

Piotr Bieliński

The First Campaign of Excavations on Tell Rad Shaqrah (Hasake Southern Dam Basin)

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 3, 77-85

1992

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

THE FIRST CAMPAIGN OF EXCAVATIONS ON TELL RAD SHAQRAH (HASAKE SOUTHERN DAM BASIN)

Piotr Bieliński

Since 1988 the Polish Centre has participated in the international salvage programme in the Hasake dams area. Two sites have been excavated there: Tell Abu Hafur and Tell Djassa al-Gharbi, both situated within the Hasake Eastern Dam Area.¹ At the end of 1990 our investigations were stopped due to the completion of the Hasake Eastern Dam and the filling of the lake with water. When in 1991 the decision was made to continue Polish participation in the Hasake Dam Salvage Project, it became necessary to choose a new site for exploration within the Hasake Southern Dam Basin.

With this goal in view our team arrived in Syria in the beginning of September 1991. After surveying several sites, we selected a mound called Tell Rad Shaqrah as the object of our further research. This oval mound is situated on the eastern bank of the Khabur river, some 15 km south-east of Hasake. The tell, which is partly covered by a modern village, measures c. 140 x 120 m and is about 8 m high, its top rising more than 305 m above sea level. The northern, western and southern slopes of the tell are considerably devastated by modern water channels bringing water from the river about 80 m distant.

A preliminary survey of the mound's surface provided evidence mainly of a 3rd millennium BC occupation, as the overwhelming majority of collected potsherds were Early Dynastic. The few sherds representing later periods were predominantly Neo-Assyrian. During the survey it also became clear that in

¹ See P. Bieliński, Polish excavations in North-East Syria 1988-89, *PAM I* (1988-1989), 1990, pp. 17-25; id., The third season of excavations in Northeastern Syria 1990, *PAM II*, (1989-90), 1991, pp. 94-101.

some parts of the tell the occupation layers of the Early Dynastic period are virtually on the surface of the mound. Some fragments of the plastered mud-brick walls belonging to these strata could easily be observed on the northeastern slope of the tell where a road leading to the summit of the mound was cut recently. Thus it became absolutely clear that layers later than ED must have been completely destroyed by erosion and human activity such as house construction and grave digging.

The first season of excavations lasted from September 21 to October 23.² Three separate areas situated in different parts of the tell were investigated. Area A occupies the eastern and northeastern part of the mound, Areas B and C, respectively, the southeastern and western sectors.

Within Area A two separate trenches were opened. The larger one, measuring 12.50 x 6.50 m was located on the eastern slope of Tell Rad Shaqrah; the smaller one set further to the north measured only 5 x 2.50 m and was called for convenience Test Trench A-I. In trench A remains of a large structure

² The team was composed of six archaeologists: Dr. Piotr Bieliński (head of the mission), Dr. Barbara Kaim and Mr. Rafał Koliński (all from Warsaw University), Mrs. Dorota Bielińska (Department of Archaeology, Polish Academy of Sciences), Mr. Mirosław Olbryś (Ateliers for Conservation of Cultural Property) and Mr. Andrzej Reiche (National Museum in Warsaw).

Only through the special and unprecedented facilities offered by the Direction General of Antiquities and Museums were we able to accomplish all our tasks. Thanks to the personal support and help of Director General Dr. Alii Abou Assaf and Director of Excavations Dr. Adnan Bounni, we had the opportunity not only to start a survey, but proceed with excavations of the chosen site as soon as it was possible. To both of them we extend our gratitude for their assistance and understanding, as well as for facilitating all official procedures. I should mention here also Mr. Jean-Simon Lazar, Director of Antiquities in the Hasake Governorate, to whom we are much indebted for his valuable advices, and, finally, Mr. Abd el-Masih Bardo, who worked with us as inspector, We owe him special thanks for his dedicated and competent work in the field.

