

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY AROUND TELL GHANEM AL-‘ALI (V)

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Introduction

The archaeological survey around Tell Ghanem al-‘Ali was initiated as part of the Syria-Japan joint project in the Bishri region (Directors: Katsuhiko Ohnuma and Ahmad Sultan), which investigates Bronze Age communities in the Middle Euphrates through a series of multi-disciplinary fieldwork involving archaeology, anthropology, and geology (Al-Maqdissi and Ohnuma 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011). Several seasons of excavations at Tell Ghanem al-‘Ali, approximately 50 km east of Raqqa, resulted in the recovery of sedentary occupations during the Early Bronze Age with some Middle Bronze Age burials (Hasegawa 2010). Our survey covers an area around Tell Ghanem al-‘Ali, up to ca. 10 km at the farthest, in an effort to recover prehistoric occupations and traces of land-use by Bronze Age inhabitants at Tell Ghanem al-‘Ali and two neighboring tells at Hammadin and Mugla as-Saghir (Fig. 1; Nishiaki et al. 2009, 2010, and 2011).

The main objectives of the survey are 1) to establish the long-term occupational history from the Palaeolithic to the Chalcolithic period as historical backgrounds of the Bronze Age occupations in this area, 2) to clarify changing settlement patterns and land-use during the Early and Middle Bronze Age, and 3) to examine the issues on Bronze Age social groups at the Middle Euphrates, particularly assessing the validity of the current dichotomous understanding that separates agriculture-based communities from pastoral nomads (Nishiaki 2010b).

Aims of this season

The survey of this season had two main objectives. The first was to clarify spatial and temporal boundaries of Bronze Age cemeteries in the steppe areas on the Bishri plateau. For this purpose, we surveyed three areas, including the Euphrates lowland, a cairn field in Wadi Beilune, and Jezla. The second objective was to obtain lithic and charcoal samples from some Palaeolithic sites for the identification of lithic industries and their radiometric dating. Several test trenches were opened at promising locations on the terraces of Wadi Kharar. Our recording system of survey path, discovered sites and finds is described in Nishiaki et al. (2009: 146–7).

Preliminary results of this season

1) Euphrates lowland (Areas 32A–32D)

The results of our previous surveys suggest a spatial pattern in which the density of Bronze Age tombs increases on the steppe plateau near the occupations at Tell Ghanem al-‘Ali, Tell Hammadin, Tell Mugla as-Saghir, and Tell Jezla (Nishiaki 2010b). However, no Bronze Age tombs have been

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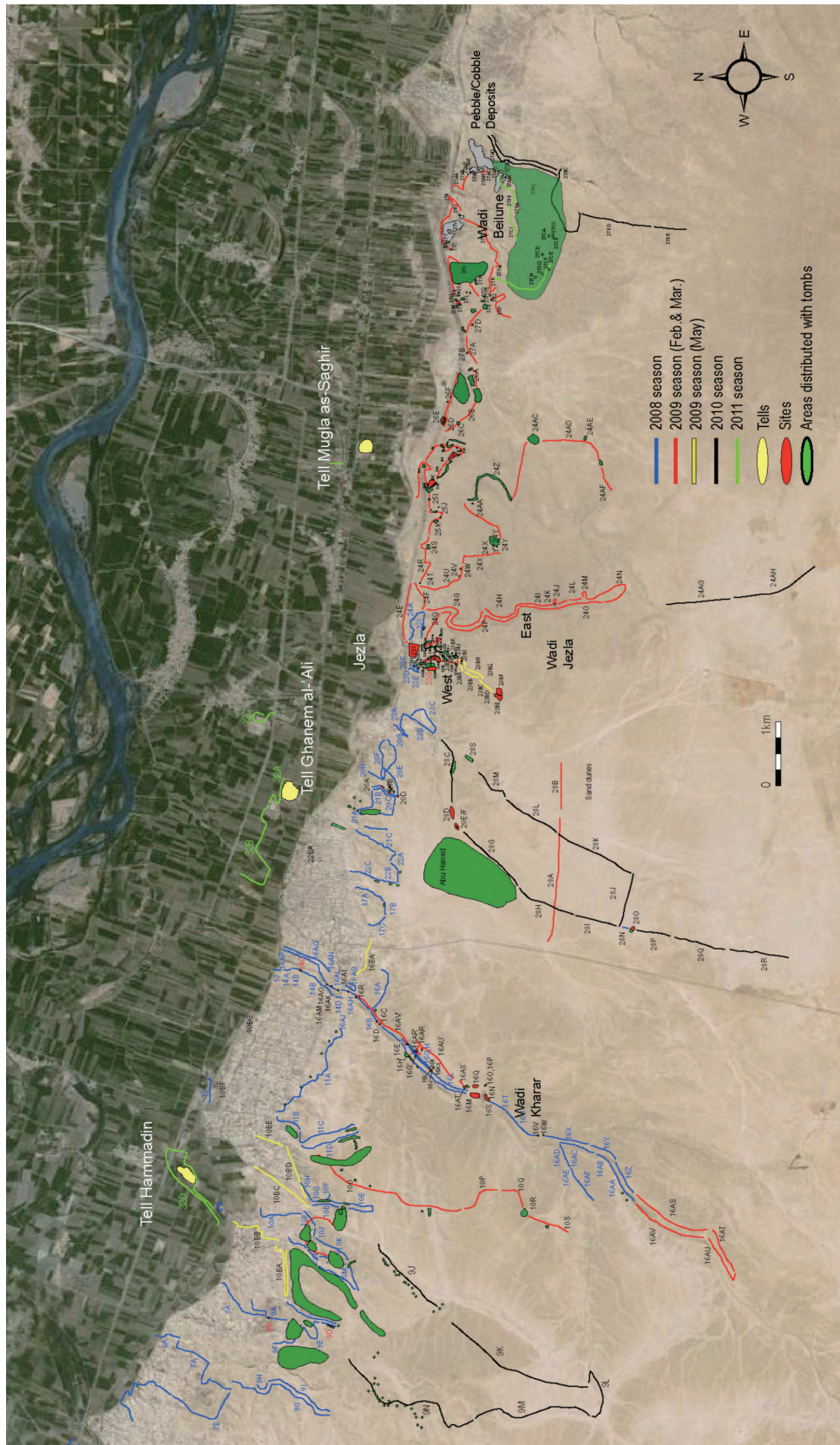


