

MORE WALL PAINTING FRAGMENTS FROM TELL ES-SWEYHAT

Thomas A. Holland

Although the planned 1994 Tell es-Sweyhat expedition to Syria had to be canceled due to a lack of financial resources, work on previously excavated materials from the 1991 and 1992 seasons has steadily progressed and a final Oriental Institute report on these researches is anticipated during the forthcoming fiscal year.

The important Early Bronze Age wall paintings, dated to the middle of the third millennium B.C., were first discovered during the 1991 season of field work in Operation 5, Quadrant C, on the southern slope of the main mound. More wall painting fragments were excavated from the same area during the 1992 season and the wall from which they had fallen was further defined. Also, fragments of wall painting were recovered from another unexcavated wall belonging to the same building complex. However, due to the meticulous care which had to be taken in the time-consuming conservation procedures necessary to lift each fragment, further excavation of the building was not possible and portions of both wall paintings at present known still remain unexcavated. A brief report on the one hundred and three wall painting fragments so far excavated (the suckling calf fragment in particular) as well as a preliminary sketch plan of the excavation square containing the buttressed wall from which one of the wall paintings fell was first published in the *1991-1992 Annual Report*, pp. 76-80, figures 2-5. Another preliminary assessment appeared in the *American Journal of Archaeology* (98 [1993]: 139-42) and other reports will appear in forthcoming issues of the Syrian Department of Antiquities Annual Report on Excavations in Syria as well as an entry in "Archäologische Forschungen in Syrien (5)," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 40.

This year's report presents ten of the one hundred and two unpublished wall painting fragments (figs. 2a-e, 3a-e), nine of which belong to a scene which was originally painted on the western side of Wall 21.2, to the north of buttress A, and one of seven fragments, WP.92.23 (fig. 2e), from an unexcavated wall in the south-

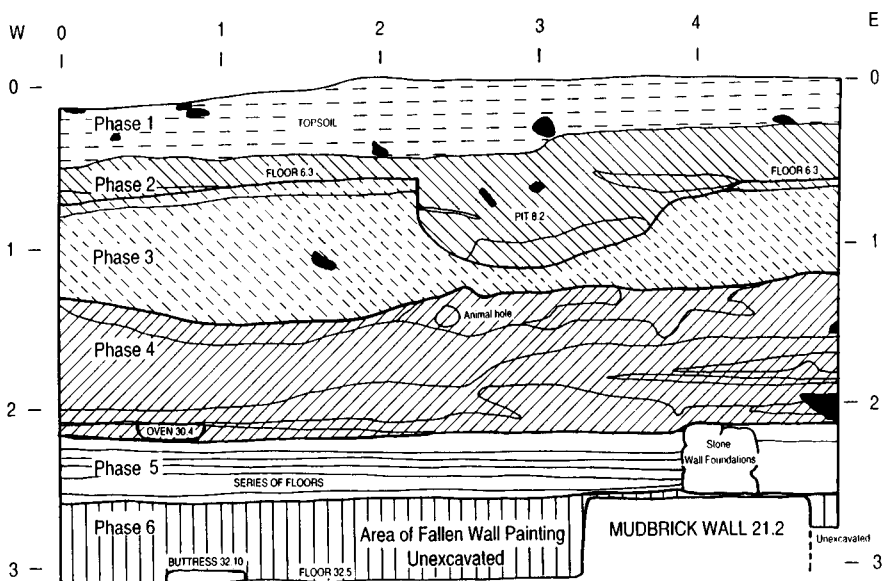


Figure 1. Sweyhat, Operation 5, Quadrant C: Northern stratigraphic section showing position of mudbrick wall 21.2 on which wall painting Scene 1 was originally painted

eastern quadrant of Operation 5, located somewhere to the south of buttress B (see sketch plan, fig. 3, in the *1991–1992 Annual Report*).

The five-meter wide stratigraphic section shown in figure 1 depicts the northern side of the excavated portion of quadrant C of Operation 5. The 1.40 meter wide mudbrick wall from which the first wall painting fell in antiquity is shown partially excavated in the lower right-hand corner in Phase 6, the surviving top of which is located 2.60 meters below the topsoil of the mound, which represents Phase 1. When the modern excavation steps, constructed in the northwestern corner of the quadrant to give access to the early levels, were excavated during the 1992 season to further define the building, the remains of the southern end of a plastered structure (another possible buttress) was found 2.10 meters to the west of the western side of Wall 21.2 on floor 32.5 and in association with the same building in Phase 6. If this structure is another buttress, it may be connected to the unexcavated northern wall of this room of the wall-painted building. The remains of one other possible buttress was found on the western side of the quadrant, approximately due west of buttress A, with the remains of a plaster floor aligned northwest by southeast as is Wall 21.2, but if this was originally the western wall of the wall-painted building, it had been removed in antiquity to the level of floor 32.5.

