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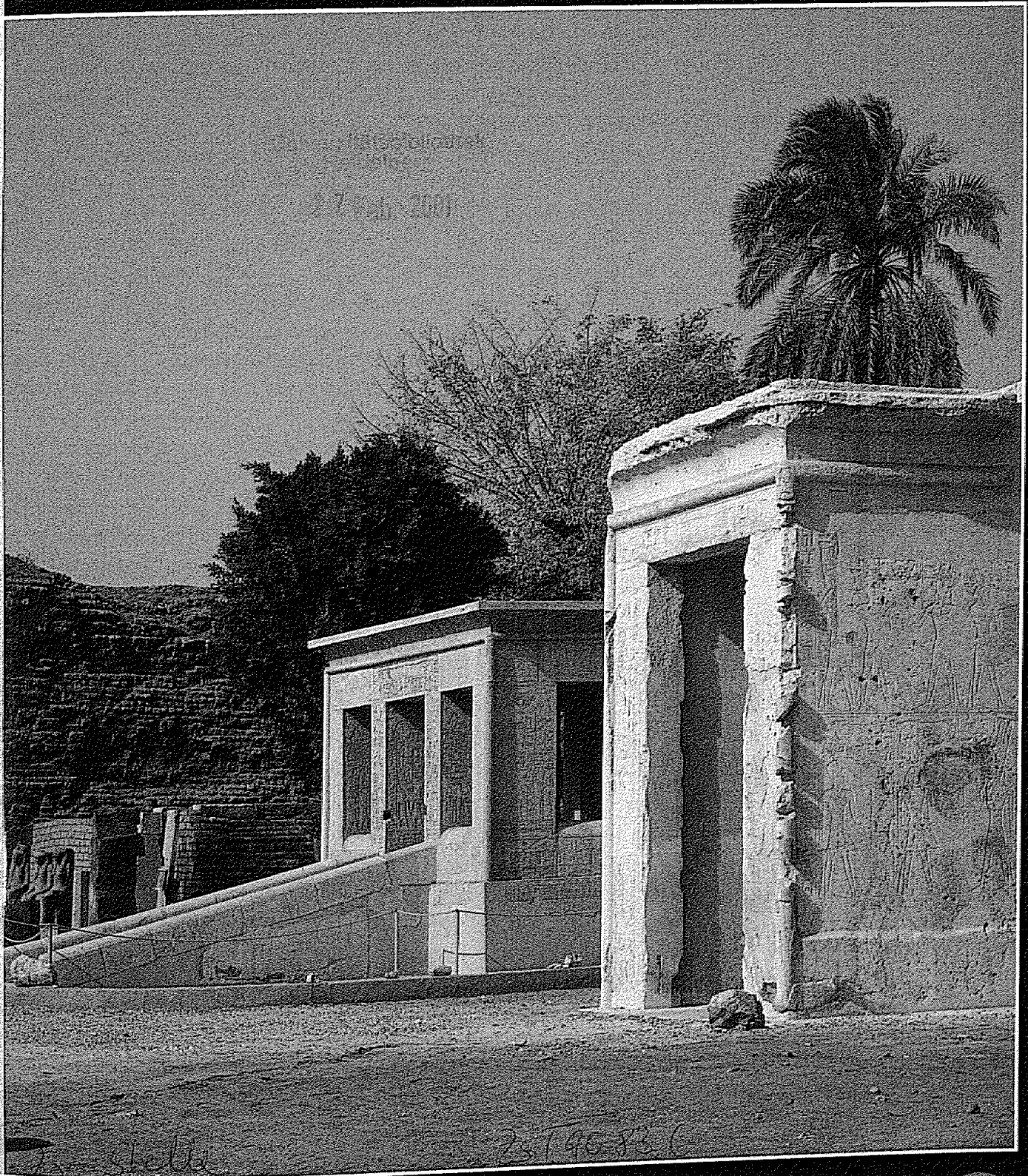


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EGYPTIAN ARCHAEOLOGY

THE BULLETIN OF THE EGYPT EXPLORATION SOCIETY





Canaanites at Buto in the early fourth millennium BC

In 1983 the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo (DAI) started a project in the north-west Delta at Tell el-Fara'in, ancient Buto, 90km east of Alexandria and about 30km from the Mediterranean coast. The excavations were directed from 1983-89 by Thomas von der Way and in 1993 were resumed by **Dina Faltings**, who reports on the latest results.

