

FORTIFIED DELTA – A CASE STUDY FROM TELL EL-RETABA*

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The primary function of fortresses, and in a wider context various kinds of fortifications, too, is to control and protect important sites/areas, but they are also very potent symbols of political and economic power. As a special type of military architecture, fortresses were usually erected in sensitive border regions to stop waves of invaders. From the period of the Middle Kingdom at least, many and varied sources testify to the fact that the area of the Nile Delta and particularly the eastern Delta/Sinai was protected by a chain of fortresses to prevent enemy attacks. The importance of the 'Walls of the Ruler' within the Middle Kingdom defence system is undisputed; its approximate location at the entrance of Wadi Tumilat is known. The military picture of Egypt's eastern frontier would not be complete without mentioning another huge military installation which was built during the New Kingdom in order to protect Egypt's eastern border: the so-called 'Ways of Horus'. To these military activities of Seti I can also be added the fortress at Tell el-Retaba, built at the beginning of the Ramesside era in the military sensitive region of Wadi Tumilat. The evident expenditure on the construction and its subsequent reconstruction indicates that its location was considered highly strategic and economically important. The promising results of the current archaeological excavations of the Polish-Slovak missions at this site may help us to uncover and consequently better not only understand the building history of one of the fortress-towns on the border of Egypt but also shed more light on the nature and various facets of the mutual relations between Egypt and her north-eastern neighbours.

Keywords: Eastern Delta, Tell el-Retaba, Ramesside fortress, migdol.

Military structures in the north-eastern Delta

From time immemorial, the territory of the Nile Delta has been quite open to progressive foreign impulses from neighbouring countries. At the same time, the Egyptians did not underestimate its security and the Delta was without doubt the most militarized territory of ancient Egypt. One of the traditional well-fortified borders of Egypt was the north-eastern Delta/Sinai. The military

architects and engineers of ancient Egypt gained considerable experience during the long dynastic era in building fortifications of various shapes and sizes, many of which have the status of real, huge fortresses, and they appropriately fulfilled their functions in considerably different landscapes for rather long periods.¹ Certainly, the eastern Delta has been in this respect the source of many archaeological (as well as literary) traces of military structures, from the Middle Kingdom's 'Walls of the Ruler' – a series of fortresses which had been maintained in good condition for centuries – to the similarly sophisticated defence system of about ten fortified structures of various sizes and building dispositions, well supplied with water, which stood here at least from the New Kingdom.² A set of battle reliefs of Seti I on the northern wall of the Hypostyle hall at Karnak show part of this defence system.³ These fortresses, known as the 'Ways of Horus', served as the trans-Sinai route from Tjaru to the Levant and have been recently identified as Hebwa I.⁴ Although Tjaru's role as a strategically situated fortress on the border of the country and as an important entry point was later taken over by other towns, the nearby Pelusiac branch of the Nile continued to offer the most easily defensible boundary line in the east. Here was the starting point of the military highway, the above-mentioned 'Ways of Horus', which led along the coast and through the northern Sinai desert, an almost waterless area that was hostile to invaders and extremely difficult to cross. The fortress was built on both sides of a canal that must have connected Lake Manzaleh with Lake Ballah, from where the road was marked by small or large stations located a day's journey apart (i.e. around every 20 km) as water sources were one of the most crucial elements for the placement of the fortresses.⁵ The road then approached the coast, passing along the southern

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¹ ARNOLD, D. *The Encyclopaedia of Ancient Egyptian Architecture*, pp. 92–93.

² SMOLÁRIKOVÁ, K. Egyptian Fortifications from the First Millennium BC. In JESSE, F., VOGEL, C. (eds.). *The Power of Walls – Fortifications in Ancient Northeastern Africa*. pp. 101–103.

³ GARDINER, A. H. The Ancient Military Road between Egypt and Palestine. In *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 1920, Vol. 6, pp. 99–116, Pl. XI.; MORRIS, E. F. *The Architecture of Imperialism. Military Bases and the Evolution of Foreign Policy in Egypt's New Kingdom*, pp. 402–447.

