

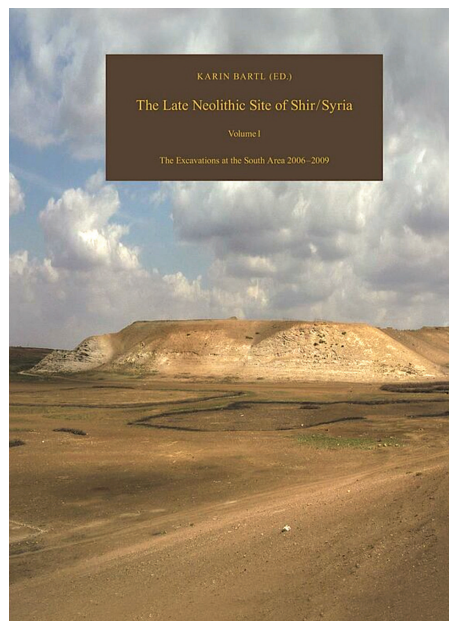
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Review of Karin Bartl (ed.), 2018. *The Late Neolithic site of Shir/ Syria I. The excavations at the South Area 2006 - 2009*. Damaszener Forschungen 18. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft/ Zabern. ISBN: 978-3-8053-5190-4. € 92.50.

With this volume presenting the results of the South Area excavations between 2006 and 2009, Karin Bartl starts the publication of her fieldwork at the Late Neolithic (c. 7000-5000 BCE) Syrian site of Shir under the auspices of the German Archaeological Institute's Orient Department (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Orientabteilung) between 2003 and 2010. The volume, comprising almost 760 pages, is substantial in both content and weight. Its layout makes it comfortable to read, but the sizes of figures are, in many cases, slightly too small, such as the detailed maps in the first chapters. Unfortunately, the affiliations and contact addresses of the 23 contributors to the 19 total chapters (including a summary chapter) are not disclosed in an author list or after their respective chapters.

The initial research schedule and how it ended abruptly in early 2011 with the start (1) of what led to a still ongoing war is outlined along with a short research history in Karin Bartl's first subchapter. This subchapter, together with Karin Bartl's and Thomas Urban's subchapter on the methods applied (7-12), serves as an introduction to the volume. While a detailed map gives orientation in space, a chronological table to provide orientation in time and connection to neighbouring regions (such as Upper Mesopotamia, Anatolia and the eastern Mediterranean) would have been welcome in order to better contextualize the relevance of the site. Recording and excavation methods employed at Shir included state of the art techniques at the time of excavation, such as drawings based on tracing georeferenced photographs, subsequent import of vectorized pictures into CAD and an accompanying database for excavation units and finds data. The following section on the site and setting comprises a short overview of selected anthropogeographic features of the region by Bartl (13-16), detailed accounts of the recent *terra rossa*, a similar paleosol buried under the site and PPN mudbricks made thereof with the addition of dung by Stephan Vitzethum and Bernhard Lucke (17-24) and the results of a geophysical prospection by Sirri Seren, Erol Bayırlı and Alois Eder-Hinterleitner (25-34). Here, the combination of geomagnetometry and ground-penetrating radar allowed for a differentiation of the signals in the South Area into four depth levels. However, neither this nor the next chapter try to link these four levels to those identified by excavation.

The chapter on stratigraphy and architecture written by Kristina Pfeiffer (35-180) is one of the main parts of the book and key to understanding the following chapters on samples and finds. The visualization of the entire sequence of the South Area in one diagram (Fig. 4 of the book) is too large to be printed in full and in a readable size. The solution of a fully digital open ac-



