

Excavating an Enigma

The latest discoveries from Tell es-Sweyhat

By Michael D. Danti and Richard L. Zettler



Tell es-Sweyhat's high mound viewed from the south

An excavation is all the more intriguing when it unveils something totally unexpected. Tell es-Sweyhat in northern Syria has much to tell about life in a Bronze Age urban center. But the fact that a complex society flourished there raises some questions.

A thriving city is not what you would expect to find in an area where the success of local agriculture is unpredictable. Yet Tell es-Sweyhat is just such a puzzle.

Despite its location in a region that averages only eight to 12 inches of rain per year, and that with high

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Tell es-Sweyhat lies along the Euphrates River in northern Syria.

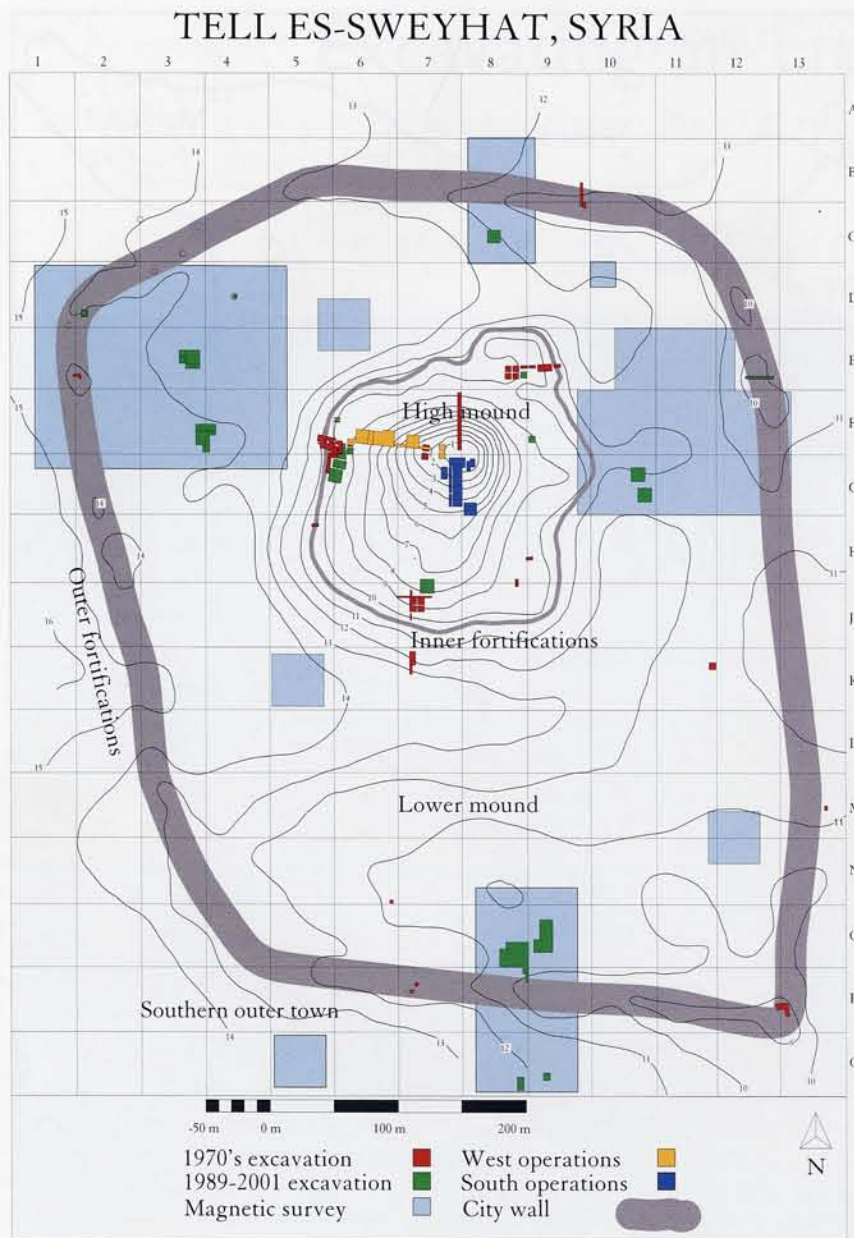
variability from one year to the next, the city, on the east bank of the Euphrates River, was indeed flourishing at the end of the third millennium B.C. (ca. 2150–2000). How did such a large fortified city evolve from a small village?

