



GREPAL

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TELL EL-GINN

Project (Eastern Delta)

(Egypt 2004)



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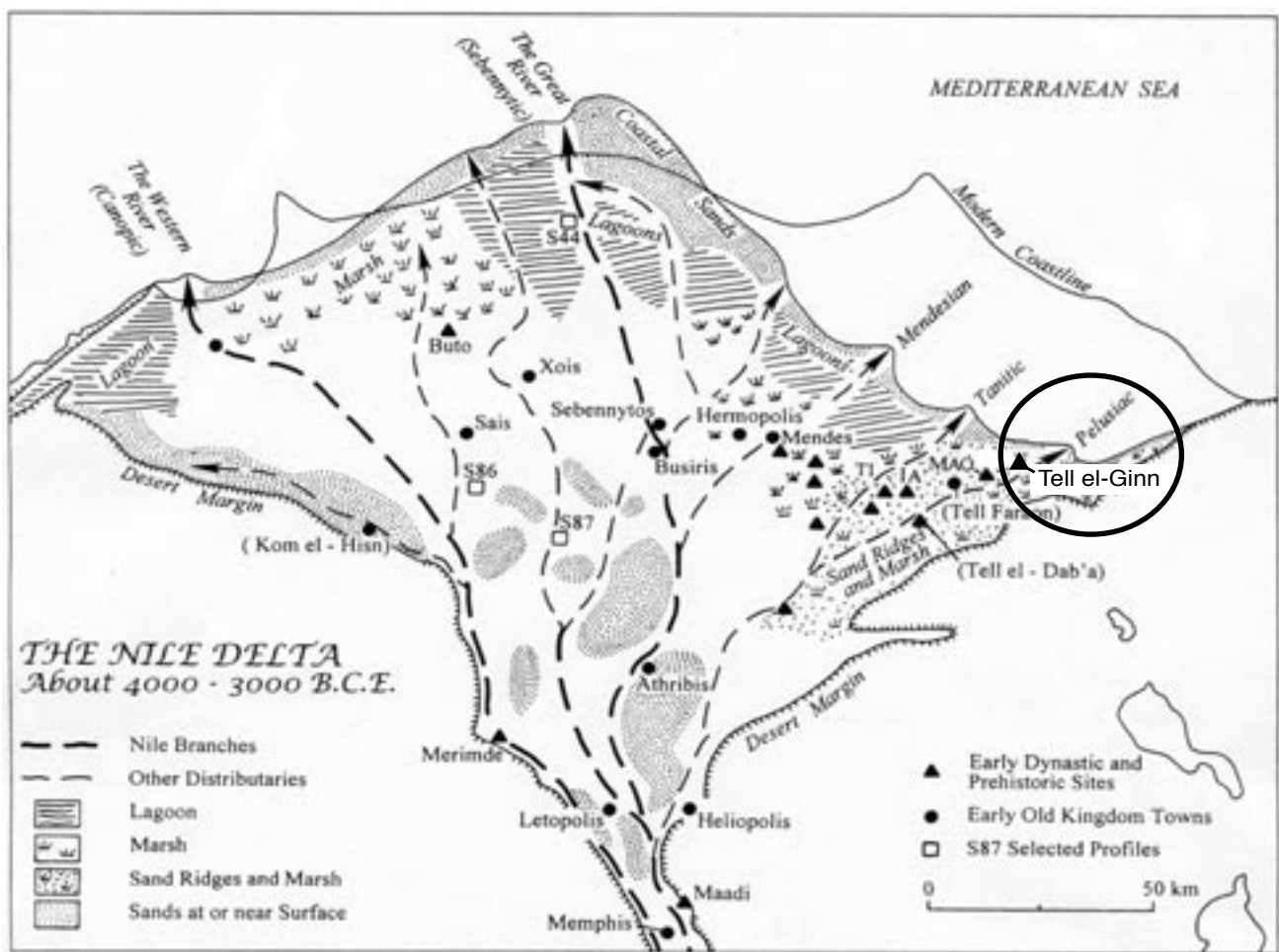
Luc Watrin

TELL EL-GINN

Tell el-Ginn, meaning “Djinn’s Hill”, is located in Lower-Egypt in the north-eastern Delta around 150 km from Cairo¹. In the 4th millennium this site was situated along a tributary of the Nile and on the banks of the Mediterranean Sea (the present-day coastline is 50 km to the north).

