Excavating an Enigma
The latest discoveries from Tell es-Sweyhat

By Michael D. Danti and Richard L. Zettler

A n 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 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 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 goats) herding would have been a critical part
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-
larly exciting discovery of monumental architecture. The impressive structures, dating to the early third millennium B.C.E., 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 these 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 features 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 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.

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Continued excavation in summer 2001 revealed that the door was 1.2 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 (Lith 1989) and Munhagha (Machlic 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 (Lith 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
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 S). The paintings date to the mid to late third millennium (Holland 1993/1994).

texts from Elda'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. 2800-2000 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 slopes 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 the trench. It was built in segments, and a substantial buttress masked the join of two segments. The core structure was at least 8.8 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.

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...
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 3.5 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 (Porter 1979).

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 ash 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 (Löhr 1985), as well as ramped or platforms associated with Temple RA at Tell Mozan (Dohmann-Pfälzer and Pfälzer 1999), and Biblical high places, or bamah. The platforms resemble constructions such as Tell Nana’s White Monument (Porter 2000) and Jerablus-Tahhan’s Tomb 302 (Pettenberg 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 by "political devolution," following the collapse of southern Uruk–influenced politics 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.

Michael D. Danti is Research Specialist in the Near East Section of the University of Pennsylvania Museum. He serves as Field Director of the Museum’s excavations at Tell es-Sweyhat.
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 Hassuna 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 el-Hafriya in Iraq and has directed the Museum’s project at Tell es-Sweyhat since 1989. He recently curated Treasures from the Royal Cemetery of Ur.

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