

Tell Kurdu Project Newsletter

ISSUE 2, WINTER 2003



Ahmet Ünal and Rana Özbal proudly present reconstructed vessels

The 2002 study season

In the successful excavation campaign in the summer of 2001, the Tell Kurdu team collected so much evidence that most of our efforts went into the crucial job of documentation (recording, describing, photographing, drawing etc.). Little time was left for analysis of the finds during the season itself. We therefore decided that before conducting another excavation campaign it was necessary to have a 'study season'. This was held in the month of August in the depot of the Archaeological Museum in Antakya, where our finds are stored.

A study season represents an important step in the whole process between excavation and the final publication of the results. The first interpretations of the finds need to be done with the material in hand. It is the time that all finds are measured, weighed and compared. If necessary, additional photographs and drawings are made. At this time too, we search for patterns in the data that will either confirm or discount the hypotheses with which we collected the data. Ideally, after a study season, it is possible to take the next steps in the sequence of analysis, interpretation and publication without having to look at the actual artifacts themselves anymore.

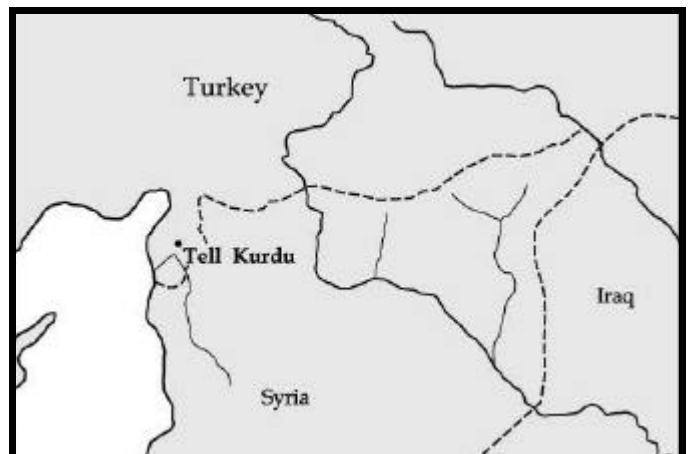
During the 2002 study season, Fokke and Rana concentrated on the pottery and the small finds. These include bone tools, personal ornaments, administrative devices, grinding and hammering implements and stone axes. Together with them in Antakya were Sabrina Sholts (University of Chicago), Mücella Erdalkýran (Ege University), Emre Kuruçayýrlý (Bođaziçi University) and Ahmet Ünal (Mustafa Kemal University). Sabrina studies the human skeletal remains that were found in a number of burials within the settlement, Mücella is our illustrator, Emre is an archaeometrist who assisted in micro-artifact analyses and Ahmet, our conservator, helped us enormously by reconstructing many of the whole ceramic vessels of the 2001 season.

It has been a year since we last reported to you on the Tell Kurdu Excavations Project. At that time we had just excavated a segment of an Early Chalcolithic settlement dating to about 5000 BC. In the past year, a lot has been accomplished in the analysis of the finds, and we are beginning to get a much clearer picture of the nature of the settlement and its inhabitants. In this newsletter we would like to give you an update of our work; archaeology not in the field but in labs and museum store rooms.

Rana Özbal and Fokke Gerritsen
co-project directors

Ongoing research

Over the course of the year, much work has also been done in archaeology labs in Turkey (at Bođaziçi University, Istanbul) and the Netherlands (at the Free University, Amsterdam), mainly by Rana on the micro-artifacts and soil samples for chemical analysis. Other members of our team have been working hard too. Elizabeth Healey (University of Manchester) completed the analysis of the chipped stone assemblage, geologist Nihal Aydýn (MTA Geological Institute, Ankara) finished a comprehensive report on the types of rock used for stone tools and personal implements, while the ceramics continue to be studied by Ben Diebold (Yale University), who among other things focused on the chemical composition of the pottery in order to establish clay sources, and possible pottery imports. Missy Loyet (University of Illinois) and Heidi Ekstrom (independent scholar) are completing analyses of the faunal and botanical remains respectively. In addition, carbonized samples have been sent to the labs of the University of Arizona for radiocarbon dating.



Neighborhood Studies at Tell Kurdu

As you can see in the top plan of the exposed trenches shown below, our excavations have yielded part of a neighborhood with a dense patterns of buildings and courtyards, separated by streets and alleys. One of our main goals is to understand how the ancient inhabitants of these houses went about their everyday life and to piece together the activities that took place in different parts of the neighborhood.

Neighborhood archaeology

In the prehistoric archaeology of the Near East large exposures are not very common because most settlements dating to this period are located beneath meters of later deposits and may take years of prior excavation to reach. The situation at Tell Kurdu is unusual; a large part of the settlement was abandoned shortly after the period that we are interested in, and there appears to have been no occupation after the middle of the fifth millennium BC. This means that Chalcolithic levels are accessible directly beneath the surface.