⁴ HOFFMEIER, J. K., ABD EL-MAKSoud, Mohammed. A New Military Site on 'The Ways of Horus': Tell el-Borg 1999 – 2001: a preliminary report. In *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 2003, Vol. 89, pp. 169–197.

⁵ SPALINGER, A. J. *War in Ancient Egypt*, p. 241.

edge of Lake Serbonis, which was separated from the sea by a narrow spit of land, and arrived at the coast itself some 160 km from Tjaru, at el-Arish, where the Wadi el-Arish also reached the sea. Nearly 50 km beyond el-Arish lay Raphia, and the road terminated in Gaza.⁶ Another, perhaps not so frequent (southern) military/caravan corridor led through Wadi Tumilat. The Egyptian military commanders were familiar with this area and its highly strategic importance with fortresses that could stop the Asiatic invaders from attacking Egypt.⁷ Such an extensive military building program was fairly fundamental by the beginning of the famous era of the Ramesside kings, when Egypt could be considered – as it was during the reign of the Thutmoside Dynasty – a powerful and respected empire in every facet of this word. There were plenty of sites which profited from this expansionary strategy of the Egyptian warrior kings based in the eastern Delta, mostly two quintessential fortress-towns, the already mentioned Hebwa I, ancient Tjaru and Tell el-Retaba, ancient Tjeku.⁸

The Ramesside kings also successfully used diplomacy in their foreign policy.⁹ The end of conflicts with the Hittites in southern Syria brought, during the reign of the triumphant builder Ramesses II and his Egypto-Hittite Peace treaty, peace and prosperity for several decades, and international trade began to flourish as borders were opened. Peace with the eastern neighbour also allowed the rulers to focus their energies on protecting vulnerable borders. It is no coincidence that Ramesses II at that time initiated a major defensive program; a dense chain of *mnw*-fortresses was built stretching along the edge of the Western Delta and along the Marmarican coast, as some foreign ethnic groups of Libyan extraction began to move into Egyptian territory.¹⁰ The eastern Delta was at that time expanded to control the strategic route leading to Syria-Palestine.

⁶ GONEN, R. The Late Bronze Age. In BEN-TOR, A. (ed.). *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, pp. 216–219.

⁷ HOLLADAY, J. S. *Cities of the Delta: Tell el-Maskhuta*, 1982, Vol. 6, pp. 19–28.

⁸ MORRIS, E. F. *The Architecture of Imperialism. Military Bases and the Evolution of Foreign Policy in Egypt's New Kingdom*, pp. 504–508.

⁹ KITCHEN, K. A. *Pharaoh Triumphant. The Life and Times of Ramesses II*, pp. 55–85, Fig. 24.

¹⁰ MONNIER, F. *Les forteresses égyptiennes. Du Prédynastique au Nouvel Empire*, pp. 20.

The Case Study: Tell el-Retaba

The field excavations by the Polish-Slovak archaeological mission at Tell el-Retaba have made extraordinary progress from their start in 2007, shedding fresh light on a wide range of historical periods, from the Hyksos era to the Late Period (Fig. 1). We are happy to include the long-term research into the Ramesside fortress as part of this success; as a result, its construction sequences are now established in detail: from the E4 phase (19th Dynasty) when the earliest defence wall was built (already by Seti I ?), through the construction of the fortress by Ramesses II (phases E3-E2-E1) and its reconstruction on a significantly larger scale by Ramesses III (phases D4-D3-D2) to the final D1 phase (20th Dynasty – Third Intermediate Period), which means the gradual collapse of the fortress and/or defence structures as a whole.¹¹ The site was certainly not *terra incognita* for the team of archaeologists prior to the current research as excavation activities in different areas clearly indicate.¹² The still very clearly visible remnants of the massive defence walls of the robust Ramesside fortress guarding the route from Egypt to the Levant via Wadi Tumilat were an early indication of its military character.

