

Tell Brak 2007 Final Report

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The 2007 excavations at Tell Brak took place from 21 March through 14 May. The objectives during this season were exploration of the 5th and the 2nd millennium BC levels on the site, some of its earliest and latest occupations. We also aimed to explore and save from destruction one of the small tells in the Outer Town at Brak, where an important mass burial of the early-mid 4th millennium BC had been exposed by modern construction and land use and is in danger of further damage.

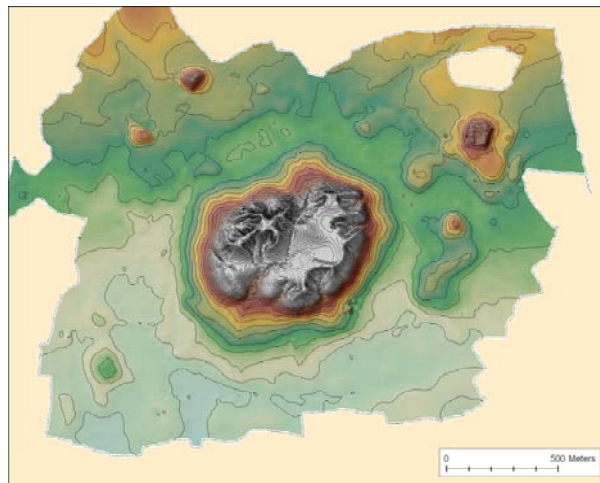


Fig. 1: Topographic map of Tell Brak

Area TW

This area has been excavated since the 1991 and still presents the best opportunity to investigate some of the earliest occupational levels at Brak. The primary results were the linking of the Monumental Building of Level 20 (excavated from 1997 through 2004) to an area of industrial features and smaller structures to its west, plus the articulation of a further Level 21 below this. Both levels belong early in the Late Chalcolithic sequence, LC 2, late 5th-very early 4th millennia BC.

The western part of Level 20 had been partially excavated in previous seasons and comprised at least two small buildings, one with several rooms and a courtyard adjacent to the Monumental Building, the second a less regular set of rooms further west. An alley ran past both buildings on their northern ends and towards the courtyard at the front of the Monumental Building. On the northern side of this alley was an additional small structure or complex of small rooms. Two large domed ovens and several smaller cylindrical ovens were associated with this level, and much of the western area of the trench is characterized by ash dump layers rich in animal bones and lithics. The pottery includes LC 2 types and Gawra fine-ware, and a small range of clay sealings with lion and snake motifs was recovered. One particularly intriguing find was that of a large “spectacle idol”, broken and reused in a wall

foundation. The area presents an interesting mixture of an imposing public structure possibly involved in regional administration, as well as an area of industrial production.



Fig. 2: Area TW, Level 20

Level 21 has several mud-brick and pisé structures but was dominated by ash pits and domed ovens. Material culture included Gawra-style impressed fine-ware sherds and channel-rim bowls (early LC 2), beads in frit and stone, and occasional clay and stone tokens and animal figurines. The obsidian and chert chipped stone tools both appear to have been derived from a variety of sources, unlike the Level 20 tools, which preliminary examination indicates may have been dominated by obsidian from the Nemrut Dag source in Anatolia. The seal impressions from Level 21 were a departure in style from the level above, with at least six impressions of the same seal, an oval with a motif of a mother and baby equid. This seal was impressed on small disc sealings from boxes or other containers. The archaeobotanical samples from Level 21 included large proportions of lentils and barley.

Nine child burials were excavated in TW during 2007, six of which are cut from Level 20 deposits, while the last three were cut from Level 21 deposits. All except the last burial were children between the ages of 9 months and 2 years of age and produced no grave goods. All of the grave pits were cut against the faces of walls, into doorways and into ovens. The single unusual child burial was cut into an oven in a late sub-phase within Level 21 and contained approximately 2500 shell beads, most probably stitched onto cloth in long straight lines (see Fig. 3). It also had a necklace of obsidian, soapstone and dentalium shell beads, with two mother-of-pearl pendants.



