

Contextual Analysis of the Use of Space at Two Near Eastern Bronze Age Sites

Part 2: Sampling an Urban Centre: an Introduction to Tell Brak Excavations 1994-1996

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Location of the Site

The great mound of Tell Brak is located in north-eastern Syria almost equidistant from the borders of modern Turkey to the north and Iraq to the south. The importance of its location cannot be overstressed. Geographically, Tell Brak is located at the northern limit of the Mesopotamian plain, on the fringes of the rain-fed agricultural zone. The site sits at a crossroads in trade and communication routes, with north-south and east-west routes passing directly by the site. The proximity of these routes kept the ancient settlement of Tell Brak alert to a long succession of shifting cultural influences.

History of the Project

Tell Brak was first excavated by Sir Max Mallowan in the 1930s (Mallowan 1947). Among the many discoveries made by Mallowan at Brak were a temple of late 4th-early 3rd millennia date - the so-called Eye Temple - an enormous palace of Naram-Sin, of late 3rd millennium date, and other architecture and finds ranging in date from the 4th to the 2nd millennia. In the mid-1970s the challenge of Tell Brak was taken up by Professor David Oates who conducted many seasons of excavations, focussing on the massive public buildings of the later 3rd millennium and on unravelling the stratigraphy of the 4th and 3rd millennia. A palace of 2nd millennium date on the mound's summit was also revealed (Oates *et al.* 1997).

In sum, previous work at Tell Brak had demonstrated the importance of the site during, in particular, the late 4th-early 3rd millennia and the later 3rd millennium. It was also very clear that the site constituted an especially sensitive marker of cultural interactions between northern and southern Mesopotamia, with periods of intense contacts separated by episodes of more localised development. The main aim of the 1994-1996 programme of investigations at Tell Brak was to develop a long-term view of the shifting cultural interactions attested at the site.

The Archaeological Strata and Methodology

Tell Brak is a large archaeological site, composed of multiple levels of collapsed mud-brick architecture and associated debris, a classic Near Eastern tell. The mound reaches a height of over 40 m above the plain and covers some 55 ha in area. The only satisfactory approach to Tell Brak has to be one of strategic sampling. A fundamental strength of the site is the presence of intact levels from a wide range of periods, spanning at the very least some two and a half thousand years from the late 5th to the mid-2nd millennia B.C. The methodology evolved in 1994-1996 for Tell Brak was multi-stranded, comprising surface collection, surface scraping and planning, and excavation with a full range of sampling tactics.

The first step in the methodology was the collection of surface objects over selected areas of the mound. By far the commonest object on the mound's surface is pottery. Based on the quantities of sherds recovered from surface operations it is estimated that the surface of Tell Brak is currently covered in anything between 5 and 10 million sherds. The recovery of surface material was designed to give information concerning the distribution across the site of the various periods. In all the areas where we

conducted surface collection followed by scraping and excavation we found high correlations, in terms of dating, between surface pottery and sub-surface architecture.

A second field technique was that of surface scraping, whereby the uppermost crust of earth was removed using wide-bladed hoes and the new surface cleaned and recorded in detail. On the heavily eroded spurs this technique on the whole worked excellently and we were able to plan a large number of intact features directly below the surface of the mound. Visible features included walls, floor sequences, brick-packing, pits, ovens and spreads of rubbish. Again we were able successfully to use this information to direct the location of excavation trenches.

The bulk of information comes from excavation, as presented below. An important part of our field strategy has been the conduct of an experimental project under the remit of the Leverhulme Trust, entitled "Contextual analysis of the use of space in two Near Eastern Bronze Age sites". This three year project is concerned to characterise, in both quantitative and qualitative senses, context types as encountered in the excavations at Tell Brak and in the Bronze and Iron Age levels of Kilise Tepe in southern Turkey. Samples from context types, such as room fills, courtyard deposits, occupation deposits on floors, pit fills, street and rubbish deposits, are processed and analysed using directly compatible techniques so that the complex processes of settlement and society, such as the distribution of activities within domestic architecture, the extent and use of public spaces, the degree and nature of interaction between the urban and rural sectors of society, may all be thoroughly investigated.

