

Report on the Excavations at Tell Brak, 2008

Excavations at Tell Brak during the spring of 2008 concentrated on developments during the site's initial urban expansion, the mid-Late Chalcolithic Period (c 4300-3600 BC). Our investigations continued work begun in 2007 in an industrial area on the main mound (Area TW) and in a sub-mound that marks Brak's northern limits (Tell Majnuna), where a series of mass graves was followed by deposition of industrial rubbish.

Tell Majnuna

This sub-mound was formed in the Late Chalcolithic 2 (c 4000 BC) through Late Chalcolithic 3 Period (until c 3600 BC). Our 2008 excavations comprised three trenches in Area MTW on its south-west edge, two trenches in Area EM and three trenches in Area EME-2, both at the south centre, and five soundings and trenches in Area EME towards its northeast edge (see Fig. 1).

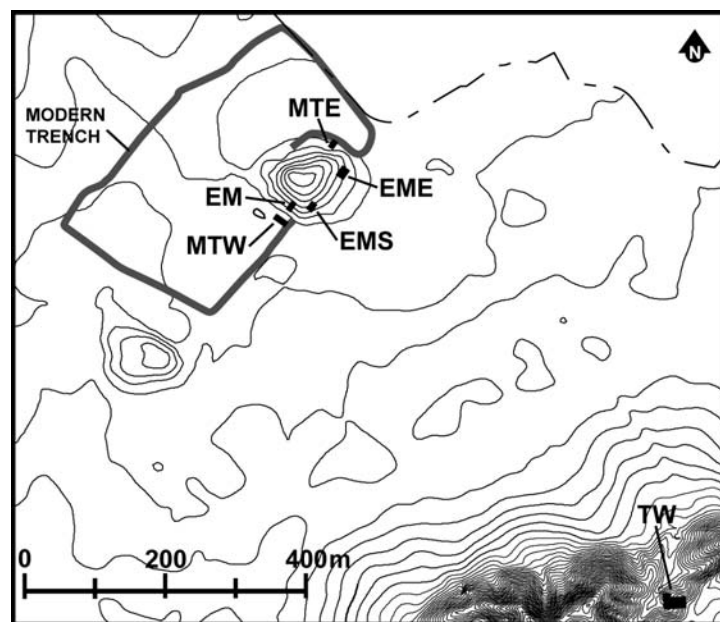


Fig. 1: Topographic Map of the northern edge of Tell Brak, with 2007 and 2008 excavations on Tell Majnuna and the main mound indicated.

Human remains were recovered in all the south-west trenches (all three trenches in MTW and both trenches in EM), as well as in two of the eastern trenches (EME 2 and 3). These human remains represent at least four different catastrophic events dated to c 3800-3600 BC, which had resulted in the deaths of primarily young adults, of both sexes. The minimum number of individuals from all the trenches together so far is 150; this number will surely increase as further analyses are conducted.

In Area MTW, we revealed an eastward extension of the dense deposit of human and animal bones that first drew our attention to the area in 2006 (and which was investigated during 2007; see the brief report in the November 2007 BISI newsletter). The bone deposit is clustered and somewhat discontinuous (a difference from the sample seen in 2007); there are both disarticulated and mostly articulated skeletons in this area, accompanied by animal remains representing large cuts of meat (see Fig. 2). The mass grave appears to have been a linear pile some 3 by 20+ meters in extent and may have

contained over 150 individuals. There is an underlying sherd layer across most of this area, resting above a clay layer that itself was just above “natural” virgin soil.



Fig. 2: Human and animal bone deposit in MTW-4.

In Area EM, c 20 meters northeast of MTW, we completed excavation of another dense human and animal bone layer, which had been partially sampled in 2007. In contrast to Area MTW, the bones in Area EM were almost entirely disarticulated and splintered; the layer of bones was a continuous long strip some 5 x 1 meters in extent (see Fig. 3) and comprises more than 50 individuals, again, mostly young adults. Ceramics and sealings associated with the deposits in MTW and EM indicate that these two mass burials were approximately contemporary and are dated early in Late Chalcolithic 3 Period.



Fig 3: Human bone layer in Area EM.

There are indications that the human remains in Area EM were a selection of elements in a tertiary context, having been shifted from their original location at death and then further sorted and separated. Many of the bones were lightly polished from handling, and a number of pointed tools had been made from longer bones, particularly the femur (see Fig. 4). The tools appear to have been made for use *in situ*, rather than being made for use elsewhere, but the nature of the deposit remains ambiguous.



Fig. 4: Pointed and polished tool made from a human femur.

