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Hartmut Kühne

Tall Seh Hamad (Fig.1) is situated on the east bank of the Lower Habur about 90 km northwest of Der az Zor.

The site was known to the archaeologist ever since Hormuzd Rassam visited it in 1879; he found most probably that fragment of a stela of Adad-Nirari III, which was published only recently by A.R. Millard and H. Tadmor in Iraq 35, 1973. Because of its «out of the way» situation, as Rassam called it, the site was actually visited only by a few scholars ever since, two of them being Max Freiherr von Oppenheim in 1911 and Sir Max Mallowan in 1934, but no detailed description was ever published. Père A. Poidebard, on the occasion of tracking the roman limes in the Habur area, published a most valuable air-photograph in 1934, but he did not actually visit the site. Therefore, when the expedition of the «Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients» first surveyed the site in 1975, nearly one hundred years after Rassam’s first step on it, almost nothing was known about it.

The assyrian city of Dur-Katlimmu on the other hand was known to the assyriologist ever since the first large scaled publications of the assyrian annals at the beginning of this century. The oldest assyrian document mentioning Dur-Katlimmu was the so called Broken Obelisk which is ascribed to the assyrian king Assur-bel-kala of the 11th century B.C. He is recording a campagne against the aramaens and against the city of Dur-Katlimmu which might have been under aramaen supremacy then. Later on, in the 9th century B.C., the assyrian kings Adad-Nirari II, Tukulti-Ninurta II and Assurnasirpal II marched along the Lower Habur collecting tribut from the cities there, including Dur-Katlimmu.

When the TAVO-expedition visited the site a second time in 1977 we were shown some «decorated sherds» as the farmers called them, and we recognized at once that they consisted of cuneiform tablets. We were able to recover about 30 pieces, which-together with many more tablets-had been washed out by an irrigation canal from below the western slope of the citadel mound of Tall Seh Hamad. The first study of the tablets by W. Röllig revealed that Tell Seh Hamad was to be identified with great probability with Dur-Katlimmu. The tablets were datable to the 13th century B.C., to the middle assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I, on the grounds of so called eponyms; they now provided the oldest mentioning of that assyria city.

Half a year later we were granted the excavation license by the Syrian Antiquities Department. The joint expedition to Tell Seh Hamad is sponsored by the universities of West Berlin and Tübingen and by the Museum of Der az Zor. It is financed by the German Research Foundation and to a less extent by both universities. At this occasion we would like to express our deep gratitude to all persons and organizations involved, especially to the general director of the Syrien Antiquities Department, Dr. Afif Bahnassi.
We took up excavation in the spring of 1978. Ever since we have conducted 4 more campa-

A topographical survey of the ancient settle-
ment ground of Tall Seh Hamad was con-
ducted in 1980 and 1981. It showed clearly a
division into five parts: the Tell itself, or, as
we call it, the citadel mound, in the south-
west and at the river bank, the Lower City I
to the east of it, clearly marked by its square
appearance, and the vast Lower City II to the
northeast of the citadel bound by a rampart
which hides the ancient city wall; outside the
city wall two suburban areas can be distin-
guished; one in the north, called Suburban
Area I, and a second to the east of Lower City
II, called Suburban Area II. The overall
ancient settlement ground covers more than
110 hectars.

We started excavation in 1978 with a step
trench down the western slope of the citadel
mound (Fig. 2) to receive a stratigraphical
sequence. We have distinguished 28 levels so
far, counting from the top down to the middle
assyrian level (28) in which the cuneiform
tables were found.

Only level 1 seems to be islamic dating from
about the 8th to the 12th century A.D. The
uppermost strata are largely destroyed by the
pits of recent graves which may date back to
the last three centuries.

Levels 2 to 16 can be dated to the
parthian/roman period which should be dated
between about 200 B.C. to 400 A.D. All
archaeological evidence points to an impor-
tant settlement during this time of which the
name unfortunately is unknown. The levels on
the citadel mound contain heavy construc-
tions, the Lower City I was covered with a
castellum and the area south of it with living
quarters while the Lower City II seems to have
been covered only by sporadic houses. The
Suburban Area I was used as a necropolis,
of which we have excavated one shaft grave.

On the citadel mound the neoassyrain period
is present with levels 17 to 27. Only level 27
has been excavated to some extent. Its remains
are founded directly on the ruins of level 28,
that is the middle assyrian level with the
tables; they consist of a large building in
combination with a cistern.

A more comprehensive impression of
neoassyrian Dur-Katlimmu can be gained
from the second main excavation area in the
northeastern corner of Lower City II.

The so far unearthed building F (Fig.3)
consists of a large central room around which
smaller rooms are grouped. The walls of the
building are mostly 1,60 meter wide and have
been plastered on the inside. Two main using
stages can be distinguished, both to be dated
between the 8th century B.C. and the end of
the assyrian empire around 600 B.C. The
arrangement of the rooms reminds to the
groundplan of assyrian palaces. The main
central room is about 20 meters long and
nearly 6 meters wide. It certainly served some
official purposes while in the rooms next to it
signs of ordinary usage have been found. For
instance in room B we discovered a hearth,
and in room D was found an iron pick de-posed
in a case of mud brick on the original
floor (Fig.4).

The main entrance to the building has not
yet been discovered. So far the south-eastern
corner of the building was unearthed, showing
that a corridor or a defensive passage existed
between the building and the city wall (Fig.5).