In the 1980s the Delta was still largely a blank spot on the archaeological map; its prehistory in particular was the subject of much speculation, since most remains from this remote period had been covered by metres of Nile sediments.

The original aim of the project was to find out more about the 'unification of the two lands' and Tell el-Fara'in, the site of ancient Buto, was chosen for excavation because of the role the town played in early Egyptian history. Some early- and proto-dynastic monuments suggest that in late prehistory Buto was a capital of kings of Lower Egypt, with administrative buildings, royal palaces and tombs. The town of Buto seems to have witnessed a warlike conflict that was settled there and ended with the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Although, because of the build-up of river sediments, Buto is now about 30km from the coast, in the fourth

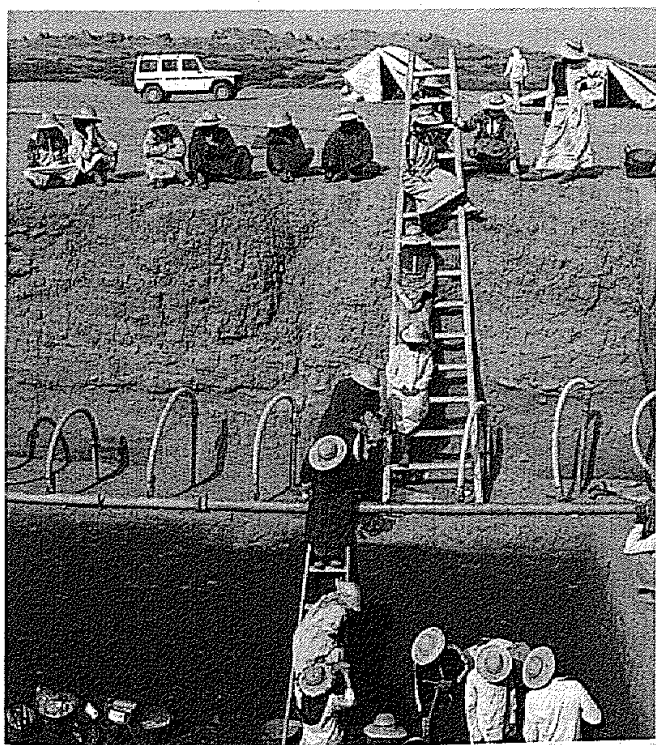


The earliest three phases of occupation. From the bottom of the section to the top of the upper posthole the deposits belong to prehistoric phases I and II. Above the upper posthole is Buto's transitional period IIIa, reaching up to the lowest course of the phase IIIb mud brick wall

millennium BC and first half of the third millennium the town was a seaport where the Rosetta branch of the Nile flowed into the Mediterranean. Buto, therefore, was in a good position to maintain contacts by sea with foreign countries and by the river Nile with Upper Egypt.

A major problem shared by many excavators in the Delta, which has prevented the region from being explored as thoroughly as the Nile valley, is the high level of subsoil water. At Buto this obstacle was overcome by the use of large vacuum pumps, which allowed the expedition to excavate 3m below ground-water level, down to the virgin soil. By doing this a stratigraphy of seven levels was established, extending without break from early prehistory to the early Old Kingdom and, after a long hiatus, to the Late Period.

The lowest two layers, Buto phases I and II, belong to prehistory. The absolute chronology still has to be established by radiocarbon dating, but on the basis of parallels with pottery from elsewhere, especially in the Palestinian region, the Buto I phase can be placed in the first half of the fourth millennium BC, contemporaneous with the Badarian and early Naqada I cultures of Upper Egypt. The Buto II phase ends within the Naqada II period. Influences from Upper Egypt then increased and resulted in changes in all kinds of cultural features, introducing higher technological standards in architecture and pottery. In the lower



The dark soil indicates the level of ground water, which is extracted from the ground by means of a pump and about 40 well points connected to each other by a ring tube. The vacuum must never be interrupted for more than 10 minutes when pumping is in progress