The University of Pennsylvania Museum has been coordinating excavations in Tell es-Sweyhat for more than 10 years now. Research has taken two parallel but interrelated tracks, continuing to focus on the topography of the urban center while intensifying

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investigations of what we have called the Tell es-Sweyhat enigma.

The large ruin mound of Tell es-Sweyhat promises unique insight into the dynamics of human existence in marginal environments such as the “transition” zone between the well-watered lands of northern and western Syria and the desert steppe. In such areas of the Middle East, rainfall agriculture, although possible, is precarious, and animal (primarily sheep and goat) herding would have been a critical part



Tell es-Sweyhat is composed of distinct morphological zones that reflect the late third millennium center's general layout: a mound 15 meters high and 5–6 hectares high (citadel); a topographically indistinct lower mound (outer town) of 30 hectares surrounding the high mound and enclosed by a rectangular embankment (fortification wall); and an area of 10 hectares to the south (suburb), possibly enclosed by an embankment.

of subsistence then as it is today. With an economy geared to pastoral production, Tell es-Sweyhat challenges conventional understanding of early complex societies. One of those challenges surfaced during our 2000 and 2001 field seasons, when we made the particu-

remains. Various factors forced us, however, to shift resources to the high mound and restrict our work in the southern end of the outer town. These factors included a prolonged drought that turned the outer town into powder, promising messy digging conditions, and bedouin

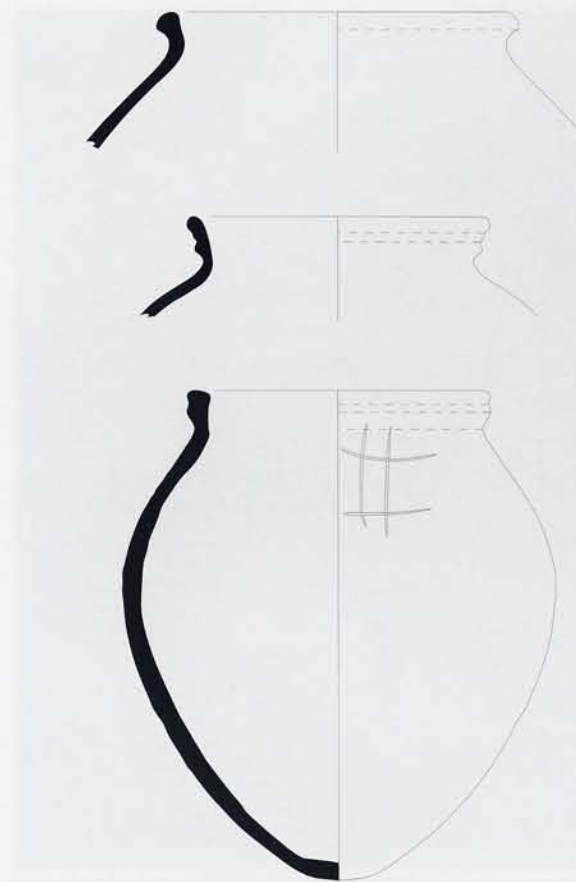
larly exciting discovery of monumental architecture. The impressive structures, dating to the early third millennium B.C., have radically altered our assumptions about Tell es-Sweyhat's evolution.

THE MAKINGS OF A DISCOVERY

The plan for our 2000 and 2001 excavations was to focus on the as yet unexcavated top of Tell es-Sweyhat's high mound. We hoped to uncover the buildings at the heart of the late third millennium citadel. We assumed these buildings would be contemporary with ancillary warehouse and kitchen buildings excavated on the western periphery of the mound. Since those structures were terraced into the side of the mound, the central structures would have stood on a level several meters above them.

We also planned to undertake several operations in the outer town, where geomagnetic survey — a remote sensing technique that produces images of subsurface conditions — had been used to map buildings and the city's outer fortifications in 1993 and 1995.

We were particularly intrigued by the eastern outer city gate, known from our geomagnetic maps, which promised to be the earliest example of the two-chambered gates typical of Middle Bronze Age (Canaanite) fortifications in both Syria and Palestine. We were also interested in the southern end of the outer town, where our 1998 excavations had uncovered well-preserved



Reconstructed profiles of pottery jars from the floor of the late third millennium elite public building located near the summit of the high mound. Diameter of top vessel 24 cm; diameter of other vessels 20 cm.

who camped in the outer town and farmed the area we wanted to excavate.

