Tell Shiyukh Tahtani

Report of the 2008 season

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In the summer 2008 the University of Palermo expedition in North Syria carried out a thirteenth season of salvage excavations at Tell Shiyukh Tahtani, a site on the right bank of the Euphrates River south of Jerablus. This season lasted about six weeks, from 18 July to 1 September. Our Representative of the DGAM was Mr. Salah Sharker.

Due to the reduced number of supervisors and senior students, as in 2006, our fieldwork was concentrated to Area C-D on the eastern slope of the tell (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Area C-D: air view from the water tower (from W).

Here were investigated three main sectors of the 500 sqm large area:
• The first was on the North-western corner on the summit (Square D23), where we investigated the upper levels of occupation, ranging from the Late Bronze Age to the Neo-Assyrian period;

• the second (Squares D9-D11) half-way the slope, where we continued explore the Middle Bronze levels;

• the third sector was East Trench (Squares C3, D4-D1) at the foot of the upper tell (now over 7 m deep), where we continued the investigation of a large building datable to the very beginning of the EBA.

We shall now briefly describe the results obtained during this season.

**Upper levels (Area D23)**

In Area D23 we brought entirely to light a massive mud-brick wall running W-E which formed the northern side of a monumental building, already partially explored and completely removed in the adjacent Area D11 to the south (Fig. 2). This wall (23093), consisting of four rows of square bricks (0,38 x 0,38 m), was preserved to a height of more than 1,2 m (12 courses). Its north-east corner, though cut by a large pit, was preserved at a lower level (Fig. 3).
A deep foundation trench was identified on its northern side cutting though earlier strata. Unfortunately no occupation floor was preserved on either side so that a possible dating to the Late Bronze Age is proposed here without solid evidence (Fig. 4).

The following lower level could be investigated only on the northern side of the Area since it was partially cut by W23093 and its foundation trench. It consisted of a portion of a large rectangular room delimited on three sides by thin mud-brick walls, 2-course high, and a small annex to the West. A thick destruction debris was lying above the floors of both rooms but unfortunately no relevant finds were found *in situ* below (Fig. 5).

The building was entered from the east, where a stepped threshold was associated to a thick pebble floor outside (Fig. 6). The scarce material associated with it suggests a date to a late phase of the MBA.

During the 2008 season we also continued to remove a large, thick dump further down the slope (Area D24) immediately to the east.
Middle Bronze Age levels (D9-D11)

We further investigated the earlier MBA levels down the eastern slope. Here a core sequence had been already established in the previous, consisting of four main phases (CD 9-6) covering almost entirely the first half of the second millennium. This year we concentrated our efforts on the earlier two levels (9-8) removing most of the mud-brick walls of the Middle Bronze II compound (phases 7-6).

These walls were mostly rebuilt above the earlier architecture of Phase 8 and usually consisted of a thick stone sockle supporting a mud-brick superstructure. The main operation was conducted in the lower room to the east where we removed a late annex and found a nice flagstone floor lying below a burnt destruction layer (Fig. 7).

Traces of an earlier floor (CD 9) were identified below the flagstone pavement which was associated with deep four post-holes, probably related to a wooden square structure, dating to the earliest phase of the MBA.

Fig. 7. Area D9. Phase 8: architecture dating to the MBI (from N).
In removing the structures just described we reached the lower EB IV level (CD 10) and brought to light the western portion of a room, which had been partially investigated in the previous season (Fig. 8).

The room contained a central circular hearth embedded in the beaten-earth floor and a small cubical platform, nicely plastered, along the west section. This room, as established in 2006, was entered from the east, where it was preceded by a fine pebble floor, which, in turn was covered by a thick layer of broken vessels (mainly Hama beakers).

As regards burial customs during the 2008 season, three new pit graves of the MB I-II periods were discovered in cutting through Phase 9-8 remains (Figs. 9-12). Most interesting was a child jar burial (T. 111) to which was associated a complete animal offering (female sheep) contained in a separate compartment (Fig. 9).
Besides personal ornaments, the jar contained three small vessels, two of them are oil bottles in Grey Ware of very fine quality (Fig. 11).

The EBA levels of the East trench (Area C3)

In the deep East Trench at the foot of the upper tell three main operations were undertaken during 2008 season.

To the south (Area C3) we brought to light what seems to be the earliest EB I building so far known at Shiyukh Tahtani. This appeared below the open court of the South Building where in 2006 we had already uncovered a small rectangular annex and the remains of a horse-shoe-shaped oven (Fig. 13).

In removing these structures and the related floors of the courtyard we uncovered a thick mud-brick wall running S-N, parallel to the buttressed façade of the South Building.
Both walls, close to each other, formed a kind of a narrow trench filled with a homogeneous brownish soil, over 1 m deep. At the bottom of the trench we uncovered the line of an earlier wall which served as a foundation to support the façade of the South Building.

