

The Works of the Syrian Mission in the Byzantine City (Tell Al Kasra) in Five Seasons (2006–2010)

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According to the works of the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums represented by the Directorate of Antiquities in Deir ez-Zor, and to the presented studies, it was consented in 2006 to establish a Syrian expedition to excavate in the archeological site in Tell al-Kasra.¹

Location, denomination and history

Tell al-Kasra is situated at the left bank of the Euphrates, to the north-west of Deir ez-Zor at about 40 km from the city (Figure 1). The al-Kasra area enjoys an important and unique locale as a very fast cross point of real desert-environment conditions. Eastward and south-eastward, there are flat areas with no definite boundaries; they make routes for Bedouins and their herds always seeking for grass and water. The historical record testifies that settlement in that region was very rare (Figure 2).

¹ We would like to thank Dr. Michel Maqdissi (Director of Excavation and Archeological Studies in the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums), Dr. Bassam Jamous (General Director in the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums in Syria), and Mr. Ahmad Haj Salih (Head of the Directorate of Antiquities in Deir ez-Zor) for their support to make successful of the project. Our special thanks to the researchers Mr. Shakir al-Shbib, to Dr. Justine Gaborit and her husband Christophe Benech, to Al-Jazeera Private University in Deir ez-Zor, represented by Dr. Ahmad Atia (Head of Architecture Section), to Dr. Elias Bakarji (Lab Director in Syrian Atomic Energy Organization), and to the members of the Syrian Archeological Team: Mr. Mustafa Kaddour (Directorate of Antiquities in Idleb), Eng. Nashwa Kaddour and Eng. Nadia al-Khalaf.

The ancient name of the site is still unknown, but A. Poidebard mentioned it by the name *Allan*. We hope that current researches would provide new information about the site's ancient name. The size of the city is 27 hectares, and the wall and civil construction of the site make us believe that it may be an ancient *polis*. It is possible that Tell al-Kasra acquired some importance due to the policies of Emperor Justinian, who shouldered the military restructuring and organization of the region and lending a major importance to the fortification of cities in Mesopotamia. Hence, the site must have included in its historical content many changes starting from the 5th century CE up to the Islamic Period.

Research history in the site

The site was first discovered by the British Mission led by Chesney in 1849 in order to study the locales situated by the Euphrates. It was mentioned by him under the name *al-Humr Wall*.²

E. Sachau also surveyed and studied the site in 1879³. Mrs. Gertrude Bell⁴ photographed the site as well and mentioned it as *Um Regaba*. During the French Mandate on Syria, the site was surveyed by A. Poidebard.⁵

The results that we reached during four excavation seasons testify the existence of a Byzantine settlement, whose importance increased in the 5th century CE, and witnessed a new architectural renaissance in the 6th century, in the light of the study of the two burials discovered in the North-West part of the site. The settlement in the city continued up to the Islamic times.

² Chesney, *Expedition for the survey of the Rivers Euphrates and Tigris*, New York, 1850, iv: «extensive mounds apparently the walls of an ancient city».

³ Sachau, E., *Reise in Syrien und Mesopotamien*, Leipzig, 1883, p. 260.

⁴ Bell, G. L., *Amurath to Amurath. A Journey along the Banks of the Euphrates*, Piscataway, 2004, p. 70.

⁵ Poidebard, A., *La trace de Rome dans le désert de Syrie. Le limes de Trajan a la conquête arabe, recherches aériennes (1925-1934)*, Paris, 1934, pl. XXXV, 1, al-Kasra.

Site description

The *tell* is surrounded by a mud brick wall, which is evident in three sides but destroyed in the north-west side. The western one-third of the site was exposed to rainwater flow, as can be observed in the net of deep cracks sloping to meet the river plain, some 20 meters lower than the *tell*'s surface (Figure 3-A). On the *tell*'s surface, there is a new cemetery situated in its western part (Figure 3-B).

1. The North wall is about 500 meters long and 1.50 meters high on its entirety. It consists of two walls (A–B) on both sides of the north-western corner; their extension is clear in the photograph taken in 1930.

A. The Eastern Wall extends straightly at about 350 meters. It is destroyed near the north-western corner because of a modern asphalt road that passes downwards the plain below the hill. This destruction contributed to the acknowledgment of the construction of the *tell* later on. There are some troughs within this wall used as paths by commoners; they may be considered as ancient gates of the city.

B. The Western Wall extends at about 160 meters. This wall is complete with simple heights composed of one or two courses of mud built directly on the level of the site. Within the western side, bricks are completely unrecognizable. This wall slightly curves north-westwards at 70 meters from the valley's end; it may have been a tower.