It seems that the building extended to the
north taking up the complete space in the nor-
theastern corner of the city wall.

The function of the whole building seems to
be one similar to a fortress, comparable to the
Fort Salmanassar in Nimrud, an assyrian «ekal
masartis»; if this is correct, one would have to
expect storage rooms or rooms of special device
alongside with official rooms, as they have
been unearthed in our building. The compara-
tion with Fort Salmanassar of Nimrud cor-
responds to other aspects as well; there is a
similar embankment of the inside bordering
wall, and the building has a similar position in
a corner of the city wall of the Lower City.

By pottery and other small finds, like for instance the pick, a similar date is indicated.

The city wall (Fig. 5) itself was unearthed for some length, about 35 meters. It is three meters wide and buttressed with towers one of which was excavated.

The middle Assyrian period is represented only by the building P (Lev. 28) on the western slope of the citadel mound (Fig. 2). The so far excavated ground plan reveals from west to east three rows of rooms (Fig. 6). The most western one is very badly preserved because of erosion and the effect of an irrigation canal. The second row from the west is remarkably well preserved, its mud brick walls standing up to a height of nearly five meters. The third row form the west is barely touched. While the western two rows are connected among each other through doors, there is no passage so far between the second and the eastern most row of rooms; instead the division is manifested by a double wall which undoubtedly belongs to the same building. With the two western rows of rooms we have unearthed a large building extending thirty meters now in north-south direction. Because of the double wall it seems possible that the whole building was terraced to the east; it is on the other hand quite certain that the western part of the whole building is completely eroded (Fig. 7).

The building consisted of at least two stories, of which we have excavated the basement so far. Traces of the ceiling construction have been found frequently; summarizing all indications it seems quite certain that the rooms of the basement had been vaulted. When the building was finally destroyed the ceiling broke down and with it the inventory of the rooms above it. Thus it is certain that the archive originally was stored in the upper story and fell into the basement room A at the final destruction together with other inventory.

The neighboring rooms C and D to the south are equally well preserved. Room D was accessible from the west by another arched doorway completely preserved (Fig. 8).

The floor consisted again of a mud brick pavement which contained three parallel running canals continuing through the threshold and room G.

The archive consists of 625 fragments and complete cuneiform tablets. It leaves no doubt that Tell Seh Hamad is to be identified with Dur-Katlimmu. The texts are dated to the reign of the two middle Assyrian kings, Salmanassar I and Tukulti-Ninurta I, that is between 1275 and 1207 B.C. The archive is homogeneous and according to the eponyms it covers a time range of at least 45 years. This corresponds well with the archaeological observations according to which the building, in which the tablets have been found, must have existed for at least two generations. The texts mention a governor who has resided in a palace, and it is perfectly possible that the building under excavation is to be identified with that palace. The greater part of the archive consists of economic and administrative texts but there is a number of letters including some royal ones to the governor. In addition the only so far known middle Assyrian itinerary has been found among the texts.

Although not excavated, older periods than the Assyrian levels are existing and can be detected by pottery and small finds. Mitannian seal impressions for example are found quite frequently on the middle Assyrian tablets; the Middle Bronze Age is present by pottery; belonging to the Early Bronze Age are sherds of metallic ware and incised ninnivite-5 ware. The Late Chalcolithic is again present by pottery.

Summarizing this evidence we can state that the area of Tall Seh Hamad was settled as early as the late 4th Mill. B.C. and continued to be settled with minor gaps until the 12th century A.D. Of the various villages and cities existing during this long span of time only the name of the Assyrian city is known, namely Dur-Katlimmu.
The Assyrian city of Dur-Katlimmu was a stronghold for more than 700 years. During the middle Assyrian empire it served as a frontier town, guarding the Lower Habur and the Middle Euphrates. The aramaean supremacy in the 11th and 10th century B.C. was apparently not a very incisive interlude. In the neo-Assyrian period it became a military camp or base proper, serving as an arsenal for military actions and being connected with the central part of the empire via a royal road, a "harran sarri". It fell with the Assyrian empire at the end of the 7th century B.C.

Literature:

Survey:


Excavation:


Fig. 1: Tall Seh Hamad, as seen from the Southeast, in the foreground Lower City I.

Photograph by: Norbert Grundmann.

Fig. 2: Tall Seh Hamad, west slope of the Citadel Mound, 1983; in the foreground building P.

Photograph by: Norbert Grundmann.
Fig. 3: Tall Seh Hamad, Lower City II, building F and city wall, 1983, schematic plan.

drawn by: Jörg Fanelli.
Fig. 4: Tall Seh Hamad, Lower City II, building F, rooms D, C, B, and A.

Photograph by: Norbert Grundmann.

Fig. 5: Tall Seh Hamad, Lower City II, building F, room A and southeast corner of the building, and city wall.

Photograph by: Norbert Grundmann
Fig. 6: Tall Seh Hamad, Citadel Mound, building P, schematic plan, 1983, drawn by: Achim Krekeler.
Fig. 7: Tall Seh Hamad, Citadel Mound, building P, sections through rooms, 1983; drawn by: Achim Krockeler.
Fig. 8: Tall Seh Hamad, Citadel Mound, building p, arched entrance to room D.

Photograph: Norbert Grundmann.