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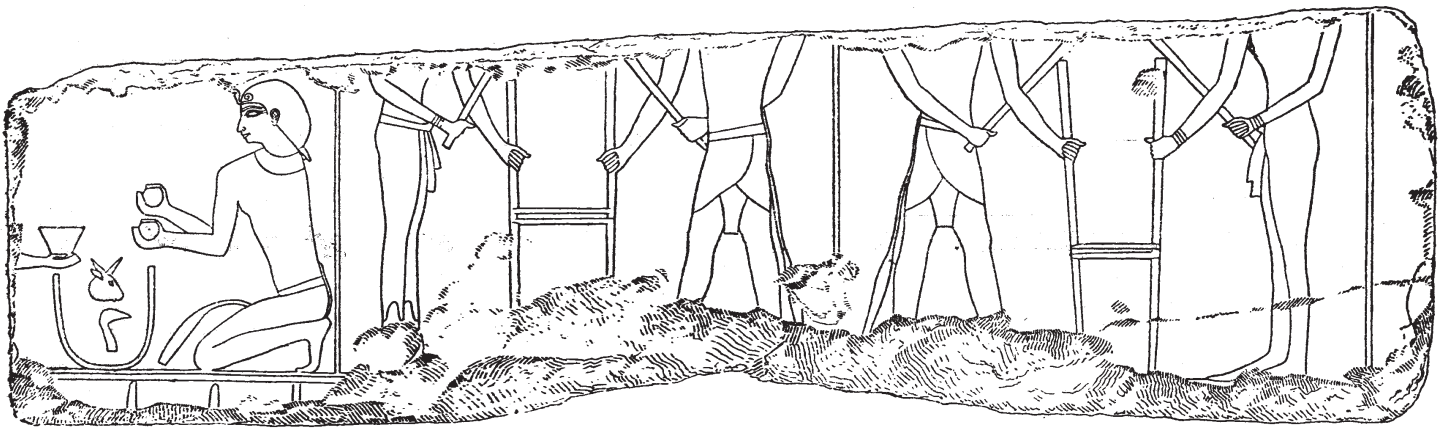
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## Foundation Deposits and Strategies of Place-Making at Tell el-Dab'a/Avaris

Miriam Müller

Relief from the south chapel of the solar temple of Niuserre at Abusir. From Borchardt 1900: Taf. V.

**F**oundation ceremonies are well known from the Egyptian royal and sacred sphere. They marked the beginning of construction work and ensured the effectiveness and longevity of the building to which they belong. They served to sanctify, purify, and protect the building in question, and could also commemorate the founder or beneficiary. A number of different steps in the performance of the rituals are mentioned in texts, especially for Ptolemaic temples, but in earlier periods as well (Montet 1964; Weinstein 1973). Ideally the king performed the ceremonies for the temple foundation, but often they were conducted on his behalf by priests.

The first stage comprised the establishment of the corners of the building under the patronage of Seshat, the goddess of measurements and arithmetic. An alignment of the building with the stars or the cardinal points was often intended. Then the so-called stretching-of-the-cord ceremony followed, in which cords were used to trace the line of the foundation trenches by stretching them between poles driven into the corners of the future building. Often the king was literally involved in “hoeing the earth” and “molding the first brick” (Weinstein 1973: 1–22).

Foundation deposits were an important component of these ceremonies. They constituted votive offerings placed in, or beneath, the foundations or in the immediate vicinity of a building prior to the start of construction or during the marking and laying out of the foundations. Foundation deposits were regularly placed under the corners of the buildings and contained various items, often miniature pottery, but also model tools, animal bones, precious materials such as beads, or faience plaques with the cartouche of a pharaoh (fig. 1). The “first brick” manufactured for the construction of the building by the king, and often inscribed with his name, could be part of the foundation

deposits as well (Van Haarlem 2013). Foundation deposits before the Middle Kingdom did not usually contain much more than (miniature) pottery. Following the completion of the building it was purified and consecrated with special ointment and libations and presented to the relevant deity or pharaoh, in the case of buildings belonging to the royal household.