2. The East Wall is about 250 meters long. A number of small *tells* can be noted, showing the localization of towers.

3. The South Wall also comprises two walls; the western wall extends south-westwards at about 250 meters long, until the corner

where the wall changes direction. It is evident that, despite river-erosion, the corner is protected by a rectangular tower.

4. The West Wall is completely destroyed.⁶

While discussing Tell al-Kasra, it is important to mention its similarities with Tell al-Sin⁷: in both sites, the fortifications present a pentagonal shape and attest occupation during the same period. This was revealed by the findings of the excavation works carried out by the joint Spanish-Syrian expedition in Tell al-Sin⁸. It showed the existence of a square-shaped mud brick wall, quite similar to that of Tell al-Kasra; it also exposed constructions of rectangular mud brick as those discovered in the constructions to the south of the northern gate. These evidences make us postulate that both sites were constructed by the same architect who followed the same design and the same construction method for both cities.

Thus, Tell al-Kasra is a site fortified by a wall of mud-bricks which is clearly evident in the topography of the *tell*. This defense wall configures a pentagonal city, supported by a front defense-line composed of a ditch excavated in the natural rocks, extending paralleled to the walls; this ditch can be recognized on the surface especially with old aerial photographs. The western part of these walls is missing, but the rest of the walls in the northern, north-eastern and eastern sides are well preserved. Topographical study allowed us to guess of the existence of three gates – one in each course of the fortification wall.

⁶ Gaborit, J., *La géographie historique du Moyen-Euphrate de la conquête d'Alexandre à l'Islam*, Paris, 2007, site N F13.

⁷ Montero Fenollós, J. L.; Shbib, S., "La mission archéologique syro-espagnole au Moyen Euphrate. Première campagne à Tall as-Sin (Deir er-Zor, Syrie)", *Orient-Express*, 2006/1, p. 6.

⁸ Tell Al-Sin is situated to the north-east of Deir ez-Zor where Mr. Shakir Shbib (Director of the Syrian part in the joint Spanish-Syrian Mission) worked between 2005 and 2007.

The Most Important Discoveries

1. The Fortification's Gate: A main gate was discovered in the North Wall through **probe /C/** in the season of 2006, where we found its basic stone-components and some iron pieces which affirmed that the site's gate was composed of two iron-made parts (Figure 4).

2. The burials of Sector E: Burial E2 was discovered in the 2008 season. This tomb is considered to be an important discovery regarding the architectural typology and the materials found inside (Figure 5).

Description of the Burial:

- The burial has a quadrate shape with a total area of 20,75 m² and a perimeter of 18,23 m. It has an also quadrate internal yard (main chamber) with an area of 6,53 m² and a perimeter of 9,83 m;
- The gate of the tomb is 55 cm width and allows ascending from the floor of the internal yard of the burial;
- The gate is followed directly inward by a threshold;
- Next follows a wide threshold;
- On the sides of the threshold there are two embrasures;
- Next to this threshold, there is the internal room of the tomb which contains three *arcosolia* distributed in U shape. The western and northern *arcosolia* are within the construction mass of the walls and covered by an arch. They are plastered with a thin layer of gypsum (*djuss*). The third *arcosolium* is facing the gate. The Burial E2 is considered unique in the area, for its masonry and typology differ from the burials in Tell al-

Sin. In Tell al-Kasra the walls of this tomb are built of dipped-stones (basalt + brown gypsum) and plastered with a layer of white gypsum and there has no staircase (*dromos*) leading to the tomb's gate. Nevertheless, we notice a wall of mud-bricks surrounding the burial's perimeter with an opening over the gate's closing-stone. In addition, two fragments of a statue of a human figurine in gypsum were found (Figure 6), along with a statue-base.

3. The *hammam* (Bathroom) and the Mosaic Tableau:

During the season of 2009 in Tell al-Kasra, the national expedition discovered in the north-western area of the *tell* an architectural building identified as a bath or a *hammam*. There, the floor of the *frigidarium* presented a mosaic main pavement of 44.82 m². A part of the panel measuring 11.88 m² is missing. The main panel is surrounded with a bordure of colored braiding (representing the water currents of the Euphrates) and animal scenes (fish + a duck + geometrical shapes)⁹. The main panel depicts several animals: the animals selected to be represented in this mosaic are very rare, and some, like the pony or the elephant, seem exceptional in the Byzantine artistic representation repertory known in Syria (Figure 7). This composition of the central scene is divided into two sections:

1. Depicting the pony in front of a predatory animal (hyena) taking the onslaught position; below is figured a water-bird (crane). Behind the pony appears a part of the elephant head with its trunk and tusks, while the rest is unfortunately destroyed. The depiction of the pony indicates its deep-rootedness in the Middle Euphrates region.¹⁰

⁹ Balty, J., *Mosaïques Antiques de Syrie*, Bruxelles, 1977, p. 137.

