

Excavation report of sounding C, 2007

Peter V. Bartl

Sounding C is situated on a terrace on the western slope of Tell Fecheriye. This area has been excavated since 2006 and still presents the best opportunity to investigate the middle Assyrian levels at Tell Fecheriye. Activities in 2006 partially unearthed the well preserved walls of a larger Middle Assyrian house which due to the topographic situation in this area lies directly beneath the modern surface. In this season the excavations were extended to squares situated to the north, the east, and the south of 6643/6644. The primary results were the excavation of larger parts of the Middle Assyrian level architecture comprising at least three separate houses – one of which (Building I) has already been exposed by the American team under the direction of McEwan in 1940 (OIP 79).

To the east of square 6643/6644, an area measuring 4 by 12 m was exposed. This trench cuts into the slope of the western edge of the mound. After having removed a layer of surface-wash, a thick deposit of limestone fragments eroded from a probably early Islamic building was exposed. It covers the still heavily eroded remains of a broad mud-brick wall or terrace.

Two at its western end almost rectangular pottery kilns are virtually embedded in the mud-bricks. At the bottom under a fill of heavily burned debris from the roof of these kilns, one of which has been replastered up to three times, pieces of misfired pottery were found. They suggest a late date in the Roman period. It seems that the kilns and the mud-brick structure are contemporary.

The level beneath the kilns and the mudbrick platform in the investigated area reveals several graves with mudbrick structure of probably Roman-Parthian date – at least according to their architecture that has close parallels in Assur, Dura Europos, Sheikh Hamad, and other sites in Northern Syria. Up to now two such burials have been recorded by A. Pruß in his 2001 campaign, and one burial was partly excavated in 2006. The 2007 season brought to light four further mudbrick cist graves all of which are either orientated north-south or east-west. One of these burials contained three individuals that seem to be buried successively since the older skeletons are partly disarticulated, indicating that the place of the previous burial was somehow marked on the surface or otherwise known to the local residents. Almost no grave goods were discovered aside from several small carnelian beads. A rather interesting observation is the fact that several of the grave pits contained a set of three pottery vessels each: a large jar holds a nipple base goblet and is covered with a bowl. They were set against the wall of the pit and all jars show traces of liquid contained within (analysis is under way). The use of typical Neo-Assyrian nipple base goblets in these Roman-Parthian graves is somehow astonishing but not unknown and can hopefully be investigated further in the seasons to come.

In the Middle Assyrian level significant parts of Building II could be exposed to the east of square 6643/6644. That way the limits of the western room, which was partly excavated in 2006 were defined and it was furthermore proven that the building has two phases, the latter altering the inner structure of the house by reducing the size of the western room and adding further walls. A small corridor abuts to the east. Some well preserved Middle Assyrian pottery was recovered within the fill of these rooms. The architectural plan seen at Building I and II has few parallels

in the Ancient Near East and will be the aim of large scale investigations on the terrace in future seasons.

To the south investigations continued in a small sounding adding another building to the front of houses bordering an open area to the west. This building will further on be referred to as Building III. This house is first of all distinguished by the more or less reddish clay its bricks are made of. In contrast, those of Building II are made of grey material. Its northern wall directly abuts the southern wall of Building II. While it was formerly believed that the western wall found in the small sounding which was already opened in 2006, to be the continuation of the western wall of Building II in square 6644, it became now clear that it belongs to a separate building unit. The confusion was caused by an Islamic well that disturbs the passage between Building II and III.

Further to the north another 10 by 10 m square (SQ 6745) was investigated. This is the area the American team chose for excavation in 1940 and it was sounded again by a Syrian-German archaeological team in 2001. The main aim of research in this area was to clear the rubble off Building I, to document its state of preservation and to commence excavation of older levels beneath it in order to clear the stratigraphic sequence in this area of the mound as well as to investigate the character of the levels prior to the Middle Assyrian occupation.

Building I is well known for the small archive found in one of the western rooms. It contained 10 tablets which date to the time of Tukulti-Ninurta I (1233-1197 BC). The ground plan of this building with the remaining walls as well as the cobble pavement of the central courtyard was uncovered in the area of square 6745 as well as some yet unexcavated parts of the building to the east. They form part of the courtyard and yielded a thick layer of Middle Assyrian deposits containing some 40 seal impressions, four fragments of clay tablets and one fragment of a clay envelope. Nevertheless one problem already recognized by A. Pruß concerning the exact findspot and allocation of the archive found 1940 remains unsolved. The American documentation assigns them to Floor 2 of the occupation of Building I thus dating the building. Pruß suggests that Floor 2 and therefore the archive must be older than Building 2 since the floor continues under the walls of the building. This is a general problem concerning the floor levels assigned to the building by the Americans: at least the older one lies below the foundation of the walls and partly runs under them. Despite accurate observations during excavations in 2007 this problem cannot be solved completely since the building has been excavated the third time diminishing almost every chance to gain new insights into the stratigraphic sequence in the known part of the building. Further investigations in the eastern unknown part of the building however can give us new insights into the different phases of occupation. Comparison to the newly discovered tablets that still have to be read thoroughly may help to better understand the archive and put it in its context.