It was professor Lech Krzyzaniak, director of the Polish School of Egyptian Prehistory, who brought the site to our attention during the Poznan Symposium on Prehistory (Poland, 2000). Professor Krzyzaniak suggested that Tell el-Ginn was very promising², having visited the site in 1981 while excavating the neighbouring site of Tell es-Sabaa Banât. Tell el-Ginn is indeed located around two kilometers to the north-east of Tell es-Sabaa Banât (close to the Minshat Abou Omar village), and risks being destroyed due to the extension of dwellings and agriculture in this area³.

Fig. 1. Localization of Tell el-Ginn site (Eastern Delta).



¹ I thank all those who collaborated on this article (Nick Collins, Gransard-Desmond J.-O, Vaudou E, Eulert P. H. Brihaye P. and Blin O., Ould Makhoulouf N.).

² L. Krzyzaniak, pers. com., Poznan, 2000. Two members of the GREPAL (N. Collins and L. Watrin) participated in the Poznan Symposium in Poland in August 2001.

³ During our survey in the region in 2001 we saw tractors trying to flatten the hillocks of Tell el-Sabaa Banât in order to have additional fields for crops.



Fig. 2. General view of the Tell el-Ginn *Gezira*, 2001.

Archaeological work was performed by German excavators between 1977 and 1984⁴. Recent graves (Greco-Roman) and ruins of a contemporary dwelling capped the upper layers of the site. The excavations then led to evidence of a cemetery linked to the Upper-Egyptian civilization of Naqada, whose earliest graves date to Naqada IId (around 3400 BC) and whose most recent graves date to the beginning of the first Egyptian dynasties. These discoveries were considered sensational at the time, as it was the first time that Naqadan graves from that early period were discovered in Lower Egypt.

The GREPAL visit at Tell el-Ginn in 2001.

Like innumerable sites of the eastern Delta, Tell el-Ginn's outer appearance is that of a great sandy hillock in the midst of cultivated fields. The area's farmers call this geological formation "*Gezira*" ("Island"), and English-speakers call it "*Turtleback*". This hillock is around 5 meters higher than the surrounding fields, and is around 900m long by 600m wide, and looks basically like a sand dune running from east to west.

The only known archaeological activity at Tell el-Ginn is limited to a few surveys undertaken by professor Labib Habachi in 1952, which revealed graves dating to the end of the 4th millennium. The archaeological material, while not published, is preserved at the Ismailia Museum. This small museum, that we have also visited, preserves several pre- and protodynastic objects from old excavations in the region. We recognized pottery from El-Beida⁵ and others from Tell el-Ginn⁶. The material excavated at Tell el-Ginn is made up of pottery, stone vases, and a fish-shaped schist palette. This material is characteristic of the Naqada IId2-IIIc1 period (around 3400-3000 BC).

⁴ K. Kroeper and D. Wildung, *Minshat Abu Omar I und II, Ein vor- und frügeschichtlicher Friedhof im NilDelta*, Mainz, 1994-2000.

⁵ At Al-Beida was found the famous jar discovered in 1913 by Clédat bearing the *serekh* of King "Double Falcon" (Ismailia n°1928).

⁶ Origin confirmed by Professor Labib Habachi (K. Kroeper, "The Excavations of the Munich East-Delta Expedition in Minshat Abou Omar", in *The Archaeology of the Nile Delta, Problems and Priorities*, Amsterdam, 1988, p. 19).

In 2001, some members of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) authorized the GREPAL to visit Tell-el-Ginn and the surrounding area. The expedition was composed of two members of the SCA from Cairo, including Mr. Mohammed Youssef, Mr. Ismail Abdel Razik Abdelmaty (SCA inspector at Faqous) and a GREPAL member Mr. Luc Watrin.

