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Reading rubbish : using object assemblages to reconstruct activities, modes of deposition and abandonment at the Late Bronze Age Dunnu of Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria
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CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

On the basis of the find material from the Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu*, this study has systematically demonstrated the function and use of all spaces in the settlement. The study has revealed that within the walls, most activities in the past were related to domestic use, food processing and administration. Especially the importance of domestic use of the settlement is in stark contrast with the previously assumed imperial role of the estate. To investigate these issues, for this study a systematic approach for the identification of modes of deposition was developed. Importantly, this approach has demonstrated that the contexts in which cuneiform tablets were found, are far from straightforward. In consequence, the functional and temporal relation between texts and other archaeological remains are compellingly problematized.

In this chapter the results of this study are discussed in line with the research questions which were posed in chapter 1. The first main question was ‘What was the function and use of the *dunnu*?’ In order to answer this, three sub-questions are discussed: ‘What activities were carried out where in the *dunnu*?’, ‘What are the diachronic changes of these activities?’ and ‘How do these activities reflect the position and function of the *dunnu* in the local society and in the Assyrian Empire?’.

Answering these questions was achieved by an examination of the archaeological evidence from the site. To ascertain to what degree this was possible the second main question was posed: ‘How representative is the archaeological evidence for reconstructing activities in the past?’. This issue was tackled by answering two additional sub-questions. These were: ‘How do the objects from the Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu* relate to ancient activities?’ and ‘How does the information from the archaeological evidence differ from the textual sources?’.

Both themes, the function and use of the *dunnu* and the representativeness of the archaeological record, were successfully addressed by this study. The representativeness of the archaeological record was investigated by a reconstruction of the depositional processes of objects which were found at the site. To this end a comprehensive methodology was devised and consistently applied to the deposits of Tell Sabi Abyad. The results from this study were compared to the literary evidence. This in turn has resulted in a critical overview of the probable function and use of the *dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad.

A comparison with six other settlements (Giricano (*Dunnu sa-Uzibi*), Qabr Abu-al ‘Atiq, Tell Fekheriye, Tell Chuera (*Harbe*), Tell Umm ‘Aqrebe and Tell Schech Hamad (*Dur Katlimmu*)) has illustrated that the *dunnu* was a multi-purpose settlement, used as a road station for the military and traders, and to govern the surrounding agricultural lands. Work in and around the *dunnu* was administrated in detail by the presence of local representatives of the empire who resided in the *dunnu*. On several occasions the *dunnu* was used by large groups of visiting officials for political meetings and feasts. Although during these events the *dunnu* was

transformed into a political centre, these events were of short duration and did not influence the long term use of the settlement. The enduring function and use of the *dunnu* was that of a domestic centre and for agricultural production and food processing. Its imperial role must therefore be considered not only in terms of military and political significance, but also for its central place in the local society.

5.1 THE REPRESENTATIVENESS OF OBJECTS

Many processes have had an effect on the representativeness of the archaeological record from Tell Sabi Abyad. These processes can be divided into three stages in the past. Firstly, those which occurred before the deposition of artefacts, such as cleaning, reuse and recycling are of major influence. Secondly, the manner in which objects were deposited (are they discarded as refuse or are they part of a catastrophic collapse for instance?) has clear implications for the degree to which they are representative of activities at their location of discovery. Lastly, processes which occur after deposition such as decay and erosion but also the excavation techniques at the site have an effect on the interpretation of archaeological remains. The pre- and post-depositional processes which occurred at Tell Sabi Abyad were similar throughout the site. The processes behind the actual deposition of objects are however different from deposit to deposit. In this study therefore a methodology was developed to identify the influence of these processes on the archaeological deposits from Tell Sabi Abyad.

The methodology comprised of a characterisation of typical deposits which can be recognized in archaeology (based on Schiffer 1987). Nine typical deposit types were recognized: primary-, secondary-, provisional- and *de facto* refuse, ritual caches and banking caches, human burials, catastrophe deposits and loss refuse. These deposit types were defined on the basis of eight characteristics: their context, object variety, structuring, size, use-life, damage, replacement cost and relation to space (see table 2.1). A secondary refuse deposit for instance can be characterized as containing mainly damaged or fragmented objects. Subsequently, archaeological deposits from Tell Sabi Abyad were compared to these 'typical deposits'. This allowed for a systematic interpretation of the depositional history of the objects from the *dunnu*. In turn, the interpretation of the depositional history revealed to what degree the deposit could be used for the reconstruction of activities in the area it was discovered in.

