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Tell Abu Hamid

This account of the results that the authors are presenting herewith on behalf of the Abu Hamid expedition staff, is very preliminary since they have only recently returned from the field.[1]

This was the first season (January 15th–March 15th, 1986) of a joint Jordano-French project sponsored by Yarmuk University, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and the Direction Générale des Relations Culturelles, Scientifiques et Techniques du Ministère Français des Relations Extérieures (DGRCST). The expedition received great support from the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and a grant from the National Geographic Society.

Situation of the site

Abu Hamid is located in the Jordan Valley, 16 km north-west of Deir ʿAlla on the terrace formed by the marls of the Pleistocene Lake Lisan (FIG. 1), at a mean altitude of –240 m below sea-level. Nowadays the precipitation is, in that area, around 200 mm per year. The site was discovered in 1975 during the first season of the Jordan Valley Survey by M. Ibrahim, K. Yassine and J. Sauer and was mentioned in *BASOR*, 222 (1976). In their report to the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, we read: 'Of the neolithic/chalcolithic sites, the new site of Abu Hamid should be singled out and given special mention here because of its very large size with some structures appearing, and the impressive assortment of surface artifacts'.

Unfortunately, since 1976, the site has suffered from agro-business and was recently partially bulldozed. There was an urgent need to begin a rescue excavation.

1. Abu Hamid (1986). View from the site towards the north.

Objectives of the first season

Our goals were:

1) to establish the extent and the nature of the settlement.

2) to locate both chronologically and spatially as precisely as possible Tell Abu Hamid's position and role relative to other sites of the Jordan river drainage system such as Shunah, Neve Ur, Djebel Sabarta/Pella, Beisan, Farah, Ghrubba, Jericho, Ghassul, and outside the region, sites of the Wadi Rabah and of the coastal plain, and sites of the Bir Saba region (Abu Matar, Safadi, Shiqmim, etc.).

3) to excavate an area large enough to discover the nature of the structures and their spatial relationship, in order to answer the following questions:

   Was Tell Abu Hamid a permanent settlement? Was the population comprised of settled or partially settled pastoralists or agro-pastoralists or were they nomads? Did the settlement, which appeared from the survey to be very large, come to be a 'central place', that is, a point of exchange and interaction which, due to its situation, could very well be the case?

4) to collect, if possible in good stratigraphic and spatial context, enough material relevant to the climate and ecology to allow a comprehensive study to be made of the subsistence activities of the group.

[1] For references, the reader should consult the report on the first season of excavation to be published in 1987 in *ADAJ* and the short note of information that will appear in *Paléorient* 12/1.

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Surveys of the site and preliminary results

To enable us to answer these different questions we decided:

1) to make a general survey over a large area on and around the site to discover, with a reasonable degree of confidence, the limits of the site. At that point, on about 20 ha, only the diagnostic artifacts were picked up. This general survey showed:

a) that the lithics, flints, ground stone tools, and concentrations of stones covered an area of 5.6 hectares (1.4 km East to West; 0.4 km North to South).

b) that the site was limited on its northern and southern sides by two deep valleys where the two closer perennial springs are located. With these springs and with the proximity of the Jordan river (less than 300 m from the site), access to water was not a problem for the inhabitants.

The settlement was located near two fords of the Jordan river. Wadis such as Wadi Kufreinja coming from the Adjlun mountains, or Wadi Farah from Samaria, and the river fords, provided natural access for people moving down from the northeast and for those travelling back and forth in the area. Dr S. Helms has already shown some archaeological evidence of these movements, and some of the ties which were linking the Jordan valley people with the ones of the eastern plateau at a slightly later period.

As soon as the limits of the site were well defined, we mapped it, and then realized how much of the site had been dissected by erosion. Some gulleys with smooth slopes are certainly very ancient, others which recut them seem to be fairly recent. Next fall, with the help of a geomorphologist, we will try to establish when the different phases of erosion took place, whether or not the configuration of the site had changed a great deal since it was settled, and with the joint efforts of the botanist and zoologist we will attempt to reconstruct the paleogeography of the area surrounding the site.

2) In a second step, we dug some trenches to test if all the site had been inhabited. These soundings showed very clearly that, at the most, only an area of 2.5 hectares, including the part which has been bulldozed, had been covered with permanent or semi-permanent buildings. In all the test-trenches that we made on the western hill, we immediately reached the virgin soil, either the marls, or the red soil that in some locations covers the marls.