Even though we still have an unsatisfactory lack of information about the very beginnings of the fortress in respect to its archaeological remains, the fact remains that the area within the walls was definitely not empty as Petrie supposed. Primarily since structures belonging with certainty to the phase E4 were detected and partially excavated in the eastern section of area 9; more precisely, a rather dense network of mud-brick walls was roughly cleared in order to obtain basic archaeological information about their building disposition.¹³ The uncovered area consisted of courtyards with rounded silos surrounded by rather thin, curved enclosure walls. A wide range of small finds was also obtained, including a unique Mycenaean terracotta figurine attesting to some sort of mutual contacts or perhaps the presence of Mycenaean mercenaries in Egypt as the Polish excavators reported.¹⁴ In this respect the find of a stamped jar sealing is of even greater interest, which might shed more light on the process of how state provisions were delivered to the fortress.¹⁵ These

¹¹ RZEPKA, S. et al. From Hyksos Settlers to Ottoman Pipe Smokers. Tell el-Retaba 2014. In *Ägypten und Levante*, 2015, Vol. 25, pp. 97–166.

¹² NAVILLE, E. *The Shrine of Saft El Henneh and the Land of Goshen*; PETRIE, W. M. F., DUNCAN, J. G. *Hyksos and Israelite Cities*, Pl. XXXV.

¹³ RZEPKA, S. et al. From Hyksos Settlers to Ottoman Pipe Smokers. Tell el-Retaba 2014. In *Ägypten und Levante*, 2015, Vol. 25, pp. 108–113.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110, fig. 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111, fig. 20.

recently unearthed structures as well as various finds offer a more detailed picture about the spatial organization within the earliest fortifications, connected with the so-called Petrie's 'wall 1'. All this would support the interpretation of previous discoveries of fragments of barracks/workshops unearthed in the western section of area 9. Similar buildings were also uncovered during the earlier excavation in area 3, in the north-western part of the fortress.¹⁶ As the archaeological excavations carried out so far also show, the ruins of earlier buildings frequently served as cemeteries: in phase E4 an infant cemetery was detected in areas 4 and 9, several burials of children in jars were discovered, while others were placed directly into the masonry of the mud-brick 'wall 1' or skeletons were simply buried in a pit without containers and funerary gifts. In phase E1, i.e. the phase linked with the ruins of the fortress of Ramesses II, the place served as a settlement and partly as a local cemetery (Fig. 2).

Judging from all the available data, there is still no clear archaeological evidence as to how long the fortress of Ramesses II fulfilled its defensive function; Pap. Anastasi V mentions that the fortress of Tjeku (modern-day Tell el-Retaba) was in use as a military outpost at least until the reign of Seti II.¹⁷ If this is true, the fortress must have lost its military function very shortly (no more than one or two decades?) before Ramesses III started to build a new, much better protected stronghold with its massive walls '2' and '3'. Consequently, the wall '1' and other installations of the fortress of Ramesses II could have been ruined but not so badly and extensively as was hitherto supposed. The structures certainly lost (at least for a short period) their defensive character but this was not the reason for the abandonment of the site with such a long settlement history, as the discovered tombs indicate perfectly. The gradual degradation also reached perhaps the temple of Atum, built by Ramesses II, which remained in use for the local inhabitants.

Considerably more evidence was obtained for the period of the 20th Dynasty, when the collapsed remains of the fortress of Ramesses II were razed to the ground and Ramesses III started his ambitious military building program on the site (phase D4), which still held its strategic importance, all the more so since the tribes of Bedouins, the Libyans and the Sea People attempted to penetrate Egypt's borders at the beginning of the Twentieth Dynasty. It is not without interest – and already a first glance at the plan of the site clearly shows it – that Ramesses's III fortress was mostly enlarged in the eastern direction. What was behind this arrangement? A recent pedological field survey detected

¹⁶ RZEPKA, S. et al. New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period in Tell el-Retaba. In *Ägypten und Levante*, 2011, Vol. 21, pp. 145–152.

