

Archaeological Discoveries at Tell Tuneinir, Syria

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Tuneinir is a 40 hectare archaeological site situated along the Khabur River downstream from the modern town of Hasake, Syria (Figure 1). Ten seasons of rescue excavation by St. Louis Community College have discovered architectural remains and artifacts spanning from 2700 BC until AD 1401 when the city was destroyed by the Mongols. The work at Tuneinir has been made possible the volunteer staff and student archaeologists.¹ The archaeological investigation of Tell Tuneinir² was a necessary response to the construction of the Middle Khabur River reservoir downstream from Hasake. The dam was completed in 1997 and future seasons of work at the site will depend upon the rainfall pattern. Approximately 10% of the ancient city has been explored by archaeological excavation. Our excavation strategy has been to fully expose a number of large buildings in each major sector of the site (Figure 2).

The founding of Tuneinir was contemporaneous with the first occupation at the nearby sites of Tell Atij, Tell Judeda, and Tell Raqai. The oldest sites near Tuneinir are Tell Ziyada and Tell Umm Qseir where the deepest deposits date to the Halafian Period (5500-4500 BC). Diagnostic artifacts in the deepest loci at Tuneinir include Ninevite V incised pottery, metallic ware pottery, a vast amount of undecorated utility pottery, bone tools, clay zoomorphic figurines (sheep, goats, and horses), and clay tokens. The two tokens from the third millennium deposits relate to animal products (symbolized by an astragalus shaped token) and textile production (symbolized by a token shaped like a robe). Tuneinir's agricultural role is underlined by a decorated sherd from the third millennium which shows stylized grazing animals.³

¹ We gratefully acknowledge the assistance provided by the Direction General of Antiquities and Museums; especially the years of patient work by Ibrahim Nano, the Syrian representative and colleague working with the St. Louis Community College team. One of the joys of working at Tuneinir has been the chance to develop strong ties with the Syrian Orthodox Church and the Church of the East congregations in the modern towns of Hasake, Kamishley, Melekiyeh, Tell Tamir, Mardin, and Midyat.

² Fuller, M. and Fuller, N., "Tell Tuneinir on the Khabur: Preliminary Report on Three Seasons". *AAS*, 37-38(1987-1988), 279-290; "Tuneinir" in "Archaeology in Syria", *AJA*, 95:4 (1991) 738-740; "Tuneinir" in "Archaeology in Syria", *AJA*, 98:1 (1994), 157-158; "A Medieval Church in Mesopotamia", *Biblical Archaeologist*, 57:1 (1994) 38-45; "Continuity and Change in the Syriac Population at Tell Tuneinir, Syria", *ARAM* 6 (1994), 259-277.

³ Professor Horace Hummel (Concordia Seminary in St. Louis) supervised the excavation of the Bronze Age strata in Area I at Tuneinir.

Many sites in the Khabur River Valley were abandoned and never reoccupied by approximately 2000 BC. Diverse opinions exist as to the cause of the abandonment and why it did not affect sites such as Tell Mozan (Urkish), Tell Brak (Nagar), and Tuneinir. Pottery forms and a cylinder seal from Tuneinir demonstrate that it was a viable settlement through both second and first millennia.

Tuneinir evolved from an agricultural settlement into a significant town once the Khabur River became the frontier between the Parthian and Roman Empires. The evolution of Tuneinir to a town would occur at the same time that Dura Europos rose to become a major urban center along the Euphrates River. Military and political pressure would lead to the demise of Dura Europos in AD 256, but Tuneinir would continue to grow until it reached the status of small city during the Islamic Period. The rescue excavation of Tuneinir by St. Louis Community College has attempted to document all phases of the site's occupation, but the focus of our research has been on the city's urban heritage during the Byzantine and Islamic Periods.

Early Byzantine Christians

One result of the excavation at Tuneinir has been the identification of buildings and artifacts associated with a Christian community that thrived at the city during both the Byzantine and Islamic Periods. Artifacts from the summit of the mound, in Area I, may represent the presence of a Roman/Byzantine Period church in that sector of the site. The specific artifacts include the nozzle of a lamp decorated with the molded relief of a saint⁴ riding horseback and carrying a cross, a pottery jar decorated with a painted cross, and a fragment of polished marble. Associated pottery and two legible copper coins (minted in Antioch by Constantine I and Constantine II) date to the 4th and 5th centuries. The contours of the marble fragment are reminiscent of the altar dedicated to St. Serge at the Deir Mar Sarkis in Maloula, Syria and a marble altar in the monastery museum at Deir Bishoy in the Wadi Natron, Egypt. Popular tradition dates the marble altar at Deir Mar Sarkis to the 4th century AD. No architectural trace of a church was discovered in Area I because several Ayyubid Period houses and associated terraces disturbed the Roman and Byzantine strata in that portion of the site.

