

## BOOK REVIEW

*A Neolithic Village at Tell el Kowm in the Syrian Desert*, by Rudolph H. Dornemann. The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization no. 43, Chicago, Illinois. 1986. 89pp, 12 Tables. 46 Plates. Appendix.

The site of Tell el Kowm lies at 38°51' E, 39°10' N, placing it to the northeast of Palmyra. The site is comprised of a high tell and several smaller mounds. The monograph is a study of the finds from a five day sounding in the southern side of the high tell, conducted during 2-6 May 1967, under the direction of Prof. Maurits van Loon, and also includes the results of a more detailed study carried out in February and March 1971.

The sounding took the form of a step trench, following the stratigraphy of the site. All the soil from the sounding was screened.

The first section of the monograph introduces the reader to the site and its environment, the second section discusses the stratigraphy and the few architectural features revealed by the sounding, which is 56.2m along the slope, 51.5m horizontally, 19.05m vertically, and is divided into nine steps.

The following four sections describe the small finds from the tell. Section 3 deals with the plaster vessels, found at several sites in Western Asia but not published to a great extent yet. The Tell el Kowm vessels are of gypsum, their production techniques and development are discussed. It is observed that these vessels were used for a limited period of time (contemporary with the earliest stage of pottery) in a restricted geographical area. Their production was then "abandoned as an unsuccessful Neolithic experiment" with pottery taking over. Also interesting here is the presence of "burnt" plaster vessels, which the author places as part of the development of pottery technology.

The fourth section deals with the pottery finds, and some overlapping features between the pottery and the plaster vessels are noted. The fifth section describes the stone vessels and objects as well as the few bone tool fragments found. The sixth sec-

tion deals with the flint tools, which comprise the largest category of artifacts found in the sounding.

For all the finds categories mentioned, except for the stone vessels and bone tools, stratigraphic distribution tables are used to illustrate the occurrence of the different types in the various layers. Stratigraphic distribution charts are also used to compare the occurrence of plaster vessel versus pottery fragments, and blade versus flake flint tools. Although these tables and charts are quite useful illustrative methods, the mere nature of the limited sounding excavated throws some doubt on their interpretation. This was very obvious in the case of comparing the plaster vessels with the pottery from some consecutive levels, where the small percentage of pottery found was attributed to a specialised function of the building excavated at these levels. In other cases the mere fact that the area excavated at each level is small (and maybe also the speed at which it was excavated) would be expected to give biased results, even if they were not as obvious as in the case mentioned above.

The concluding section (section 7) also attempts to place Tell el Kowm in its contemporary Neolithic setting. Here a scale on the map showing some of the Neolithic sites in Western Asia would have been of convenience. The team that worked on the site included a paleobotanist and a paleozoologist. The botanical report is presented in the appendix. It indicates plant cultivation, and irrigation agriculture is proposed. No bone report is presented, but preliminary examination of the (small) sample could not give conclusive evidence of animal domestication. These environmental studies suggest that the el Kowm settlement, like its contemporary sites, was largely dependant on food production.

The chronology of the site is based on only two C14 dates, which come from two

different layers in the middle of the sequence and are very close together. Thus the more exhaustive chronological table presented seems to be somewhat tentative. Four Neolithic (dated to 6400-6050, 6050-5675, 5675-5400 and 5400-5250 B.C. respectively) and one post Neolithic (5250 B.C.-modern) phases are given. The Neolithic phases are described and compared to contemporary phases from other sites, including Wadi Shu'aib, 'Ain Ghazal and el-Beidha in Jordan. There seems to have been a smooth continuity from the "period of early villages" through the "phase of established farming villages" up to the "beginning of the period of advanced village communities". Although comparative material could be found from sites spread over a large area of the Asiatic Near East, most of the contacts seem to be with sites to the northeast, with the desert probably forming a barrier to

contacts with the west and south.

This monograph presents a good cross-section of the Neolithic at Tell el Kowm and its association with the Neolithic of the Asiatic Near East. It certainly contributes to the concordance of the artifacts of the period. But again, its limitations, due to the short period of fieldwork, are obvious. Dornemann ends his concluding section by saying "Clearly, much needs to be added to what has been presented here to provide greater insight into the many fascinating developments which occurred through the history of the settlement at Tell el Kowm". More recent surveys and excavations in the area were carried out by a French team, the references to which are given in the monograph.

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