¹⁷ CAMINOS, R. *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies*, p. 255.

bedrock gravel on the western side of the fortress, which indicates the existence of a river or at least a larger channel at this place at that time.¹⁸ In area 9, a rather thick layer of wind sand and gravel evidently separated the lower old remains (19th Dynasty) from those on top (20th Dynasty), thus it seems that the area was for some time abandoned and sand-covered by a layer without artefacts, which was later levelled by a layer of gravel.¹⁹ This levelling of the terrain might be linked to the construction of Petrie's 'wall 2' a massive, ca. 9m thick defence wall (phase D4). In area 9, Petrie's 'wall 3' fragmentary preserved was also detected, and this was the latest of a series of robust defence walls in Tell el-Retaba.²⁰ It was definitely built later than 'wall 2', which was partly covered by 'wall 3'. A unique sand buttress in the form of a ramp or 'triangle' was identified supporting the internal side of 'wall 2', so far on its western and southern part. There is no doubt about the dating of 'wall 2', as a foundation deposit discovered already by Petrie during his excavation under the south-eastern corner of the enclosure wall contained objects inscribed with the name of Ramesses III.²¹ However, the dating of 'wall 3' (phase D3) is not so clear and we are mainly dependent on pottery evidence. This wall is a massive structure, built of very large mud-bricks (42x18x14cm). The southern face was almost completely destroyed; only a very short fragment of the original width of 8.8m could be observed.²² The preserved remnant is about 1m high, unfortunately, most of it is the wall foundation. It appears from the section cuts through both walls that the foundation level of 'wall 3' was about 1.3m higher than the foundation level of 'wall 2', so indisputably in the southern part of the defences 'wall 2' was covered by 'wall 3', implying that 'wall 2' should have only been 1.3m high. Was 'wall 2' a defence or only a revetment wall? Its width of 10.4m detected in the western part of the defences (8.8m for 'wall 3'), which is without doubt too strong to be a mere casing structure, speaks for its function of a real defence wall. It seems much more acceptable to identify it as a double defence wall at least on the longer – more vulnerable – sides of the fortification. A comparison between the fortress of Ramesses II (fragments of 'wall 1'), which was small and quite irregular in plan perhaps due to the rough quality of

¹⁸ HUDEC, J. et al. Historical and Environmental Determinations of the Ancient Egyptian Fortresses in Tell el-Retaba. In *Asian and African Studies*, 2015, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 247–279.

¹⁹ RZEPKA, S. et al. From Hyksos Settlers to Ottoman Pipe Smokers. Tell el-Retaba 2014. In *Ägypten und Levante*, 2015, Vol. 25, p. 117.

²⁰ ČERNÝ, M., HUDEC, J. Fortifications at Tell el-Retaba. In *Asian and African Studies*, 2016, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 126–131.

²¹ PETRIE, W. M. F., DUNCAN, J. G. *Hyksos and Israelite Cities*, pl. XXXIV.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

terrain, and the fortress of Ramesses III, which was significantly larger, better protected and more rectangular speaks for its function as a revetment wall. We must keep in mind that times had changed and during the reign of Ramesses III Egypt was on the defensive, rather than on the offensive. In this case, the architects or engineers levelled the terrain by thoroughly razing old irregularities and constructing an artificial platform, so that ‘wall 2’ was merely a low revetment wall for this platform, on which the actual defence ‘wall 3’ was built.²³

A narrow corridor/street, 3.6m wide, ran along the inner/northern face of ‘wall 3’ and the *insulae* of barracks (building no. [834/838]), which features the same orientation as the defence wall and was founded on the same level, hence it was presumably contemporary (Fig. 3). Pottery evidence from the barracks indicated that the ‘wall 3’ was constructed in the first half of the 20th dynasty, thus ‘wall 3’ was contemporary with, or slightly later than ‘wall 2’. Building remains of the above mentioned large building no. [834/838] have been identified and excavated continually since 2011.²⁴ In terms of the building disposition, this is a long structure extending east-west, parallel to the massive defence ‘wall 3’. The total length of the building was at least 67.8m (so far neither its western nor eastern limits have been able to be identified), and ca. 8.8m wide. It contained 13 uniform units, each comprising six rooms: three narrow ones and three larger ones. The majority were poorly preserved due to enormous destructions caused by later building activities. All units were regularly planned, and their domestic character is confirmed by a repertoire of small finds; moreover, small silos and bins were found inside some units, while there was no example of military equipment. Some rooms served as magazines, others as storerooms, and they could have been used as living quarters as well. Since the research is far from complete, it is difficult to say with certainty whether the building served as barracks for soldiers or as living quarters for civilians. However, the fact that the architects situated it in the close vicinity of the defence wall would suggest that the building was part of the military complex rather than the living quarters. The absence of military equipment can be explained by its high value. It is not without interest that in the next phase

