

SOME NOTES ON THE GREAT ENCLOSURE WALL
OF TELL EL-MASKHUTA*

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Tell el-Maskhuta, investigated by the archaeological expedition from the National Research Council of Italy ISPC, is characterised by a huge enclosure wall. The recent research raises the issue of its purpose. The enclosure is described and the history of the studies is presented. In addition, the topic of city walls in ancient Egypt and their function is addressed.

Keywords: Tell el-Maskhuta; Wadi Tumilat; enclosure wall; fortresses; Egyptian Delta

1. THE TELL EL-MASKHUTA SITE AMIDST NEW FINDINGS, DOUBTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Tell el-Maskhuta site, which has been investigated for some years by the archaeological expedition of the National Research Council of Italy (CNR - ISPC), raises numerous questions, due to its strategic position, its breadth and a legacy of, not always completely clear, data concerning investigations on the ground previously conducted since the end of the nineteenth century. The research team looks at the site and its insertion in the specific environment of the Wadi Tumilat, one of the major links between Egypt and the Levant from very ancient times, whose strategic profile was accentuated thanks to the presence of the so-called Canal of the Pharaohs.¹ One of the primary questions, addressed in the first stages of field work, concerns the large enclosure wall that characterizes the archaeological site, its extension, its characteristics and its function, as well as its relationship with other nearby buildings. The wall has been investigated to a limited extent, together with some adjacent structures.

2. THE GREAT ENCLOSURE WALL OF TELL EL-MASKHUTA

The archaeological expedition of the CNR² has dedicated, from the beginning, a considerable commitment to the exploration and documentation of the enclosure wall, which is the most notable artefact still evident on the site, in the knowledge that it is clearly an important key to understanding Tell el-Maskhuta. The large enclosure wall is visible, as a whole, from Google Earth images, immediately south of the large tell, a sandy relief that borders the entire northern part of the site, along the Ismailia Canal. Although mostly underground, the wall constitutes a large rectangle that extends from north to south with a known extension of about 300 × 200 m. The south side was located in the area of the current village, as showed by recent excavations carried out by the Supreme Council of Antiquities.³

* I thank the Egyptian authorities of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and the Supreme Council of Antiquities for allowing the CNR archaeological expedition to work in Tell el-Maskhuta.

¹ On this, see Posener 1938; Redmount 1995; Bresciani 1998; Aubert 2004. Recently: Marcolongo 2019 and Squillace 2019.

² Capriotti Vittozzi - Angelini 2017; Capriotti Vittozzi - Angelini - Iacoviello 2018; 2019; Angelini *et al.* 2020.

³ I thank Dr. Moustafa Hassan, Director of the Ismailia antiquities zone, for this information.

From the same images, a wall that connects the east wall with the west one is clearly visible, a little further north than the middle of the enclosure wall itself: the large wall would therefore be composed of a large, roughly square enclosure in the south part (SEW = Square Enclosure Wall), and a further rectangular enclosure to the north (NEW = Northern Extension Wall) (fig. 1).

The existence of the enclosure has been mentioned since the first archaeological explorations of the site, but never precisely documented: E. Naville⁴ described it, also through a table (fig. 2) while J. Clédat⁵ (fig. 3) recognized the existence of an extension to the north (NEW), also visible in satellite images.⁶

In 2016, field investigations revealed part of the head of SEW's north wall, called SEW-N (fig. 4).

It should be noted that the preliminary study of the site through satellite images had suggested the existence of a northern wall of the NEW, also documented by Clédat, immediately south of the great tell: the surprise revealed by the excavations was, at least until now, an absence of facilities in that area.⁷ The track observed through the images from Google Earth, would therefore correspond to an absence of structures (a negative track so to speak), unlike the other sides of the walls where the Google Earth images reveal quite clearly the development of the large enclosure wall, ascertained by excavation tests. The observation of the terrain, combined with the analysis of the images resulting from the radar sensors of Cosmo-SkyMed (Italian Space Agency) (fig. 5) instead led to the recognition of a possible large wall under the large sandy curb that rises immediately north of the 'negative track'. It came to light at the end of 2017: a huge wall (BNW = Big Northern Wall), 8 meters high above ground, covered by a sand dune (fig. 6); the wall cuts into the greater relief of the high tell. These data are combined with those deriving from geophysical surveys conducted in 2016 (fig. 7), which identified a large structure under the large tell that runs north of the site, probably corresponding to the northwest corner of the wall and therefore to the western section of the great north wall discovered in 2017.

