

## The Archaeological Framework and the Research Questions

### 1.1. Research Questions and Aims

This study aims to analyse the objects deposited in several rooms of the Old Kingdom temple at Tell Ibrahim Awad within their archaeological and functional contexts. These object deposits were sealed in the 4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (ca. 2550 BC), by the destruction debris of the OK temple, but include many objects that are in all probability much older (Early and Pre-Dynastic). In addition, these objects are compared to various assemblages from elsewhere in Egypt, as well as several relevant sites outside Egypt. As one of the largest of this kind of collections in Egypt, with many unparalleled items, it can be regarded as a reference set for existing and future cases (see chapter seven).

It is argued in this study that most of these objects are votive objects of a relatively humble kind and as such an expression of an early, independent religious substratum, defined as ‘popular’ religion to differentiate it from, and followed by the emerging, more centralized state religion; an alternative terminology would be ‘great’ and ‘little’ traditions<sup>1</sup> (cf. also sections 4.1 and 7.2.1; Kemp 1991: 64-107; Assmann 1995: 190; Stevens, 2006: 17-23 / 291-93 / 327-29; Bussmann 2010: 427-30; id. 2016; LÄ V, 1061-062). While the established state cults were meant to preserve the stability of the Egyptian universe and maintained by temple professionals (from the NK onwards)<sup>2</sup>, individuals had their own religious practices that related more directly to daily life: rites de passage such as birth, coming of age, and death; wishes for children and healing, and protection against all kinds of evil (Sadek 1987: 1-2; Baines 1987: 83). These concepts preceded and partly stood at the cradle of the state religion (Sadek 1987: 5-10; Kemp 1995: 82-83), but were not replaced by it, albeit more or less tightly controlled (Sadek 1987: 2; Baines 1987: 97; see also section 4.1 on Preformal culture, the embodiment of ‘little’ cults). This hypothesis is not new, and both concepts are not diametrically opposed to each other or mutually exclusive, but partly co-existing (Sadek 1987: 2-3 / 294-95; Routledge 2006). There were forms of interaction for common people with manifestations of the state religion: processions of gods outside their shrines during religious festivals, in special chapels against the outer walls of large temples (the inside was strictly out of bounds), access to divine statues in front of the temple pylons, and last but not least through dreams, sometimes in special sleeping pavilions near the

temple (R.H. Wilkinson 2003: 46; Baines 1987: 88-93). Moreover the same votive objects were found in both local sanctuaries (as Tell Ibrahim Awad and Elephantine, see section 4.9.1., and Bussmann 2011b) and large temple complexes (Hierakonpolis and Abydos, *ibid.*). The variety in category and quality of votive objects, partly as items of personal expression, like the child figurines for an alleged wish for children, is an indication for the intimate and local character of votive donations (Bussmann 2011a)<sup>3</sup>.

The temple of the early Middle Kingdom at Tell Ibrahim Awad, with a double shrine, one for an unknown deity and one, supposedly, for a royal cult (section 2.3.1, Phase 1) probably marks the last phase at this site of a tendency to uniformise local cults and put these under state control, as effectively illustrated by the apparently obligatory addition of a royal cult at other sites like Elephantine as well (Bussmann 2010: 512-13). This was preceded by a long period of relative freedom of local religious expressions (Bussmann 2010: 506-09), and probably more accessible temple precincts than in later times (sections 3.4.1 and 5.2), unlike some interpretations to the contrary (Baines 1987: 92). Like in the case of the early votives found in the comparable temple site at Elephantine, which was apparently only later attributed to the goddess Satet, there is nothing among these objects, by name or iconography, which refers to a deity before the MK. One would expect some connection between the votive objects and the goddess herself, at least attested as such at a later date, which is not the case (Kopp / Raue 2008: 45).

Hierakonpolis might be an exception, as the local Horus as a warrior god occurs earlier than Satet or Osiris, and his warrior aspect may be reflected in the large number of mace heads found there (see Figure 7.4). It seems that all these shrines were only later appropriated for, and attributed to, these deities, possibly on a centralized basis, to coordinate the cults and link them to the royal cult. This general tendency seems to have been instigated during the OK, and continued with more emphasis in the MK and later, as such reflected in a marked change in the temple architecture: larger and more uniform than before (Seidlmayer 1996: 125-126). For Tell Ibrahim Awad, this is illustrated by the striking difference of the MK temple layout compared with the earlier temple phases (see section 2.3.1), and the possibility of an additional royal cult (section 2.3.1: Phase 1). MK temples tend to be much more uniform in their layout than earlier temples (section 2.3.2 / Figure 2.13).

