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Shkârat Msaied: The 2005 Season of Excavations.

A Short Preliminary Report

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In 2005, two short campaigns were undertaken at the Neolithic site of Shkârat Msaied, Southern Jordan (Fig. 1), under the direction of Charlott Hoffmann Jensen (spring), Ingolf Thuesen (fall) and Bo Dahl Hermansen (spring and fall) and with Talal al-Amarin as representative of the Department of Antiquities. This year's efforts turned out to be fruitful, especially in four areas of research.

1) In addition to the relative dating of the site, we now have five C14 dates which allow us to approach an absolute dating.

2) Excavation in Unit F finally yielded an answer to the question, recently raised by Bienert *et al.* (2004), concerning the PPNB: 'where are the dead'?

3) The recovery of a group of flat stone slabs with engravings suggests the existence of some sort of symbol system, employed in association with the mortuary practices of the neolithic inhabitants of the site.

4) Complete excavation of the interior of Unit K yielded some of the most comprehensive evidence yet known for how stone architecture was constructed in the MPPNB of Southern Jordan. Additional important information on this point was provided by the excavation of Unit U and the surface exposure of Unit H.

Ad 1 – Radiocarbon Dates

The conventional dating of the site within the MPPNB is based on relative dating of the chipped stone material. In addition, five radiocarbon dates are now available, given below in uncalibrated conventional dates BP, according to find context, material, and lab. no.

Context	Material	Lab. no.	Date BP
Unit E	Charcoal	Aar-9336	9590 + 90 BP
Unit E	Charcoal	Wk-15160	9144 + 55 BP
Unit E	Charcoal	Wk-15159	8977 + 60 BP
Unit E	Charcoal	Aar-9337	8885 + 70 BP
Unit C	Charcoal	Aar-9335	8880 + 80 BP

Of these samples AAR-9335 is a charcoal sample of *Ephedra* sp., *i.e.* a shortlived herb. This sample was collected from a stone cist in Unit C, in which it has been sealed until excavated, *i.e.* a very good context. The other samples are of *Juniperus* (AAR-9336), *Pistacia* (AAR-9337) and unidentified tree species (WK-15159 and WK-15160). They are all from Unit E: AAR-9337 was found beneath the floor of the late phase of that building. Wk-15160 and AAR-9336 were found just above (6-15 cm) that same floor; Wk-15159 was recovered higher up in the fill of the same room, in material interpreted as 'collapsed roof material'. Significantly, Wk-15159 was apparently part of the wooden construction of the roof of the building. This may well have been the case with Wk-15160 and AAR-9336, too.

At face value, the dates acquired so far would seem, in general to place the tested samples in the EPPNB (AAR-9336), and in the early-middle part of the MPPNB. However, in particular the early date of AAR-9336 requires explanation (reused timber? old wood?). Therefore, while awaiting additional radiocarbon dates (more samples are available, esp. from Unit K; Unit H looks promising), we maintain the previously proposed MPPNB date, which is particularly supported by the *Ephedra* sample: Aar-9335. However, AAR-9336, together with the recovery of a few Helwan points (Jensen *et al.* in press), does raise a suspicion that the beginning of occupation of the site may have been earlier.

Ad 2 – Burials

Excavation at Unit F (Fig. 1), a large house with a floor area of ca. 25 m², but not subterranean, indicates that this house was set apart as an architectural frame for mortuary rites of the inhabitants. A minimum of 15 inhumations have been found in this house so far, and more can be anticipated. One burial, recovered already in 2003, consisted of the bones of a ca. 30-years-old female. Her arms had been placed inside the rib cage, the legs in front of it, and the skull and mandible were missing, probably