The Excavations

Initial indications were that the large spur at the north-west of the mound, designated **Area HS**, held an intact and readily accessible sequence of occupation spanning at least the earlier part of the 4th millennium until the very late 3rd millennium, and we focused much of our efforts on this spur. Over the three years we have explored a total of six areas of the spur.

Early-Middle Uruk Period: At the base of the spur levels of Early-Middle Uruk date were investigated, that is early to mid-4th millennium. In the lowermost trench, **HS6**, a large mud-brick wall, with multiple rebuilds, may have functioned as an imposing boundary to a compound or large-scale structure of some sort. The continual rebuilding and repairing of this wall may be some indication of its importance through time. A series of pottery kilns, with pot wasters, show a degree of industrial activity on what was probably the fringes of the settlement. The pottery from this trench is distinctive and has its best parallels in the Early to Middle Uruk pottery of Tepe Gawra level XI in northern Iraq. Here, then, we already have evidence, in the form of a substantial compound wall and pottery kilns, for a large-scale, supra-domestic element in the settlement at Tell Brak in the early 4th millennium.

In trench **HS1**, adjacent to HS6, a series of structures of Middle Uruk date were excavated. Rarely for Tell Brak some human burials, all of children, were

encountered, and pottery typical of the Middle Uruk period was recovered in great quantities. A major group of finds was retrieved from an ashy layer in a lane, comprising a number of clay sealings with seal impressions. On their obverse faces they bear impressions made by cylinder seals. These small pieces of clay have amongst the earliest securely stratified cylinder seal impressions from anywhere in the Near East and are thus of considerable significance. Cylinder seals were thought to have originated in south Mesopotamia and to be intimately connected with the development of proto-cuneiform writing and urban complexity in the later part of the 4th millennium. And yet here we have unmistakable evidence for the use of cylinder seals in north Mesopotamia by the middle of the 4th millennium. Given the size of the Middle Uruk settlement, or group of settlements, at Tell Brak and the increasing evidence there for social and administrative complexity, we may continue to query the traditional view of northern Mesopotamia as a late benefactor of south Mesopotamian-inspired cultural influence.

Early Ninevite 5 Period: Moving on to Tell Brak in post-Uruk times, the Ninevite 5 period is a key episode in the late pre-history of northern Mesopotamia and we have little understanding of its true nature. The collapse of the Late Uruk world system, which reached from south Mesopotamia into Syria and beyond, was followed by a renewed period of regionalism across all of Mesopotamia. At Brak we have excavated several structures of Ninevite 5 date, ranging from its beginning to its end.

Dating to the start of the Ninevite 5 period, around 3,000 B.C., we exposed in trench **HS4** an impressive structure with a series of plastered floors, the uppermost of which was burnt. After its uppermost floor had been burnt, the building had been carefully packed with mud bricks of two colours. Several pits had been dug through the brick packing but stopped at floor level. The function of this building is not known, but the quality of the floors and the treatment of the structure after its abandonment do not suggest purely domestic activities.

Other early Ninevite 5 evidence was revealed in trench **HS2** in the form of a series of ash-filled pits, yielding quantities of early Ninevite 5 pottery, including a rare example of a painted chalice. Also from the pits came a collection of clay sealings with cylinder seal impressions. The function of these sealings is largely concerned with the closure of baskets, showing a concern to control movement of portable goods within these containers. The style of the seal impressions is typical of Ninevite 5 sealings known from elsewhere, especially Nineveh itself.

Ninevite 5 Temple: Later Ninevite 5 occupation was investigated further up the spur in the upper levels of trench **HS4**. Overlying the brick-packed building mentioned above, a series of stratified surfaces and rubbish deposits had accumulated, from which came many examples of the fine incised pottery and coarse wares which typify the later Ninevite 5 period. These deposits had built up through long-term use of an open courtyard which was associated with a series of single-roomed structures to its

east. This complex constitutes one of the most important Ninevite 5 buildings yet uncovered in Mesopotamia.