<sup>1</sup> Assmann (1995: 190) even differentiates between official, local, popular and personal religion.

<sup>2</sup> Before the NK, priestly functions seem to have been more of a part-time occupation on a rotation basis, besides administrative duties, as signified by titles (LÄ IV, 1084-097).

<sup>3</sup> From the MK onwards, votive practices were increasingly controlled by the official state religion (Pinch 1993: 356-60).

What is the relation between ‘great’ and ‘little’ traditions in the case of Tell Ibrahim Awad? A hypothesis on this distinction is formulated below on the basis of the results acquired during the temple research activities between 1988 and 2001 at Tell Ibrahim Awad (see section 1.3). More analysis of this phenomenon is relevant for a better understanding of one of the basic concepts of ancient Egyptian religion in general (Sadek 1987: 1-3; David 2002: 273, 276-77). To verify this hypothesis, the spatial units in which these objects were found, and the way they were developed, have to be investigated, and the objects themselves catalogued and analysed. As a next step the set at Tell Ibrahim Awad is compared with other contemporaneous sets in Egypt and abroad, and the similarities and differences analysed. The same hypothesis may be applicable for these assemblages, or at least for some of them (see section 7.2.1).

Another hypothesis interpreting the sites with deposits as focal points of an early royal cult instead of a divine cult seems to focus too much on the exceptional site of Hierakonpolis, with questionable validity for the other sites (McNamara 2008: 926-932). Except for the ambiguous presence of baboons, sometimes associated with royal ancestor figures (see section 4.6.2), there are no indications of royal connections at Tell Ibrahim Awad before the Phase 1 temple.

Non-royal ancestor cult, a likely part of popular religion, is difficult to point out before the New Kingdom (Fitzenreiter 1994: 51-56). The baboons may have played a role as ancestor figures (see sections 4.6.2 and 7.2.1; Dreyer 1986: 69-70).

The argument that the deposits at Tell Ibrahim Awad, represented in this study, belong to a phase of popular (non-official) worship, preceding a formalized state cult, as expressed in the features of the MK temple is presented in a five-fold approach:

1. What is the physical context, the formation process of the deposits and the spatial distribution of the votive objects in the deposits within the site of Tell Ibrahim Awad? Was there a difference in the function of the individual deposit units? Which conclusions can be derived from the answers to that? These questions will be discussed in chapters 2 and 3.
2. What was the function of these objects at the time they were deposited? This includes the votive objects per se and the other categories found, like discarded material related to the cult (mainly ceramics) and decorative elements of earlier temple constructions, such as tiles (chapters four, five and six).
3. Was there an impact of these objects (or some of them at least) on the temple ritual at Tell Ibrahim Awad and how could this have been effected? What are the implications of this for other comparable sites? This will be the subject of chapter five.
4. What was the wider context of the site and its finds in the Delta, in Egypt as a whole, and compared

with a selection of sites outside Egypt? What are the similarities and differences, and what are the further implications of all this? This is the focus of sections 4.9 and 4.10.

5. Is it possible to identify the main divinity or divinities associated with the temple? If not a temple for a specific deity, was it a mortuary or an ancestor temple? What does this mean for the relative position of this temple within the whole range of temples in the course of time? This will be dealt with in chapter four and the final chapter 7.

As noted above, these issues are addressed by comparing the situation at Tell Ibrahim Awad with other contemporary sites in Egypt. Sites included and extensively treated in this connection are Abydos, Hierakonpolis, Elephantine and Tell el-Farkha. Both Abydos and Hierakonpolis were investigated a long time ago, with methods that, while being adequate for the period, are now insufficient for a reliable analysis; an attempt will nevertheless be made to make the best of this poorly documented material. Elephantine is well published, but does not reach as far back in time as Tell Ibrahim Awad: until about 3000 BC, the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty. As such, it is the main reference corpus for the Tell Ibrahim Awad set in this approach. The material at Tell el-Farkha (Ciałowicz 2007; Chłodnicki / Ciałowicz 2012: 201-31) is much less in number (ca. 70 pieces) and as such less suitable.