We approached the high mound by laying out two series of excavation units, one on its western and the other on its southern slope. Much to our surprise, excavations in 2000 turned up only remains of the early to mid third millennium settlement, with little evidence of an overlying late third millennium occupation. The only exception, uncovered at the northern edge of our southern trenches, was an unusually wide mudbrick wall, preserved more than 12 courses (layered rows of bricks) high, with a doorjamb covered with a thick gypsum plaster — reliable evidence for an important building. Although we did not know it at the time, this intriguing discovery would prove to be the core of the late third millennium citadel, but we had to wait a year to satisfy our curiosity.

Our complex's location, as well as its architectural elaboration and paintings, emphasizes its "elite" character, while the size of the room and the bench suggest a public reception function.

Continued excavation in summer 2001 revealed that the door was 1.3 meters wide and had a stepped stone threshold. The northeast corner of the stone slab in the doorway was broken, and a pivot for a doorpost, about 5 centimeters in diameter, was worn into the floor there. The doorway stood at the western corner of a single large (6 by 10 meters) room on the northern side of a courtyard. The building had burned in antiquity. Charred roof beams, probably of poplar and 5–10 centimeters in diameter, lay on the floor, as did several smashed ceramic vessels. The jars date the building to the late third millennium, contemporary with our ancillary storage and kitchen buildings on the citadel's western periphery.

The unusually wide mudbrick walls of the room were set on stone footings and were buttressed on the outside. In a deep alcove formed by two buttresses we found fragmentary paintings. (Wall paintings are also known from nearby Halawa [Lüth 1989] and Mumbaqa [Machule et al. 1986].) Inside the room, the walls had shallow piers perhaps associated with roofing requirements or with carrying the weight of a second story. A low mudbrick bench ran around the room.

Although we know of no exact parallels for the Tell es-Sweyhat building complex, the room is similar in general form to buildings from nearby Tell Halawa B, whose German excavators have described them as "sacral" in character despite the fact that their plans are atypical of other known Syrian temples (Lüth 1989). Our complex's location at the center of the high mound, as well as its architectural elaboration and paintings, emphasizes its elite character, while the size of the room and the bench suggest a public reception function. The complex might have served as a gathering place for the elders of the city, who are attested in the somewhat earlier archival

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ILLUSTRATION BY TED HEMMAPLARDH



The paintings on the exterior wall of the late third millennium public building were done in black, yellow, and red on gypsum plaster. The most extensive scene shows a man with distorted head and raised arms, standing next to a woman with prominent hips, her hands clasped at her waist. We had previously found wall paintings in the early 1990s on the far south side of the high mound (Area 5). The paintings date to the mid to late third millennium (Holland 1993/1994).

texts from Ebla's Royal Palace G as standing alongside the king as the highest authority of the state (Archi 1995:115).

**TELL ES-SWEYHAT:
FROM VILLAGE TO FORTIFIED CENTER**

Previous work at Tell es-Sweyhat suggested the settlement was small and relatively inconsequential until the latter part of the Early Bronze Age (ca. 2300–2000 B.C.), when it grew to urban proportions (roughly 100 acres). However, excavations in 2000 and 2001 revealed that the early third millennium settlement had monumental mudbrick platforms on the western and southern sides of the high mound that would have required substantial labor, implying the presence of a powerful, centralized political authority.

We had already uncovered part of the mudbrick platform on the western side of the high mound in

1993, and initially described it as “likely to be a platform or terrace built on the northern slope of the mound, presumably to expand the area for building” (Zettler et al. 1997). However, we largely ignored the structure until 2000, when we cut a narrow trench through it to link our excavations on the western edge of the mound to operations near its summit. The trench revealed a solid mudbrick platform that had been enlarged a number of times, so we continued work on it in 2001.

We uncovered the core structure in the center of our trench. It was built in segments, and a substantial buttress masked the join of two segments. The core structure was at least 5.5 meters high. Its face, about 3.2 meters from the eastern balk (edge) of the trench, was stepped back, or battered, and covered with a heavy red plaster. We were unable to reach the building floor of the core structure.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL D. DANTI



Western side of the reception room of the public building. The doorway with its gypsum-plastered doorjambs is in the lower left corner. The stone footings in the upper right corner belong to a later wall built when the room was partially filled.

