

Research history

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The more recent research activities at Tell Fekheriye look back on a series of older investigations beginning with the diplomat and explorer Max Freiherr von Oppenheim who visited the site several times during his excavation at Tell Halaf from 1911-1913 and 1927-1929.

Topographical survey by Max Freiherr von Oppenheim (1929)

In 1929 Oppenheim dispatched the architects Felix Langenegger and Hans Lehmann to conduct a survey and to take topographical measurements of the settlement area. Oppenheim's own plans to excavate the site in 1939 were halted by the beginning of World War II.

Excavations under the direction of Calvin McEwan (1940)

For this reason it was the American team consisting of members from the Oriental Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, under the direction of Calvin McEwan, who received the first excavation permit for the site at Tell Fekheriye. The excavations that began in 1940 were suspended in the same year by the Vichy-loyal, French mandate administration that occupied Syria. McEwan died shortly after the end of World War II and the excavations were not resumed. The results of his campaign were nevertheless published by the Oriental Institute of Chicago (McEwan et al. 1958) and despite its brief duration, showed remarkable findings. The American excavators confirmed a roman castellum within a doubly fortified city and identified this area with the antique Rhesaina as Oppenheim had previously suggested. The monumental building that was found in *sounding IX* has been interpreted as a neo-Assyrian palace in the form of a *bit hilani*. In *sounding VI* the structures of a Middle Assyrian house were laid open in which cuneiform tablets were found dating to the reign of Salmanasser I. (1263-1234 BC) and Tukulti-Ninurta I. (1233-1197 BC) (Güterbock in: McEwan et al. 1958: 86-90).

Soundings by Anton Moortgat (1955-56)

Anton Moortgat carried out three soundings in 1955 and 1956 (Moortgat 1956, 1957, 1959) aiming to demonstrate how easily alleged Hurrian layers could be reached. The following areas were examined: at the highest elevation, westward of an Islamic tomb in the so-called 'Türbentrench', the 'eastern trench' on the eastward perimeter and a third trench left behind by McEwan's team in *sounding IX* near the *bit hilani*-building. Despite the very promising finds of so-called Nuzi and Khabur ware sherds and well preserved architectural structures from the

soundings that point toward settlement in the first half of the 2nd millennium BC and during the period of the Mitanni empire (Moortgat 1957: 23; Hrouda 1961), further excavations were once more suspended in 1956. Moortgat decided to concentrate his study on Tell Chuera, 60km westward, where interesting layers were expected to be reached more quickly.

Discovery of the statue of Hadad Yis's (1979)

The coincidental discovery of a statue depicting a local Assyrian governor dating to the late 9th or early 8th century BC rekindled the discussion about the historic importance of Tell Fekheriye. The basalt statue, found during grading works in 1979, bears a bilingual inscription in Akkadian and Aramaic language devoting the statue to the weather god, the 'Lord of the Khabur' of the city Sikāni. This raises the question whether the Iron Age site of Sikāni is (identical with) the late Bronze Age site of Waššukanni. The significance of Sikāni as a central cultic place for the weather god and his wife Šala can also be retraced in the 'Répertoire Géographique' dating to the Ur-III period at the end of the 3rd millennium BC (Müller-Kessler/Kessler 1995: 240-241).

Discovery of a monumental roman statue (1996)

During construction work on the northern edge of the lower city in 1996 a monumental roman statue from the late 2nd century AD was found, further underscoring the importance of the possible location of Rhesaina (later Theodosiopolis). From the second quarter of the 3rd century AD onward the city possessed its own right to mint, became a bishop's see in 383 AD and was an important military outpost on the border between the Byzantines and Sassanids (Castelin 1946).

Investigations carried out by Pruß and Bagdo (2001)

Excavations were taken up again in 2001 by a German-Syrian team under Alexander Pruß and 'Abd al-Masih Bagdo through the initiative of the University Halle-Wittenberg (Pruß/Bagdo 2002). *Soundings VI* and *IX* from the American excavations in 1940, where architectural structures had been found, were extended to verify the stratigraphy in that area of the tell. A third trench at the northern perimeter of the lower city served to investigate the late Antiquity period in areas most put in danger by contemporary intrusion and where the monumental statue was previously found. In this case it was because of financial difficulties that excavations could not be continued.