Figure 1: Satellite image of the survey area, showing the survey paths and sites.

reported in the Euphrates lowland despite the proximity to the occupations at tells. Our survey of this season included the field walking in the lowland areas to check the possible existence of Bronze Age tombs.

The survey resulted in no recovery of tombs. Admittedly, the surface visibility is low in this area because of agricultural crops. Moreover, the sedimentation by the Euphrates may have buried Bronze Age tombs as we know that the periphery of Tell Ghanem al-'Ali is overlain by alluvial sediments. Nonetheless, if the lowland has a concentration of Bronze Age tombs comparable to the scale of Abu Hamad and Jezla, which extend over a few kilometers, at least some of them should have been discovered by modern earth-working for constructing dense canal systems, water reservoirs, and agricultural fields.

2) Cairn field in Wadi Beilune (Areas 27CA–27CI)

The survey in the 2009 season discovered an area densely distributed with Early Bronze Age cairns on the flat-topped plateau in the mid-stream of Wadi Beilune (Nishiaki et al. 2011a). Although a part of this cairn field was mapped in the 2010 season, the overall extent of the cairn distributions was still unclear. In this season, we examined the western extension of the cairn field, particularly to check whether the cairn field continues to a cluster of earth-mound tombs in Areas 26A, 26F, 27F–M, Q–U, and Y, south to Tell Mugla as-Saghir (Nishiaki et al. 2011a).

Although some cairns were encountered on the western side of Wadi Beilune, their density was not as high as that on the eastern side, which was surveyed in previous seasons (Fig. 2). Notably, the density of cairns decreases towards the northwest, leaving an area without tombs. This gap separates a cairn field from the area with earth-mound tombs, located ca. 200 m to the north.

3) Jezla (Areas 23CA–23CG)

Large rectangular ramparts are constructed at the northern edge of the Jezla plateau, and they are reported to represent a fortress since the 2nd century B.C. with subsequent restorations in later periods (Napoli 2000). Distributed around the fortress, a large number of Bronze Age tombs are reported by the Syro-Japanese project (Al-Maqdissi and Ohnuma 2008). In the 2008 season, we surveyed this area and discovered a mound site (Tell Jezla: 23H) with surface finds, including Canaanite blades and ground stones in addition to pottery sherds (Nishiaki et al. 2009).

In this season, we surveyed Tell Jezla and nearby tombs to collect chronologically diagnostic pottery sherds (Fig. 3). Pottery sherds were collected from surface scatters around looted tombs. Tentative observations of the pottery sherds suggest that Tell Jezla and its adjacent shaft tombs can be dated to Middle Bronze Age (23CA, 23CB, and 23CE). In contrast, two other clusters of tombs to their south (23CC and 23CF) were found to be associated with pottery sherds apparently earlier in date, including Euphrates Fine Ware. This indicates that the use of Jezla as a place for tombs and/or occupations may have continued from Early to Middle Bronze Age.

