

TELL ES-SWEYHAT

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Although the Sweyhat project was again unable to have a field season during 1998 to recover the remainder of the important mid-third millennium wall paintings from the monumental building in Operation 5 on the southern slope of the main tell, more time was available for research at the Oriental Institute on the final excavation report as well as a closer examination of the 103 wall painting fragments thus far recovered (see *1991/92 Annual Report*, pp. 76–80, for a preliminary assessment of the fragments and in particular the large fragment depicting a bovine suckling her calf; also see *1993/94 Annual Report*, pp. 53–61, for illustrations and descriptions of ten of the seventeen fragments presented in this report). Further details regarding parallels and dating evidence for the bovine with suckling calf fragment were presented by the writer in the comprehensive article on the Sweyhat excavations from 1989 to 1992 (see “Tall as-Swehat 1989–1992,” in “Archäologische Forschungen in Syrien (5),” *AfO XL/XLI*, 1993/1994: 280–81).

The close similarity of some of the Sweyhat wall painting fragments with elements depicted on the two, nearly complete, published wall paintings discovered at Tell Halawa B and Tell Munbaqa, south of Sweyhat on the left bank of the Euphrates River, was noted in both the *1993/94 Annual Report* and the *AfO* articles listed above, notably those Sweyhat fragments that included geometric borders, tree branches, and stylized human figures with Medusa-like hair styles. While both the Halawa and Munbaqa paintings were found in situ and largely complete, the Sweyhat paintings had fallen from their positions on the plastered walls around the middle of the third millennium BC and were subsequently buried by later Bronze Age and Roman occupation building levels, thus preserving the fragments. As only the northeastern side of the large building, with one meter wide walls, has been excavated at present, we have not been able to recover all of the fragments now known to belong to at least two separate paintings, as shown below. There are possibly even more paintings fallen from the unexcavated north, west, and southern walls of the building complex.

New research conducted this year on the Sweyhat wall painting fragments now allows for a partial and very preliminary reconstruction of parts of the two separate scenes from the northeastern Wall 21/2 of the Operation 5 building. Line drawings of the two paintings are illustrated below in figures 1 and 2. Before discussing the artistic elements of the scenes, it is important to note that the vertical placement of all of the fragments illustrated here is based upon the small drip lines of the paint, which occurred when the artist(s) were applying the maroon- and black-colored paints to the plaster wall face.

The hitherto unpublished three fragments (A, B, and G) and the other eight published fragments shown in figure 1 are more closely related to one of the Tell Halawa B paintings from Room 313 (F. Luth, “Tell Halawa B,” in *Halawa 1980–1986*, ed. W. Orthmann, pp. 85–100; *Saarbrucker Beiträge zur Altertumskunde*, Band 52, Abb. 66) than to the Munbaqa wall painting (D. Machule et al.,

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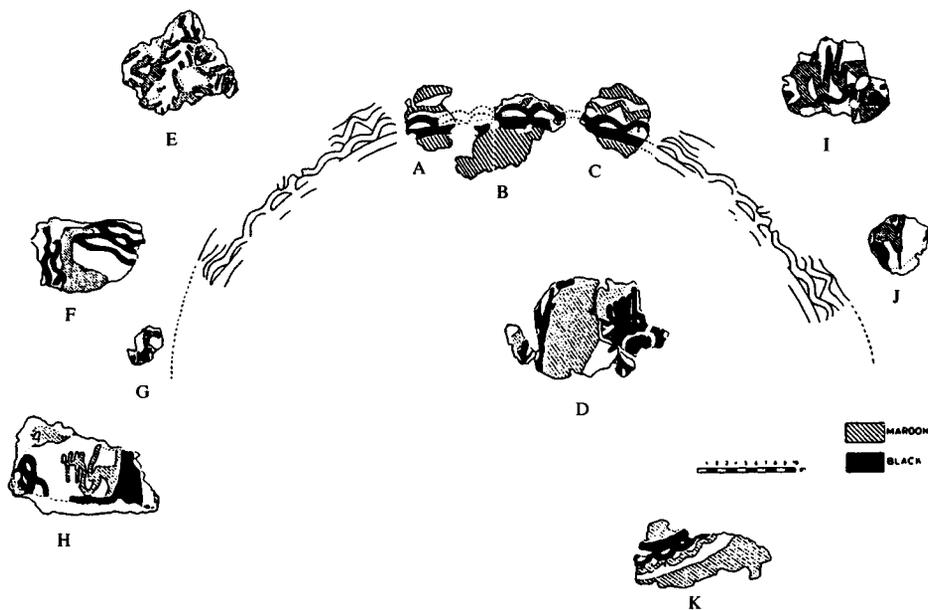


