Excavation report of Sounding A, 2006

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Bartl, P.V., Excavation report of Sounding A, 2006, http://www.fecheriye.de/pdf/2006_A_report.pdf (Date: 19.05.2011).

Sounding A in Square 8449 is situated towards the north-eastern end of the main mound of Tell Fekheriye approximately south of the area where the American fieldworks commenced in 1940 under the direction of the Oriental Institute and revealed a monumental Iron Age building. The sounding consists of a 10 by 10 meter wide trench situated between 840 and 850 meter east and 490 and 500 meter north by the site grid installed in the 2005 season.

General aims and problems of the work in sounding A

1. All previously published topographic plans of the Tell are based on a plan made in 1929 by the Oppenheim-expedition. Thus all results of subsequent expeditions like those of the Oriental Institute in 1940, the expedition by Moortgat in 1956 and 1957 and the short campaign of A. Pruß in 2001 have been added to this original plan. This led to several problems concerning the exact location of the trenches previously excavated. Moreover the surface of the Tell has been altered heavily during the last 50 years on the grounds of agricultural activities and the use of the topsoil as adequate material for mud-bricks for building purposes. By re-excavating the southern part of the old American trench it should be possible to locate the exact position of the architectural remains of the Iron Age palace published by McEwan.
2. The absolute height above sea level has never been measured so far due to a lack of adequate information. With the new topographic plan this problem has been solved. In order to position the previously excavated objects exact within their 3D-environment it is necessary to convert the relative height measured in the old excavations and to transform it into the absolute height above sea level. In order to do so it is necessary to re-excavate previously excavated levels as described in 1.

Stratigraphic question and its impact on the topographic history of the Tell

3. Until now the stratigraphic sequence in this area of the high mound has been almost unknown and it is poorly described what lies above the monumental Iron Age building. Research in this area is one of the main aims of this season and includes the documentation of a sounding made by Moortgat in 1956 as well as of the damage modern field building activities have done to the younger levels.

Aims concerning the "iron age palace"

4. Another aim of work in Area A was to uncover the extent of the Iron Age building. As already described by McEwan and Pruß the excavated rooms of the building are part of a much larger complex. The east-western expansion of the building can be clearly seen in a steep section at the northern edge of the Tell whereas the north-southern expansion has to be investigated by means of excavation.

5. The different building phases of the Iron Age palace show different use for *room 8*: in a first building phase it is a room south of a central court (*floors 4+5*). In a later phase connected with *floor 3* the American excavators describe the room to become an open space by removal of the southern wall and adding another row of bricks to its northern wall which became the new exterior wall. This situation is closely connected to the question whether there are more parts of this palace belonging to the same or later building phases further to the south. Since McEwan only had few finds to support his chronological conclusion it would be of special interest to find more objects belonging to the different building phases to be able to date them more accurately.

The early Islamic and Byzantine levels

The process of fieldwork in Area A commenced with the removal of crops from a modern field that covered the area. The topsoil had to be cleared away by scraping the surface until the first traces of archaeological remains appeared (Fig. 1). They consist of an accumulation of badly visible pits and graves cutting earlier structures not to forget about numerous animal holes covering the whole sounding. Most of the pits contained few shards and tiles of late Antique date whereas the graves did not reveal any bones aside from some poorly preserved remains. Some of this material is clearly intrusive and might come from totally different area of the mound by ploughing the field. The latest structures that can be recognized and recorded in a larger context are walls of late Antique date. They appear ½m beneath the surface in the western part of the sounding, whereas the eastern and south-eastern part revealed structural remains on a 30cm higher level. These walls consist of a river pebble and limestone foundation with cast limestone blocks on top that have almost disintegrated. It becomes clear, that the walls have at least one phase of rebuilding in form of a younger stone foundation above a layer of mud-bricks that seals an older foundation. Up to date seven floor levels belonging to this walls have been detected. They consist of a make-up of small shards and pebbles covered with a lime floor up to 1cm thickness.

After recording and removing these structures another layer with late Antique walls and installations was uncovered. The presence of an oven (tanur) with a working-platform and several broken grinding stones indicates an economic use of this area during Byzantine times.

At this level excavation stopped in this area of the sounding for the aims could be followed much better by excavating the northern part of the sounding: here the material consists of a huge dump with lots of modern objects. They include a tube with antibiotics, corned beef cans, several plastic objects, Syrian coins and other modern objects. It becomes clear that the dump slopes down towards the north-eastern corner of the sounding which would indicate the approximately position of the American trench (and probably the trench dug by Moortgat). Even nowadays this can be seen in a depression on the northern side of the mound. The exact position seems to become clear about 1.5m beneath the modern surface of the mound: the filling of a room with a floor and wall breaks off at a right angle about 40cm north of an artificial section. This might indicate the eroded edge of the older trenches that filled with surface wash. In recent times levelling the surface of the tell for fields and other agricultural activities might explain the amount of modern objects described above.

In the continuing fieldwork the situation in the northern part of the trench where the main effort of investigation was put becomes clearer:
The edges of the American trench are rather eroded and wash filled the trench up to a height of about 355m a.s.l. This means that about 3m of refill covers the top of the southern part of the Iron Age building the Americans excavated in 1940. On top of this another 3m of modern debris fill up the old trenches. This made it possible to re-excavate the building only in a limited area in the northern part of Sounding A. The test sounding (Fig. 4) covers an area of 2.5 by 9 meters and is about 6m deep. At a height of 354.5m the shaft of a well was determined by the homogenous fill of ashy layers and broken pottery. This was helpful for identifying the stratigraphic sequence in the sections before excavating the whole area.

The Iron Age levels
After almost 2.5m of debris that indicates a hiatus in the occupation of that area at a height of 353m a layer of several thin floors with some Iron Age pottery was excavated. The surface was covered with some small river pebbles and seems to have accumulated during a certain period of time. This might indicate an exterior surface, what could explain the many bones and bone fragments that were in the make up of the floor.

In the side of the well it became apparent that a massive mud brick wall was cut (Fig. 5). The wall consist of a northern part with mud-bricks made of red cemented earth and a southern part of one meter width that was build of mud-bricks of a totally different material. Already the American excavators noticed a rebuilding in the wall between *courtyard 4* and *room 8*: in the latest phase of occupation the exterior wall of the building was destroyed and *room 8* ceased to

be a room. The northern wall of *room 8* was thickened and it was possible to determine the two building phases by the colour of the mud-bricks. This gives a hint to the dating and association of the wall cut by the pit. Also the absolute height correlates to the levels given by the OIP-publication. This might indicate that the exterior surface is identical to *floor 3* identified in the American excavation and the badly eroded walls belong to the palace.

Fig. 1: Sounding A from the south. In the upper left the area with the modern dump is visible where the edges of the American excavation can be identified.

Fig. 2: Sounding A from west with the remains of the youngest Byzantine level.

Fig. 3: Remains of a Byzantine working area. In the foreground the deep sounding is visible.

Fig. 4: View of the test sounding dug in order to reach the Iron Age layers.

Fig. 5: Wall of the Iron Age palace cut by the shaft of a pit. Two phases of building can be observed.