

Excavation report of sounding B, 2006

Dominik Bonatz

About 15 years ago a considerable part of the area in which Sounding B is situated was flattened with a caterpillar in order to prepare a field for agriculture. As a result about 1.5 m of the surface of the ancient mound was damaged and with that ruins of more recent date (e.g. the Byzantine-Early Islamic Period) were destroyed.

Excavations in the first layer under the modern surface in Sounding B (10 x 10 m) led to the discovery of eight human skeletons which were loosely buried into the ground. Finds like shirt buttons and late Ottoman gold coins, which were associated with one skeleton, suggest that the corps were buried at the beginning of the 20th century. This conclusion is supported by historical evidence which indicates that several Armenians were killed in 1915 or 1916 during their stay in Ras el-Ain.

The early Islamic – Byzantine Levels

The proceeding excavation in Sounding B showed that the modern skeletons were buried in ancient terrain formed by the accumulation of a fallen mud brick walls, roof tiles and various earthen materials. Between the ruins of the first recognizable mud brick walls, four skeletons of more ancient date were buried. All of them point with the face to the south. One was associated with a vase of early Islamic date, thus it seems probable that all these burials date to the early Islamic period.

After having removed the skeletons and most of the ancient debris, the architectural features of the first occupation layer in this area became clearly visible. The walls of a large building complex were unearthed. Their fundaments consist of larger pebble stones mixed with basalts and roof tiles, others were erected on large limestone blocks or blocks made of fired lime. Two rooms of the building were clearly distinguishable. The southern one (room 2) is of particular interest since it can be interpreted as being a bathroom. Situated in this room is a well, which was covered by a pebble floor. The wall on the eastern side of the room, which is made of fired lime blocks, seems to have protected the room from the extensive use of water. In a deeper layer of the same room a second floor made of gypsum was uncovered. This floor was apparently destroyed when the pit of the well was dug.

The northern room (1) measures about 4 x 5 m. Two phases can also be distinguished in its construction. The younger phase is clearly recognizable by the limestone-basalt fundaments of walls encircling the room. A partly preserved floor inside the room, which runs under the eastern wall to a third room in the east (not yet completely excavated), belongs, however, to an older phase. This floor can be connected to a wall which crosses the same room from west to east.

Concerning the date of the building with two occupation phases, some preliminary remarks

can be made. The pottery found in the fill of the room seems to be mostly early Islamic but also Byzantine. Among the objects discovered, several oil lamps of Islamic as well as Byzantine type, very small coins and one ivory fragment are remarkable. Another interesting find was made in cache embedded in the wall which divides room 1 and 2. There 6 large bronze coins and one earring were discovered. The coins are of Byzantine origin and date to the early 6th century AD. In conclusion, the building might have been erected in Byzantine times and later reused in the early Islamic periods.

The late Roman or early Byzantine levels

A gypsum floor which was quite well preserved in the south-western part of the square marks the border to an earlier building phase which can be either assigned to the late Roman or Early Byzantine period. This building phase is characterized by the remains of huge mud brick walls which cross the centre of the square. To the west the mud brick wall was heavily disturbed by the pit dug for the early Islamic / Byzantine well, and by another pit which probably resulted from the removal of mud bricks as material for new construction works. To the east the same wall continues under the foundation stones of the Byzantine wall. It is still visible under the floor which covers the corridor between the two parallel running stone walls in the eastern part of the square. In this part, excavations stopped after having reached the surface of the mud brick wall.

Excavations proceeded, however, in the western part of the square. Here, the floor of the mud brick wall was reached at 1.4 m in depth. This floor consisted of a thick layer of gypsum which clearly marks the border to the next phase. This phase, however, was neither characterized by architectural remains nor did it contain any other features of settlement activities. Instead it consisted of an accumulation of loose brownish soil which can be considered as natural deposition and thus as proof that this area of the Tell has been abandoned for a longer period before occupation started again in the Roman period. The exact date of this reoccupation can not be fixed yet. Only detailed pottery studies may help to date the beginning and duration of this building phase.

The Middle Assyrian levels

The next architectural feature unearthed after having removed the accumulation of soil depositions in the western part of the square were mud brick walls, which stand in a right angle to one another. Later, a third wall was identified which together with the two other walls forms the enclosures of a rectangular room measuring about 2.5 x 3 m. Only the southern wall of this room was not preserved due to a large pit, which exactly cuts the place of this wall. To our surprise, it turned to be out that this architectural structure already dates to the Middle Assyrian period.

The bricks of the walls have measurements typical for Assyrian buildings, that is 34 x 34 cm. Middle Assyrian pottery and even some shards of Mittani pottery were found in the upper stratum of the room. The floor belonging to this stratum is only two rows of mud bricks deeper than the eroded upper edge of the walls. To this floor belongs a doorway which leads to the north in another room in which an installation made by fired bricks was found. The bricks were set in a row and posed in an upright position thus forming a channel in which

several fragments of Middle-Assyrian storage jars were found.

Under the upper floor of the building the soil consists of layers of brownish earth mixed with ash. The pottery found in these layers shows the same characteristics of Middle Assyrian and some Mittani materials. Two rows of mud bricks, which continue under the upper floor, indicate this is part of an earlier building phase, still assigned to the Middle Assyrian period. Under the mud bricks the soil consists first of a compact layer of dark brownish earth and thereafter changed to a greyish earth layer with traces of ash. This layer covers the last floor that we excavated during this campaign. This floor is of special interest since it was formed of small pebble stones and many shards, the latter giving a terminus post quem for the floor. The shards date to the Late Bronze Age II (Middle Assyrian) and, with few examples, to the Late Bronze Age I (Mittani). They indicate that we are not far from reaching the first Mittani level in this square.

To sum up, the most interesting result concerning the stratigraphy in sounding B is that no occupation levels have been found which date from between the end of the Middle Assyrian period and the late Roman / Byzantine period. The absence of any clearly recognizable Neo Assyrian or early Iron Age occupation layer in this part of the Tell is especially remarkable since a Neo Assyrian monumental building was documented further north by the American excavations in 1940. Future investigations in this area may help to explain this contradictory situation and the exact relation between Neo Assyrian and Middle Assyrian building activities.

		<i>Height a.s.l.</i>
Level 0	Surface	357.10 m
Level 1	Debris of early Islamic / Byzantine Architecture	356.95 m
Level 2	Early Islamic / Byzantine Architecture: Building Phase II	356.85 m
	Byzantine Architecture: Building Phase I	355.60 m
Level 3	Late Roman / or Early Islamic mud brick walls and gypsum floor	355.55 m
Level 4	Accumulation of soil: Abandonment of the site	354.90 m
Level 5	Middle Assyrian mud brick walls; floor in one room	353.81 m
	Middle Assyrian floor; no architectural feature	353.10 m



Fig. 1: Sounding B: Overview of the excavation area.



Fig. 2: Sounding B: Byzantine walls.



Fig. 3: Mud brick walls of a Middle Assyrian building.