This brief overview of the research history clearly shows that the previous mostly once-off or time-limited research ventures were able to confirm or reconfirm the archaeological importance of Tell Fekheriye but were not able to reveal a consistent settlement history of the site.



Fig. 1: Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, 1896.



Fig. 2: Western slope of main mound with *sounding VI* in 1940 (McEwan et al. 1958: pl. 13B).

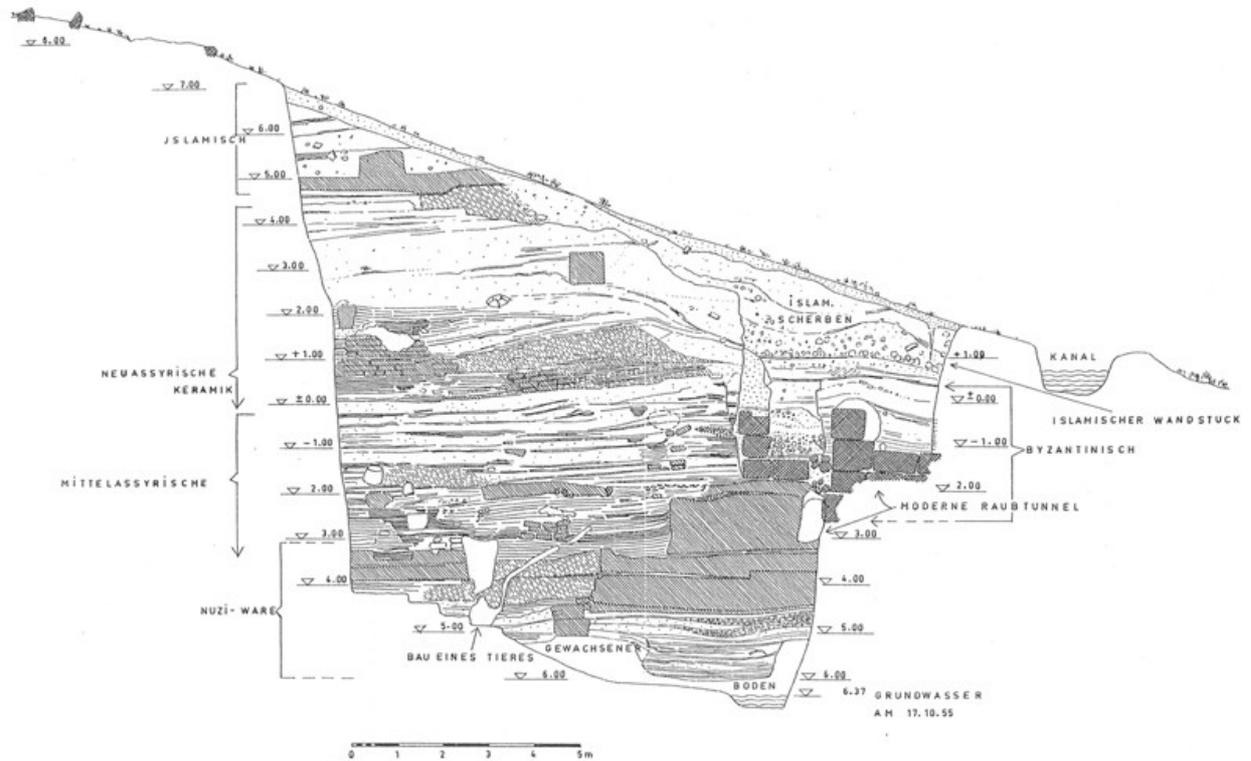


Fig. 3: Deep sounding by A. Moortgat at the highest point of the site (so called Türbe-Trench) (Moortgat 1959, fig. 2).



Fig. 4: Hadad-Yis'i statue, Museum Damaskus.



Fig. 5: Roman statue, Museum Deir ez-Zor.