cess version under a hyperlink¹ instead of the cumbersome loose foldout attachment sheet of olden days is much appreciated. However, inconsistencies between the published version and the digital one would require cross-checking by the authors. The graph was created using yEd² (37), a freeware originally designed for very different graph types such as flowcharts, but certainly able to also visualize stratigraphic relationships, albeit with more effort. Comprehensively distinguishing between symbols for different feature types such as walls, deposits and pits and showing the vertical and horizontal relationships between them and assigning them to layers, Fig. 4 is a very useful tool for rough orientation in the descriptive text and the plans. However, in contrast to the claim made in the text (37), it is not a Harris Matrix. As still widely practiced in German archaeology (Novák 2008), no distinctions are made between interfaces (e.g. the cuts for pits or foundation trenches) and deposits (e.g. pit fills or buildings collapse) as the basic stratigraphic categories according to Edward Harris. Instead, multi-unit features such as burials are collapsed into one unit. Moreover, Fig. 4 does not show all units (e.g. 104 is missing), shows some units twice (such as Floors 8, 59 and 171) and has no symbology for stratigraphic relationships between features or units – it only shows the schematic vertical and horizontal spatial situation. The unit list in the appendix (165-180), while being very comprehensive to link samples and finds from the other chapters to feature/ unit types and layers, also lacks any stratigraphic information or description beyond the layer attribution.

Consequently, readers interested in detail must establish their own stratigraphical models based on the published plans and text. Fig. 4, text and plans are, however, hard to interpret due to the lack of cross-referencing numbers throughout in the plans and occasionally in the photos and text³ in addition to inconsistencies; for instance, Vessel Unit 111 is assigned to Room 1 according to the captions of Figs. 135 and 137, but to Room

4 according to the text (114) and Fig. 128b, and while the text says its position is east of Wall 108 (114), Figs. 128b, 135 and 137 show that it is north-west of that wall; Unit 4 is a wall according to the text and the unit list (121), but is drawn as a floor in Fig. 4. Hours of browsing, thinking and scribbling unit and wall numbers onto the plans of my reviewer's copy were necessary to extract the information that a real Harris Matrix (cf. Fig. 1) would have provided in an instant. Especially, stratigraphic relationships across layer limits were often omitted in the text, likely because the text is structured along the layer sequence rather than unit sequences.

This is only a small clipping, but it illustrates how much the stratigraphy chapter would have benefited from a real Harris Matrix, augmented by either a somewhat repetitive yet precise list of stratigraphic relationships in tabular form or standardized language (Kind 1989: 141) or a more vivid narrative like a building biography (Rogasch 2014). A building biography approach would have, in addition, had the advantage of a better integration of building alterations (150-151) into the stratigraphic narrative; building alterations are difficult to grasp since text information on remodelled buildings is dispersed across several paragraphs on layers and building/ room labels. Moreover, a more biographical approach would have provided the opportunity to scrutinize depositional histories and formation processes that led to poor preservation of "in situ" (133), *i.e.* primary, contexts more closely. They are in parts addressed by the ceramic chapter (277-280), but this void in the stratigraphy chapter leaves the outliers in the subsequent ¹⁴C chapter and the detailed find distribution plans in the following find sections somewhat orphaned. However, the sheer number of pits (cf. Fig. 4 of the book) and the apparently "severe depositional regime" (278) on the site may also explain some of the shortcomings of the chapter – Shir is certainly a tricky place to dig.

In her interpretation of the individually arranged and presumably one-storeyed rectangular buildings (132-163), Kristina Pfeiffer distinguishes between one- or two-room mudbrick buildings set on stone foundations without foundation trenches interpreted as dwellings (135) and smaller wooden sheds in the earlier layers IV to V, while from layer VI onwards, the buildings become multi-roomed, with a parallel trend of increasing food processing and storage installations inside buildings dated to *c.* 6800 cal BCE by ¹⁴C. Overall, while following certain shared traits of the entire 7th millennium Near East, the settlement's layout and architecture have their closest parallels with sites in the Southern Levant such as Ramad or Yiftah'el (163).