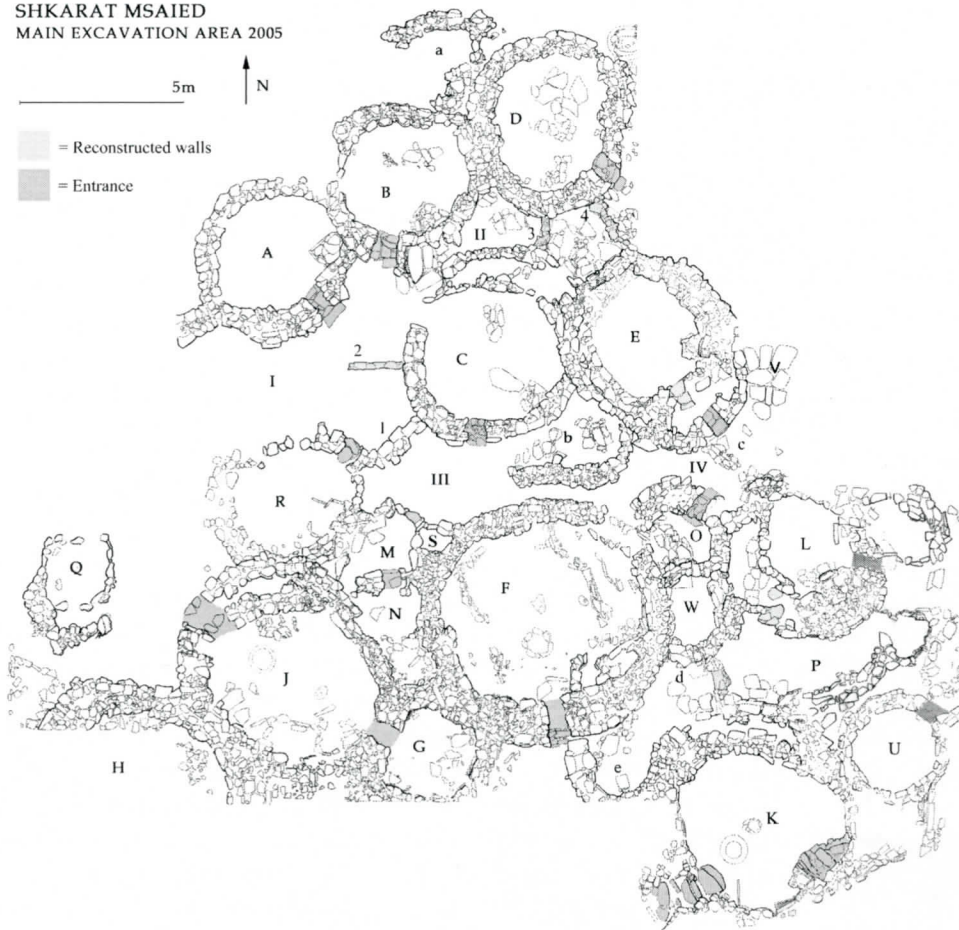


Fig. 1 Plan of Shkârat Msaied, 2005.

having been removed in order to be subjected to some sort of ritual manipulation, as was accorded some individuals in the MPPNB. Found together with the burial were four ovi-caprine mandibles, suggesting that feasting may have been part of the practices associated with burial. This individual was buried in the stone cist found inside the building just to the right (east) when entering, and marked by a large monolithic slab (*cf.* Hermansen and Jensen 2002: 92, fig. 6).

The stratigraphy of Unit F indicates that the original floor of the building was made of lime plaster. This plaster floor was cut at some point in time. Several subfloor stone cists, built of flat sandstone slabs, were then constructed, most of which contained human remains. Two small cists contained the burials of two and four infants, respectively. In both cases, the burials were secondary and the skeletal remains were fragmentary. A third cist contained the bones of at least eight individuals, six adults and two subadults (Fig. 2). The bones were sorted very carefully, so that individual bodily identity had been totally dissolved: 7 skulls were laid down first in the southern part of the cist, all but one standing upright and facing north, and the last one resting on the facial part of the skull with skull cap facing the south. An eighth skull (of an adult) was already fragmented when buried, as the fragments were found scattered in the grave. A rib cage and vertebral column were found at the bottom of the grave in anatomical order. Lower extremities of one

individual were found to be lying in an articulated position; however, left and right side had been separated. Most of the long bones had been placed in a north/south direction together with the flat bones such as hips and scapulae. Mandibles were mostly strewn in the center and surrounded by a scatter of ribs and vertebrae. The last skull to have been buried was resting on the other skulls in the southern part with articulated mandible. Two additional cists, one large and one small, were excavated, but no inhumations were found in either. Instead a very large greenstone bead was recovered in the fill of one of them. In the fill within and above the stone cists,



Fig. 2 Shkârat Msaied: Stone cist with burials.

additional fragments of human (and animal) bones and teeth were found, possibly indicating several events that would have caused disturbance to earlier burials, as well.

We hope that further excavation of Unit F and analysis of this material will allow us to gain detailed insights into the practices associated with burial in PPNB Shkârat Msaied.

Ad 3 – Incised Sandstone Slabs

Associated with the stone cists were found a group of three incised sandstone slabs. The incisions on these stones could well be part of some sort of symbol system. The most complex examples are a cross with two additional lines in the upper right quadrant, suggesting a shooting star? (Fig. 3) and two interconnected rectan-

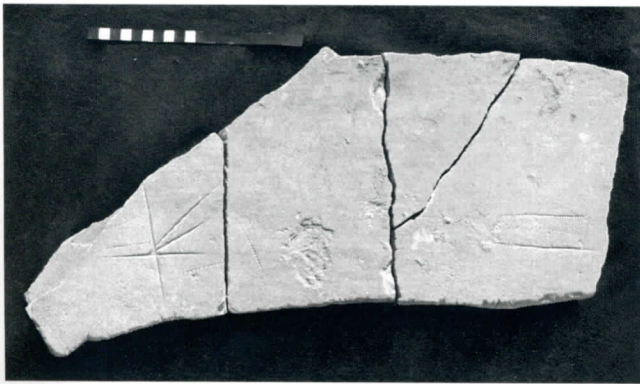


Fig. 3 Shkârat Msaied: Incised stone slab.



