

BSAI GRANT REPORTS

TELL BRAK 2006

The 2006 Tell Brak excavation took place from 25 March to 11 May, 2006. Work focussed on two transitional periods in the site's history, incipient urbanism in the 5th millennium BC (Area TW, near the northern edge of the site) and the final occupation and decline in the mid-2nd millennium BC (Areas HH and HN, along the high northwest ridge).

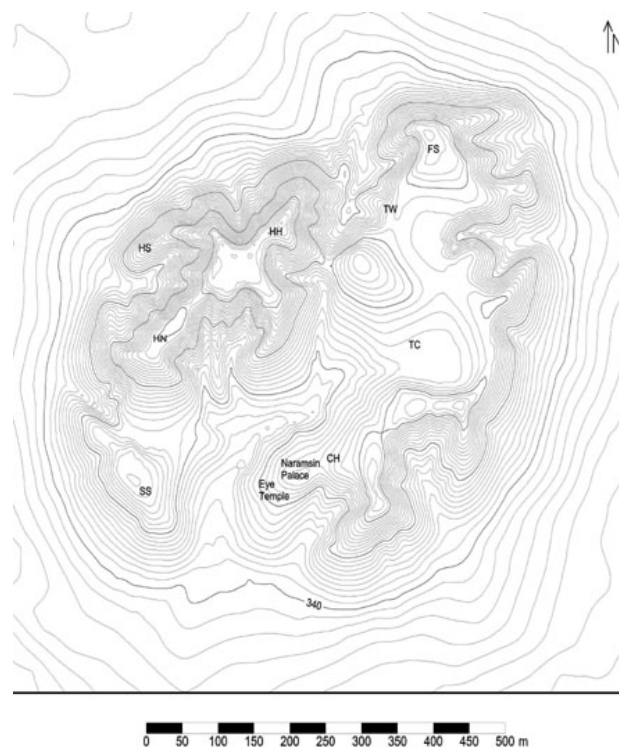


Fig. 1 Topographic plan of Tell Brak

Area TW

The research question here is the nature of early social complexity in the region, and its economic aspects in particular. This area has been a focus of attention for the last several excavation seasons, as it presents an excellent opportunity to explore the key early periods of occupation of Tell Brak, in the 5th-4th millennia BC, when Brak attained urban size and internal organizational complexity. The location of TW, near a likely gate or access route into the city, also allows exploration of one “public face” of the site at this time. During the 2006 season, we continued to uncover more of the “Level 20” buildings first reached in 2004, a group of probable domestic structures belonging to the Late Chalcolithic 2 Period. The plans and relationships of these structures still require more work, but we have a comprehensive ceramic assemblage and large quantities of obsidian tools and spindle whorls. There were also several infant burials in pottery jars associated with this level. These buildings’ successor, in Level 19, was a substantial building of at least four rooms with wide walls, which probably had a manufacturing/industrial function since it presented a collection of tools and several large ovens (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2, Level 19 Building, from East

The deposits in this building contained an interesting assemblage of clay sealings, from doors and a variety of containers (mostly storage jars and some baskets). The most common motifs are twined snakes and lions, the latter usually associated with southern Mesopotamia and the end of the Late Chalcolithic; their presence in northern Mesopotamia and in earlier

levels is further evidence of the early social and economic elaboration experienced by this region. Comparanda for many of the motifs are found on contemporary sealings from Tepe Gawra and Degirmentepe, but at least one of the lion motifs (see Fig 3) is unusually clear and sophisticated and, so far, without parallel. Shells and shell (mother of pearl) inlay, large basalt grinding stones still in situ, caches of clay sling bullets and spindle whorls, large flint blades, lumps of bitumen, and obsidian objects (polished discs, very fine blades) complete the rich assemblage in this structure. This building also contained a unique fluted obsidian and limestone chalice from a bin in the southwest room (see Fig. 4).



Fig. 3 Lion seal from TW



Fig. 4 Obsidian chalice from TW

Several new pottery types have been identified from both Levels 19 and 20, which should prove useful identifiers of the sub-phases of the Late Chalcolithic Period elsewhere on the site and in the survey material. A sounding revealed an earlier LC 2 (or LC-1?) level with a pottery kiln, which we hope to investigate further in the 2007 season. A brief preliminary report on the Area TW findings, plus some discussion of how these fit with the intensive “suburban survey” results, was submitted to *Antiquity* in September.

Area HH

One of our goals in the excavation along the high northwest ridge of the site is to explore the reaction of Brak to the political changes of the 2nd millennium BC: the growth of Shamshi-Addu’s kingdom, its devolution into smaller states, and the subsequent growth and collapse of the Mitanni empire. Texts illuminate a fluctuating political picture, yet the regional archaeological record, while patchy, presents more of a cultural continuum (for instance, Khabur Ware pottery outlasts Shamshi-Adad’s

kingdom, occupation at Chagar Bazar—among other sites—is essentially unchanged).