Most deposits which were analysed for this research were secondary refuse deposits. These often consisted of damaged or fragmented tools such as pieces of grinding stones. Because these objects were simply discarded, their representativeness for identifying activities in the past is often limited. In some cases however, secondary refuse deposits were discovered which displayed a remarkably homogeneous object assemblage. In particular several tablet-rich deposits which were interpreted as secondary refuse deposits, consisted of only administrative objects. These were therefore interpreted to have been deposited in proximity of their place of use. An interpretation as secondary refuse consequently does not necessarily signify a low degree of representativeness.

Other refuse types which are directly related to the activities which were carried out in the past in the location they were found in, are primary, provisional and abandonment stage refuse. Primary and provisional refuse are often the result of production processes. Within the walls of the Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu* three pottery workshops were found which also revealed primary and provisional refuse. These were the only major production processes which were discovered within the *dunnu* walls. In other spaces, in particular abandonment stage refuse, consisting of the large and invaluable objects which were left behind at abandonment, were indicative of activities in the past. The presence of large vessels which are interpreted as part of beer brewing in the north of the *dunnu* have indicated that in that area a brewery was located. Interestingly, these object assemblages also indicate that these areas were slowly abandoned.

Other spaces, such as a room in the central building and the courtyard of the monumental residence, were struck by a large fire. Additionally, the deposits in the central building contained many complete and apparently valuable items. The object assemblages in these rooms therefore are characterized as a catastrophe deposit. This deposit type, as well as loss, is strongly indicative of the activities which were carried out in the room they were found in. In these cases, the rooms were apparently used as storage space prior to the catastrophic fire.

In conclusion, apart from most secondary refuse deposits, many of the deposits from the Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu* are indicative for the activities which were carried out in the spaces they were found in. The methodology which was conceived for this research has yielded a systematic interpretation of objects assemblages and their degree of representativeness. Ironically however, in some cases the objects from a secondary refuse deposit were probably not only discarded there, but also used in the area. The apartment which is known as the 'office of Tammitte', was interpreted as an official structure on the basis of its layout and location. In this office a thick layer of tablet-rich soil was discarded, as secondary refuse. In this case however, although the objects were deposited as secondary refuse, they may also have been used there.

5.2 THE TEXTUAL SOURCES

The textual evidence from Tell Sabi Abyad has revealed a plethora of details about the workings of the *dunnu*. The texts have exposed that the settlement was owned by the Grand vizier of the Assyrian empire and was run by a local steward. Important in this regard is the evidence the texts yield for the function of the *dunnu* for the empire and the owner of the settlement. These are aspects which may be less well-understood by merely investigating the archaeological remains. Additionally the texts have yielded evidence for very specific crafts, such as the production of chariots, and trade which must have taken place in and around the *dunnu*. The degree to which these activities were carried out in the *dunnu* is however not clear from the texts alone.

Much like the archaeological evidence discussed above, the textual corpus is composed of a biased and fragmented selection of tablets. But unlike the objects and architecture, the processes behind the selection and deposition of the tablets is much less clear. It can therefore not be deduced from the surviving elements which other objects must have been present in

the past. Consequently, if evidence for a certain craft such as metal working is lacking from the documentation, this is not evidence for the absence of this process in the past.

Important in this regard is that the tablets speak about a shorter period of time than the archaeological remains do. Many tablets were deposited decades after they were written. This makes the correlation between the two lines of evidence difficult to construct. Clearly however, although the administration of the *dunnu* diminished at some moment in its history, the settlement remained in use as an agricultural estate for decades. This indicates that especially the changes of function and use of the *dunnu* are less well-represented by the textual sources than by the archaeological remains. Remarkably, even within the phase which is described in this study, Level 5, many areas in the *dunnu* drastically changed in function.

One persistent aspect of the areas within the *dunnu* walls was that most activities were focussed on food processing. Interestingly, in the south of the *dunnu* many spaces could be used as apartments and small adjoining courtyards for the processing of food for a single family or household. This suggests that the *dunnu* fulfilled a domestic function in these areas. This contrasts the formal role of the *dunnu* which is suggested by the historical accounts.

The contextual analysis of tablet deposits in this study has revealed that many tablet groups which were previously considered to be *in situ* catastrophe deposits were in fact discarded as secondary refuse. This remarkable new explanation of how tablets were deposited at Tell Sabi Abyad is of great consequence for our understanding of the assemblages themselves and the relation they bear with other archaeological remains. The tablet groups were most likely carefully selected items from a larger archive. These tablet assemblages are therefore not a significant representation of the actual and complete archives from the past. It is worth mentioning that the term 'archive' is often used to denote any large tablet group in archaeological excavations. This study has revealed that this may be a gross oversimplification of the actual nature of the deposit and is in need of thorough investigation.

Similarly the chronological relation between the archaeological stratigraphy and the dates which are revealed by the cuneiform tablets is by no means a straightforward issue. At Tell Sabi Abyad the dates from cuneiform tablets have indicated that youngest tablets are deposited in the oldest layers and that the oldest tablets are deposited in the youngest layers. It follows that tablets should strictly and explicitly only be used to assign a post-quem date for a deposit.