Foundation deposits are attested for temples, palaces, tombs, city walls, and forts. They usually designate the corners of the building but were also found in important places such as at the entrance of a building or tomb, under columns, or along the central axes of a building. Although they have also been found in connection with profane architecture, such as storage buildings or fortress walls, these buildings always belong to the royal household. Foundation deposits are uncommon in the nonelite, private realm. As a result, little attention has been devoted to foundation deposits in domestic architecture (Weinstein 1973: 433–36; with one rare exception: Marchand 2004: 8). Foundation deposits for domestic architecture have been mentioned only briefly in an unpublished 1973 PhD dissertation by James Weinstein, “Foundation Deposits in Ancient Egypt,” which would now need substantial revision. Foundation deposits are not mentioned, with a few rare exceptions, in the publications of settlement areas from the extensive excavations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They are also largely absent from the more recent excavations from the 1960s onwards despite a new focus on settlement archaeology. Even though it could be argued that royal and divine architecture has received more attention in past excavations, the extensive documentation of settlement areas within the last fifty years should have resulted in more evidence for this practice. Richard Ellis’ *Foundation Deposits in Ancient Mesopotamia* (1968) was equally silent on the subject of domestic foundation deposits, however, his work has recently been expanded by Claus Ambos (2004, 2010), who focuses on first-millennium written evidence for foundations



rituals, also including domestic architecture. Also, an article published in 2012 on the first-millennium eastern Delta site of Tell el-Ghaba has responded to the need for a discussion on the topic of foundation deposits in Egyptian nonelite architecture (Crivelli et al. 2012).

Evidence of this practice in a neighborhood of the ancient city of Tell el-Dab'a/Avaris in the eastern Nile Delta from the late Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate period (fig. 2) may help shed light on the matter. Here, many foundation deposits and offering pits have been discovered in relation to domestic architecture. The material from the offering pits at Tell el-Dab'a has been examined in a comprehensive publication by Vera Müller (2008). The foundation deposits, however, have not been evaluated due to the extensive material associated with the investigation of the offering pits in temples and near tombs (V. Müller 2008, 1: 278, 321; 2: 431). Given its status as the later capital of the first foreign rulers in Egypt, the so-called Hyksos, with a mixed Egyptian and Near Eastern population, the evidence from Avaris can be evaluated in light of comparative material from other parts of Egypt and the Near East. With the evidence from Tell el-Dab'a I hope to provide insights into a new area of research in Egyptian domestic architecture and aspire to stimulate a reevaluation and closer examination of this phenomenon in excavations of Egyptian settlements today.

### Foundation Deposits in Neighborhood F/I at Tell el-Dab'a

Tell el-Dab'a, identified with ancient Avaris, is situated in the eastern Nile Delta on one of the three major Nile tributaries, the Pelusiac branch of the river (fig. 3). This strategic position allowed for access via land and water to the eastern Mediterranean, in particular to the Levant and the cities along the Nile. The city became an important trade hub in the second millennium B.C.E. with foreigners and merchants settling at the site under these favorable circumstances. For people from the Near East, and especially settlers from the Levant, the eastern Nile Delta was the first point of contact with the Egyptian empire on their way south. The site shows a distinct mix of Egyptian and Near Eastern material culture and it seems that foreign settlers were able to take advantage of the location and attained highly valued positions within the Egyptian administration in this imperial border zone. Around 1640 B.C.E. a formidable group of Levantine origin was able to takeover political power in parts of Egypt. This dynasty, the so-called Hyksos, made Avaris their capital.

Through a detailed analysis of different households in the center of the city, neighborhood F/I (fig. 4), circumstances of daily life, household economy, and in particular a gradual rise in wealth and status can be documented in the period directly leading up to Hyksos rule (late Middle Kingdom and early Second Intermediate period, or MBA II-III; M. Müller 2015a, 2015b). The houses and estates in this neighborhood show a number of characteristics that allow for an