Fig. 3: Child Burial in Area TW Level 21, with bead ornaments

Tell Majnuna

This outlying tell on the northwest edge of the Outer Town of Brak was first identified and sounded by Mallowan during his 1930s excavations. However, his excavation was a small trench only, and the publication of his results is limited to an outline of his sounding on the site topographic map. During the Brak Suburban Survey of 2003 through 2005, intensive surface sherd sampling took place on Majnuna as well as other outlying tells and in the fields surrounding the mounded portion of the site. It appeared from the surface sherds that Majnuna had been established in the Late Chalcolithic 2 (late 5th-early 4th millennia BC), as part of Brak's urban expansion. Ceramics of the 2nd and 1st millennium BC also appeared sparsely there. In the autumn of 2006, the survey team's attention was drawn to this area of Brak because an extension of the local grain storage area involved cutting a bulldozer trench around the perimeter of the visible mound. Unfortunately, this bulldozer trench cut into ancient occupational levels, which lie at or near the modern plain level in that location. Most important was an area at the west side of the mound, where the spoil heap from the trench and the trench section both revealed a thick deposit of human and animal bones, among large quantities of Late Chalcolithic ceramics, seal impressions and other objects. At the northeast edge of the mound, a further modern trench cut through a dense layer of similar Late Chalcolithic sherds, and there appeared to be individual burials associated with this layer. In northern Mesopotamia in general for the late 5th-early 4th millennia BC, there are very few adult burials represented in excavations, although burials of children less than 4 years old are relatively common (as they are in Area TW on the main mound). Thus these two episodes of burials appeared to offer an excellent opportunity to recover a unique sample of burial practices for the adult human population in the region.

Five separate excavations and soundings were made at Majnuna, three on the visible mounded area of the site (Areas EM, EMS and EME) and two more just off the mounded area, adjacent to the modern bulldozer trenches (Areas MTW and MTE, respectively to west and east). The material recovered in Areas EM, EMS and MTW all can be dated to roughly the middle of the Late Chalcolithic sequence, LC 3, while materials from EME and MTE is slightly later, although still within the LC 3 phase. This will need further investigation in future but may indicate that the tell expanded gradually from southwest to northeast.

Area MTW investigated the dense bone layer at the west edge of the tell. It was a 3 x 15 meter trench, aligned perpendicular to the modern bulldozer trench. Above the bone layer already visible in the modern trench section was a series of large shallow pits, many also containing large quantities of pottery and animal bones within an ashy matrix. The layer of mixed human and animal bones below these extended only approximately one meter north of the edge of the modern bulldozer trench, and this appears to be the northern limit of the bone pile, which surely continues under the current road past the mound. The human bones are a mixture of partially articulated skeletons and disarticulated elements, while the animal bones are mostly single large pieces (see Fig. 4). They rested on a dense layer of flat-lying pottery sherds, which in turn rested on a clean grey layer of soil which was above what appears to be “natural” virgin soil, a reddish layer with no cultural material. Analysis of the human remains is ongoing, but preliminary results suggest a “death population” of young to middle-aged adults, not the normal death population we expect from natural causes. This suggests that warfare was the most likely explanation for the sudden simultaneous death of so many individuals. There is some evidence of carnivore damage here and in Area EM (see below); this plus the degree of articulation suggests that the skeletons had been left exposed for several months before being collected and moved to Majnuna for disposal or burial.



Fig. 4: Dense bone layer in Area MTW

Area EM was situated north and east of MTW and upslope. We wished to explore what we hoped would be architectural remains at the edge of the mound, in stratigraphic relationship to the mass burial of MTW. However, the deposits in Area EM were similar to those above the bone layer in MTW: thick sloping layers of ash with large quantities of pottery, bones and other rubbish. Unusually, rather than corresponding to the slope of the current mound, these layers sloped down to the north and east--that is, towards the centre of the mound rather than the more normal slope away from the centre. There were at least 3.5 meters of these rubbish layers above evidence of yet another mass burial event, similar to that in MTW. This consisted of a comparable dense layer of mixed human and animal bones. Unlike MTW, there was less pottery associated with this event, although clay container sealings and other small objects were recovered. The upper southern edge of this layer was very fragmented and contained few articulated elements, as if it had been trampled in the past. However, further towards the north and lower down the gentle slope, the fragmentation decreased and a few articulated elements were recovered. At least 10 skulls were found, relatively evenly spaced along the edge of the layer. Other clusters of long bones were

identifiable within the layer, as if they had been transported to the location by the “armload”, or in some kind of large container.

