Jebel Khalid: A Hellenistic Settlement in North Syria

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The mountain Jebel Khalid is situated on the Euphrates approximately 3 kilometres downstream from el-Qitar. It became known through research in the region from 1982 onwards; more concentrated investigation in 1984 and 1985 demonstrated that it was a centre for hermits in the early centuries of our era but that as a largely classical site, about which nothing was known, a formal campaign would produce important results.

Three seasons have been held under the co-direction of Professor G.W. Clarke (ANU) and Mr P.J. Connor (University of Melbourne). The first season in 1986 was devoted largely to a survey of the walls in conjunction with Mr C.L. Ogleby (Surveying, University of Melbourne) who had also worked at el-Qitar from the beginning, and to limited excavation in two key areas. Mr E.B. Joyce (Geology, University of Melbourne), also a member of the team, studied the geology and geomorphology of the area.

Jebel Khalid is long (about 1500m on the river frontage) and narrow, with fiercely steep sides at the north and for much of the eastern (river) flank. The northern side is uniformly steep, its eastern part topped by a deep crown of rock. Towards the south, on both east and west, the slope becomes more moderate; but a long and hard and totally visible climb from the valley below makes for a difficult approach.

The top of the mountain, though a plateau, is difficult enough terrain : two gullies and two lofty ridges run in a generally west-east direction. Many caves are cut into the rock. They are generally squared off inside and often fashioned into an outer and an inner compartment; one cave has an impressive 'barrel-vault' roof now blackened with smoke. Clearly these caves were originally quarries for the limestone blocks that built the fortifications and other large buildings that we have partially explored; but they were used subsequently for dwellings or storage of goods or penning animals.

This plateau at the top of the mountain, as the plan shows, is protected by a fortification wall which keeps consistently to the highest point of land round the perimeter. In addition, the acropolis situated on the highest ground has its own fortifications which, on a similar principle, also enclose all the highest ground. The trace of the walls can be confidently established because smaller or longer stretches or single blocks of either the inner or outer face (or both) can be detected at regular intervals right round the mountain; they total some 4 kilometres. It is clear that at the north-east corner the wall runs into a high face of rock and ends there. Several exhaustive searches have found no trace of wall along the river, so the river itself and the steep cliffs along it at this point must have been thought sufficient natural protection; at the south the wall continues right to the large ravine, and in any case the projecting finger of the acropolis fortifications provides a strategic defence overlooking the ravine.

The wall is constructed in a regular pattern of compartments created by the consistent alternation of headers and stretchers. This means that every metre (the average length of a block), a block is laid end-on across the wall, forming compartments which are then filled with chunks of limestone. This wall is therefore much stronger than those which have a mass of rubble thrust between the shaped blocks of the inner face and outer face with only a few blocks placed laterally to give some stability. The compartment system requires skill and care and probably also depends on the quarrymen extracting the limestone blocks at a prescribed size : the blocks must have been sawn out from the soft limestone. The wall is 2.80m wide on average and probably reached over 6m in height with some sort of parapet above that to shield the soldiers who walked along on guard-duty.

The wall changes direction as it keeps to the highest level of ground, very often by simply turning corners, but often also a tower is placed at these points. There are 28 towers of varying sizes. On the northern perimeter the towers are fewer in number and quite small; they project inside the line of the fortifications, doubtless because the fall away is so steep that underpinning their foundations would have been almost impossible. The remaining towers project forward of the circuit. Some of these are very large : the Northwest Tower, for example, the towers flanking the Main Gate, and the huge tower at the southern most point which is built around a massive outcrop of stone to make its foundations stronger and more impressive. There appears to be one gate (in the western flank), whilst the river offered access on the east (to friends). There are two entrances to the citadel, one at the north, the other at the south-east corner.

The construction technique of the wall is clearly Hellenistic and, in addition, the method of encircling all the strategic areas of a site, rather than defining some smaller defensible area, belongs especially to the beginning of the third century B.C. when Alexander's successors were consolidating Greek power throughout Asia Minor, past the Persian Gulf, and on to Afghanistan. This technique is known as the Great Circuit, and seems to be limited to the years approximately 310 to 280 B.C., when the powerful princes had much money and a great deal of human resource at their disposal. These considerations suggest a date for the foundation of Jebel Khalid in the early third century B.C., at a time when Seleucus Nicator was turning Northern Syria into a second Macedonia by founding new cities like Seleucia in Pieria and Apamea, and reconstructing others like Aleppo (Beroia) along modern lines, and allocating Macedonian names. So far the ancient name of Jebel Khalid is not known.

