

Fortress-Towns of the Eastern Delta and Wadi Tumilat



Egypt's Eastern Delta frontier, including the Wadi Tumilat, was vulnerable to attack from unfriendly powers in the Near East. It is not surprising that a set of fortified settlements was developed during different periods of Egyptian history to guard against incursion or invasion.

Tukh el-Qaramus

One of the largest (over 30 hectares, or 74 acres) in area, **Tukh el-Qaramus** is certainly one of the least-explored town-mounds in the Nile Delta. Ancient names for the site probably included Bekhnu and Dekyt, both of which are mentioned on a stela of Shoshenq III found there. Evidence for occupation before the Third Intermediate Period is limited, but this is probably a result of its archaeological under-exploration since it is unlikely that such a substantial *gezira* in the Eastern Delta would not have had a long history of settlement.

Tukh el-Qaramus was principally excavated in a period of just over a decade by Édouard Naville and Francis Ll. Griffith (1887), Georges Foucart (1892) and Campbell Edgar (1906), but the site was surveyed by Steven Snape in 1984. Although the site has largely been denuded of its stone buildings, the mudbrick platform on which its temple stood still remains, as do sections of the massive mudbrick walls that provided the outer fortifications for this fortress-town, and the internal zoning within the town. It is likely that Tukh el-Qaramus served as one of Egypt's eastern military bases during the Third Intermediate and Late Periods (the term *bhn*, bekhen, refers to a fortification), but was abandoned at some point during the Graeco-Roman Period.



The major *tell* of Tukh el-Qaramus is typical of large settlement sites in the Nile Delta in having a surface largely formed by weather-worn hills of large mudbrick structures. Steven Snape.

Shagamba

Shagamba (also known as Tell Miniet el-Habib) is a site that was probably similar in character to Tukh el-Qaramus, if somewhat smaller. It is located in the Eastern Delta on the route from the Wadi Tumilat to Memphis. It was visited by Petrie's team in 1906 at which time the walls of a fortress, identified as being of the Late Period, were relatively well preserved. By the 1980s most of these mudbrick walls had been removed, leaving just one fragment, a dark grey mound of degraded mudbrick over 10 m (33 ft) in height, protected by a modern cemetery sitting on top of it.

Tell Dafana

The *tell* of **Tell Dafana** (ancient Tjebnet, Classical Daphnae) is a substantial mound, 1,200 by 700 m (3,937 by 2,297 ft) in area. Largely on the basis of comments by Herodotus, Petrie (who worked at Tell Dafana in 1885–86) suggested that it was primarily a fortress-town founded by Psammetichus I for Greek mercenaries to defend Egypt's eastern borders at a time of pressure from the Assyrians. More recent work at the site by Jeffrey Spencer and François Leclère for the British Museum has indicated that the site had a primarily Egyptian character, including a large temple enclosure, suggesting that its occupation by non-Egyptians was relatively transitory. However, occupation of Tell Dafana after the 26th Dynasty is not well attested, making it likely that the site was primarily a military outpost whose use was perhaps eclipsed by the development of Pelusium.

Tell el-Maskhuta



Despite the importance of Tell el-Maskhuta as a strategically placed fortress-town, its surface remains today are relatively limited, apart from visible sections of its external walls. Rutherford Picture Library.

The site of **Tell el-Maskhuta** is probably the location of the Biblical Pithom, a name deriving from one of the site's names – Per-Tem-Tjeku, 'The House of Atum in Tjeku'. Herodotus refers to the site as 'Patoumos'. The site was first explored by Édouard Naville in 1883, who identified the massive enclosure (210 by 210 m, 689 by 689 ft) on a town-mound of 1,100 by 600 m (3,609 by 1,969 ft). Between 1977 and 1985, Tell el-Maskhuta was excavated by John Holladay for the University of Toronto, which resulted in the location of the site's earliest occupation phase, a small and short-lived Hyksos settlement and cemetery.

Excavations at the site have produced a series of monuments dating to the late New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period, although it has been argued that these were imported during the Late Period from abandoned or diminished sites of the Eastern Delta. During the 26th Dynasty, a much more substantial phase of activity was initiated by Necho II's construction of a canal along the Wadi Tumilat, thus linking the Pelusiac Branch to the Red Sea; at this point Tell el-Maskhuta became an important trading and military centre.

The site became especially fortress-like with the construction of an enclosure wall, which was 8–9 m (26–29½ ft) thick. The strategic importance of Tell el-Maskhuta against invasion from the east – a major concern in the Late Period – is attested by destruction layers associated with the Babylonian and Persian incursions of 601, 568 and 525 BC. Major revivals in levels of occupation and mercantile activity at Tell el-Maskhuta were associated with renewals of the canal under Ptolemy II (when it was known as Heroonpolis) and Trajan (when it was called Ero).



The extensive development of the infrastructure of modern Egypt in the 20th and 21st centuries constitutes another threat to the survival of archaeological sites, and increases the necessity of urgent rescue excavation, as can be seen clearly here in the road running through Tell el-Retaba. Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw.

Tell el-Retaba

Briefly explored by Flinders Petrie in 1905, **Tell el-Retaba** has since 2007 been excavated by a Polish–Slovak archaeological mission led by Sławomir Rzepka and Jozef Hudec. Their work to date indicates that the site appears to have been founded in the 18th Dynasty, if not earlier, and expanded during the reigns of Ramesses II and III. In this New Kingdom phase of occupation, Tell el-Retaba was surrounded by an enclosure wall to form a quadrilateral fortress over 400 by 200 m (1,312 by 656 ft) in area, with a massive gateway on its western side. A significant military character to the material excavated within the walls of Tell el-Retaba suggests that it functioned much as Tell el-Maskhuta did in the Late Period, i.e. it was a major fortified town guarding access into the Nile Delta through the Wadi Tumilat.

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