²³ RZEPKA, S. et al. Tell el-Retaba from the Second Intermediate Period till the Late Period. Results of the Polish-Slovak Archaeological Mission, Seasons 2011 – 2012. In *Ägypten und Levante*, 2014, Vol. 24, pp. 73–75; RZEPKA, S. et al. From Hyksos Settlers to Ottoman Pipe Smokers. Tell el-Retaba 2014. In *Ägypten und Levante*, 2015, Vol. 25, pp. 126–127.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 75–88; Ibid., pp. 118–126.

(D2), some significant changes in spatial arrangement took place; some rooms and units were merged and some annexes for horses were added.²⁵

The main entrance to the fortress was through the western high gate, the so-called migdol,²⁶ the high towers of which were a feature of Egyptian defences from an early date. Another, rather small gate was identified by Petrie in the middle of the southern 'wall 3' and a further gate on the eastern side of 'wall 2' was indicated by geophysical prospection.²⁷ In connection with the Ramesside era, an extraordinary example of migdol is known from the still standing 'Mansion of Millions of Years' of King Ramesses III at Madinet Habu.²⁸

Although the archaeological excavations in different parts of the migdol (area 4) started already in 1910,²⁹ the structure is, due to its monumentality as well as many destructive interventions, being revealed rather slowly.³⁰ The works are concentrated primarily on the northern tower of the migdol, where despite the degree of erosion of the tower masonry at its western edge, it has been possible to ascertain that the dimensions of the northern and southern towers were almost identical (ca. 22.5x14m). Naville's trench cut into this tower³¹ and its subsequent cleaning. To a wider extent, this showed that the western base of the tower was constructed on a mud-brick platform instead of the fine yellow-sand deposit discovered under the core of the northern tower. The platform was 10m wide and 13-48cm thick. The mud-bricks of the platform were surprisingly quite hard and very well preserved (Fig. 4). Interestingly enough, the lowermost row of the platform was settled into a rather thick layer of clay mortar (Fig. 5). This kind of platform was also detected in the northern area of the migdol, at the site of the expected continuation of 'wall 2', even though no mud-bricks of 'wall 2' have been preserved here. During the excavation, remarkable archaeological as well as stratigraphical data were obtained below the tower in old Naville's trench: a large amount (up to 2.5m thick) of fine yellow sand had filled an artificial ditch below the migdol of Ramesses III. It is possible to assume that this sand was deposited in a single event to fill the ditch in preparation for the construction of the migdol of

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 82–84; Ibid., pp. 124–125.

²⁶ SEGUIN, J. *Le Migdol: du Proche-Orient à l'Égypte*, pp. 109–117.

²⁷ ČERNÝ, M., HUDEC, J. Fortifications at Tell el-Retaba. In *Asian and African Studies*, 2016, Vol. 25, No. 2, p. 125.

²⁸ HÖLSCHER, U. *Excavations at Ancient Thebes*. 1930 – 1931, Vol. 15, pp. 9–20.

²⁹ RZEPKA, S. et al. New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period in Tell el-Retaba. In *Ägypten und Levante*, 2011, Vol. 21, pp. 139–142.

³⁰ ČERNÝ, M., HUDEC, J. Fortifications at Tell el-Retaba. In *Asian and African Studies*, 2016, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 131–132.

³¹ NAVILLE, E. *The Shrine of Saft El Henneh and the Land of Goshen*. Vol. 5, 1887, Pl XI, section E–F.