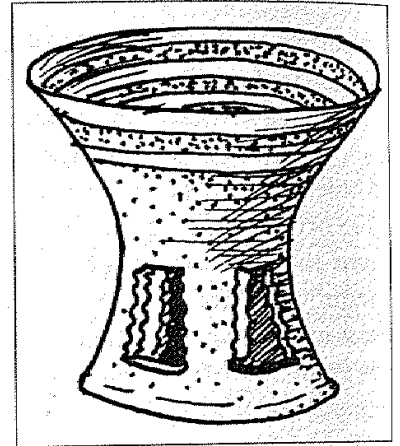


Sherds from bowls with pie-crust rim - a typical feature of the Beersheba-Ghassulian culture

(earliest) layers, for example, huts and other buildings were constructed with wattle and daub walls, as indicated by large postholes which still remain, while from the level of the Buto IIIa period onwards the inhabitants built in mud brick. The early postholes were made using a particular technique: a layer of very clean fine grey clay was pounded into a roughly conical hole in the ground and another layer made of crushed potsherds and burnt mud was similarly pounded so that the material became heavily compacted. Sometimes the sequence of clay and burnt mud is reversed or

repeated. This may have been to prevent the (probably made of reed bundles) from rotting by getting wet from below. The clay on the outside of the surfaces of the reeds, and the crushed pottery served as an additional air channel to keep the posts dry.

In the earliest levels - phase Buto Ia - a clear division in the cultural output was found. There was, on the one hand, the local handmade pottery, consisting of quite thick-walled pots made of Nile clay mixed with organic matter such as chaff and dung and covered by a red, brown, grey or black slip. The surface was usually burnished carefully to seal the pores. On the other hand, there were vessels made of very fine clay mixed with inorganic matter (such as sand). These vessels are thin-walled, unslipped and unburnished, but decorated either with painted white bands or with plastic decoration such



Reconstruction of a fenestrated bowl-stand

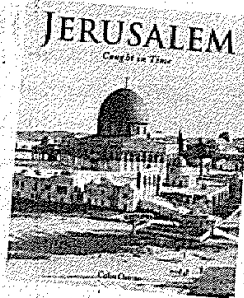
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Colin Osman is editor of *The PhotoHistorian* journal.

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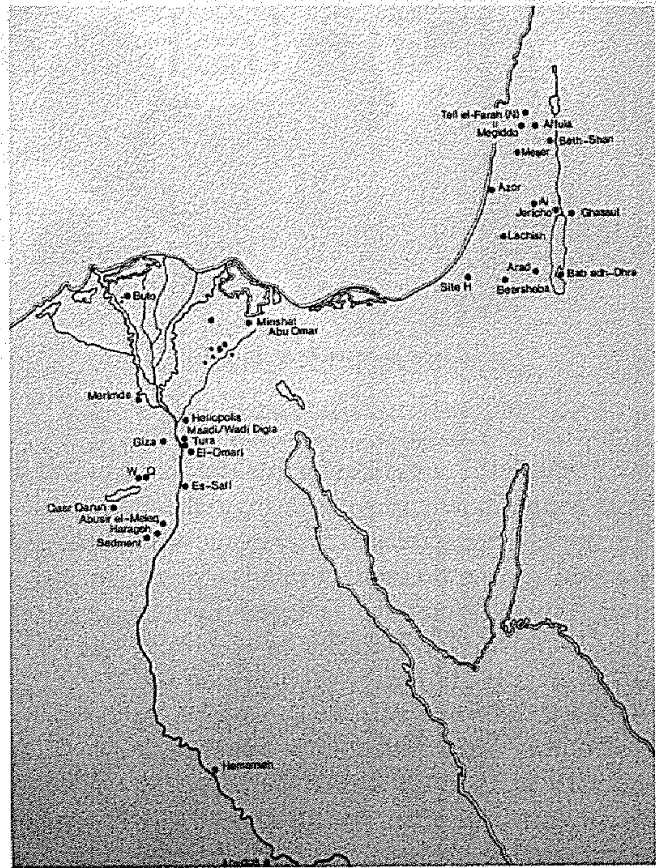
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as indented rims (called pie-crust-rims), knobs or ledges. This pottery - characterised by shapes such as fenestrated bowl-stands and churns - was produced on a turning device, i.e. a device without a fixed centre. The evidence for this is shown by turning-grooves and/or spirals on the inside and imprints of the device itself on the exterior base. The vessels were, in effect, thrown, the speed of rotation achieved being sufficient to shape the whole vessel. This type of pottery represents about one third of the whole prehistoric assemblage. It looks strange in an Egyptian context and its decoration is in sharp contrast to the plain pottery of the Delta, which continues the Neolithic tradition. The horizontal white stripes are painted on the inside of open vessels and on the outside of closed forms. On both of them the decoration usually covers only the upper portion.