We met the local authorities of Tell el-Ginn, the mayor Mr. Salem Bakr Mohammed and his deputy Mr. ‘Ali Atiya. They explained to us that the hillock used to be twice as high (originally around 10 m in elevation) but that the upper levels had been eroded by generations of farmers, who used it as a quarry for *sebakh* and sand for construction. They also told us that this mechanical delving had unearthed ceramics as well as fragments of faïence amulets (Roman ?). They also mentioned that there has been no archaeological intervention on the site in the last 50 years.

Our surface survey on the *Gezira* revealed Copt, Greek, and Roman ceramics. Such material can be found on the entirety of the site’s surface. This survey also yielded skeletal remains of animals and a high level of crude ceramics, as well as stone architectural elements indicating an “urban” occupation of the site over several periods.

The stone elements include column bases and shafts in pink granite, the remains of a historical period temple. Some of the alignments could indicate that this temple, reduced now to near-oblivion, was built on the eastern edge of the hillock. Other blocks, particularly column fragments, are no longer in their original place and lay near to the temple. Traces of cutting at the center of several column segments point to their transformation into



Fig. 3. On the *Gezira* : remnants of temple column turned into grain millstones.



Fig. 4. Out of the *Gezira* : two layers showing remnants of settlements.

grain millstones after the abandonment of the structure⁷. These granite blocks, without markings or decoration, cannot currently be dated precisely. With the exception of small fragments of limestone emerging at places from the ground, no large limestone block appears to have been preserved on the site's surface. In line with a longstanding Delta tradition, they were probably the targets of lime-kiln burners. We know through the history of the eastern Delta sites (particularly clearly observable at San El-Haggar/Tanis) that during the Roman period kiln-firers found it easier just to use the limestone blocks from temples rather than carving them out of quarries⁸.

The visit at Tell-el Ginn also extended eastward to the *Gezira*. An irrigation drain revealed a section of the ground in the loess allowed us to identify two succeeding antique ground levels. They are made up of stone-cutting refuse, unfortunately without any datable archaeological finds. These remains testify to the extension of the ancient village occupation beyond the *Gezira* at an undefined period.

The Tell el-Ginn regional environment: the Eastern Connection.

The site of Tell el-Ginn has an unfathomed scientific potential, as it is located in the north-east of the Delta, along a former tributary of the Nile and near the former coastline.

The earliest layers of the Delta sites date to the beginning of the 4th millennium, revealing a frequentation of this region by Levantine populations. These populations can be traced on the site of Buto I through their material culture. The archaeological artifacts from Buto I include several pottery groups, both typologically and technologically linked to Palestinian productions. The petrographical analysis demonstrates that they were locally made in Nile clay. Apparently, these groups cohabitated in the villages among Egyptian populations of Nilotic tradition. These facts perhaps would indicate that a segment of a Palestinian chiefdom migrated toward the Delta at the end of the Palestinian Chalcolithic period (around 3900 BC). These culturally Palestinian elements were settled in a less technologically advanced area, devoid of the potter's wheel and metallurgy.

A second migratory wave from the South Levant seems to have reached the south of the Delta after the fall of the Palestinian chiefdoms. Ma'adi has produced elements of material culture linked to Levantine population groups dating to the beginning of the Early Bronze Age I (EB Ia1), around 3700 – 3600 BC. The most spectacular fact is clearly the local adoption of Palestinian architectural models. At least one semi-subterranean structure made of stone slabs, of a sub-rectangular shape (probably a warehouse), adopt the traditional shape of dwellings from the beginning of the Palestinian Early Bronze Age I⁹. Another characteristic of the Ma'adian civilization is the practice of copper metallurgy, the oldest such practice in the Nile valley. Lastly, we note the spectacular development of animal burials associated with funerary offerings. At Heliopolis, as demonstrated by the Debono's excavations it appears that animals (goats and dogs) were buried in a special area of the cemetery.

⁷ The re-use of Egyptian temple granite elements in order to transform them in grindstones is a current practice in Egypt and is often mentioned by traveller logs. Nearly 3000 years ago, in 1737, the famous geographer Richard Pococke remarks this phenomenon of devastation at Behbeit el Haggar : “the Turks destroy precious monuments every day, and use columns to make millstones” (quoted by E. Naville, *Behbeit el-Hagher*, Paris, 1930, 44).

