

The architecture and the signification of the Tarkhan mastabas

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Tarkhan is the name given by Flinders Petrie to a cemetery about 60 km south of Cairo near the modern villages Turk Kufri (29°30' N 31°13'E) and Kafr Ammar, close to a place called Kafr Tarkhan (for the geography see Yoyotte 1961). Flinders Petrie excavated the cemetery in 1911 to 1912. He found more than 2000 tombs dating across almost all periods of Egyptian history, though with only a few burials of the Middle and New Kingdom. The cemetery was published in three volumes. In these volumes, the pre- and early Dynastic cemeteries are called Tarkhan. All later cemeteries are labelled Kafr Ammar. It should be noted that in terms of location there is no difference between the cemeteries called Tarkhan and Kafr Ammar. The burials of all periods lie more or less side by side. Geographically, the cemetery does consist of two parts, but not by the chronological division imposed by Petrie. There are hills in the east where there are many burials and there is in the middle a valley cutting from East to West with many smaller tombs. In general terms, the richer tombs were placed on the hills, while the Valley cemetery was more heavily used for the broader population (Ellis 1992).

The cemetery of Tarkhan is remarkable for several reasons. First, the tombs cover a wide social range, from burials most likely belonging to very poor people to tombs belonging to the highest social level of Egyptian society, with perhaps only kings and members of the royal family missing. Secondly, the preservation conditions for organic material are exceptionally good at Tarkhan, and, as a result, many wooden objects and even quantities of linen survived. This is popularly thought to be the case throughout Egypt, but in fact such quality of preservation is rare outside Thebes and some other places. Furthermore, a high proportion of the tombs belong to the time shortly before and after the formation

of the Egyptian state. Here, it is possible to follow the development of tomb architecture and burial equipment from this time to the middle of the First Dynasty, when the biggest tombs were constructed - three or perhaps four palace facade mastabas. For its time, the excavation report in three volumes reaches a high standard in archaeological publication. Most tombs are listed in a register. In the second volume (Petrie 1914) even the number of vessels found in a tomb are registered. Such precision is not common at that time. Even twenty years later, only types of pottery found in tombs were recorded, not their number, because excavators of the early twentieth century were mostly interested in typologies, not in reconstructing tomb groups and the context of burials. Finally, the tomb cards of the excavation are preserved in the Petrie Museum in the University College London, providing individual plans for almost all tombs excavated, and a means of checking the publication – a vital condition of a scientific record. Together all these sources provide a detailed picture of the cemetery and its finds.

There are several general tomb types from the time of state formation at Tarkhan. Simple surface burials form the highest number of graves found. The size of the opening in the ground for the dead varies. There are many simple shallow ovals. Some of the dead were instead placed into small underground chambers. In a few examples, these underground chambers were plastered with mud, on occasion even lined with bricks. Not much survived from the superstructures of the tombs. However, few burials intrude into older ones, and this suggests that the ground surface above most tombs bore some kind of superstructure. In the Valley cemetery, in the very middle of the whole series of burial grounds, the tombs are packed close to each other, without disturbing the adjacent burials. Furthermore, there is clearly a path visible, also a strong indication that the tombs were marked on the surface. (Petrie 1914: pl. XLVI).

In the Valley cemetery where many more simple burials were found, some small mastabas survived. These were plain cuboid structures built overground, above the shaft in which lay the skeleton and burial goods. On one side there was always a small annex, evidently the place for performing the cult of the deceased (Petrie 1914: pl. XIV). Here were found many pottery vessels, clearly left after rituals took place. There is no specific orientation for these cult chapels; some are on the east, some on the west side of the mastaba, though they are never on the north or south. The chapel annexes were always located on a long side of the rectangular mastaba building. These tombs are among the earliest in Egypt for which the cult places are so well preserved (**fig. 1**).

The period of the cemetery at Tarkhan started shortly before the First Dynasty. It grew to be one of the biggest of its time in Egypt. The reasons for this development remain rather unclear. Was there a royal residence, a local centre or a provincial capital in this region? We simply do not know. Already in the first phase some tombs are bigger than others. The first of these elite tombs are found in the North of the cemetery. These are the tombs with the numbers 412 and 414.