Ramesses III. Such large ditches or pits filled with fine sand to stabilize the foundations of massive constructions were popular and widely used by Egyptian architects (especially in the Delta) already before the Ramesside era, as were mud-brick foundations beneath buildings of different types.³² Keeping in mind all the results of the exploration, a possible time-table of the building works connected with the Ramesses III fortress in the migdol area was proposed:

- 1) considerable adaptation of the terrain by levelling/razing the older, already non-functional, structures;
- 2) constructing the solid mud-brick foundation platform under the wall;
- 3) erecting the two huge towers of the migdol;
- 4) final arrangement of building elements: threshold, gateway, staircases, etc.³³

As time went on, the fortifications were abandoned and slowly degraded (phase D1: 20th Dynasty – Third Intermediate Period), their utility waned and/or completely disappeared because the political and economic power shifted during the Third Intermediate Period/Late Period further to the east, closer to the entry of the Wadi Tumilat area – to the site of Tell el-Maskhuta.³⁴ The military nature of Tell el-Retaba was transformed into a common agriculturally-based settlement³⁵ where occasional commercial relations with the eastern neighbours perhaps played an important role.³⁶

Conclusion

The building reconstruction of the Ramesside fortress or rather the strongly fortified Ramesside settlement/fortress-town³⁷ briefly traced in the present article is the result of decade-long archaeological excavations and fairly intensive and stimulating discussions among the members of the Polish-Slovak

³² SPENCER, J. A. *Brick Architecture in Ancient Egypt*, p. 121.

³³ RZEPKA, S. et al. Tell el-Retaba from the Second Intermediate Period till the Late Period. Results of the Polish-Slovak Archaeological Mission, Seasons 2011 – 2012. In *Ägypten und Levante*, 2014, Vol. 24, p. 72.

³⁴ HOLLADAY, J. S. Wadi Tumilat. In *Encyclopedia of the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt*, p. 879.

³⁵ RZEPKA, S. et al. From Hyksos Settlers to Ottoman Pipe Smokers. Tell el-Retaba 2014. In *Ägypten und Levante*, 2015, Vol. 25, pp. 127–137.

³⁶ RZEPKA, S. et al. Tell el-Retaba from the Second Intermediate Period till the Late Period. Results of the Polish-Slovak Archaeological Mission, Seasons 2011 – 2012. In *Ägypten und Levante*, 2014, Vol. 24, pp. 111–115.

³⁷ MORRIS, E. F. *The Architecture of Imperialism. Military Bases and the Evolution of Foreign Policy in Egypt's New Kingdom*, p. 383.

mission to Tell el-Retaba on the turbulent period when Egypt was being attacked by numerous waves of invaders/nomads from the Levantine area. In fact, our data clearly shows that the previous, exclusively offensive foreign policy (Ramesses II) changed to a defensive one (Ramesses III), in effort to protect the north-eastern border.

