

The Housing Insula at Jebel Khalid on the Euphrates

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Jebel Khalid is a large, heavily fortified site on the west bank on the Euphrates, founded early in the Hellenistic Seleucid period (c. 300 BCE) to guard the river. It was abandoned c. 75 BCE and not re-settled by the Romans.

One of the sites excavated by the Australian team from ANU and Melbourne University has been the Housing Insula, situated on the southern slope of the lower of two hills, facing the Acropolis Palace. This was a classic position for Greek housing, as recommended by Xenophon and Aristotle. In 1987, a small sondage, excavated by the late Peter Connor, found what turned out to be the southeastern corner of a block of houses. The extent of the insula was eventually discovered to be 90 m north/south and 35 m east/west and to contain within its perimeter walls at least seven houses. The houses were built of limestone from the nearby quarries. No mudbrick structures were found but it is possible that an upper storey was built of mudbrick. One staircase has been found, so at least one house had an upper storey. Roofs were tiled in the Greek style, which helped to collect water draining into courtyards. Unlike many other Greek sites, where every house had its own cistern, only two houses had rock-cut cisterns, each c. 5.0 m deep, to store water. Many people and pack-animals must have been employed to bring water up from the Euphrates in the long dry summers.

The houses are spacious and, in their original form, seem prosperous. Four similarly-sized house in the north of the insula had an average dimension of 332 m², discounting any upper storey. In the south the houses were more irregularly-sized, due to the take-over tactics of the large House of the Painted Frieze, which took up a huge 772 m². All the houses had, as their circulation space and source of light and air, a large central courtyard in the Mediterranean style, surrounded by rooms. While every house was different, a common pattern was for the important family or reception room to be at the north of the courtyard, flanked by two private rooms, one on either side. The service rooms were either to the south of the courtyard or along its sides.

The House of the Painted Frieze is a good example of this arrangement and of the inhabitants' desire for privacy and security, who, after all, were settlers in an alien landscape. The house had the grandest street door in the whole insula, with a recessed and paved porch, which led (as in several other houses) into an entry room, which acted as a buffer between the street and the courtyard. Here a visitor could either go ahead via another door, into the lower courtyard which housed the cistern and various domestic activities, or turn right to climb steps





The House of the Painted Frieze and a reconstruction of the frieze to right.

