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Short Fieldwork Report: Tell Arbid (Syria), seasons 1996–2010

A. Sołtysiak

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Short Fieldwork Reports

Tell Arbid (Syria), seasons 1996–2010

Arkadiusz Soltysiak

Department of Bioarchaeology,

Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw,

ul. Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28, 00-927 Warszawa, Poland

email: a.soltysiak@uw.edu.pl

Ongoing archaeological excavations at Tell Arbid (36°52'22"N 41°01'18"E) began in 1996 by Polish-Syrian expedition directed by Piotr Bieliński, Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw, Poland. Between 2008 and 2010, another archaeological expedition directed by Rafał Koliński, Institute of Prehistory, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland operated at so-called Sector P. Over the last 15 years of excavations, large areas of the ancient town were unearthed in various parts of the irregular site which extends for ~40ha (see **Figure 1** on page 26 in this volume).

The oldest known strata at Tell Arbid are dated to the Ninevite 5 period, i.e. first half of the third millennium BCE. During this period the site reached its maximum size and was densely occupied, with some public buildings and administrative areas found among regular houses. After the Akkadian period the settlement size diminished and in the first half of second millennium BCE (Middle Bronze Age, local Khabur Ware period) Tell Arbid was covered by scattered houses and was partially used as a cemetery. Later (e.g., Late Bronze Age, Neo-Babylonian and Hellenistic periods), the site was occasionally inhabited and was eventually used as a burial place. Recently, the lower parts of Tell Arbid have been settled partially by a small Kurdish village. Preliminary results of archeological excavations at Tell Arbid have been published in the journal *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean* (recently Bieliński 2008). A report on the animal remains from Tell Arbid is available in the present volume of *Bioarchaeology of the Near East* (Piątkowska-Małecka & Smogorzewska 2010).

In all excavated areas at Tell Arbid several human remains were unearthed, usually in regular graves, sometimes as small secondary bone scatters. Many 3rd and 2nd millennium burials were abundant in grave goods e.g., two chamber graves dated to the Mitanni period contained many pieces of jewellery as well as fine vessels (Smogorzewska 2006). The Khabour Ware period cemeteries cluster around houses and are composed of single and multiple primary burials, and occasionally also secondary burials.

Human bones from Tell Arbid were studied in the dig house at the site during the autumn excavation seasons 2001, 2002, and then every even year after. The fieldwork protocol was based on Buikstra and Ubelaker (1994), modified and adopted to Near Eastern conditions. Selected tooth and bone samples were transported to Poland and are now stored in the Department of Bioarchaeology, University of Warsaw. Most excavated skeletons were reburied following osteological analysis.

In total, 311 more or less complete skeletons were studied together with less than 40 small bone assemblages, which often seem to be elements from regular burials left in the section during excavations and retrieved later. This total number includes also minimum numbers of individuals for multiple burials. Sex and age-at-death distribution in specified periods is presented in **Table 1**. Most skeletons that could not be precisely dated may be attributed to more general chronological subsets e.g., the Bronze Age or Pre-Islamic period.

Table 1. Sex and age-at-death distribution in the sample of human remains from Tell Arbid.

Period	0-2 years	2.5-14 years	15-21 years	Adults			Total
				F	?	M	
Ninevite 5	7		2	2	4		15
Early Dynastic III	11	2		4	4		21
Akkadian	11	2	4	3	6	3	29
Post-Akkadian	14	5	1	2	3	2	27
Khabur Ware	29	36	3	20	20	9	117
Mitanni			1	1			2
Hellenistic	1	1				2	4
Post-Hellenistic		1	1		5	2	9
Islamic	3	7	2	2	5	2	21
EBA or MBA	1	1		1	3	3	9
Unknown	16	11	2	1	14	3	47
Total	93	66	16	36	64	26	311

There is an evident sex and age-at-death bias in the sample. In the Khabur Ware period females were preferentially buried in the cemetery located on the eastern slope of the tell (Sectors P and S), especially in single graves, while multiple burials contained both male and female skeletons. During the 3rd millennium BCE, the proportion of infants (up to 2 years old) was very high and reached half of the sample. These patterns correspond with general Near Eastern burial customs that distinguish between infants buried often in domestic contexts and adults for which regular cemeteries were established outside settlement areas. Moreover, several multiple burials of foeti and neonates were found, all dated to the Ninevite 5 and Early Dynastic III periods; there is a distant analogy to the roughly contemporary site of Tell Barri (Sołtysiak 2008). In the Khabur Ware period the proportion of infants clearly decreased and older subadults were more often discovered (especially 3-5 year old children). This age distribution suggests a considerable change in the burial customs at the site. Later chronological subsets (especially Hellenistic and Post-Hellenistic subset) contain relatively more adults likely buried far away from the domestic context (see **Figure 1** for details).

