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Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 1, 17-25

1990

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.

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POLISH EXCAVATIONS IN NORTHEAST SYRIA 1988-1989

Piotr Bieliński

The region of Syrian Jezirah has become in recent years a zone of particularly intensive archaeological activity. It is mainly due to important irrigation projects, which have been started some years ago in the basin of the upper Khabur. Since 1986 a team of Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology is participating in the international Salvage Programme of the Hasake Dams Area. This programme is organized and supervised by the Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums to the officials of which we owe many thanks for their constant help and support.

A survey of several archaeological sites was carried out in the vicinity of Hasake in 1986.¹ As a result, two sites situated within the Hasake Eastern Dam Reservoir Area were selected for further exploration: Tell Abū Hafur and Tell Djassa al-Gharbi. The regular excavations on both of them have begun in the spring of 1988 and the second season took place a year later.

TELL DJASSA AL-GHARBI

Tell Djassa al-Gharbi is situated near the southern end of the Hasake Eastern Dam (only 50 m from its western face).² The mound is about 16 m high and has c. 150 m in diameter. It is conical in shape and its slopes are rather steep, especially on the northern and northwestern side. The top of the mound rises to 333.8 m above sea level and is entirely covered by a modern Islamic cemetery. The potsherds collected on the slopes of the tell during the preliminary survey have clearly indicated that there must have been 3rd

¹ See W.A. Daszewski, F.M. Stępniewski, p. 45ff. in this volume.

² For the localization, see Fig. 1 in W.A. Daszewski, F.M. Stępniewski, in this volume.

millennium BC occupation. In order to establish the full stratigraphic sequence of the site, a long step trench (35 x 5 m) was cut on the northern slope from the top to the foot of the mound. During the second campaign another step trench parallel to the first one but much smaller (10 x 5 m) was opened on the same slope. There are four main occupational layers on Tell Djassa al-Gharbi and all of them should be dated in the 3rd millennium BC as suggested by the results of the survey.

The topmost occupational layer on the tell is composed in fact of three consecutive building levels. Some of the walls of the lowest level were in use during the latest phase. The deposit of this stratum, labeled as Layer I, is over 1 m thick.

Its two upper levels were partly destroyed by modern Islamic graves. The deepest of the grave pits penetrated more than 1.50 m into the ancient deposits. All levels of Layer I contain fragments of

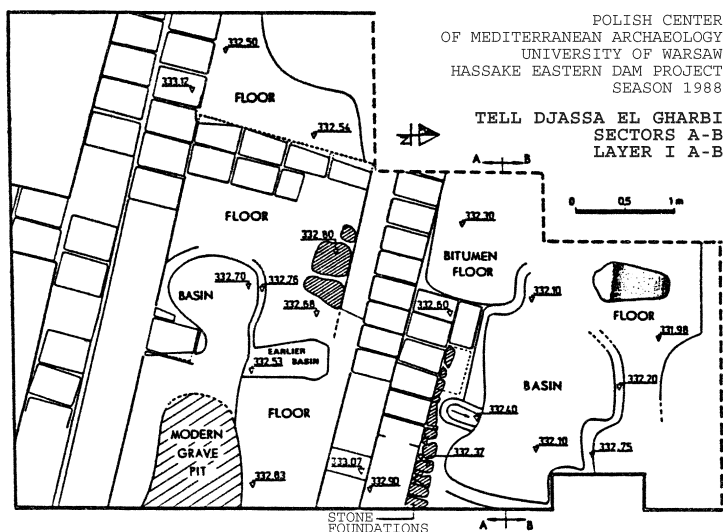


Fig. 1. Structures of Layer I in sectors A-B.
Drawing P. Bieliński

mud-brick structures composed of several rooms each. The walls of some of them have foundations built of stones and potsherds. The most interesting feature of these structures is the presence in most of the rooms of numerous basins of different shapes and dimensions. The largest of them was nearly rectangular in shape (2.5 x 1.8 m) and was lined with a thin layer of white gypsum laid on a layer of beaten reddish clay. On one of its sides a fragment of an open and plastered channel was found. The outlet of the channel was situated 0.3 m over the bottom of the basin. (Fig. 1) In another small room (1.9 x 1.9 m) labeled as Locus 1, two basins were discovered. The smaller of them was ovoid in shape and occupied the central part of the room while the other, measuring 1.7 x 0.9 m and c. 0.4 m deep was placed along one of the walls. This basin was at least once restored, its floor raised c. 0.4 m higher, on a pottery deposit layer composed of 29 vessels, most of them complete and some intentionally broken.

The ceramic material coming from the uppermost level of Layer I consists mainly of numerous globular jars, small flat-bottomed beakers, small bottles with elongated necks and medium-sized ovoid jars with high necks. It seems that this level should be dated to the Late ED III or the beginning of the Akkadian period. In the lower levels of this stratum there are no bottles and, apart from still numerous globular jars and beakers, there appear some small bowls and cooking pots, as well as fragments of Metallic ware. These assemblages clearly represent the late phase of the ED III period.

