The Hirbemerdon Tepe Archaeological Project

Nicola Laneri, Mark Schwartz & Jason Ur

Introduction

The Hirbemerdon Tepe Archaeological Project has provided a unique opportunity to study the development of complex societies in the upper Tigris river valley through a combination of excavation and intensive survey. The site of Hirbemerdon Tepe was a medium-size settlement located along the west bank of the upper Tigris valley of south-eastern Turkey in the Diyarbakir province. Archaeological work at the site commenced in 2003 and will terminate in 2012 when the valley will be flooded by the completion of the Ilisu Dam.

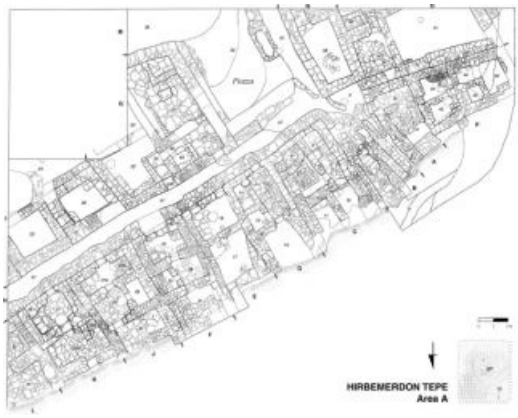


Figure 1. *Top plan of the 'architectural complex' on the High Mound of Hirbemerdon Tepe.*



Figure 2. *The 'architectural complex' with the Tigris river in the background, viewed from the west.*

The architectural complex of the first half of the second millennium BC

https://doi.org/10.15184/S2978855200904621 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Excavations of the past five years have identified occupation levels dating to: a) the Chalcolithic period (fourth millennium BC), b) from the late third and to the first half of the second millennium BC, c) the Iron Age (first millennium BC), and finally, d) the twelfth-thirteenth century AD (Laneri *et al.* 2006).

However, the first half of the second millennium BC appears to be the most important phase of occupation at Hirbemerdon Tepe. This period is of particular importance to the history of the region and the entire Near East due to the complexity of its economic system, which was based on a combination of production, consumption, and local and long-distance exchange typified by the Old Assyrian Trading System in Anatolia (Larsen 1976).

This period is characterised by the locally produced ceramic assemblage (e.g. 'Red Brown Wash Ware') found in association with material culture that suggests inter-regional interaction with both northern Mesopotamia and central Anatolia (Laneri *et al.* 2006; Ökse 2006). Excavations in the High Mound revealed an extensive 'architectural complex' organized into different sectors, some of which were employed for centrally organised working activities and others that bear strong ceremonial features (Figures 1 and 2) evidenced by the presence of unique objects (e.g. decorated votive clay plaques, portable hearths, ritualistic ceramic vessels, and clay human figurines, Figures 3 and 4) in a large outdoor space (*piazza*). From the nearly complete examples, it is possible to determine that the votive clay plaques had incised, impressed and painted geometric decorative patterns in red and black, framing a central human figure with a spout at the bottom edge and a pierced square at the top for affixing the object to a wall. Lying next to and associated with this outdoor space was a large stone building centered on a long room containing a central 'altar' built using medium-size stones. The long room, the 'altar', and the proximity of the area to discarded ritual objects suggest that this section of the 'architectural complex' was possibly associated with ceremonial activities. On the other side of the main alleyway, the 'architectural complex' was composed of a series of agglutinated buildings that were all devoted to specialised working activities, demonstrated by the presence of mortars, pestles, grinding stones, storage and cooking vessels. The well-preserved structures and the material culture found *in situ* thus far suggest the existence of a political economy based upon social segments that utilised ideological power to establish and maintain their control over economic resources (Earle 1997: 143-92).



Figure 3. *Decorated clay votive plaque found in the outdoor piazza of the 'architectural complex'.*

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Figure 4. *Head of a human figurine found in the outdoor piazza of the 'architectural complex'..*

The Hirbemerdon Tepe Survey's pilot season attempted to apply Mediterranean-style intensive methods to a Near Eastern context. Traditional field methods identify effectively mounded sites (*Tepes* or *Höyüks*) but overlook unmounded sites, sherd scatters and other subtle landscape features. In July 2007 our team walked 47.7km of field transects and plotted over 6500 surface artefacts. In a preliminary assessment, we recognised 29 significant features or artifact concentrations which might be labeled as 'sites'. The survey region (Figure 5) is roughly divided between long-term agricultural lands (zones of landscape destruction) and eroded uplands predominantly used for pasture (zones of landscape preservation). Of particular interest are several campsites of pastoral nomads, with associated burial fields, cisterns and linear stone features.

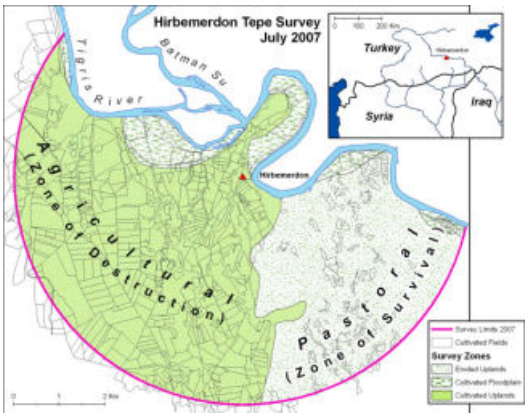


Figure 5. *The Hirbemerdon Tepe Survey region, with agricultural areas (zones of landscape destruction) and pastoral areas (zones of agricultural survival) indicated.*



Figure 6. *Flat and mounded sites in the immediate vicinity of Hirbemerdon Tepe.*

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Our transects demonstrate that the Upper Tigris region is a 'continuous landscape' with regard to surface artefacts, although not as dense as northern Mesopotamia (Wilkinson 1989). Most sites were flat and without the anthropogenic soil discoloration typical of sites on alluvial plains (Figure 6). These sites were predominantly prehistoric and Hellenistic through to Islamic. The two Middle Bronze Age sites, on the other hand, are exclusively mounded in the Hirbemerdon Tepe Survey area, and are close to the Tigris on low terrace edges. Other Middle Bronze Age sites in the Upper Tigris valley also fall into this pattern.

Acknowledgements

For the archaeological work at Hirbemerdon Tepe, we would like to thank the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Turkey for its support and the permit. The project was jointly planned with the Museum of Diyarbakır, as part of the Ilisu dam project. Our best acknowledgements go to the Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, Grand Valley State University, Harvard University, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Curtis T. and Mary G. Brennan Foundation, and other private donors who have supported the archaeological work at Hirbemerdon Tepe.

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https://doi.org/10.15184/S2978855200904621 Published online by Cambridge University Press