

## TELL ES-SWEYHAT EXPEDITION TO SYRIA

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The fifth season of archaeological excavations was conducted during October and November 1991 at the Early Bronze Age site of Tell Es-Sweyhat, which is located on the left bank of the Euphrates River in northern Syria. The expedition was sponsored by the Oriental Institute (University of Chicago) and the University Museum (University of Pennsylvania) under the joint directorship of Dr. Thomas A. Holland and Dr. Richard L. Zettler. Both institutions and private donors from Chicago and Philadelphia generously financed the work, for which we are very grateful. The staff consisted of ten full-time and four part-time members from the United States and Britain. We also had two Syrian representatives from the Department of Antiquities, Mr. Bassam Falhout from Damascus and Mr. Ma'an Hassoun from Raqqa, who greatly facilitated the work of the expedition.

Five new trenches (Operations 1, 5, 6, 7, and 8) were excavated in the walled inner city of the main mound and two areas (Operations 4 and 9) were excavated in the northwestern sector of the lower town, which is encompassed by an earthen fortification wall enclosing a total area of about forty hectares (see fig. 1).

The major goals of the season were: 1) to obtain more information with regard to the architectural planning as well as to the dates of different phases of occupation on the site; 2) to compare the relationship of occupation in the central walled town to that in the lower, outer town; and 3) to investigate changes in the pattern of settlement with respect to the physical landscape.

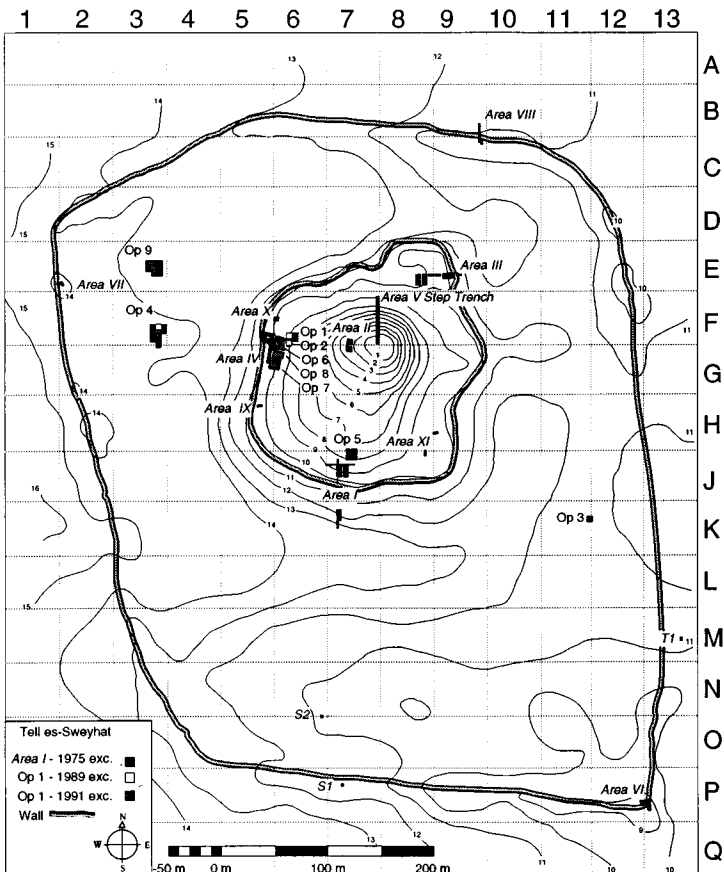
The first goal was initiated by expanding Operation 1, first excavated in 1989, by 10 m to the east and opening up new areas of excavation in Operations 6, 7, and 8 on the western side of the site in Area IV as well as a 10 × 10 m square, Operation 5, on the southern slope of the mound north of Area I (see fig. 1). To compare the inner and outer towns, Operation 4 (begun in 1989), located in the outer town, was greatly expanded and Operation 9 was started to the north of Operation 4 in grid square E3. The third goal, the relationship of the site to its regional environment, was the responsibility of Tony Wilkinson, who did an extensive survey by foot in an area of 5 km surrounding the main site.

The expansion of Operation 1, located to the east of the inner ring road or street discovered during the 1989 season, gave us valuable information about the later phases of the Early Bronze Age buildings, which were aligned at a

different angle from the earlier town layout and were more crudely constructed.