The huge northern wall (BNW), which seems to reach a thickness of about 22 m, requires further investigation. However, it is different from the other sections investigated, both for the type of masonry (for example, the consistency of the bricks appears more friable), and for the measurements and higher elevation.

During the 2016 and 2017 archaeological campaigns, the CNR expedition was also able to highlight the head of sections of the west wall both in the southern part (SEW-W) and in its northern extension (NEW-W), which is much lower than the great north wall (BNW), and a part of the east wall (NEW-E) (fig. 8).

The relationship between the roughly square part of the southern enclosure (SEW) and the northern part (NEW) is to be clarified, however, thanks to the excavations made near the intersection along the west side, a notable difference was observed in the type of masonry: the northern part would be a later extension of the square enclosure wall (SEW). The latter

⁴ Naville 1885.

⁵ Clédat 1921.

⁶ Capriotti Vittozzi - Angelini 2017.

⁷ Up to now, we have been limited to a test of the area where the north wall was supposed to be, but a complete absence of artefacts was found.

(SEW) could be dated to the Late Period (maybe XXVI dynasty) and the northern extension (NEW) most probably to the Ptolemaic period, or maybe to the XXX dynasty.⁸ Further questions are posed by the great north wall (BNW), whose west corner would be under the great tell. It could therefore even represent a different phase and/or a different function. The absence of structures immediately behind, on the south side, of BNW is remarkable: an area left free after, perhaps, the useful soil or waste materials had been used to erect the wall itself. This creates a different situation than the other areas explored so far, where various structures are located close to the enclosure wall.

E. Naville, the first archaeologist who investigated the site, believed that the enclosure wall of Tell el-Maskhuta was that of a temple, having found the remains of the temple in the southwestern part of the area.⁹ Subsequently, however, the Tell el-Maskhuta enclosure was generally defined as a fortress: the massive presence of a large masonry quadrilateral, in a border area, controlling communication and commercial exchange routes of vital importance, suggested an almost obvious answer. The Wadi Tumilat, as well as the whole area of the north-eastern border of Egypt, is characterized by fortresses, as already evidenced by ancient sources.¹⁰ The great wall of Tell el-Maskhuta has therefore often been interpreted as one of the fortresses of the Saite era known along the roads of Palestine. J. Clédat already defined the walls of Tell el-Maskhuta: «une très grande citadelle, certainement la plus forte de l'isthme». He describes the enclosure wall with some precision, first documenting the existence of an extension to the north, beyond the north wall of the square enclosure described by E. Naville (SEW).¹¹ J. Holladay, since his published volume of the investigations on the ground, believes that the enclosure, for him still coinciding with the roughly square one found by Naville, would be a fortification datable to the Saite period.¹² The definition of 'temenos wall' and what it refers to (perhaps simply a reference to Naville's definition) is less clear in the relatively recent publication of the geophysical surveys conducted on the site.¹³ Contrary to the extensive existing bibliography, F. Leclère identifies the large wall as the boundary of a *temenos*¹⁴. G. Mumford, in his study about Tell Tebilla, still counts Tell el-Maskhuta among the fortresses, taking into consideration only the roughly square southern part (SEW).¹⁵

As, since 2015, the excavation and study of the great wall has progressed, doubts have grown that it was a real fortress: the wall has no battlements and is not crowned by protections of any kind, nor do traces of superstructures of perishable materials appear in the excavated sections. In the excavated parts there are not even bastions, but only slight overhangs. As it currently appears, the great wall of Tell el-Maskhuta does not exactly seem to be that of a fortress. This does not mean, however, that a fortress did not exist on the site. The following notes represent an attempt to illuminate existing data and draw guidelines for future research.

⁸ Capriotti Vittozzi - Angelini - Iacoviello 2019, 177.

