

## 15. Tell Sabi Abyad (Raqqa)

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Tell Sabi Abyad lies about 80km north of Raqqa, in the gently undulating plain of the river Balikh, a perennial of the Euphrates. The site is about 5ha in extent and 10m high. Large-scale excavations by a team from Leiden University (The Netherlands) between 1986 and 2010 have revealed a very substantial and unique sequence of Neolithic settlement, dated from about 7100 to 5500 BC. Altogether, 145 radiocarbon dates were analyzed, establishing the most precise and best-dated chronology for a Late Neolithic site in the Near East thus far. In addition, Tell Sabi Abyad gave evidence of extensive occupation in the Late Bronze Age (or Middle Assyrian period), ca. 1230-1180 BC (Fig. 1).

The earliest levels are characterized by rectangular, multi-roomed houses, their interiors often white-plastered, made of large clay slabs up to 1.2m long; the doors were low and narrow. Hearths, fire pits and white-plastered storage basins were sometimes inside the buildings but more often in the yards around them. Remarkable are the

artificial terraces or platforms measuring approximately 7 by 6m and 1m high. Most of these platforms served as a foundation for architecture (Fig. 2).

Tell Sabi Abyad has yielded some of the earliest pottery of Syria, dated at ca. 7000-6900 BC, consisting of mineral-tempered, sometimes painted wares. Around 6700 BC pottery was turned in a plant-tempered mass product, with simple hole-mouth shapes lacking virtually any decoration (Fig. 3).

Important change in the community at Tell Sabi Abyad took place around 6200 BC, involving new types of architecture, including extensive storehouses and small circular buildings (the so-called tholoi); the further development of pottery in many complex and often decorated shapes and wares; the introduction of small transverse arrowheads and short-tanged points; the abundant occurrence of clay spindle whorls, suggestive of changes in textile manufacture; and the introduction



FIG. 1 TELL SABI ABYAD: THE EXCAVATIONS IN THE PREHISTORIC AREAS IN FULL SWING.



FIG. 2 TELL SABI ABYAD: SYMMETRICAL, TRIPARTITE STRUCTURE BUILT ON A PLATFORM, CA. 6900 BC.

of seals and sealings as indicators of property and the organization of controlled storage. The best information comes from the ‘Burnt Village’, destroyed by a violent fire in about 6000 BC. Rich inventories were recovered from the burnt buildings, including pottery, stone vessels, flint and obsidian implements, ground-stone tools, figurines, personal ornaments, and hundreds of clay sealings with stamp-seal impressions.

The heart of the Burnt Village consisted of a series of regular rectangular structures, interpreted as granaries and storehouses. They were usually divided into three wings, each of which consisted of fifteen or more very small cubicles, each only between 3 and 5m<sup>2</sup>. There is evidence that various kinds of activities were carried out on the roofs, including rituals associated with fire and death. The storehouses were surrounded by white-plastered circular structures up to 4m in diameter. Most tholoi were used briefly and then replaced. In the early 6th millennium (or Early Halaf period), a single rectangular building of monumental appearance, about 18 by 10m, stood prominently on the summit of the mound, with a large stone-walled terrace next to it and tholoi low on the slope. It had a stepped entrance and white-plastered facade with niches and benches on stone foundations, and possibly an upper storey. The building with its 20 small rooms probably served as the community’s communal granary or storehouse.

Exceptional find were the hundreds of Neolithic burials of men, women and children, radiocarbon-dated to



FIG. 3 TELL SABI ABYAD: PREHISTORIC MUD-BRICK ARCHITECTURE, CA. 6400 BC.



FIG. 4 TELL SABI ABYAD: LATE NEOLITHIC POTTERY, CA. 6700 BC.



FIG. 5 TELL SABI ABYAD: AN EARLY HALAF BURIAL OF A YOUNG WOMAN WITH GRAVE GIFTS, CA. 5800 BC.

