



Preliminary Report on the First Season of the Tell Nabasha Project, Autumn 2015

DOI:

[10.1553/AEundL26](https://doi.org/10.1553/AEundL26)

Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Nielsen, N., Gasperini, V., & Mamedow, M. (2017). Preliminary Report on the First Season of the Tell Nabasha Project, Autumn 2015. *Ägypten und Levante*, 26, 65-74. <https://doi.org/10.1553/AEundL26>

Published in:

Ägypten und Levante

Citing this paper

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PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE FIRST SEASON OF THE TELL NABASHA PROJECT, AUTUMN 2015

Nicky Nielsen, Valentina Gasperini and Mandy Mamedow¹

Abstract: *A team from the University of Liverpool undertook the first season of fieldwork at the site of Tell Nabasha near the modern village of el-Hosayneya in the North-eastern Delta in the autumn of 2015. After mapping the eastern portion of the tell, the team conducted test excavations revealing domestic architecture dateable to the transitional period between the Late Period and the early Ptolemaic. More than 200 small finds, as well as 600 diagnostic sherds of pottery and whole vessels were recorded. The ceramic corpus was largely domestic in nature but included a smaller amount of Phoenician and Hellenistic imports.*

Key-Words: Settlement archaeology; Delta archaeology; Late Period; Ptolemaic Period; Tell Nabasha; Tell Fara'un; Imet; Persian rider; Sculptors models

I. Introduction and Previous Exploration

The first season of the Tell Nabasha Survey Project was conducted by a team from the University of Liverpool between September 21st and October 16th, 2015. The aim of the project was to conduct exploratory excavation of the eastern portion of the *tell* in order to determine the depth and type of archaeological deposits in preparation for a non-invasive survey of the remaining *tell* areas planned for 2016. Secondary aims included the documentation of archaeological features exposed by modern construction on the edges of the site and also the cleaning and recording of the extremely damaged

granite shrine of Amasis II located on the western edge of the site.

The first significant archaeological survey and exploration of archaeological remains at Tell Nabasha (ancient Imet, also known as Tell Fara'un and Tell Bedawi, figs 1–2) was conducted by Flinders Petrie in February 1886. Following rumours of a 'great stone',² which was standing at a *tell* south of Tanis, Petrie travelled to the area finding a large *temenos* wall containing two temples, one provisionally dated to the Ramesside period and the second (smaller) to the Late Period (fig 3). The 'great stone' was found to be a badly weathered red granite shrine built by Amassiss II (570–526 BC). Petrie also explored a Late Period-Ptolemaic village which had been partially uncovered by *sebakkin* activity west of the *temenos* as well as an extensive cemetery on the edges of the *tell*.³ Among Petrie's most notable discoveries was a large quantity of Ramesside inscriptional material both from the temple and the cemetery and in particular a pair of Middle Kingdom sphinxes, probably reused in the gate of the *temenos*.⁴ On the basis of his work at the site, Petrie hypothesised that the larger temple at Tell Nabasha, in particular during the New Kingdom, was a cult centre of the goddess Wadjet. Petrie also suggested that the smaller temple structure and the shrine should be ascribed to the worship of this goddess. Modern scholars have shown his assumption – at least regarding the temple and shrine of Amassiss II⁵ – to be erroneous, demonstrating that these were dedicated to Min⁶ and that

¹ The project is grateful to the Ministry of State Antiquities for permission to undertake the work and for their support throughout the mission. Particular gratitude is due to the former Minister of State Antiquities, Dr Mamdouh al-Damati, the Director of the Permanent Committee, Dr Hany Abu Elazm, the Director of the Zagazig Inspectorate, Dr Hesham Abd el-Moemen, the Director of the North Sharqiyah Inspectorate, Mr Hany Fahim and our inspector Mr Amr Naiel who kindly shared his experience of the site with us during the work. We would also like to thank *reis* Omar Farouk and Ramadan Ab el-Rady, as well as Ahmed

el-Hamagi, Ahmed Saad and Abdallah. The project was only possible through the generous support of the Gerald Averay Wainwright Fund, University of Oxford and Herlovanersamfundet's Legater. The team comprised Valentina Gasperini, Nicky Nielsen, Mandy Mamedow, Diana Teodorova Nikolova and Christopher Bebbington.

² PETRIE 1892, 64.

³ PETRIE 1888.

⁴ PETRIE 1888, 29–30.

⁵ PETRIE 1888, 13.

⁶ RAZANAJAO 2009.