⁸ The quest for primary resources that made up the structural supports of temples (walls, etc.) led to the destruction of many buildings, which now feature only granite parts (slabs, door frames, columns, obelisks, etc.). One of the rare Delta temples escaping this horrible process is that of Behbeit el-Haggar in the western Delta because it was built entirely in gray granite (E. Naville, *Behbeit el-Hagher*, Paris, 1930,).

⁹ These elements have been detailed in several of our scientific communications, including: “Copper Drops and Buried Buildings: Ma'adi's Legacy as a Predynastic Delta Trade Capital”, *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie d'Égypte* 73, Cairo, 2000, p. 163-184.

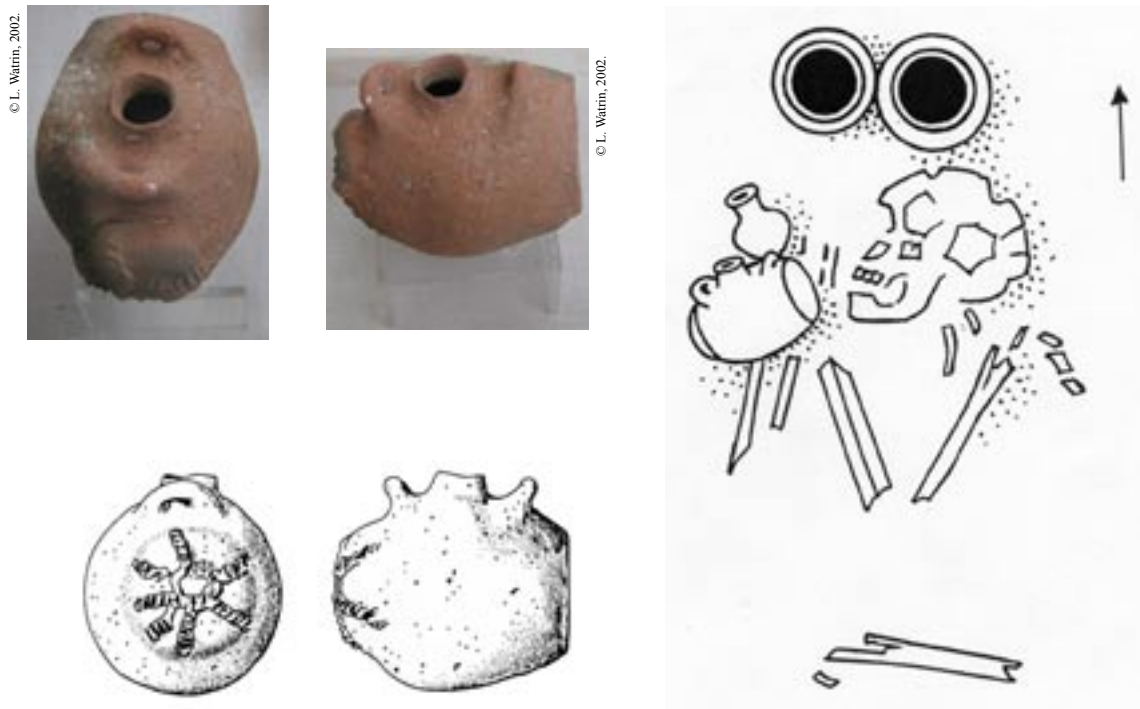


Fig. 5. Minshat Abou Omar I, grave 787 (located at 2km to the south-west of Tell el-Ginn) showing a small imported Palestinian churn from the Middle EB I (c. 3400 BC)