We excavated two phases of the enclosed complex, but the lower phase was the better preserved. The plan is simple, comprising a single room with benches along two wall faces and a narrow doorway in the top north-east corner. In the middle of one end of the room is a free-standing brick structure with reveals, directly in front of which a carefully delineated area of flooring is stepped down and partly burnt. The free-standing structure proved to be a hollow container and from within it came a large collection of clay sealings with cylinder seal impressions. Under this structure and set into its floor was an unbaked clay object of unusual shape and unknown purpose. Its fabric comprised large voids suggesting the clay had been carefully kneaded around some organic substance which has since decayed and disappeared.

This building appears to be a temple of Ninevite 5 date and the free-standing brick structure may be an altar or offering table with the recess in the floor being a receptacle for liquids, perhaps blood from offered animals. The date of the building is secure - from its floors and that of the overlying rebuild came quantities of incised and excised pottery dating to the later part of the Ninevite 5 period. Several AMS dates put the building at about 2,700 B.C. The closest comparison comes from the site of Kashkashok, less than 50 km to the west of Tell Brak, where a single-roomed structure with benches along two sides and with possible cult statues has been excavated by Syrian archaeologists. A similar plan, with bent-axis approach, also occurs at Tell Mozan in Temple BA, but that building is much larger and about 200 years later.

The collection of sealings from the HS4 building is of considerable interest. Only a handful of different seals are attested by the obverse seal impressions, most being of a curvilinear design. Crude animal scenes are also featured. If we turn the sealings over and examine their reverse faces we see that they had been originally affixed to a range of objects including possible box lids, often with traces of a curving peg set into a smooth riveted plaque or flange. This may represent an elaborate fastening for a box lid or for a removable cover for the altar itself. Along the plastered benches on the inner wall faces, there was evidence for the emplacement of pots and other containers. It may be that valued commodities, perhaps deposited within the room by temple devotees, were kept within these containers and sealed, either by the worshippers or by temple officials, to be re-opened under proper authority and then used as temple offerings on the altar.

Other Ninevite 5 Levels: Further Ninevite 5 levels have been briefly investigated by us at widely separated points of the mound. In **Area HL** burnt structures with typical pottery, including an elaborately decorated vessel, were explored. In **Area HF** at the north-east corner of the mound, a series of structures of late Ninevite 5 date included a room with brick fittings, partially bitumened floor and scatters of bird bones, which may have functioned as a kitchen. Another structure had a deeply stratified series of clean plaster floors. The main point of these investigations has been to demonstrate the extent of the settlement at Tell Brak during the Ninevite 5 period. There can be no

doubt that during these centuries Tell Brak was one of the most important settlements in northern Mesopotamia, and this fact helps us to understand how Tell Brak may have quite smoothly been transformed from a major regional focus in the early-mid 3rd millennium into an imperial administrative centre by the last quarter of that millennium.

Later 3rd Millennium / Akkadian Period: Current work at the neighbouring sites of Tell Beydar, Tell Leilan and Tell Mozan is transforming our understanding of this region of northern Mesopotamia during the later 3rd millennium. It is now clear that major developments in the complex processes of urbanisation and cultural florescence occurred before the imposition of south Mesopotamian Akkadian rule around 2,400 B.C. There is clearly a social and economic trend starting around the middle of the 3rd millennium, or earlier, culminating in the establishment of Tell Brak as a major focus for Akkadian rule.

In exploring these issues we opened two trenches near the summit of the HS spur. In **HS5** we excavated domestic structures dated by AMS samples to around 2,300 B.C. and with assemblages of what we believe to be early Akkadian pottery. In trench **HS3**, a little way down the spur, we exposed a rather fine baked brick floor in a suite of two small rooms, clearly some sort of washing facility with drain. What was under the floor, however, gave dramatic testament to the increasing wealth of the inhabitants of Tell Brak. Set into a pit under a large white stone in the floor was a pot which contained a unique collection of precious items and materials, deposited as a hoard meant for later recovery. Items included a gold pendant with crossed lions; a lapis and gold lion-headed eagle, the Anzu-Imdugud figure of Sumerian and Akkadian mythology; other small figurines; and substantial quantities of silver in a range of forms. All these items have strong iconographic connections to the art of southern Mesopotamia in the middle of the 3rd millennium B.C. (Matthews 1994). This hoard at Brak represents the wealth of a householder or administrative official of some standing. Associated pottery and AMS dates from here and connected structures suggests a date very early in the Akkadian period or a little earlier.