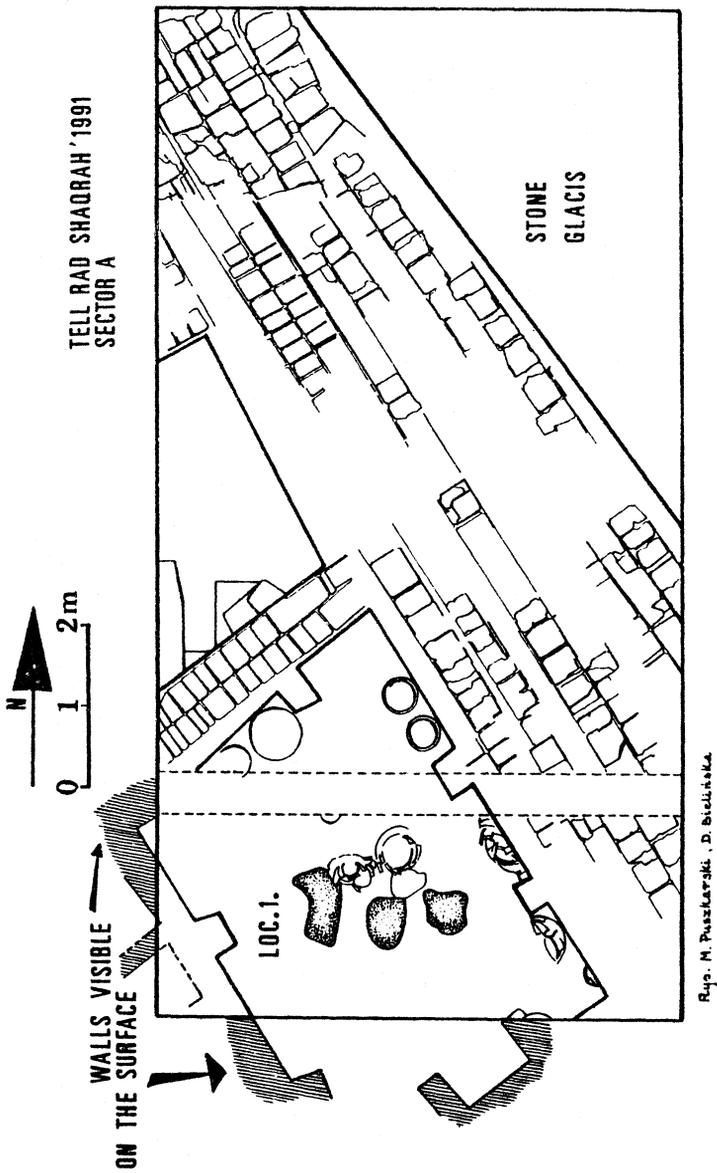


Fig. 1. Defense(?) wall and adjoining rooms discovered in sector A.

were uncovered. A fragment of a substantial mud-brick wall was identified, running from NNW to SSE. The part of it exposed within the limits of trench A was over 8 m long. The wall, constructed of mud bricks of two different sizes, was c. 3.9 m wide and preserved to a height of about 3.8 m (Fig. 1). It was erected on a foundation of basalt boulders. Since the base of these foundations was not reached, all that can be said is that they were at least 1.60 m deep. On its eastern, outer side the above described wall was reinforced by a steep glacis made of clay, broken mud bricks and basalt boulders. This glacis was in itself a carefully built structure. Its outer face was made up of a number of layers of tightly packed stone boulders. At the lowest level reached this year in trench A, the glacis was at least 4.40 m wide. It protected the mud brick wall to a height of about 5 m. In a later stage the glacis was additionally covered with a new layer of clay and stones, 1.20 m thick.

Another fragment of the same glacis was exposed in Test Trench A-1, some 15 m further to the north, where, most probably, the northeastern corner of the structure was situated, as suggested by the form of the glacis in this place. It means that this mud brick wall and stone glacis were at least 24 m long. The scanty ceramic material retrieved from between the bricks of the wall, as well as potsherds from the fill of the glacis all belonged to the Early Dynastic period II/III, conclusively indicating a date for the whole structure. It would seem that both elements were constructed at the same time, for the space between the boulders in the foundation of the wall was not filled with sand – this being possible only if they had been sealed by the glacis immediately after the construction of the wall. The span of time between the construction of the wall and the new layer of the glacis remains unclear. It is noteworthy that some 3rd millennium pit burials were dug into the outer face of the glacis. Two such burials and part of another one were discovered

in trench A, while the fourth was found in Test Trench A-1. All of the pits seem to have been rather shallow and contained skeletons of adults accompanied by grave goods, consisting of beads, pots and bronze pins. The richest grave offerings were discovered in the burial found in Test Trench A-1; they consisted of six pottery vessels and a bronze knife. The skeletons were found lying in contracted position on the E-W axis with heads to the north.