An attempt has been made to relate these finds to similar contexts in the neighbouring region of Syria/Palestine. Criteria were not only comparable circumstances, but also whether the finds included (originally) Egyptian or Egyptianising material. Not all these sites are contemporary with the finds from Tell Ibrahim Awad; some are later, but are included anyway for a wider perspective in time and space.

## **1.2. Research Problems**

Challenges to be considered in the analysis and interpretation of the data are mainly due to the lack of reference possibilities, for example in the dating and identification of individual objects. More extensive definitions of the problems, which are to be expected, can be formulated as follows:

1. A positive identification of the sequence of buildings in question as a sequence of temples. Could it be a residential building, or any other with a more or less public function? In that case, a sacred precinct, to be expected in a settlement of this size (see below), must be located elsewhere on the (former) tell area. To overcome this problem, a set of evidence criteria has been developed to identify the building and its context as such (section 2.3.2).
2. Viable definitions of the concepts of votive and other offerings and deposits. To counter this, clear definitions are formulated for the concepts mentioned (see sections 3.3.1-3.3.3). However, not the function of

all objects from the deposits could be clearly attributed within the framework of these definitions, like in the case of the mace heads (see chapter five).

3. The scarcity of the inscribed material recovered so far seems to impede the realisation of the research aims: hardly any royal names, no mention of any divinity, no votive inscriptions. However, they can be accomplished almost just as well in other ways, by analysing comparable and contemporaneous contexts.

### 1.3. Introduction to the Site

The ancient settlement site of Tell Ibrahim Awad is situated just outside the village of Umm Agram in a remote corner of the central part of the Eastern Nile Delta, in the province of Sharqiya (30.50° N, 31.49° E.; Figure 1.1 / 1.2). The highest point is now just ca. 2 m. above the agricultural plain, but this must have been more in earlier days. About 30 years ago, the central part of the tell was levelled for a fruit tree orchard, thus destroying part of the archaeological record. An extensive subsoil drilling program has shown that the present site surface of approximately 20,000 m<sup>2</sup> comprises not much more than 10 per cent of the original tell size, and has revealed the subsoil presence of a sandy gezira there (Figure 1.3). About 90 per cent of the original tell has been reclaimed gradually for agricultural activities (van den Brink 1986: 85, Figure 8)<sup>4</sup>. Finds made in 1999<sup>5</sup> during drainage activities in the cultivated area to the North of the tell have further confirmed this original extension, apparently a substantial settlement, at least some time during its history.

The remaining surface of the tell is rather level, and is covered by low vegetation like camel thorn and half-grass. Remains of an old irrigation ditch are visible in the Western part (Figure 2.4). The core of the tell was formed by a sandy turtleback or gezira in the curve of a former Nile branch, but this original sandy gezira is now covered with settlement and flood deposits. There were several shifting Nile branches nearby; in fact, these shifts may have been the cause of the abandonment of the tell after the early MK (ca. 2000 BC), making the site less accessible. This is comparable to the fate of nearby Piramesse as residence after the NK, when this river port became inaccessible due to the silting up of its waterways (ca. 1100 BC; Bietak 1975: 215-17).

The site of Tell Ibrahim Awad was singled out because of the wide-ranging pottery repertoire (PD to MK) found during a survey in 1984 by the *Amsterdam University Survey Expedition* (AUSE), the predecessor of the *Netherlands Foundation for Archaeological Research in Egypt* (NEFARE) (Figure 1.2). The first season of excavations took place in 1986, after soundings had struck