Excavations under the supervision of P.J. Connor and Gillian Shepherd (University of Melbourne) were undertaken at the Northwest Tower which is placed on a high peak of rock and dominates the approaches from the west and the north and commands a view of the river upstream, in order to understand its structure, to clarify the construction of the wall, and to produce stratified objects (from an area of the fortifications which must have seen constant activity) which might confirm the suggested dating. As the plan shows, two aims were largely fulfilled. The plans, elevations and sections are the work of Bryce Raworth, a recent graduate of Classical Studies and Architecture; he also supervised a trench in the Central Area. The tower is horse-shoe shaped (half-round) and, at least in the foundation courses (and very likely for the full height of the wall) is built solid with two blocks laid end to end on the vertical arms, giving a width of approximately 2.40m; that is, slightly less than the normal width of the circuit wall. The depth of the tower is 18m and its width 15m. At the rounded western end the bedrock has been shaped in 'steps' in order to fit tightly the limestone blocks that form the tower's circumference. Some of these blocks remain firmly fixed in their bedding. The eastern wall of the tower comprises two distinct parts : the compartmented wall is adjacent to the solid-built wall; the compartmented section continues the structure of the circuit wall with its regular alternation of header and stretcher, but at 1.6m is not nearly so wide. The solid-built section (1.84m) is not as wide as the arms of the tower, but the combined width is 3.49m which is appreciatively greater than the normal 2.80m of the circuit wall. The entrance is off-centre.

No tiles were discovered, therefore, we deduce that the tower was not roofed. Roofed towers often had two or more storeys to give sophisticated catapults a greater range; but the Northwest Tower at Jebel Khalid is by natural position so high and dominating that a multi-storey construction was not necessary.

The so-called half-round or horse-shoe towers seem to make their appearance at Colophon and Heracleia on Latmos (in present-day Turkey) by the end of the fourth century B.C. The latter are closest in plan to the Northwest Tower, and one has a very similar off-centre entrance. During the third century increasing use was made of round-faced towers, no doubt because of their wider fields of fire. The Northwest Tower at Jebel Khalid is perhaps amongst the earliest extant half-round towers.

In 1988, under the supervision of Anna Curnow and Michael Galvin (both of the University of Melbourne), we undertook investigation of the Main Gate. Work here was exceedingly difficult both because the Gate (through which the modern track still enters the plateau) is exposed to the stiff, prevailing westerly winds, and because the limestone blocks had rotted and crumbled to powder. However, some significant progress was made in plotting the plan and in glimpsing some of the splendour of the outer face. The plan of fortification shows two rather shapeless towers flanking the entrance. Though this cannot be accurate, the plan correctly reflects what can be traced on the ground; namely, that there are clearly two towers of considerable dimensions where the circuit walls to both north and south of the entrance terminate. That plan also indicates a wide entrance-way, which is scarcely possible since an entrance needs to be closed with manageable gates, as can be seen from reasonably contemporary examples in that part of the Greek world of the third century B.C.

Whilst no certainty yet exists about the limits of the towers as they face each other, we can now see how the outer face of the wall joins the southern tower and how, importantly, there is a narrower projection from the north tower which diminishes the entrance, and provides also a courtyard-like space in front of the gate where an enemy attacking from close quarters would be vulnerable to weapons from the side and from the back.

Fortunately, an area close to this projection was relatively free of the massive tumble and revealed five courses of blocks in position and demonstrated the nature of the 'facing' which added something special to the Main Gate. Work should be continued in this important area, but many heavy tumbled wall blocks will need to be carefully and safely removed before progress can be made.

The **Central Area**, at the head of the large ravine, has been explored because the evidence of robbing by the local villagers, of fragments of unfluted columns, and of traces of large structures revealed in the ground surface, suggested that this was a public area with large public buildings. Such seems indeed to be the case though more work is needed to produce a satisfactory plan.

Excavation, under the supervision of G.W. Clarke and B. Raworth, revealed that a floor of well-cut limestone blocks had been laid on an underpinning of stones levelled off by a limestone slurry. Across the flooring lay a tumble of building blocks and column drums. None of these elements appeared to be in its original position. Several columns had collapsed across the paving with the roofing falling on top; shattered roof tiles were found in great abundance and at least two socketed blocks can be identified as roofing elements for holding roof-beams. A further trench west of this area produced interesting fragments of pottery and so on, but the only construction was a flimsy wall built on a soil foundation and therefore of later date than the earliest structures which were founded on bedrock.

The **Domestic Quarter** lies on the south-facing slope opposite the Acropolis. Houses begin at the top of the slope, stretch along it towards the edge of the plateau on the river-side, and continue down almost to the public buildings in the Central Area. Work was begun here in 1987 and continued in 1988 under the supervision of Peter Connor, Miles Lewis, Dora Constantinides (University of Melbourne) and Radi Oqdi (Syrian Archaeological Service).

The initial trench (Sondage d) was placed at a midpoint which seemed to be bounded by streets on the east and the south. Among the scatter of rubble, certain areas are visibly clearer, giving the impression of courtyards and of streets intersecting, after the Hellenistic manner, at right angles. Sondage e, a little to the east, was located at the edge of a presumed courtyard. Results here were a little disappointing since bedrock was not far below the surface. We could however plot a room or part of a room with two tall stone posts framing a doorway, and the lower courses of at least two rubble walls built on bedrock.