Micromorphology has shed valuable light on the deposition of this hoard by analysis of samples extracted from a section through the lane adjacent to the hoard building. Trampled deposits, rich in decayed plant remains, are overlain by a deposit of sterile wind-laid deposits and collapsed wall plaster and pisé fragments suggesting the decay into the lane of the adjacent building. Occupation then resumes after a spell of uncertain duration. This sequence of deposits puts the failure of the hoard depositor to retrieve their possessions into an informative context, indicating a spell of abandonment, at least in this part of the site, immediately subsequent to the deposition of the hoard.

Further illustration of the wealth and administrative power of Brak at this time is demonstrated by our excavations in **Area HP** at the south-west corner of the site. Here we exposed a large brick structure with associated rooms, yielding pottery and a rare inscribed piece of clay. Adjacent to the rooms was a large rubbish dump from

which came hundreds of clay sealings with very fine cylinder seal impressions, showing a range of detailed and well-modelled scenes, closely paralleled by examples recently found at Tell Beydar. Functionally, these sealings had been used to seal door pegs on store-room doors. In sum, they indicate extensive administrative activity in this area, close to some of the massive public buildings previously excavated in Area SS by David Oates.

Post-Akkadian Period: Following the collapse of Akkadian rule in the north, the picture becomes less clear. Some scholars are suggesting a period of extensive regional turbulence and abandonment in the centuries around the end of the 3rd millennium, but the evidence from Tell Brak remains unclear in detail. Partly in order to address this issue, we opened a trench in **Area HN**, not far from the summit of the mound, where we exposed levels dating to the first half of the 2nd millennium. A building with a large central room, including plastered holes in the wall faces above floor level, was excavated and a sounding below this building uncovered traces of earlier levels, all with painted pottery. In the end, time ran out and we were unable chronologically to connect these lower levels, dating to the earlier 2nd millennium, with our late HS levels dating to the very late 3rd millennium. The nature of settlement at Tell Brak during these important centuries remains largely unknown.

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List of contexts

Trench	Context	Comments	
HS1	A4000	Surface collection	
	A4075	"Mixed brown room-fill with libn fragments, charcoal, on floor"	
	A4079	"Burnt patch with associated bones, possibly connected to FI"	
	A4083	Ashy lens along edge of wall	
	A4091	Rich deposit of burnt ash with sherds and bones	
	A4092	Ashy lens within room	
	A4093	Homogeneous brown fill with libn fragments and phytoliths	
	A4103	Brown compact fill with lot of libn fragments	
	A4108	Ashy lens with much pot and bone adjacent to doorway	
	A4112	Dark mixed loose fill of pit	
	A4118	Brown fill above ash lenses	
	A4126	"Series of lenses of ash and brown fills, very rich in pot and bone"	
	A4129	Fire installation deposit	
	A4130	Occupation deposit directly above floor	
	A4134	Fill of small circular pit	
	A4162	Occupation deposits directly above floor	
	A4167	Mixed spit	
	A4168	Fill of small FI	
	HS3	A1117	Loose ashy fill of pit
		A1121	Dark ashy fill between floors
A1136		Loose ashy fill of pit	
A1143		?	
A1146		Loose dark ash with bones and charcoal	
A1150		Mixed fill	
A1154		Loose brown soil with ashy patches	
A1169		Black ashy deposit	
A1172		Loose ashy fill	
A1176		Structure of FI	
A1185		Loose burnt fill	
A1196		Grey ash layer in lane	
A1197		Brown trampled occupation deposits in lane	
A1198		Grey ash layer in lane	
A1199		Brown deposits in lane	
A1200		Grey ash layer in lane	
A1201		Brown deposits in lane	
A1202		Grey ash layer in lane	
A1203		Interbedded layers of eroded debris in lane	
A1204		Collapsed and eroded building debris in lane	
A1205	Probably natural layer of dust on top of trampled debris in lane		
A1206	Occupation debris in lane contemporary with use of baked brick building		
HS4	A6004	Soft ashy fill of FI	
	A6005	Soft ashy fill adjacent to FI	
	A6010	Ashy fill of FI	
	A6018	Soft ashy soil between floors	
	A6030	Soft ashy soil	
	A6031	"Ashy soft grey fill, lot of burning and charcoal"	
	A6036	"Ashy layers and compacted soil, possible floor level"	
	A6041	Greenish fill of pit	
	A6045	"Fill of rectangular structure, possible FI"	
	A6051	Ashy grey-brown fill with lot of libn debris	
A6054	Soft grey-brown ashy fill on irregular surface		