Tomb no. 412 (Petrie 1913: pl. LXI, tomb register; discussion: Wilkinson 1996: 72, Grajetzki 2006) belongs, at 154 x 318 x 152 (depth) cm, among the largest of the cemetery (**fig. 2**). It is perhaps the earliest one built for a local ruler or administrator, whatever the status and function of the

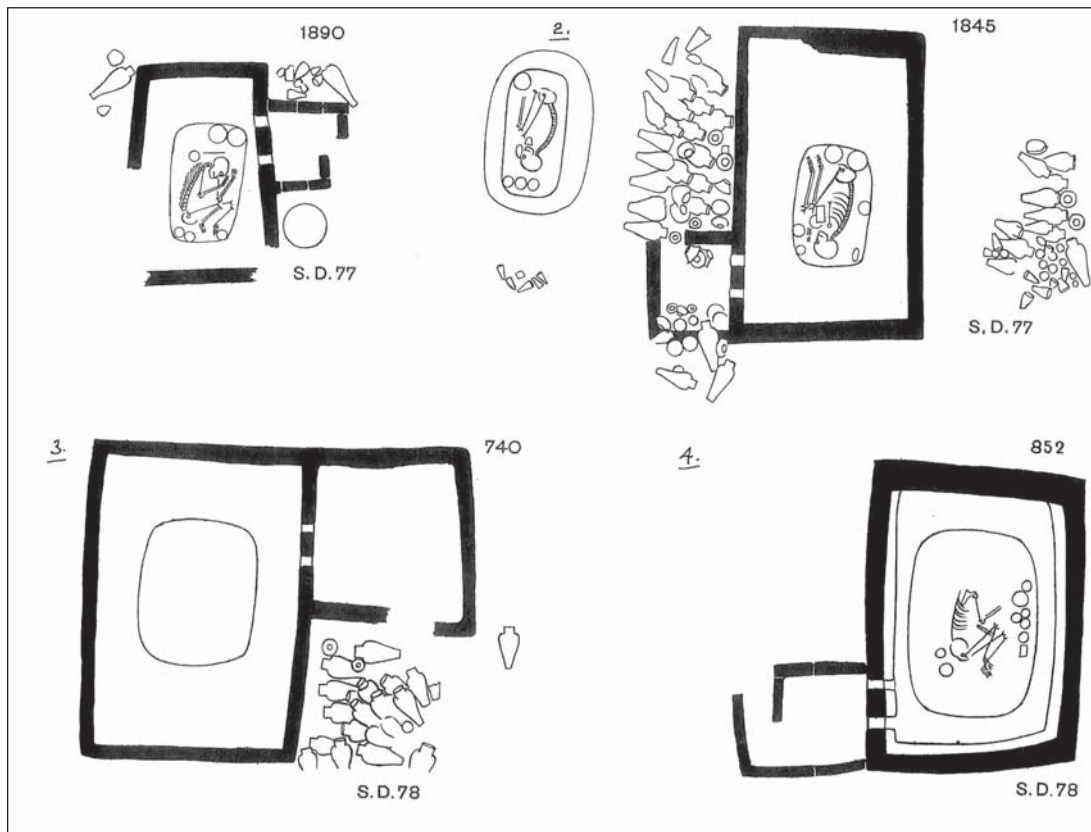


Fig. 1
Small mastabas
(Petrie 1914:
pl. XIV).



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Fig. 2
Tomb 412 at
the excavation,
unpublished
excavation
photograph.

person buried here was. Not much survived of the tomb. There was a chamber, cut into the ground and simply mud plastered. It contained a number of vessels, one of them inscribed. The tomb is dated by the pottery to the material cultural phase Naqada IIIC1, corresponding to the early First Dynasty (Hendrickx 1996: 60).

Perhaps each belonged to an official with the same administrative position, one following the other in office within a short space of time. In the case of the owner of tomb 414 a strong link to the royal court is visible, as his tomb was supplied with objects sealed in the name of king Narmer or his administration. If both tombs were on the same social level there is a certain degree of progress visible in the architecture. While the older tomb 412 was only carved into the gravel and mud plastered, tomb 414 was additionally lined with bricks. However, it is also possible that the two tombs are more or less contemporary. The difference in architecture might in this case reflect two different social positions and different resources available for the tomb owner.

For neither tomb is any superstructure preserved, or at least no trace is recorded. Most simple surface burials at Tarkhan were often found close to each other. Around 412 and 414 (fig. 4) there is wide space of several meters left, providing space for some kind of superstructure. However, one interesting point is the arrangement in rows of several smaller burials, north of tomb 412. The rows create the impression of subsidiary tombs on a pattern familiar from the large First Dynasty mastabas at Saqqara¹ and the royal tombs at Abydos². Whether this vague evidence is conclusive remains an open question. The subsidiary burials around tomb 412 are not aligned with the chamber, and so their relation to the main tomb remains highly hypothetical. The smaller tombs are not numbered on the published map. It is therefore not possible to identify them in the publication for comparing the dates.

