

The Excavations at Tell Abu Hureyra in 1972

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In 1971 I was asked by the Syrian Department of Antiquities to excavate a Neolithic site in the area to be flooded by the new Euphrates dam, as part of an international program of salvage excavations. The most promising mound was Tell Abu Hureyra and so this site was chosen. The excavation was sponsored jointly by Oxford University (the Pitt Rivers Museum) and the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. It was financed by generous grants from the Oriental Institute, Oxford University, and other institutions in the United Kingdom. The staff was drawn largely from both supporting universities. There were ten people in the team, including Mr. G. C. Hillman, an archaeobotanist from Reading University. The first season of excavation took place from late September to the end of November, 1972, and our participation was warmly welcomed by the Syrian authorities. I am most grateful for the support that the Oriental Institute gave to this international project, which made possible the successful outcome of the work.

Four trenches were excavated along the spine of the mound and one on the edge of the site. These showed that the site was about 500 m. long and up to 250 m. wide, and so the largest known Neolithic site in Syria. Two trenches were excavated to bedrock and the deepest of these revealed nearly five meters of occupation deposit. This trench had a continuous sequence of occupation from the Mesolithic through the aceramic Neolithic. All the other trenches yielded substantial deposits of aceramic Neolithic material, and there was some evidence of a ceramic Neolithic phase of occupation also.

The Mesolithic layer was reached in a narrow sounding at the bottom of one of the trenches. It was over a meter deep and consisted of occupation material with trodden floors and hearths. A pit filled with similar debris had been cut into the bedrock. The finds were mostly flint tools and waste from a microlithic industry of Natufian type. This phase of occupation must date from the ninth millennium B.C.

Stratified above this were the earliest aceramic Neolithic levels. There was no discernible stratigraphic break between the two phases.

These Neolithic levels contained rectilinear buildings of mud brick with plastered floors and walls. No complete building has yet been exposed, but it is clear that at the end of the phase structures with several rooms were being built. Some of the buildings were modified and rebuilt over long periods of time. In one trench we found the corners of no less than five buildings on the same alignment superimposed above each other. We found many tools and organic remains *in situ* on the floors of these structures and these tell us that some were houses and others workshops.

We have a great deal of information about burial practices in this phase, for we found a number of graves in the houses and yards. Most were contracted single burials in shallow pits dug into the floors of houses. A few had grave goods, such as a string of beads, and some had traces of red ocher on the bones. A number of the burials were headless. One large burial group consisted of at least fifteen skulls and three skeletons, all apparently thrown together.

The chipped stone industry was abundant. Most of the tools were made of flint but a small proportion were of obsidian. We found evidence of flint- and obsidian-working on the site. The flint artifacts showed some technical development through the aceramic phase. The other artifacts included bone tools, stone axes, bowls and ornaments. Among the latter were several winged beads, a unique type of polished greenstone.

There was some evidence of a later phase of Neolithic occupation on the site. In two trenches we found pits and floors near the surface. From the pits came a few sherds of dark-faced burnished ware, the earliest known Syrian pottery. The flint industry in the upper levels on the site shows further development. This evidence, together with that of the sherds, suggests that the Neolithic occupation on the site ended some time in the sixth millennium B.C.

We used a flotation machine to process soil samples on the site to recover seeds and charcoal fragments. Mr. Hillman has already examined some of the material from the upper layers on the site and has been able to identify several kinds of domesticated wheat and also domesticated barley, together with cultivated legumes. It appears that by then agriculture formed the basis of the economy. We found large quantities of animal bones, and when these are studied, they will fill out our knowledge of the economy of the settlement.

After the site was abandoned, it was not reoccupied until modern

times. The latest Neolithic levels were disturbed by a Muslim cemetery, and there were remains of a few modern houses on the surface.

The most important aspect of the site is that it appears to have been continuously occupied from the ninth until the sixth millennium B.C. It was thus occupied throughout the period of cultural development when settled communities dependent on agriculture first came into existence. This excavation provides a rare opportunity to study this process of economic and social evolution on one large village site.

The Euphrates dam will be finished later this year and our site will be flooded in 1974. A second and final season of excavation is planned for the late summer and autumn of 1973.