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Tell el-Kerkh is a large tell-complex located in the south of the Rouj Basin, Idlib province. It was occupied for long periods from the Neolithic to the Byzantine, however we concentrated our excavations on the Neolithic period.

It is the oldest Neolithic settlement in northwest Syria, dating back to the middle of the 9th millennium BC. Therefore, the site provided us with data on how farming villages appeared in this region. Based on the excavated plant remains and animal bones, the subsistence of the people who first settled at Tell el-Kerkh seemed to follow the path from hunter-gatherers to farmer-herders.

In the late 8th millennium BC, the settlement at Tell el-Kerkh dramatically expanded to around 16ha. This expansion certainly occurred because of rich agricultural produce. The Rouj Basin has been blessed with rich water and fertile soil and is still one of the richest agricultural areas in Syria. All the evidence from the excavations indicates that the people were full-time farmers and herders in the late 8th millennium BC. We discovered a large communal storehouse with many clay bins (Fig. 1) and plural sickle blade caches, therefore agricultural activities were practised with communal coordination. Many exotic materials, such as obsidian, carnelian, malachite, gypsum stone, gabbro, etc. were imported from remote places.

The 7th millennium BC cultural layers have been the most extensively excavated at Tell el-Kerkh. The settlement seemed to reduce to half its previous size, but was still about 8ha in extent. The people were also prosperous during this era. They started pottery production on a large scale. We discovered the earliest pottery in the northern Levant, and named it Kerkh Ware (Fig. 2). It is the ancestor of all Dark-faced Burnished Ware, which became dominant during the 7th and early 6th millennia BC in the northern Levant.

The architecture of this era consists of various types, such as one-roomed square-plan houses and multi-roomed...
**Fig. 3** Excavating the ground floor of a two-storeyed building.

**Fig. 4** Communal kitchen.
14. Tell el-Kerkh (Idlib)

Fig. 5 Communal Cemetery

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rectangular planned houses. One of the most notable houses at Tell el-Kerkh is large and two storeyed. The ground floor (or foundation floor) consists of grid cellar rooms, and their ceilings were covered using timbers, twigs, pebbles, and lime-plaster (Fig. 3). The second floor was a large open room without partition. Such labour-intensive ceiling-flooring was adopted probably for ventilation or storage purposes. Some buildings seemed to have been built for special uses. Str. 827 produced over 16 food-processing ground-stones (mortars, querns, grinding stones) with many other cooking facilities, and we suppose that the building was used as a communal kitchen (Fig. 4).

One of the most notable discoveries from the 7th millennium settlement is a communal cemetery (Fig. 5). Over 240 human skeletons have been recovered from a vacant lot within the bounds of their settlement, with excavations extending to around 200m² by the close of the 2010 season. ¹⁴C dating of the human bones indicate that the cemetery was in use for a period of some hundreds of years around 6400-6100 BC. As most of the previous burials in the Near East were discovered in habitation buildings, this cemetery is one of the oldest outdoor communal cemeteries ever discovered in the Near East. It is also notable that the secondary and cremation burial practices were observed along with many preliminary burials within the cemetery.

The remains of rich ritual activities were recovered here and there from the Pottery Neolithic settlement. We can point out various remains, including ‘foundation deposits’ for buildings (Fig. 6), ‘ritual pits’ for the dead, ‘curious artefacts’ with buildings and individuals, etc. We guess that the Neolithic people held ritual ceremonies encompassing all aspects of their life, and these activities played an important role in human relations and social management.

The excavations of the 7th millennium settlement produced many objects. Among these there were many seals (Fig. 7). 140 stamp seals and 6 clay sealings were discovered up until the 2010 season, and Tell el-Kerkh is one of the Neolithic sites which have produced a large number of stamp seals. The sizes of the stamp seals are quite small but they tell us much about the life of the Neolithic occupants. The discovery of the sealings indicates that they were used for the individual protection of property. Some seals were discovered in the graves, indicating that these objects protected not only property but also the dead from evil spirits.

All of this evidence excavated from Tell el-Kerkh indicates that people once built large settlements (16-8ha) during the Neolithic period, which matched the small cities of later historic periods. Their societies were complicated, including communal storage, communal cemeteries, high technology in terms of craft products, long-distance trade, and ownership concepts. On the other hand, we did not find clear evidence of social classes. Neolithic people lived in egalitarian societies, where economic and social disparity had not yet been actualized. The discipline required for integrating large-scale societies might have been based on frequent ritual practices. The evidence from Tell el-Kerkh gives us with much of material for reconsidering why people started to congregate within settlements, why they started to create larger societies, and what constitutes a ‘city’.

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