A preliminary report on the human remains found in seasons 1996-2002 has been published (see Sołtysiak 2003) and a more detailed report on the skeletons from Sector P (area of the site excavated by Koliński between 2008 and 2010) has been submitted for publication (Sołtysiak & Koliński 2012). Some of the data from Tell Arbid were used by the present author in more general papers concerning temporal trends in the frequency of dental caries in the Khabur basin (Sołtysiak 2006) and on dental size reduction in northern Mesopotamia (Sołtysiak 2007).

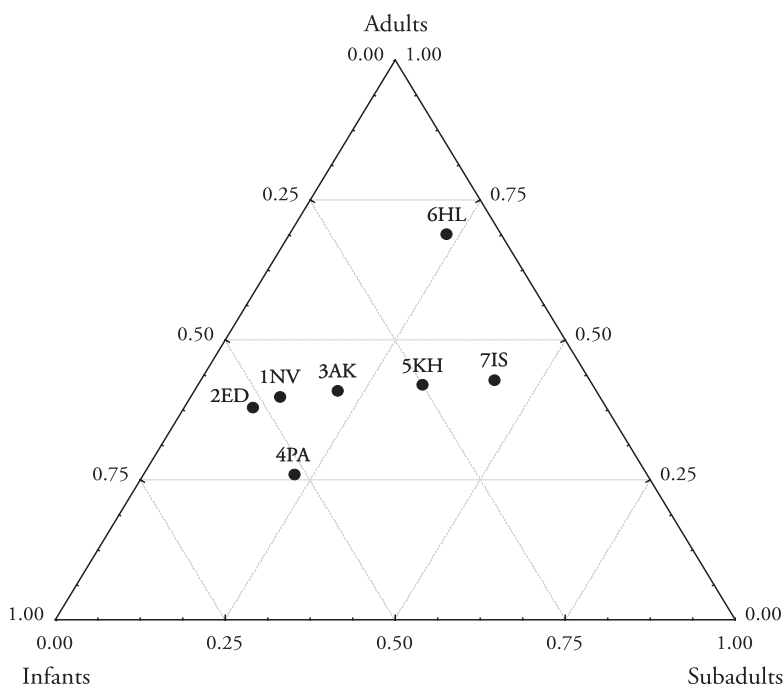


Figure 1. Ternary graph showing the distribution of the three main age categories (infants up to 2 years old, other subadults, and adults) in the seven periods. 1NV – Ninevite V, 2ED – Early Dynastic 3, 3AK – Akkadian, 4PA – Post-Akkadian, 5KH – Khabur Ware, 6HL – Hellenistic and Post-Hellenistic, 7IS – Islamic period.

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Tell Barri (Syria), seasons 2008–2010

Arkadiusz Sołtysiak

Department of Bioarchaeology,
Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw,
ul. Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28, 00-927 Warszawa, Poland
email: a.soltysiak@uw.edu.pl

During the 2008-2010 fieldwork seasons at Tell Barri (36°44'20"N 41°07'37"E) excavations focused on Area J at the western slope of the tell and around the tell itself, including trenches in the Area L, Area M, and Operation 19. During these excavations, the previously studied sample of 106 individuals (Sołtysiak 2008) was appended by the remains of 11 individuals originating from strata 1 and 2 (Early Islamic and Modern Bedouin cemetery) as well as stratum 9 (Achaemenian period). A large proportion of the skeletons was extremely eroded, with obvious weathering, root etching, and signs of invertebrate activity. Only one recent skeleton (T72) was well-preserved. Most of the skeletons belonged to adult individuals (see **Table 1**), and this evident age bias was most likely also the effect of erosion. See Sołtysiak 2008 for a description of the fieldwork protocol.

The only complete skeleton (T72) from the modern Bedouin cemetery exhibited clear directional asymmetry of the upper limb—the right side was more developed. The clavicles were the only exception, which is expected in humans (cf. Jaskulska 2009). The first sacral vertebra was partially lumbarised, with the right transverse process resembling a lumbar vertebra and the left one more developed and attached in an irregular way to the second sacral vertebra (**Figure 1**). At the same time, the first coccygeal vertebra was sacralised.

While the skeleton T202 was poorly preserved, a few of the skeletal elements were surprisingly well-preserved, including some metatarsals, metacarpals, and phalanges. This adult individual exhibited still preserved one deciduous canine, at least two cervical ribs, and non-specific deformation of the proximal end of the right fibula. Moreover, polysyndactyly was recognized in the left third finger which split in the middle of the proximal segment, had two distinct middle segments, and joined in the distal segment (**Figure 2**). The distal end of the corresponding metacarpal was broadened in comparison to its right counterpart. At least