The third area in which we continued excavations from 2007 was Area EME; exposure of the later Late Chalcolithic 3 cemetery discovered in 2007 was extended to the north. The 32 skeletons here were entirely articulated, but some bodies in the north sector of the cemetery appear to have been buried quickly and haphazardly. These skeletons appear to have been flung down roughly, unlike the careful placement of the bodies further south. The ages indicate a majority of younger adults, similar to those in the mass graves. Finally, in Sounding EME-3 (10 meters west of the cemetery), we encountered yet another deposit of mixed disarticulated human remains (including a group of 12 human skulls; see Fig. 5). Ceramics indicate this smaller mass burial lies temporally between the MTW/EM deposits and the EME cemetery. Thus we have at least four events which resulted in death of healthy adults, followed in three cases by exposure, disarticulation and finally burial.



Fig. 5: Twelve Human Skulls and articulated human limbs in Sounding EME-3

In all the areas excavated, we have revealed sloping layers of rubbish above the human remains (ash, large quantities of pottery, flints, sealings and figurines) of up to c 5 meters' depth. The consistency of ceramic types through the stratigraphy, plus the presence of sealings bearing the same stamp seal image from layers separated by more than a meter's depth, both indicate that the rubbish at the western edge of the mound in particular had accumulated very quickly. Other than the eroded base of a probable Neo-Assyrian mud-brick platform in Area EM, there is no architecture in any of our trenches, and the Late Chalcolithic mound appears to be composed entirely of rubbish and bone deposits.

The Late Chalcolithic 2-3 period precedes the heavily-researched southern Mesopotamian (Southern Uruk) expansion episode and saw local urban expansion and

development of a new administrative complexity, evidenced by sealings (see below) and monumental architecture on the main mound. The human remains from Majnuna, and the probability that the individuals met a sudden simultaneous death, indicates that the urban expansion and developing hierarchies of power and wealth were achieved despite or because of violent conflict.

Approximately 700 clay sealings with stamp seal impressions were recovered from Tell Majnuna during 2008 (added to the c 250 impressions from 2007). The majority of these sealings present scenes of lions attacking goats or gazelles, but there are also lions in nets, vultures, snakes, and both human (see Fig. 6) and hybrid figures. Most of the sealings are from containers: baskets, reed boxes and jars. Clay figurines, polishing stones, grinding stones and masses of flint and obsidian tools and debitage from tool production complete the assemblage. The extremely large quantities of all the materials, especially pottery, suggest an industrial scale of rubbish production, beyond the household level. This information fits well with our ongoing investigations of industrial development in Area TW on the main mound (see below).



Fig. 6: Sealing from Area EM with human figure in pointed horned hat and fringed garment.

Main Mound, Area TW

We have now reached the early-mid Late Chalcolithic 2 Period (c 4300-4200 BC) in this long-term excavation (Level 22). The lowest level exposed in 2007 had consisted of small ephemeral structures, ovens, pits and similar features. The level below this, Level 22, was revealed in 2008 to consist of more substantial architecture, a multi-roomed building at the south and a slightly later large oven with two attached rooms to the north. In one room of the southern building, shallow plates had been abandoned on the floor within a niche (see Fig. 7). The northern oven building is paralleled at Tepe Gawra; the oven (over 2 m in diameter) seems too large to have had a household purpose, and we assume it was used for baking large quantities of bread or (perhaps) roasting meat.



Fig. 7: Room in Level 22 Building with plates in niche

The southern building has at least three rooms in a north-south line, but its eastern extent was unfortunately beyond the boundaries of our excavation. Its external wall on the west was rebuilt several times and in one phase had three evenly-spaced long jars set laterally across its width, possibly for storage or air circulation. All the architecture in this level is concentrated in the eastern portion of our trench, while the western side had multiple outdoor layers and surfaces, alternately clean or sherd-covered, sloping down towards the west. In subsequent levels of the Late Chalcolithic 2-3 (TW Levels 20 through at least 18), the western portion of this trench comprises an access route, a street or alley. It now seems that this later street formed in an area that was at one point an open space and that access to the settlement through this area had a lengthy history.

The obsidian assemblage from TW Level 22 is rich and variable; the colours represented (clear, brown, green and grey) may indicate multiple sources, while the abundant debitage (small chips and flakes, cores) imply that industrial-scale production of tools took place within the area. Other industrial activities occurring in Area TW may include manufacture of shell inlays, production of beads of obsidian and other stones, roasting of grain or meat in large ovens, and textile manufacture (spindle whorls were frequent). Sealings from containers and doors indicate that systematic control of goods and access to goods was already well developed. Infant burials were occasionally found, as in later levels, placed in jars or in small pits, with no grave goods or at most a few shell beads (see Fig. 8).



Fig. 8: Infant Burial in Area TW, Level 22.

Our excavations in Area TW thus continue to reveal that economic complexity and hierarchy were already developing in the 5th millennium BC in northern Mesopotamia. Many industrial activities had already moved out of the “household” sphere by the later 5th millennium BC and into separate workshops, while the evidence of sealings indicates a multi-level hierarchy was involved in administering and controlling access and movement of raw materials and/or manufactured items.

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