Operation 6 was designed to continue the 1970s excavation of the large building complex constructed against the inner face of the mudbrick town wall on the western side of the mound. This resulted in the complete excavation of a well-defined central building unit of eight rooms situated between the town wall and the inner street, which measured 10 m in width and 13.50 m in length.

Operation 7 was laid out 10 m to the south of Operation 6 against the town wall in an area suspected to be the location of one of the city gates. Although not completely excavated, two stone foundation piers were found positioned against the city wall on opposite sides of a 3 m wide street, which led eastward through the city wall into the town and which probably joined up with the inner ring road. The stone foundations of a large mudbrick guard house were also situated to the north of the street just inside the gateway. The position of the gate is in direct alignment with a saddle-shaped depression located in the



Computer plan ('92) by A. Weiss and M. D. Daniels after field plan by A. L. Bellerby ('74)

**Figure 1. Plan of Tell es-Sweyhat**

rampart surrounding the outer town to the west in grid square G2. This probably is another gate since Wilkinson's studies show that there is a hollow way leading from that position in the outer defensive wall to the southwest, which leads in the direction of another Bronze Age settlement at Tell Jouweif, located in the Euphrates valley flood plain.

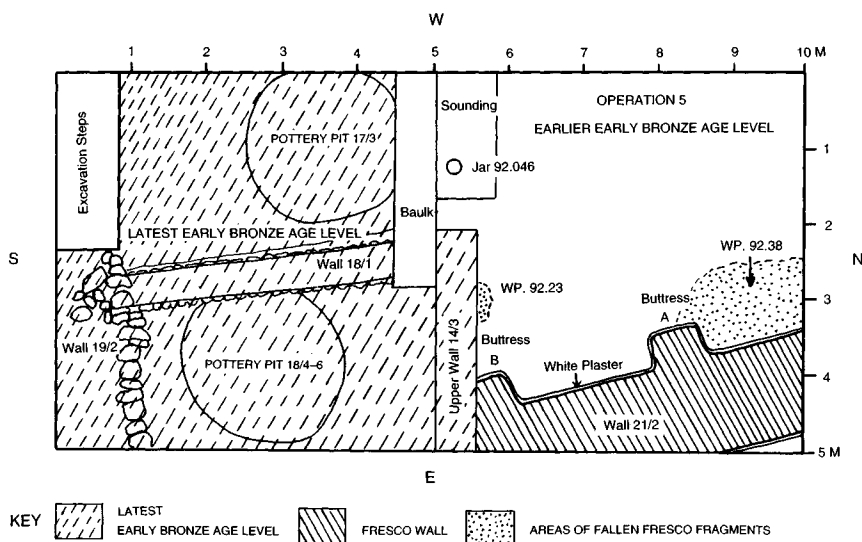
Operation 8, a  $5 \times 10$  meter trench, was positioned against the town wall between Operations 6 and 7 in order to ascertain the relationship between the large central building unit to its north and the street and gateway to its south. Although this trench was not completely excavated to Bronze Age levels, the stone foundations of a north-south wall in its eastern end confirm that there are more rooms adjoining the large central building complex to its north.

On the southern slope of the main mound another large square,  $10 \times 10$  m, designated Operation 5, was laid out in grid squares H7 and J7 to throw more light on the architecture and finds which were discovered in Area I during the 1970s. The upper levels of occupation were dated to the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The remains of the latest Early Bronze Age levels were encountered about 1.50 m from the topsoil. Towards the end of the season, a most remarkable discovery was made in the northeastern quadrant of the operation. When the top portions of earlier Early Bronze Age walls were exposed and the mudbrick debris from the fallen wall was removed, the excavator, Jennifer Arzt (former graduate student in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations), detected a few small pieces of brightly painted plaster amongst the broken mudbricks (see fig. 2).