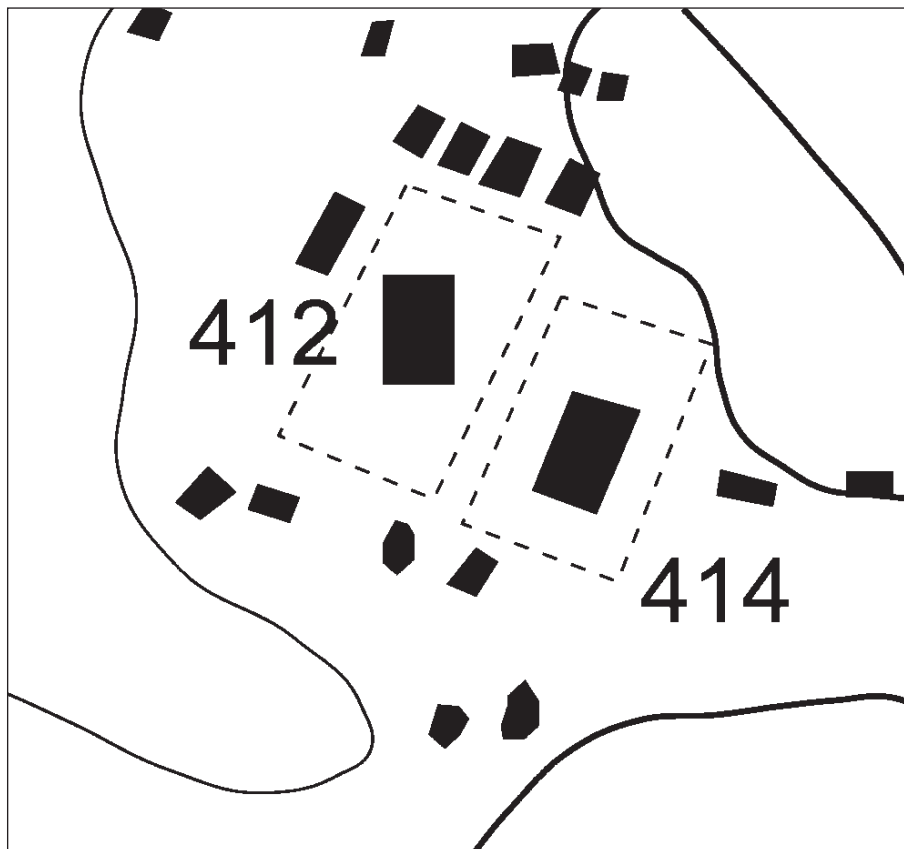


Fig. 4
Area around
mastaba 414
and 412.

1. See Hendrickx this volume.

2 See Engel this volume.

For the very beginning of the First Dynasty there seems to be a gap in terms of bigger tombs at Tarkhan. There is no outstanding tomb datable under either king Aha, successor of Narmer, or the next king, Djer. However, there are several other tombs from the beginning of the First Dynasty, which are bigger in size than the average in the cemetery. 1053 (137 x 355 x 170 cm), 1054 (137 x 488 x 165 cm) and 1061 (168 x 445 x 178 cm). Following the pottery they belong to the early First Dynasty. The tomb chambers are square, but not lined with mud bricks or even with mud. Tomb 2056 was 464 x 279 cm big (measurements not in tomb register but in text, Petrie 1914: 8) and had inner rooms made of sand walls. These tombs might fill this gap, although the simple architectural structure makes this rather unlikely.