A third phase of utilisation can be observed in all buildings - I, II and III: After a short phase of abandonment and collapse several double-pot burials were dug through the floors of the buildings. They can be found mainly in the corners of the rooms indicating that the walls were still standing. Three of them were dug in the corners of Room 4 and Room 1 of Building I and two further double-pot burials were found in Building II and III. All of them probably date to the very end of the Middle Assyrian period. One burial is exceptional concerning its grave goods

that consist of a very rich collection of small finds including over one hundred beads made from semi-precious stones, shell and “fayence”, a dozen golden earrings, bronze bracelets, and animal shaped pendants. The bones of the individual buried within this grave indicate an infant still having its deciduous teeth. A complete Middle Assyrian standardised carinated bowl is placed on top of the southern end of the grave pit in a niche separated from the pit by a mudbrick standing on its edge. In the fill of the pit the extremities, scull and shoulderblade of a small ruminant animal (goat or sheep) were found pointing out the ritual context of the burial.

Building I	Building II	Building III
Reuse as graveyard for double-pot burials		
(Short) phase of abandonment and decay		
<i>Floor 1</i>	Rebuilding and second phase of occupation	Phase of occupation
<i>Floor 2</i>	First phase of occupation	
Upper floor below cobble surface of court with fire installation and tannur		
Lower floor below cobble surface of court		

A different type of burial was found below one of the walls of the Middle Assyrian Building I. It is an inhumation grave covered by three mudbricks. The corps of the deceased was heavily mutilated by a blow on the head that cracked the scull. Another injury is formed by cutting of the right lower leg. Both of those mutilations must have happened during lifetime since the bones show adhesions. The stratigraphic position of the grave indicates a date for this burial older than that of the Middle Assyrian Building I.

In square 6745 occupation levels below the Middle Assyrian building could be investigated. At least two probably external surfaces with an octagonal fire installation and tannur hint to an open area prior to Building I.

The previous level revealed massive mudbrick walls which certainly indicate some sort of monumental building. Two east-west orientated walls consist of five, respectively three and a half rows of mud-bricks. They are separated by a small row of mudbrick fragments indicating two different buildings or at least two building complexes abutting each other. North-south running walls of similar width define the corners of three rooms so far.

The filling of these rooms contains typical Middle Assyrian pottery standard forms as well as some potshards clearly Mittani in date like red-slipped-polished--ware as well as one fragment of Nuzi-ware. This allegedly mixture of pottery from different periods is not surprising since intrusive material can be found almost everywhere. However this can as well be a result of deliberate filling of the rooms in order to level the area for building purposes. Unfortunately the base of the walls couldn't be reached so far implying a lack of in situ-material needed for an accurate dating of this building. Nevertheless the importance of this building is stressed by its monumental walls preserved to a height of more than 1.5m.

Further investigations in this area are aimed at both resolving the accurate date of the building complex and defining its character.



Fig. 1: General overview of the Sounding C, Middle Assyrian levels.



Fig. 2: Pottery Kilns embedded in mud-brick structure.

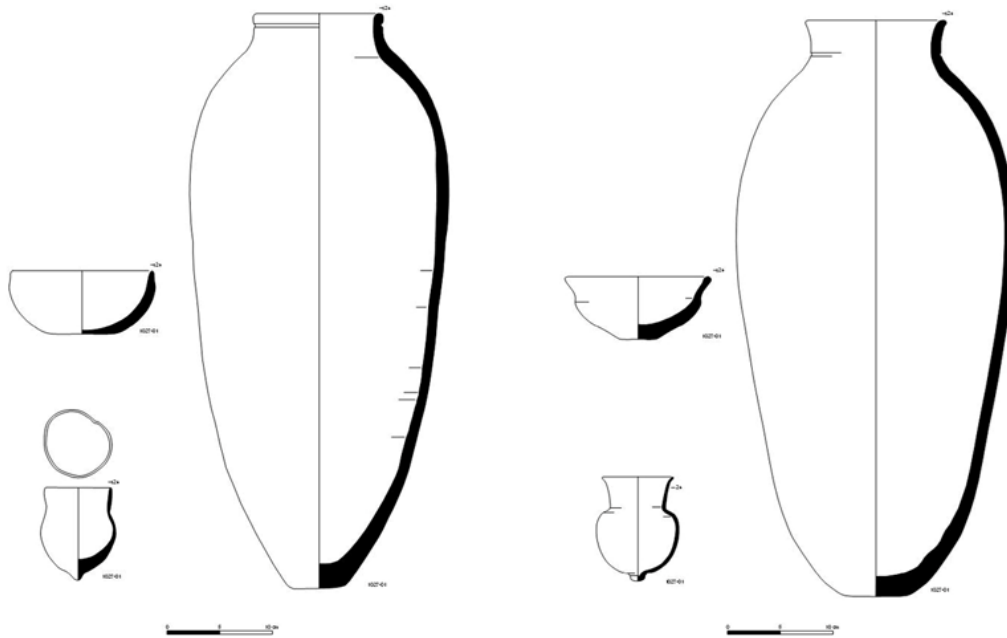


Fig. 3: Set of pottery contained within some Roman-Parthian burials.



Fig. 4: Middle Assyrian Buildings II and III to the south.



Fig. 5: The remains of the Middle Assyrian Building I after clearing the surface erosion that filled the trench since 1940 respectively 2001.



Fig. 6: Corps of burial beneath Middle Assyrian walls with heavy mutilations.