¹⁰ Zouhdi, B., *L'art des chefs-d'oeuvres en République arabe syrienne dans le Guide officiel. XXIIème Foire internationale de Damas*, Damas, 1975, pp. 21-32 (in Arabic).

2. Top wards of the first section to the south-west of the tableau, is represented a mythical animal created by the Byzantine artist: a body of a winged predatory animal with a beak of a bird of prey slaughtering a domestic animal with a bleeding neck. Beside the domestic animal, there is a plant facing a part of a donkey's head with its front legs, while the rest is destroyed. This tableau is considered a breakthrough in the central Euphrates region of Syria.

In the fifth season, in 2010, the works of the expedition concentrated on sector X, on squares X1, X2, X3; dust partitions between squares were removed and perseverant cleaning was done to expose complete architectural structures: consequently, a *hammam* with three halls (*caldarium–frigidarium–apodyterium*) in addition to its appendices (hypocaust)¹¹ with an area of 334.40 m². It takes the shape of rectangle (North–South) and is built of different size bricks (Figure 8). It is similar in design to the *hammam* discovered in Halabiya (Zenobia).¹²

Cold Hall (Outer Section): It is situated in the south side of the *hammam*. Its walls are built of bricks, with some traces of white gypsum-plastered and white marble-covered bench for the *hammam*'s frequent clients to sit on. In the middle of the north wall there is a door to the middle section.

Snuggery (Middle Section): From a door in the middle of the north wall, the cold hall leads to a square-shaped hall with a brick-paved and gypsum plastered floor. In the west side appears a half-circular water reservoir of which the interior is covered with a thin layer; below, there is a brick sluice to the other halls. At its eastern side, there is a

¹¹ Fournet, T; Redon, B. (éds.), *Le Bain Collectif en Egypt, Origine, evolution et Actualité. Actes du Colloque Balnéorient d'Alexandrie, Déc. 2006*, Le Caire, 2009, p. 113-137.

¹² Fournet, T., "The ancient Baths of Southern Syria in their Near Eastern Context", international conference «*Sanitas Per Aquam, Internationales Frontinus-Symposium zur Technik und Kulturgeschichte der antiken Thermen*», Aachen 18-22 March 2009 (forthcoming).

door leading to a small rectangular room of 320 cm × 220 cm and a brick-paved floor, with bricks of the 40 × 40 × 5 cm size, and covered with a thick layer of gypsum.

A bench on the southern wall was available for the *hammam's* frequent clients. Alongside the eastern wall, a small sluice passes coming from the middle section to the *hammam's* outside where a 16-centimeters wide sluice was found under the eastern wall. At the north-east end of this room, there is a rectangular basalt threshold leading to a big hall to the north of the previously mentioned room; it is a rectangular hall in the eastern end of which there is a brick-built arch; this part of the hall ascends from the main hall's floor and it is paved with bricks and covered, above the bricks, with large pieces of rosy marble; on the right side of the arch there were noticed benches; the whole floor is loaded on brick-columns because there is a hollow under the floor for hot air to pass and heat up the hall; there are terraces to the north and east sides through which hot air passes, in addition to a sluice at the south-east corner leading to the previously mentioned sluice to drive water outside. In the eastern wall there is an arch below which there is a hole in the form of a small door leading to the interior of the empty hall below the warm hall. It was compared to Andarin Hammam discovered in Hama where there was an arch in the eastern side used as a sluice, but in this *hammam* there is no clue about its usage. A study of this hollow might be done well very soon.

The Hot Hall (Interior Section): In the middle of the north wall of the snugery, a door was discovered. It has a basalt threshold covered with gypsum, leading to the hot hall (Interior Section). In the threshold there seems to be a sluice; this threshold leads to a square hall which has terraces on the interior of its walls for the frequent clients of the *hammam* to sit on. After the cleaning of the hall there appeared to be huge damage in the floor of this hall; it was noticed that the floor of the hall is loaded on brick-columns; these columns carry 60 × 60 × 7 cm bricks plastered from top with a layer of gypsum for rosy marble slabs to anchor and add beauty to the hall; all terraces

are plastered with white gypsum; brick-columns loading the floor are paved with $40 \times 40 \times 5$ brick slabs.