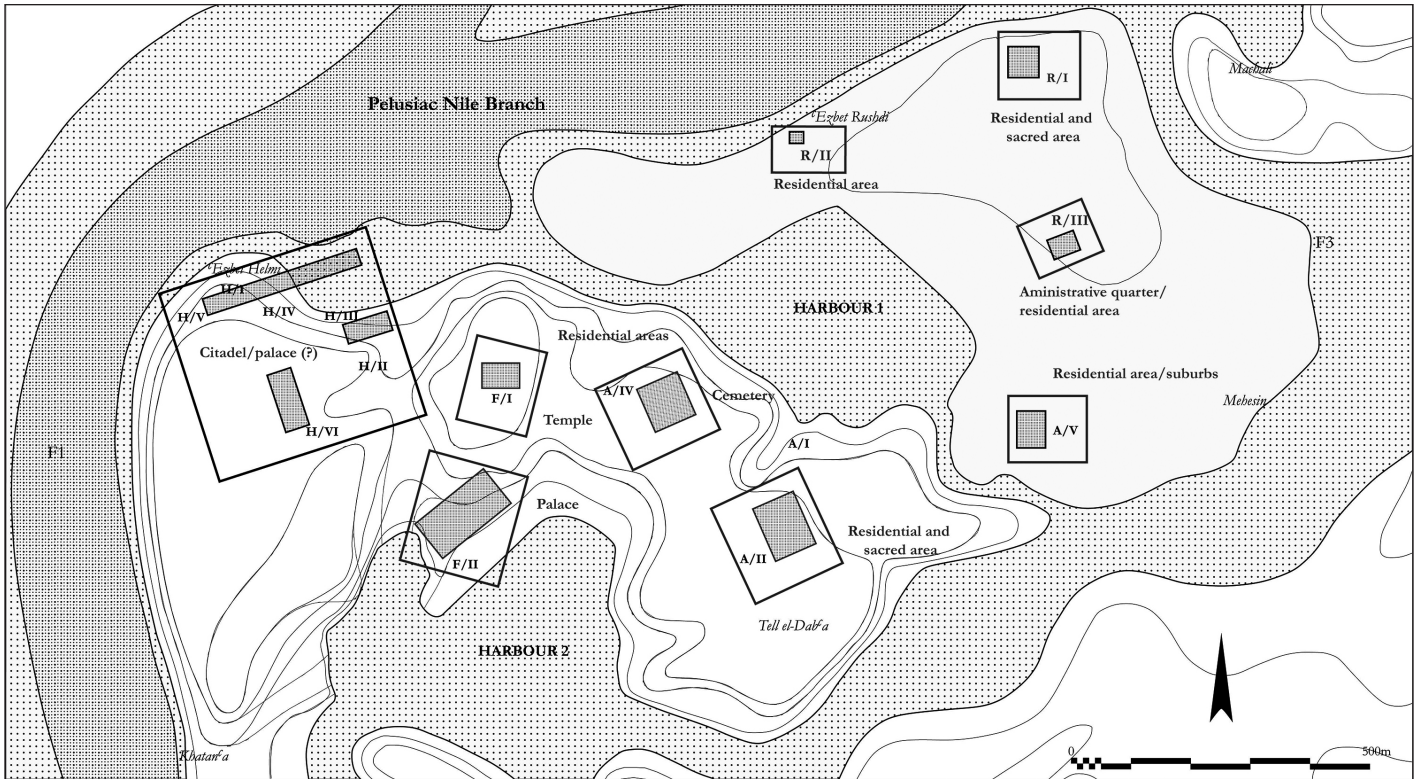


Figure 1. Reconstruction of a foundation deposit under the temple of Hatshepsut in Deir el-Bahri. Photograph © the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 2. Map of Egypt with relevant sites.





**Figure 3.** Map of Tell el-Dab'a showing area F/I. Drawing by Miriam Müller; from Bietak 2010: 32, fig. 6.

assessment of the populations' status in society and the conscious creation of a new identity built on family histories of mixed Egyptian and Near Eastern descent (M. Müller 2015c). The location of especially the family estate plays an important role in this process and thus exhibits strategies of place-making and territorial interests (fig. 5; McAnany 2010). A veneration of the ancestors and their prominent role in everyday life, through both burial in family vaults attached to the houses of the living and rituals undertaken in their honor, are pronounced features in the inhabitants' everyday life.

Cult ceremonies and ritual practices also played an important role in the founding of the different households and at the beginning of construction work on their homes. All houses of this quarter had deposits in the lower courses of the walls (fig. 6). Mostly animal bones (fig. 7), but also miniature ceramic vessels (fig. 8), stone vessels (fig. 9), and bronze pins (fig. 10) were placed into the walls. While it has been argued that the many bones



**Figure 4.** Layout of estate 1 in area F/I. Drawing by Miriam Müller based on maps prepared by Bietak and Eigner in 2006; © the Austrian Archaeological Institute.