Three trenches were opened in this area, in which we were able to explore the final stages of occupation on the site in the 2nd millennium BC; we ultimately hope to achieve a sequence through the 2nd millennium BC levels and into the controversial terminal 3rd millennium BC “Post-Akkadian” Period occupation. This last is our second goal for this portion of the project: scrutiny of the so-called “Habur hiatus” settlement and climatic disruption after the Akkadian presence. Two trenches, HH E and HH F, were placed near a Mallowan excavation from the 1930s and just west of the Mitanni Palace and Temple; a third trench, HH G, was located some 6 meters lower and to the south, along a sloping ridge between two current erosion gullies. The aim was a combination of vertical sequencing and horizontal exposure.

The final episode of use of this part of the site, in trenches E and F, dates within the Mitanni Period, to judge from provisional pottery analysis conducted during the season. The main occupational phase consisted of at least two substantial multi-room structures, separated from each other by a street or alley running east-west and towards the Palace and Temple. The most interesting aspect of this phase thus far is the probable vaulted room at the northwest corner of the southern building (see Fig. 4). Both buildings had multiple floors, and frequent repairs and re-plasterings had been made to their wall faces. After abandonment and some collapse of the walls, the area was reused by “squatters”, as there were more hardened surfaces, sherd pavings and traces of hearths and pits within the rooms. This squatter phase dates to later within the Mitanni Period. These excavations yielded domestic material culture: beads, animal figurine fragments, model wheels, bronze pins, other metal fragments and basalt grinding stones.



Fig. 4 Vault in HH Trench F

We now have slightly more than 200 square meters exposed in this area, considerable space in which to excavate earlier 2nd millennium BC levels in the future. The regularity and general spaciousness of the final houses is notable, and it will be interesting to see whether this derives from earlier property plots. We will also pay particular attention to access routes and their history.

Trench G, the stratigraphic sounding opened down-slope from trenches E and F, was a smaller operation designed to test the depth of the 2nd millennium BC deposits. A step-trench of 4.5 meters depth here encountered early 2nd millennium BC levels at the top, above a deep layer of slope wash and erosion channels. Below this there was architecture which preliminary analysis of the pottery suggests is Isin-Larsa in date. Unfortunately, due to the severe erosion and limited size of this trench, complete building plans were not achievable, but several small rooms were exposed. Combined with the information from trench HN A (see below) we have a preliminary idea of the variable but generally rather restricted occupation of the high ridge of the site during the key transition from the late 3rd to early 2nd millennium BC.

Area HN

Excavations in this area had the same goals as those of Area HH; Area HN lies some 150 meters to the west of HH, along the high northern ridge of the site. In two new trenches, B and C, levels of early Mitanni date

were uncovered, while a brief sounding in former Trench A reached levels of the mid 3rd millennium BC.

The architecture in Trenches B and C was similar to that excavated in Area HH Trenches E and F, substantial multi-roomed and spacious structures with several floors and repairs. Here also, there were traces of squatter occupation in the half-ruined structures. This area holds great potential for future investigation, as there is space for substantial horizontal exposures here.

A deep sounding was opened in the bottom of Trench A, which had been excavated in 1994-96. The previous excavation had stopped at levels within the Old Babylonian Period, and our goal was to try again to identify the depth of 2nd millennium BC material and to pinpoint the transition from the 3rd millennium. We did reach levels of the mid 3rd millennium, but the “transition” itself seems to be absent in this area of the site; a mid 3rd millennium structure was succeeded by cobbled areas and pits of the early 2nd millennium BC. The area showed no evidence of long standing abandonment or erosion, so it may be that the key transitional layers were removed by later activities.

Scientific Sampling Programme

Our archaeobotanical sampling programme is comprehensive and efficient, with large soil samples for flotation taken both at random from a variety of contexts and in focussed manner from particular floors or features. A faunal analyst has been recording the animal bones (lion and bear are represented among the bones from Area TW, as well as more traditional species). And numerous soil samples for phytolith and thin section analysis have been taken, mostly targeted at specific use areas (courtyards, floors adjacent to ovens, etc.). Most of these samples are still undergoing analysis but should eventually shed light on any changes in diet and in use of space within the site in concert with our key transitions.

We must thank the Directors of the Departments of Antiquities in Damascus (Dr. Bassam Jamous) and in Hasseke (Mr. Abdul-Massih Bagdo) for their support for our work. The 2006 team consisted of a core staff of fifteen, including students from the Universities of Cambridge, Edinburgh and Damascus and staff from the Universities of Cambridge, Pennsylvania, Sheffield and Nottingham. We were also joined for part of the season by Helen McDonald (working on Area TC pottery) and Tim Skudboel (Copenhagen, working on 4th millennium pottery from earlier

soundings). We were visited by the Ambassadors to Syria from the UK and from France (with entourages); colleagues from the University of Aleppo (Dr. Farouk Ismail and a busload of enthusiastic students), the University of Chicago (Dr. Clemens Reichel of the Hamoukar project) and Paris (Dr. Hermann Gasche and family); as well as numerous Syrian and European tourists. All this activity encouraged us to create a “Brak tourist brochure”, with small plans and brief text in English and Arabic.

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