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The Excavations at Tell Safut*

Tell Safut stands on the northern edge of the present highway to Jerash, 1.5 km from the main Suweileh intersection, and approximately 12 km northwest of downtown Amman. The name of the tell is taken from the small village that borders it on the west. Millar Burrows noted its existence and commented on it as an interesting site (1931: 11). Pere De Vaux (1938: 418) included it in his survey of the Salt region. At first he dated the earliest pottery to the Late Bronze Age. Subsequently, he agreed with Nelson Glueck who said: 'We have collected sherds from Tell Safut on several occasions now, and have never yet, despite the most careful search, been able to find any sherds there that preceded EI I & II' (1939: 191). The present area of 17,728 sq m is bounded by the highway on the south, by two wadis on the east and northeast, by a small field on the northwest, and by the village of Safut itself on the southwest, where one of the houses has encroached upon the tell itself. The tell has been reduced in size by the road and the village. The tell has a fairly flat top, oriented ENE by WSW, measuring approximately 18 by 70 m (Glueck: 1939: 191). The present height is 927.56 m above sea level. Tell Safut overlooks the luxuriant Beq'ah, a valley which runs roughly 5 km wide for 10 km in a northeasterly direction.

Before the 1950s, the old Jerash road used to run through Suweileh. It was rerouted to run past the tell, by cutting into the tell itself. One result was the disclosure of extensive architecture, part of which was then described as 'a sloping plastered glacis revetment, resting on natural rock, and crowned by a wall. The glacis was constructed of different layers of sand, huwar, and earth, beaten into a kind of terre pisée' (Ma'ayeh 1960: 115). Traces of it remain visible today as witness to the importance of the site. But the importance of the road, the main north-south artery in Jordan, became even more evident, because it became clogged with traffic for hours nearly every day. Thus, the highway from the new airport south of Amman all the way to Jerash became a development project for the 1980s. The initial plan proposed a nearly complete removal of all the archaeologically significant strati-

graphy and architecture of Tell Safut. At the insistence of Dr Adnan Hadidi, Director-General of the Department of Antiquities, however, two alternate plans were drawn up and a rescue mission was charged with demonstrating the significance of the site to the Minister of Public Works, H.E. Mr Awni al-Masri. The final resolution was to take but a few meters off the south side, none of which appeared to be archaeologically critical.

Excavations began in 1982, jointly between the Department of Antiquities and Seton Hall University, with assistance from the American center in Amman. Included among the designated probes were two 5 m squares, near the glacis. A direct sectioning of the glacis and its wall was precluded for reasons of safety, due to the steepness of the incline and the proximity of highway traffic flowing beneath.

There is no question that the bedrock was cut in antiquity as foundation for the crowning wall, and that the composition of the inclined plane agreed with the earlier description, except that no certain signs of plaster appeared. It could have weathered away, or have been removed by the 1950s construction. There is an abundance of cement-like substance nearby, but it is clearly not part of a glacis. It should be noted that the crowning wall, as it was called, is curved, and that the segment on the west has its counterpart on the east as is evident in a pre-excavation slide. Excavation produced only MB/LB Bronze Age pottery in the layers immediately above the glacis itself which proved to be sterile.

The day after fieldwork ceased, the bulldozers cut a new section on the face of the tell and on the hillock across the way where close inspection found no traces of occupational stratigraphy. Although the new section on the tell left the previously visible glacis fragment intact, it seems that a cross-section of the glacis should have appeared somewhere. It does not. Considering that the angle of the glacis is almost identical with the embankment cut by the road builders, could it be that the exquisitely described glacis is really of 1950s vintage? But, in that case should not the Bronze Age pottery have been mixed with at least a modicum of Iron Age ware? In observing further how the bedrock drops off sharply at one point in the newly created section of the tell as it does elsewhere in

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this general vicinity, we are cautioned to allow the conjecture that there was a bedrock drop-off and a glacis relating it to the crowning wall, but only in a limited region of the tell.

Despite the presence or absence of a glacis, the oblong nature of the acropolis and its corresponding perimeter defense wall compels the quite evident conclusion: that Tell Safut as a site is not so severely damaged as it appears to be at first; and, that what is now rescued from nearly total annihilation in the name of progress is an almost complete preservation for the sake of archaeology and general cultural education (see FIG. 1).

Periodization

Middle Bronze. Sauer (1985: 209) cites Tell Safut among others as illustrative of MB II–III glacis defenses. This is neither proven nor disproven by excavation at the present time. Should Safut have had such a feature in the Middle Bronze Age, it could have continued in use into the Late Bronze Age. MB pottery came up often, but always mixed with LB. There was no pure MB stratigraphy in any of the probes.

Late Bronze pottery is attested in the lowest stratigraphy associated with perimeter defense walls, purely in at least two other squares east of the so-called glacis. One instance may prove to be a continuation of the crowning wall cited above. Both instances rest on or penetrate virgin soil, probed in each of two cases, for over a meter. More interesting is the LB outer perimeter defense wall, B.2.2. Here, a 1.25 m probe through virgin soil showed the wall, with its very narrow foundation trench, resting on bedrock.

The square that yielded the most interesting LB material was inside Wall B.2.2. It gave us a pedestalled bowl or chalice, for example. In this square a large amount, over 600 cubic centimeters, of charred two-row barley was lying under a destruction layer on which were tumbled quantities of large mud brick, some of which were intact. Among this debris was the

1. Airview of Tell Safut. Shows highway cut on south edge of tell. Also shown, ancient access road on NE along the wadi.



2. Tutelary deity of Tell Safut. Late Bronze Age. Forearms wrapped in gold foil. Metal: bronze. Note traces of smile indicate a beneficent deity. Discovered in Area B.5. in 1982.