5.3 ACTIVITY PATTERNS IN THE *DUNNU*

The analyses carried out for this study have focussed on the area within the walls of the *dunnu*. Within these confines the activities which were identified can be divided into five main categories: Food processing, pottery production, storage, administration and domestic use.

Food processing was carried out everywhere in the *dunnu* at some point. However, there are some clear patterns in the location and duration of these activities. Particularly in the south

and southwest large areas were used for grinding and bread baking. Throughout the sequences described here, this use of the area did not change. Even in the phase in which the residence was already in a dilapidated state, the south was used for this purpose. Interestingly, the area has yielded a fairly straightforward and uniform assemblage of objects and features, indicating that the area was largely dedicated to large scale bread baking and possibly also to domestic use. In contrast, three several specialized food preparation areas were found as well. These include two kitchens and at least one brewery in the north of the *dunnu*. The large kitchens were possibly used to prepare feasts for large parties which visited the *dunnu*. These food production areas were located in the north, northwest and east of the *dunnu* and were used for a short period of time. Possibly these were used to produce large feasts for visiting groups of dignitaries. In the south many solitary ovens were found, possibly related to small domestic structures. In this area therefore, food preparation occurred on a smaller scale. In contrast to the large scale kitchens, these southern areas did not change function within the period described in this study.

In three locations within the *dunnu* walls pottery kilns were discovered. It is clear from the size of the kilns and the extent of the work involved that the production of ceramics was an important activity within the *dunnu* walls (Duistermaat 2008). The ceramics from the *dunnu* were probably used in the surrounding settlements as well (Bartl 1990; Duistermaat 2008). In particular a large kiln and workshop in the east of the *dunnu* has remained in its place and in use for a long period. The two other kilns were constructed in the north and northwest, in areas which were in a dilapidated state. Other production processes were not attested in this study within the walls.

Although every excavated contemporary settlement which was discussed in this study has demonstrated the presence of a storage building comprised of several parallel rectangular rooms, the *dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad did not. Whether the function of storage of surplus is therefore less important may however be questioned. Textual evidence has suggested that at least 1 million litres of grain was stored in the *dunnu* at one point (Wiggermann 2000:195). The archaeological evidence did not yield an unequivocal storage building however. At least short term storage possibly took place in the various bins which were found in the *dunnu*. These have probably been used in conjunction with food production activities. Long term storage may have taken place on the roof or higher storeys of the central building (Klinkenberg and Lanjouw 2015). No diachronic changes were attested for this function of the *dunnu* during the period which is discussed in this study.

In several locations in the *dunnu* evidence for administration was found. Although most of the tablets from the *dunnu* were found in refuse layers, these mostly appear to be located in areas which can be characterized as either apartments or offices. These deposits were often interpreted as the remains of local administration, discarded near or at their location of use. Consequently, the *dunnu* contained several offices which were used by the authorities, possibly by the steward of the *dunnu*. At the start of the sequence described here, an office was located in the north-west of the *dunnu*. Later, when this location was no longer in use, another office or apartment in the south-east was used. Two other literate figures in the *dunnu* were the baker

and brewer of the *dunnu*. Tablets which were directed at them and written by them were found around the locations of their work or residence. Their receipts illustrate how the authorities kept a close eye on business and how administration was a part of everyday life.

The last category of activities in the *dunnu* is that of domestic use. Firstly, the large monumental residence must be mentioned. This large house contained two apartments which were fitted with bathrooms. This residence was originally probably constructed for the owner of the *dunnu*. Three other apartments with bathrooms were found within the walls of the *dunnu*. These were possibly inhabited by the high ranking staff of the *dunnu* such as the steward. In addition to these formal apartments, a large number of rooms in the settlement could be used to house staff members. Also the higher storeys or roof space could be used to this effect. In particular the southern half of the *dunnu* was perhaps used for domestic purposes. Small courtyards with ovens which were excavated there were perhaps used by the people inhabiting small apartments in the south. Interestingly, within the period described here, this function did not change. This suggests that domestic use of the areas within the *dunnu* walls was an integral part of the function of the settlement, significantly more important than previously assumed.

In conclusion, The areas within the walls of the *dunnu* were used both for official business such as administration and the receiving of important guests, as well as for mundane everyday activities such as food preparation and domestic life. In the north of the *dunnu* the official and representative function seems to have diminished at some point, while the activities which were carried out in the south of the *dunnu* remained largely the same. There, many staff members could be housed and several areas were reserved for food processing. Interestingly, this seems to be the enduring use of the *dunnu*, despite its apparent diminishing role as administrative and representative centre during the *course of this period*.

