

Excavation report of sounding B, 2007

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In 2007, sounding B was extended by opening square 8545 to the south and square 8446 to the west of square 8546 where excavations had begun in 2006.

The sole aim of excavations in square 8545 was to expose the remains of human skeletons which belong to the group of individuals that had come to light in square 8546 the year before. The bones lay directly under the surface and were mostly fragmented and in a bad condition. Associated finds like shirt buttons and late Ottoman gold and copper coins prove that the corpses were buried at the beginning of the 20th century. Historical evidence furthermore suggests that these individuals were Armenians who died during their internment at Ras el-Ain in 1915 and 1916. Analysis of the bones carried out by forensic anthropologists shows that most of the individuals died of diseases; it is therefore quite probable that the skeletons, which are only found in the western part of the Tell, mark the burial ground of a camp, which seems to have been situated elsewhere on the Tell. The graves extended across squares 8546 and 8446 where several more skeletons were excavated at the beginning of the campaign. The main focus of research in square 8446 however lay on the continuations of the early Islamic and Roman-Byzantine architecture that had previously been exposed in square 8546.

The uppermost early Islamic layer in 8446 consisted mainly of building debris and contained pottery of the Abassid/Ayyubid period including green-glazed Raqqa-ware. After its removal, it became clear that the large Byzantine building complex in square 8546 did indeed extend westwards into square 8446.

A massive stone wall – fired lime blocks on a fundament of larger fieldstones – traversed the square from north to south. It is identical with the westernmost wall excavated the year before in the neighbouring square. The western face of the wall was coated with a thick lime plaster indicating a wet room or bath in this newly defined part of the building. This observation corresponds with the fact that a bath and well were already documented east of the same wall in 2006. Several floor levels and wall installations in a different construction technique yet aligned with the massive lime stone walls indicate a least two different building phases. The dating of the building into the 5th and 6th centuries is confirmed by finds of coins, oil lamps showing Christian iconography and potshards decorated with painting in “Syriac” style; further interesting finds include stucco relief panels, gypsum panels and glass vessels.

An earlier stage in the occupation of this place became apparent towards the end of the season when we unearthed mud brick walls or fundaments running in different directions under the floor of the Byzantine building. In the north western corner of square 8446 the walls seem to form a small apse. Their date is still uncertain but it can be expected that they belong to Roman installations which were also identified in the neighbouring square 8546. The use of this area in the time after the Byzantine occupation is documented by a large pit which cut deeply into

the floors of the western room and showed traces of plaster and mortar on its walls. It was filled with black soil and burnt grain and might have functioned as a silo. Furthermore, two burial pits were discovered in the foundations of the lime stone wall. In analogy to the burials discovered in square 8546 in 2006, they might also date to the early Islamic period.

The main purpose of excavation in sounding B however was to continue the work in square 8546 where remains of a Middle Assyrian house had been exposed in 2006. The mud-brick wall of this building began to appear at a depth of 3.40 m under the modern surface. The layers above consist of soil deposits, which probably accumulated during a longer abandonment of this area between the Assyrian and Roman period. In the upper strata different phases of late Roman, Byzantine and early Islamic building structures were documented.

Since the stratigraphy of these structures had already been clarified in 2006, we were able to remove the remaining parts quickly at the beginning of the season and to unearth 70m² of the Middle Assyrian building level in the course of the excavation. Furthermore, it was possible to clarify the stratigraphical sequence of the Middle Assyrian and earlier architecture in square 8546. Sounding B yielded evidence for a Mittani period layer in the south western area of square 8546. Here, a floor appeared together with a mud brick wall which ran under the bases of Middle Assyrian walls. The amount of Mittani pot shards, including bowls with red slipped rim and beakers with high pedestals, from the layer above the floor was significantly high in relation to the Middle Assyrian shards from the same deposit. So, it can be expected that the floor itself belongs to a Mittani period building stratum.

Above these findings, a floor and mud brick wall came to light which, on account of the associated pottery, represent the first building phase of the Middle Assyrian period. A second room was exposed to the east, the adjoining wall of which was built separately against the eastern wall of the former room.

An interesting architectural feature was imbedded in between these two walls: a stone arch, supported by a vault of mud bricks, span a circular pit. The cave contained a lot of trash from the Roman period such as fragments of oil lamps, 'brittle ware' cooking pots, a well preserved bottle and fragments of metal objects. It is interesting to note how deeply the Roman installation cut into the layers of the Middle Assyrian occupation. The stratigraphic situation here confirms yet again that no observable occupation layers fill the gap between the Middle Assyrian and the late Roman period.

A second Middle Assyrian building phase is indicated by a floor level which appeared in the section of the northwestern corner of square 8546; it was about 0.5 m higher than the floor from the earlier Middle Assyrian building phase and run against a massive mud brick wall in the northern part of the square. The wall crossed the whole square from east to west and was only disturbed in the middle by a Roman installation which consisted of two parallel stone rows running from north to south. The same wall had a fundament pit to the south which shows that the wall cut into the eastern wall of the first Middle Assyrian building phase.



Fig. 1: Modern burial in square 8446.



Fig. 2: Wet room in the western part of the Byzantine building, square 8446.



Fig. 3: Roman apse in square 8446.



Fig. 4: Roman vault construction cutting into Middle Assyrian walls in square 8546.