

Excavation report of sounding C, 2006

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Sounding C is situated on a terrace on the western slope of Tell Fecheriye. In 1940, the American team led by C. McEwan found here a Middle Assyrian administrative building with 10 tablets inside, dated to the time of Tukulti-Ninurta I. In 2001, the Syro-German team under the direction of Abd el-Masih Baghdo and Alexander Pruss re-examined the area and was able to offer minor corrections in the stratigraphic sequence. One of the most important results of the latter campaign was, however, the discovery of a corner of another building continuing to the south of the previously excavated complex.

The exploration of the newly discovered structure (designated as House II by A. Pruß) was the principal aim for the summer of 2006. Furthermore, it was necessary to inspect the level of preservation of all the cultural strata on the terrace which has been used as a field in recent years.

The old trench of the 2001 excavations was cleared from the backfill in order to uncover the previously found northwest corner of the House II and in order to use the trench's profiles as a help for our strictly stratigraphic progress in the adjacent, newly opened square (6643-6644). This cleaning action proved to be very helpful. Not only did it make the search for continuations of the walls easier but surprisingly it also brought some new results since the heavily eroded profiles revealed areas invisible in the past. Thus in the eastern profile of the old trench a previously undocumented mud brick wall was discovered which belongs to the latest level of House II and a well-preserved boundary of a previously only partially excavated grave was reached. The facades and the exact orientation of the new wall could not be determined in the limited area where it had been cleaned, since it was damaged by later activities. One side was cut by a grave, while the other side was cut by a large pit filled with burnt debris. In order to ascertain the orientation of the wall, it will be necessary to enlarge the sounding to the east, an activity which was not planned for the 2006 season. The grave was of a mud brick cist type, oriented in an E-W direction. The cist was well-preserved in this part, including the roof which consisted of mud bricks placed on their edges, as lozenges. No in situ bones or inventory were found; accordingly the dating remains unclear (it could range from Iron Age to Byzantine, with slight preference given to the Parthian period, on the basis of structural parallels of the cist).

The main new sounding of the 2006 campaign measured 10x10 meters (incl. profiles) and it was positioned 1 meter to the south of the old A. Pruss trench (i.e. Sqs. 6643-6644). Later on, a small 4x3 m sounding was added to the south of the main sounding (allowing 1 m for the profile, sqs. 6643, 6642) in order to compensate for the unfortunate situation near the profile (earlier strata destroyed by a deep well).

The uppermost layers on the terrace were disturbed by recent agricultural activities. The latest undisturbed cultural features date to the Early Islamic Period. They include refuse pits, a stone-lined well and a deepened structure (a pool?) which went out of use in that time. Only one row of big ashlar blocks and a floor (both covered by a continuous cemented plaster) were preserved from an otherwise totally destroyed structure. All these features cut through several scarcely preserved walking and floor levels and also through an earlier destroyed horizon characterized by many broken terracotta tiles. The finds of several arrowheads in this horizon

strongly imply that the destruction was a result of a violent action. The pottery from the horizon is mostly nondescript and still awaits analysis by a specialist, but a Hellenistic or Roman date can be anticipated. All the strata decline towards the west and down the slope.

The debris from the sought-after House II was encountered under the Hellenistic or Roman (?) destruction layer. The main wall, as had been expected, continued running in a southerly direction, parallel to the wall discovered in 2001. Two other walls joined it at right angles from the east. To the west must have been an open area, as indicated by missing walls, a thick clayish fill with several walking levels and a drain made of flat stones. This installation, placed close to the main wall, most probably served as an area for discharging the rain water. The northernmost of the adjoining walls is a partition wall. The nature of the southern one was not possible to ascertain, since the crucial point had been destroyed by the Early Islamic stone-lined well and its foundation pit. It remains thus unclear whether it was just another partition wall or the southeast corner of the House II.

There is however little doubt that some contemporary buildings (either House II or still another, new house) continued behind the disturbance since a wall running in the same direction was found in a small 4x3 sounding. Although the colour of the mud bricks is evidently redder there than in the main sounding, the foundation level, the orientation of the wall and the dimensions of the mud bricks are identical.

The House II was subdivided into two phases by A. Pruß and both of them were considered to date to the Middle Assyrian Period. This could not be unequivocally confirmed in the newly opened areas, since no in situ inventory was found in the only room which could have been excavated under the floor level, and its fill was disturbed by later activities. Some of the shards from the supposedly undisturbed open area to the west of House II imply Iron Age date.

Interestingly, there are no indications of a building activity between the time of House II (Middle Assyrian?) and the Hellenistic or Roman (?) destruction horizon. This area seems to have been used for burials, as suggested by a Neo Assyrian double-pot burial and another mud brick cist grave of a type known already from the old 2001 trench (Parthian?). The double pot burial cuts into the fill of one of the rooms of the House II. This burial contained a skeleton of an adult person buried into two big pots – the legs were placed into a pithos, the upper part of the body into a bath tube. The orientation was S-N, with the head to the north. There were two smaller pots placed as offerings at the side of the grave. These vessels were removed en block to the laboratory of Tell Halaf project where they have been kindly restored. The restorator, Mona Korolnik, reported that they contained burnt bones but due to time constraints no closer analysis was possible this summer. No other grave offerings were associated with the skeleton. No earlier layers than the Middle Assyrian were reached this year but we expect to excavate them during the next season. It was proved, however, that the earlier cultural strata on the terrace are well preserved despite recent agricultural activity and they present high potential for future research in the area. Accordingly, it is advisable to expand the excavation areas further to the south (the terrace) even to the east (to the slope), provided that there will be enough financial resources, time and personnel to carry out the work.



Fig. 1: The old Trench of A. Pruss after being cleared from the backfill. The new wall is visible in the corner, next to it the mud brick cist grave.



Fig. 2: Walls of the House II in the main new sounding from the North. On the right, the clayish fill of the "open area", in the upper part of the image the Early Islamic stone-lined well.



Fig. 3: Neo-Assyrian double pot burial with offering vessels.



Fig. 4: Early Islamic stone-lined pit during excavations.