Fig. 1 Map of the Eastern Nile Delta showing the location of Tell Nabasha (Drawing N. Nielsen)

the local triad during the later occupation of the site most likely comprised Min, Wadjet and Harpocrates,⁷ a combination of deities also evidenced during the Ptolemaic period at the nearby site of San el-Hagar/Tanis.⁸ Successive missions by the EAO/SCA in the 1970's and 1980's excavated the cemetery area, as well as further settlement remains now located under the modern village of el-Hosayneya.⁹

The last mission by the MSA was conducted in the spring and summer of 2015 by Mr Amr Naiel of the Faqus Inspectorate and revealed a possible Late Period-Ptolemaic industrial complex immediately west of the University of Liverpool concession. In recent times the unexcavated areas of the *tell* have suffered from sporadic looting, evidenced

by large pits in and around the *tell* area. As a result of this and the urban development of the village, few archaeological remains persist above ground-level.

II. Excavation of Trench 1

The 2015 season was predominately focused on the eastern portion of the *tell* where Petrie identified domestic structures dating to the mid-Ptolemaic period, with walls of the houses still standing above ground, having been cleaned by *sebbakhin* activity.¹⁰ In his publication of the site, Petrie noted that walls belonging to earlier structures could be seen underlying the standing remains. Soundings conducted by M. E. el-Mussalami in 1976 also

⁷ RAZANAJAO 2010, 370.

⁸ See for instance Stela British Museum EA1054.

⁹ MUSTAFA 1988a, 141-149, MUSTAFA 1988b and RAZANAJAO, 2014, 48-58.

¹⁰ PETRIE 1888, 25.

identified Late Period to early Ptolemaic architecture in the area.¹¹ The location of T1 was determined partially on the basis of a concentrated scatter of well-preserved ceramic material as well as the exposure of a section of mud brick wall by a modern construction cut c. two meters east of the pottery scatter. The trench was initially intended as a 2 x 5m sondage, although this was later expanded to a 5 x 5m grid (fig 4).

The entire *tell* is heavily overgrown with *halfa* grass which when removed, revealed a layer of loose topsoil with vegetation remains, some modern material but also ancient pottery (C004) to a depth of approximately 0.1 m. Following the removal of C004, a mixed deposit (C005) was identified in the eastern portion of the trench, while in the western section, the remains of a mud brick wall running west-east (C007) appeared after the removal of C004.

C005 constituted a construction fill, containing large quantities of mixed pottery and small finds dating to the period between the fourth and the third century BC. Following the removal of C005 and the clearing of C007, the trench was expanded three meters north-east in order to further identify structures, which appeared in the northern section of the trench. Following the removal of the topsoil, several other walls were identified, notably C012, running south-north and joining C007, and made from similar dark, compact mud bricks. A parallel construction (C016), made from lighter coloured sandier brick material and in places also of darker, more compact mud brick was also identified. A structural feature built against the west side of C012 was also cleared, comprising a mud and plaster 'basin' (C011, fig 5).

A hard-packed surface of stamped mud (C013 and C014) surrounded C011 and a single small