	A6057	Soft ashy grey pit fill
	A6079	Black burnt clay layer between floors
	A6514	Soft ashy fill on floor
	A6535	Soft brown burnt fill
	A6539	Room-fill on floor
	A6540	Pale brown compact fill
	A6548	Fill of pit or depression
	A6549	Fill of pit
	A6550	Fill of small pit
	A6555	Loose room-fill
	A6568	Ashy occupation deposit above floor
	A6571	Ashy lens within packing layer
	A6576	Ashy fill of pit
	A6580	Ashy burnt layer above grey-brown floor
	A6583	Charcoal lens within pit fill
	A6588	Fill of small pit
	A6590	"Dumped bricks, burnt"
	A6592	Bricky fill within doorway
	A6596	Room-fill
	A6600	Fill deposit within altar of temple
	A6603	Fill deposit within altar of temple
HS5	A508	Fill of clay-lined pit
	A514	Room-fill
	A520	Pisé wall
	A538	Floors in pisé room
	A539	Floors in pisé room
	A540	Floors in pisé room
	A543	Exterior and doorway fill
	A553	Floors in pisé room
HS6	A765	Ash deposits on surface
	A777	Floors and occupation deposits in room
	A787	Lower fill of FI/kiln
	A789	Ash fill and floor of FI/kiln
	A790	Mixed bricky debris outside FI/kiln
	A802	Floors and ash deposits
	A815	Hard grey floor surface
HF	A8006	Occupation deposit on floor
	A8010	Lenses within levelling fill
	A8012	Fine plaster floors
	A8020	Thin occupation layer directly on floor
	A8025	Multiple plaster floors
	A9003	Multiple lenses and layers of ash
	A9007	Fill of shallow FI/hearth
HN	A102	room fill
	A104	fill on floor, loose grey ashy fill on floor
	A107	fill on floor, same as A104
	A108	fill, same as A107
	A109	ash deposit, ash on floor
	A116	room fill, loose ashy material on floor
	A123	room fill, loose ashy fill
	A124	occupation debris, dump of tannur debris, possible levelling

A125	external surface, compacted earth surface
A127	sub-floor fill, packing, clean fill with occasional brick fragments
A130	ashy room fill
A136	room fill, similar ash spreads
A140	room fill, soft fill with bricks which have probably fallen from wall
A143	surface in room, compacted uneven surface, seemingly a rough re-occupation floor
A142	external surface, compacted surface
A149	external surface, compacted earth surface
A152	brick, step construction in doorway from room 1 to rooms 6/7
A158	floor, possibly plastered floor surface
A159	fill of large jar
A166	room fill, clean fill with brick pieces, below floor
A176	sub-floor fill, dump of ashy bricky fill
A177	floor, uneven floor surface
A181	external ash spread, dump of ashy material
A184	sub-floor fill, fill of bricky material with ash inclusions
A187	pit
A193	external ash lens, ash spread on surface
A203	external ash dump
A225	room fill, on floor
A237	floor, plastered floor surface
A250	occupational deposit/room fill, brown with fired bricks
A252	fill in room, loose spreads of ash and phytoliths ?re-deposited materials from external area
A253	room fill, compacted surface of fills on room 3 floor A267, compacted ashy material
A255	room fill, loose grey occupational deposit on floor
A261	fill of fire installation,
A262	pit fill, refuse
A263	room fill, loose grey ashy fill
A264	fill, same as above
A271	external surface