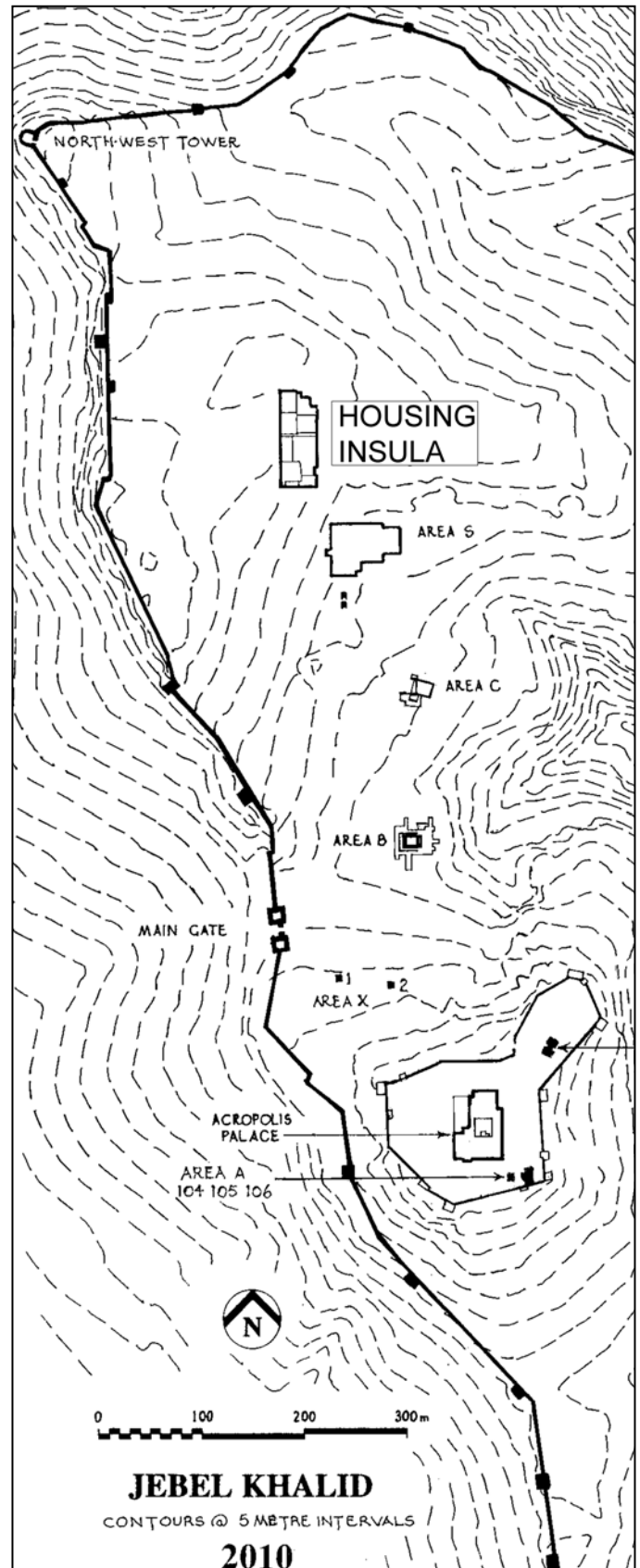


into another ante-room and finally enter the grander courtyard, at the north of which was the reception room or oikos. This room was 7 x 10.5 m, the largest in the whole insula and just falling short of needing the support of internal columns. It faced south over a wide verandah or pastas, which overlooked the courtyard. It accessed not one but two rooms on either side, which must have been very private. Flanking the courtyard were, on the east, three spacious rooms of some elegance to judge by the remains of their yellow stucco decoration, and on the west by a series of smaller rooms housing ovens, obviously service rooms for a large household. In the style of a few, rich houses on the island of Delos (visited by many Syrian traders), it had not one but three doors opening south, the central one very wide and the other two quite narrow. So this room would have been full of light when the doors were open, and the painted frieze, which gives the house its name, would have been on brilliant display. The stucco frieze itself was not found *in situ*, but the lower panels of the plastered wall were, painted in yellow, black and red. The fragments of patterned mouldings and of the frieze itself were found on the floor near the back wall. The patterns included egg-and-dart, meander, wave and one called the Lesbian cymation, all familiar from Greek housing at Delos and elsewhere. But quite special were the few fragments of a figured frieze showing little Erotes (Cupids) driving lively goat chariots. These could not be physically pieced together but months of research enabled us to reconstruct what the whole wall may have looked like, on the lines of comparanda from the few Hellenistic sites where figured friezes occurred, which was only in large and prosperous houses.

Such painting would be expensive, not only in the use of pigments but also in the employment of a suitable Greek-trained artist. This is quite an extraordinary find on the banks of the Euphrates. The owner of the house wanted to be seen as educated in Hellenistic taste.

It is clear that this was the house of an important person, perhaps an army officer in the military settlement, or a rich businessman if this was not a military area. Yet, like all the other houses excavated, it has no bathroom and no latrine. It is possible that there were communal facilities elsewhere on site, or that all the necessary containers were portable, such as washing basins and convenient pots.

Not all houses in the insula were so elite. Several others had far more evidence of storage and equipment for



processing agricultural produce such as basalt grinders, olive press fragments and of course loomweights. In most of them, rooms seem to have been multi-functional. In none of them is there evidence of the seclusion of women, but women's presence was manifest in the form of jewellery and beads, as well as figurine fragments. The total insula, its architecture, prolific pottery and artefact assemblages provides a valuable picture of several different households in the 2nd century BCE. ■