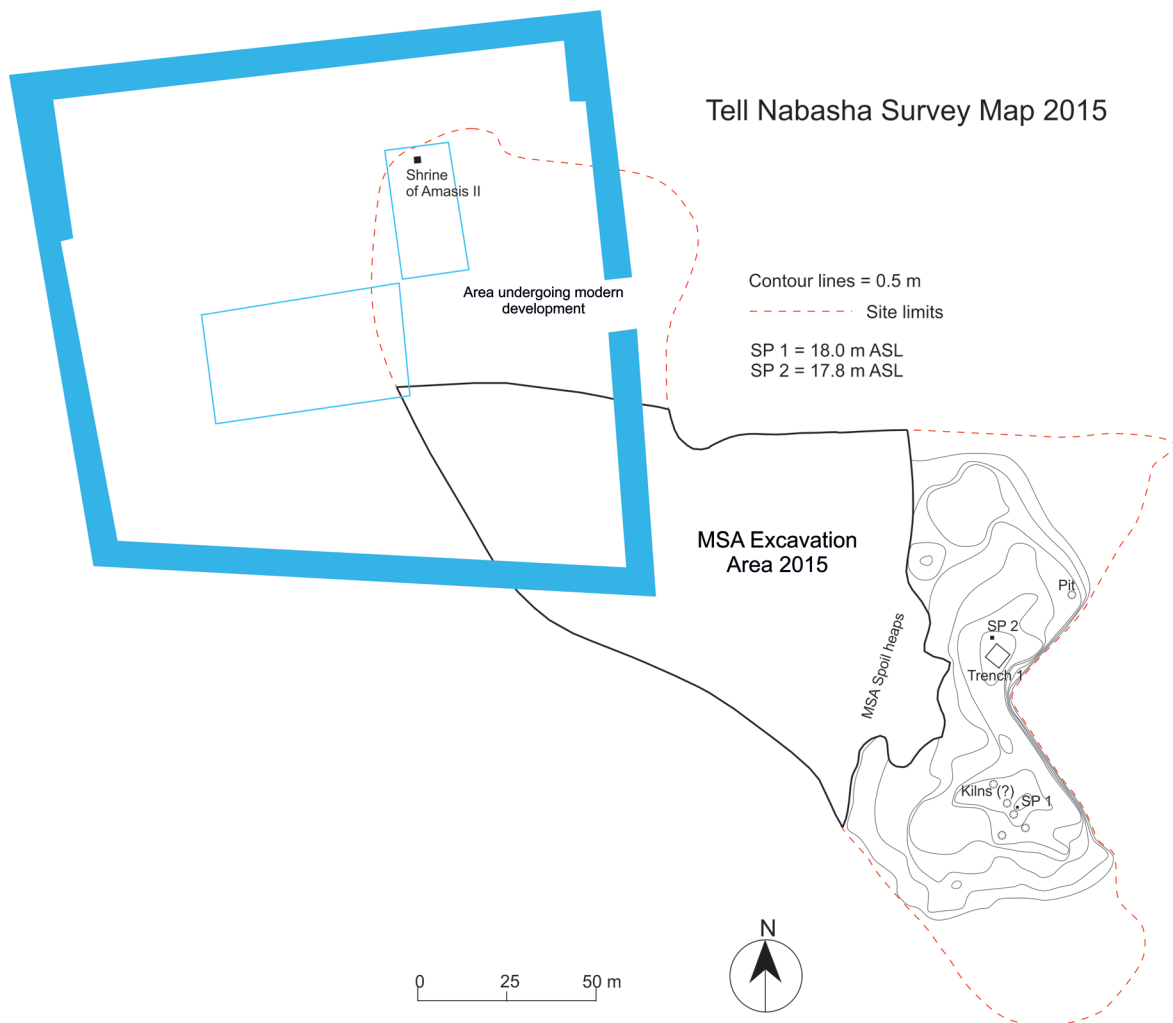


Fig. 2 Topographic map of the University of Liverpool concession on the eastern portion of the archaeological site (Drawing N. Nielsen, M. Mamedow and C. Bebbington)

¹¹ MUSTAFA 1988a, 142–144.

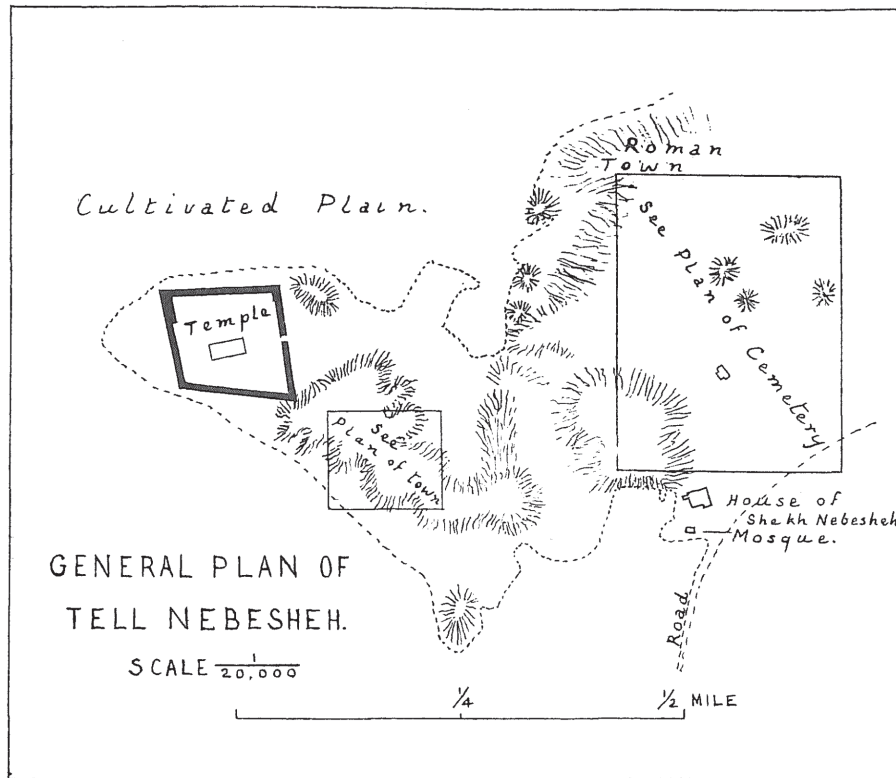


Fig. 3 Petrie's plan of Tell Nabasha (Petrie 1888, Pl. XVII)

