

Excavation report of C-III (Sq. 6644, 6744, 6643, 6743), 2009

Simona Bracci

Squares 6644, 6744, 6643 and 6743 are located on a terrace at the western slope of Tell Fecheriye. This area of the Tell, as well as the adjoining squares, were occupied by imposing residential and administrative architecture (House I, House II and House III) the investigation of which has already began during the previous campaigns. In 2009 two new areas were opened mainly aiming at widening the exposure of House II. In addition to these two main operations, minor archaeological investigations were also carried out - once the Middle Assyrian levels were reached - in the area opposite these two squares, which had previously been investigated in 2006 and 2007. The excavation was supervised by Simona Bracci in cooperation with the German Students Marcus Garbrecht and Raphael Tonner.

Islamic – Late Antique

The upper levels in this area have recovered poorly preserved architectural fragments in association with pottery of the Islamic period (including some attractive blue fragments of Raqqa pottery together with nicely decorated shards belonging to the medieval Islamic period). In the southern part of area C these upper levels, as well as the lower, were sometimes heavily disturbed by later pits of which one contained some fragments of glass objects.

Late Roman Period

After having removed the later deposits, an interesting and well preserved feature was encountered. This structure was made up of a mud-brick wall lying on a stone foundation - running north-south - and preserved to about 2.5 m in length. Several occupational floors were connected to this structure, the upper and more important (C-433 and C-435) consisted in a beaten earth surface running up against both faces of the wall. This situation proved to be important in establishing the stratigraphic connection with the southernmost sector of area C. Floor C-433 (Fig. 2), in fact, not only ran up against the eastern face of the aforementioned mud-brick wall but continued southwards running up against the superstructure of the large kiln C-455. The southern part of area C, in fact, was occupied by two big kilns partially excavated in 2007.

The investigation of these two kilns was completed during this campaign, they show two different layouts. The northernmost one (C-455, Fig. 3), directly connected to C-433, clearly indicating how the base of the kiln had been partially embedded during construction, consists of a single chamber with 4 vents (a pair in both the northern and southern ends) in its upper extent. The inner surface of this chamber was covered by at least one thick layer of plaster, with two layers of plaster preserved in a small portion of the inner surface. Of particular interest is the deposited material within the kiln: it was formed by layers of debris from the upper part of the structure, layers of incompletely fired pottery, limestone fragments and ash.

A second kiln (C-439, Fig. 4) was also brought to light. The structure was made of mud-bricks and was divided in two sections: a compartment located at the back of the kiln, oval in shape with a flat covering made of mud with an elongated oval-shaped opening in the middle. The

inner surface of this compartment, presumably relevant in some way to the regulation of firing temperatures, was lined by two strata of thick gypsum plaster. The second section of the kiln (possibly the fire chamber proper) was again oval in shape and once more lined by a simple layer of plaster. Connecting these two chambers was a perfectly preserved wide vaulted opening. The dimensions of the overall structure are impressive measuring 1.38m in width and at least 2m in height. The deposit uncovered within the kiln was again formed by an accumulation of several superimposed layers: the upper one was created by the debris fallen from the roof of the structure, followed again by two layers of incompletely fired pottery, a layer of small fragments of limestone and finally a layer of ash.

Common to both these kiln structures was the unusual absence of a horizontal partition separating the inner chamber into lower and upper halves - the lower to act as the firebox and the upper for the placement of the pottery for firing. The flat interior surfaces of the kilns provide no indications to how such an internal separation could be housed within the structures. This evidence, in conjunction with the not particularly well fired pottery, could suggest that this kiln could be used a "cottura a catasta" or "pile cooking" method where pots were stacked together with the fuel. This simple type of firing is known to have been utilised as a method in open areas as well as in structures lacking the partition or shelf dividing of the pottery from the fuel. During this process the temperature can reach 700 – 800° with the effectiveness of the firing of the pottery, generally not very good, varying in relation to the position of the pots within the pile.

Once the two kilns were removed, it was possible to see that they had been constructed on an initial wide levelled surface of beaten earth. As a consequence, it can reasonably be affirmed that in this period the whole area had a manufacturing/productive character; one of pottery production.