Mudbrick Church

The ruins of a mudbrick church are situated along the extreme eastern margin of the site. Before excavation, the ruins of the church were misinterpreted by several scholars as the remains of a Roman tower or fortification. The mudbrick church may have started as a Byzantine Period

⁴ The lamp nozzle design fits within the tradition of St. George; a popular saint among the modern Syrian Orthodox Church and Church of the East congregations.

domestic house which measured 10.8 meters (E-W) by 11.64 meters (N-S). The church grew in each time period until it reached 20.0 by 13.4 meters during the Ayyubid Period (Figure 3). Rooms for the priest were added to the south side of the church during the Abbasid or Ayyubid Period. Fragments of inscriptions on various artifacts (pottery jars, fired bricks, and Eucharist boxes) are all in Syriac.

The outlines of four superimposed altars were discovered along the east wall of the church. The Byzantine altar was made of mudbrick and faced with plaster while the Islamic phase altars were more substantial features manufactured out of stucco. The east wall of the church was flat during the Byzantine and Umayyad Phases, but modified into an apse during the Abbasid and Ayyubid Phases. The addition of the apse may reflect a shift in the congregation from the traditions of the church of the East to the traditions of the Syrian Orthodox Church. The shift in architecture corresponded to an increase in the complexity of church decoration that could also be explained by a shift in the congregation.

Directly associated with the Byzantine altar were sherds from a green glass beaker decorated with ribbons and rounded bosses of glass. Similar glass at Susa dates from the 5th to 7th century and parallels to this form in the Corning Glass Museum have been associated with Sasanian glass production.

Three steps (called the *derage* in Syriac) connected the nave with the *haikal* (Syriac, temple room); five distinct phases of superimposed steps were identified when the steps were disassembled. Fragments of a molded and painted lintel, dating to the Abbasid Phase, were reused in the ballistrade during the final rebuilding phase of the *derage*.

Fragments of a painted lintel, dating to the Byzantine Period, were found beneath the floor of the *haikal*. The Byzantine lintel measures 1.55 meter and once spanned the doorway between the nave and *haikal*. It is decorated with the design of three crosses painted with red and black paint.

Two cisterns were constructed during the Byzantine Period to collect rainwater and snowmelt from the roof of the church. Both cisterns were filled with soil during the 9th or 10th centuries and a number of artifacts were found intentionally buried in both cisterns. The most significant of these artifacts are two amber colored glass oil lamps (Syriac, *candilo*) and a clear glass, stemmed wine chalice (Syriac, *koso*) discovered in the cistern situated at the northwest corner of the church. A radiocarbon sample beneath the glass artifacts has a calibrated radiocarbon date of AD 380 to 700 (Beta-74631) while a sample from deeper in the cistern fill has a calibrated radiocarbon date of AD 660 - 970 (Beta-74632). Byzantine, Umayyad, and Abbasid artifacts (lamps, pottery, coins) were found in several loci within the northwest cistern.

A second cistern, situated along the south margin of the church, contained a variety of domestic pottery sherds, animal bones, and eggshells. One of the sherds from the south cistern was incised with the Syriac word *Abou* ("Father") and the cistern is only 10 meters from the rooms identified as the priest's house. Inscriptions on other sherds from the second cistern give the name "Father of

Peace” (in Syriac) and “Rose” (in Arabic). The two names may be of a priest and his wife, or the names of individuals who made donations of specific pottery vessels (and their contents) to the church.

The destruction of the Area III church does not appear linked with the burning and evidence of warfare found in other parts of the site. The roof and walls of the church had already collapsed before the 13th and 14th century episodes of warfare and burning. A heavy snowfall or earthquake may have been responsible for the collapse of the church. Christians returned to the ruined church and left offerings of blue glazed hooded saucer lamps on top of the ruined *haikal* and constructed a small plaster lined basin in the fill above the prothesis. The function of the basin could have been for baptisms or to hold offerings.

Monastery

An elaborate monastic complex (Figure 4) was discovered in 1997 at the southern margin of Tuneinir. Sherds from the surface around the monastery and the fill within the buildings include Early Byzantine wares (5th/6th century) and Roman Brittle Ware (associated with the 2nd through 4th centuries). The monastery church was built out of local limestone and slowly decayed until the destruction of the city by Mongol troops during Tamerlane’s invasion of Syria in AD 1401.

Artifact and architectural evidence indicate that the monastery was intensely used during the Umayyad and Abbasid Periods, but pillaged during the unrest associated with the Seljuk Turk incursion into northern Syria. Several Abbasid Period lamps were discovered inside monastery church as well as a Late Byzantine coin of the 11th century. The monastery continued in a reduced capacity during the Ayyubid Period.⁵

The final use of the monastery was as the place of burial for a handful of men who were interred in the *haikal* and baptistery of the monastery church. Our initial assumption, that these were Ottoman Period Bedouin burials, was called into question when an unglazed clay oil lamp was found associated with a burial (locus 937036) in the baptistery. Radiocarbon dating⁶ of a sample of human bone from burial locus 937036 has yielded a calibrated radiocarbon date of AD 1410 +/-70. The osteological analysis⁷, associated artifacts, and radiocarbon date identify the burials in the baptistery and *haikal* as the last population of monks who died in the monastery during the dark days of Tamerlane’s invasion.

