

The Chicago Euphrates Project

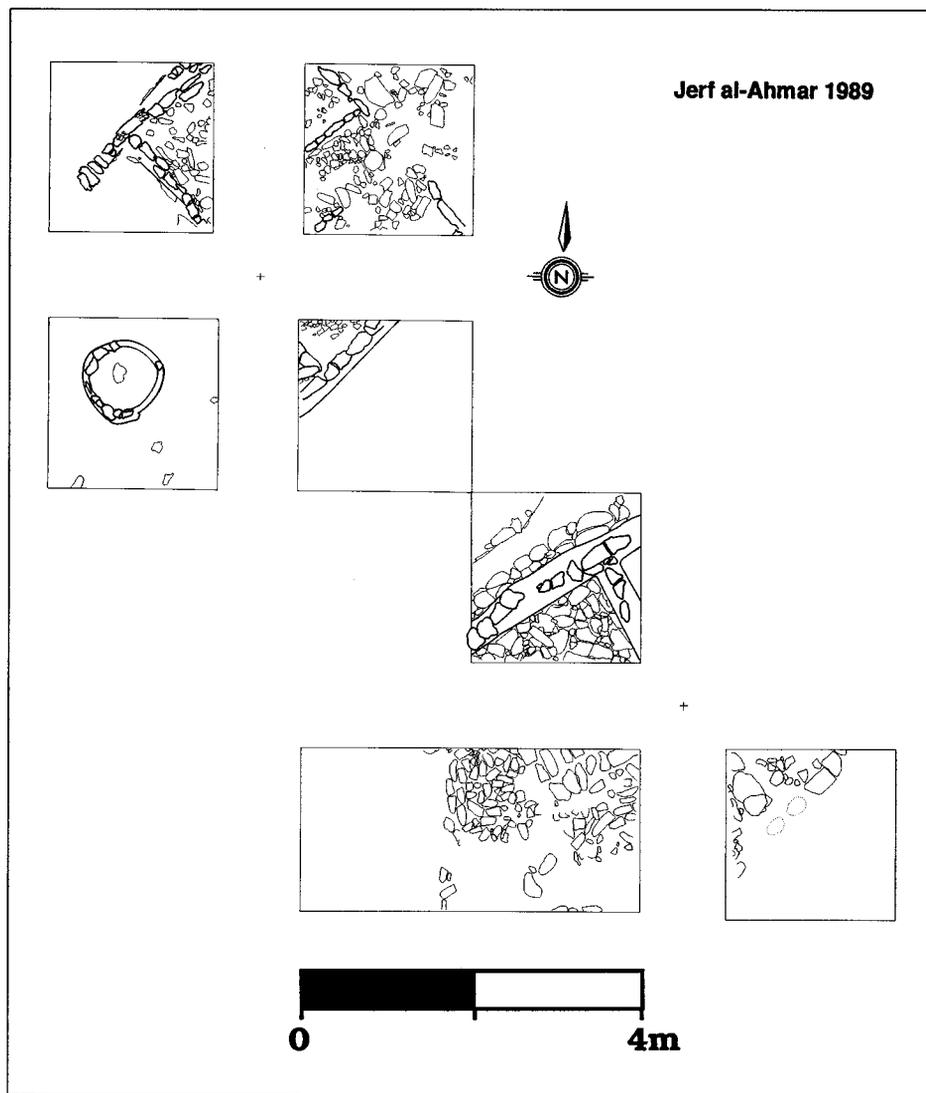
Thomas L. McClellan

The Chicago Euphrates Project for archaeological research in northern Syria was organized in 1988 as an outgrowth of the el-Qitar excavation and in response to the immediate need for salvage archaeology in the flood zone behind the Tishreen Dam, scheduled for completion at el-Qitar in 1993. The aims of the project are to make a broad diachronic study of settlement patterns in the alluvial plain of the Euphrates River, utilizing surface survey and excavation in the sixty kilometer stretch from ancient Carchemish south to el-Qitar. In a preliminary survey in 1987 over twenty sites destined for flooding were identified. An important cluster of them that centered at Tell al-Banat was selected by Chicago for further research. In 1988 a small team from Chicago conducted surface surveys of five sites: the village of Tell al-Banat, the small conical site of Tell al-Banat North, Tell Saghir, Tell Mresh, and Mount Bazey. Concentration on these sites permits investigation of intersite economic and political relationships during the second and third millennia B.C. to which they date and investigation of changing settlement over a span of a millennium or more.