Figure 1. Provisional reconstruction of first wall painting from Op. 5

"Ausgrabungen in Tall Munbaqa 1986," *MDOG* 120 [1988]: 11–50, Abb. 10). The Halawa and Munbaqa paintings referred to here have been discussed at great length by Sally Dunham in her article entitled "A Wall Painting from Tell al-Raqa'i, North-east Syria" (*Levant* 25 [1993]: 127–43) to whom I am indebted for much of the insights on these paintings described here. The Halawa painting measures 95 cm wide and 60 cm tall, making it a roughly rectangular scene. The partially reconstructed Sweyhat scene (fig. 1) measures approximately 96 cm wide and 75 cm tall. The central feature of the Sweyhat painting, represented by fragments A–D and K [note that K, although in its original vertical position in fig. 1, is from the lower right bottom of the face and shown in its present position to save illustration space], appear to depict a human face similar to the face on the Halawa painting, but both the shape of the border surrounding the face and its motif are somewhat different; the reconstructed projections from both sides of Sweyhat fragments A–C indicate that the face is circular rather than oval in shape and the shallow maroon and black double loops of the border stand in contrast to the red, almost triangular-shaped and deeper single loop border surrounding the Halawa head. Fragment D possibly represents part of the nose and an eye of the face, which is also similar to the Halawa face. The external features surrounding the Halawa face include rectangle panels of straight and wavy lines at the top sides and bottom, which adjoin the outer oval of the face; at present there is no evidence from the excavated Sweyhat fragments that this particular design is present. The remaining Halawa elements, external to the face, depict tree branches, stylized human figures, two partly preserved four-legged animals, and possibly a dove sitting on top of one of the human heads. The tree branch motif, fragment E, shown in the upper left-hand corner of the Sweyhat painting is positioned there on the basis of the Halawa painting, but as there are a number of other unpublished Sweyhat fragments with the same motif, they could have origi-

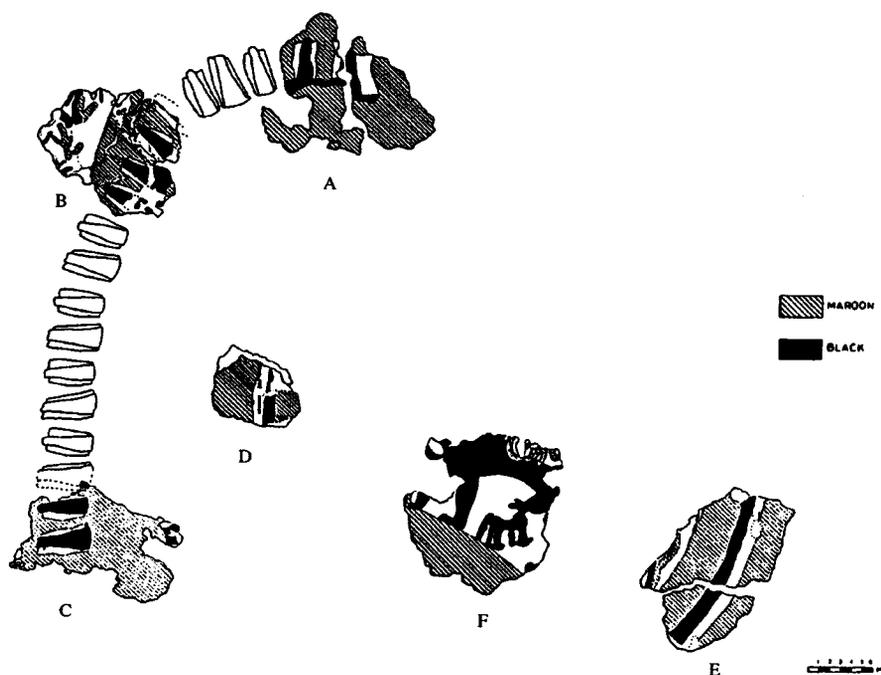


Figure 2. Provisional reconstruction of second wall painting from Op. 5

nally been located anywhere external to the central face. Fragments F–J, positioned here on both sides of the face similar to the Halawa painting, all represent stylized human figures that are all painted maroon. Only fragments F and G show the heads of the figures, which are both bird-like in shape and face inwards to the large central face of the scene. The black-painted wavy lines beside the neck and behind the head of the fragment F human most likely represent hair, again similar to a human figure on the Halawa painting, but which is depicted there on the right-hand side and facing the large central face of the scene. All of the preserved human torsos shown on fragments H–J are depicted with their arms upraised, which is a characteristic also present in the Halawa painting; Dunham states that the Halawa figures “hold either their hands up toward the face as if in worship or they hold up objects of uncertain identity.” None of the Sweyhat fragments thus far recovered indicate that the arms are holding objects with the possible exception of fragment H, which appears to show the right half of a human torso with two upraised right arms, one of which is holding an unidentifiable object that might represent a small animal.