bowl (NAB15/014/205/C) was found *in situ* leaning against the southern edge of C011. After removing C013 and C014, a mixed layer of sandy and loose soil appeared (C020) containing pottery and small finds broadly similar in date to the material recovered from C005, as well as limestone cobbles and chips along with fragments of mud bricks (possibly a collapse from C007 and C012). A further collapse (C021) was identified along the north edge of C007. Along the western edge of C012, north of C011, another layer of sandy soil containing some remains of ash and charcoal (C019) was removed. It revealed a largely complete globular cooking pot (NAB15/019/268/C, fig 6) most likely dating between the fourth and third century BC standing directly on a hard packed surface (most likely identical to C020). After the removal of the collapse layer C021, layer C020 appeared to continue underlying C021 along the northern edge of the wall C007. In this area, and along the western edge of the trench, the layer C020 contained three ash deposits (C028, C029 and C032) with remains of burnt organic material (bones), entirely burnt fragments of ceramic vessels as well as fragments of vessels that show traces of light scorching on the exterior surface. These deposits are most likely to be interpreted as

hearths and may be related to the ashy deposit found packed around NAB15/019/268/C.

In the north-western corner of T1 a compact deposit of dense mud mixed with limestone chips without any structural features was identified as a possible collapse of a mud brick wall (C023). In-between the two parallel walls (C012 and C016) and south of C023 a densely packed layer of light-coloured, sandy silt with limited pottery and small finds and no structural features was identified and removed. Towards the end of the excavation, an earlier mud brick structure underlying C016 was identified (C030). This wall may be contemporary with another mud brick structure identified in the south-western corner of the trench underlying C007 (C031). In the north-eastern portion of T1, another densely packed layer of light-coloured, sandy silt resembling C015 was identified and removed. The layer contained few ceramics and small finds, but a small section of mud brick wall (C018) running parallel to C012 was identified in the north-eastern corner of the trench. However, its relation to other structural components in the trench cannot be ascertained due to its limited exposure. During the removal of C017, a further lens of burnt material (C024) was discovered along the northern edge of the trench containing burnt

organic material (animal bones and charcoal) and fragments of slightly burnt pottery.

The archaeological investigation in T1 revealed the remains of architectural features made from mud brick lying immediately beneath the surface, which in combination with the comparative lack of modern material in the area makes it suitable for non-invasive investigations, such as a magnetometry survey. This would also aid further contextualisation of the area and enable the modern investigations to be linked with Petrie's earlier observations of the site, in particular the Late Period/

Ptolemaic settlement. The limited scale of the archaeological excavations by the University of Liverpool precludes firm conclusions regarding the functions of the structures uncovered in T1. However, the location of the trench in the northern portion of the Late Period and Ptolemaic settlement documented by Petrie in 1886, as well the chronologically homogenous nature of the ceramics and small finds found by the Liverpool team suggests that the structures belong to a similar domestic complex with possible industrial activity (also suggested by large quantities of slag found in