Before describing in detail the individual wall painting fragments presented here, along with the comparative material at present known, it is appropriate to report the scientific analyses of the wall plaster upon which the two scenes were painted in red and black on a painted white ground. The examination of several small fragments was conducted by one of our conservators, Mark Fenn, who was then associated with the Smithsonian Conservation Analytical Laboratory and to whom we are grateful, along with Donna Strahan, for the Herculean efforts expended in conserving and lifting the wall painting fragments during the 1991 and

1992 seasons. Mr. Fenn's technical report on the 1991 samples is presented below as it was submitted.

"Each piece examined consisted of one or more layers of a yellowish ground covered with a white layer which bears red and black pigments. One fragment of the red-painted plaster was examined by X-ray fluorescence (XRF) to determine the elemental composition of the paint and the white surface to which it was applied. Iron and calcium were found in relatively large amounts and minor amounts of strontium were also detected. A black-painted fragment was similarly tested and found to contain relatively large amounts of calcium and minor amounts of iron and strontium. X-ray diffraction (XRD) was then used to identify the crystalline species present in samples of each of the two pigments and the white ground layer. The white ground to which the paints were applied is calcite (CaCO_3); small amounts of strontium are frequently associated with calcite. The red sample contained hematite (Fe_2O_3 , a common iron-based pigment) and calcite. The black sample contained only calcite, apparently from the white ground. The black pigment is some form of carbon, probably charcoal or bone black. This conclusion is based upon the fact that the element carbon is too light to be detected by XRF and the fact that neither charcoal nor bone black is crystalline, so neither would be detected by XRD. Other black pigments would have been detected by either XRF, XRD, or both. The small amount of iron detected by XRF in the black paint sample is probably contamination from the adjacent red-painted area of the fragment."

All of the wall painting fragments illustrated in this report, except WP.92.23 (fig. 2e), come from the first painting found to the north of buttress A, designated hereafter as "Scene 1." WP.92.23, along with six other unillustrated fragments from "Scene 2," was recovered from the southern side of quadrant C, to the southwest of buttress B. Both wall paintings were made with the same black and red pigments on a white ground and also had some similarity of design in depicting stylized human figures and border elements. At present, the closest known wall painting parallels in the Near East for the Sweyhat examples come from two Early Bronze Age sites located to the southeast of Sweyhat on the left bank of the Euphrates River in northern Syria; they are Munbaqa, ca. twenty kilometers distant, and Halawa Mound B, ca. forty kilometers distant. As is shown below, the best comparisons for the Sweyhat paintings come from both a wall painting and a painted limestone stela from Tell Halawa B (fig. 4), Level 3, Period I, for which the excavators suggest a date in the first half of the third millennium B.C. (F. Luth, "Tell Halawa B," Abb. 66, 67, in *Halawa 1980-1986*, edited by W. Orthmann, pp. 85-109. Saabrucker Beiträge zur Altertumskunde, Band 38, 1989). Some of the Sweyhat border elements are also similar to the "frame" surrounding the two stylized human figures in the Munbaqa (fig. 5) painting ("Ausgrabungen in Tall Munbaqa 1984," by D. Machule et al. *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft zu Berlin* 118 [1986]: 67-145, Abb. 10).

The ten previously unpublished wall painting fragments from Sweyhat illustrated in this report are:

1. WP.91.7 (fig. 2a). From Scene 1. Human motif (found face up). Two adjoining fragments which were broken when they fell from the face of the mudbrick wall. The black-painted design on the right-hand side most likely represents an eye of a stylized human figure, which is encircled by a band with radiating “fingers” of paint, possibly meant to depict the eyelash; compare the large round-painted face on the limestone stela from Tell Halawa B (Luth 1989, Abb. 67). The fragmentary black-painted bands on the left-hand side of this Sweyhat fragment may be part of the hair of the head, similar to that depicted on the Halawa stela, or even some type of headdress. S. Dunham, who recently discussed some wall painting fragments from Tell al-Raqa‘i in the Habur valley of northeastern Syria, has drawn attention to the close similarity of the painted head on the Halawa B stela to a small terracotta head from Terqa (S. Dunham, “A Wall Painting from Tell al-Raqa‘i,” *Levant* 25 [1993]: 135).