Our knowledge of the Delta cultures after the fall of Ma'adi and before the expansion of Naqadan culture into Lower-Egypt¹⁰ remains limited. On the other hand, the following phase is well represented by Tell el-Ginn's neighbouring site, that of Minshat Abou Omar. The culturally Naqadan identity of Minshat is underlined by funerary deposits, and it seems to have been settled by populations from Upper-Egypt. The earliest tombs (Minshat Ia) sometimes feature weapons (*rippleflake* knives, pear-shaped maceheads) which might point to settlement by force. If these hypotheses are correct, we can consider Minshat as a kind of Upper-Egyptian outpost/colony settled in the eastern Delta on the trade routes leading to Palestine. Its establishment corresponds to an expansion phase of Upper-Egyptian civilization into the Delta beginning in Naqada IId (around 3300 BC). The trade relationship with the East are well attested by imported jars deposited in graves. Some Palestinian jars are also re-used in funerary context for containing immature dead. The matter of the origin of these populations is complicated since they are of Naqadan culture, but adopt unerringly (Minshat I-II) a funerary orientation different from that of Upper-Egypt (deceased positioned on the left side, facing west). In the earliest tombs of Minshat (Minshat I-II) the deceased is lain with the right-hand side faced earthward, with the head to the north-north-east, facing west¹¹.

Given its position in the eastern Delta, Tell el-Ginn would certainly have played a part in the busy inter-regional trade, which poses questions on the relationship between Upper and Lower-Egypt, the nature of the relationship to the east of the Delta, as well as that of the origin of the Lower-Egyptian civilization.

¹⁰ L. Watrin, « Five or Six Lost Generation what was going on on the Delta after Ma'adi and before Naqada », *Abstracts of the International Symposium of Puszczykowo near Poznan, Poznan, 2000*.

A post-Ma'adian and pre-Naqadan phase is apparent in the Delta. It is a "missing link" of Delta prehistory corresponding to the Naqada IId-c period. This period was compressed between the end of Ma'adi placed in Naqada IIc and the beginning of Minshat Abu Omar, also placed in Naqada IIc. Yet our works demonstrate that the proposed chronologies are erroneous. There is an intermediary series between these two sites, as shown by the archeological material. It is confirmed by the stratigraphical studies in other Delta sites. It includes the closing of Ma'adi at the end of Naqada IIa and the beginning of Minshat in Naqada IId.

¹¹ In the later phases of Minshat (Minshat III-IV) the orientation changes. The deceased are lain on the left side of the body, the head to the north-west, facing the east or southeast.

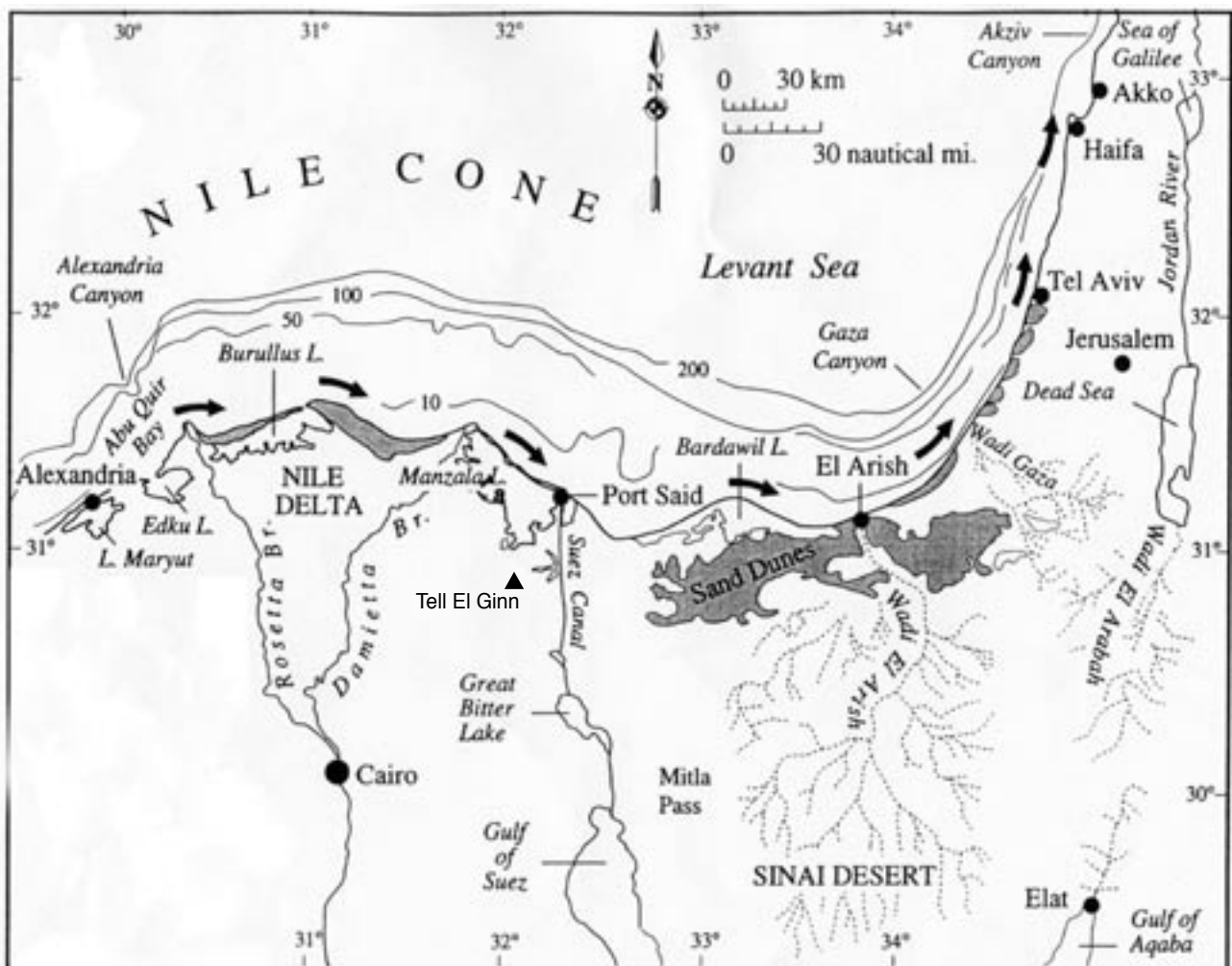
Tell el-Ginn: a promising untapped site requiring a multi-disciplinary research.