Sondage d produced a great deal of material : fragments of pottery, terracotta lamps, fragments of glass, one or two heavily corroded bronze coins. Solid walls of rough limestone with the occasional large dressed blocks, which appear to come from the fortification material, meet at the south-east of the trench and clearly define a house corner. The trench did not reach as far as the street and to-date no street has been explored, though original estimates were not far off the mark since in 1988 impressive doorways have come to light to both the north and west of Sondage d.

In 1988 Cliff Ogleby mapped out a grid for the whole of the Domestic Quarter in blocks measuring 15 x 15m, giving nine 5x5m squares to each block. Sondage d (now renamed D1) was taken as the reference point. By means of this grid we will be able to pursue random sampling and a start was made on this towards the close of the 1988 season by working on A3 and B1 both of which emerged among the random numbers now marked on the grid. These areas did not look at all promising; they were selected first because their proximity to D made control of the operation possible. However, the structures are interesting, with a large oven coming to light in A3 (as well as two walls joining), and a fluted column drum used as a wall block at the foundation level in B1. Here too an enigmatic cross-wall has emerged. Smaller objects were reasonably abundant : typical Hellenistic wares, pottery and lamps.

The squares in D and E, the area of our main attention, showed at least three levels of occupation which nicely complicates matters. The finds, so far as we can tell at present, remain within the Hellenistic period of the third to first centuries B.C., and there is nothing noticeably Roman. Just below surface soil, for example, have been found large coarse-ware amphorae, broken but reasonably complete (a sign of abandonment) which seem to be Hellenistic not Roman, whilst partially-painted echinus bowls and fragments of West Slope Ware and relief moulded bowls (with stylized plants or comic masks or mythological figures) also emerge from the upper strata, though more so in D1 than the other squares.

Two impressive doorways have been discovered, with specially designed flanking doorjambs (one door has neat paving outside it) showing a level of elegance perhaps surprising for such a remote settlement. These doors were both blocked up at a later time, one of them with a block taken from a public building, since it is part of a metope-triglyph frieze.

Excavation in D1 revealed no door. The walls are founded on bedrock and broken across one wall which was part of an earlier occupation. Dimensions of individual rooms cannot yet be given because for none do we have more than two sides and that not complete. The rooms do however appear to be large. A further occupation (the latest) is represented by the stone door-jambs previously mentioned in respect of Sondage e; for these are associated with walls built, not on bedrock, but on soil sometimes 1.5m above bedrock.

Further excavation will perhaps make clear to us, based on our present experience, the nature of the settlement and of the various occupation phases.

In 1988 excavation was also extended to the **Acropolis**. Its situation, specially fortified, the traces of walls in the central part where robbery had disclosed fragments of painted plaster, and a huge cistern in the middle of it all, encouraged the belief that a major building was located here : the home of the Ruler (Model B) or the Administrator (Model A). The supervisors were G.W. Clarke and Gillian Shepherd.

In this first season the results are impressive. The chosen trenches were placed on a corner of the building which can perhaps even now be reconstructed as a rectangle surrounding a courtyard. It has a columned portico facing the courtyard and a series of rooms behind. No entrance leading from portico to the main rooms has yet been detected. Several column-drums have come to light, and, though none is *in situ,* the position of columns on the stylobate can clearly be seen, since where they sat originally the floor is quite smooth in a circle, whilst to each side the surface is somewhat rougher. This roughness might well indicate that there was no pedestrian traffic at random through the inter-columniations and that something like a low parapet was strung between the columns.

The side wall of one of the interior rooms (at the east) has been uncovered. Associated with it are numerous scraps of painted plaster. These increase the range of plain colours known to us from surface finds (there are stratified scraps of red from the Domestic Quarter), but reveal also that some areas were painted with stylized designs giving a mottled effect done in contrasting colours, and also with motifs resembling stylized plants. At the moment these fragments cannot be assembled to produce a coherent panel but their existence is an encouraging indication of what might possibly lie in store.

Fragments of triglyphs and metopes came to light, giving clues to the entablature. But perhaps the most exciting find was a single corner block incorporating a small lion's head water-spout between two sets of guttae placed at right angles.

Did this settlement have a temple, a theatre, a gymnasium - the essential amenities of a Greek town ? We do not know. A theatre needs a particular kind of land formation, so that looks unlikely. However, it seems clear that Jebel Khalid is not a town or city *(polis)* in the manner of some Seleucid foundations in North Syria, but a type of soldier-colony *(katoikia)* which Seleucus used as an important element of his policies. These colonies were not granted to veterans as a retirement village. Seleucus and his successors preferred a force of their own Macedonians when occasion arose, wishing to avoid relying on mercenaries as the nucleus of their armies. These settlers received grants of land (probably both inside the city and outside on the rich river plains below), had a permanent home, and were expected to maintain the practice of arms in case their ruler needed them.

One such, well-known, settlement is Dura Europos, also on the Euphrates but near the southern border of present-day Syria. Dura had a history till near the end of the third century A.D., but it began as a Seleucid military colony to protect the river crossing. Our team is working to bring to scholarly attention another such colony whose existence has never been suspected, and where the seeming absence of Roman occupation could well have left the Hellenistic remains unspoiled and not complicated by later habitation.