⁹ Naville 1885, 2-10: the enclosure would have had walls more than 7 m (8 yards) thick and the space inside was calculated as 55,000 square yards, therefore more than 200 m on each side.

¹⁰ See, for example, Monnier 2010, 74-85; Hoffmeier 2013.

¹¹ Clédat 1921, 184. Clédat reports measurements of about 320 m in length, 200 m wide and an average of 12 m thick. He compares the walls of Maskhuta with those of Tanis, Sais and Pelusium, considering them fortifications: Clédat 1923, 185.

¹² Holladay 1982, 21; as yet in other subsequent publications (see Leclère 2008, 555, fn. 77).

¹³ Banning 2015.

¹⁴ Leclère 2008, 555.

¹⁵ Mumford 2013, 46.

3. NOTES ON THE ENCLOSURE WALLS OF ANCIENT EGYPT

In recent years, scientific interest has developed in the great enclosure walls of ancient Egypt. A diversification between construction types and techniques can be recognized, without, however, the ability to always define the function with certainty.

Ancient Egypt also handed down considerable defensive constructions, fortresses erected with specifically defensive and military purposes.¹⁶ E.F. Morris¹⁷ recognized in these constructions, during the New Kingdom, different typologies: border fortresses/citadels, forts and fortified administrative headquarters. These buildings have been identified on the borders of Egyptian state territory or in the areas defined as being in the sphere of Egyptian influence.

The existence of enclosure walls in Egypt, which appears from the most ancient iconographic sources, has been the subject of reflection and debate: of particular interest is a set of studies edited by B.J. Kemp, who, in his introduction, underlines how «ancient Egypt differs from the stereotype that walling is an expression of fear».¹⁸ N. Moeller, analysing the phenomenon in the third millennium BC, highlighted its symbolic significance.¹⁹ K. Spence, illustrating the enclosure wall of the second millennium BC, underlines how they are above all templars and how «massive walls were not necessarily constructed as a response to proximate threat, nor was the scale of walls always proportionate to any threat that did exist».²⁰ Finally, Kemp, presenting the phenomenon during the first millennium BC, reflects on the fact that the great temple walls, sometimes assimilated to fortresses, such as the case of Medinet Habu, were subject to ebbs and flows of the presence of centuries-old buildings such as 'intrusive houses', for example in Tell el-Balamun.²¹

The temple walls are a characteristic of Egyptian architecture: the sacred space had to be clearly separated from the profane and it had to be accessible, in its most hidden part, only to the priests. These enclosure walls, sometimes of considerable extension, could nonetheless have other functions: the profane advanced and infiltrated, especially on some occasions, taking advantage of particular historical situations or following the search for protection by groups of the population in particular emergencies and in cases of risk of external aggression.²² However, these walls were not erected with the main purpose of defence, but in order to constitute a powerfully visible sign of the extraneousness of the sacred. Some scholars have recognized a defensive intent in the proliferation of huge temple walls during the XXX dynasty, given the turbulent period from an international political point of view.²³ On the other hand, the case of the temple of Medinet Habu and its entrance in the form of a bastion is well known.²⁴ A study by F. Monnier returns to illuminate this coincidence of temple constructions with typical characteristics of fortresses,²⁵ to demonstrate how the two

¹⁶ A.J. Spencer 1979, 104-110; Monnier 2010; Vogel 2010.

¹⁷ Morris 2005.

¹⁸ Kemp 2004a.

¹⁹ Moeller 2004.

²⁰ Spence 2004, 270.

²¹ Kemp 2004b, 276.

²² Thiers 1995.

²³ Zivie-Coche 2008. On the remarkable case of El-Kab, see Clarke 1921; Limme 2008; Hendrickx - Huyge - Newton 2010.

²⁴ For example in Spence 2004, 266.

