# Jawf/Tabuk Archaeological Project (JTAP)

A Brief Report of the Third Field Season, 2013

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### **Research Objective and History**

Our research project, *JTAP* (Jawf/Tabuk Archaeological Project), aims to trace the process of pastoral nomadization in the northern half of the Arabian Peninsula. A key to the issue is the socio-cultural movement in the five millennia spanning from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (when sheep and goats were first domesticated) to the Early Bronze Age (when full-fledged nomadic society backed with a tribal system is supposed to have been established).

Our comprehensive research started in December of 2012 with a reconnaissance survey in the northern half of the Tabuk Province (Fujii 2012). The survey located several promising sites, which served as targets for subsequent research (**Fig. 1**). The second field season, conducted from 23 September until 9 October in 2013, focused on the Gurayya Basin *ca*. 60 km north of Tabuk and attested to the existence of Chalcolithic to Early Bronze Age burial fields along Wadi Ghubai and Wadi Moharek (Fujii 2013). We test-sounded a tower tomb (Feature 3045) in preparation of future investigation.

This report summarizes the research outcome of the third field season taken place for two weeks from December 14 until 28 of the same year. We conducted a limited excavation of Wadi Sharma 1 along the Red Sea coast, which proved to be a small settlement dated to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B.

# The Site and Site-setting

Wadi Sharma is a small drainage system ca. 70 km in total length that rises in the western slope of Harrat al Uwayrid, a basalt plateau running in the center of the Tabuk

Province in the NW-SE direction, and flows westward into the Red Sea. The site of Wadi Sharma 1 is located *ca*. 25 km upper of the mouth of the wadi, occupying a tongue-shaped gentle slope protruding southward toward the sandy wadi bed (**Figs. 2-3**). This site was first found in 1980 during the *Comprehensive Archaeological Survey Program*. The preliminary report refers to it as Site 200-47, one of the two Neolithic sites located at the foot of Jebel Arrayig al-Yusri (Ingraham *et al.* 1981: 67). We visited the site in the course of the first and second survey seasons and confirmed anew its importance. This is the reason why we embarked on a full-fledged investigation.

The site is covered with stones and sand, and a number of masonry wall alignments are exposed on the present ground surface. Overall, they develop southwestward along the rocky ridgeline of the slope, suggesting a site area of ca.1.2 ha (= 60 m NS by 20 m SE). Given this, it would follow that the site represents a hamlet-size settlement. Our portable GPS receiver set on the benchmark indicated the coordinates of latitude 28.05.463N, longitude 035.28. 561E, and an elevation of ca. 264 m.

With a background of a chain of rocky foothills, the site faces a wide wadi bed where acacia and tamarisk trees are dotted (**Figs. 4-5**). Nowadays no perennial natural water source is available around the site, but the existence of palm tree gardens along the wadi bank is suggestive of the abundance of subsoil water. It is highly likely that the Neolithic local population enjoyed a more favorable condition of water supply.

Another focal point when we discuss the site location of Wadi Sharma 1 is the convenience for local transportation. The drainage basin of Wadi Sharma is fringed with steep slopes at both sides, but a small gap exists immediately to the west of the site, making it possible to traverse the rocky foothills in the north-south direction (**Fig. 2**). In this sense, we can argue that the site occupies a strategic point of the local traffic. Another likely inducement is the availability of various construction material including sandstone, slate, and granite, all of which are easily procured around the foothill on which the site is located. The site location of Wadi Sharma 1 can be understood in these contexts.

### Excavation

The excavation took place following the standard 5m by 5m grid and locus system. Since no reliable triangular point was available, a benchmark was set up arbitrarily at the northern part of the site. Due to time constraints, our operation in this field season focused on Area 1 extending over a total of eleven squares around the benchmark (Fig.6). The excavated area total 245 square meters, and the volume of excavated soil amounts ca. 20 cubic meters.

We dag down until the middle level of Layer 2 and revealed the top course of wall alignments of masonry structures (**Figs. 7-9**). Due to the long spell of strong sandstorm, the excavation was interrupted at this stage and has not yet reached their foundation course. The only exception to this is a small trench (Trench I) opened along the northern edge of Square B8, where we confirmed that the preserved wall segment (ca. 0.4 m high) was constructed on a bed rock layer underlying ca. 30-40 cm below the present ground surface (**Fig. 10**).

# Structural Remains

The excavation has revealed a cluster of stone-built structures, most of which were constructed with a double-faced, dry masonry technique. As for construction material, sandstone, slate, and granite cobbles ca. 20-30 cm long were used without any substantial processing. In addition, small rubble was used as adjusters for masonry walls. In view of the volume of fallen stones around the walls, the original wall height of the structures is estimated at more than 1 m.

The exposed structural remains fall into two in terms of typology: a large square structure ca. 8-10 m on a side and several oval or rectangular features ca. 2-3 m in a longer axis. It appears that the former has a tripartite layout consisting of a central hall and several side rooms. The location of an entrance to this large structure is still unknown, but there is a high possibility that it existed at the southeastern part where illicit digging pits leave their scars. Meanwhile, most of the smaller features clustered along the northern and eastern walls of the key structure. Both components were combined to form a large complex, but further scrutiny is required to grasp its overall picture.

## Small Finds

The limited excavation yielded a small number of artifacts. Flint artifacts included single-platform pyramidal cores, a crested blade, unmodified blades and flakes, Amuq type points, a scraper, a serrated blade with silica sheen, scrapers, a retouched blade, and a digging tool (**Fig. 11**). The contents of the tool kit suggest that the inhabitants

were engaged in both hunting and agriculture. Of significance is the occurrence of the diagnostic points, which, together with the existence of the large, multi-roomed, square structure, enables us to tentatively date the settlement to the PPNB (Pre-Pottery Neolithic B), especially the Late PPNB.

Grinding implements made of slightly reddish sandstone also occurred in a small number. They contained a basin quern and several palm-size grinding slabs, both of which attest to the importance of cereal cultivation at the settlement (**Fig. 12**). Miscellaneous finds included a snail bead and several unworked snail and shell fragments, suggesting that the inhabitant was engaged in the exploitation of marine products of the Red Sea as well.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The limited excavation has made it clearer that the site of Wadi Sharma 1 is the second PPNB settlement in Saudi following al-Aynah (Site 200-104) located again in the Tabuk Province (Ingraham *et al.* op. cit.: 67-68, Al-Asmari 2012). This means that the Neolithic northwestern Arabia was incorporated into the cultural sphere of the southern Levant, and that the initial stage of pastoral nomadization in the area should be discussed in this context. However, our excavation still remains halfway and has just caught a glimpse of the site. The next field season scheduled in September of 2014 is expected to provide further insights into the archaeological implications of the unique site.

#### Acknowlegements:

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Fig. 1 Wadi Sharma 1: site location.



Fig. 2 Wadi Shrama 1: surrounding topography.



Fig. 3 Wadi Shrama 1: aerial photo (N above).



Fig. 4 Wadi Shrama 1: distant view (looking E).



Fig. 5 Wadi Shrama 1: general view (looking S).



Fig. 6 Wadi Shrama 1: site plan.



Fig. 7 Wadi Shrama 1: Area 1 (looking N).



Fig. 8 Wadi Shrama 1: Area 1 (looking NW).



Fig. 9 Wadi Shrama 1: Area 1 (looking NE).



Fig. 10 Wadi Shrama 1: Square B8, Trench I (looking NW).



Fig. 11 Wadi Shrama 1: flint artifacts.



Fig. 12 Wadi Shrama 1: grinding slabs.