In 2001, having already discovered that the platform was built in segments and phases, we experimented with scraping and sweeping the existing top of the platform to see if we could find seams in the brickwork. A small

The monumental mudbrick constructions bring to mind temple platforms known from nearby sites such as Halawa B.

investment of time revealed the outline of at least parts of several phases of the platform's construction, including the northern face and western corner of the core platform. The core platform was an irregular rectangle whose northern face was at least 10 meters in length.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL D. DANTI

The western half of the core construction was enlarged multiple times over the course of its long history. The latest enlargement of the construction, clearly visible from our surface scraping, was the facing of red and gray mudbricks set on and against the stone footings we first uncovered in 1993. The enlargement resulted in a rounded western face. A 1-meter-wide wall — perhaps part of a tower — projected from the front of the facing and ran to the south.

In 2001, we enlarged our excavations at the northern end of Operation 12 to trace the platform's late facing. We found the join of the facade with the phase that immediately preceded it, but our excavations yielded additional results — a stairway leading to the top of the platform that existed during the intermediate and latest building phases. On top of the platform, a vaulted corridor about 1.25 meters wide led to the east. As for the dating of the western plat-



Trench through the mudbrick platform in our western operations. The platform's core structure, with buttness, is in the center of the photograph.

form, houses on the east side associated with the core platform contained pottery dating to the early to mid third millennium, while houses on the west side that are associated with the building floor of the platform's latest enlargement yielded pottery that can be dated to the mid to late third millennium. The pottery provides a terminus ante quem (a reference point for dating purposes) for different phases of the platform's construction.

On the opposite side of the high mound, in our southern trenches, we exposed a portion of the south-

ern side of a second monumental platform in 2000. We continued work on the southern platform in 2001. We now know this freestanding structure was minimally 3.3 meters high and 9.2 meters east to west by 12.6 meters north to south. As in the case of the western platform, we have yet to find the platform's base, but in the closing week of the 2001 field season we uncovered a stone-paved surface on its south side. However, this is probably the uppermost paving in a long sequence of superimposed surfaces associated with the platform. We expect the platform to continue down below this level, or that we will find an earlier precursor to this structure. Two walls running perpendicular to the platform's southern side likely served as the retaining walls for an earthen ramp that provided access to the top of the platform. Similar retaining walls were associated with the Dagan temple's ziggurat at Mari, located about 400 kilometers (240 miles) south of Tell es-Sweyhat on the middle Euphrates near the Iraqi border (Parrot 1974).

The dating of the southern platform is based on ceramics found in the soil layers and houses that covered it when it fell out of use. These sherds indicate that the southern platform fell into ruin sometime during the mid third millennium. At that time, the monument was allowed to deteriorate, and the western side suffered greatly from erosion caused by wind and rain. Gradually, houses of the mid third millennium were built against the western side of the platform and eventually over the top of it. A substantial deposit of trash and ashy debris covered the southern side. As implied above, we have found only traces of late third millennium occupation in this area. These layers appear to have eroded after the site's abandonment in the early second millennium. Later Hellenistic occupants of the site (third and second centuries B.C.) removed these strata to level the mound's slope for new buildings.

We can only speculate about the function of the monumental mudbrick constructions in our western and southern operations at Tell es-Sweyhat. They bring to mind temple platforms known from nearby sites such as Halawa B (Lüth 1989), as well as ramps or platforms associated with Temple BA at Tell Mozan (Dohmann-Pfälzner and Pfälzner 1999), and Biblical high places, or bamah. The platforms resemble constructions such as Tell Banat's White

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD ZETTLER



General view of the mudbrick platform in our southern excavations. The southern face and retaining walls of the platform are visible in the foreground.

Monument (Porter 2000) and Jerablus-Tahtani's Tomb 302 (Peltenberg et al. 1995), though we have no evidence that our platforms were funerary in character. Alternatively, the platforms could be part of a fortification system. Only further excavation will provide the answer.