²⁵ Monnier 2014, 199, no. 26; 203, ns. 47-48.

genres can overlap. Ancient documents often maintain a certain equivocation:²⁶ let's consider in particular a document from Armant, from the time of Ptolemy Philometor, where it speaks of the 'great wall of Thebes', leaving it uncertain whether it is a city or a temple wall, but it seems likely that it is the latter.²⁷

Ch. Thiers,²⁸ regarding the profane use of the great temple walls, writes:

«Les enceintes des temples semblent donc avoir été fort appréciées pour leur caractère défensif et avoir plus ou moins joué le rôle de forteresse. Cela ne paraît en rien étonnant, les temples marquant fortement le paysage de la vallée du Nil par leur caractère monumental et leur localisation généralement urbaine permettant, à l'abri des murs d'enceinte, de contrôler la ville et la campagne environnante. Les forts égyptiens ont été construits durant les périodes de conquêtes aux marches de l'Égypte et dans les contrées annexées, mais le pays proprement dit n'a pas réellement connu de telles constructions. Ceci explique que les conquérants, asiatiques ou grecs, arrivés en Égypte, aient vu dans les temples les seuls lieux capables de leur assurer une installation suffisamment sûre et une défense relativement aisée».

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²⁶ Among other things, on the ambiguous use of the terms 'jnb' and 'sbty' see Lombardi 2011-13.

²⁷ Thiers 1995, 503-504.

²⁸ Thiers 1995, 507-508.

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Fig. 1 - The site of Tell el-Maskhuta by Google Earth.

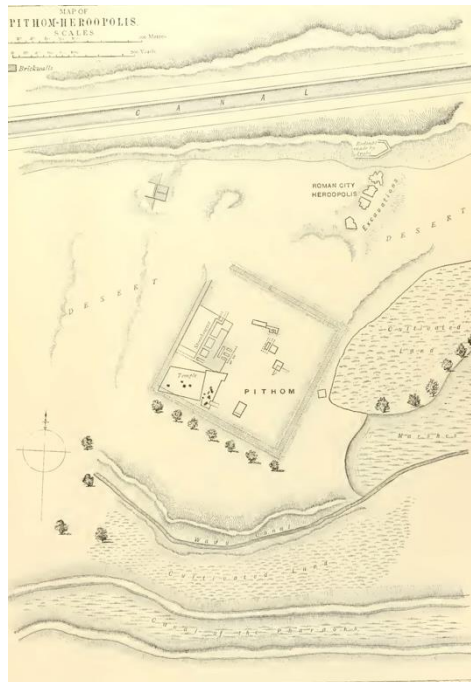


Fig. 2 - The enclosure wall of Tell el-Maskhuta (Neville 1885).

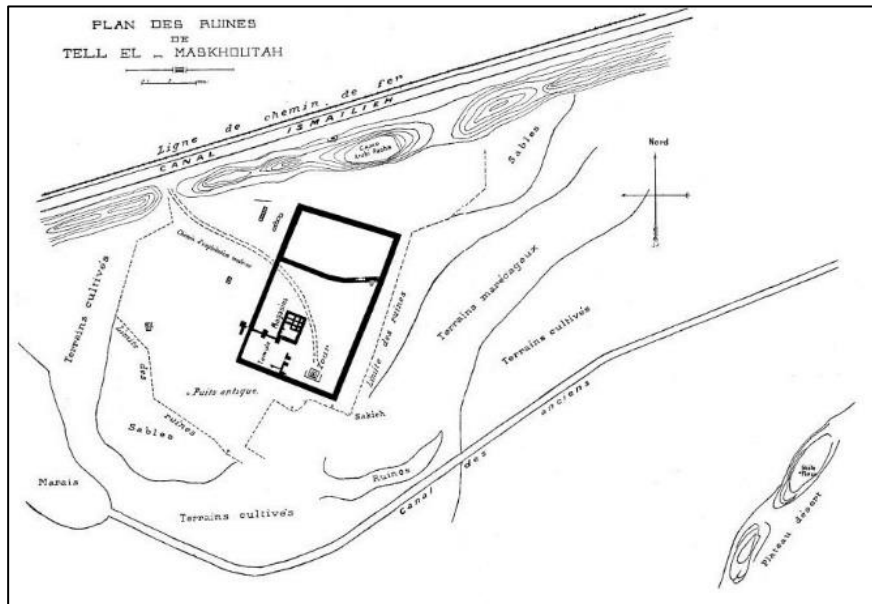


Fig. 3 - The enclosure wall of Tell el-Maskhuta (Clédât 1921).



Fig. 4 - SEW-N discovered in 2016.

