

Tell Kurdu Project Newsletter

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Assemblage of in situ finds from kitchen area in Trench 12

The 2003 study season

The 2003 season at the Tell Kurdu Project lasted five weeks from the end of June to the beginning of August. The season had two objectives; one archaeological, and the other logistical. Archaeologically, we aimed to complete the analysis of all remaining good context artifacts from the 2001 season, especially the ceramics. The second more practical goal was to move the artifacts to a new and secure location. (read more about this on page 2 of the newsletter).

The season personnel included Rana Özbal (Northwestern University), Fokke Gerritsen (Free University Amsterdam), Ahmet Ünal (Mustafa Kemal University), Hadi Özbal (Bogazici University), and Mucella Erdalkiran (Ege University). Our chipped stone specialist Elizabeth Healey (Manchester University) and Halaf Period painted ceramics specialist Jonathan Pickup (Manchester University) joined the project for a few days.

The major part of the analysis focused on the ceramics. The 2003 season allowed us to complete analysis of all artifacts found in clearly determinable contexts. Recording the full ceramic datasets for these contexts is very important for investigations such as ours, because at Tell Kurdu we are concerned with a contextual analysis of rooms and spaces. Having a thorough record of all artifacts from each area is thus an essential step in this process. In addition, during our 2003 season we selected ceramics for publication, checked that the drawings we had made of them were correct and recorded their temper types, colors and textures. Record photos were made of all painted and unique sherds.

Our season also focused on ensuring that all data generated by the artifact analysis over the past few years was entered into a Tell Kurdu database. Ahmet Ünal and Hadi Özbal assisted with the data entry. This will ensure that the results of the analysis can be analyzed statistically.

We have recently completed our 2003 field season and many of the analyses we have been conducting over the past years have been yielding interesting results, some of which are exceptional. Our publications and the presentations we have given to both archaeological and general public audiences in the United States, United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Turkey have brought recognition to the Tell Kurdu Project. This is an exciting time for us, and we would like to share this excitement by giving you a brief update of these developments.

*Rana Özbal and Fokke Gerritsen
co-project directors*

ABSOLUTE DATES WITH BIG IMPLICATIONS

Archaeologists date their materials in two ways: through relative and absolute dating methods. Relative dating, for example, the stylistic comparison of decorative motifs on pottery from Tell Kurdu with that from other sites, had given us a rough chronological framework for the occupation of the Amuq C settlement. Absolute dates in calendar years can be established through methods such as dendro-chronology (tree-ring dating) and radiocarbon (C14) dating. This summer when we received the results for the ten samples that we had submitted to the radiocarbon laboratory of the University of Arizona we were very surprised. The excavated neighborhood at Tell Kurdu is roughly 500 years older than we had surmised from our relative dating! The ten dates show some differences, but they cluster around 5,800 BC (calibrated to calendar years), placing it at the very beginning of the Halaf Period, not long after what is traditionally seen as the end of the Neolithic Period.

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Moving the Tell Kurdu Storage Depot

The logistical work we did in the summer of 2003 with moving the artifacts was very time-consuming but vitally important. Until now, the archaeological materials from all the Amuq Valley projects including those collected during 7 seasons of survey in over 300 mounds in the valley and those yielded by excavations at Tell Atchana, Tell Judaidah as well as over 4 seasons at Tell Kurdu, were stored in the depots provided by Mustafa Kemal University. These storerooms were located in the heart of Antakya, close to the museum and could easily be monitored by the authorities there. Unfortunately, the university's plan to expand their departments meant that we could no longer keep these rooms for the storage of our artifacts. With increasing pressures to empty these rooms, early this summer director of the Amuq Valley Regional Project, Dr. Aslihan Yener, flew to Antakya to secure a new location for these finds. The hunt was successful, and two houses near each other in the village of Tayfur Sokmen, 20 minutes from the city of Antakya were rented by the project. Arriving shortly afterwards, we began to renovate one of these buildings, designated as the new Tell Kurdu storage depot. As the house was nearly 40 years old, it demanded considerable work. All the walls were painted and most doors and windows were replaced. In addition, to meet the museum's safety requirements, metal bars were installed in all windows. Painters, carpenters and metal-smiths were hired and the building was transformed into a safe and sanitary artifact storage depot

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Loading the Trucks



The new depot

ABSOLUTE DATES (continued)

For the interpretation of the excavated neighborhood, the differences in age between the samples provide interesting clues about the sequence in which the different buildings of this phase were constructed. Just as in a modern-day village, older and newer buildings stood side by side. Some were abandoned and rebuilt after perhaps 25 years; others may have stood much longer before they were torn down and built over. With the refined (AMS) dating techniques that are becoming more and more available, we are beginning to unravel the details of this dynamic and differentiated process of building and rebuilding the settlement. Currently, we are looking for funds to extend our dating program.