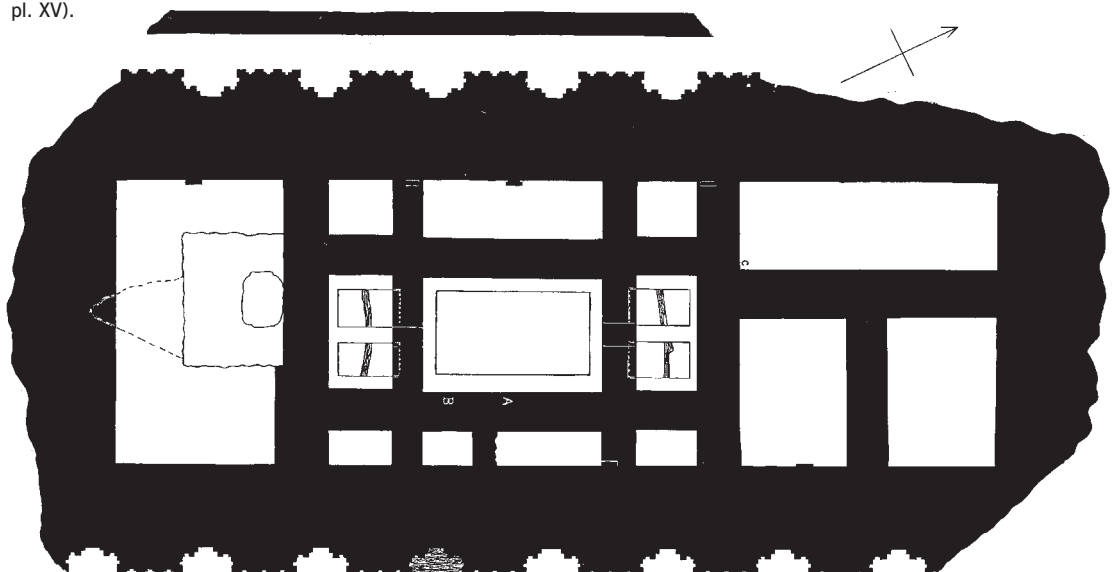
The palace façade tombs

The next great tomb dates to about the time of king Djet, who was the next ruler of the First Dynasty after Djer. This tomb superstructure takes the form of a palace façade mastaba, a type well known especially from Saqqara. Its dimensions are markedly greater than the earlier tombs of the ruling class at Tarkhan.

Tomb 1060 (Petrie, Wainwright & Gardiner 1913: 13-20, pl. XV-XX, XXX; Reisner 1936: 31-33)

On the evidence of Petrie's pottery sequence, this is the earliest certain example of the big palace façade tombs at Tarkhan (fig. 5). The building was excavated at the end of the first Petrie season. It is situated a little bit removed from the rest of the cemetery at its southern end, on a hill overlooking the whole region. It therefore had an entirely different position from the other big tombs just described. One wonders whether this also reflects a change in administration or a new line of local governors. As the mastaba was the first one of this type excavated by Petrie at Tarkhan, the description of the building and its construction is quite detailed. By comparison, the other mastabas found in the next season were only briefly discussed, although Petrie did provide full plans and measurements.

Fig. 5
Mastaba 1060
(From Petrie,
Wainwright &
Gardiner 1913:
pl. XV).



The mastaba measured about 34.04 x 15.62 m (= 539 m²) and was built of mud brick which Petrie describes as 'crude'. It was constructed on a low mud-brick platform. The measurements of this platform are not known, as its edges were already destroyed when found. The short ends of the tomb are also not preserved. There was a wall all around the building, but its remains could only be traced at the back (west) side. The mastaba proper was decorated on the outside with a palace facade. There were perhaps nine niches on each long sides and maybe four on each short end. The whole mastaba was originally covered with white plaster. The better preserved niches show traces of red colour. Only one niche did not show any traces of red and exactly this niche had a wooden floor and was evidently of special importance (Petrie, Wainwright & Gardiner 1913: 13, pl. XV, 2).

The inner part of the mastaba was divided into 14 rooms or chambers, one over the underground burial chamber, nine around this middle chamber and four bigger chambers and at each short end of the building. According to the Petrie record, these chambers were found filled with sand and not used as storage rooms as in Saqqara.