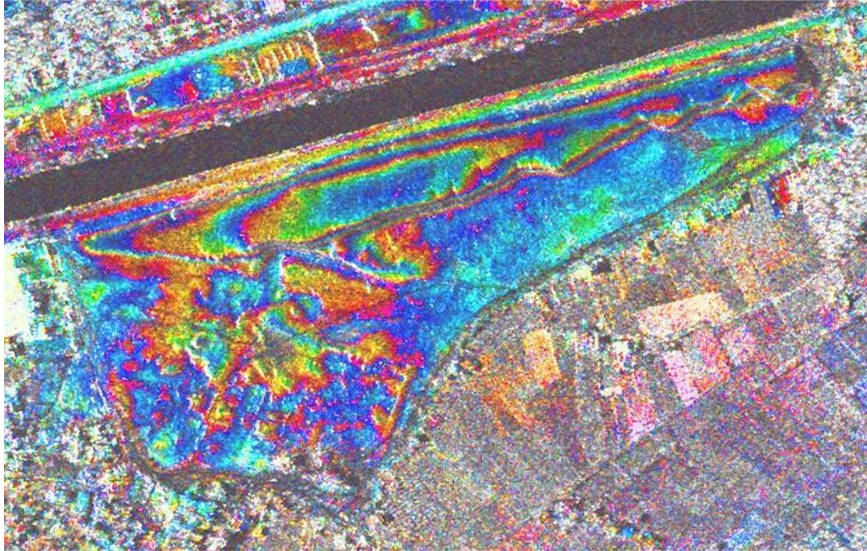


Fig. 5 - Interferogram of Tell el-Maskhuta and surrounding area produced from two CSK satellite images acquired on 1 and 5 February 2014. The coloured fringes indicate topographic height variations (data processed by S. Gusmano, C. Stewart, M. Fea).



Fig. 6 - The big northern wall (BNW) discovered in 2017.

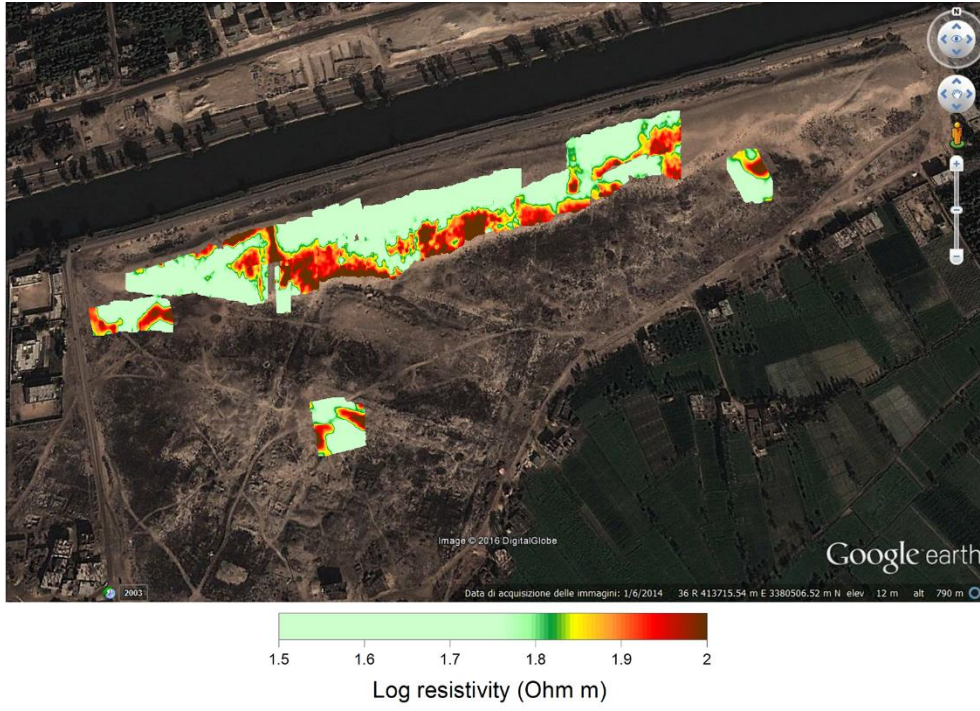


Fig. 7 - Geophysical survey results (by M. Cozzolino and V. Gentile).

