found at Tell el-Maskhuta, were transported here from Tell el-Retaba. It follows the hypothesis that, somehow, Tell el-Maskhuta “assumed the role” of Tell el-Retaba in the Late Period, also supported by the fact that, as Holladay writes, he found no trace of New Kingdom pottery at Tell el-Maskhuta. However, K.A. Kitchen contests such an assertion.³¹ The hypothesis of an exchange of roles between Tell el-Retaba and Tell el-Maskhuta remains to be verified. On the other hand, in fairly recent years, excavations by the Supreme Council of Antiquities have identified at Tell el-Maskhuta, in the area north of the Ismailia Canal, the tomb of a scribe from the Ramesside period, while at Tell el-Retaba remains are emerging of the Late Period.³² It should be borne in mind that the Tell el-Maskhuta site, which in its residual part is rather large, has not been excavated in its entirety and that there is no precise documentation of parts excavated in the past.

In the so-called Pithom Stele, a Ptolemaic decree from the time of Ptolemy II, found in Tell el-Maskhuta, the text tells of a journey of the royal couple, composed of Ptolemy II and his sister wife Arsinoe II, to the eastern border of Egypt, of their visit to Tjeku (Tell el-Maskhuta) and their commitment to the area.

On line 16 of the decree, we read: «Year 16 of His Majesty, first month of Peret. According to the wish of his father Atum, the great living god of Tjeku, he dug a canal to lead the gods of Khenet-Iabet. Such canal starts from the river north of Heliopolis and ends at the Scorpion Lake. Then he built a great wall, which is located in the middle of its eastern desert; with its admirable length (?), this impassable wall could repel the enemies - disaster of the gods - when they enter Egypt». ³³ It should be noted that, in this important excerpt step, the excavation of the navigable canal - which should be the readjustment of the previously existing one called Canal of the Pharaohs - is connected to the construction of a large defensive wall.³⁴ The term used would be *sbtj*, being an *s* before the characteristic sign indicating the wall.³⁵ Although it is possible that the extension to the north of the great wall known at Tell el-Maskhuta is attributable to the works of the time of Ptolemy II in the city, the description of the great wall reported in the text of the decree clearly refers to a defensive structure. It seems likely that the city of Tjeku and its surroundings, much larger than the area currently investigated by the CNR mission, was equipped with many other structures, also meant for defence purposes and for controlling the navigable canal.

³⁰ In summary terms, see Holladay 2001. For a summary of the problem and a wider bibliography: Leclère 2008, 546-549.

³¹ Kitchen 2006, 257-259.

³² Hudec *et al.* 2018, 32, fn. 61; Rzepka *et al.* 2017.

³³ From the translation of C. Thiers: Thiers 2007, 52.

³⁴ For the commentary on the text of the stele, see Thiers 2007, 52-55, 107-117.

³⁵ Gardiner O36. For others, it would be ‘jnb’: on this discussion, see Thiers 2007, 54 (111). On the meaning of ‘sbtj’ in comparison with ‘jnb’; see Traunecker 1975; Thiers 1995, 500; Lombardi 2011-13. On ‘jnb’, see also Monnier 2012.

In conclusion, the great enclosure wall of Tell el-Maskhuta offers important data thanks to its good state of conservation, unlike the others in the Delta. Thanks also to the comparison with other sites of the Delta, it seems possible that this enclosure is a temple wall that wasn't built with the technical characteristic of the undulating wall, but with buttresses that create a pattern of projection and recess.³⁶ It is possible that it could also have a defensive function, however, according to current knowledge, it does not have the typical characteristics of a military building, at least in the sections excavated to date. Nevertheless, it is likely that a building more specifically intended for this use was present on the site. Reflections on enclosure walls in recent years provide interesting guidelines: on the one hand, a massive enclosure wall should not necessarily be understood, in Egypt, as a sign of a fear of the outside world and of a possible planned aggression, on the other hand, precisely in the first millennium, when the stability of the country was severely tested by a dangerous international situation and by invasions, it seems that enclosure walls were increasing in number and size. The last indigenous dynasties, both the XXVI and the XXX, are known for having their eyes fixed on a prestigious tradition and therefore, probably, in these periods, the symbolic value of these colossal enclosure walls must be taken into account, without neglecting the possible practical function. To understand the problem, the study of Ch. Thiers is interesting, as it analyses a series of documents on the infiltration of profane structures and roles within the temple walls, specifically of armed groups, and especially in the Late and Greco-Roman periods, when temple walls were used for defence purposes.³⁷

The enclosure walls observed in the Delta, such as Tell el-Maskhuta, are enormously larger than full-fledged temple areas and must have accommodated a considerable number of buildings; the subdivision found in two or three sectors is also striking, as in the case of Tell el-Maskhuta. Here, when the extension to the north was built (NEW), the east-west wall (SEW-N) that divides the area into two parts was nevertheless maintained. If the walls excavated so far in Tell el-Maskhuta do not look like those of a fortress, it can therefore be assumed that a real fortress, probably existing in a strategic border area, has not yet been found. However, this large wall had to make Egypt, its power and its gods clearly visible, in a border area heavily traversed by foreigners for trade and not just for military reasons. It could also create a protective barrier, if not against armies, at least against raids that must have existed on the edge of the country and in turbulent times. An extensive and in-depth investigation of the great northern wall (BNW) could give answers about the existence of a truly defensive wall, given the size of the northern wall, its diversity compared to the rest of the enclosure wall and a sort of buffer zone - apparently empty of structures - adjacent to it.

³⁶ Interesting, in this regard, the reflection of K. Spence who observes how 'In Egyptian temple (and occasionally tomb) architecture, buttressed and niched walls, sinusoidal and wavy walls and pylon entrances are all features which served as markers of the differentiated nature of the space within' (Spence 2004, 266).

³⁷ Thiers 1995, 507-508.

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