UR REGION ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT

Since we last reported in the 2014 BISI newsletter on the activities of the Ur Region Archaeology Project, three more seasons of excavation and research have taken place. It is a pleasure and a privilege to bring BISI members up to date on the latest results.¹

While we now know a lot more about Tell Khaiber, it continues to intrigue and challenge us. It was settled around the turn of the third millennium, as quantities of re-deposited solid-footed goblets and Jemdet Nasr artefacts attest,² but the occupation accessible for investigation dates to the time of the Sealand Dynasty, in the middle of the second millennium BC. The major feature of this is the large building (henceforth the ‘Public Building’) first spotted in satellite photos, which dominates the low mound, occupying over 4,000 square metres. This has duly been the main focus of our research. To date, we have recovered the plan of about three-quarters of the building by surface clearance and have excavated fourteen rooms, in whole or in part.

The southern third of the Public Building is the oldest part. This was originally free standing. It had a substantial perimeter wall, nearly 4m thick, with external towers all the way round, and a single entrance on the north-eastern side. Elements of the internal plan of this part of the building are typical of Old Babylonian domestic architecture, even if we cannot find parallels for the whole. An antechamber restricts access to the central courtyard. On the opposite side of the courtyard from the antechamber is a candidate for the main reception room. Excavation has concentrated on the rooms along the eastern side of the courtyard where we have found an archive of over 150 inscribed tablets, the majority being tabular accounts of collection and disbursement of quantities of grain. From these we can piece together a picture of an administrative centre in the middle of the countryside, regulating production and distribution of agricultural produce, including ‘to the palace’. There are also school texts as well as the occasional letter, and a court case. Best of all, one has a date from the thirteenth year of Sealand Dynasty king Ayardaragalama, which places our administrative activities firmly in the years around 1,500 BC.³ There are otherwise no provenanced documents from this time, and no significant archaeological exposure of remains either, so these discoveries become all the more exciting.

In 2016, we reached the lowest extant floor level in the southern part of the building, and found underneath a series of six parallel vaults. These sub-floor

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¹ A full list of all our supporters is available on our website www.urarchaeology.org as are annual illustrated summary reports.
³ On the Middle Chronology.
structures, at least 12 m long, run from the main external wall as far as, and possibly into and beyond, the central courtyard. Suggestions for their function include suspended flooring for aerating grain stores or perhaps terracing. Meanwhile, surface scraping has revealed the plan of much of the later northern addition. As it survives, the plan is surprisingly irregular when compared with the southern part, but this may be because we are seeing a later phase on the highest part of the mound, dating to a time when the function of the building had changed. An exception is the row of at least ten identical rooms along the eastern edge where perhaps the original lay-out was retained. These are curious. Most have an oven next to the doorway. Perhaps we should think of accommodation for soldiers, slaves, or other personnel.

Investigation of nearby private houses, broadly contemporary with the very latest preserved levels of the Public Building, yielded finds indicative of wealthy status, such as a mirror, spearheads and other implements of copper. An intramural double-pot burial in the corner of one house, cut from levels now eroded, is probably early Kassite in date. The settlement has barely any other indications of Kassite occupation such as the characteristic heavy goblets, so abundant at nearby Tell Khaiber 2, so we conclude that occupation ceased around the time the double-pot grave was dug.


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