In a ten-week field season in summer, 1989, excavations were conducted at three sites: Jerf al-Ahmar, Tell Mresh, and Tell al-Banat, while surface survey work continued in the northern part of the Tishreen flood zone. Our group was divided into three excavation teams and one survey team. Excavations at the village site of Tell al-Banat were directed by the Project Director, Thomas McClellan, with the assistance of Alan Lupton (London Institute of Archaeology). Site supervisors were Jenny Arzt (University of Chicago), Tom Mudloff (University of Chicago), Jemal Haydar (University of Damascus), and Bassam Jamouss (University of Damascus). Tell Mresh was excavated under the direction of Anne Porter (University of Chicago) with site supervisors Anna Curnow (Yale University), Ann Shafer (University of Chicago), Nichola Laneri (University of Rome), and Ahmed Suriyeh (University of Damascus). Mandy Mottram (University of Melbourne) directed the excavation of Jerf al-Ahmar and was assisted by Lorraine Brochu (University of Chicago). Gil Stein (Smithsonian Institution) conducted surface collections of three sites previously unrecorded with the help of surveyor Richard MacNeil (Royal Melbourne

Institute of Technology) and Glenn Carnagey (University of Chicago), who collaborated in the production of computerized topographical maps. Glenn was also in charge of all computer operations. Subsidiary tasks such as flotation and photography were undertaken by Larry Lyke (University of Chicago).

JERF AL-AHMAR. The Pre-Pottery Neolithic site of Jerf al-Ahmar is only two kilometers behind the Tishreen Dam and will be one of the first sites to be flooded. It lies on the first eastern terrace overlooking the Euphrates River flood plain and is at least 75 by 100 meters in size. Excavation of the latest stratum uncov-



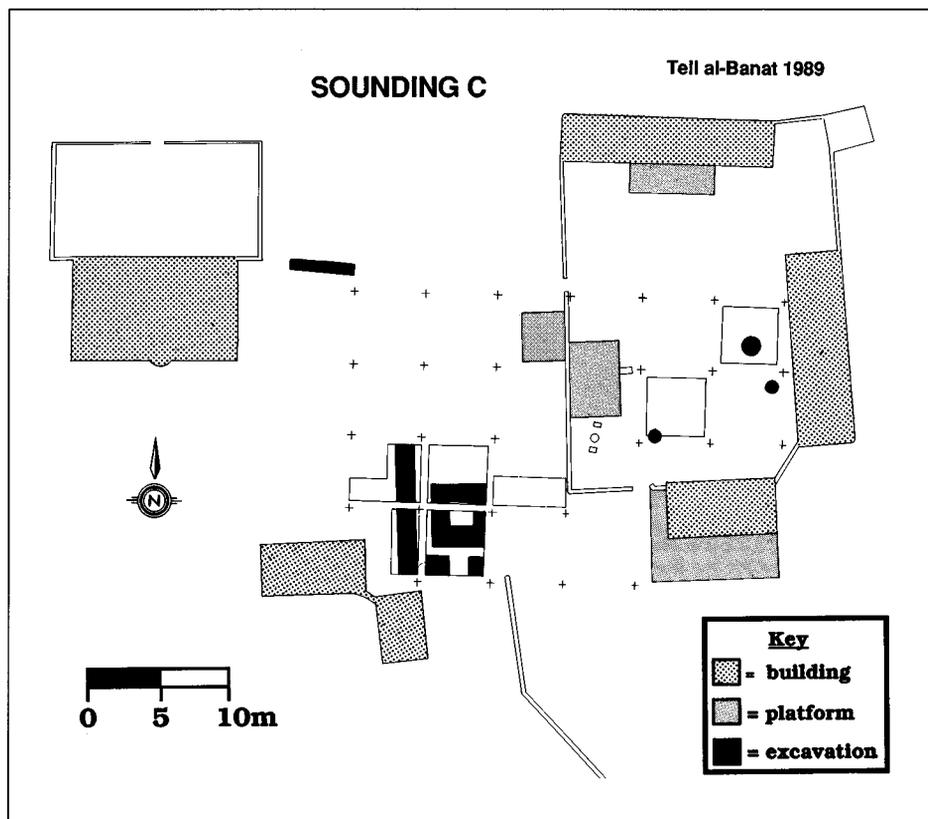
ered remains of rectilinear buildings about 10,000 years old. Walls were constructed by using shaped stones encased in mud. Limestone blocks were chipped into a standard range of shapes and sizes. In places walls were formed by lines of loaf-shaped stones 15 to 20 cm wide laid end to end and resting in a slightly wider mud matrix. Eight 2 by 2 meter squares were opened revealing the partial shapes of rectilinear rooms, a circular hearth, and a midden rich in burnt animal bones.