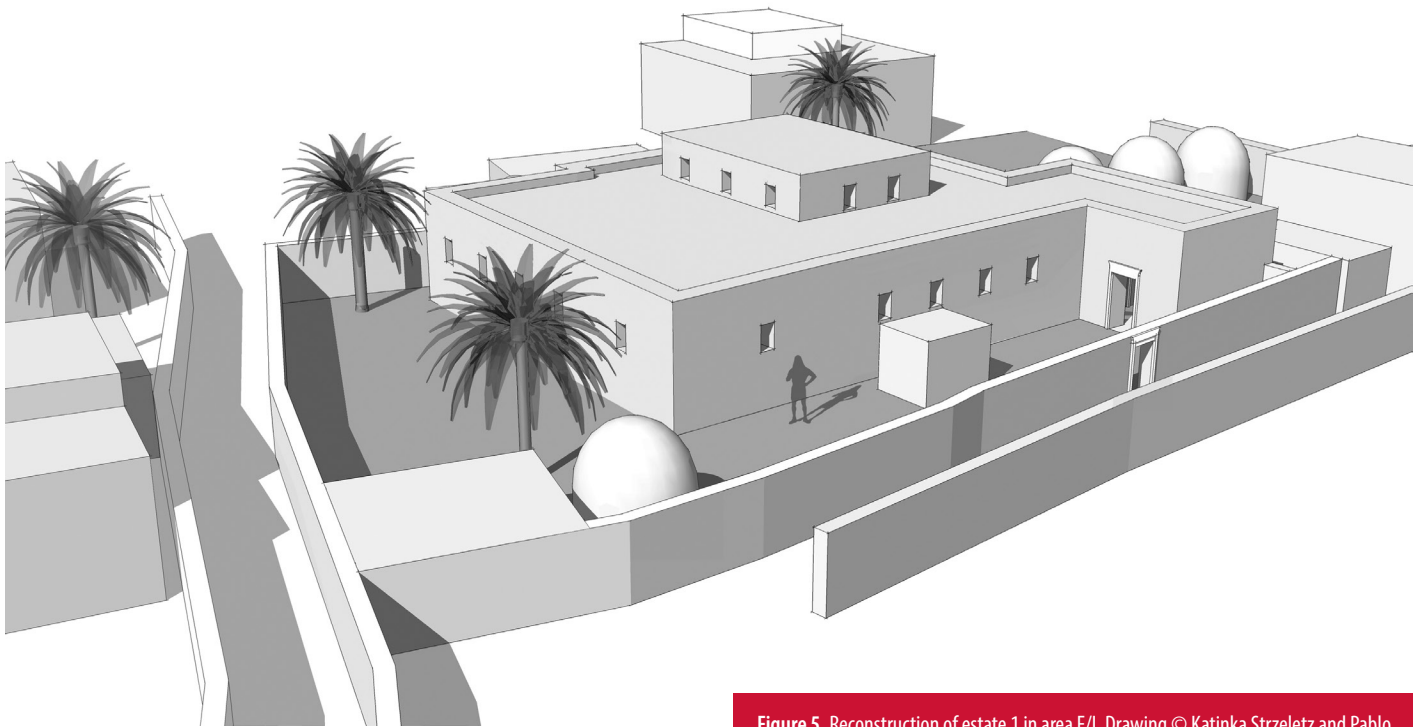


Figure 5. Reconstruction of estate 1 in area F/I. Drawing © Katinka Strzeletz and Pablo García Plaza.

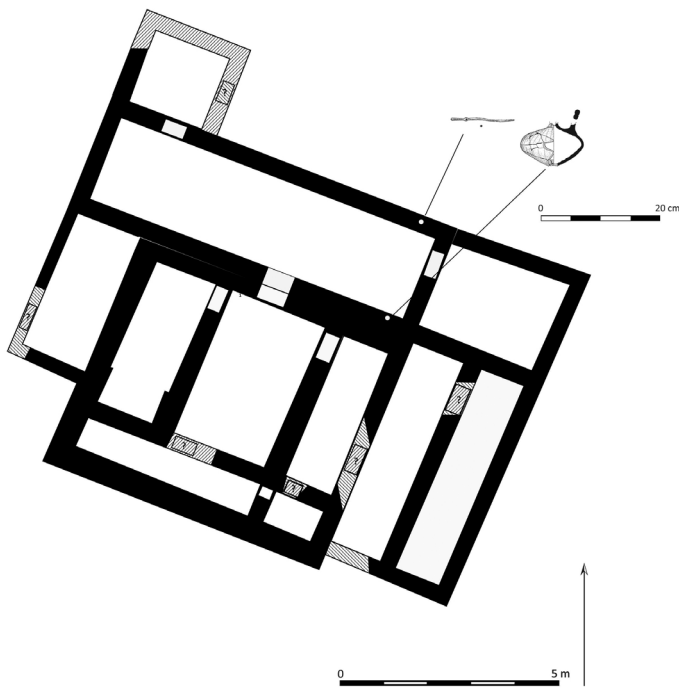


Figure 6. House of estate 1 with foundation deposits. Drawing by Miriam Müller based on maps prepared by Bietak and Eigner in 2006; © Austrian Archaeological Institute.

in the wide gaps of the lower brick courses—consisting mostly of cattle, but also other animals, such as birds, pigs, hippopotamus, and fish—could have been used as filling (Boessneck and Von den Driesch 1992: 21–22), the location of the other deposits are

conspicuous. They occur on both sides of important doorways, such as the entrance or the passage into the main room and the four corners of the house.