Egyptian archaeology has long focused on cemeteries, better preserved and easier to exploit, particularly in Upper-Egypt. Very few sites in Lower-Egypt actually have multi-disciplinary teams working to resolve questions of dwellings and their environment. Tell el-Ginn, by its geographical position (the easternmost site of the Delta) could testify with relationships beyond Egypt.

The relationship with the East is indeed one of the major phenomenon in the history of the region. The excavation of Merimde Beni Salame, a Neolithic site, the most ancient discovered to this day in the southern Delta, has, for instance, revealed remains of domestic animals (goats), probably from the Levant (Merimde I). The same links hold true at Buto I for thrown ceramics, and for Ma'adi for metallurgy and stone architecture in more recent periods.

Other disciplines would shed light on the special relationship between the Delta and the east, notably archaeo-zoological studies. At this point this joint venture project, involving the GREPAL with the National Museum of Natural History of Paris (scientific Museum unit 303, associated with the CNRS, UMR ex-ESA 8045), would allow us to determine the culinary traditions of these populations and the variety of animal species. The location of the site at the seaside would allow an ichthyologist to evaluate the status of fishing in the local economy, and could also determine the species consumed by the populations and estimate the culinary evolution over time. Ports installations could also exist, opening up the issue of seafaring communication, to confront with the recent discoveries on the Palestinian shore.

Fig. 6. Tell el-Ginn in the regional geomorphological context.



Anthropology could attempt to determine the origin of these populations. We suppose that in the 4th millennium, at least two major migratory movements took place in Lower-Egypt, the first one originating in the Southern Levant toward the Delta during an early period (that of Buto I), and the second one originating in Upper-Egypt in a more recent timeframe (that of Minshat Abu Omar I). All these hypotheses must be verified and refined.

Carpology, a field little developed in Egypt, would enhance the information by opening the field to studies of the landscape, possible agricultural practices, and trade within the geographic areas.

The presence of dwelling remains would make possible confrontation with ethnology. It would be pertinent to compare early remains with those of current populations. These populations, both sedentary and agricultural, as we observed, currently live sometimes in socio-economic conditions close to those of early populations¹².

The possibility that the earliest layers could be flooded by a rise in the water table, a situation on several Delta sites, may require the use of water pumps. Such context may have led to good conservation of organic remains (wood, bones, and leather) and could lead to Tell el-Ginn becoming a reference site.

