

Studies on human remains in Syria and Iraq, seasons 2001–2002. A general overview

Arkadiusz Sołtysiak

Department of Historical Anthropology
Institute of Archaeology, Warsaw University, Poland

In spite of decades of intensive archaeological research, there are still very few publications on the physical anthropology of ancient Mesopotamia. Apart from less than a hundred already published often brief reports on individual sites, there were only single comparative studies (Cappieri 1970, Bernhard 1993) or regional surveys (Ishida 1981) published in the past. For that reason the present author decided to gather all possible data and establish a database of human skeletons from every periods and all accessible sites described in a comparable way. In the autumn excavation seasons of 2001 and 2002 the human remains from four Syrian and Iraqi sites were studied, namely from Tell Arbid (Bronze Age settlement near Qamishli, Polish-Syrian excavations directed by Prof. Piotr Bieliński, Warsaw University), Tell Ashara (ancient Terqa on the Euphrates, French-Syrian excavations directed by Prof. Olivier Rouault, Lyon II University), Tell Masaikh (Neo-Assyrian town on the Euphrates near Tell Ashara, French and Italian excavations directed by Dr. Maria Grazia Masetti-Rouault, CNRS Paris), and Ashur (the first capital city of Assyria, German-Iraqi excavations directed by Dr. Peter Miglus, Heidelberg University). The research was done also on stored collections of bones and teeth found at three sites excavated in the past: Tell Fecheriye, Tell Rijim, and Tell Rad Shaqra.

The chronology of the studied human remains is most variable in Tell Arbid, the bones from the other sites are more chronologically homogenous (see **Table 1**). The two largest samples are Bronze Age Terqa (110 individuals) and Pre-Islamic/Islamic Tell Masaikh (137 individuals). These two sites are located on both banks of the Euphrates, ca. 5 kilometers in a direct line from each other, thus making a possibility of some diachronical comparisons in a regional scale possible. Other samples are still very small, but at least in the case of Tell Arbid it may be expected that they will increase in future.

Table 1. Number of skeletons per chronological units.

chronology \ site	Ashur	Tell Arbid	Tell Ashara	T. Fecheriye	T. Ma-saikh	T. Rad Shaqra	Tell Rijim	Σ
3000 – 2500 BCE		2						2
2500 – 2000 BCE		7				16		23
2000 – 1500 BCE		17	110		3			130
1500 – 1000 BCE	4	4						8
1000 – 500 BCE	11			1	4			16
500 – 1 BCE	22				4			26
1 – 1000 CE		21	1		137		2	161
unknown		33	2		5			40
Σ	37	84	113	1	153	16	2	406

Since it has not been possible to bring the bones out of Syria or Iraq (except for a few samples), the research must had to be done in the excavation houses. There is always a danger that the bones may be destroyed during the winter due to rains and other local conditions. For that reason it was very important to study them as quickly as possible after their excavation.

All skeletal remains have been described with use of the questionnaire based on *Standards of Data Collection* (Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994), but simplified due to time restrictions and fieldwork limitations. The questionnaire contained the following information:

1. state of preservation of bones (4-step scale: absent, fragments only, broken, complete);
2. sexing (based on pelvis & skull morphology);
3. age diagnostics (pubic symphysis, auricular surface, suture closure, dentition);
4. 34 basic cranial measurements (also two methods of orbital breadth measuring);
5. 52 basic postcranial measurements (incl. some not included in the *Standards*);
6. 15 additional child measurements (sphenoid, occipital, mandible, pelvis, and scapula);
7. 36 primary nonmetric traits (chiefly cranial ones);
8. dental measurements (mesiodistal and buccolingual diameters);
9. dental wear, hypoplasia, and caries (last two in 3-step scale: absent, trace, present);
10. observation of traumas and most evident pathological changes (incl. *cribra orbitalia*);
11. taphonomical observations, if possible.

Due to general poor state of preservation of most specimens, the questionnaire could be filled out averagely only in 10–20%. For example, in Tell Masaikh in the season 2002 about 60% of individuals have been classified as incomplete, very poorly or poorly preserved, and no one as very well preserved (Sołtysiak 2003), although this sample is more complete than others. The bones were preserved *in situ* with 5% acetate solution of polyvinyl acetate whenever possible.

In each site an individual research strategy had to be developed. At Tell Arbid there is a number of rich Khabour and Mitanni graves (2nd millennium BCE) and the anthropological research may be focused on relations between social background and biological characteristics of the individuals. In Ashur the taphonomical research was a priority when some disarticulated human remains were found in the settlement context (Sołtysiak 2002c). In Tell Ashara there were many very poorly preserved skeletons, including one interesting case of an individual with all the ribs broken and then healed (Sołtysiak 2002a). Tell Masaikh is abundant in Pre-Islamic and Islamic regular graves, sometimes with quite well preserved skeletons (Sołtysiak 2002b, 2003).

So far, four preliminary reports were already published (Sołtysiak 2002 a,b,c, 2003). This volume of the "Studies in Historical Anthropology" contains also a very general preliminary report on human remains from Tell Arbid excavated in seasons 1996–2002, and final reports on human remains from Tell Fecheriye, Tell Rad Shaqra, and Tell Rijim. Last three reports contain all measurements taken and observations done on poorly preserved and singular individuals. Although very few, in the future these skeletons may be included in wider regional/chronological samples.

Acknowledgements

This research was financed by the Polish Committee for Scientific Research (Komitet Badań Naukowych, grant No 5 H01H 035 21 entitled "The Variability of the Ancient Near Eastern Human Populations"). The autor thanks all the team directors who offered facilities for studying the excavated bones (in alphabetical order): Prof. Piotr Bieliński (Tell Arbid, Tell Rad Shaqra, Tell Rijim), Dr. Maria Grazia Masetti-Rouault (Tell Masaikh), Dr. Peter Miglus (Ashur), Dr. Alexander Pruss (Tell Fecheriye), and Prof. Olivier Rouault (Tell Ashara). Many thanks are also due to Constance Frank, Dr. Franciszek Stępniewski, Dr. Dariusz Szelağ, Dr. Anna Smogorzewska, and Zuzanna Wygnańska for detailed information about archeological context of human remains from studied sites, as well as to all other members of the expeditions to Ashur, Tell Arbid, Tell Ashara, and Tell Masaikh for their support in the field.

Bibliography

Bernhard W.

1993: *Anthropologie von Südwestasien*, "Rassengeschichte der Menschheit" 14, München.

Buikstra J.E., Ubelaker D.H. (eds)

1994: *Standards of Data Collection from Human Skeletal Remains*, "Arkansas Archaeological Survey Research Series" 44, Fayetteville.

Cappieri M.

1970: *The Mesopotamians of the Chalcolithic and Bronze Ages*, Miami.

Ishida H.

1981: *On the Human Remains in Hinrin and Other Sites in Iraq*, "Sumer" 40:1979–81, pp. 34–36.

Sołtysiak A.

2002a: *Human Remains from Tell Ashara – Terqa. Seasons 1999–2001. A Preliminary Report*, "Athenaeum" 90, No 2, pp. 591–594.

2002b: *Human Remains from Tell Masaikh. Seasons 1998–2001. A Preliminary Report*, "Athenaeum" 90, No 2, pp. 594–597.

2002c: *Assur 2000–2001: Vorläufiger Bericht über die Bestattungen*, "Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft zu Berlin" 134, pp. 41–46.

2003: *Preliminary Report on Human Remains from Tell Masaikh, Season 2002*, "Athenaeum" 91, No 2, pp. 584–589.