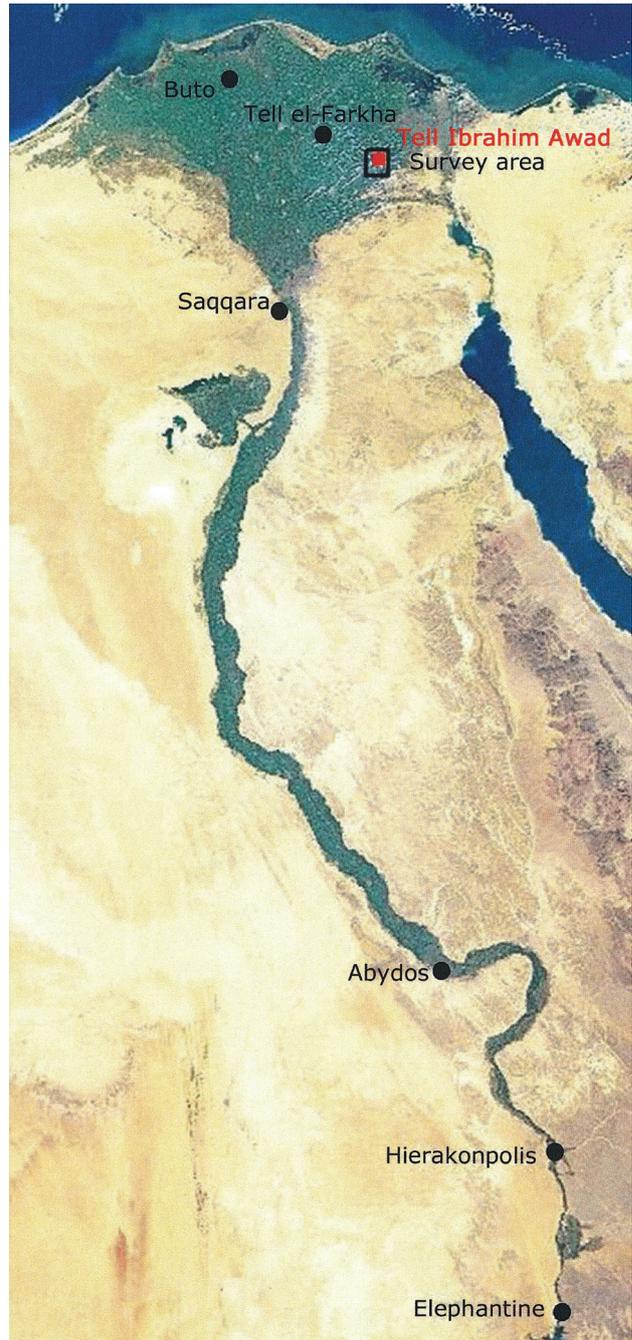


Figure 1.1. Map of Egypt with the location of Tell Ibrahim Awad and the other main sites mentioned in the text (© NASA).

upon a rich tomb (in the zone later designated as Area B) and a large mud-brick wall, which appeared to belong to the *temenos* of a temple (in Area A; van den Brink 1986). Several other surveyed tells in the area around Tell Ibrahim Awad featured remains from the PD to the MK. Some of these, such as the Late Predynastic site of Tell el-Iswid (South), were investigated more thoroughly because of the early periods which they covered (van den Brink 1989)<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> The drill cores show settlement debris and gezira sand in the highlighted areas in Figure 1.3 (van den Brink 1988, Figure 8). A planned magnetic survey might produce more data about the original extension (see Figure 1.3).