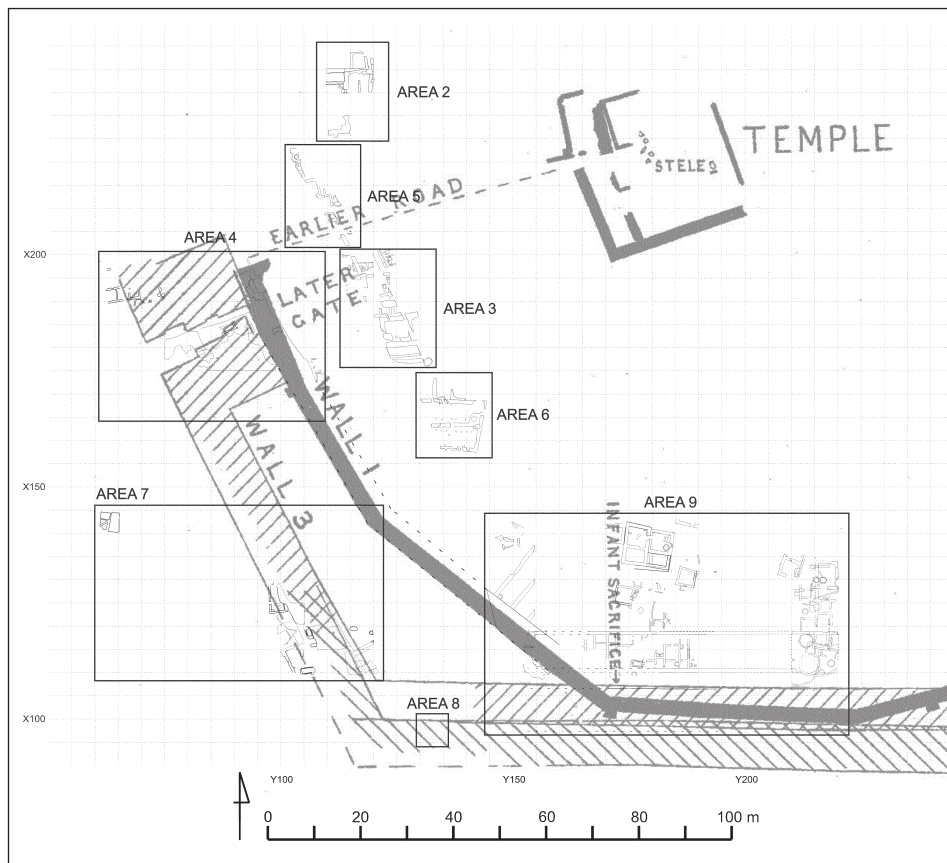
In this respect, some earlier, hastily formulated hypotheses were corrected or even refuted (due to inadequate research); while many freshly emerging questions were answered (at least partly). However, much more should be done to clarify the history of the people living on the tell during the second millennium BC.

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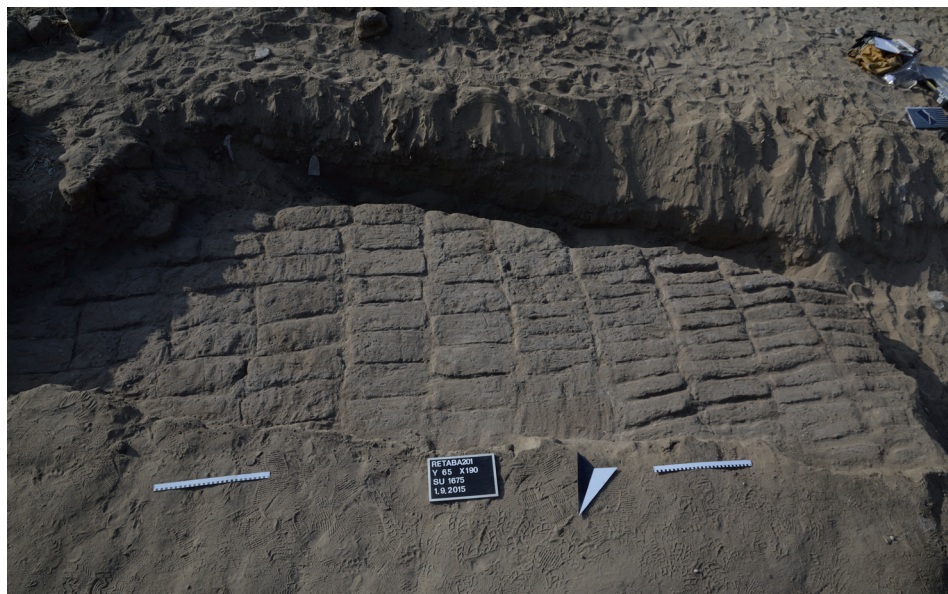
PLATES



Smoláriková, Fig. 1. Plan of the western part of the fortress which contains all of the walls and other structures unearthed so far (author Ľ. Jarmužek).



Smoláriková, Fig. 2. A section of Petrie's 'wall 1' with a child burial in a jar (photo J. Hudec).



Smoláriková, Fig. 4. A view of a very well-articulated mud-brick platform (photo L. Hulková).



Smoláriková, Fig. 5. The lowermost row of the mud-brick platform was settled into a thick layer of clay mortar (photo K. Smoláriková).