⁵ Several hooded saucer lamps, typical of the Ayyubid Period, were found inside the monastery church.

⁶ Beta-109965 is a date obtained from bone collagen extracted with alkali.

⁷ Osteoarthritis of the knees was identified on burial 937036 by Helen Cho, University of Missouri - Columbia.

The monastery included a sanctuary, *haikal* (Figure 5), baptistery (W. Syriac *Beth Ma'mudita*; E. Syriac, *Beth el Mather* “House of giving the name”), refectory (W. Syriac *Beth Hsamita*; E. Syriac *Beth Shametha*) and mortuary chapel (Syriac, *Beth Kadeshy*). The refectory is large enough to have accommodated approximately 30 monks; directly attached to the refectory is the kitchen and wine press. A pottery plaque decorated with the design of the forked arm cross was found in the monastery kitchen.

The wine press consists of a crushing basin linked by a conduit to a fermentation vat equipped with a sediment trap (Figure 6). The fermentation vat would have held approximately 650 gallons of wine (in modern terms, that translates into 3250 bottles of red wine). Today, wine grapes are tended in several Christian villages upstream of Tuneinir. Most of the local red wine is used for domestic purposes, but some is donated to the churches for use in communion. It is significant to note that cracks/fissures in the floor of the crushing basin were sealed with tar. The cracks may have resulted from an earthquake or the natural result of decades/centuries of use. Whatever the cause, the cracks were sealed and the crushing basin was kept in production. Two artifacts found in the fill of the fermentation vat include a pottery jar for transferring the wine to jars and an elaborately decorated channel nozzle oil lamp.

Syriac inscriptions have been identified on a clay sealing and a large ostrakon found in the monastery church. The sealing is of particular interest because it may have closed the mouth of a jar used for sacramental wine. The three Christian names, preserved as signet ring impressions on the sealing, are tentatively identified⁸ as Bar Denho, Sabrah Abel, and Bar Sergius.

Three molded stucco panels have been recovered from the monastery. The first panel illustrates (Figure 7) a foliated cross resembling the 13th and 14th century Armenian Khatchk'ar in the cemetery of Noraduz⁹. It was mounted on the south wall of the church. Two molded stucco panels framed a niche along the south wall in the interior of the *haikal*; it is likely that the niche held either a reliquary or the consecrated communion bread. The decorative motif of each panel is of the cross flanked by a series of geometric and rosette designs. Similar panels were used in the Area III church during the Abbasid Period.

Two of the most significant artifacts from the monastery were found directly east of the monastery church among a series of ruined pottery kilns. A broken marble reliquary box (Syriac, *Semant Garme*) was found among the

⁸ Translation of the three names were made at the site by Archbishop Mor ostethaos Matta Rohom of the Syrian Orthodox Church who resides at the Cathedral of St. George in Hasake, Syria.

⁹ Jeni, Giulio, “The figurative arts of the khatchk'ar” in *The Armenians: 2000 years of Art and Architecture*. Translated by Bryan Fleming. (Paris, 1995), 227-264; plates 125-128.

ruined kilns as well as a small bronze bell (Syriac, *Zagga*) that would have been used in the monastery refectory to begin and end the common noonday meal. Neither of these artifacts should have left the confines of the *haikal* or refectory. Their presence, discarded or intentionally hidden in the ruined pottery factory, can be interpreted as indicative of an episode of raiding and looting by the Seljuks during the 11th century.

The reliquary is decorated with the sign of the cross on all sides (Figure 8) and underneath, but it bears no inscription to indicate the nature of the relic. An interesting possibility is that the reliquary could have held a tooth of St. Febronia¹⁰ who Syrian Christians remember as a martyr in the city of Nisibis during the reign of Diocletian (AD 284-305). The reliquary from Tuneinir is the right size for a tooth and oddly enough has a “molar” like look.

Summary

The Ayyubid Period city of Tuneinir consisted of markets, khans, a bath complex, church, monastery, mosque (*mesjed*) and residential quarters (both elite /and commoner). The artifacts and architecture from Areas 1, 3, 9 and 10 provide clear evidence for a significant community of Syriac speaking Christians who thrived at Tuneinir from the Byzantine Period until the city’s destruction during the invasion of Tamerlane. Its population was a mixture of Syriac speaking Christians and Arabic speaking Muslims.

¹⁰ Brock, Sebastian P., and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy women of the Syrian Orient*. (Berkeley, 1987), 150-176.