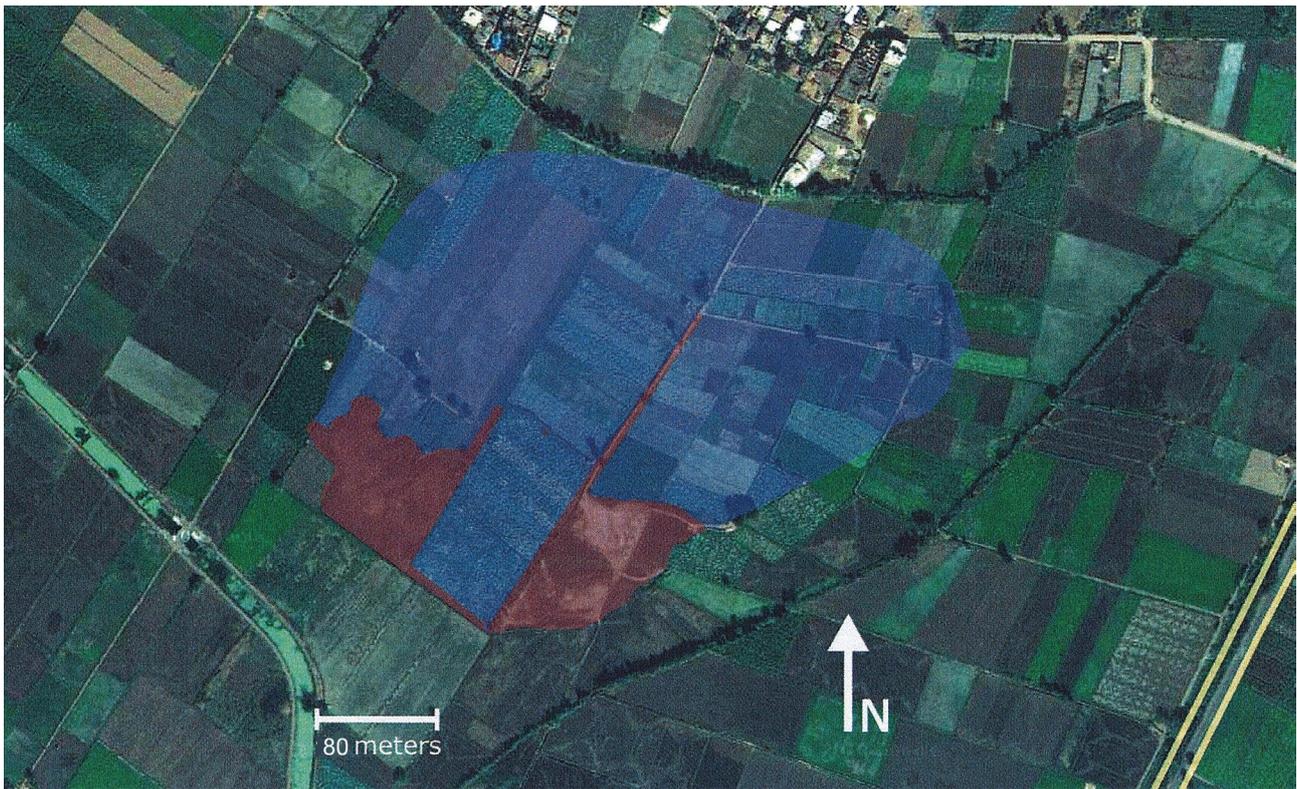
<sup>5</sup> Pottery and stone vessels, apparently partly in a funerary context.

<sup>6</sup> Tell el-Iswid (S) is since 2007 being excavated by the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale in Cairo (Midant-Reynes 2007; 2014).

Temple Deposits in Early Dynastic Egypt



Figure 1.2. Map of the survey region around Faqus (from Van den Brink 1987).



**Figure 1.3.** The situation of Tell Ibrahim Awad: the surviving tell surface in red; the original surface as established by drilling in blue (© Google Earth).

From 1988 to 2004, regular excavations have proceeded on the site of Tell Ibrahim Awad under the aegis of the NEFARE, which had been founded for this purpose in 1988 (van den Brink 1992; van Haarlem 1995, 1996c, 1998a, 1998b; Belova 2001; van Haarlem / Hikade 2006; van Haarlem 2009). Until 1991, the fieldwork was directed by Edwin C.M. van den Brink; since then, by Willem M. van Haarlem. From 1988 to 1993, research was carried out in both locations, A and B (see Figure 2.4)<sup>7</sup>. Between 1994 and 2004, the work has been focused on Area A, with a temple and a settlement with a cemetery.

The objectives of the first excavations were, respectively:

1. To obtain a better insight in the poorly understood ancient Egyptian temple architecture and temple ritual before the SIP (ca. 1750 BC)<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, the sequence of temple layers at Tell Ibrahim Awad was investigated.
2. To obtain a representative picture of the inhabitants of the settlement concerning health, age and mortality. So far, very little is known of the early communities in the Egyptian Nile Delta, as opposed to those in the Nile Valley. To that end, the research in the cemetery, discovered beside the temple site, was continued, producing ca. 80 burials in four phases (van Haarlem / Rose 2009).

3. To get a better idea of the extension and features of the settlement. So far, settlement and cemetery seem to have covered the same area, although the chronology of the settlement vis-à-vis the cemetery remains not fully settled as yet. Tombs seem to have been situated in abandoned residences.