2. WP.92.73 (fig. 2b). From Scene 1. Human motif (found face up). The central, red-painted image represents the upper portion of a human figure with a “bird-like” head facing left. The wavy, black-painted bands emanating outwards from the area of the head probably depict the hair of the figure. This figure is well represented on the Halawa B wall painting (fig. 4) where similar human figures are situated in groups on both sides of a much larger central stylized face of a human, which is itself encircled by a wavy line pattern enclosed by wide bands of paint. The bird-headed figures on the left side of the Halawa central face have their heads pointed right in the direction of the central figure and those on the right have their heads pointed left, also facing the central figure, as is the position of the Sweyhat example.

3. WP.91.24 (fig. 2c). From Scene 1. Human motif (found at a forty-five degree angle, face up). The two red-painted figures positioned side-by-side on this fragment are depicted with upraised arms, in the same style as some of the Halawa figures. The head of the left figure has mostly flaked off and an adjoining fragment, which originally had the head of the right-hand figure, is either missing or not yet excavated; both heads were most likely also bird-like. The upper torsos appear to have been roughly triangular-shaped, with the apex of the triangle located in the waist area of the figures.

4. WP.91.5 (fig. 2d). From Scene 1. Human motif (found on its edge, facing east). This small fragment has a portion of a red-painted upper torso and black-painted lower torso of a human figure with the left arm upraised. The black paint used to decorate the lower torso may have indicated some particular form of garment; the two small protuberances on the top two sides of the “garment” may represent a drawstring or sash for securing the clothing. This particular fragment is of technical interest in that it shows a long perpendicular paint “drip-line” extending from the elbow of the upraised arm, which occurred during the original painting of the scene. Although not enough of the Sweyhat wall painting fragments have been excavated of either of the two scenes to begin a reconstruction of the motifs, both red and black drip-lines occur on a majority of the fragments and, therefore, are a vital clue to the original position of the individual fragments on the walls.

5. WP.92.23 (fig. 2e). From Scene 2 (found face down). Possible human motif with part of a border or frame design. The image on the right-hand side of this fragment is somewhat enigmatic, but may have represented the right-hand side of a bird-headed human figure although it appears to have two right arms, one of which seems to hold an unidentifiable object. The undulating black-painted bands on the left side of the fragment are similar to the border design which frames the two standing human figures depicted on the Munbaqa wall painting (see fig. 5, here; and Dunham, p. 136, for W. Pape's suggestion that this type of frame might be a representation of reedwork, or as Dunham suggests, it might depict "a decorated curtain drawn open with tassels hanging across the top").

6. WP.91.9 (fig. 3a). From Scene 1. Naturalistic motif (found face up). This is one of a number of fragments from Scene 1 that depicts either scrub or tree branches, which are painted red in the Sweyhat examples, the same as those depicted on the Halawa wall painting. These branches are held aloft in both hands of the stylized Halawa human figures. The fragment of black paint at the top center of this piece may represent part of a bird or animal similar to those shown in the branches at the top left-hand corner of the Halawa wall painting (fig. 4).

7. WP.91.25 (fig. 3b). From Scene 1. Border or frame motif (found at a thirty degree angle, face up, facing south). These two large adjoining fragments, ten by sixteen centimeters, may represent part of the wide circular-shaped band of decoration that originally enclosed a centrally-positioned human face similar to those faces on both the Halawa stela and wall painting. The "eye" fragment, WP.91.7, discussed above (fig. 2a), may be part of such a face painted as a central feature on the Sweyhat wall-painted Scene 1. The left, inner side, of these two pieces depict portions of two slightly wavy bands painted in black and red. The remaining bands on the border consist of a wide red band delineated on its outer circumference with a thinner black band; a six millimeter space is left in reserve and another red-painted band continues in a circular position, but the width of this band is unknown as both fragments are broken on their right edges.

8. WP.92.74a (fig. 3c). From Scene 1. Border or frame motif (found face up). This fragment may be similar to WP.91.25 discussed above, but there is an additional red-painted area on the inner circumference, which in the case of WP.91.25 may have flaked off as there is only a very small segment of plaster remaining on the inner circumference of that piece.