Map of recent discoveries in Tell el-Maskhuta (CNR-MEM)

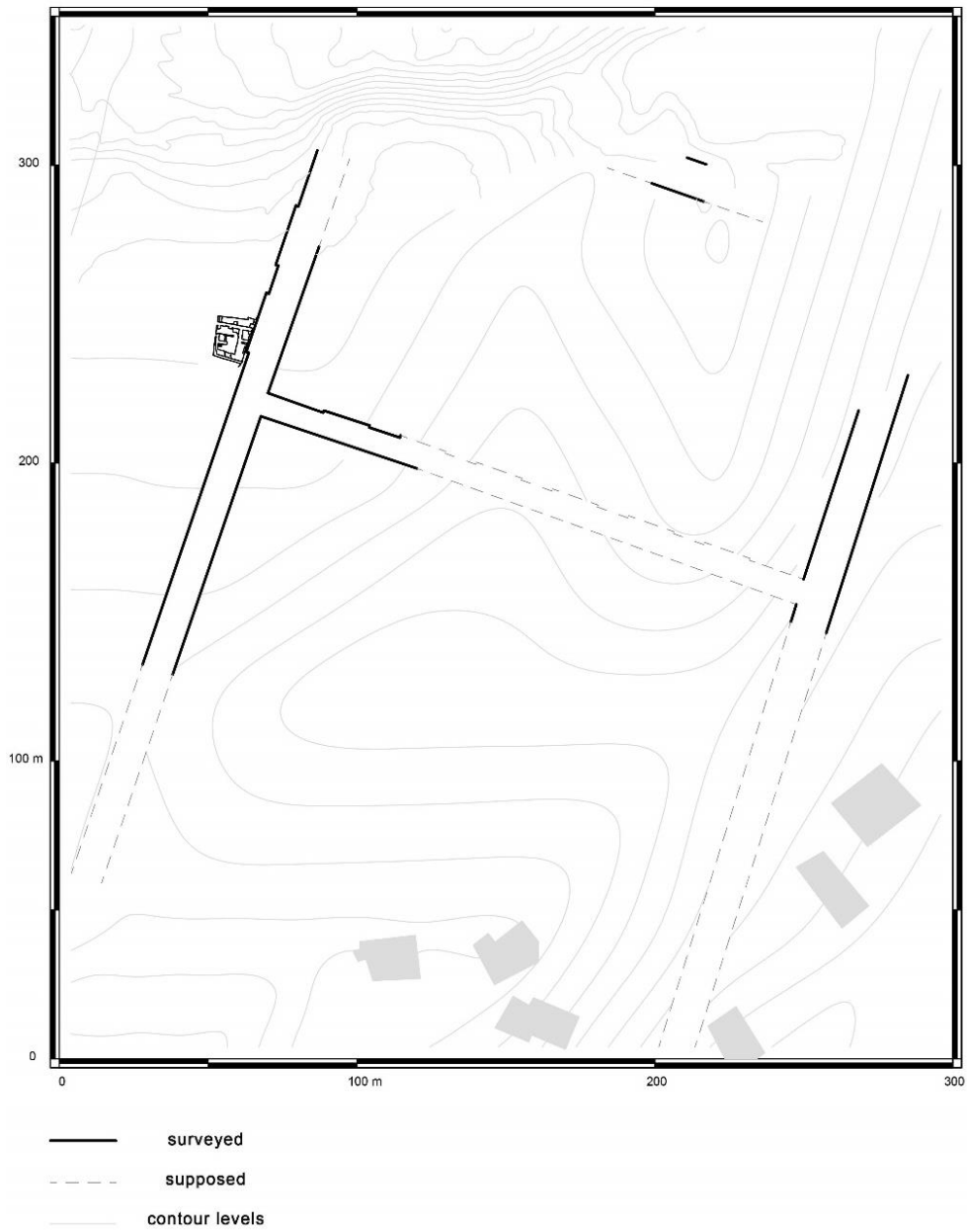


Fig. 8 - The excavations in Tell el-Maskhuta (map by A. Angelini).