The excavation of the temple site, discovered in Area A, was completed in 2001, when the sand of the original *gezira*, the supposed building site of the first temple, was reached. This cult location was almost continually in use from Naqada IIa to the early MK. The most intriguing and numerous finds were made in temple deposits (chapter three) of the FIP / Late OK. With this, the first objective on the architecture of the temple was realized (van Haarlem 2009).

The excavation of the cemetery is not finished, particularly for the deeper levels (see section 2.3.3.1; van Haarlem / Rose 2009). The settlement has not been excavated extensively enough for a coherent picture (see section 2.3.3.2).

## 1.4. Research Context

### 1.4.1. Palaeo-ecology of the Region

The natural environment of Tell Ibrahim Awad is dominated by the many Nile (sub) tributaries in the area. Settlements like Tell Ibrahim Awad were largely confined to the many sandy *geziras* and natural levees (see section 1.1 and 2.2.1),

<sup>7</sup> Most of the records of Area B are, unfortunately, unavailable to me.

<sup>8</sup> After that, the standard for temple architecture and ritual is set and well documented (Cauville 2012).

as the lower plain would have been submerged during the autumnal Nile floods. Except in the northern Delta, these plains were not permanent marshlands, but only seasonally flooded (Butzer 1976: 25), and otherwise suited for farming, or at least grazing. The natural vegetation would have consisted, i.a., of papyrus and reeds, and trees like tamarisks and acacias, and several palm tree species. Domestic plants were mainly emmer wheat and barley (van Zeist 1986).

Although in Predynastic and Early Dynastic times the climate was somewhat more humid than now (Murray 1951), the annual rainfall alone would have been insufficient for farming (Figure 1.4). Consequently, river irrigation was the major element in agriculture. Failing Nile floods at the end of the OK caused widespread hunger (ca. 2550 B.C.; Stanley / Krom 2003).

Natural fauna consisted of fish, tortoises and fowl; hippopotami and gazelles were common (Boessneck / Von den Driesch 1986). No crocodile remains were found at Tell Ibrahim Awad, as one should expect to encounter in a marshy area. Domestic animals were foremost pigs, then cattle and sheep. In time, the number of sheep increased at the cost of pigs. Donkeys were used for transport (see section 5.1.4). Wild animals, particularly fish, were still a considerable source of food at Tell Ibrahim Awad (Boessneck / Von den Driesch 1992b).

#### 1.4.2. Surveys and Excavations

The Egyptian Nile Delta has traditionally been an underexplored region, compared with the archaeological activity in the Upper Egyptian Nile Valley. This has been the case since archaeological exploration started in earnest around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the great impetus earlier in that century by Napoleon's Egyptian Expedition and the decipherment of Egyptian writing by Champollion, with the notable exception of Alexandria.

The archaeological remains in Upper Egypt, generally situated in the desert near the edge of the cultivation area are as a rule more prominent and easier to be exploited than those in the Delta. Due to more intensive agriculture and a higher number of people and settlements, thick alluvial sediment layers and the nature of the ancient traces there (perishable mud brick rather than durable stone), the Delta always seemed less inviting for research<sup>9</sup>, with a few exceptions like the work carried out at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century on behalf of the Egypt Exploration Fund by W.M.F. Petrie (Petrie 1885; Petrie / Smith 1886, Petrie / Griffith 1888) and E. Naville (Naville 1885, 1887, 1890, 1891) and later again at Tanis / San el-Hagar (Montet 1947-1960)<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> In Reeves 2000, only seven out of the 70 sites mentioned are situated in the Delta.

<sup>10</sup> Up to the present continued by the French Mission there (Leclère 2015).