This practice is likely associated with another foundation ritual. Offering pits are not only found in the vicinity of tombs or temples, but also in front of houses or associated with important household doorways (V. Müller 2008, 1: 314–21). Although the examples are rare, at least two offering pits in this neighborhood are related to a specific part of a house; that is, the entrance and doorway into the main room. No other link, for example with an adjacent tomb, can be established (V. Müller 2008, 1: 317–18). The pits contain a large number of vessels, foremost drinking vessels and ring stands, but also miniature pots and offering stands, as well as animal bones. These ensembles either symbolize functional sets for ritual meals or pottery offerings with marks of burning. Nearly all vessels display evidence of intentional smashing (V. Müller 2008, 1: 321).

It is notable that the practice of placing foundation deposits in domestic architecture at Tell el-Dab'a occurs for the first time in the Late Middle Kingdom, which coincides with the first presence of Near Eastern traits in the material culture at the site (table 1). Although the architecture shows clear Egyptian traditions, and foundation deposits are found in houses of all sizes in the different neighborhoods of the city, this practice sets the houses of earlier periods, such as the early Middle Kingdom houses of the typical Egyptian planned settlements (Czerny 1999, 2015), apart from the later examples of the Second Intermediate period (Bietak 1991; Hein and Jánosi 2004). The importance of this custom can furthermore be seen in additional deposits under new

Table 1. Distribution of foundation deposits in Tell el-Dab'a from the early Middle Kingdom to the late Second Intermediate period.

Residential areas/ period	R/I	R/II	R/III	F/I	A/II	A/IV	A/V
Early Middle Kingdom (11/12th Dynasty)	No	—	—	No	—	—	—
Late Middle Kingdom (13/14th Dynasty)	—	—	—	Yes	Yes? (1 uncertain)	No	—
Hyksos period (15th Dynasty)	—	No	No (but: offering pit)	—	Yes		Yes

parts of buildings, when houses were enlarged over time due to the spatial needs of different households.

### Near Eastern and Egyptian Parallels

One of the reasons for the lack of evidence of foundation deposits in private houses might be the fact that they were usually not dismantled during excavation and potential evidence for them was therefore not recovered (Marchand and Soukiassian 2010: 124). Possible deposits at the foot of walls or in the immediate vicinity, very similar to the evidence for offering pits in the center of a room at Tell el-Dab'a, have probably not been recognized and not much attention has been paid to the recording of objects in their find positions in the early excavations. The investigations by the Deutsche Orientgesellschaft at Amarna might serve as an example, uncovering and documenting a large number of houses (Borchardt and Ricke 1980). Among the detailed architectural studies one can also find long lists of objects, however, often without any clear indication about the respective findspots. In one instance, a faience amulet in the form of a bull's head has the annotation *Gründungsbeigabe*, "foundation deposit" (Borchardt and Ricke 1980: 26, no. 531). How the excavators came to this conclusion or whether this evaluation was entirely based on the nature of the object, however, remains unclear.<sup>1</sup>

Limited evidence comes from other sites in the Delta. At Tell el-Maskhuta, another important Hyksos-period site, animal bones were also found in the lower brick courses of walls (Paice, Holladay, and Brock 1996: 171). A remarkable assemblage of male and female figurines, often of an erotic nature; miniature vessels; and a bronze ring were found in the foundations of a house at Tell el-Muqdam from the Late period (Redmount and Friedman 1997: 63–65, figs. 5–7). Another foundation deposit from the eastern Delta site of Tell el-Ghaba consists of loom weights, imitation Levantine and Cypriot vessels, and a faience pendant with the name of an Egyptian god, and also dates to the Late period (Crivelli, Kohen, and Lupo 2012). This assemblage suggests a mix of foreign influences and Egyptian customs that probably constitutes a similar tradition to the examples from Tell el-Muqdam. Further examples are known from Tebtunis in the Roman period (Marchand 2004: 18). The closest chronological parallel to the Tell el-Dab'a finds comes from a number of deposits in the foundation trenches at the foot of the walls in smaller houses in the Thirteenth Dynasty settlement at Balat in the