But the new dates for Tell Kurdu are not only significant for understanding the settlement itself. They demonstrate that Tell Kurdu is older in relation to other sites than previously thought. However, there is more to this than being older or

younger; the real importance of the C14 dates lies in our understanding of the chronological sequence of cultural processes that took place in this time. According to a traditional view, the Halaf Culture that originated in northern Iraq expanded to the east, north and west. Tell Kurdu, where 'Halaf' and 'Halaf-influenced' ceramics are fairly common, is situated at the westernmost boundary of this sphere of expansion, and should logically have come under Halaf influence towards the end of this process. In recent years, this view has come under more and more criticism, mostly because our understanding of theoretical concepts such as culture and cultural expansion are changing. Tell Kurdu now offers the exciting possibility to substantiate this criticism with empirical evidence: now that we know that the 'Halaf' pottery at the site is much older than previously thought, we need to start thinking about different chronological sequences of influence, and perhaps even consider a re-evaluation of the directions from which it emanated.

Mudbrick walls with Ritual Contexts

The excavated neighborhood at Tell Kurdu provides insights into many aspects of the social and economic life of its inhabitants. But there are also finds that give us a glimpse of cultural practices with a strong symbolic or ideological element. To build an understanding of the people that we study, these finds are as important as information on the subsistence economy, the procurement of raw materials such as obsidian or the domestic activities carried out inside and outside the excavated houses. One such intriguing find consisted of a cache of several artifacts inside a wall adjoining the main street. The cache was comprised of a very large horn, possibly from a wildbull, a shoulder blade of a smaller animal, a rock that did not show traces of working but that had naturally flat sides, and an extremely thin obsidian bladelet.

We have several reasons to assume that this is a ritual deposit, although none of the objects by themselves give a convincing explanation for the meaning of the deposit. First of all, the horn, belonged to an animal that played a central role in the symbolism of the societies of Neolithic and Chalcolithic Anatolia. Famous examples of cattle symbolism come from the site of Catal Höyük in Central Anatolia. One of the main motifs of the painted pottery from Tell Kurdu is the so-called bucrania motif, which consists of stylized bull's heads with large, curved horns.

Secondly, the obsidian bladelet cannot have been an ordinary cutting tool. In fact, it is thin enough to be almost see-through, and its tip would undoubtedly have broken if it had ever been used. This artifact was thus placed in the cache without ever having been used.

Finally, the location of this cache also suggests that it may have had some ritual importance. The objects were placed in a rectangular space about 40 cm wide that could possibly have been the structures' entrance threshold. At other Anatolian Chalcolithic sites such as Degirmentepe to the north seals believed to have ritually importance were similarly found buried beneath the main threshold of buildings

A second deposit is slightly easier to categorize, but its interpretation is no easier; a cremation burial. The cremated remains of a human had been placed in a ceramic jar or urn and this was deposited together with two other jars. These side jars were empty when we excavated them, but they may have originally contained liquids or foodstuffs given as burial gifts. Cremation burials are not a very common phenomenon from this period. More frequently, the dead were placed in a tightly flexed position in a simple pit. But what really makes this cremation burial fascinating - and harder to understand - is the fact that the urn and accompanying jars were placed inside a wall, in between the bricks of the corner of a single-room structure.

We have to conclude that the internment took place when the wall was built. Perhaps this burial is then some sort of a foundation deposit. Foundation deposits below walls are known from both Mesopotamia and Anatolia, and are usually interpreted as offerings to ensure the good fortune of the building and its inhabitants. But, as

far as we know, these do not take the form of human burials. Therefore, we have to speculate about the meaning of the deposit. Was it indeed as a protection for the building? Or was the structure built after the death of an important person as a kind of shrine? Indeed, there are some clues from the interior furnishing of the room that it was no ordinary dwelling space. The walls are buttressed on the interior, even though from a structural viewpoint this does not seem necessary. In front of the buttress in the short side opposite the corner with the burial was a low platform - an altar? - with a small ceramic bowl set into the floor next to it.



Ritual deposit within wall, notice horncore, scapula and bladelet

The two ritual deposits described are similar in some ways, both were placed within the walls of a structure, possibly with the idea that they would provide protection for the users of the structure. Though they were a currently far from understanding their immense significance, they do give us bits of insight into the rich symbolic and ideological world of the time.

Moving the Depot (continued)

Towards the end of the season, on 29 July, after the second house had also been restored by members the Tell Atchana field team, all the artifacts and excavation equipment were moved from the Mustafa Kemal University storerooms to their new location. The transportation took place with permission from the Turkish Ministry of Culture and under the supervision of the Antakya Archaeological Museum. Two 10-wheeler trucks, one smaller sized truck, 13 workmen and 6 supervisors were necessary for this immense task. The move itself required elaborate coordination. At least a week was spent organizing and re-labeling the artifacts so they could be transported without being misplaced. New crates were purchased to replace old ones, and the exact location for each crate in the new storage area was pre-planned and mapped out. Fortunately, all went successfully. The disadvantage of the move was that all remaining Tell Kurdu funds had to be spent as a result of expenses paid for the house repairs and the transportation of the artifacts. We are currently looking for new funds for some remaining necessary analyses including obsidian provenance sourcing, and C14 analyses.



Fokke recoding color and temper information for the Tell Kurdu ceramics

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CHECK OUT OUR WEBPAGE

www.pubweb.northwestern.edu/~rdo832
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www.oi.uchicago.edu/OI/PROJ/AMU/Kurdu
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