Figure 2. Fragment of painted wall plaster in situ, Operation 5

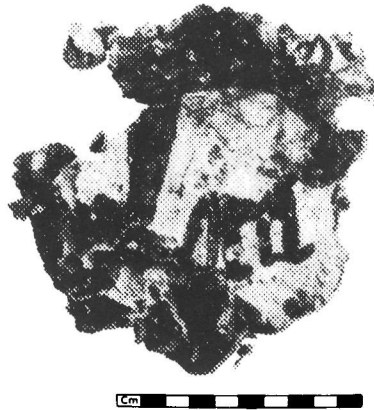
Upon closer inspection at the end of the workday, it was evident that the white jus plaster from the fallen wall(s) had been painted with some fresco-like scene or scenes. Our two conservators were immediately sent to work in the square the following morning and spent the next ten days laboriously uncovering each piece as it appeared with dental tools and fine brushes. Each fragment then had to be consolidated with chemicals and strengthened with fine gossamer gauze and left to dry out before the pieces could safely be removed to the lab workroom. Each piece then had to receive yet more chemicals after consolidation in order to remove the gauze backing (applied to the face of the fresco, the back of the plaster, or the actual mudbrick, depending upon the position each fragment had landed on the floor when the wall originally collapsed). In total, twenty-six fragments varying in size were recovered and then photographed and drawn. The area from which the plaster was removed measured approximately 1.0 m by 1.50 m in front of the wall, which extended to the northwest into the northern section of the square. Due to the meticulous care that had to be taken to lift the fragments, excavation proceeded to a depth of only fifteen centimeters and the area had to be covered with plastic sheeting, stones, and backfilled with earth to preserve the unexcavated portions of the fresco until the following season.



**Figure 3. Plan of Operation 5**

Although the present report only concerns the fiscal year 1991–92, the importance of a major wall painting from the third millennium B.C. warrants our preempting somewhat the 1992–93 Annual Report by briefly announcing here the sensational results of the work in Operation 5 during the 1992 season. When the work was resumed during September, 1992, Mark Fenn (conservator

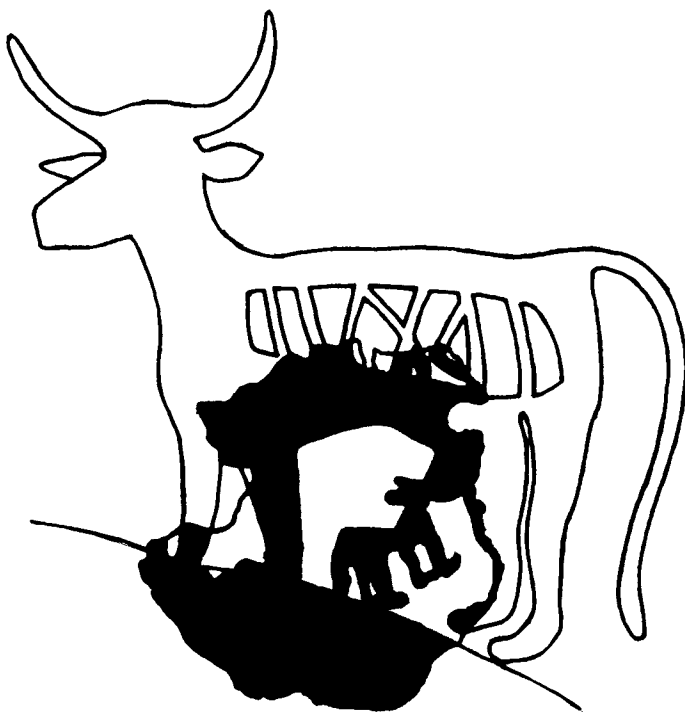
from the Smithsonian Conservation Analytical Laboratory) continued to lift the fresco fragments and Clemens Reichel (graduate student in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations) excavated the areas to the south and west of the fallen wall in order to determine the extent of the fallen plaster and to investigate the nature of the building to which the fresco belonged (fig. 3). The wall which originally held the fresco is oriented northwest by southeast and is 1.25 m wide, double the width of any previously excavated Early Bronze Age walls at Sweyhat with the exception of the town wall. Although it is still not completely excavated, the wall has at least two buttresses on its western face and it is also plastered on its eastern face (unknown as yet if this face is also painted), which implies that it is an internal wall of a very large building complex that may belong to a temple, an official governor's residence, or possibly a palace belonging to the still unknown ruler of ancient Sweyhat. One of the more important discoveries of the season was the discovery of a large fragment of painted fresco in front of the southern buttress B, which most probably belongs to a second fresco from that portion of the wall still unexcavated in the southern half of the operation. At present, there is no evidence of painted plaster on the portion of the wall between the two buttresses. During the season, another seventy-six fragments were lifted to a