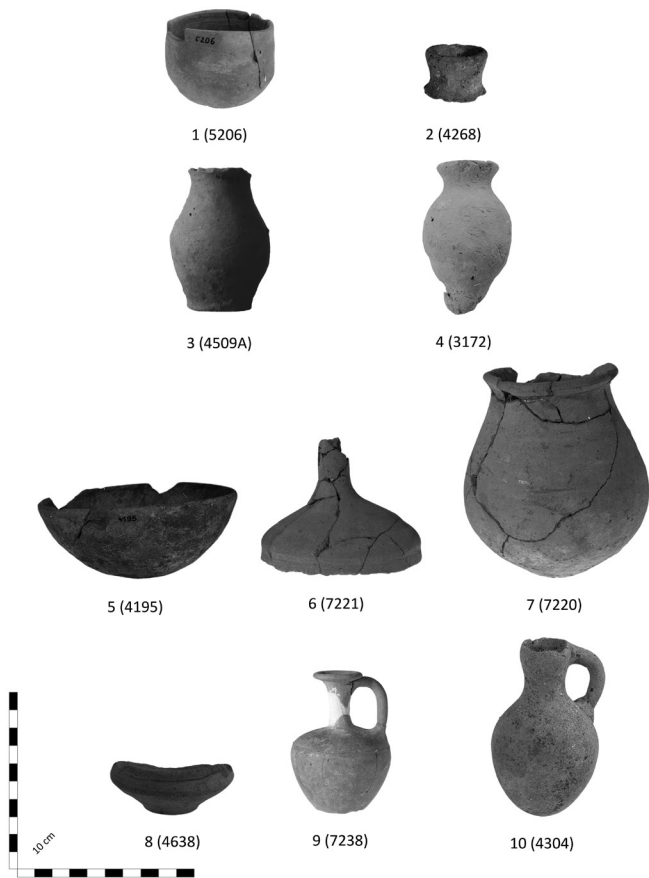


Figure 7. Animal bones as found in lower brick courses of the house walls. Photograph © Austrian Archaeological Institute.

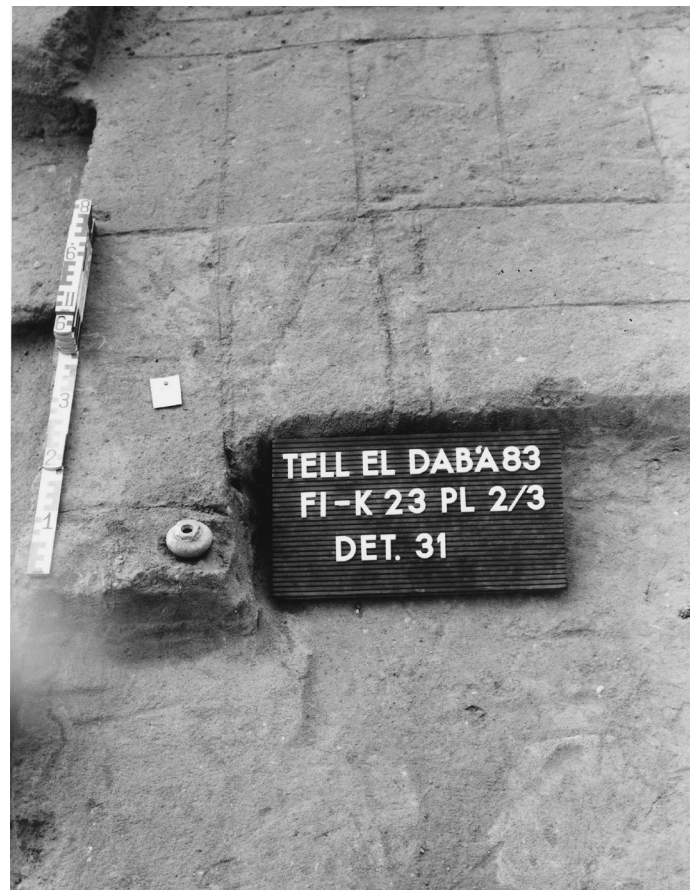
Dakhla Oasis. Here, ensembles of open drinking and pouring vessels, and, in one instance, an assemblage of beads and a scarab are described as foundation deposits (Marchand and Soukiassian 2010: 12–13, figs. 10–11, 21–22, 19–20, 34–35, 122–26, 151–52).