One of the areas of research, therefore, where our project can make a significant contribution, is what is called neighborhood or household archaeology, which has the potential of a large expo-

sure for a spatial and contextual analysis in order to understand the social practices of daily life.

For our interpretation of the nature of the settlement that we excavated, it is necessary to know in some detail about the distributional patterns of the ceramics and other artifacts. Are there clusters of fine wares that may have been used for display or serving food? Are there concentrations of heavy storage jars in rooms that we have preliminarily interpreted as storage rooms? Are there perhaps indications for differences in the wealth of households to be found in the ceramics or other objects that are found in different houses? We are trying to answer such questions by recording, counting, weighing and drawing thousands of potsherds, from all stratigraphically sound contexts in the excavation.

So far, the detected patterns are striking: there are areas such as courtyards with high concentrations of serving vessels, small rooms with hearths with mainly cooking vessels, while others lack cooking vessels altogether.

Domestic and ceremonial structures

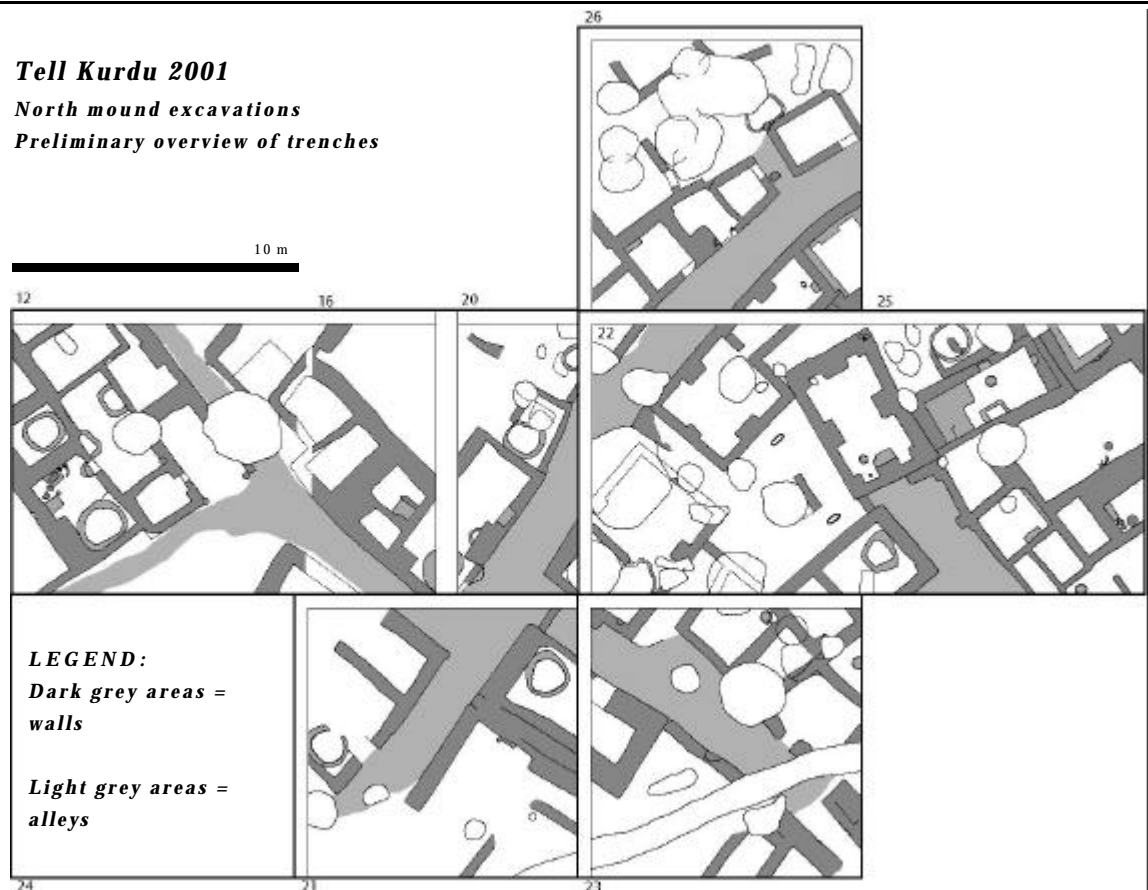
One area within the excavations contains structures which show higher care in construction and maintenance than the others. This area yielded evidence for at least four different structures with plas-

tered and niched-and-buttressed walls. These characteristics are significant in that there are no other structures yet discovered at Tell Kurdu which have such furnishings. The lack of cooking wares and serving vessels in these structures suggests that these buildings may not only have been ordinary houses. Moreover, the presence of a small platform (altar?), as well as a foundation deposit inside the wall consisting of three small jars, suggests that at least one structure in this area may have been used for ceremonial or ritual purposes.