9. WP.92.74b (fig. 3d). From Scene 1. Border or frame motif (found face up). This piece was lifted in situ along with WP.92.74a discussed above and it initially seemed that it was part of the same motif. However, a closer inspection of the drawing reveals that the black wavy band is both wider and more spaced out than the similar band on WP.92.74a. Also, the red-painted band surrounding the black band is much more angular and more like a zig-zag pattern, while the similarly positioned band on WP.92.74a is more undulating.

10. WP.91.1 (fig. 3e). From Scene 1. Border or frame motif (found face down). This piece, along with other similar examples from Sweyhat, shows much more affinity to the Munbaqa wall painting than it does to the Halawa B wall painting. The design on this fairly large fragment is almost identical to the perpendicular borders (jambs) on the two sides of the Munbaqa frame enclosing the two central human figures. The position of the decorative motif on the Sweyhat fragment sug-

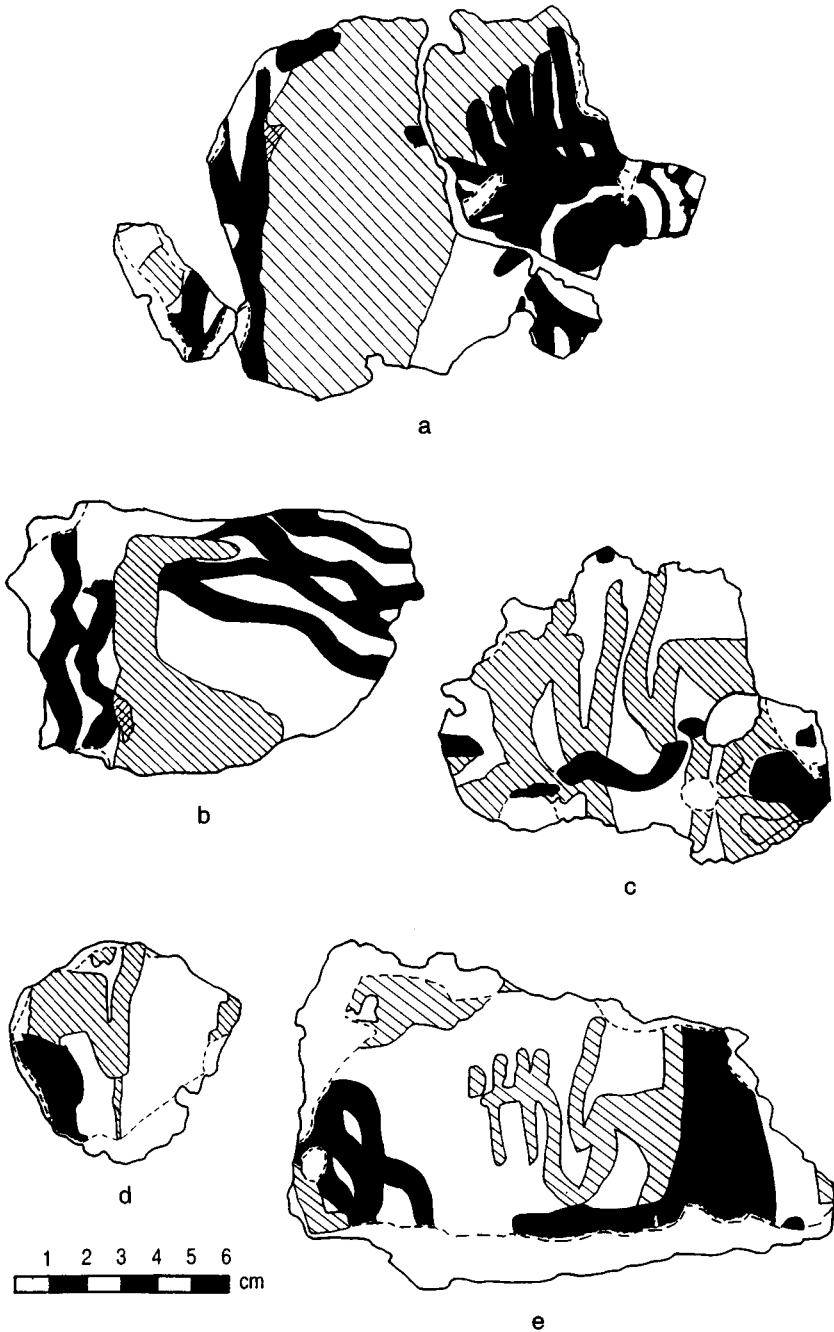


Figure 2. (a) WP.91.7, Scene 1: Human eye fragment; (b) WP.92.73, Scene 1: Human "bird-like" head fragment; (c) WP.91.24, Scene 1: Human torso fragment; (d) WP.91.5, Scene 1: Human torso fragment; (e) WP.92.23, Scene 2: Human and border fragment