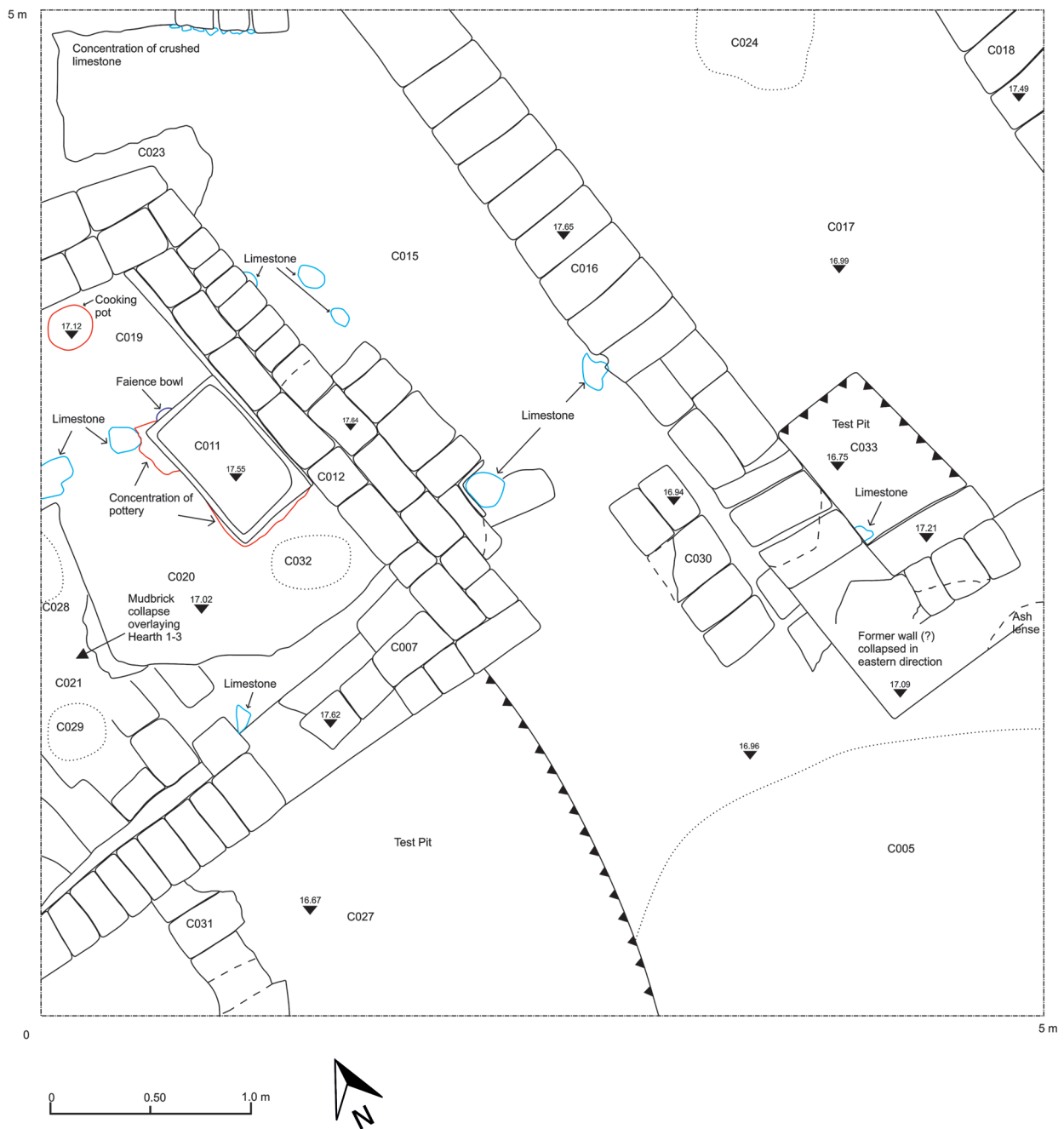


Fig. 4 Top plan of T1 (Drawing M. Mamedow and N. Nielsen)



Fig. 5 C011, a mud- and plaster basin in T1
(Photo M. Mamedow)



Fig. 6 *in situ* cooking pot NAB15/019/268/C
(Photo M. Mamedow)

T1). This possible industrial activity may also be linked to the recent discoveries of the MSA excavation 50 m west of T1, which uncovered multiple large pottery kilns and wasters dating broadly to the same period. Chronologically, the corpus of pottery and small finds from the site suggests that the structures were both occupied and subsequently abandoned in the later part of the Late Period and the early Ptolemaic between the fourth and third centuries BC.

III. Small Finds

The small finds discussed below are a representative selection of the 226 small finds registered during the season. These constitute, along with recut potsherds of which 75 were found, both the most common object categories found during the sea-

son's work and also help to illustrate aspects of both daily life and ritual.

1. Persian riders (Fig 7)

Finds no.: NAB15/005/76/S, NAB15/005/113/S, NAB15/005/225/S

Material: Ceramic

Dimensions:

NAB15/005/76/S:

l. 6.5 cm, w. 4.0 cm, th. 2.8 cm

NAB15/005/113/S:

l. 2.2 cm, w. 2.0 cm, th. 1.3 cm

NAB15/005/225/S:

l. 7.8 cm, w. 4.9 cm, th. 1.1 cm

A total of three terracotta figurines found during the 2015 season constitute depictions of a so-called 'Persian Riders', showing the distinctive head gear and beard associated with the type. The dating of the Persian riders is complex and varies from site to site.¹² However, the three riders found at Tell Nabasha are stylistically highly similar to material found at Tell Basta and dated by Vaelske¹³ to between the fourth and third centuries BC.