The following chapter by Bernhard Weninger, Lee Clare and Karin Bartl (181-196) describes ¹⁴C samples taken and the results of their modelling using CalPal. The 40 total samples were measured at four different laboratories and were, with a few exceptions, taken from presumably short-lived plant remains such as cereal grains. This is a different approach than practised

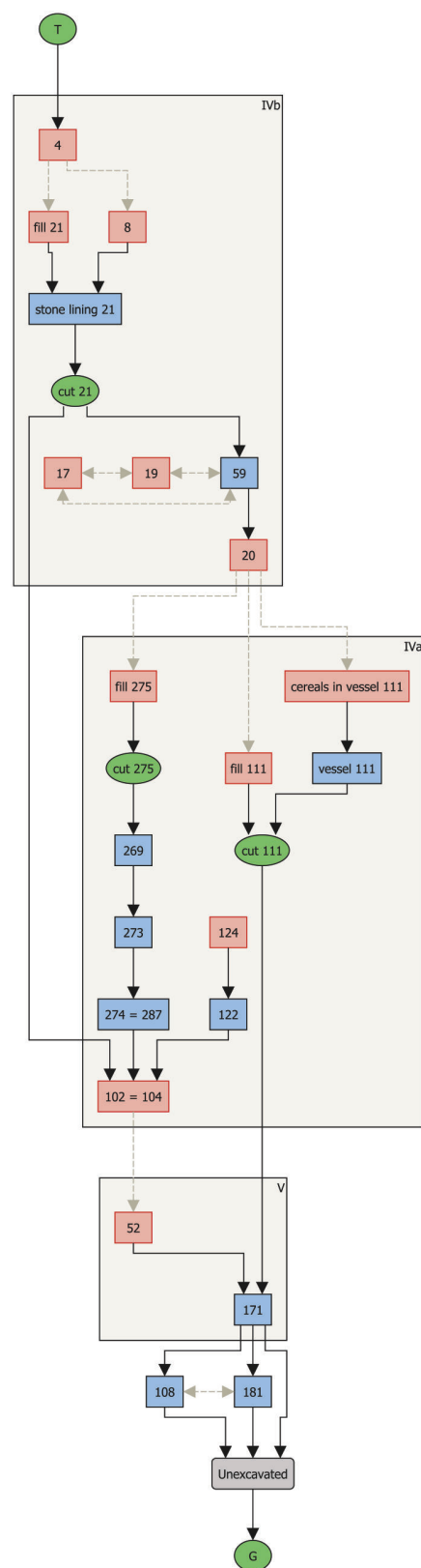


Fig. 1 Selected units forming the stratigraphic context of Vessel Unit 111 according to the reviewer's attempt at reconstructing the stratigraphy of Levels VIb to V in the southern part of L7 at Shir from the publication. Blue: units where stratigraphic relations are addressed in the text (solid lines); red: units where stratigraphic relationships had to be guesstimated from figures and additional assumptions (dotted lines). Created using Harris Matrix Composer (<https://harrismatrixcomposer.com>). (Graph: E. Rosenstock)

elsewhere⁴, and it is debatable given that cereal and pulse grains can potentially be stored for decades. This would make articulated bone – articulation ensuring close temporal association between deposit and dated sample – a good alternative; however, it is not even discussed despite apparent problems with stratigraphic outliers and frequent burials found in layers IV to VI (see below). Phrases such as “truly in-situ samples” or “stratigraphically reworked samples” (189) justify the exclusion of *c.* half of the samples from the analysis and give the impression that there are stratigraphic or taphonomic problems with the association between sampled material and dated deposit that are, however, not addressed in the stratigraphy chapter. While the end of layer IVb can be determined at *c.* 6500 cal BCE, the start of layer I can only be determined somewhere between the middle of the 71st and the 69th century BCE due to the known plateau in the Intcal13 curve between *c.* 7000 and 6800 cal BCE.