**Figure 4. Fragment of painted wall plaster showing bovine suckling calf**

further depth of 20 cm from the original fresco area north of buttress A, bringing the present total of fragments to 103. Although the 1991 fragments had some similar border designs to a small fresco found at the Bronze Age site of Munbaqa, located on the Euphrates about 15 km south of Sweyhat, no recognizable scene could be reconstructed from the Sweyhat pieces. However, the 1992 season produced enough large fragments to enable us to attempt some reconstruction of designs such as the border patterns consisting of red,

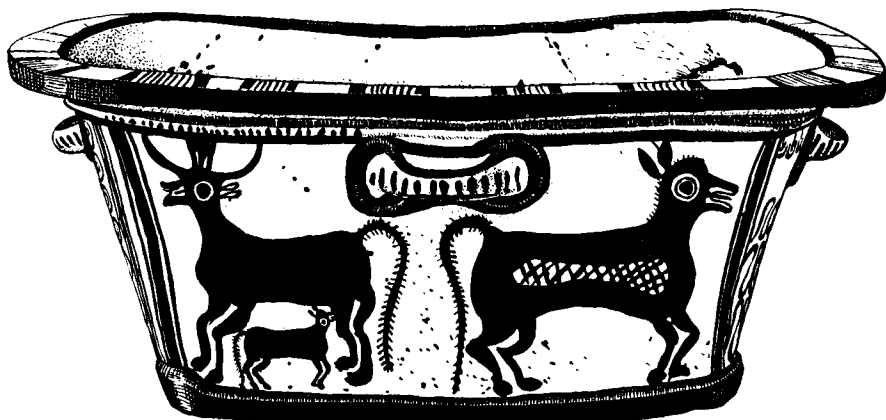
black and white-painted, wedge-shaped, alternating horizontal bands as well as linking chain bands and solid bands painted in circular patterns. But of even greater importance for the development of Near Eastern art history and possible foreign trade connections was the discovery of a fairly large fragment, 14 × 16 cm (WP.92.38), which depicted a calf suckling its mother (figs. 4–5). The animals are painted black except for a rectangular white box on the mother's body, which contains a geometrically red-painted pattern. A few fine paint drip lines, produced when the fresco was painted on the wall, extending vertically from the mother's stomach, indicate the exact directional position of this scene on the wall. This shows that the base upon which the animals are standing, painted red, is positioned at a 45° angle so that the mother is standing and facing uphill, on the right-hand side of the representation of a mountain,



**Figure 5.** Line drawing of bovine suckling calf from painted wall plaster fragment (Drawn by Abbas Alizadeh)

which is a well-known Near Eastern motif. Another similar scene was probably depicted on the left-hand side facing the scene under discussion. At present, no painted parallels for this suckling calf motif have been found by us from other Near Eastern sites, but an Akkadian stamp seal from Tell Brak (ca. 2350–2000 B.C.) has an engraved scene which depicts a triple-headed long

horned cow giving birth and giving suck to a second calf at the same time (*Iraq* 9 [1947], pl. 16:9). However, a remarkably close painted parallel comes from the site of Gurnia in Crete (fig. 6); it is painted on one side of a large clay basin or tub with horizontal loop handles on each side and end (Boyd Hawes, *Gournia*, pl. 10, fig. 44). The vessel from Gurnia depicts two bovines standing back to back and facing vertical border patterns, one of which is similar to our chain pattern. The horned cow on the left has a suckling calf and the animal on the right is shown without a suckling calf, but it does have a rectangular-shaped box on the body with a geometrically painted design that is very



**Figure 6.** Scene depicting bovine suckling calf painted on vessel from Gurnia, Crete

similar to that on the Sweyhat example. The Gurnia vessel is dated to the Late Minoan III period, about the fourteenth century B.C., about a thousand years later than the Sweyhat painting! Another example of the suckling calf motif is painted on the lid of a clay sarcophagus from Episkopi in Crete and is also dated to the first half of the fourteenth century B.C. (see W. Orthmann, *Der Alte Orient*, Berlin, 1975, no. 443). The presence of this extraordinary fresco from Sweyhat is the first evidence we possess from the northern Syrian Jazira that there may have been cultural and trade contacts between the upper Euphrates Valley and the Aegean during the Early Bronze Age. A preliminary assessment of the pottery from the later part of the Early Bronze Age phase of occupation in pits 17 and 18 above and to the south of the painted wall indicates that the Sweyhat fresco may be dated to the middle part of the Early Bronze Age, sometime between ca. 2,600-2,300 B.C.