2. Female plaque figurines (Fig 7)

Finds no.: NAB15/005/115/S, NAB15/017/162/S

Material: Ceramic

Dimensions:

NAB15/005/115/S: l. 6.8 cm, w. 2.5 cm, th. 1.4 cm

NAB15/017/162/S: l. 6.2 cm, w. 3.8 cm, th. 2.7 cm

Two fragmented figure plaques depicting the front view of a naked female were also found in T1. As noted both by Thomas¹⁴ and Waraksa,¹⁵ these figurines are a continuation of a tradition begun during the New Kingdom, in particular the 18th Dynasty.¹⁶ NAB15/005/115/S depicts a naked female figure with her arms crossed possibly holding a baby. The pose and appearance of this figure is similar to Thomas' type P-F.2 and is broadly contemporary with Type P-F.1.¹⁷ NAB15/017/162/S is similar to Thomas' type P-F.1, naked female figure on a plain or absent background¹⁸ and can be dated to between the sixth and third century BC, although due to the relative commonality of the object, precise chronological frameworks are prob-

¹² THOMAS 2015, 30–31.

¹³ VAELSKE 2012, 13.

¹⁴ THOMAS 2015, 33–34.

¹⁵ WARAKSA 2009, 29.

¹⁶ WARAKSA 2009, 2.

¹⁷ THOMAS 2015, 34.

¹⁸ THOMAS 2015, 34.

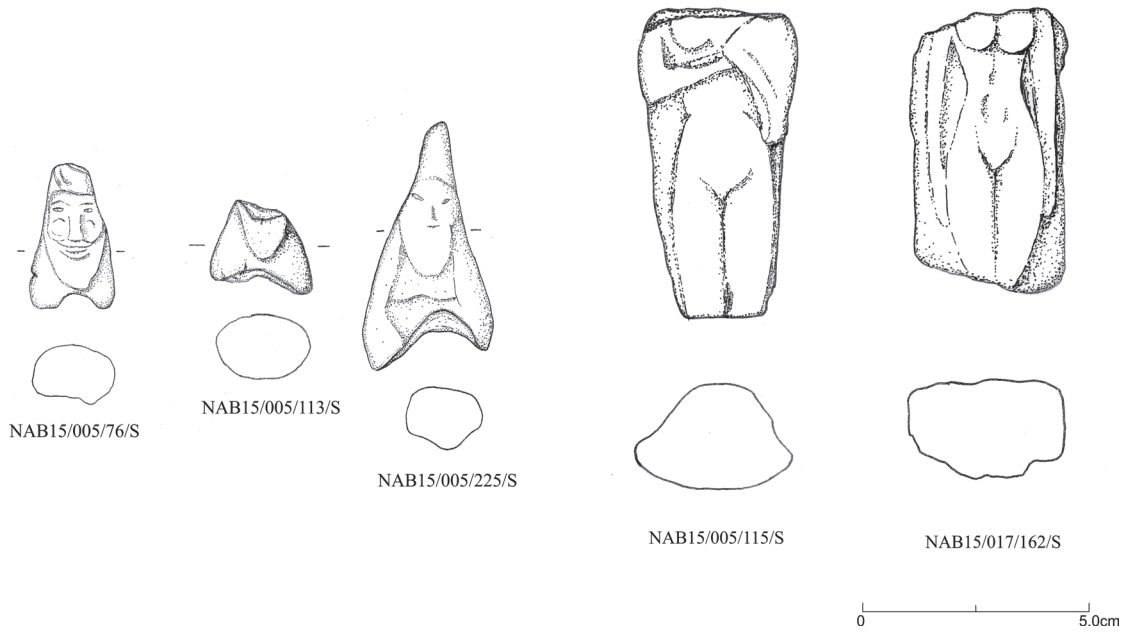


Fig. 7 Persian riders and female plaque figurines (Drawings N. Nielsen)



Fig. 8 Faience amulets (Photos V. Gasperini)

lematic to establish. Female plaque figurines are however common finds within Late Period and Ptolemaic contexts at sites such as Mendes¹⁹ and Tell el-Balamun²⁰. During earlier excavations at Tell Nabasha, Flinders Petrie also recorded a number of plaques with naked females found in House 100, located in the south-western corner of the temple *temenos* wall and dated by him to 230 BC on the basis of coins found in association with the structure.²¹

3. Amulets (Fig 8)

Finds no.: NAB15/005/38/S, NAB15/014/152/S, NAB15/020/182/S

Material: Faience

Dimensions:

NAB15/005/38/S: l. 3.5 cm, w. 2.0 cm, th. 0.5 cm

NAB15/014/152/S: l. 1.5 cm, w. 0.9 cm, th. 0.4 cm

NAB15/020/182/S: l. 1.9 cm, w. 1.0 cm, th. 0.5 cm

¹⁹ REDFORD 2010, fig. 13.10.