6400-5800 BC. Close examination of the stratigraphic context of each individual grave and the corresponding radiocarbon data has shown that there were at least seven cemeteries at the site, constructed one after the other over the centuries. There was a bewildering complexity in the burials found in the various cemeteries. Usually the deceased were interred in a crouched position on their side in unlined pits about 1m deep. Single, primary burials were most common in the cemeteries (Fig. 4). However, multiple and/or secondary burials also

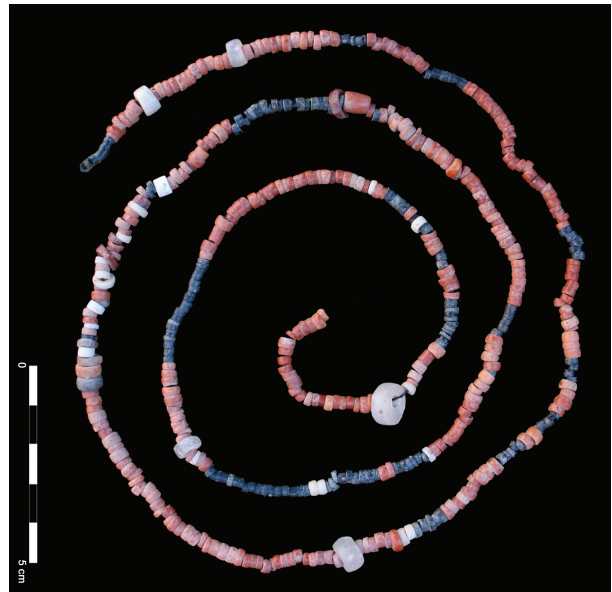


FIG. 6 TELL SABI ABYAD: A COLOURFUL PREHISTORIC NECKLACE FROM A BURIAL, CA. 6100 BC.

occurred, as did primary burials in different positions. Pathologies occurred in many different forms, from dental caries to anemia, growth disturbances, and possibly epidemic diseases. Almost half of the deceased were accompanied by grave goods, including pottery and personal ornaments (Fig. 5).

Around 5500 BC the prehistoric settlement at Tell Sabi Abyad seems to have come to an end. The reasons for this apparent decline are not yet clear, however the site was reused thousands of years later in the Late Bronze Age, when an Assyrian fortified administrative centre or *dunnu* was installed atop the Neolithic layers.

The *dunnu*, dated to ca. 1230-1180 BC, covers roughly 1ha in total and has in its centre a walled stronghold (60 by 60m), surrounded by an impressive dry moat. In the heart of the installation was a massive square tower (20 by 23m) adjacent to what seems to have been a palace, a tripartite edifice with a central reception room flanked on its long sides by smaller chambers including baths and toilets. Around the tower and palace there were administrative units, houses, storage buildings, pottery kilns and workshops of all kinds, including those of a potter, brewer, and baker. The settlement yielded a remarkable array of in-situ artefacts including pottery, grinding tools, bone implements, weapons, jewellery, seals and sealings, and over 400 cuneiform tablets (Fig. 6).

The cuneiform texts, evincing a not infrequent mixture of state and private interests, prove that Tell Sabi Abyad was the seat of the regional Assyrian administration, as well as a garrison station, custom post and rural estate. Moreover, they show that from its foundation early in the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I the *dunnu* was maintained by a number of high-ranking officials affiliated with



FIG. 7 TELL SABI ABYAD: A CUNEIFORM TABLET FROM THE ASSYRIAN FORTRESS, CA. 1,190 BC.

THE TEXT REFERS TO A LONG LIST OF MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN, PROBABLY PRISONERS OF WAR, WHO ARE ENTITLED TO FOOD RATIONS.



FIG. 8 TELL SABI ABYAD: AN INTRICATELY PAINTED BOWL FROM THE GRAVE OF A YOUNG WOMAN, CA. 5,800 BC.

the Assyrian royal house and each bearing the titles of ‘grand vizier’ and ‘king of Ḫanigalbat’: Aššur-iddin, Šulmānu-mušaḫši and, finally, Ilī-padā. The death of Ilī-padā around 1180 BC seems to have ushered in important changes in the layout and organization of the fortress in the first place, followed by its devastation by a violent conflagration. Shortly afterwards there were attempts to partially renovate and reconstruct the rural estate, and the occurrence of cuneiform texts reveals the continuing presence of both Assyrian functionaries and a centralized system of administration and control until the end of the 12th century BC, albeit at a much lower level and on a much smaller scale than before.

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