BUTO (MODERN NAME: TELL EL-FARA‘ĪN)

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The settlement of Buto (modern name: Tell el-Fara‘īn) is situated in the flood plain of the northwestern Nile Delta, c. 40 km south of the modern shore line of the Mediterranean. It covers an area of approximately 1 km². Buto is assumed to have been the archaic capital of Lower Egypt and played an important role throughout the pharaonic period as a counterpart to Hierakonpolis (Nekhen) in Upper Egypt, both in religious belief and in cultic life.

Since the late New Kingdom, Buto was known under the name of Pr-Wdj, i.e., “House of (the Goddess) Wdj” (Uto), from which the Greek name Buto derives. Buto is also identified with the twin cities of P and Dep, known from pharaonic inscriptions and mentioned already on Early Dynastic seal impressions. Another name connected with Buto is Dhwty, mainly known from Old Kingdom sources. The earliest evidence for this name, written with a heron on the roof of a building, occurs on small bone labels from the late Predynastic (Naqada IIIA1) tomb U-j at Abydos.

According to Early Dynastic depictions several events and ceremonies are thought by scholars to have taken place in archaic Buto. Also supposedly located in Buto is an estate and probable temporal residence named “Palace of the Harpooning Horus.” However, although Buto seems to be quite well attested in written sources and depictions of late Predynastic and Early Dynastic date, only little is known of the archaeology of the site. The impressive mounds of mud-brick ruins rising up to 15 m above the cultivation, which affect the appearance of Buto today (Figure 1), are mostly of Ptolemaic/Roman date. All occupation remains before the Late Dynastic period are deeply buried below later cultural deposits.

The first excavations on behalf of the EES exposed only Roman, Ptolemaic, and Late Period remains. It was only during the early 1980s that W. Kaiser (former director of the German Archaeological Institute) initiated investigations at Buto with the aim of clarifying the early history of the site. The work revealed for the first time not only the chalcolithic Lower Egyptian Maadi Culture of the 4th millennium in the Nile Delta proper but also Early Dynastic settlement remains which seemed to belong to a large administrative building. However, the limited size of the excavations inhibited a more complete understanding of the exposed structures.

During the last decade, besides a systematic survey combining auger drillings and geophysical measurements to answer questions about the development of the settlement throughout its long history and its topographical setting in respect to the surrounding landscape, excavations were continued in the previously investigated location but in a considerably enlarged area (Figure 2). As a result—after the investigations of overlying Saite building structures and Third Intermediate Period remains—a much more complete picture of the Early Dynastic settlement remains can now be drawn. From the late Predynastic until the late 2nd Dynasty several phases of construction can be distinguished which seem to mirror the development of a presumable royal estate throughout the 1st Dynasty until its modification into a palace complex in the late 1st Dynasty and its destruction by fire and final abandonment towards the middle and late 2nd Dynasty. The architectural features of the subsequent construction phases and the material culture connected to them (e.g., the pottery and the flint industries) clearly reveal an increasing level of organization and a strengthening of the representation of power connected to the consolidation of political and administrative structures in the course of the 1st Dynasty.

The palace complex (Figure 3) constitutes doubtless the climax of this development. The building, oriented north–south, must have been at least 50 m wide. Its total length cannot be determined because its walls continue southward beyond the limits of the excavation and below a modern village. Although badly disturbed, the excavations have revealed essential parts and allow for some reconstructions. The complex is surrounded by an
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enclosure wall and comprises several compounds of specific function, such as prestigious rooms, workshops, magazines, and rooms for private and probably cultic purposes, which are arranged around a central reception hall. The general plan reveals the intention to connect economic, administrative, cultic, reception, and private functions within one and the same building, i.e., all those aspects that characterize palaces and residences of the king and high officials in later times. Such an Early Dynastic building was hitherto known only from Hierakonpolis.

The well-planned regular construction is based on repeatedly employed architectural principles and standardized measurements. This, along with the solid building techniques, leaves no doubt that the complex was built at Buto as an official enterprise. Especially interesting is the arrangement of the entrance area with its long and meandering corridor from the outer gate at the northwestern corner of the complex to the reception room in the center (see Figure 3). Such a long and winding route was surely not established by accident but—in addition to its protective function—in order to emphasize the social distance between the likely high status individual and his visitors.

So far, the question of whether the excavated complex can be identified with the so-called Palace of the Harpooning Horus mentioned above cannot yet be answered, and there is also no direct evidence as to who might have been the owner of the complex, whether the governor of the region or the king himself. The king could have used the building together with his followers as a temporary residence when the court came to Buto during royal journeys across the country. During his absence the main task of the complex might have been the organization of the agricultural production of the region, the storage and distribution of commodities, and the manufacturing of different luxury items such as stone vessels and flint knives whose production is attested. Like in the Late Period and in Ptolemaic/Roman times trade with the Eastern Mediterranean might have also played a role in early Buto; connections to the Levant are indicated by fragments of imported pottery.

On the other hand, in addition to its economic, administrative, and probably cultic functions, the complex was also a clear statement of power and political interest that was perhaps of particular significance in the remote region of the western Nile Delta.
Figure 2: Excavations in Buto with Early Dynastic building structures just showing up. In the foreground the overlying Saite building remains are still visible.
Figure 3: Plan of the palace complex dating to the late 1st/2nd Dynasty.
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NOTES


6 Buto was continuously occupied from the early 4th millennium until the end of the Old Kingdom and re-settled in the late 8th century BC until the 6th century AD; cf. Ulrich Hartung, in: Ulrich Hartung et al., “Tell el-Fara‘în-Buto, 10. Vorbericht,” *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Kairo* 65 (2009), 172–188. The urban development of Buto in Ptolemaic and Roman times is the focus of investigations conducted by Pascale Ballet (University of Poitiers/France) in cooperation with the German Archaeological Institute.


9 Several of the rooms excavated in the 1980s might have belonged to the private part of the complex; see already von der Way 1997, 169–173.

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