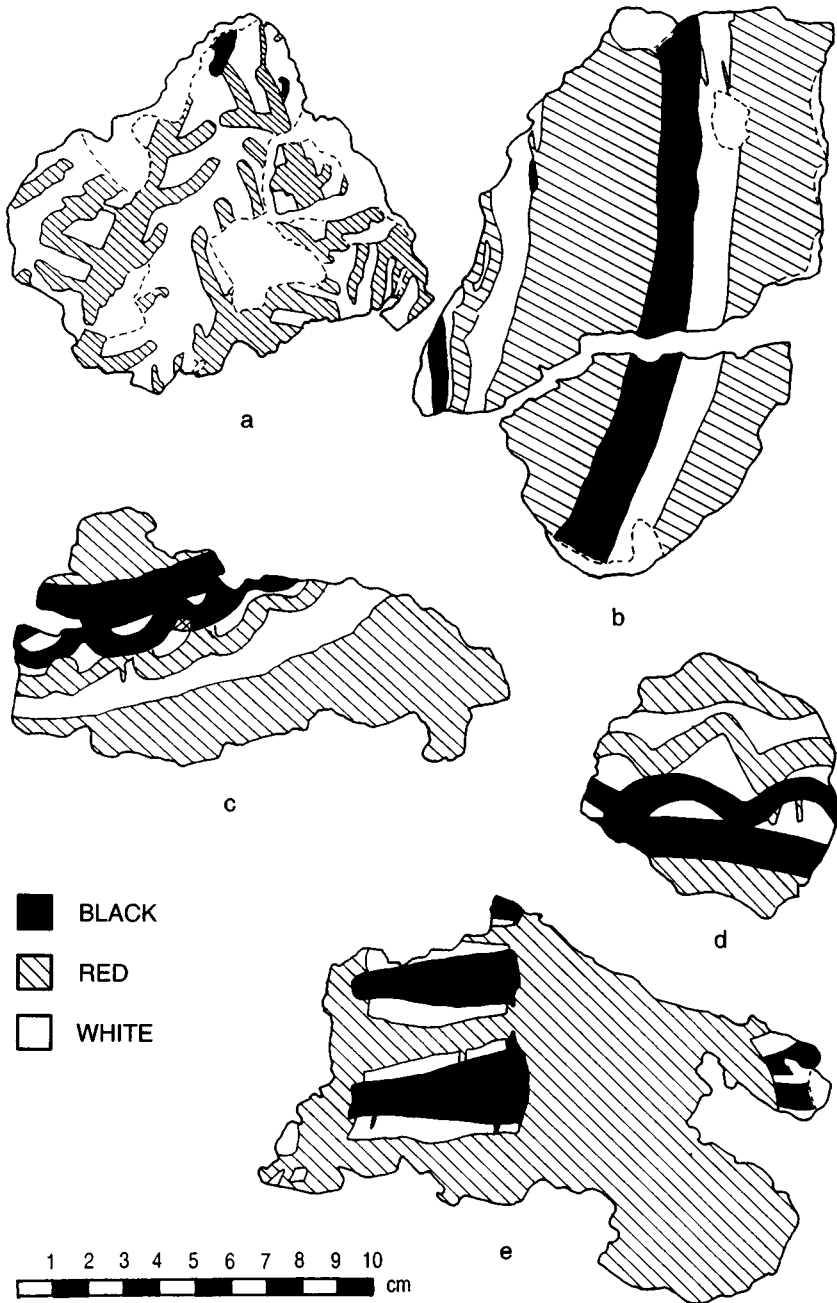


Figure 3. (a) WP.91.9, Scene 1: Naturalistic, scrub or tree branch, fragment; (b) WP.91.25, Scene 1: Border fragment; (c) WP.92.74a, Scene 1: Border fragment; (d) WP.92.74b, Scene 1: Border fragment; (e) WP.91.1, Scene 1: Border fragment

gests that it belonged to a similar type of jamb on the right-hand side of the original wall painting. Most of the background of the jamb is painted red with rough-shaped wedges alternately painted in black and red over a rectangular-shaped white background left in reserve. The two fragmentary black-painted bands on the far right side of this piece may be the remains of a loop-like pattern similar to that which encloses the whole frame of the Munbaqa wall painting.

