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Master and apprentice? a short note on wall construction in Ancient Syria

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Ethno-archaeology opens our eyes to possible explanations of questions raised by our excavations. The present contribution shows how architectural details of the 18th century BC may be interpreted, by comparison with present-day techniques.

One of the most important supports for an archaeologist's interpretation of the world he or she excavates is the architecture. The very human inclination to create shelter leads us to think that we understand, almost *a priori*, what was meant by this or that construction. It is, however, not often the case nowadays that archaeologists have architectural training, and although technical details are in most publications treated as just that, details, they can provide deeper insight into the world behind them. A case in point is the architect Hansjörg Schmid's comprehensive overview of early Near Eastern architecture, where, for instance, pilasters in Tell es Sawwan are analyzed not as necessary supports but as status symbols (Schmid 2009, 62f.). Debatable or not, such insights pave the way for new interpretations of the architecture we dig up. Another well-known drawback of the archaeologist's perception of ancient architecture is the fact that only a small percentage of a building is found, often only consisting in (part of) the plan, and wall stubs. Matters of height, proportion and decoration often remain unknown, and yet they are necessary elements in one's experience and appreciation of buildings. Now how we perceive buildings in general is a hotly debated matter with philosophical aspects (cf. Hill 1999, esp. Ch. 3), but the sensory experiences of touch, sight and even smell are very important, and without those impressions a building is for us not a building but an un-fleshed and incomplete skeleton.

Not only are technical details interesting for our understanding of the ancient builders' artisanship, but through them we may attempt to reconstruct at least the formal characteristics of the missing parts of the constructions we excavate. For such reconstructions we can use various means, among which of course ancient textual material.¹ In these technical matters, ethno-archaeology may also help us. Ethno-archaeology is a fascinating approach to the solution of problems of interpretation in one's excavation.

Comparisons with present-day situations or phenomena cannot be used as one-to-one solutions, as everyone knows, but an open eye for today's traditional ways of life in many regions does give an opportunity to investigate whether a model based on such phenomena might fit the ancient data.

In the first volume on the excavations of Tell Hammam al-Turkman, a large site on the left bank of the Balikh river in Northern Syria (figs 1, 2), some of the details of construction techniques, wall plaster and timber used in the Late Bronze Age palace at the site were discussed (Van Haafte 1988). There, the bonding methods of the mud bricks in the walls were shown to be variable. Our present theme deals with such construction details. The Late Bronze Age palatial building, the western half of which might be reconstructed as a so-called *bit hilani*,² replaced a Middle Bronze Age complex of rooms provisionally described as "Administrative Complex" by virtue of some finds of cuneiform texts as well as a "scribal quarter" (Meijer 2004).

This Middle Bronze Age complex proved to have had a c. 400 year long history of rebuilding and refurbishment without major upheavals, from c. 2000 – 1600 bc. This circumstance, unfortunate for the archaeologist who much prefers conflagrations and other sudden disturbances through which finds can be found *in situ*, was responsible for a dearth of datable objects in the remains: at every occasion in antiquity the rooms had been emptied out in order to be refurbished. The very end of the building came softly, witnessed by a short period of desertion. (Meijer 1988, 88; in preparation).

As happens so often in the Near East nowadays, also in antiquity building processes did not always proceed entirely according to plan. Half-finished constructions often remain standing for years, only parts of them are lived in, or they are sometimes not even used because the money for finishing them ran out or some such reason. An interesting example of such an unfinished construction was found in the Tell Hammam Middle Bronze age Administrative Complex.

In squares K23-22 (fig. 3) an initially enigmatic mud brick construction came to light. It consisted of a set of walls enclosing a square chamber measuring roughly 4 × 4 m on

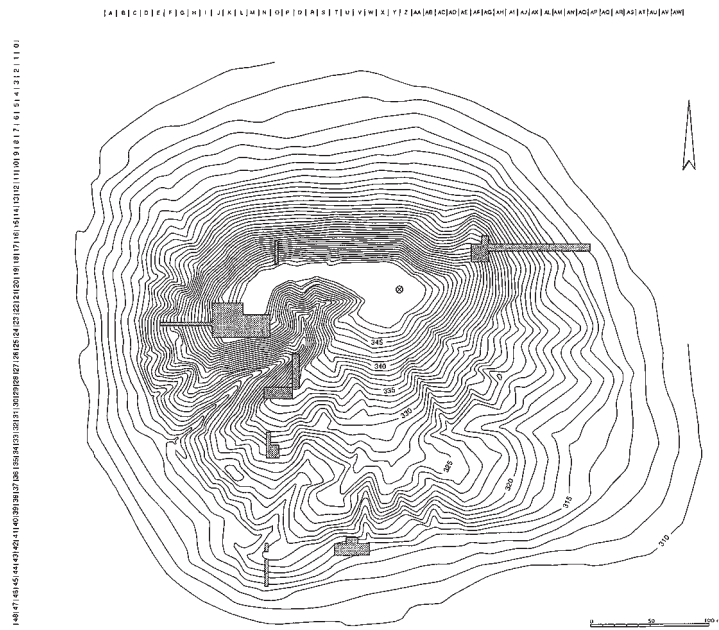


Figure 1 Tell Hammam al-Turkman with the main excavation areas indicated.



Figure 2 Tell Hammam from the air (ca. 1964).