The partial reconstruction of a second wall painting from Sweyhat is shown in figure 2. Certain elements of this scene compare favorably with a portion of one of the three wall paintings found at Munbaqa, level 7, Room 3B, dated to about 2400–2250 BC. The most complete scene published from Munbaqa Room 3B shows the frontal view of two human figures with upraised arms who are surrounded on their sides and tops by an elaborately decorated border, which measures 44.3 cm × 45.8 cm; unidentified black and red shapes on a white-painted background to the left of this scene suggest that the two human figures surrounded by a border was only one

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element of a much larger painting. The left-hand side of the extant reconstructed Sweyhat border is 48 cm long.

The reconstruction of fragments A–C on the second Sweyhat wall painting are again positioned by the direction of the paint drip lines. The black-painted, roughly cone-shaped design inside the elongated white-painted rectangles is similar to the two inner vertical portions of the border pattern of the Munbaqa painting that enclose the sides of the two human figures inside the preserved three-sided border which originally might have been rectangular in shape. While the excavators of the Munbaqa painting suggest that the frame surrounding the two human figures might be a representation of reedwork, Dunham (1993:136) offers the following interpretation: "... one might also perhaps think of a decorated curtain drawn open with tassels hanging across the top." Sweyhat fragments A–C appear to belong to a similar type of border as the inner element on the Munbaqa painting, although fragment B suggests that Sweyhat did not have the outer scalloped red line completing the outermost portion of the Munbaqa border. The outside portion of the Sweyhat border extant on fragment B depicts part of a maroon-painted tree branch similar to fragment E on the first Sweyhat painting and the branches shown on the Halawa painting described above. Fragment B also appears to have the hind legs of a four-legged animal painted in black that may also compare with the Halawa animal located in the top left of the painting facing away from the central portion of the scene. Fragments D and E appear to belong to the same circular or oval design, but their placement within the border design (fragments A–C) is only hypothetical as is the placement of the suckling calf fragment F shown in the center of this painting. The suckling calf fragment is placed on this painting since there is the fragment of another animal on fragment B and there are none so far evident on the first Sweyhat wall painting described above. If the suckling calf fragment does belong inside, rather than outside, the border, this would suggest that it is a key element of the painting; its size, larger than the human figures on the first Sweyhat painting, also indicates that much importance was placed on this element of the painting.

The suckling calf fragment certainly implies that ideas of life and fertility were being represented in this painting and most likely did have some connection with cult practice in what seems likely a building of worship at Sweyhat. Whereas the suggested reedwork or drawn curtain of the Munbaqa painting probably does indicate the presence of the two humans with upraised arms inside a sacred place, the proposed central position of the suckling calf enclosed within either a circle or a rectangular-shaped reedwork border may simply represent a corral-type holding pen for protecting the stock. It should be noted that the Munbaqa painting was also found in a thick-walled building, but was intended for public use and not cultic in nature. However, as Dunham points out, "the occurrence of a wall painting with a clearly cultic (or ritual) subject in such a building at Munbaqa may imply that within an industrial installation there could also be cultic accommodations. Indeed, the close connection of craft and temple in the ancient Near East has often been noted" (1993: 137).

At Halawa, the archaeological evidence suggests that the level 3 Room 313 wall painting was associated with a temple dated to the first half of the third millennium BC. The monumental size of the mid-third millennium building at Sweyhat, which

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contained at least the two suggested wall paintings so far partially excavated, may also be a temple complex, but much more excavation is needed to determine the exact character of the building(s) and to recover the remaining wall painting fragments. On the other hand, as stated above, the one published Munbaqa wall painting was found within a public (rather than a cultic) building, which was probably used for storage and commerce. Whichever type of building contained the Sweyhat wall paintings is important to discover if a more complete interpretation of the purpose and final designs of these wall paintings is to be developed.

In conclusion, on behalf of the Tell es-Sweyhat Expedition to Syria, I would like especially to thank Margaret and Jim Foorman not only for their friendship and loyal support of the fieldwork in Syria, but also for their continued financial assistance for our research. In order to complete the wall painting scenes and to assess the nature of the building from which they come, the Tell es-Sweyhat Expedition looks forward to welcoming new supporters for another field season.