Tell el-Ginn: a project to begin as soon as possible.

Most of the Delta excavations in the past consisted of small surveys, many of which were led by the Dutch Institute in the 1980's. The only site extensively excavated and which produced both pre- and protohistorical structured dwelling layers is that of Tell el-Farkha, whose excavation concession is held by a Polish team. Recently (2002), a contemporary cemetery of dwelling levels has been identified on the same site¹³. This discovery has made Tell el-Farkha the only current site in the eastern Delta to combine a cemetery and a contemporary prehistoric settlement. In the western Delta, excavations at Buto consisted largely of soundings which reached only the very ravaged dwelling layers. The earliest layers date to the first part of the 4th millennium and remain on the level of the water table. They could only be obtained by pumping.

In terms of chronology, the macro-survey results, combined with soundings from the department of Egyptian Antiquities in the early 1950's, correspond to those obtained at Minshat Abu Omar. For the early periods of Minshat, there is only one cemetery dating from the last third of the 4th millennium. Deep soundings on the site have nonetheless also reached Neolithic layers (5th millennium). The Polish and Germans have not yet found any traces in the village corresponding to Naqadan cemeteries. Thanks to Labib Habachi's soundings made in 1952, we also know that graves from the end of Naqada II – Naqada III exist at Tell el-Ginn. This site appears to present a comparable occupation.

Remnants of dwellings appear to be absent at Minshat, with the exception of a few later Greco-roman period installations on the edge of the hillock. Tell el-Ginn, on the contrary, features anthropic remains on the entire length of its surface. The layers that are currently accessible are those corresponding to heavily altered recent surface levels. Only surveys on the site would allow one to reach the early layers of the site and to have a clearer understanding of its stratigraphy. Any pre- or protohistorical villages, not visible today, would be buried in the deeper layers. Their location is one of the major goals of the Tell el-Ginn project. We could then establish comparisons between dwelling material and objects from the protodynastic cemetery that must be found again.

¹² The environment has changed greatly, with the coastline becoming more distant and the ground higher, both phenomenon are linked to alluviation.

¹³ K. Cialowicz, pers. com., 2002.

The site's history may correspond to that of Minshat Abu Omar. Minshat features layers dating from the last third of the 4th millennium and from the beginning of the 3rd millennium (middle of the 1st dynasty) then a long 2300 year gap (between the 2nd and the 26th dynasties) before reoccupation during the Greco-Roman period. It is possible that the villages corresponding to the Minshat tombs are actually located at Tell el-Ginn, a site clearly more vast located only 2 km to the west. The site of Tell el-Ginn turns out to be wider and higher than that of Minshat¹⁴. Its sedimentological power is also twice that of Minshat.

Tell el-Ginn thus has an exceptional potential. We must underline that the Delta sites featuring both a prehistoric cemetery and a contemporary settlement are rare. Tell el-Ginn may present this type of configuration. Even the type of sediment (sand) calls for the use of archaeological teams with experience excavating in such an environment. Several members of the GREPAL benefit from such experience. Fine stratigraphies in prehistorical dwelling layers have already been established by Dr Luc Watrin at El-Adaïma (Upper-Egypt) and Dr Olivier Blin at Swayr (Oman).

Given its location, its configuration, and its environment, Tell el-Ginn has unfathomed scientific potential. Due to the competition between foreign institutions¹⁵ that which is increasing, responding to the threat of urban and agricultural projects in the Delta, a joint venture excavation project conducted by the GREPAL in collaboration with the National Museum of Natural History of Paris (scientific Museum unit 303, associated with the CNRS, UMR ex-ESA 8045, directed by Dr. Jean-Denis Vigne) and the Supreme Council of Egyptian Antiquities (SCA) should be launched as soon as possible.

Luc Watrin

¹⁴ Minshat Abou Omar, like Tell el-Ginn, is a *Gezira* site. This one measures 600 x 400 m for an elevation of 2.5 m.

¹⁵ Remember that an unfair rapt made by the German Institute on the GREPAL's Ma'adi project, prejudiced a Franco-Egyptian team at the west sector of Ma'adi in 1999.