The Graves

At least seven new graves have been found in this sector of Area C, which makes a total of 32 graves at the moment. They were mainly cut into the depositional layers which seal the Middle Assyrian period occupation. The double pot grave was oriented north-south. As with the graves discovered in the previous seasons, the body was interned within two jars and the grave goods consisted of four iron bracelets and a necklace made of numerous small beads. Four more cist graves, each sealed by a simple mud-brick capping in form of a gable, have been excavated. The orientation of the interned bodies was different: two were positioned north-south with the third and fourth orientated east-west. Funeral assemblages were scant, with few grave goods placed within the cist graves. Common to all these mud-brick cist graves is the presence of a jar resting in one corner of the grave pit, the mouth of which was covered by a bowl, containing a small nipple base goblet. Both smaller vessels clearly stand in the tradition of Assyrian pottery. Noteworthy, are the finds of a Middle Assyrian tablet, a seal and two clay sealings in the secondary deposit fill (C-478) of one of the badly preserved graves.

The graves correspond to the types already discovered at Tell Fecheriye in previous seasons: one belongs to a group of double-jar burials, well known from late Middle Assyrian period levels at sites like Mari, Tell Knedig, Tell Barri, and others. The other type is that of mud-brick cist graves, that are widely spread across the Ancient Near East especially during the Roman-

Parthian era (e.g.: Tell Sheikh Hamad, Dura Europos). Pottery vessels associated with and C-14 samples taken, however, confirm that at least some of the graves have to be dated to the early first millennium BC – the Middle and Neo-Assyrian Period.

Middle Assyrian Level Haus II and III

The Middle Assyrian remains in this area are represented by the imposing House II, the excavation of which was widened in 2009 toward east, north and south/southeast. To the east one more room relevant to this building was uncovered; its floor abuts the wall delimiting its northern side. Although disturbed in some points by a pit and the previously mentioned graves, this floor extended across a wide portion of eastern part of Square 6744. The pottery discovered lying on this surface affirms a date to the Middle Assyrian period (Fig. 6).

To the north, after the removal of a balk located between Squares 6744 and 6644, a meaningful sector of the building was brought to light. Here the junction of four different walls (C-803, C-804, C-806 and C-807) was uncovered. Wall C-804 (Fig. 7), followed to the considerable length of about 4.40m, was built of mud-bricks measuring 34 x 35cm. Two more walls joined it: C-807 (forming the western limit of House II) and C-803 (the eastern limit of Room 3 in House II). These three walls belong to the same later construction phase that followed the first building and therefore stress the existence of a later occupational phase in the life of House II.

One last room relevant to this building was uncovered in the south/south-eastern part of Squares 6744 and 6743, overlaid by the two kilns (Fig. 9). The removal of the kilns has exposed a fragment of a wide wall (lying behind the southernmost kiln) overlapping two subsequent floor levels. At first, this wall was thought to be the southern limit of House II. This assumption derives from the 2007 excavation of the area facing Square 6743 where a pair of wide walls had been discovered. Abutting each other, they were well-built using two different types of mud-bricks (red and grey in colour) and appeared to form the southern and northern limits of House II and House III respectively (Fig. 8).

The existence of a later occupation phase within the life of House II was also observed during the removal of the remainder of the fill in Room 2 that had been left from the previous excavation season. Although the two floor levels previously detected within the room were not discovered during this campaign, the removal of the remaining fill exposed the lower part of the eastern wall of Room 2 and enabled us to establish two different building phases. These phases are distinguishable by the two superimposed walls. In the north-eastern corner of this room a jar resting on a mud-brick bench was recovered.

The excavation of the fill in Room 2 was halted, at the same elevation as the grave C-32 (a double pot burial excavated in 2006), when the upper extent of a further wall was discovered. Running in an east-west direction it passes underneath the eastern wall of Room 2. Unfortunately, the continuation of the wall is not easy to follow as it is cut by grave C-26 and, as mentioned above, directly superimposed by a second later wall. A final scraping back of the walls revealed the presence of several further walls underlying those already fully excavated, so suggesting the existence of an earlier building in this location.



Fig. 1: Sounding C General view.



Fig. 2: Floor L 433 view from north.



Fig. 3: The chamber of kiln L. 455.



Fig. 4: The pottery kiln L. 439, view from south.



Fig. 5: The double pot and the mud-brick cist graves.



Fig. 6: Middle Assyrian floor in Haus II (East).



Fig. 7: Wall 804 view from East.



Fig. 8: Walls between Haus II and III.



Fig. 9: Middle Assyrian floor in Haus II.



Fig. 10: Raum 2 Haus II general view.