Between Layer I and the preceding one there is a short gap in the occupation of the site. This second layer (Layer II) contains fragments of two separate architectural units erected in mud brick. Both of them were unearthed in a very good state of preservation. Some of the walls were preserved up to height of 2.3 m. The larger fragment (Building I) is composed of at least four rooms and measures c. 10 x 5.5 m. The main room (Locus 5), measuring c. 4.5 x 3.2 m, is divided in two parts by a false arch. There are at least three door-

ways leading to this room and its walls are carefully plastered. Of the second building unearthed in this stratum only two rooms were found within the limits of the trench. Both of them have plastered walls and one (Locus 10) contained a *tannur* and a storage jar dug into the floor. All the structures found in Layer II have been constructed of mud bricks measuring c. 0.5 x 0.32 x 0.09 m. The pottery discovered inside the rooms of this stratum is typical of the ED III period. There were numerous large bowls, some Metallic Ware vessels, some beakers and short-necked jars, as well as a few fragments of big storage jars and cooking pots. Apart from pottery, there were some flint blades, bone pins, shell rings, terracotta figurines and wheels of clay chariots. Also another structure adjoining the above described buildings from the north and occupying the very edge of the slope belongs most probably to the same Layer II. It is a very thick and high mud-brick wall or rather a large platform composed of two steps. Its upper terrace is c. 3 m high and at least 6.3 m wide, while the lower step is about 3.9 m larger than the first and c. 1.6 m high. The total height of this platform is about 4.6 m and its width counted from the outer face at least 10.2 m. The inner face of this huge structure is not yet exposed. The function as well as the exact stratigraphic relation between this platform and the other structures of Layer II requires further clarification.

Architectural remains representing the next stratum (Layer III) have been exposed until now only in two small soundings excavated within the buildings of Layer II. They consisted of the upper parts of some badly preserved mud-brick walls. Their tops lay immediately beneath the structures of Layer II and on some of them the walls of the upper-layer buildings were erected. The scanty ceramic material found there is of an ED II/III date.

The lowest stratum (Layer IV), which lies directly on culturally sterile soil (c. 14.9 m below the top of the tell). In the upper part of layer IV some walls constructed of mud bricks were unearthed. They belong most probably to one structure composed of at least

two rooms. In one of them there was a large fireplace with thick deposits of ashes around it. There was also a small, rectangular, carefully laid pavement, measuring c. 1 x 0.55 m. The ceramic material was nearly absent from this layer, but what was found was sufficient to date Layer IV also to the Early Dynastic period.

After two seasons of excavations on Tell Djassa al-Gharbi it seems clear that the site was inhabited during most of the Early Dynastic period. The structures of Layer II suggest that it must have been at an important centre at some time.

TELL ABŪ HAFUR

The second site explored by our team is located some 2.5 km to the North-North-West of Tell Djassa al-Gharbi. It consist in fact of two parts: a huge, crescent-shaped mound about 200 m long and c. 16 m high, and a flat, oval-shaped hill c. 130 m long and about 5 m high situated to the east of it, designated as Tell Abū Hafur East. The tops of both hills and part of the slopes of the bigger tell are occupied by modern Islamic cemeteries. As in the case of Tell Djassa al-Gharbi, the results of the 1986 survey suggested that at least the main mound of Tell Abū Hafur was inhabited during the latter part of the 3rd millennium BC.

On the main tell two separate sectors were investigated. One of them, called Area A, is located on the southeastern slope of the hill, while Area B was set on the very steep northern slope. The larger of the two was Area A, where the total surface of 290 sq.m were explored. The stratigraphy of this sector as it was established after two seasons of excavations included four strata. The uppermost Layer 1, represented by a series of large pits is much younger than the lower strata, but its precise dating remains uncertain. The pits (some of them even 4 m deep), as well as the already mentioned Islamic graves have seriously disturbed and partly destroyed the contents of the lower layers. Not much has thus been preserved of the second stratum (Layer 2), to which belong fragments of

mudbrick walls forming three rooms, a tannur and a refuse pit. The ceramic material found there was of Late ED III/Early Akkadian date. Much more can be said of Layer 3. It contained a large fragment of a habitation quarter, composed of tightly packed dwelling houses and of two parallel lanes, running c. 10 m from each other and very narrow (c. 1 m). Parts of at least five houses were found in the explored area. (Fig. 2) The houses, erected of mud bricks measuring 0.48 x 0.3 x 0.1 m, consisted of two to four rooms and courtyard. Most of the walls were plastered. Inside the house there were numerous flat fireplaces and *tannurs*. In one of the rooms (Locus 20) an installation composed of two small square basins was unearthed. A series of rooms or maybe rather open spaces, grouped along the northeastern border of the trench, seems to serve some household and economic activities. The very abundant ceramic finds coming from this layer can be considered as typical of the ED III period.