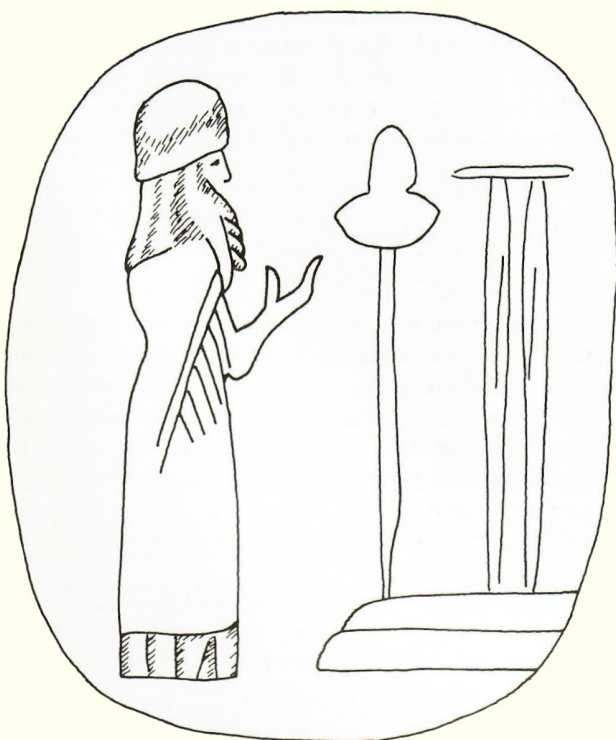
Safut figurine (see FIG. 2), a smiling deity with both forearms extended and wrapped in gold, as are the hands, one open, the other closed. Neither hand shows evidence of having held anything. The crown is exceptional in that it is flat on top, and boasts a motif not unlike a sea-shell, a conch, or perhaps a feather. The nose and proper left arm are enlarged by thick erosion. The surface of the piece is completely mineralized. Several types of copper corrosion are visible, malachite and cuprite especially. The proper right arm was re-attached. The two bronze pegs protruding from the seat and feet suggest that the figurine was attached to a chair or throne of some other material. The eyes are hollow and may have been inlaid. Metallurgical analysis obtained through MASCA of the University of Pennsylvania revealed a bronze composition of 92.8 per cent copper, 5.45 per cent tin with the remaining 1.75 per cent coming from 12 other elements. Whether this figurine is another form of the Canaanite Ba'al, an Ammonite

deity, or simply the tutelary god of Safut remains an open question.

Iron I. Two squares yielded a sequence from LB II, through a comparatively light Iron I, well covered with abundant Iron II. No destruction evidence appeared between LB and Iron I, whereas a not insignificant burn layer separates other Iron II layers. These sequences are under study for another presentation.

Iron II is the latest occupation on the site. It seems that this population overflowed former boundaries, and required the construction of a more extensive defense system to enclose a much more extensive area. In one probe, the major Iron II perimeter defense wall rested on a very thin locus over a pure Iron IIB destruction locus. This wall was reinforced by a battered wall, with a dirt core, lying up against the main wall, which was, in turn, the outer architecture of a casemate wall structure (see FIG. 3). In the one room excavated to its floor, a destruction layer covered a series of cookpots smashed *in situ*, along with figurine heads with painted features and hollow eyes, probably for insets. The walls of this room were still plastered on all sides. In a crevice or crack in the plastered floor, a dipper juglet with rounded base and high looping handle proves to be an exact parallel with one in the late Iron Age Megabelein tomb collection. It gives the date for the latest use of the floor of this room. Later usage of this general space left us with a fire spot, cook pots, Assyrian bottles, and other things which might be associated with an

3. Late Babylonian seal impression from Tell Safut 1985. Worshipper stands, hands upturned before fire stand and altar on raised platform. (Line drawing by E. Barbanes.)



obvious rebuild in the associated wall, but a clear connection with the wall could not be verified.

Exceptional among the Iron IIC finds is an iron military standard measuring 1 cm in thickness and 24 cm in diameter. It was held by three rivets to a 17 cm long hollow shaft for mounting on a long pole. On the top is a rectangular loop, perhaps for affixing banners. It is also riveted in place. There is also an iron bar, suitable for dismantling walls (see 1 Chronicles 20: 3). Major architecture on the highest part of the tell shows a cobbled floor in a large rectangular room, to which are adjoined several others with beaten earth surfaces resting on a layer of mudbrick detritus, a feature appearing in several other squares further down.

The very latest phase of occupation yielded a burned Late Babylonian seal impression (see FIG. 4) which was apparently affixed to a tie string. The seal depicts a worshipper with long hair and beard, in a long dress with a round cap, standing, palms upward, as if in prayer or priestly function, before a raised platform on which stand two elongated items, a fire on an elongated firestand and an altar.

Noteworthy features of Tell Safut, not excavated, are observed further down the tell: inset/offset walls that adjoin a major bench which encircles the north and western parts of the tell at the 905 m level. It connects with another which is accessed by a route that, after ascending 155 m from the valley floor, switches direction and continues for another 105 m, presumably to the city gates. Water is supplied to the tell from Suweileh hills running toward the tell and by at least four springs that issue from the Tell itself. That Tell Safut was easily agriculturally self-sufficient is evident not only from its natural resources, but also in the immense number of grinding stones, mortars and pestles that abounded in every square.

In conclusion, it is apparent that Tell Safut was easily defended on the North and strongly defended on the South. Evidence shows that it was occupied as early as the Middle Bronze Age, and that it flourished in the Late Bronze and

4. Tell Safut, 1982, after excavations, before being cut away for the new highway. Shows Late Bronze to Late Iron Age walls.



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Late Iron Ages when, in the light of the history, trade, and commerce of ancient Jordan, it was certainly an enviable place for a stable and sedentary community.

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