Area EMS was another trench designed to explore the possible architecture and internal stratigraphic sequence of the Majnuna mound. It was located to intersect with an area of mud-brick visible in the mound section created in the spring of 2006 by the partial bulldozing of the Majnuna tell for agriculture. The brick area was explored and identified as a circular structure ca. 2.5-3 meters in diameter, preserved to over 2 meters in height; the walls were plastered inside and out and it was probably a storage silo for grain or similar materials. The pottery included a large percentage of Late Chalcolithic sherds, but the latest sherds present belong to the Assyrian/ Post-Assyrian Period, including a saucer lamp and carinated bowls. A fragmentary “Hand of Ishtar” confirms the late date. The silo had been built underground, into a circular pit which cut into layers of Late Chalcolithic rubbish and ash similar to that in Area EM to its northwest. Here also was found further evidence of a third mass burial event, although at a far smaller scale than in Areas MTW and EM. Within the rubbish layers, there was a small cluster of mostly human bones, mixed with some animal bones, all completely disarticulated. As in Area EM, the long bones were grouped together and the skulls were around the edge of the cluster, which was itself roughly oval, as if it had been contained in a large bag or sack. (See Fig. 5)



Fig. 5: Bone pile in Area EM

Area EME was the final excavation area on the mound, also located in order to explore an area of mud-brick visible in the road section. The upper phase in this trench had a single poorly-preserved mud-brick wall, running north-south, with collapsed bricks to its east. This dated to the 2nd millennium BC, to judge from preliminary analysis of the associated pottery. Below this was a thick layer (more than one meter deep) of fine ash and lenses of reddish material, sloping down from east to west and surrounding the area of mud-brick which had drawn our attention to this location. This brick proved to be a pile of brick rubble rather than a constructed wall. The lack of built architectural features in the site is unusual (although it must be admitted we have excavated only very small areas thus far); we are tentatively hypothesizing that much of this tell may be rubbish from the mounded are of the site or houses within the Outer Town.

Within the ash layer to west and north of the bricks in Area EME were fifteen skeletons, all still articulated but in rather poor condition due to the acidity of the surrounding ash. All were adults, ranging from ca. 20 through 45, and were buried with respect to each other, without overlapping; they appear to have been placed in very shallow pits. The lack of overlap, despite close proximity, seems to imply that the burials were roughly contemporary. As in the areas with mixed mass burials, the ages represented among the skeletons are not a

“normal” death population, containing too many young to middle-aged adults and too few young children or older adults. The contemporaneity of the burials and the ages represented indicate death through a catastrophic event such as war or conflict. However, the date of the burials may be slightly later than that of the mass burials in MTW, EM and EMS.



Fig. 6: Burials in Area EME

Finally, Area MTE at the northeast edge of the mound was placed to investigate the dense sherd layer and possible individual burials. This excavation also presented sloping layers of ash and rubbish, with a particularly large and varied selection of clay sealings, as well as Late Chalcolithic 3-4 pottery. Again, no architectural features appeared here. The individual burials seen in the modern trench section proved to be much later than the sherd midden, probably within the 1st millennium BC.

Approximately 300 clay container sealings were recovered from Majnuna, including sealings from jars, woven baskets, coiled baskets in two different sizes and reed boxes. The 300 sealings contained only 7 repeated scenes, i.e., over 290 unique images. The majority of motifs involved lions attacking gazelles or goats, but this was supplemented by an intriguing range of images, including flowers, lion herds, geometrics, single lions, hybrid goat-man and goat-bird figures, rows of turtles and hedgehogs, human figures, and lions in nets or cages.

Area HH

Excavations in this area began in 2006, with the long-term aim of exploring the late 3rd through 2nd millennia BC settlement at Brak. Portions of two Mitanni Period houses were excavated during 2006; and in 2007, we continued down through an early Mitanni level and into a later Old Babylonian phase of occupation in this area. The structures were domestic/private houses throughout the sequence recovered, and a street which runs east-west through the area and towards the Mitanni palace and temple remained in use throughout the several levels identified.

The earliest phase reached here belongs within the Old Babylonian Period and consists of a multi-roomed house, with at least three parallel rectangular rooms arranged from north to south. The street runs along its northern façade. Materials from this building and a subsequent “squatter” phase include large numbers of basalt grindstones, smaller numbers of bronze pins, equid figurines and bone tools.



Fig. 7: Old Babylonian House in Area HH-F.

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