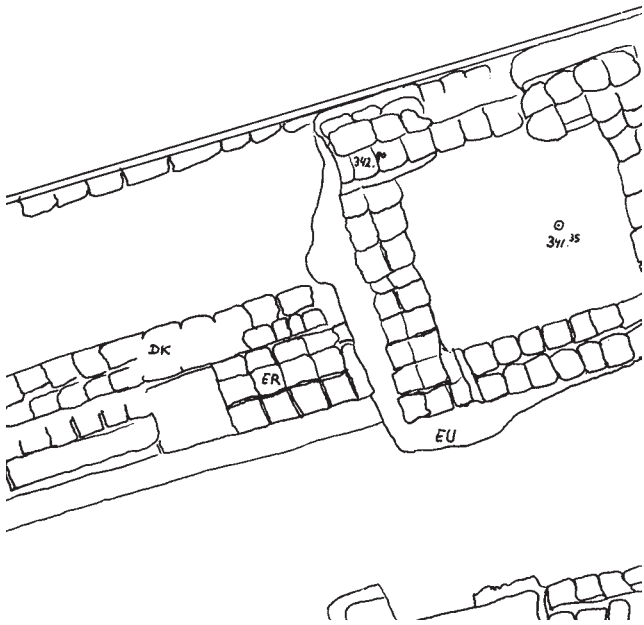


Figure 3 The cut-in chamber. The outline of foundation pit EU clearly cuts wall DK-ER.

the inside, and c. 5 × 5 m on the outside (fig. 4). The well-made bricks measured 35 × 35 cm, usual for the period, and were laid in a very regular fashion with considerable amounts of mud mortar in between. The bonding where the

walls met was carefully executed, and the general impression is of a construction well planned. One striking feature was the fact that the chamber had been built into a pit excavated into earlier Middle Bronze Age (I) remains during one of the phases of rebuilding: the sides of the foundation pit were quite clear. The walls as extant showed no doorway (the minimum height of the wall remains was 65 cm), which indicates that the room had been planned to be entered from above. A thin coat of normal mud plaster adhered to part of the inside of the walls and the floor, but had clearly not yet been applied to all the necessary surfaces. In short, the construction was never finished; it was subsequently filled in and overbuilt with the next phase of the Administrative Complex.

The function of the planned but not fully finished room is not quite clear. It may have been planned as a cellar (indeed to be entered from above). The flimsy plaster precludes a water-related function. The room was, of course, empty. However, given the relative monumentality of the complex and the generally solid execution of its walls and doorways, perhaps this built-in room may have been planned as a burial chamber for an important person involved in the administration of this site, which may be seen as a regional centre of some importance (cf. Meijer 2000; in press). Such burial chambers occur in more archaeological sites, such as Alalakh and Qatna etc., both in the Middle and in the Late Bronze Age (Woolley 1955, 95ff; Pfälzner 2011 *passim*). On the



Figure 4 The cut-in chamber, facing NW. The foundation pit is clearly visible along the west and south walls.

other hand no stairway had yet been installed, and a simple wooden ladder may of course have been planned as means of access, thus perhaps invalidating the option of the solemn character of a burial chamber. No clear context of the planned surface from which the room was to be entered has been found, since recent fox holes had greatly disturbed the area. The room's planning and subsequent non-use make one all the more curious about the historical circumstances under which the construction took place. The next locally recognizable building phase consisted in a northern exterior wall with a glacis, which protected the Middle Bronze Age complex in its last two sub phases (Meijer in preparation).

The most eye-catching feature that emphasized the unfinished character of this built-in room was the fact that great care had been taken in constructing the room corners: the bonding of the bricks was excellent, their very consistency also very good – but the wall space between the corners showed a slightly lesser degree of proficiency. Moreover, those spaces (which, as mentioned, had a minimum height of 65 cm) had never reached the height of the corner parts which stood up to c. 1.70 m. All this suggests that an experienced craftsman had been involved in the setting-up of the room, concentrating on the important corner work to ensure greatest stability, leaving the much easier 'filling up' of the wall body with bricks for later or to his apprentice.

This suggestion finds excellent support in present-day traditional mud brick architecture in Syria. During our

excavations we often witnessed the building of modern mud brick houses in the neighboring villages, and sometimes here also the builder constructed the corners of the walls first, the rest being filled in later by younger boys; for resulting unevenly fitting patches people simply used half bricks or larger amounts of mortar to fill spaces. A very good illustration of this can be seen in fig. 5.

This illustration of the longevity of building traditions, mundane as it may be, suggests a further insight into the Middle Bronze Age situation in the complex. If we suppose that the Administrative Complex was indeed the seat of a regional ruler or administrator, his relatively lofty social position led him to employ a builder with the latter's apprentice. This emphasizes the tiered society that we know from cuneiform texts, but in those texts workmen and artisans always remain underexposed, except in terms of their rations or salaries.³ In our instance, the physical evidence makes them slightly more tangible.

Notes

1 For more on the interpretation of architectural remains, cf. Meijer 2006 and 2008.

2 For a short discussion of the *bit hilani*, see Meijer 1989.

3 The tiered character of the society in Tell Hammam was also emphasized by the find of a sealed bulla together with the responsible seal, cf. Meijer 1995. Further sealings emphasizing the existence of a hierarchy of civil-servant control will be published in Meijer (in prep.).



Figure 5 A modern builder concentrates on the corners of the walls.

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