

The Tell es-Sweyhat Regional Archaeological Project



FIG. 1. View of Tell Hajji Ibrahim from the northwest in 1993.

The Tell es-Sweyhat project's research design extends beyond the site-specific level of analysis to cover broader issues, regional and interregional in scope. This component of the project is critical for investigating Sweyhat's urban transformation and for approaching larger issues, such as the organization of northern Mesopotamian dry-farming/pastoral economies, secondary-state formation, and core/periphery relations in the Early Bronze Age (3200–2000 b.c.).

Systematic archaeological survey in the Sweyhat area, initiated in 1973–74 by T.J. Wilkinson, focused first on the flood plain and second terrace (Wilkinson 1994). The *jebel* (high plateau) was not intensively surveyed, although it was settled in antiquity. In addition to dry farming, the local inhabitants practice sheep/goat pastoralism, which constitutes an important part of the regional economy; the *jebel* serves as a seasonal pasture. The modern balance between pastoralism and rain-fed agriculture probably existed in antiquity as well (see reports by Miller and Weber, this issue).

In 1993 we initiated a new phase of archaeological survey as a follow-up to Wilkinson's work. The current project extends survey coverage to the *jebel*, and complements this work with small-scale excavations at select sites. We laid out this study area to cover the full range of local environments, targeting zones of rain-fed agriculture and pastoral production. In two seasons of regional survey and excavation we have completed the re-survey of the early 3rd millennium tells in the

Sweyhat embayment. In our upcoming season, we plan to survey three transects of *jebel*. The survey team will seek out tells, as well as more ephemeral remains indicative of pastoral activities, such as herding and milking stations.

SURVEY METHOD

To locate the actual sites we use information from a combination of sources: field reconnaissance, Wilkinson's initial survey, low-level aerial photographs, SPOT (Satellite Pour l'Observation de la Terre) panchromatic and multispectral images, and interviews with local informants. The SPOT images serve not only as maps, but also as data sets. For example, by using their high resolution digitized imagery we may be able to reconstruct water table, watershed, and travel cost data for the region. Since water is scarce in the area, these data in turn may enable us to predict site location.

Once a site is discovered, its coordinates are determined using a GPS (Geographic Positioning System). A topographic site plan is made, site size is recorded, and relevant surface features are noted. The survey team then carries out surface collections.

Our survey has already enabled us to refine our initial picture of 3rd and early 2nd millennium settlement in the Sweyhat embayment. The interpretation of our data is closely linked to the excavations, where the recovery of a long, continuous ceramic sequence has enabled us to construct a more precise chronology.



FIG. 2. The central structure at Tell Hajji Ibrahim looking northwest.

EXCAVATIONS AT TELL HAJJI IBRAHIM

In addition to the survey information, the results from the excavation of a small tell in the embayment, Site 3 (Tell Hajji Ibrahim), have provided an intriguing glimpse of regional economic and demographic developments of the early to mid 3rd millennium (Fig. 1). The site is located only 900 meters southeast of Sweyhat's main mound along an east-west running wadi (seasonal water course). It is a mere 0.25 hectares in size and stands approximately 2.60 meters above the surrounding plain. The mound is one of seven sites dating to the early to mid 3rd millennium within 4 kilometers of Sweyhat. Two of these are of similar proportions to Hajji Ibrahim and are also situated along wadis. We chose this site for excavation since it was being destroyed by looting. Also, its rectilinear form, visible on low-level aerial photos, seemed to indicate a walled settlement—a curious feature for such a small site of that period.

To date, we have excavated a 5-by-15-meter trench across the site, reaching sterile soil in one 5-by-5-meter area. Preliminary analyses of the ceramic assemblage and stratigraphy have revealed two phases (A and B) of early 3rd millennium occupation, and at least one badly disturbed phase (C) of the mid 3rd millennium. We are currently awaiting the results of C¹⁴ dating.

