

Excavation report of Sounding E (Sq. 8152, 8153, 8253), 2010

Investigations of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic settlement at Tell Fekheriye

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Excavations in the north-eastern part of the mound took place for the first time in Area E (Squares 8152, 8252, 8153, 8353) during the 2010 field season.

The work was supervised by Annika Hotzan-Tchabashvili and Kilian Teuwsen.

Area E is located above one of the spring-fed ponds of the Khabur River. In this part of the mound, excavations first took place in 1940 under the direction of Calvin McEwan. Here the so-called *Sounding IX* was excavated, in which a massive building described as a Neo-Assyrian *bit hilani*-palace was unearthed. In an extension to the north (12 x 3m) two red-painted stone statuettes were uncovered, which were dated to the 13th-10th century BC (McEwan et al.: 1958) due to a lack of comparable objects (this is also visible on the label in the Oriental Institute Museum in Chicago) and which, following the recent study by Bernd Müller-Neuhof (Müller-Neuhof 2007), can now be dated back to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic.

In 1955/56 excavations in this area took place under the direction of Anton Moortgat (Moortgat 1956: 44-45; Moortgat 1957a: 13-14), who investigated the levels beneath *Room 1* and *Room 3* of the Iron Age building already excavated by the American team. The uncovered structures were interpreted by Moortgat as buttressed walls of a temple from the Khabur-Ware period (Moortgat 1954-1956: 429-430; Moortgat 1956: 44-45). The excavations were stopped at this level, because of the intrusion of groundwater. More than 50 years later, the groundwater level has dropped drastically; hence excavations into deeper strata were possible.

In addition to the statuettes other evidence (e.g. lithics), found in secondary contexts in the former excavations, led to the suggestion that a Neolithic settlement may exist underneath the previously excavated structures (Braidwood in McEwan et al. 1958: 53-55).

Thus, the main goal of this campaign was to prove the existence of a Neolithic settlement in this area and, provided this assumption was correct, to investigate its structural layout and stratigraphic relation to later levels.

In the 1980s a loader greatly disturbed that part of the mound. The old trenches were partly levelled to open more land for cultivation and large amounts of earthen material were removed for mud-brick production. This process formed a high section in the northern part of the upper mound (Fig. 1). Due to these modern disturbances it became difficult to locate the old trenches of McEwan or Moortgat. Nevertheless, we were able to place our trench in the former area of *Room 3* in the Neo-Assyrian *bit hilani*-palace using the plans at hand (McEwan et al.: 1958. plates 6-7).

Area E is subdivided into three trenches. One (E-I) measures 9 x 9m. It is located in two grid squares (8152 and 8251) due to the on-site circumstances. A smaller trench (E-II) is located to the north of the 9 x 9m main excavation area and measures 9 x 4,5m (Squares 8153 and 8253). The third trench (E-III) is located to the west of the 9 x 9m trench. Because of the high section the trench is much smaller measuring 9m in length, but only 2m in width in the south and 1m in width at its northern end (Fig. 2).

After removing modern deposits and refill, which were in some parts up to 2m in depth (Fig. 1), we found an architectural structure that is probably rectangular in plan and has a north-west - south-east orientation (Fig. 3) with a dimension of at least 9,5 x 7m. The walls are 0,5m to 0,7m thick, made of pisé and strengthened with buttresses. They were clearly visible because of a light-coloured plaster that was applied to the pisé walls (Fig. 4). In some parts it is clear, that more than one layer of plaster was applied. The buttresses are oriented toward the inside of the rooms and are placed in regular intervals.

The external wall in the south (context number E-12/E-13) is made of pisé and superimposed by a double-row of stones, which probably give structural stability to the architecture. This wall runs from the southern edge of the trench towards the north-west into E-III. In the south-east of trench E-I, we have a further wall (E-56), which is orientated to the north-east. It seems that E-13 and E-56 form the corner of a house, which is still hidden in the balk. Parallel to E-56 runs another wall (E-57), that is made of mud-bricks, which are 67 x 43cm in size. Two walls (E-7 and E-10), which run perpendicular to the external wall E-13 give the building its rectangular structure. Thus, it appears that we are dealing with at least three rooms belonging to one building. Between wall E-10 and wall E-49 an entrance situation was found (Fig. 3). However, a floor level undoubtedly belonging to this building could not yet be excavated.

Despite the fact that some of the stone walls can be interpreted as reinforcements for the pisé walls, there are also some younger stone installations that disturb the walls E-7 and E-10, e.g. E-11 and E-6. Their context and stratigraphic setting are badly damaged due to the Iron Age foundation trenches and cannot yet be assigned to any specific level.

No pottery has been recovered within the building so far. However, a small assemblage of stone-implements, including blades and scrapers for example, has been excavated. Altogether around 300 artefacts have been analysed. Most of the lithics (around 40%) are secondary products, such as tools and weapons. Primary products have not been found in great quantity, suggesting a local production is not yet clearly evident. The obsidian objects (around 20%) are mostly so called Cayönü-tools. The source for the obsidian is probably the area around Lake Van in East-Anatolia. Flint has been used mainly for projectiles or burins, and it can be assumed that the resource was not far from the site. Because of the technology, size and form of the projectiles (Byblos and Amuq Types), the lithics can approximately be dated to the late PPNB (Fig.5).