Offering pits in or near private houses also occur at Tell el-Maskhuta (Paice, Holladay, and Brock 1996: 165) and Vera Müller lists offering pits inside houses for Kahun<sup>2</sup> (V. Müller

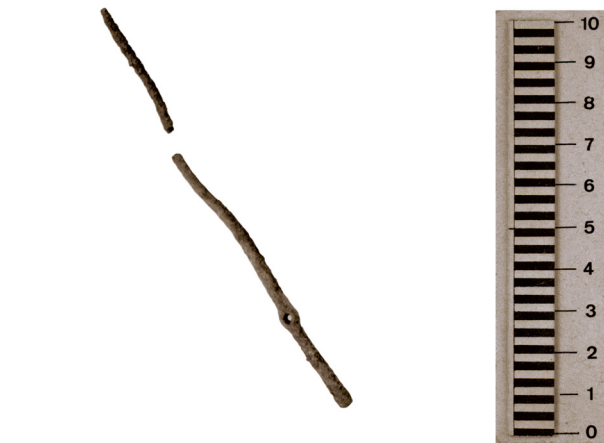




**Figure 8.** Miniature vessels as found in the lower brick courses of the house walls.  
Photograph © Austrian Archaeological Institute.



**Figure 9.** Alabaster vessel as found in the lower brick course of a house wall.  
Photograph © Austrian Archaeological Institute



**Figure 10.** Pin as found in the lower brick course of a house wall.  
Photograph © Austrian Archaeological Institute

2008, 1: 368, 376; Petrie 1890: 24, 43). Based on the available information, a link with the surrounding architecture is, however, not possible. According to the reports, strong similarities with foundation deposits are clear. Evidence for cultic meals, or the burning and intentional smashing of offerings, however, is not apparent.

Although there is no direct evidence for foundation ceremonies in private domestic architecture preserved in Egyptian texts,

rituals for the protection of the house are well known (Jankuhn 1972). Magic rites such as knotting threads, displaying linen amulets, drawing protective images on the floor, or applying ointment to the window frames, were specifically connected to the final days of the year and the immediate beginning of the new year (Ritner 2008: 184; Stevens 2009: 10).

Offering pits in front of tombs or in houses are not documented for the Levant (V. Müller 2008, 1: 353, 367). Foundation deposits are found in royal and divine estates and rarely in private houses. A common practice is the deposition of pegs and pins, primarily found in buildings belonging to the royal or sacred sphere in third millennium B.C.E. Mesopotamia.<sup>3</sup> The best-known examples are the so-called *Nagelmenschen* or foundation pegs (fig. 11), bronze figurines, or animals mounted on top of a nail that were driven into the soil or lower mud-brick walls of buildings, most commonly under the corners (Van Buren 1931). Most examples incorporate anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figurines fashioned in a “peg” shape, but a few early aniconic pegs are also known. They could also be shaped in the form of a god or the king, characterizing the king as laborer by showing how he grasps the actual peg with his hands, or with a large basket on top of his head carrying mud brick or mortar.

In a number of instances, pins were also found in the foundations or under the floors of private houses in Mesopotamia and were also linked to the practice of driving nails into the outer

Figure 11. Foundation peg of King Shulgi from Nippur.  
Photograph © the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



walls of houses after they were sold to a new owner (Klein 1992: 256). Scholars have argued that these pegs represented nails used in the building project for marking out the ground plan and construction work. Others suggest they functioned as doorposts, embodied the spirit of the house, sealed business transactions, or had magical purposes (Ellis 1968: 72, 77–93). Foundation deposits for royal and divine architecture included tablets in the same way Egyptian ones displayed plaques with the name of the pharaoh or deity commemorating the builder or beneficiary, the king or the god, and the building project. Another noteworthy addition is the offering of precious materials, metals, stones, fragrant plants, and fine oils. Ellis (1968: 44) noted that animal sacrifices were relatively unusual and unimportant for Mesopotamian foundation rituals in the royal and divine sphere since animal bones appear only sporadically in Mesopotamian foundation deposits. Foundation deposits could also be placed in capsules or boxes made of bricks.

Texts about building rituals in Mesopotamia inform us that certain practices were also common for private houses. They describe the sacrifice of a ram with its blood poured over the foundation stones; libations of different liquids, such as honey, milk, wine, beer, and oil; and the deposition of food offerings, precious metals, and stones, as well as cloth into the foundations of a house. The building is thus protected from evil spirits and guaranteed a long life, including the well-being of its owner. Discovering the foundation deposits of a house while tearing it down, on the other hand, symbolized bad luck and the probable failure of the new building project (Ambos 2004: 71; 2010: 230–31).

Another interesting parallel is exhibited in a Hittite text that treats the foundation of a palace. Haas (1994: 250, 254) furthermore concludes that similar rituals must have taken place for the foundation of private houses. Not only are the materials mentioned, including precious metals and stones, but four bronze pegs are also specified. In addition, the position of the deposits beneath the four corners of the building and at the door describe a familiar pattern.