Architecture from Phase B, the later of the two early 3rd millennium phases, consists of a single build-

ing and a courtyard surrounded by a series of rectangular mud-brick structures atop stone footings (Figs. 2, 3). The remains of these structures are responsible for the mound's height and shape. At least three such structures may be inferred from the current excavated area, although two were badly damaged by looting. One of these structures, preserved from two to five brick courses high, was entirely excavated. It had niches on at least two sides, and possibly on a third (northern). The western (outer) side of the structure had none. There was no ground-level entry. The structure was heavily coated with mud plaster inside and out, and the floor was lime plastered.

These structures are preliminarily interpreted as silos or storerooms based on their proportions and form, and on corroborating data recovered from contemporary areas of the site. Similar structures, also interpreted as storerooms, are depicted on cylinder seals of the Uruk period from Susa.

The central structure was utilized over a long period of time, judging from the five successive plastered floors and associated fill (the accumulation between the first and last floors was 1 meter thick). The building's layout was modified at least twice after initial construction. In the final phase of modification, the room was divided with a wall. A grinder, storage jars, and cooking pots were set into the two earliest floors. Large accumulations of ash, charcoal, and carbonized seed and plant remains had accumulated atop each floor.



FIG. 3. One of the silos/storerooms looking south. Overall exterior dimensions of the structure were 4.60 by 3.80 meters. The walls were 1.20 meters thick; their mud bricks averaged 35 by 50 by 9 centimeters.

A reconstruction of the Phase B architecture indicates the storage structures and central compound occupy nearly the entire site. During the earlier to mid 3rd millennium, the site must have served as a specialized grain storage/processing center. If such is the case, was this site part of a larger economic system, e.g., one linked to Sweyhat? This seems unlikely. Although we do not know Sweyhat's exact size during this period, we know it was small, no larger than 4 hectares. Thus, it is unlikely Sweyhat was the center of a centralized economy. Even if we were to accept that it was, Hajji Ibrahim, less than 1 kilometer from Sweyhat, is not situated far enough away to have been established for the purpose of minimizing grain-transport costs.

How then can we interpret this small, specialized site? It is likely that Hajji Ibrahim and other early 3rd millennium embayment sites were located along wadis to take advantage of seasonal runoff water from the jebel. Fields located in these areas would have been less susceptible to drought. This water supply would also have helped minimize the reliance on wells, providing a seasonal water source for livestock and the large amounts of water necessary for mud-brick construction. One possibility is that such small, specialized settlements might have formed the cores of small agricultural land holdings, used by a largely semi-nomadic population moving between the embayment for farmland and the jebel for pasture. Throughout this region's history, subsistence patterns have shifted between pastoralism and rain-fed agriculture; the two modes of production are interdependent, one never completely replacing the other. This site may document the beginning stages of a period (early to late 3rd millennium) characterized by rain-fed agriculture.

Tell Hajji Ibrahim's mid 3rd millennium levels were badly disturbed, making interpretation difficult.

There is, however, an obvious change in the built environment. The earlier grain storage facilities and central structure go out of use and are sealed by the following building phase. The site apparently became a modest settlement with multiple residences. Large numbers of metallic ware whole vessels were recovered from Phase C and provide an important chronological diagnostic. This pottery is identical to that in the tombs at Sweyhat which date to the third quarter of the 3rd millennium. We are now certain the site was occupied until the development of Sweyhat's outer town. It was then abandoned, along with at least two other small, early to middle 3rd millennium sites located along wadis.

As intriguing as our initial results are for reconstructing long-term regional developments, our data set is currently too incomplete to draw any conclusions. The in-depth investigation of small sites and off-site archaeology form the core of our future work. In the Near East, small sites are often under-represented (or under-investigated) in models of early state-level societies, which are often based on the excavation of a single regional center and data gained from regional archaeological survey. Survey procedure typically involves recording the size, chronological periods, and locational data for smaller sites in settlement hierarchies. Recently, several authors have rightly pointed out that more detailed work is needed at small sites in rural hinterlands if we are to reconstruct the economic, political, and demographic milieu of early city states (Schwartz and Falconer 1994). Fortunately, the situation is gradually changing as more small-site archaeology is completed.

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