It is unclear whether the thick wall and glacis just described should be interpreted as the enclosure wall of the whole settlement or rather as the outer wall of a single architectural complex of considerable dimensions. The second possibility seems to be more plausible. It is suggested by the fact that on the western (inner) side of the thick wall a fragment of an important building was discovered. It was a multi-room structure directly adjoining the thick wall. During the present season four rooms belonging to this structure were located, probably being only a small fragment of the whole complex. Some architectural details lead to believe that the above mentioned rooms and the thick wall belonged to the same building, but this problem cannot be solved without further investigations. Of the four identified rooms only one has been nearly completely explored this year (labeled locus 1/A). The excavated room measured c. 4.90 x 4.00 m and each of its walls was reinforced on the inside by a pair of regularly spaced buttresses. The only door leading to the room was most probably situated in its south western corner. The walls were covered with a thick layer of white plaster, which was renewed at least three times. Room 1/A must have served as a store as it contained at least ten storage jars standing along the walls and fixed in place by means of bricks and plaster. Most of them were covered with a thick layer of white plaster, also found inside. Beside storage jars there were eleven other pots in locus 1/A, including small and

medium jars as well as bowls and some Kitchen Ware. The dimensions of this storeroom, matched by the thickness of the mud brick wall, lead us to assume that the building to which they belonged was an important one. All the pottery collected from the floor of the storeroom could be dated to the Early Dynastic III period (but not to its later part), corroborating the date suggested for the thick wall and the glacis.

In area B in the southeastern corner of Tell Rad Shaqrah, two trenches were opened, each of them measuring 9.50 x 4.50 m, separated only by a narrow baulk. Remains from three consecutive occupational strata were uncovered in both trenches. All the strata contained pottery of ED III date with such characteristic elements as Metallic Ware and rarely found sherds of incised (late) Ninevite 5 pottery. The topmost layer of this sector was nearly completely washed away by erosion. It comprised only fragments of basalt foundations (about 0.50 m wide) consisting of two rows of boulders with no corresponding floors or walls. These foundations, in certain places preserved to a height of two layers of stones, formed the outlines of small regular rooms on the tell surface.

The second stratum was much better preserved. In this layer, in the northern part of the trench, there was a narrow street (c. 1.40 m wide) running from NW to SE. The discovered fragment was nearly 4 m long and was partly paved with pebbles and covered with ashes mixed with potsherds. On both sides of this lane two separate dwelling units were located. These had stone foundations similar to the ones from the upper layer. Of the northern unit only one room corner was exposed within the trench limits, while of the southern one two small rooms were explored. Each of them was c. 1.10 m wide. The northern contained a large *tannur*. It seems that this unit continued further toward the west and south. Still further to the south and southwest, fragments belonging to three other domestic

structures were discovered. They consisted of (with one exception) very small rooms, rarely larger than 1.50 m, and with walls respecting the same orientation as the narrow street. The mud brick walls of these houses were plastered from inside and were constructed of courses of headers alternating with courses of stretchers; the walls were of an average thickness of about 0.50 m. Most of the houses contained domestic equipment like *tannurs*, plastered basins and querns. In one of the dwellings, situated in the eastern part of area B, a 3rd millennium BC child burial was found. The skeleton was put in a box made of mud bricks set on edge and was accompanied by a small globular jar of Metallic Ware. Another interesting discovery was made in the southern part of the trench, where a small sculpture of limestone was found. It was an almost regular cuboid with one carefully flattened side on which a representation of a human face was carved in shallow relief (Fig. 2).

The representation with its prominent eyes, nose and a very rich hairdo resembles in many ways the eye-idols from Tell Brak. In the vicinity of the idol a small limestone figurine representing a goat decorated with small circles was also found.