Apart from the extreme rarity of wall paintings so far excavated in Near Eastern archaeological contexts, what is the importance of such paintings for our understanding of ancient history and the lives of the Early Bronze Age inhabitants? It is clear, even from the fragmentary scene depicted on a wall in room 313 at Halawa (fig. 4), that the centrally positioned large oval face is the key element in the painting, especially as the human figures are all shown facing this image with arms upraised and in some instances holding branches, possibly animals, and other unidentifiable objects in gestures of offering and adulation. The large stylized oval-shaped heads of the two human figures on the wall painting from room 3b at Munbaqa, as well as the similar head on the stone stela, indicate that all of these figures were special and were meant to be shown as "larger than life" beings. The archaeological contexts at Sweyhat, Halawa, and Munbaqa suggest that the wall paintings decorated walls in either temples or come from rooms closely associated with ritual practice. The depiction of a suckling calf on Scene 1 at Sweyhat (WP.92.38), a motif not known on any other wall paintings discussed here or found elsewhere in the Near East, further reinforces the evidence that a part of the subject matter of these wall paintings was to illustrate fertility in the eyes of the beholders and possibly to offer some form of obeisance to either political or religious beings.

The close similarity of the painted motifs, with the exception of the suckling calf, and the use of red and black paint on a white ground from Sweyhat, Halawa, and Munbaqa also suggest a single artist or a guild of artists versed in what was the acceptable figurative representations for public imagery for both political and



Figure 4. Tell Halawa B. Wall painting in Room 312. (SBA 38, Abb. 66)

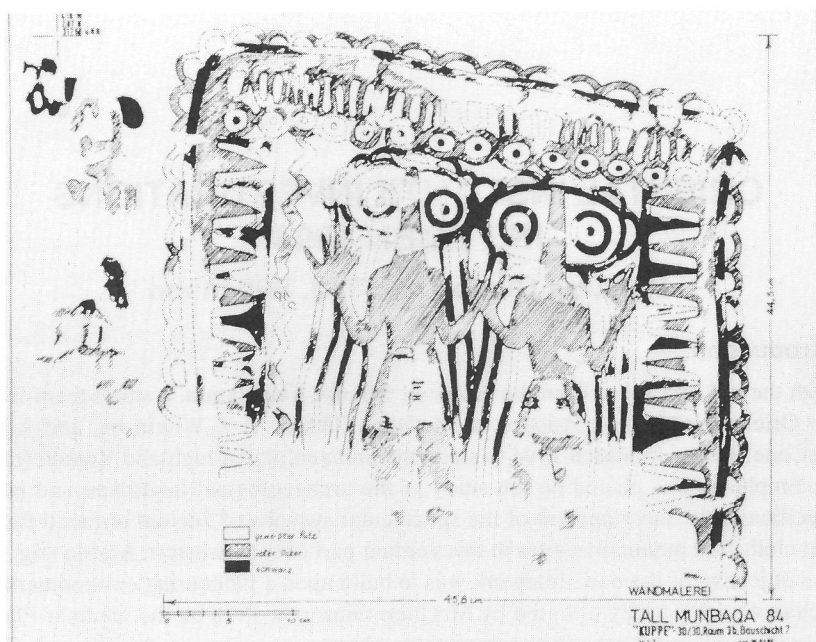


Figure 5. Tell Munbaga. Wall painting in Room 3b (after MDOG 118, Abb. 10)

religious dissemination to the populace. That the three sites discussed here are approximately twenty kilometers equidistant from each other implies that these settlements served as spheres of influence, both politically and in the use of their respective landscapes. Thus all three sites with wall paintings in this area of the upper Euphrates River valley were most likely key administrative centers in a larger political entity that still remains unclear, primarily due to the lack of excavated cuneiform source materials. The small portion of the wall-painted building so far excavated at Sweyhat has certainly thrown considerable new light on the importance of the cult during the middle of the third millennium B.C. Future work in Operation 5 will greatly clarify the full extent of both known wall paintings and perhaps others as well as providing a complete plan of the architecture and related finds from what is almost certainly a temple and palace/administrative complex.