

Excavation report of Sounding F (Sq. 6144, 6244 & 6344), 2010

Soundings in the lower town of Tell Fekheriye

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Bartl, P.V., Soundings in the lower town of Tell Fekheriye, http://www.fekheriye.de/pdf/2010_F_report.pdf (Date: 22.05.2011).

Squares 6144, 6244 and 6344 are situated in the lower town about 30m west of the terrace and the slope of the main mound. Investigations were aimed at finding evidence for a continued expansion of the Bronze Age settlement in this direction and gaining insights into the Roman-Byzantine occupational layers in the lower town. Therefore three 2m by 3m wide soundings each placed at a distance of 10m to the other (F-I, F-II and F-III). Excavations in these squares were supervised by Simon Jacob (Fig.1).

In all three soundings the top levels were of mixed surface materials mostly containing Byzantine tiles, some so far undated coins and numerous tesserae. They form an up to two meter thick surface layer that covers several architectural features in the different soundings. The westernmost sounding (F-I) was excavated to a depth of approximately 2m below the surface. At that level two walls were identified built as rubble masonry with some Islamic sherds in their makeup. As terminus post quem they indicate that these walls were of probable Early Islamic date (Fig.2).

The middle and the western sounding (F-II and F-III), yet, could be excavated to a depth of about 5m. In Trench F-III two parallel walls made of huge limestone blocks were uncovered. Both of them are remarkably well preserved to a maximum height of seven rows of stones. Due to the limited size of the sounding it is difficult to come to any apodictic conclusions concerning its chronology. However it seems likely that they represent different building phases of a large Byzantine building. Between both walls, heavy accumulations of tiles and a basalt eave gutter came to lie. At the western edge of F-III part of a monochrome floor mosaic was uncovered that probably superimposed one or both walls, as parts of this mosaic and loose tesserae have been found in the upper part of the fill (Fig.3).

Both in trenches F-III and F-II parts of walls were observed, yet in F-II only the lowest row of stones was preserved in the northern section. It is likely that this wall abuts the one in trench F-III and thus forms the corner of a building. This is supported by the fact that right below a lime floor was found which is clearly contemporaneous with the wall. This floor was covered with a thick layer of very homogeneous ash in both trenches, indicating that the building was destroyed in a violent fire (Fig.4).

A most remarkable find, that can be associated with the Byzantine walls is that of a ritual bucket (situla) found crushed between two blocks of stone in the upper part of the eastern wall in F-III (Fig.5). This situla is about 18cm high and in spite of the folded surface a relief design can be recognised that shows nine male figures with gloriole and different objects in their hands. They are bordered by a frieze at the top and bottom consisting of floral elements and alternating shell and bird motifs. A guilloche pattern takes up a central place in the relief and probably encircles a depiction of Christ, yet this area is obscured by a fold (Fig.6).

As Rhesaina/Theodosiopolis was fortified under Theodosius I in 383 AD and became bishop's see according to antique sources, it is likely that this is so far the first evidence for a religious building of that era in the lower town. Why this situla was crushed and obviously hidden in the gap between both stones has yet to be determined.

At the end of the depositional process after the destruction of the buildings the topography of the area was still totally different than what we see today. It is obvious that the main mound stood much higher above the surrounding plain as can be seen from the difference in altitude between both the Byzantine level in the lower town and the Middle Assyrian level on the terrace.

In the time after the American excavations the cultivation of fields and constant ploughing has levelled the whole area and filled the depression visible in the sections of all three soundings with an inhomogeneous surface material.

These soundings prove very well the potential of the site and the state of preservation of Byzantine levels in that area and thus open a window into the late Antique history of the region as well as into possible future research projects.



Fig. 1: The three soundings of Area F as seen from the east.



Fig. 2: Sounding F-I with architecture of Early Islamic date.



Fig. 3: Sounding F-III with the huge Byzantine limestone walls and parts of the mosaic floor in the upper left corner of the trench.



Fig. 4: Walls of Byzantine building and associated destruction layer.



Fig. 5: Ritual bucket (situla) in situ between two stone blocks.



Fig. 6: Photograph of the situla with three friezes of decor containing floral elements and anthropomorphic figurines respectively.