Foundation deposits are also known from the Levant, however, they date to the late Canaanite and early Philistine periods. The so-called lamp-and-bowl deposits, as well as other vessels, were often filled with sand and deposited at important points such as the corners, walls, and in the middle of rooms in private houses. Since they only appear in the Late Bronze and Iron Ages after a significant presence of Egyptians in Canaan, they have been interpreted as an Egyptian-inspired local Canaanite custom (Bunimovitz and Zimhoni 1993: 123–24; 2004; Shai et al. 2011: 115–19). In light of this review and the more extensive evidence for foundation deposits in the private sphere from the Near Eastern realm, this seems rather unlikely.

### A New Area of Research in Egyptian Domestic Architecture

All of these components of building rituals described for the Near East and Egypt, mostly in the divine and royal spheres, are mirrored in the finds from the houses in neighborhood F/I at Tell el-Dabā. While the bones deposited in the wide gaps between the rows of bricks give an idea of the animals sacrificed during the construction of the foundations, small containers such as a ceramic



juglet or an alabaster pot probably contained different liquids used in rituals. These might also allude to the deposition of precious materials, as in the case of the alabaster pot or the bronze nails. In one instance, a piece of cloth was found together with a ceramic juglet that had apparently been covered with linen. The bronze nails, found in deposits, strongly relate to the process of construction or may have been used in marking out the ground plan of a house.<sup>4</sup> That the slaughter of rams and sheep are specifically mentioned for the foundation of Mesopotamian houses, in light of the extensively practiced deposition of animal remains in the foundations of the Tell el-Dab'a houses, might not be a coincidence.

The basic functions of foundation deposits in the Near East and Egypt were sanctification, protection, commemoration, and elaboration, the latter meaning enhancing the value of the building. From the preceding discussion, and in light of the texts from Mesopotamia, I would argue that domestic foundation rituals are essentially poorer, smaller versions of royal ones (Ambos 2004: 37–39). In the same way the house of the god or the king was constructed, domestic buildings received similar rituals on a “lower scale.” Other scholars, however, suggest a very distinct difference between royal/divine and domestic building rituals; with components that diverge in essential ways due to different motivating factors in regards to the respective building. While royal/divine construction ceremonies specifically had political motivations, the focus in domestic architecture was essentially a protective one. In the same vein, they argue that royal/divine and domestic foundation rituals are set apart from each other to underscore the essential social disparity between the common inhabitants of houses and those of palaces and temples (Guinan 1996).

A long-lasting tradition of foundation rituals is attested in both cultural spheres. Many components are essentially similar or even identical. With the lack of archaeological and textual evidence for foundation deposits in domestic architecture in Egypt, and the existence of foundation rituals explicitly for private houses in Mesopotamia and the wider Near East with the particular focus on animal sacrifice and the deposition of bronze pegs, I am inclined to see a stronger Near Eastern component in the practice of the foundation deposits at Tell el-Dab'a (see also Bietak 1984: 330–31). At the same time, domestic buildings at the site display a clear adherence to Egyptian construction traditions, thus these households display a mixture of Near Eastern and Egyptian practices. More evidence from Egyptian settlements, in particular in the Delta region, and a more detailed examination of this phenomenon in Egyptian contexts, however, could modify this picture. The care and effort that was dedicated to the marking out of these houses at Tell el-Dab'a, the founding of the households, and not only the enhancement of the buildings but also the promotion of the owners' well-being and protection, supports the image of a prosperous and socially mobile community claiming land and establishing their family traditions. By employing those strategies of place-making the population at Tell el-Dab'a strove for power and prestige, which culminated in the assumption of political dominance by the Hyksos centered at Avaris.

## Notes

1. Weinstein (2001: 560) mentions the lack of foundation deposits in royal or sacred buildings at Amarna and attributes this to Akhenaten's religious revolution.
2. Although V. Müller also describes offering pits for the Eighteenth Dynasty houses under the mortuary temple of Eje at Medinet Habu (V. Müller 2008, 1: 376), no mentioning of any kind of pits can be found in the report (Hölscher 1939: 68–71).
3. The last known peg deposits were made no later than the mid eighteenth century B.C.E. (Ellis 1968: 70).
4. Both cultural traditions depict the king as a laborer either by showing him holding, or even thrusting, the peg into the ground (Mesopotamia) or hoeing the earth and molding the first brick (Egypt).

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