Major find classes are treated in separate chapters, starting with the one on lithics by Dörte Rokitta-Krumnow (197-263). While most tools were made from the exceptionally good local flint, provenance analyses of the few obsidian tools by Ernst Pernicka (259-262) make an origin in the Nenezi and Göllü Dağ Region of Central Anatolia likely, possibly imported as raw blades. Pressure flaking is mentioned (207) and is interesting since it is one of the key traits in the discussion about the origins of the Aegean Neolithic at the beginning of the 7th millennium and is thought to derive from Upper Mesopotamia or the Northern Levant (Carter and Milić 2013). Oliver Nieuwenhuys’s introduction and concluding remarks to his chapter on the pottery (263-423) make up for many questions left open by the too short introduction and conclusions to the overall volume. Along with these passages, the humorous tone that makes even the dullest parts on Dark Faced Burnished Ware (DFBW) entertaining to read, once more shows what a great colleague we all have lost. In contrast to the initial 7th millennium BCE DFBW, which was imported according to the archaeoscience chapter by Malgorzata Daszkiewicz and Gerwulf Schneider (432-444), the widened array of coarse pottery shapes from the mid-7th millennium onwards was produced locally. The accompanying chapter on cordage, basketry and textile impressions on pottery (424-431) by Koen Berghuijs sheds light on a widely neglected class of evidence and gives guidelines on how to routinely study such impressions in future projects.

Rokitta-Krumnow’s and Susanna Wittmann-Gering’s (445-462) chapter on vessels made from White Ware, includes photos and drawings of this often neglected class of finds, which I did not even know that it had persisted so long into the Pottery Neolithic until the day I read the chapter. The small finds chapter by Laura Dietrich (463-602) describes a wide array of finds ranging from ground stone, bone and non-pottery clay objects to two female figurines. Slingstones may have been better discussed together with certain lithic objects



Fig. 2 The presentation of the anthropological results is one of 19 chapters in the impressive final publication of the Neolithic site of Shir in Syria. Example: Burial 362 of Shir SH08-2 L8 (Photo: German Archaeological Institute, Orient Department, T. Urban).

interpreted as “bolas” by Rokitta-Krumnow (215-216), whereas stone vessels could better be understood in conjunction with pottery and White Ware.

The burials (Fig. 2) – mostly of infants – are presented by Denise Resch and Julia Gresky (603-632). The anthropology and pathology section by Gresky, Juliane Haelm, Resch and Bartl (633-687) reveals morphological hints at a possible consanguinity between three adult individuals buried together in House F of Layer Va. However, this could not be ascertained by aDNA due to insufficient collagen preservation. Here, I would like to know the target bone, now that the petrous bone has proven the best archive of aDNA (Pinhasi *et al.* 2015). Interestingly, the authors speculate about a possible influence of chaste tree (*Vitex agnus-castus*) on children’s health during their mother’s gestation and lactation period (653). According to the archaeobotany chapter by Reinder Neef (688-694), chaste tree was consumed widely at the site along with the usual cereals and pulses, which, however, excluded peas (*Pisum sativum*) and included grass peas (*Lathyrus sativus*). Despite the data input by Ammar Haidar from the Syrian *Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées (DGAM)*, the preliminary and illustrated note on zooarchaeology (695-697) is only authored by Norbert Benecke. Certainly, the bone finds would have been another valuable clue to the difficult site taphonomy.

Overall, the volume suffers from insufficient cross-connections between the evidence treated by different authors in their chapters. Also Bartl’s conclusions (698-704) are mostly a summary of the preceding chapters, leaving it to the reader and to future research to fully acknowledge the potential of Shir, one of only two Neolithic sites in western Syria that have been dug recently and at a larger scale. With the full publication of Tell el-Kerkh still pending, the book presented here is currently the main source of information about a potential key region for understanding not only the wider socioeconomic developments during what has been termed the “Second Neolithic Revolution” but

also the contemporary onset of the Neolithic expansion into the Aegean around 6800 cal BCE from possibly the Northern Levant (Horejs *et al.* 2015). Hence, it is a must-have for Near Eastern and Prehistoric Archaeology libraries alike.

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Endnotes

¹ <https://arachne.dainst.org/entity/6525347>

² <https://www.yworks.com/products/yed>

³ For example, “the storage facility lowered down from layer IVb”. Likely, Unit 21 is meant here (112).

⁴ For example, at contemporary early Pottery Neolithic Çatalhöyük (Bayliss *et al.* 2015).

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