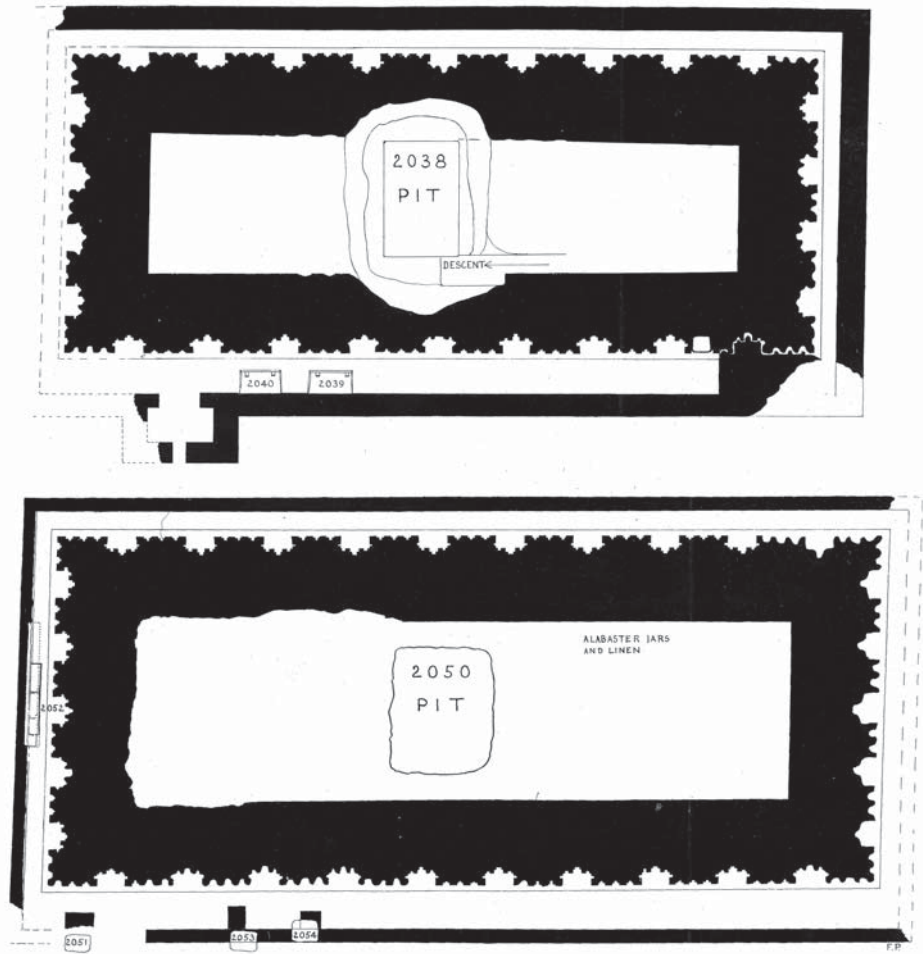
The central burial chamber was placed underground, and next to it there were four smaller store rooms. None of these chambers were connected by doorways. The burial chamber had on its walls four 'false doors', two at the North and two at the South. These solid cult-doors were slightly incised into the plaster of the walls and painted red, just like the 'doors' of the façade of the mastaba. All underground chambers were plastered and painted white. The chambers above ground were just plastered. Petrie noted a high number of worked limestone slabs found in the remains of the central chamber of the mastaba. None of them were found in an original setting, but Petrie (1913: 15) speculates whether they come from the roofing of the chamber.

Mastaba 1060 is of special importance as it shows clearly a place for the cult of the deceased. The niche with the wooden floor was left unpainted, and not painted red like the others. This is certainly remarkable. Petrie (Petrie, Wainwright & Gardiner 1913: 13) assumed that there was placed a wooden stela similar to the ones found in the Third Dynasty tomb of Hesire at Saqqara. This seems possible, but no stela at all was found at Tarkhan. According to our knowledge stela seems to have been restricted to Abydos, Saqqara and Helwan. In the latter places they appear at the very end of the First Dynasty (Merka at Saqqara) or even later (Helwan). Therefore, the decoration and the arrangement of this cult place remains highly hypothetical. The original character of the cult remains therefore unknown.

Mastaba 2038 (Petrie 1914: 3-5, pl. XV, XVIII ; Reisner 1936: 70-71)

The mastaba is 32.13 x 12.95 m (= 411.1 m²) big and therefore smaller than 1060 (**fig. 6**). The building is also decorated with a palace facade and has nine niches on each long side and four niches at each short side. The interior of the mastaba was filled with sand and gravel. There were no signs of further structures within the mastaba building proper. The whole building was surrounded by a wall, which was found in good condition apart from on the south side. At the east, towards the southern end of the building, there was some kind of entrance structure with a small, perhaps open courtyard. On the north side of this structure was a great quantity of pottery, evidently left as offerings. The pottery included

Fig. 6
Plan of mastaba
2038 (top) and
2050 (Petrie
1914: pl. XVIII).



several models small of granaries (Petrie 1914: 4, pl. XV). As at mastaba 1060 the fourth niche on the front side had a wooden floor, evidently again some kind of cult niche. There are almost no inner structures in the mastaba. No chambers were built, or at least nothing survived.