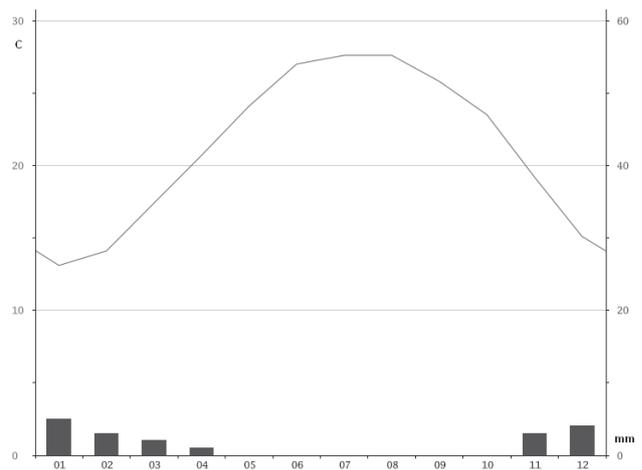


Figure 1.4. Rainfall in the Cairo region (from <https://climate-data.org>).

This picture only changed around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when more and more missions started to work in this region. One of the first was the Austrian Mission to Tell ed-Dab'a (Bietak 1975). The extensive research undertaken by this mission in the Eastern Delta paved the way for further exploration in this specific area. The Delta landscape was characterised by several main Nile branches and numerous minor ones, continually changing their courses. In the river bends, sand, carried in the water, was deposited as the current slowed down there, forming so-called turtlebacks, or geziras. These were preferred for settlement in this marshy region. The German excavations at Qantir / Piramesse focused on the same area (since 1981; Pusch, et al., 2017). Also active in the Central Delta is the German Archaeological Institute at Buto / Tell el-Fara'in (Hartung / Ballet 2010).

Between 1984 and 1988, an extensive survey has been conducted by E.C.M. van den Brink for the AUSE in an area of 30 x 30 kms around the town of Faqus, as part of a project called 'Regional Diachronic Investigations into Settlement Patterns in the Eastern Nile Delta'. This project was set up firstly to gain insight into the development of settlements and the diversity and functionality of the sites in the Eastern Delta, and secondly to investigate the nature, intensity and productivity of land-use, starting from a reconstruction of the ancient ecological environment, i.e. the hydrology system.

This survey has located about 90 potentially interesting archaeological sites (about one per 10 km<sup>2</sup>), ranging from the Predynastic to the Roman period (van den Brink 1987). Special attention was paid to the past and present geomorphology and hydrology of the area (van Wesemael 1986; Sewuster 1987; de Wit 1988; Markus 1990).

In 1987, an Italian team conducted a comparable survey to the northwest of the first survey area, resulting in the location of more than 30 sites, and finally in the excavation

of Tell el-Farkha by a Polish mission (Chłodnicki 1991; Chłodnicki / Ciałowicz 2012). The French excavations at Tell el-Iswid (South) are already mentioned (section 1.3). Finally, the Egypt Exploration Society adopted the Delta Survey-project<sup>11</sup> since 1997, resulting in excavations in Sais (Wilson 2006) and Minufiyeh (Rowland / Zakrzewski 2008).

### **1.5. The Structure of This Study**

As the temple at Tell Ibrahim Awad presents the archaeological context for the votive and cult objects, it is introduced in chapter two, preceded by the questions and aims of the research presented here. Included is a general introduction to the physical environment of the region and a survey of the excavation methods used. The chronology of the site proper is extensively discussed here as well. The concluding part of this chapter surveys the other discoveries, mainly in the settlement's cemetery.

The following chapter three is devoted to a definition and explanation of the several kinds of deposits, focusing on votive offering deposits. General aspects involved in the donating of votive objects are discussed. It concludes with a discussion of how the objects were deposited where they were found.

In chapter four, more specific physical aspects of the votive objects are treated, and a functional analysis is attempted of the different object categories encountered in the deposits and their specific meaning. A candidate for the patron deity of the temple is discussed.

A comparison follows of the Tell Ibrahim Awad finds with similar cases in Egypt and abroad, mainly the neighbouring Levant.

In order to arrive at a better understanding of the temple ritual, it is attempted to determine the possible uses of the various cultic vessels and other potential cult objects from the Deposits in the temple (chapter five).

The study is continued with a tentative reconstruction of the way the faience tiles discovered might have been used in the temple architecture, compared to other contemporary temple sites (chapter six).

The work is concluded with a summary of the results and general conclusions pertaining to the objects and the temple itself (chapter seven), and an extensive catalogue of the source material, split up in non-ceramic and ceramic categories. A bibliography, concordance, lists of Plates and figures and indexes complete the volume.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.deltasurvey.ees.ac.uk>