We can then conclude that on this western part of the site either (a) there were only very temporary dwellings, like tents or bush shelters which might have been lined with stones, such as the ones now found down-slope in the erosion gulleys (of which some are already fossilized) and that these disappeared totally with the deflation and the erosion, or (b) that this part of the site had never been the location of any building, but just used for enclosures of herds or for other activities.

This observation leads us to raise the question of the validity of the relationship between the size of the settlements and the demographic estimates based only on survey grounds.

3) Preliminary to the excavations, we proceeded to a systematic pick-up, according to the grid, of all the artifacts which were lying on the surface, and we mapped all the stones, heavy tools, concentration of artifacts, zones of flint debitage etc. over an area of 2000 m^2 that seemed to us the best preserved.

Our purpose was twofold or, if you prefer, complementary:

(a) to document by seriation and on typological grounds, as much as possible, the duration of occupation of the site, despite the erosion and deflation that could have affected the structures during the last periods of the settlement.

b) on a more methodological ground (and that will be a next stage of our research), to compare the nature of the material found on the surface with that retrieved from the excavation in order to work out for this kind of site, which is typical of many in the Jordan valley, the reliability of the evidence which can be obtained from the surface material.

Stratigraphic observations and description of structures

Finally, we opened about 300 m^2 in three main operations. The first took place in the area where we did the systematic surface collect; another one, on another spur, was a little lower in altitude, in a zone where lines of stones and delineation of pits were still visible on the ground. From the excavations, we know that the cultural deposit is very thin (0.30–0.50 m in some parts; 1 m to 1.30 m in others); we reached the virgin soil in different areas either in sections, in pits, and in one probe. All these results suggest that at least in the area which has not been bulldozed, we are in the presence of a short duration occupation settlement.

In two of the operations, we were able to distinguish two main levels of successive occupation that we might be able in the future to subdivide on the basis of some repairs to walls that we noticed while we were excavating.

The lower level which lies on the sterile soil is composed of mud-brick walls forming rectangular rooms, but, so far, we have not yet excavated complete ones. The walls are built of small plano-convex mud-bricks without any foundation trench or stone foundations. They are sometimes lined on one of their sides by a row of small pebbles; one wall might have had some niche or opening which is marked by four big stones.

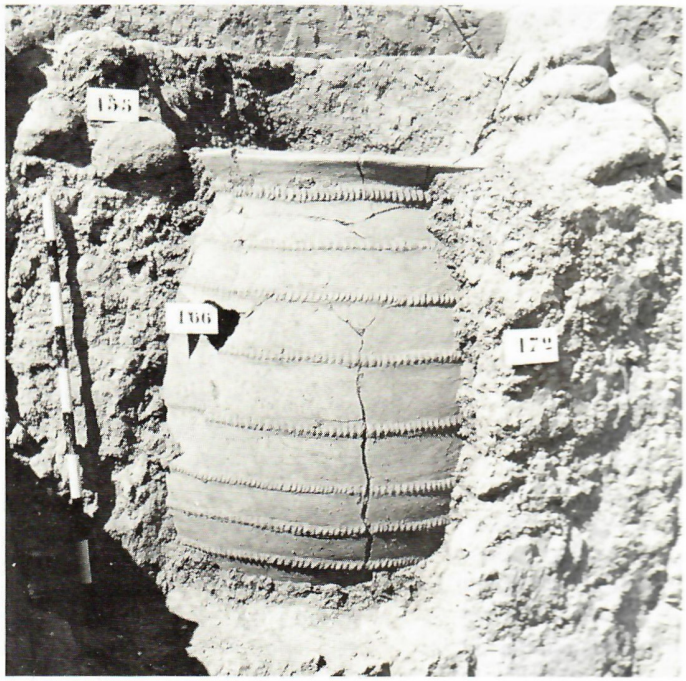
Associated with these walls are small stone surfaces and packed clay living floors on which pots, flint artifacts, and spindle whorls were collected (FIG. 2). These structures were cut in by cylindrical pits made by the inhabitants of the following occupation (FIG. 2). At least one of these pits had a base and sides well coated with a smooth yellow clay plaster and this can be considered as a storage bin; at the bottom a big stone slab was uncovered.

The upper level, to which most of the pits can be related, is badly eroded. It consists essentially of patchy remains of burnt whitish clay floors, of mud-brick walls which are preserved in most cases only on one layer of bricks, of circular clay-lined basins, of small stone fire-pits and hearths—some

2. Abu Hamid (1986). Pit 117 and fire-pit 121 (upper level) cutting into the structures of the basal level; in the background, behind wall 114, a living floor of the basal level.