This suggests that the building must have had a long life, of which we know so far very little apart from the courtyard area outside. This now forms one of the best examples of niched architecture in a pure Mesopotamian tradition so far known in the Middle Euphrates Valley (Fig. 14).

Fig. 14. Area C3. The buttressed façade of the South Building and W 3080 in foreground (from W).
West of the new parallel wall we found a thick mud-brick detritus cut by a large round pit, filled with a rich pottery deposit (Fig. 15).

![Fig. 15. Area C3. Large circular pit with pottery fill (from W).](image)

Below this layer a large room was uncovered in the central part as well as two small annexes to the south (Fig. 16). One of them, square in plan, had the main walls lined with fine lime plaster and no doorway was preserved. However, below a thick fill of ca. 1,5 m deep a plastered beaten-earth floor was reached at the end of the season (Fig. 17).

In the adjacent room to the North, larger in size, though we did not reach the floor level, several features were revealed. The thick East wall was thickened by means of mud-brick benches and a thick layer of similar bricks appeared at the end of the season was abutting on the north wall. Most interesting is the presence of a squared stepped mud-brick platform, the top of which was surmounted by a large white slab (Fig. 18). Unfortunately the nature of this platform could not be ascertained since a large portion of it lies below the west section outside the excavation border.
Another interesting feature was a cooking-pot burial found along the same section near the platform (Fig. 19). This contained the remains of an infant (T. 116) and was sealed by a “champagne cup”, laid upside down as a lid. This is the earliest burial so far uncovered at Shiyukh Tahtani (Figs. 19-21).
Fig. 21 Area C3. Room layout to the West of W 3080 (from S).
Area D4.

Short operations were conducted in the central sector of the East Trench, especially inside the North Building. In removing the baulk to the North we could identify its north wall which showed several phases of repairs and additions. Moreover, on the N-E corner we cleared out the underground canteen partially explored during the previous season (Fig. 22) which turned out to contain at its bottom a large quantity of pottery vessels, there were mainly smashed and incomplete, most common types included S-shaped bowls and champagne cups (Fig. 23).

Fig. 22 Area D3. Underground structure

Fig. 23 Area C3: broken pots at its base.
Area D1.

Last, most spectacular were the finds in Area D1 to the north of the North Building. Here we first proceeded to remove entirely the thick destruction layer which separated the scanty remains of the EB III from the more impressive architecture of the earlier period. This turned out to be a large room, over 8 m long, enclosed on three sides by mud-brick walls and paved with a floor only partially preserved.

The new compound (fig. 24) was separated from the North Building by two parallel cross-walls, one abutting upon the other, and was most probably used for domestic activities and food production.

Most striking was a 2 m wide circular mud-brick oven to the NW surrounded by three cooking-pots embedded into the floor (Fig. 25). One of them was deliberately set inside a niche in the western wall, near a squarish hearth. The three cooking-pots were also filled with ash, containing a large amount of carbonized seeds of wheat and various other plants, which were retrieved by flotation. All this evidence suggests that it was an open area used for domestic activities, connected with food production and consumption.

Fig. 24. Area D1. The EB I compound (from the S).
In addition several burials were found cutting through these layers. The latest, belonging to the EB III period (T. 107), consisted of a vertical shaft and a side chamber closed by vertical slabs (Figs. 26, 28) and contained the remains of a child surrounded by rich pottery assemblage: it includes a late type of long-stemmed pedestal bowl (or champagne cup), 2 small globular jars and a kind of “drinking set” (chalice and beaker) which will became very common at Shiyukh in the following EB IV period (Figs. 27) and a small gold bead (Fig. 29), a unicum so far at our site.
Even more impressive were the burials of the previous EB I-II levels. Three of them contained infants inside cooking pots laid inside pits. The infants were generally laid in a crouched pose without particular equipment.

The last two graves were instead very large pithos burials entered by a deep side oval shaft (Figs. 30-32). These contained reach furnishings consisting of small sets of pottery vessels, metal toggle pins and hundreds of tiny stone polychrome beads, probably meant to decorate some kind of cloth, which were found copiously in the soil all around the body. The pottery
includes champagne bowls of the “Carchemish” style, *cyma recta* bowls and small jars (Fig. 33).

Fig. 31. T. 109 (from S).

Fig. 32. T. 109 (from S).

Fig. 33. T. 109, pottery assemblage

To conclude it seems that area to the north of the North Building in the east side of area C-D at Shiyukh Tahtani was used as a burial ground for children and sub-adults in the later phase of level 13. These graves are very similar in shape and contents to the pot burials first uncovered on the Carchemish citadel mound by the pioneer excavations of the British Museum in the early 20th century and show a peculiar character of the funerary culture of the Middle Euphrates region during the early third millennium B.C.

Shiyukh Tahtani, 1 September 2008