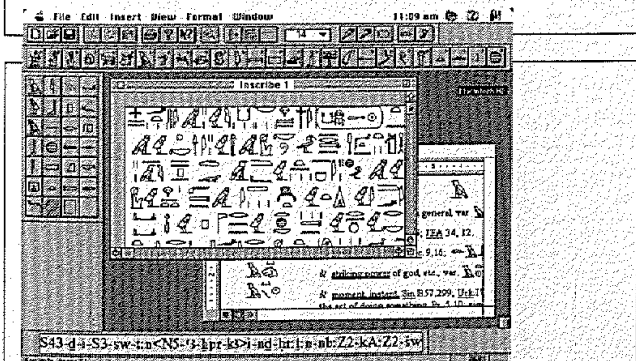
In the later phase, Buto Ib, this kind of pottery gradually decreases as a percentage of the whole and by the beginning of phase Buto II (roughly parallel with Naqada IIb) it has practically disappeared, making way for a very conspicuous new decoration called rocker-stamp design. This pottery is the marker for phase II at Buto and has been found in several other places in the Delta, whereas the 'foreign' material from phase I is still unique in this region.

One does not have to go far to find parallels for our ceramics, as there are many places with this kind of pottery in Palestine. In particular Nahal Mishmar, near



Buto in the early fourth millennium BC had connections with Beersheba in Canaan and possibly even with Ghassul, north-east of the Dead Sea. In Ghassul an Australian mission has found imported goods from Egypt, such as large shells (Aspatharia rubens), typical of the Nile valley

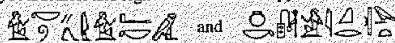
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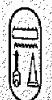
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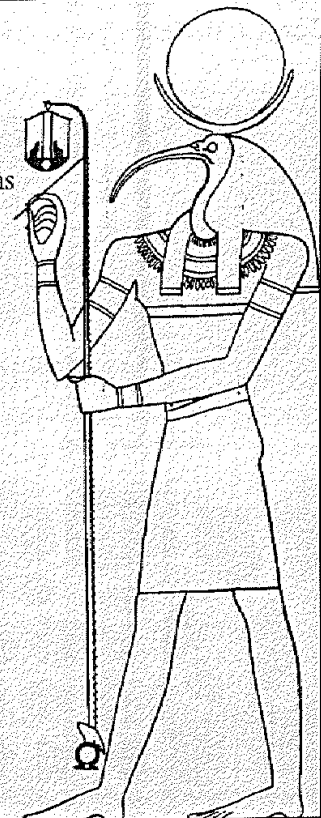
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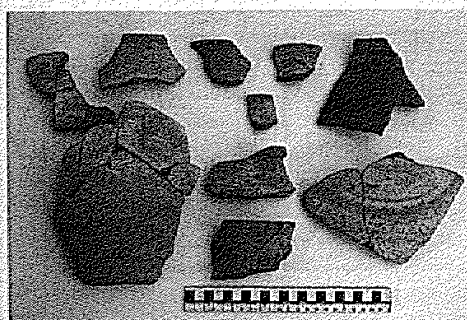


Typical Delta pottery showing signs of being produced by hand

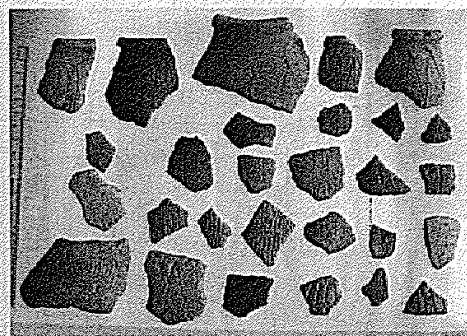
the Dead Sea, a cave famous for the discovery of a large copper hoard, provides many remarkable parallels. Just as at Buto, the clay is tempered with inorganic material, giving the sherds a rough surface. The horizontal painted bands can be found on the exterior of closed forms and the interior of open ones. The plastic decoration and variety of shapes are also the same.