The inside of this building-structure is cut by a large and deep modern pit (E-5), which resulted from Moortgat's excavation in 1955/56. This pit cuts several floor layers in the north-east of the trench, and wall E-56 in the south-east (Fig. 3). The upper floor layers, however, are not associated with the previously described building. Below the floor layers we found an assemblage of bones (Fig. 6) which certainly contained some human bones (E-64). This assemblage has been cut by the modern and ancient pits above. So far we have been able to identify the skulls of at least five individuals. The deposit of these individuals, within or without a burial structure remains to be solved, as no grave or other such structure was able to be identified.

In the northern part of trench E-II we found several pits that have been cut by a large foundation trench (E-66) for one of the northern walls of the Neo-Assyrian palace.

Thus a more detailed picture of this area of the site is starting to arise, revising some previously expressed assumptions and adding to our understanding of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic in the western Khabur headwater region. However, this small contribution is only the beginning, as further research and excavations on the described material will continue in future seasons.



Plan of Sounding E.



Fig. 1: Beginning of the excavation with the high section, view to the south.

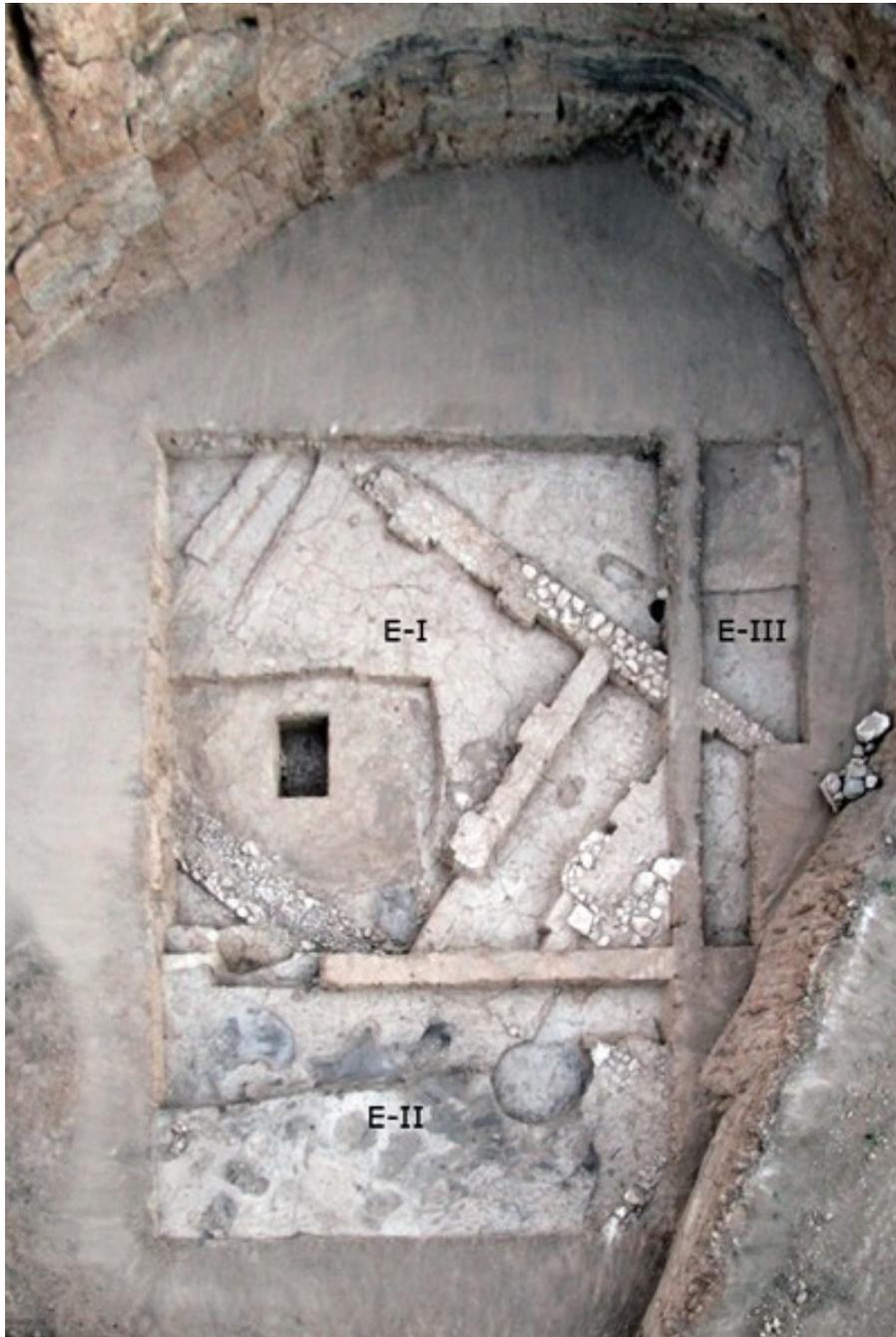


Fig. 2: Aerial view of Excavation Area - E, view to the south.



Fig. 3: Situation at the end of the 2010 field season, view to the north.



Fig. 4: Detail of the plastered walls.



Fig. 5: Selection of lithics.



Fig. 6: Accumulation of bones (E-64) with five skulls visible in the section.