Fig. 4 Shkârat Msaied: Incised stone slab.

gles set at a right angle (Fig. 4). The preserved edge of two of the slabs (which do not all seem to have belonged to the same original piece) is engraved with short grooves, perhaps some sort of counting system. Having suggested such an interpretation, it must be added that it is purely speculative, and that we do, of course, not presently have a key to reading any representative meaning in these engravings. However, they do seem to have been deliberately destroyed, and left behind in some sort of association with the burials. Thus, their meaning would seem

to have been closely associated with the very act of manipulating and destroying them in the social context of burial.

Ad 4 – Architecture

This year's excavations uncovered the complete plan of a stone-built house, Unit K (Fig. 5), with a floor area of *ca.* 18 m², preserved to a height of ≤ 1.60 m. The collapse fill inside the walls contained roughly 1/2 m³ of dressed stones per m³ of excavated volume, indicating that the walls originally stood even higher. Charred remains of wooden beams and posts indicated that the house was constructed on a wooden frame consisting of a circle of posts, supporting the wall. A central post supported a radiating skeleton of roof beams on which was laid a construction of wickerwork, mortar, and fist-sized stones, much as can be observed in more recent bedouin stone architecture of the region. This construction would have served as a flat roof or as the floor of a second storey. The collapse fill indicated a fireplace and activities on this roof or second floor. Particularly important is that the house had two stone-built staircases set in mortar. One staircase, in the southwest, leads six steps and roughly 1m down from the MPPNB surface to the ground floor of the house. The other one, opposite the former, leads eight steps upwards from the ground floor along the wall, supporting our interpretation that this house had a substantial, flat roof or a second storey.

Turning towards an adjacent architectural unit, Unit H, we were able to calculate a minimum original height of that building by studying the collapse fill. A fallen wall segment with at least 16 courses of stones was traced on the surface (Fig. 6). Measuring the thickness of each stone and adding them together suggested an original height of 1.34 m for this piece of collapsed wall. Further, adding this to the preserved height of the still standing wall, from where this wall segment had fallen (0.78 m), suggested that Unit H would have stood to the considerable height of 2,12 m. Lumps of mortar between stones indicate that these may have been separated by mortar. If this were the case, the wall could have stood to a height of some 2.28 m. Except for a small cut in the northeast corner which allowed us to study the collapse pattern, the plan of Unit H is only known from the surface. Consequently, its plan is not well known, but it does seem to have had a doorway in the west-northwest, probably (but not yet certainly) with a staircase down to the floor of the building, and it does seem to have an entrance in the southeast, flanked on the exterior by two vertical stone slabs. Thus, it appears that this building reproduces the plan of Unit J, while also reproducing some features of Unit K, including its remarkable height.

The excavation of Unit U is also of considerable interest. With its much smaller floor area (*ca.* 5 m²), this architectural unit is entirely different from other build-



Fig. 5 Shkârat Msaied: Unit K.

ings at the site. It, too, was entered by a staircase, in this case from northeast, leading down from the exterior, with three steps bridging a difference of some 0.5 m between outside and inside. Thus, the houses in the southern part of the site were clearly dug into the ground, and their access patterns and architectural installations differ from the patterns hitherto observed in the central and northern part of the excavated area (Hermansen and Jensen 2002; Jensen *et al.* in press; Kaliszan *et al.* 2002).

Interestingly, in Unit K, a scatter of groundstone tools was found in the debris on the floor at the base of the interior staircase. A similar scatter of groundstone objects was found at the base of the stairway into Unit U. The meaning of this is not clear, and a committed interpretation of this pattern must await close contextual analysis.



Fig. 6 Shkârat Msaied: Collapsed wall material.

Final Remarks

The exposed part of the village now comprises more than 600 square meters of area occupied in the PPNB. Plans have been made for continuing excavation another two years if funding is provided and permission granted by the Director-General of the Department of Antiquities. The idea is to finish excavation of the Units F, H, and L; to extend the excavated area towards the southern edge of the site; to make a sounding from the present boundary of excavation to the eastern edge of the site; and to make small trenches to document the west and north boundaries of the Neolithic village archaeologically. Another important aim will be to investigate the stratigraphical relation between the architecture in the southern part of the excavated area (Unit H, K, L, and U) and that of the central and northern parts of the site, excavated in previous campaigns (Hermansen and Jensen 2002; Kaliszan *et al.* 2002; Jensen *et al.* in press). If we succeed in this, a significant proportion of a village plan from the MPPNB will have been exposed. And, given the excellent preservation of the architecture and burials in the central and southern part of the site, Shkârat Msaied will have contributed significantly to our knowledge and understanding of architecture and burial practices from this period.

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