Nahal Mishmar belongs to the Palestinian chalcolithic Ghassulian culture, which spread as far as southern Sinai. Its Canaanite manifestation, known as Beersheba-Ghassulian, has slightly different assemblages and is the cultural phase which shows the most parallels with our material from Buto I. All these indications show that there were strong bonds between the peoples of Buto I and the Beersheba-Ghassulian cultures. But of what kind were they?

The 'foreign' type of pottery found at Buto is, with few exceptions, made from local clay. The use of a turning device to shape the whole vessel is unknown in Egypt at this early period, though the use of a turning device to shape the rim and neck is



White decoration on the upper outside of closed vessels from Buto



Rocker-stamp decoration - a marker for phase II

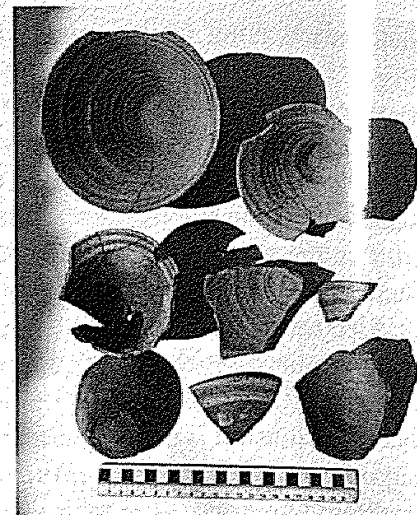
securely documented in Naqada II (and perhaps earlier) but the body of the vessel is in all cases handmade, usually by coiling. The use of the local clay shows that the pottery was not imported but must have been made by immigrants from Canaan

who settled down at the mouth of the Nile and lived side by side with the local Egyptians.

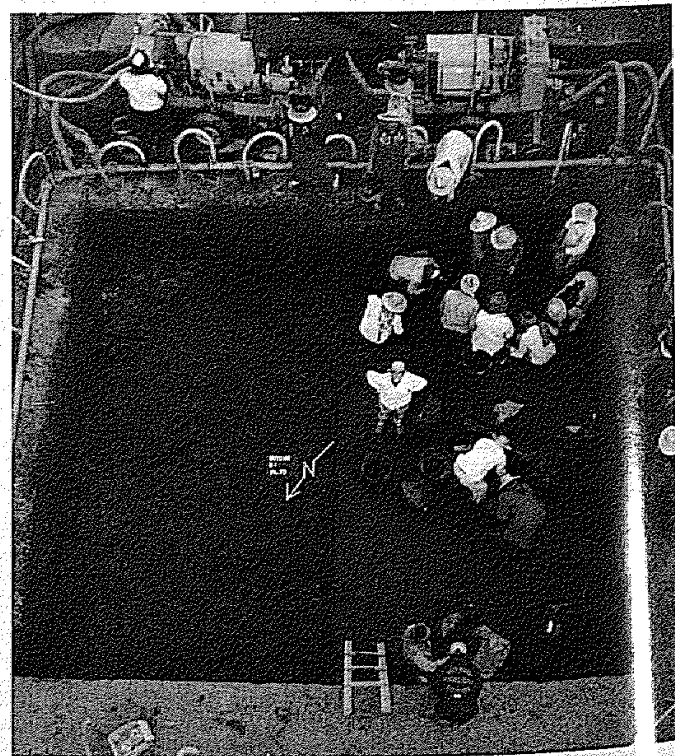
The use of a turning device - in itself an indicator of mass production - points to a higher degree of social development than would be expected in Lower Egypt at this time, with special-

ised artisans or at least skilled potters working seasonally on pottery making. This includes selling products (at least on a local, or slightly broader, scale). The immigrants brought their technology and their social structure with them, but why did they then give up their advantage? The settlement may possibly have been too small to maintain specialists, with the result that the newcomers adopted local technology and, in time, forgot their native skills.

By the time the Upper Egyptians came to Buto the use of a turning device for shaping whole pottery vessels was knowledge long-lost. It took some hundreds of years to regain it.



So-called v-shaped bowls thrown on a turning device



Aerial view of the excavation at Buto

□ Dina Faltings directed the excavation at Buto for the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo from 1993-1998. She is preparing the final report on the work for which she has been responsible. Photos: writer and DAI Cairo.