5.4 THE FUNCTION AND USE OF THE *DUNNU*

Historical evidence suggests that when the *dunnu* was constructed it helped to implement Assyrian rule and consolidate imperial power in the region. It functioned as a node in the Assyrian network of military settlements and was able to shelter, feed and equip passing army groups. Additionally, located in the margins of the empire, the *dunnu* functioned as a hub for the gathering of military intelligence. The *dunnu* also had a clear administrative and representative function. In the archaeological remains this is illustrated by the monumental residence and the large paved court in front of it. This was possibly used by high officials to do business, matters of state. In this sense, the *dunnu* could be considered as a settlement of political significance when the owner was present.

From historical sources it has become clear that the *dunnu* was owned by a private individual, the King of Hanigalbat and grand vizier of the Assyrian Empire. This could indicate the importance of the settlement to the imperial powers. The owner did however not reside in the *dunnu*. Although a large monumental residence was constructed in the centre of the settlement, he was probably usually housed in Dur Katlimmu. Day to day work in the *dunnu*

was taken care of by a steward who did reside in the settlement, among many other people who worked there. To the owner, the *dunnu* was a private agricultural estate, there to provide agricultural surplus. The settlement was also occasionally used by the owner during travels in the region. The settlement provided lodgings for him and his party and could be adapted to hold large meetings and even feasts. From his perspective, the *dunnu* could be considered as a 'home away from home' and also an 'office away from home'.

The occasions of the visits by the owner were however sporadic and temporary. For most of the inhabitants of the *dunnu* and the surrounding lands, the day-to-day activities were centred around working in agriculture and feeding their families. Even within the *dunnu* walls, a major part of the architecture was possibly dedicated to domestic use. It is conceivable that among the people who resided in the settlement many were employed in specialized crafts such as beer brewing, pottery production and handling the livestock which were attested in the archaeological remains. In this sense, the settlement probably played a facilitating role for the surrounding settlements.

The discovery of the large amount of tablets in the *dunnu* indicates that the settlement was well integrated in the Assyrian administration. Both letters between high dignitaries as well as receipts of lower ranking craftsmen were found. These receipts may indicate that the activities which were carried out in the settlement were securely regulated and monitored by the authorities. They illustrate that the settlement was a formal element of imperial domination, not a fully independent settlement.

Curiously, apart from administration and domestic use of the *dunnu*, the activities which were attested by the archaeological remains mostly relate to food and drink production. Apparently therefore these activities must have been an important element of the function of the *dunnu*. Transporting the resulting foodstuffs and drink to the core region around Assur would, however, have been too costly (Düring 2015a: 60). Rather, the products were most likely traded or consumed locally, in the Balikh region.

The bulk foods were partly used to feed large passing army groups. Additionally, the *dunnu* was well-fitted to hold large banquets. Large feasts could be held to strengthen the relationship with local tribes and other dignitaries. The production of beer in the *dunnu* may also have been of great importance in this regard. Analysis of pottery shapes in this study has revealed that beer brewing was carried out in many places in the *dunnu*. It is likely that nomadic groups and perhaps smaller settlements relied on the *dunnu* for this drink.

Food processing was however also accomplished simply for local consumption. The evidence for food processing in the *dunnu* illustrates that large banquets may have been held for short periods, but that a continuous effort was made to provide the local population with food. In particular the southern part of the *dunnu* appears to be equipped to facilitate families who lived in and around the settlement for bread baking. In this sense the day to day activities in the settlement were mainly concerned with feeding the people who lived in and around the *dunnu*.

The historical view of the Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu* generated a narrative which focussed mostly on the imperial motives for its establishment. One of the important assumptions was that the *dunnu* was established to provide agricultural surplus for the empire and the owner. Secondly, its role in the imperial network of military settlements was highlighted. Although both of these interpretations may be considered accurate, they disregard the local function and use of the *dunnu*, besides its formal imperial role. Careful analysis of find material from the *dunnu* has resulted in a perspective on the settlement which highlights this local function. The majority of activities which are attested within the *dunnu* walls were carried out for the benefit of the local community. The most consistent use of the *dunnu* appears to be small scale bread baking in the south, possibly by families inhabiting the settlement. In this sense, in parallel to an interpretation as an imperial stronghold, the settlement should be viewed as a local agricultural community.

On a regional scale, the presence of the *dunnu* brought about the easy availability of beer for all local and passing groups. Perhaps this, unintentionally, contributed in the consolidation of the area. The settlement did in this sense not function as a display of military might and imperial authority, but, as a social meeting place and source of alcoholic drink. The function of the *dunnu* can therefore be understood both in military terms, as well as in these social respects. For the empire, the settlement functioned both as the proverbial 'stick' as well as the 'carrot'.