LIGHTING THE "DARK AGE"

The early third millennium in Mesopotamia has been described as a sort of "dark age," characterized

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL D. DANTI

by "political devolution," following the collapse of southern Uruk-influenced polities and preceding the reemergence of city-states in Syria (Schwartz 1994). This period is commonly thought of as stagnant in terms of cultural developments, but the new discoveries at Tell es-Sweyhat suggest this may not be the case.

In fact, future exploration of the two monumental platforms promises to provide unprecedented evidence for a high level of social and political complexity for the early third millennium along the upper Euphrates, and in northern Mesopotamia more generally. For Tell es-Sweyhat's later period of occupation, excavation of the late third millennium summit will reveal evidence of those who ruled during the city's twilight years.

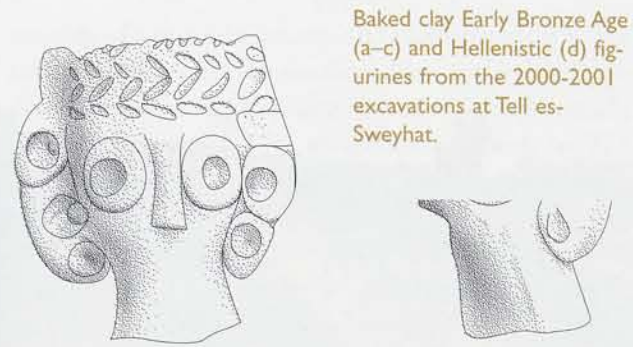
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The face of the mudbrick platform with stone pavement at its base. The plaster is still intact at the top of the platform, while the mudbricks are visible lower down.

Tell es-Sweyhat, Syria, and is currently working with Dr. Robert H. Dyson, Director Emeritus, on the final publication of the Museum's excavations at Hasanlu Tepe, Iran.

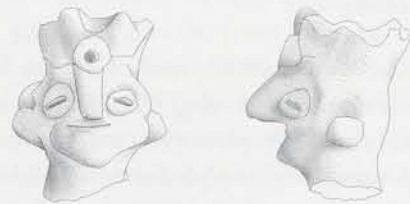
Richard L. Zettler is Associate Curator-in-Charge of the Museum's Near East Section and Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. He has worked at Nippur and Umm al-Hafriyat in Iraq and has directed the Museum's project at Tell es-Sweyhat since 1989. He recently cocurated *Treasures from the Royal Cemetery of Ur*.



A.



B.



C.



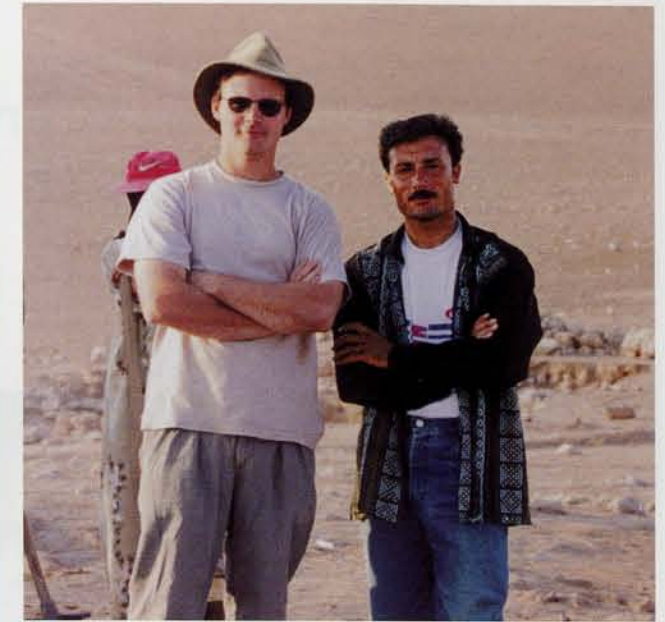
D.

Baked clay Early Bronze Age (a-c) and Hellenistic (d) figurines from the 2000-2001 excavations at Tell es-Sweyhat.

TOP LEFT PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL D. DANTI; BOTTOM LEFT PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD ZETTLER; RIGHT DRAWING BY TED HEMMELARDH



Richard L. Zettler (right), who directs the project at Tell es-Sweyhat, pauses with James Armstrong, from the Harvard Semitic Museum.



Field Director Michael D. Danti (left) surveys the terrain at Tell es-Sweyhat with Mahmud il-Hilef, the site guard's son.

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