²⁰ SPENCER 1996, 82, pl. 78-79

²¹ PETRIE 1888, Pl. VII.

Three whole faience amulets were found during the 2015 excavation, along with two examples too fragmentary to typologically classify. NAB15/005/38/S and NAB15/014/152/S are both in the shape of *wadjet* eyes, the former made from a fine light blue faience and the latter in variously coloured faience and also in a poorer state of preservation.²² Due to the commonality of this object type throughout most periods of Pharaonic history, a specific dating is problematic although on the basis of associated material they are both most likely datable to the transitional period between the Late and Ptolemaic periods. A small amulet depicting a standing, Ibis-headed Thoth (NAB15/020/182/S) also finds parallels at several Late Period contexts in the Nile Delta.²³ During Petrie's excavations at the site, he both found and purchased large amounts of faience amulets from locals²⁴ although he recorded only few of these.

4. A Sculptor's Model of Harpocrates (Fig 9)

Finds no.: NAB14/023/221a+b/S

Material: Limestone

Dimensions:

a: l. 15.3 cm, w. 13.2 cm, th. 3.0 cm

b: l. 12.5 cm, w. 9.0 cm, th. 3.0 cm



Fig. 9 Sculptor's model of Harpocrates
(Photo M. Mamedow)

Among the most notable finds made during the 2015 season at Tell Nabasha was this fragmentary sculptor's model. The object was deposited broken in at least two pieces in the foundation fill of wall C023. It is carved from fine white limestone and shows the god Harpocrates (identified by his sidelock of youth) in profile. Stylistically and on the basis of parallel material,²⁵ the piece most likely dates to the latter part of the Late Period or the Early Ptolemaic, around the early third century BC, a date consistent with the date ranges exhibited by other small finds and the ceramic corpus from the site.

IV. Pottery

More than 600 whole vessels and diagnostic sherds were recorded during the 2015 season, the majority of these from contexts uncovered in T1. The corpus is relatively homogenous both with regards to date range and typological categorisation. The ceramics are in most cases wheel thrown and manufactured from Nile silts. Less than 1% of the corpus is manufactured from Egyptian marl clays. The excavation also yielded a small quantity of imported material, corresponding to less than 5% of the entire pottery corpus. The most common imports are Aegean transport amphorae, Levantine Torpedo jars and fine wares of Aegean origin.

The Egyptian ceramic material (fig 10) is mainly represented by domestic utilitarian shapes. The most common among these are bowls, characterised by direct rims, oblique walls with carination and a flat or modelled base (Types A and B). Small lamps were similarly coherent in terms of shape, the majority with direct rims, traces of burning on the lip of the vessel, slightly convex walls and flat bases (Type C and D). The most common type of lid found at the site are characterised by a short, flat handle, oblique wall and an outer thickened direct rim (Type E and F). Pot stands generally have direct rims, concave walls and a rounded base, with heights varying between and 10.0 and 5.0 cm (Types G and H). Basins and jars are some-

²² Both objects are similar to contemporary examples found at Tell el-Balamun (SPENCER 1996, Pl. 74.29-30) and Kom Firin (SPENCER 2008, Pl. 200).

²³ See in particular Tell el-Balamun (SPENCER 1996, Pl. 74.23) and Mendes (REDFORD 2004, Fig 61.528).

²⁴ PETRIE 1888, 24.

²⁵ TOMOUM 2005, 56-73.

