Short Fieldwork Report: Tell Masaikh (Syria), seasons 1998–2007

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Tell Masaikh (Syria), seasons 1998–2007

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Tell Masaikh is a rectangular-shaped archaeological site located on the left bank of the Euphrates, some 6 km upstream from Tell Ashara (34°58'23"N 40°33'13"E). The north-western portion of the site was recently destroyed by local farmers seeking to extend their land. Excavations at the site began in 1997 as a salvage operation. Beginning in 1998, the project

expanded into a regular excavation under the direction of Maria Grazia Masetti-Rouault (École Pratique des Hautes Études – Sorbonne, Paris, France) and was associated with the excavations at Tell Ashara. The excavations were concentrated around the culmination of the site in its western part where a Halafian occupation with a stone wall was found on the bottom, followed by an Old Babylonian village (trench D), and a Neo-Assyrian palace in the upper layers (trenches D and E). Three trenches in the lower Neo-Assyrian town were also excavated (F, G and H). In some places, the remains of Hellenistic-Roman structures were found, most of them close to the surface and indistinguishable due to erosion.

The major settlement, dated to the Neo-Assyrian period, is rectangular and surrounded by still visible walls. In the mid-9th century BCE, the Assyrians established a military colony with a governor's palace and a lower town covering ca. 25 hectares. It is likely that during this period the town was called Kar-Assurnasirpal (Akk. "harbour of Assurnasirpal [II]"). Around the beginning of the 8th century BCE, under the governorship of Nergal-eresh, the town and neighbouring area flourished and perhaps gained a certain degree of autonomy. By the mid-8th century BCE however, Assyrian kings re-conquered the land and converted the palace into a stronghold. After the fall of the Neo-Assyrian kingdom, the town was abandoned and later partially re-settled during the early Roman period, finally served as a cemetery in Roman and Islamic times (Masetti-Rouault 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006).

Studies on the human remains from Tell Masaikh were parallel to those of Tell Ashara (see report in this volume). The total number of individuals is 404 (3 excavated in 1998, 9 in 1999, 32 in 2000, 7 in 1998–2000, 46 in 2001, 80 in 2002, 34 in 2003, 22 in 2004, 50 in 2005, 55 in 2006, and 66 in 2007). Most individuals came from the Islamic and Late Roman cemeteries, some poorly preserved Old Babylonian skeletons were found in trench D, and a few Neo-Assyrian skeletons were excavated mostly beneath the floors of houses in the lower town (Sołtysiak 2002, 2003, 2005; Tomczyk & Sołtysiak 2007). Roughly half of the sample could not be dated because the Islamic and Late Roman cemeteries covered more or less the same area (trenches E and F). In the case of the simple pit graves, because of a general lack of grave goods, it was often impossible to distinguish between the two periods. There has been an attempt however to date some of the burials using body position and orientation (Frank 2006). The Islamic cemetery was in use until the 13th century CE, although there were also a few recent burials in the southern part of the site.

Frequencies of sex and basic age categories are presented chronologically in **Table 1**. Contrary to Tell Ashara, at least two clear biases were recognized at Tell Masaikh. Firstly, there were more males than females buried in the Late Roman and Islamic cemeteries (and this difference is also seen in the skeletons that could not be dated). It is not likely that this bias was caused by inadequate sex determination methods, because a similar pattern appears in the results of all sexing techniques e.g., those based on skull and pelvic morphology and metric measurements. No completely reliable interpretation may be offered at this stage of the research. However, it is possible that such a predominance of males in areas E and F reflects frequent military conflicts in this border area between Romans, then the Eastern Roman Empire and Parthians, Sasanians, and then the Early Islamic Caliphate.

The preliminary analysis of the spatial distribution of the Pre-Islamic and Islamic graves from the first excavation seasons suggests that the large proportion of males may have been very high in the earlier part of the cemetery near the top of the tell. Islamic burials in the lower areas seem to contain both male and female remains. A bias recognised not only in the Roman, but also in the Islamic sample may then be an artefact of poor chronological discrimination.

Another clear bias is the very high number of infants in the Late Roman cemetery; many of them were neonates and perinates. It is possible that burial customs (i.e., differential placement) were responsible for this difference, because in other periods, the low number of neonates is atypical of a pre-industrial society. That the Late Roman period is an exception suggests some kind of cultural discontinuity, which needs further investigation, but may be in some way associated with a higher proportion of males in the same period. The Late Roman period was also exceptional in its higher rates of linear enamel hypoplasia compared to the periods before and after it, both at Tell Masaikh and Tell Ashara (Tomczyk et al. 2007).

Table 1. Sex and age patterns in the chronological sub-samples from Tell Masaikh.

Period	Infants (0-2 years)	Children (2 to 14 years)	Juveniles (14-21 years)	Adults			Total
				F	?	M	
Old Babylonian	1	3		3	8	5	20
Neo-Assyrian	2	2		5	1	3	13
Achaemenian					1		1
Hellenistic	1	1				1	3
Late Roman	24	6	1	6	5	14	56
Pre-Islamic	8	3	1	2	1	8	23
Pre-Islamic/Islamic	1	1		4		6	12
Islamic	14	10	5	17	32	38	116
Unknown	30	17	6	23	48	36	160
Total	81	43	13	60	96	111	**404**

People buried in the Islamic cemetery at Tell Masaikh more often suffered from dental ca-ries than the Bronze Age inhabitants of Tell Ashara (Jaskulska & Sołtysiak 2002). This finding may be related to the development of agriculture following the construction of the great canal (later referred to as Nahr Dawrin) which supplied water for irrigation to communities on the left bank of the Euphrates. The precise dating of this canal is impossible, but no doubt, it was used for irrigation from the Neo-Assyrian period to the beginning of Islamic rule over the middle Euphrates valley.

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Jebel Mashtale and Tell Marwaniye (Syria), seasons 2005–2006

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In the early 2000s, archaeological excavations at Tell Masaikh (see report in this volume) were accompanied by surveys of the left bank of the Euphrates. Among many small sites dated chiefly to the Iron Age and later periods, two partially destroyed areas of settlement were found: Jebel Mashtale (34°53'40"N 40°36'23"E, ca. 10 km downstream from Tell Ma-