The Boiler Hall: To the north of the hot hall, a boiler hall was discovered. On top of it, there is a water basin in the form of an arch, in its west side. It is equipped with an inner terrace in the form of a tub, plastered with a layer of gypsum. It is built of bricks measuring $40 \times 40 \times 5$ cm. The floor is loaded on 20 columns composed of $40 \times 40 \times 5$ cm square bricks, taking into consideration that the basin's floor is missing in the eastern side. A part of its western floor is preserved and it is paved with $60 \times 60 \times 7$ cm large bricks. All the columns are anchored in $40 \times 40 \times 5$ cm bricks floor.

Beneath the previously mentioned floor of the basin there are fire apertures which in turn distributes hot air to the *hammam* parts, shaped like triangles built on top of one another; they are built in two brick columns of three apertures each (*hypocaust*). There were found small stores to the north of the boiler hall. A large quantity of coal – coaled wood remains and animal droppings – which were used to ignite the boiler.

Water-system of the *hammam* (bath): A water-channel was discovered in the east side of the *hammam*, situated outside the eastern wall and running southwards from the north. It is built of gypsum in U-shape. On top it is covered with brick slabs. It supplied water to the basin discovered in the small eastern hall in the middle section, leading to the cold hall as well. The architectural rising of the *hammam* was carried out by al-Jazeera Private University – Architecture Department represented by Dr. Ahmad Atiah (Head of Architecture Department), Dr. Ayman Sulaiman and Eng. Bashar Heneidi (Figure 9).

The pottery discovered inside the *hammam* during the season of 2010 was dated by thermal radiation, conducted by Dr. Elias Bakarji (Antiquities Lab Director in the Syrian Atomic Energy Organization). It belongs to the Byzantine era, 6th century.

The archeological works executed by the national Syrian expedition from 2006 to 2010 in the Byzantine Level of Tell al-Kasra site attested the existence of a fortified city. The settlement of this locale increased, turning it into a real city. The site is bordered from the north by a navigation channel called *Semiramis* (a name given to it by Isidore of Charax, which was used for navigation between the Euphrates and the Al-Khabur river, near the site of Halabyia.

The path of the Euphrates played a major role in the defense system of the eastern borders of the Roman Empire, and later on during the Byzantine rule. Tell al-Kasra is part of the *limes* defenses, i.e. the eastern border-line of those two empires. These borders included a number of border-forts intended to fight off against erupting and continuing assaults of the Persians and Sassanians. Emperor Diocletian (284-305) applied great efforts for constructing a chain of forts within this frontier region which witnessed later on the re-supporting and re-enhancement by the Emperor Justinian in the face of the fierce attacks of the Persians. In fact, the history of the frontier provinces in the Euphrates region during the 6th century was characterized by the clashes between the Byzantines and the Persians up to the beginning of the Islamic-Arab conquest of the region.

In 532, a peace pact (known as the *Eternal Peace*) was signed by the Byzantines and the Persians after the procession of the Persian troops in 531 to pervade the region near *Circesium* (al-Basra) and then to go up the Middle Euphrates valley. But the breach of this pact by Khosrau I in 540 pushed the Emperor Justinian to apply great efforts to reform the military organization and to enhance the defensive systems on the eastern frontiers of the Empire. This gigantic project echoed to us via such ancient historians as Procopius of Caesarea at the beginning of his masterwork *De Aedificiis*. In addition to historical texts, we have archeological researches that provided us with important indications of several sites with military purposes, such as Halabiya, Zalabia, Tabus and al-Kasra. All these sites resulted from the policies applied by Emperor Justinian to the military reorganization of the frontier provinces in Middle Euphrates Valley.

The historical development of the Byzantine city in Tell al-Kasra can be grasped with the historical content of the eastern frontier regions of the Byzantine Empire from the 6th century CE up to the Islamic conquest. The nature of the site and the results of the excavation's work reveals it as an unique example for the knowledge of defensive systems, life style, socio-economic organization, and religious beliefs of a group of Christians in the Syrian Middle Euphrates Valley.¹³

¹³ Montero Fenollós, J. L.; Shbib, S., *La Necropolis Bizantina de Tall As-Sin (Deir ez-Zor, Siria): Memorias del Proyecto Arqueológico Medio Éufrates Sirio I*, (Biblioteca del Próximo Oriente Antiguo 4), CSIC, Madrid, 2008, S. al-Shbib, XIV, p. 329.

