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**Short Fieldwork Report: Tell Ashara (Syria), seasons 1999–2007**

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## Short Fieldwork Reports

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### Tell Ashara (Syria), seasons 1999–2007

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The ancient city of Terqa, located on the right bank of the Euphrates 60 km downstream from modern Deir ez-Zor, is well known to historians of Mesopotamia for a variety of reasons. Mainly, it was the primary cult center of Dagan, one of the chief deities in the northern steppes. It was also the capital city of the Kingdom of Hana, which had been established by a Kassite dynasty following the destruction of Mari by the Babylonians. Excavations at the ruins of Terqa (modern Tell Ashara, 34°55'20"N 40°34'05"E) began in 1976 by Georgio Buccellati (University of California, US) and were continued from 1987 by a French expedition directed by Olivier Rouault (Lyon-2 University, France). Recently the excavation has developed into a French-Syrian project co-directed by Olivier Rouault and Yasser al-Showan. Unfortunately, a major portion of the site is covered by a modern village and excavations are limited to an open space near the public park and to a small strip of land over the Euphrates valley. In spite of this inconvenience, many interesting structures have so far been discovered including the temple of Ninkarrak, the goddess of health, a large administrative building from the Middle Bronze Age (MBA) and some portions of the city wall, as well as many private dwellings dating from the Early Bronze Age to the beginning of the Late Bronze Age. The city of Terqa flourished especially during the later MBA when after the fall of Mari it became the capital of the whole region (Buccellati 1983; Rouault 2001, 2004, 2005, 2006). In 1998, the Ashara archaeological project was broadened and several sites on the left bank of the Euphrates have since been excavated by Maria Grazia Masetti-Rouault (see reports on Tell Masaikh, Jebel Mashtale and Tell Marwaniye in this volume). Altogether, data from these sites provides insight into the history of the middle Euphrates valley from the Chalcolithic period to modern times (cf. Rouault & Masetti-Rouault 1993; Rouault 2001; Masetti-Rouault 2001, 2007).

Studies of the human remains from Tell Ashara began in 2001 by Arkadiusz Sołtysiak and in 2005 the expedition was joined by Jacek Tomczyk. Starting in 2006, the archaeological activities were supported by a bioarchaeological sub-project which includes Arkadiusz Sołtysiak, co-ordinator, Jacek Tomczyk, human osteologist, Anna Gręzak (Warsaw University, Poland), zooarchaeologist, and Lucyna Kubiak-Martens (BIAX Consult, The Netherlands), palaeobotanist. The preliminary results of studies on the human remains from Tell Ashara

were published in *Athenaeum* (Sołtysiak 2002, 2007; Tomczyk & Sołtysiak 2007). Further papers will be published in the series *Akh Purattim*, which has recently been established to present the results of archaeological research in the middle Euphrates valley. Also a study on the health status of the local population from Tell Ashara and Tell Masaikh (Jaskulska & Sołtysiak 2002) and another concerning temporal changes in the frequency of linear enamel hypoplasia (Tomczyk et al. 2007) have been produced so far.

The human skeletons from Tell Ashara, Tell Masaikh, Jebel Mashtale and Tell Marwan-iyeh were studied in the excavation house located in Darnaj on the left bank of the Euphrates. Due to space limitations, all the remains from earlier seasons (to 2005) were re-buried; the new skeletons continue to be stored in Darnaj. All teeth and bone samples were exported to Poland for further laboratory studies (dental microwear and elemental analyses are in progress). The fieldwork protocol was based on Buikstra and Ubelaker (1994), with some additional observations and measurements taken.

A total of 254 individuals were studied (44 excavated in 1999, 66 in 2000, 7 in 2001, 24 in 2003, 32 in 2004, 33 in 2005, 43 in 2006, and 5 in 2007). Basic sex and age distributions in the sub-samples are presented in **Table 1** in chronological order. Most skeletons were found in domestic contexts, beneath the floors and between houses. However, it seems likely that, at least in the Old Babylonian period, the excavated part of the site served as a cemetery. Also, a number of skeletons came from another cemetery which was used from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century until the beginning of excavations. Unfortunately, several of the recovered individuals from seasons 1999–2000 could not be assigned to a temporal period, but it is possible that, after full digitalisation of the fieldwork records, most of them will be at least roughly datable.

There is no sex bias in the whole sample, although among the skeletons of unknown chronology there are almost three times the number of females than males, and this ratio is in-

**Table 1.** Sex and age patterns in the sub-samples from Tell Ashara (in chronological order).

Period	Infants (0-2 years)	Children (2-14 years)	Juveniles (14-21 years)	Adults			Total
				F	?	M	
Early Dynastic III	4			3	4	2	13
Akkadian	1	1			1		3
Early Shakkanaku			1	2	5	2	10
Middle Shakkanaku		1					1
Late Shakkanaku	1	4		1	3	4	13
Shakkanaku (general)	3	3		1	1	3	11
Old Babylonian	5	6	3	8	8	10	40
Bronze Age (general)	3		1		2	3	9
Middle Bronze Age		3			3	2	8
Khana	1				1		2
Late Bronze Age			1			1	2
Iron Age	4	1		1	3		9
Parthian				1			1
Islamic	3			4	3	5	15
Modern Islamic	2	6	1	4	5	7	25
Unknown	7	23	4	19	32	7	92
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>254</b>

verse in the Bronze Age burials. Perhaps this difference reflects some social custom, although proper interpretation needs spatial analysis which is not possible at this time. No clear bias may be observed in the age profile of the whole sample, and the chronological sub-samples are too small to detect any possible deviations from a regular attritional age-at-death distribution.

During the past nine excavation seasons, some distinguished burials were found in the Early and Middle Bronze Age strata, including three lavishly adorned graves belonging to adult males (TQ26 F211, TQ27 F167), one having also the complete skeleton of an equid (TQ26 F222). Perhaps the most interesting find in the whole sample was the skeleton of a 40-45 years-old male (TQ22 F219, Old Babylonian period) presenting with a broken left clavicle and ten left ribs. These fractures were completely healed, often with horizontal or vertical displacement (**Figure 1**). The trauma was characterized by a vertical line. This combination of fractures may have resulted from a strong blow or from a vehement fall. The complete healing of this truly life-threatening injury suggests very good social care during the recovery period. It is also possible that the left fibula was broken at its midshaft; unfortunately, only a portion of this area was preserved. However, a healed fracture combined with dislocation is also suggested by considerable asymmetry of the distal epiphyses of both fibulae: the left was expanded in the area of the lateral malleolus (maximum breadth 35 mm on the left side vs. 29 mm on the right side).



**Figure 1.** Selected ribs of individual TQ22 F219 with healed fractures (interior view).

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