

Excavations at Tell Khirbet Salih

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(Plates LXX, CVIII, 5 - CX)

Tell Khirbet Salih was a small mound in the Tigris valley, ca 0.5km east of Tell Fisna, a big tell partially destroyed by the river (see Plate I). The dimensions of Tell Khirbet Salih are modest, measuring ca 40m in N-S and ca 60m in E-W direction. The highest point of the mound only exceeded the surrounding plateau by approx. 4.50m (see Plate CVIII, 5).

The present name of the site was chosen in the course of a survey carried out by the State Organisation of Antiquities and Heritage in preparation for the archaeological rescue project in the Tigris valley, north of Eski Mosul. According to the information we received from our workers, who lived in the village Khirbet Salih on the Tigris, 1.8km further to the south (see Plate I), the site of our excavation had been nameless.

The place was selected for excavation despite the scarcity of surface finds, because its limited size and its proximity to Tell Fisna suggested a suburban villa-type settlement, or, possibly, a cemetery. The highest point was marked by evidently young structures of rubble and mortar masonry. It was used as our zero-point in a grid of 5 x 5m, oriented to the north. Two squares were partially excavated, one (C 4) in the steep slope of the northwestern ridge of the mound, close to its highest part, and the second (K 8) at the southeast edge, where the tell gently merges with the plain (cf. Fig. 1). The excavation at Tell Khirbet Salih lasted from October 3 to 30, 1984, and from October 12 to 24, 1985.

SQUARE C 4

(Plates CVIII, 6 - CIX, 1)

The surface soil contained only a few sherds, among them one from a moulded vessel. The layer below the surface soil consisted of light greyish earth with some stray stones (SU 1). Several graves appeared at a depth of 30 to 50cm below the surface; they were covered by medium-sized stones.

One of them (Burial 2) contained the skeleton of a child, ca 80cm in length, lying on its right side in an E-W

orientation and facing south. Close to the skull were three small round stones of different colour (red, white, and greenish; diameter 1-2cm), which seem to have served as a burial-gift. The bones were very fragile, and some parts of the skeleton were not preserved at all. The pit of another grave (Burial 3) was cut into the northern column of the western gate of the main building, which was unearthed later in the course of the excavation. The bottom of the grave had been filled with compact clay, which contained pieces of lime and dark ashes. Around the skull was a half-circle of small white stones. The skeleton was found in supine position, the head elevated a bit and slightly inclined to the right. The hands had been put together on the belly. The orientation was E-W, as well, with the head to the west. The length of the skeleton measured 1.10m. A third grave (Burial 5) was covered by a row of fairly regular flat stones, placed obliquely and closely above the dead. As in Burial 2, the skeleton was found in a lateral position, E-W oriented, with the head to the west and facing south.

Some more graves (Burials 6, 7, 8) were discovered and partially excavated. In all of them, the position of the dead was the same as in Burial 2 and 5, suggesting an Islamic cemetery.

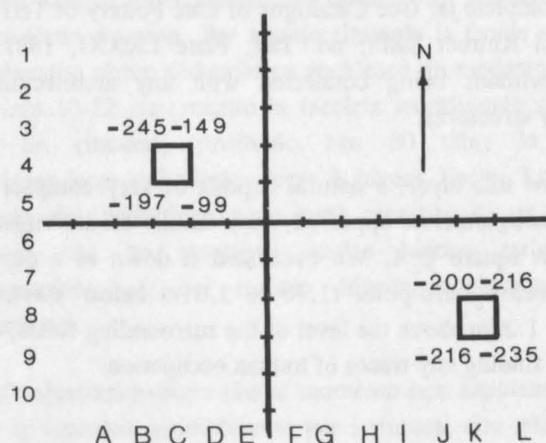


Fig. 1: Schematic plan with position of excavated squares.

In the eastern part of the square, a column made of stone and lime mortar with a diameter of 1.20m and a half column of the same diameter connected with a pillar appeared between and below the graves. It became evident that we had discovered the ruins of a big building of a later date.

After the tombs had been removed, the area between the column and the half-column was further excavated. It consisted of brownish earth with mud brick debris (SU 7). Below this layer, we found a compact layer of clay (SU 4 = 8), which had been cut by the architectural structures, whose foundation pit was filled with light, greenish earth. On the surface of the clay layer, a piece of glass was found. The clay itself contained fragments of pottery and glass. In the southwest corner of the square, there was a pit or well with a diameter of approx. 70cm. It had been cut into the compact layer of clay and contained light greyish earth (SU 5). In the northwestern part of the square, a sounding proved that the layer of clay covered a layer of white-yellowish compact soil, which showed no traces of human occupation.

SQUARE K 8

Square K 8 in the southeastern part of Tell Khirbet Salih was excavated in its southern part only (1.5 x 5m). The surface soil consisted of loose greyish earth with many small and medium-sized stones and traces of brownish earth, possibly mud brick debris (SU 2). In the northern part of the trench, there was a grave covered by a row of obliquely placed stones (Burial 4), similar to Burial 5 in square C 4. The orientation was SSW-NNE.

The next layer consisted of light grey earth with gypsum and lime particles (SU 3). In this layer, a ship-shaped lamp (see Tell Khirbet Salih Small Finds no. 1; Plate LXXXV, a) and a complete jar (see Catalogue of Late Pottery of Tell Jikan and Tell Khirbet Salih, no. 188; Plate LXXXI, 188) were found without being connected with any architectural or funerary structures.

Below this layer, a natural deposit of very compact light yellow conglomerate appeared, very similar to the virgin soil found in square C 4. We excavated it down to a depth of 3.36m below zero-point (1.20 to 1.01m below surface) or approx. 1.20m above the level of the surrounding fields, again without finding any traces of human occupation.

It was evident, then, that the stratigraphical situation of Tell Khirbet Salih was rather simple. The place had first been used for a monumental building presumably of medieval times, and had become a cemetery later.

THE ARCHITECTURAL REMAINS

The dimensions of the architectural structures and the lack of time and labor force discouraged any attempt to excavate them according to the usual scientific methods. Since the site was expected to be submerged by the rising waters already during the following winter, we were prepared to stop the excavation. In this situation the State Organization of Antiquities and Heritage offered to supply heavy machinery in order to trace at least the basic layout of the architectural structures to which the column and half-column found in square C 4 belonged. From October 14 to 23 the building described and discussed in the following chapter by Professor Scerrato was uncovered, except for the interior of the central building. Though the methods applied inevitably destroyed much of the evidence, the results seem to justify the procedure. When in 1985, it turned out to be still possible - though difficult - to approach Tell Khirbet Salih, the central room was excavated down to its floor. The upper part of the filling consisted of stones and mortar which apparently were the remains of a domed roof. Further below, thick layers of ash from probably two different fire-places as well as a fragment of a mill-stone hinted at several phases of secondary use. This corresponds to an observation made in 1984: traces of two floors were visible in the west of the central building, the upper one at a level of -0.93m, the lower one at -1.56m. On the upper level a nearly complete big mis-fired jar was found (Pottery Cat. 244; Plate CXI, 1), which suggests that there was a pottery kiln at the site between the dilapidation of the building and the use of the site as a burial place.

Within the central room two compact floors of small pebble stones and mortar were found, which, however, stopped short of the walls of the building. To judge from their level (ca 20cm above the doorsills), they belong to a younger phase of use. A testpit of 1.40 x 1.60m cut through the floors in the center of the room showed that the building had been erected on sterile soil.