The burial chamber was badly preserved, disturbed by later burials. It was once lined with wood. A special feature not known from any other mastaba at Tarkhan is some kind of staircase leading from the top down to the burial chamber. The staircase provides a clue for the dating, as such stairs leading to the underground chamber were first built under king Den. There was no datable pottery in the tomb itself. The pottery found in the subsidiary tombs Petrie (1914: 5) dated under king Djet.

Two subsidiary tombs were found in a perfect condition of preservation (Petrie 1914: 5, pl. XV). The small mastabas were slightly doomed. They were of mud and had a white wash. They were quite low and had two niches on the front side. The bricks of these tombs were rather loosely laid, and held together by the thick layers of mud plaster. However, the lowest layer formed an arch over the small burial chambers, which were found undisturbed.

Mastaba 2050 (Petrie 1914: 5-8, pl. XVIII; Reisner 1936: 37-38)

This tomb is 35.38 x 15.10m (= 540.85 m²), the largest mastaba at Tarkhan (fig. 6). The palace façade has ten niches on the long and five niches on the short sides. The building had again a surrounding wall. At the east wall, at the

south end there was an entrance, not preserved well enough to identify any special features. No inner structures in the mastaba proper survived. There is only one big underground chamber. The tomb had evidently been extensively robbed already in antiquity; at some point it was reused as a dumping-ground, perhaps by tomb robbers, as piles of linen of different dates were found. Under the wall in front of the mastaba were found three subsidiary burials. Under the southern wall an unusual long grave was found. It contained three skulls and skeletons of donkeys were found, as if from some kind of ritual burial or foundation deposit.

Mastaba 2055 (Petrie 1914: 8)

Next to these three relatively well preserved palace facade tombs there is perhaps a further one, only known from some remains of walls and large underground chamber. Mastaba 2055 is poorly preserved. There was an underground pit 6.12 x 2.61 m in size. This pit was divided into three chambers, the middle about 4.95 m deep. From the mastaba above ground only a part of the wall and part of the enclosure could be recorded by the excavators. The tomb is dated by Petrie into the middle of the First Dynasty (Petrie 1914: pl. XLIII, Sequence date 81).

Summary

The palace facade mastabas at Tarkhan follow in general, in design and arrangement, the better preserved and documented examples excavated at Saqqara. Some features provide the same impression of a less evaluate status in comparison to Saqqara. Only one mastaba had chambers in the superstructure. There are only a few subsidiary tombs at Tarkhan, in marked contrast to the high number of such burials in Saqqara, or to the number and arrangement of subsidiary burials at Gizeh (Petrie 1907: 2-7, pl. VI). Furthermore, there is not much inscribed material from these tombs; perhaps this reflects the looting of these mastabas, but it is also possible that writing was, at that early state of Egyptian history, not yet so widespread across the country. A special feature are the well recorded cult places at the outside of many mastabas, not so well attested at other sites for this early period. Next to these cult places was always found a big amount of pottery, indicating a cult activity. The excavators did not record this pottery in detail. It remains unknown how long the cult functioned. However, for mastaba 2050 is mentioned that three pot marks found, relate to similar ones of the time of Semerkhet (Petrie 1914: 5), indicating a cult at least for the following generation.

For each generation from the time shortly before state formation to about the middle of the First Dynasty one large-scale tomb is known from the excavations. This creates the impression that these elite burials were reserved for the local governors at the town served by the cemeteries of Tarkhan. A gap is only visible at the beginning of the First Dynasty, between Narmer and Djet. There are two possible explanations for the gap. Either the governor tombs of that time are simply missing, or there was a governor with a particularly long reign, eventually buried in tomb 1060, the first of the extant palace façade tombs at Tarkhan.

After Sequence Date 78, the time of state formation, a decline in number of burials is visible. One or two generations later the big palace façade tombs start. At first sight, this seems curious, but it has to be remembered that Flinders

Petrie did not publish all tombs found. Burials with not enough pottery were not included in his publication (Petrie, Wainwright & Gardiner 1913: 4). With the time of state formation a polarisation of rich and poor is noticeable in the whole country (Seidlmayer 1988; Wilkinson 1996); perhaps, then, the number of burials remained at that time more or less the same, only with a high number of poorer burials, emptier or entirely empty and therefore not recorded by the excavators. After the middle of the First Dynasty there are no longer big palace façade tombs at Tarkhan. There are still some important burials of the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period (Petrie 1915), but in general it seems that the place lost its importance. Forty kilometres to the north the cemeteries at Helwan and Saqqara were growing, reflecting the rise of a new national centre, Inebhedj, the future Memphis. The history of Tarkhan must also be read against this regional and national setting.

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