3. Abu Hamid (1986), operation 3; the jar 166 and its cover of mud-bricks.

4. Abu Hamid (1986), operation 3; the jar 166 in its pit dug into the virgin soil.



of them associated with jars and cooking pots—and of larger pits filled with rubbish or with pebbles often cracked by fire. Associated with this level is an irregular sloping open area surface, delineated by little stones, and filled or covered with grey blackish organic material and remains of decayed structures of combustion.

On what appears to be the western margin of the settlement, close to remains of mud-brick stone-lined rectangular dwellings, we noticed a series of large depressions. We thought at first that these could have been temporary dwellings such as pit dwellings so often attested in the excavation reports on the late 5th/early 4th millennia sites. In order to try to find the stratigraphic link between these two kinds of structures, we decided to clean a long section along one of the erosion gulleys which cut through them.

This operation led us to discover that these pits were not, at least in that area, pit dwellings. In one of them, we found a very regular 1.50 m diameter circle consisting of two rows of four layers of bun-shaped finger-impressed bricks (FIG. 3). Inside that circle, a large amount of fallen bricks were hiding what soon appeared to be the rim of a huge pithos (FIG. 4). This jar (1.50 m ht; 1 m in diam.) had been deposited in a deep pit dug into the marls and into the underlying conglomerate sands. This heavy jar (150–180 kgs) presents an interesting feature: on its inner wall at 35 cm above the bottom are two ledge handles opposite one another. These do not seem to have ever had a prehensory function; they could have been placed there so as to indicate the level when the jar had to be refilled. The morphology of the jar, the type of ware, the

decorative coils with finger-impressed decoration are comparable to storage vessels excavated at Ghassul, in the Beisan region, and at Sahab, as attested by Dr M. Ibrahim.

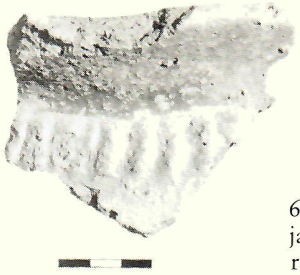
Our guess is that there are or were, in the depressions noticed nearby, more of these jars, and that this part of the settlement could have been used at some point as a storage area. But this hypothesis has to be proved by future excavations.

Concluding remarks

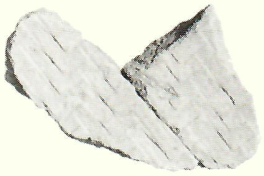
In this short presentation, we have had no time to discuss the assemblage of the artifacts nor the subsistence activities of the people. We will leave this discussion for the coming workshop on pre- and proto-history of Jordan. The lithics, especially the perforated disks (FIG. 5), comparable so closely

5. Abu Hamid (1986). Perforated disk.

to the ones found at Neve Ur on the West Bank (opposite to Shunah) on the Gaulan, and on the Hauran at Dera'a, together with the plain ware (FIGS 7–8) and the decorated pottery, painted red, (FIG. 9), and often associated with impressed bands in relief (FIG. 6), the basalt (FIG. 11) and limestone vessels, the mace-heads (FIG. 12)—some of them in hematite, others in marble—the figurines (clay horns or stone figurines (FIG. 10)) indicate an occupation which could have begun a little earlier than the foundation of Shunah North and lasted until this last site was settled. Some rare red-burnished sherds could be related to the pottery of the Wadi Rabah phase as they are evidently in its tradition. The architectural features, the assemblage of the artifacts, and the high level of production attested by the botanical and faunal remains, suggest a date for the settlement either at the extreme end of the 5th millennium or, more probably, at the first half of the 4th millennium BC. However, better samples of reliable date from a larger number of sites are needed for verification of this assumption.

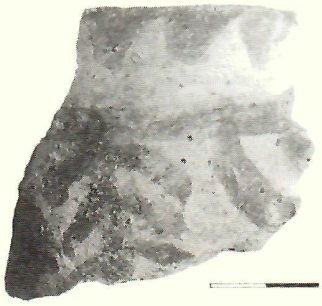


6. Abu Hamid (1986). Rim of a painted jar decorated with a band of lunates in relief.



7, 8. Abu Hamid (1986). Mat and basket impressions on the base of bowls.

9. Abu Hamid (1986). Small painted jar.



10. Abu Hamid (1986). Limestone violin figurine.