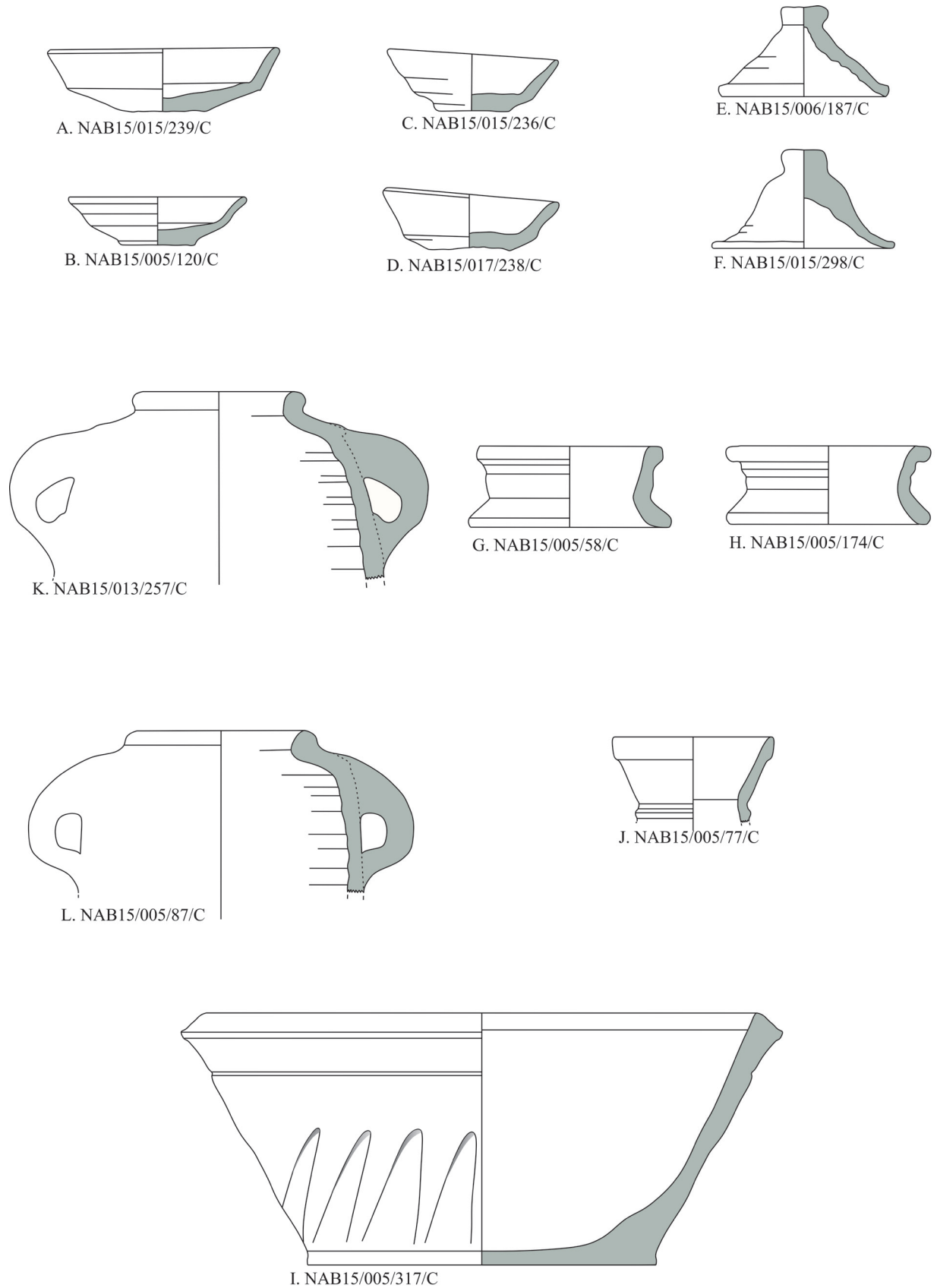


Fig. 10 Pottery Types from the 2015 season (Drawings N. Nielsen)

what more varied in terms of shape, although the basins were often characterised by an outer thickened rim and oblique wall (Type I) while the most common jar type (Type J) had direct rims, concave necks with a ridge at the junction with the shoulder and oblique walls.

The most common transport amphorae present in the corpus are Egyptian imitations of Levantine Torpedo jars (Type K and L), made either from Nile silt or marl clays. When manufactured from silt, the exterior surface was generally found covered with a beige-white slip in order to imitate the pale surface appearance of the genuine imports.

The preliminary analysis of the ceramic material from Tell Nabasha suggests a chronological horizon spanning the pre-Ptolemaic to early Ptolemaic period (in particular the fourth and third centuries BC). The sporadic occurrence of some later material from disturbed contexts, such as an Egyptian imitation of a Greek *lopas* cooking pot datable to the second and first centuries BC should also be noted.

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V. Summary

It is evident that the architectural remains uncovered at Tell Nabasha during the 2015 autumn season most likely belong to a domestic environment and should be viewed in the context of similar structures uncovered at the site both by Petrie and later EAO excavations. The material remains, both small finds and pottery, help to date these structures with relative accuracy to a period between the fourth and third centuries BC, during the latter part of the Late Period and the early Ptolemaic. The chronological relationship between the structures uncovered in T.1 and the kilns identified west of the Liverpool concession by the MSA is uncertain although preliminary investigations of the MSA trenches suggest that the kiln structures may be of a slightly later date than the architectural remains in T.1. It is possible that the industrial complex to which the kilns belong was built partially on top of domestic structures similar to those found in T.1. Future excavations, planned for the autumn of 2016, and in addition the application of non-invasive technologies will help to further contextualise the remains and create a broader picture of the settlement remains at Tell Nabasha.

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