Figures

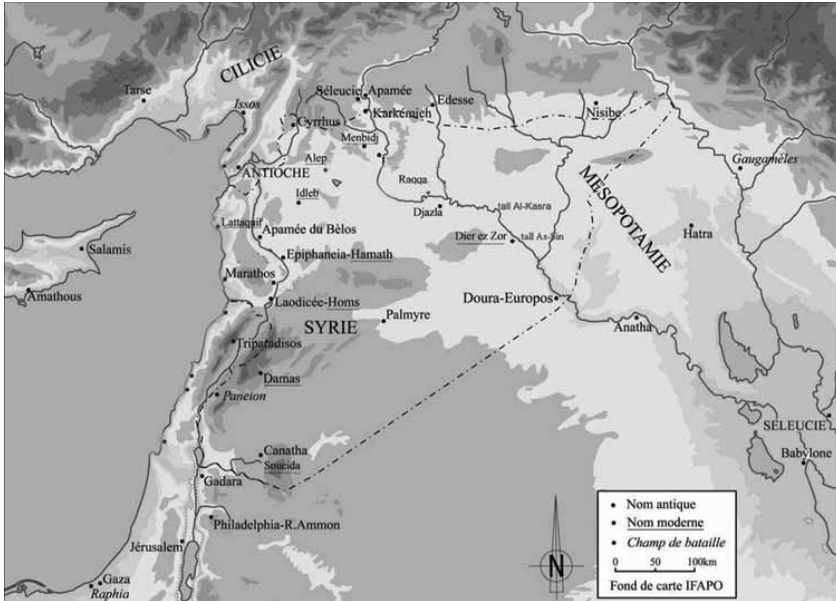


Figure 1: Map of Syria.



Figure 2: An aerial view shows the location of Tel Kasra on the Euphrates River.



Site de Um Rejeba (G. Bell)

1 - Al-Kasra. (A. Poidebard 1934)

Aéro Levant

Figure 3-A: Tall Al-Kasra (A. Poidebard 1934).



Figure 3-B: Tall Al- Kasra aerial photograph (*Google Earth*).



Figure 4: North Gate (2006).



Figure 5: Tomb E2 (2008).



Figure 6: plaster statue discovered in the tomb - E2 (2008).

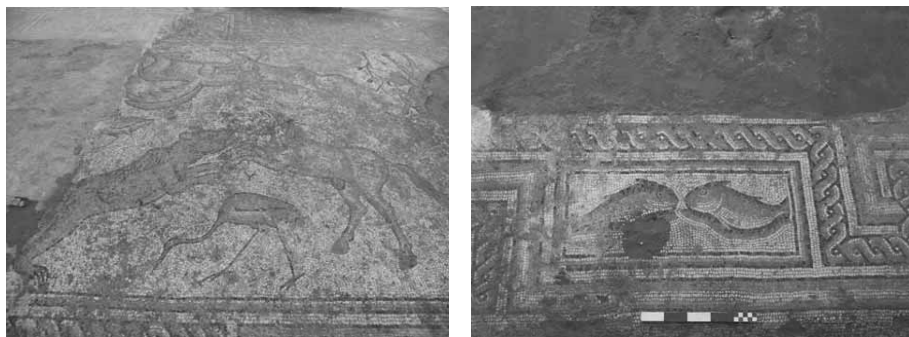
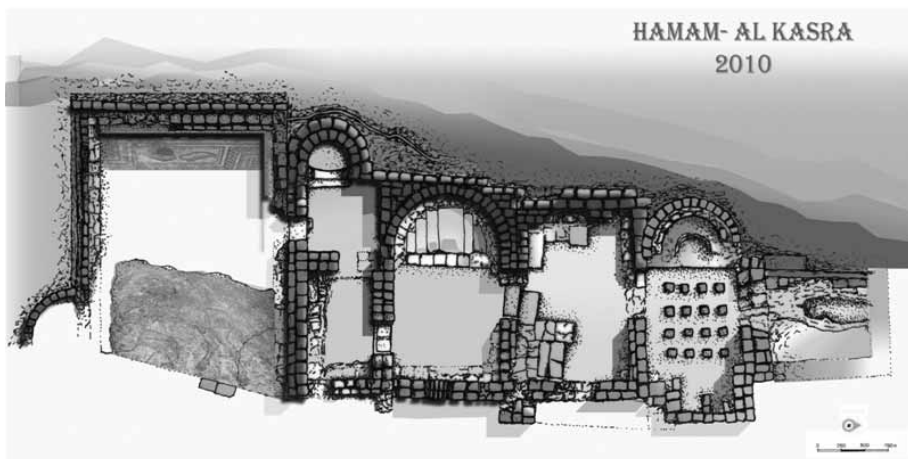


Figure 7: mosaic discovered in the bathroom (2009).



Figure 8: Bathroom (2010).



(Figure-9): plan of Bath Al-Kasra.

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