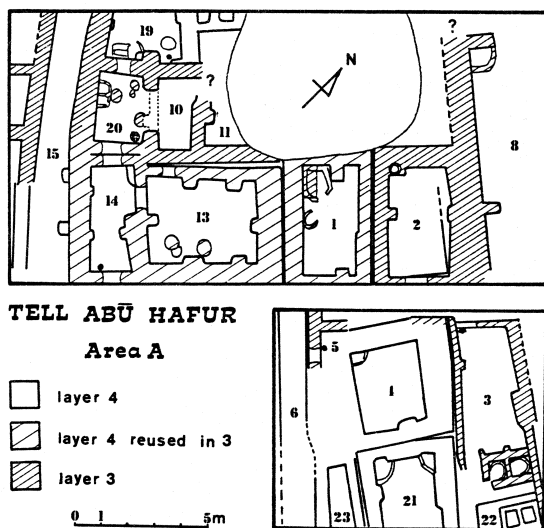


Fig. 2. Tell Abū Hafur, Area A.
Drawing R. Koliński

Among the potsherds discovered in Layer 3 there are also some fragments of Metallic Ware vessels. The lowest stratum reached till now in Area A is Layer 4. This should be not much older than the upper one, as the lanes as well as some of the rooms were in use during both periods. In Layer 4 we discovered remains belonging to at least four dwelling houses, which seem to be slightly larger than the structures found in Layer 3. There are no important differences between the two strata as far as the domestic installations are concerned. It is striking, however, that in structures of Layer 4 *tannurs* and ovens are much more numerous than in Layer 3. They were always set in the northern or western corner of the room. The pottery from Layer 4 is also not very different from what was found in Layer 3 and must be of similar date. The only new element, which appears in Layer 4, is local Ninivite 5 pottery with incised/excised decoration.

In Area A, there were seven burials of 3rd millennium BC date beside the architectural remains. Three of them were infant burials with skeletons deposited in large cooking pots covered from above with mud bricks or sealed with clay. Burials of this kind were made inside houses not deep beneath the floor. The four remaining burials come from a period when this part of Tell Abū Hafur was temporarily uninhabited and the ruins of dwellings served as a cemetery. One of them was a simple inhumation grave of an adult. The skeleton was accompanied by a pottery jar, two bone pins and two spindle-whorls. Three other burials contained remains of children in mud-brick cists. In the latest of them (slightly later than Layer 2), there were three ceramic pots, two bracelets and a necklace of beads and shells found beside the skeleton.

Area B is a 31 m long step trench cutting the northern part of Tell Abū Hafur from the top to the base of the mound. The trench is 5 m wide in its upper part and only 3 m further down. The stratigraphic sequence, as revealed after only one season of investigation, is very preliminary in character. At least nine oc-

cupational layers can be distinguished, of which five upper ones represent the 3rd millennium BC. The topmost layer, almost completely destroyed by erosion, lies immediately beneath the surface of the tell. Its scanty remains consist of a fragmentary stone pavement made of pebbles with some broken ED III pots scattered over it. The second layer contained only some badly preserved fragments of mud-brick walls, while the third included a fragment of a large, well preserved mud-brick wall. Against this wall there was a deposit over 1.5 m thick, composed of thin layers of ash and clay. In the fourth stratum, a fireplace and a tannur were discovered in an open space. The fifth layer (over 1.6 m thick) contained some fragments of mud-brick structures and a pit filled with ashes and potsherds. The ceramic material coming from there can also be attributed to the ED III period. The sixth layer contained fragments of at least five very small rooms. Their walls were constructed of single rows of long mud bricks. There was no trace of doors leading to any of the rooms and not a single diagnostic sherd can be associated with this structure. The next, seventh stratum seems to belong to the Late Uruk period. A huge wall, over 6 m wide, constructed of very large mud bricks is considered as the eight layer. The character and exact function of this structure remains unclear, but it seems evident nevertheless that it was erected during the ED III period. The lowest stratum can be subdivided into smaller stratigraphic units representing Late Obeid culture. This rather thick layer lies on top of sterile soil and should be considered as representing the oldest settlement on Tell Abū Hafur. It can be said in conclusion that the main bulk of occupational deposits on the site comes from ED III period, when Abū Hafur was a large and prosperous settlement. It was also established that the site was occupied since the Obeid period.

The occupation of the smaller mound, Tell Abū Hafur East, is much later. Four small soundings were opened there to test the stratigraphy of this tell, three on the top and one on the western

slope. There are at least six main layers. The upper stratum, considerably disturbed by modern Islamic graves and erosion, contained some fragmentary stone foundations and the pottery collected was a mixture of Early Islamic, Parthian and Mitannian sherds. All the lower layers down to sterile soil should be dated to the middle of the 2nd millennium BC. They contained, besides scanty architectural remains consisting of walls in mud brick erected on stone foundations, numerous Mitannian potsherds and some fragments of vessels with decoration painted in white representing so-called Nuzi pottery. It is beyond doubt that the first settlement on Tell Abū Hafur East was installed well over half a millennium after the settlement on the main mound had been abandoned. Tell Abū Hafur East is the first example of 2nd millennium BC occupation in the Hasake Eastern Dam Reservoir Area.