Preliminary analysis of the chipped stone tool assemblage indicates the settlement dates to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A period (ca. 8000-7600 B.C.). Lithics consist most noticeably of notched and notched-base arrowheads (Khiamian points), numerous scrapers, sickle blades, micropiercers, and the erminette, an elegant adze with rounded cutting edge and narrow butt. Decorated worked stone included a fragment of a stone bowl with a highly polished exterior surface on which there were two rows of three incised stick figures with outstretched limbs and head. A flat limestone fragment had deeply incised lines radiating in a sunburst motif. These and other pieces give insight to the aesthetics and ideology of the inhabitants.

◆ The Pre-Pottery Neolithic A period is generally considered to be a time of round houses; until the discoveries of 1989 at Jerf al-Ahmar, there was only one place where such early rectangular structures had been found—at Mureybet, a site on the Euphrates about 30 km south that was excavated by Maurits van Loon for the Oriental Institute in the mid-60s. The unusual construction techniques encountered at Jerf al-Ahmar are similar to those of the Mureybet rectangular houses. Thus there

was a sharing of experimental building techniques and shapes along this part of the Euphrates; although these construction techniques were short lived, rectangular houses continue to be found.

TELL MRESH. The 3.5 hectare site of Tell Mresh, which lies one kilometer west of the village of Tell al-Banat, was investigated by soundings on its summit and western slope. Four distinct phases of burials were encountered on the summit, but the dating of each phase is problematic due to the lack of burial goods, and the disturbed nature of this area. The latest phase consists of a modern children's cemetery on and slightly below the surface of the mound while the earliest is represented by a group burial—an articulated adult skeleton, an articulated infant skeleton, and a disarticulated adult—in a burial pit which may have been dug from within Iron Age levels. Grave styles ranged from elaborate stone constructions reusing architectural elements from an earlier building, to simple pits, to pits with an overlay of baked mudbricks. Several of these reused stones have large deeply incised lines of an uncertain script, possibly Aramaic, Arabic, or Syriac. However they may be much later graffiti. Others are decorated with geometric motifs including semi-circles. On the western slope a major public building dating to the Early Bronze III-IV period was found to be at least 12 by 20 meters in size, with large stone walls two meters wide supporting a baked mudbrick superstructure. The most recent floor excavated in this building was of thick white plaster into which several large circular pits had been dug.



and possibly a small indirect-entry gateway. The tower may have been a later addition designed to impede access through the passageway which existed in earlier construction phases. In all, two or more phases of the structure were encountered to a depth of three meters beneath the surface. Ceramics from the sounding date to the mid to late third millennium B.C. Early Bronze remains were also exposed beneath the Late Bronze Age stratum in the southern portions of the site in Sounding A.

The mounting evidence that Tell al-Banat was an important urban center in the mid-third millennium B.C. is reinforced when Tell al-Banat North is considered. Intensive surface survey in 1988 recovered only Early Bronze Age sherds on its surface. Its steep cone shape suggests its function was special; it is probably the ruin of a public or elite structure. How the public structures at the subsidiary sites of Tell al-Banat North and Tell Mresh were related to those within the main settlement is of interest and will be investigated in future seasons.

◆ After a period of abandonment, Mount Bazey and the southern part of Tell al-Banat were occupied in the Late Bronze Age. Sound-

ing A revealed a portion of a domestic quarter, including two streets and several buildings. The site was destroyed suddenly by fire, leaving much pottery broken but in situ. In Sounding B two strata of Late Bronze Age buildings were found constructed near and over the earlier city wall.

◆ In addition to a generous grant from the Women's Board of the University of Chicago for the 1989 field season, private funds for the project were raised under the leadership of a volunteer committee of friends of the Chicago Euphrates Project: Margaret Foorman (chair), Jane Imberman, Nina Longley, Rita Picken, and Mary Shea. This committee also hosted a tea in November at the home of Charles and Mary Shea.