The other structures were probably primarily domestic in nature. This was already indicated by the layout of the rooms and courtyards, and the ongoing ceramic and micro-artifact analysis largely confirms our initial impression. There are many questions remaining, however. For example, how should we understand the different character of the architecture in the western and northernmost areas? In the west, there is a complex of rooms around a courtyard, whereas the northern area consists of single-room structures along one of the streets. Using different types of analysis of architecture and artifact distributions, Rana is currently investigating questions about household and neighborhood diversity for her doctoral dissertation for Northwestern University, Evanston.

Buildings and Alleys Exposed in 2001

Tell Kurdu 2001
North mound excavations
Preliminary overview of trenches





Sherds with Halaf-style painted decoration (above) and some seals and incised pendants (right).



Cultural Contacts in the Chalcolithic

Our research project at Tell Kurdu aims to shed light on several scientific problems. One concerns the settlement itself and focuses on questions such as the social organization of the community of inhabitants, their cultural practices, their subsistence base and interaction with the surrounding landscape. These questions are mainly studied through the detailed spatial analysis of architecture and associated find groups described above, as well as specialist studies of artifact categories, faunal and botanical remains (see *ongoing research*). Another problem that we are interested in concerns the place of Tell Kurdu in the larger socio-cultural constellations of the northern Levant, Anatolia and Syria. For this, we rely on a combination of stylistic and scientific analysis of several types of artifacts. Together, they present a picture of a complex web of cultural contacts of the people at Tell Kurdu with different regions, especially to the east, northeast and northwest.

Halaf ceramics

The relationships with the Halaf world are particularly interesting. The so-called Halaf period dates from about 5,500 to 4,800 BC and is named after a site in northeastern Syria, Tell Halaf, where materials of this period were first discovered. The material culture is characterized by well-made ceramics that are

painted in a distinctive style. Halaf-style ceramics have been found over a vast region, stretching over much of northern Mesopotamia (modern-day Syria and northern Iraq) and into southeastern Anatolia.

Tell Kurdu is located at the western fringe of the region where Halaf-style artifacts occur. Local pottery styles dominate, but a small percentage of the ceramics are clearly in the Halaf style. According to our ceramic specialist, Ben Diebold of Yale University, the Halaf-style pottery was mostly locally made, with a few exceptions that may have been imported from regions in Syria or Iraq. This suggests that the inhabitants of Kurdu were intimately acquainted with ceramic traditions and fashions hundreds of kilometers to the east.

Though the ceramics indicate that we should position the community of Kurdu therefore within the cultural sphere of the Halaf horizon, other typical aspects of Halaf material culture are not present. An example is the absence of round buildings, so-called tholoi, that are considered one of the hallmarks of Halaf culture. This raises new questions about the nature of contacts that existed between the inhabitants of Tell Kurdu and societies to the east. Apparently, the people at Kurdu selected and incorporated some aspects of Halaf-style material culture, and perhaps social practices, but ignored others. The social dynamics that are involved in this are fascinating, but still poorly understood.

Anatolian obsidian

Obsidian, or volcanic glass, was an important material for the production of chipped stone tools: knives, sickle blades, scrapers, chisels and also pendants. There are only a limited number of sources of obsidian in the Near East, with the two most important clusters in west-central and eastern Anatolia. Tell Kurdu is roughly three hundred kilometers away from the nearest obsidian sources, but no less than 30% of the overall chipped stone assemblage (tools and debitage) consists of obsidian, the remainder being of local flints and cherts. This is significantly higher than at other Halaf-period sites in southeastern Anatolia.

Together with the ceramic evidence, this demonstrates that Tell Kurdu was active in a web of long-distance contacts going in different directions. It is still too early, however, to be certain about the mechanisms through which the obsidian arrived at the site. Did people from Kurdu go on long journeys to obtain raw materials? Or, did they acquire it from neighboring communities, who had acquired it themselves from a neighboring community, and so on? Was the obsidian exchange under the control of some elite?

Continued analysis of the chipped stone industry by Dr. Elizabeth Healey will no doubt shed further light on this aspect of cultural contacts of the people of Tell Kurdu; especially because Dr. Healey has selected some obsidian samples for trace element analysis, to obtain information on their sources.

2003 and beyond

Our first goal now is to finish the analyses that are underway and prepare a publication on the results of the 2001 excavation season. This publication will be finalized in the upcoming year. Before we excavate again we also need to put effort and finances in a new storage space for the Tell Kurdu artifacts from the seasons until now. The current artifact storage depot will be handed back to Mustafa Kemal University in the near future, and understandably, a storage space for antiquities needs to meet a number of basic security requirements.

This means that in 2003 we will have to continue to be patient and not go out into the field for another excavation campaign. However, another task for the upcoming year will be to prepare for excavations in 2004. In that year we plan to expand the area on the northern part of the mound, further exposing the neighborhood towards the north and east where we expect the preservation of the architecture to be even better.

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Soon the Kurdu newsletters can also be found at:
www.arcmet.boun.edu.tr

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