During the survey of the tombs in Jezla, we found another possible mound site (23CG) near Tell Jezla (23H) at the other side of Wadi Jezla (Fig. 4). The 23CG mound was heavily cut by modern earth-working, exposing a wide section of a few meter thick ash deposits that contain artifacts, bones, and charcoal fragments (Fig. 5).

4) Wadi Kharar (Areas 16J, 16K, 16N, 16R1, 16R2, and 16AT')

Wadi Kharar is located between Tell Ghanem al-'Ali and Tell Hammadin. It stretches over 20 km with a perennial spring at the mid-stream. It also retains well-developed terraces and thus outstands in the scale and habitability among the wadis on the Bishri plateau. In the 2008 and 2009 seasons, we discovered a number of surface scatters of Palaeolithic artifacts on the terraces of Wadi Kharar (Nishiaki et al. 2009 and 2011a).

In this season, we opened several test trenches (1 m × 1 m) at some promising spots to recover artifacts and datable samples from secure Palaeolithic deposits. This resulted in the discovery of artifact rich deposits at Areas 16R1 and 16R2 (Fig. 6), from which bones and charcoal samples

were also collected. Tentative observations of the lithic assemblages date them to Upper Palaeolithic (Fig. 7), but further analyses are necessary to specify technological characteristics.



Figure 2: Burial cairns at the western side of Wadi Beilune seen in the middle, looking east.



Figure 3: Looted MB tombs in front and Tell Jezla (23H) seen in the middle. Top left is the Jezla fortress, looking southeast.

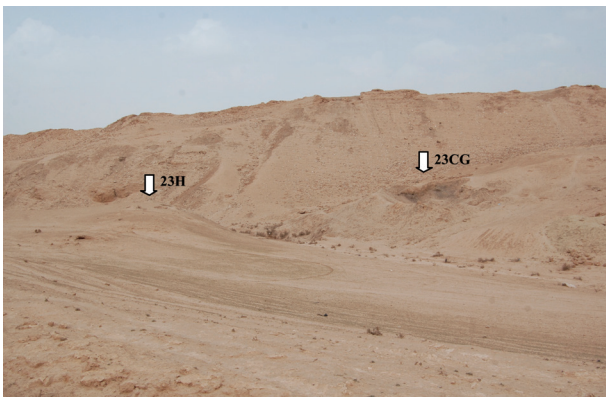


Figure 4: Tell Jezla (23H) and another mound site (23CG) separated by Wadi Jezla. Behind them is the Jezla fortress, looking north.



Figure 5: Thick ash deposit exposed at the 23CG mound in Jezla, looking north. Farther side is the Jezla fortress.



Figure 6: Locations of test trenches at Area 16R on the west bank of Wadi Kharar, looking west.



Figure 7: Upper Palaeolithic artifacts from 16R1. 1: el-Wad point, 2: Bladelet with Ouchtata retouch, 3-5: End scrapers, 6: Laterally carinated scraper, 7-8: Bladelet cores.

Summary

The archaeological survey of this season had two purposes. The first was to clarify spatial and temporal boundaries of Bronze Age cemeteries in the steppe areas on the Bishri plateau. The second was to collect lithic and charcoal samples from some Palaeolithic sites for the identification of lithic industries and their radiometric dating. The completion of these tasks brought us the following tentative results and new questions.

- 1) Around the tell sites in the Euphrates lowland, we detected no Bronze Age tombs comparable in the scale to those at Abu Hamad and Jezla.
- 2) The cairn field in Wadi Beilune does not continue to the cluster of earth-mound tombs near Tell Mugla as-Saghir, leaving a few hundred meter space devoid of tombs separating the two grave areas. This raises a question of what is represented by the two grave areas, both of which are apparently dated to Early Bronze Age.
- 3) There are both Early and Middle Bronze Age tombs in Jezla, with EB tomb tending to be concentrated south to MB tombs. While MB occupations are likely to have been located at nearby tells (23H and 23CG), currently known EB occupations at Tell Ghanem al-'Ali and Tell Mugla as-Saghir are quite far from the EB tombs in Jezla.
- 4) Some of the Palaeolithic surface finds at Wadi Kharar were found to be associated with deposits with Palaeolithic remains, which can provide useful samples for technological and chronological studies.

With these new ideas and questions in minds, we plan to analyze data and samples collected in this season to further clarify chronological and spatial patterns in the prehistoric occupations and land-use on the Middle Euphrates.

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