Of the third occupational stratum mostly the tops of the walls were unearthed. Only in the southeastern part of the trench were floors belonging to this layer reached.

As said above, all three strata investigated in this part of the tell should be dated to the later part of the 3rd millennium BC.

The third and the last of the areas explored this year on Tell Rad Shaqrah occupied the western slope of the mound. It was labeled Area C. One large trench

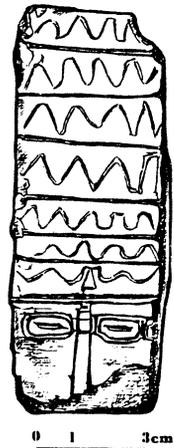


Fig. 2. Marble eye-idol found in Area B.

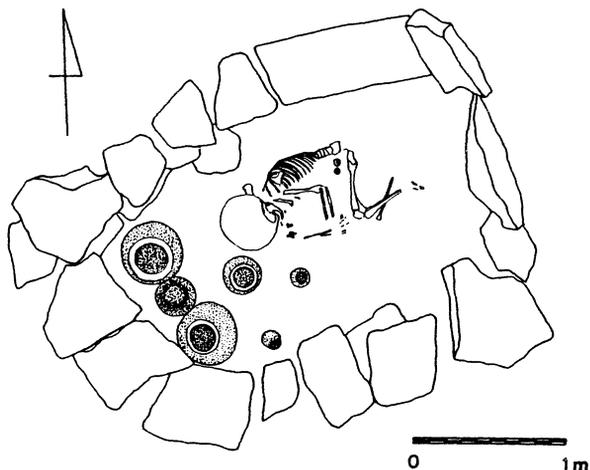


Fig. 3. Child grave from Area C.

measuring 9.50 x 9.50 m was opened there. Like in Area B, also here the remains of a dwelling quarter were uncovered. They were represented by two consecutive architectural strata.

The upper layer was represented by a stone foundation forming the outline of a rectangular structure c. 4 m wide and over 8 m long. The floor level of this house was totally destroyed (it was probably just under the surface of the tell, nevertheless its level could be reconstructed from the position of finds most probably connected with this floor). Apart from a big storage jar, no less than 14 complete vessels (mainly small jars, some of them of a black or grey variety of Metallic Ware) were collected from this layer.

The lower architectural layer was identified mainly in the southern part of the trench, where several mud brick walls forming at least six rooms belonging to two units were cleared. The rooms tended to be small, nevertheless their walls in several cases were provided with buttresses, some of them forming false arches. In one of the rooms (labeled 8/C), a sequence of five

successive tannurs was observed. The floor levels of these rooms were not reached due to the shortness of the season. It seems that the lower layer is contemporaneous with the earliest constructions found in Area B, while the upper one is considerably later, although both can be placed within the Early Dynastic III period.

In the northern part of Area C two child burials, both from the ED III period, were discovered. One of them was preserved in rather bad condition as it was nearly completely destroyed by the pit of a modern grave. Only modest remains of bones and several stone beads were found. The other one was found exceptionally well preserved (Fig. 3). It was a small but deep pit with stone walls, covered with a large slab of limestone. The body of the deceased and the offerings were placed in the grave from the side and the opening left there during the construction of the grave was then closed by several mud bricks and another slab of limestone. The burial contained a skeleton of a child five or six years old, accompanied by six pots as well as a rich set of jewellery (including bronze earrings and hundreds of frit and stone beads forming a necklace and bracelets).

Trench C was the only sector where evidence of activities later than the 3rd millennium were uncovered. In the central part of the trench, a rectangular oven and a pit, both with Neo-Assyrian sherds in their fill, were explored.

The clear difference between the domestic quarters exposed in the western and southeastern parts of the tell and the substantial structure identified in its northeastern corner show that the 3rd millennium occupation on Tell Rad Shaqrah was not homogenous. The Early Dynastic settlement on this site turned out to be much more complex than expected and the present evidence is insufficient to determine its structure and functions. More work is also needed to establish the full stratigraphical sequence of the site.