

Piotr Bieliński

Tell Arbid: Preliminary Report, 1998

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TELL ARBID

PRELIMINARY REPORT, 1998

Piotr Bieliński

The third season of the joint Syro-Polish Archaeological Expedition to Tell Arbid took place in the fall of 1998.¹

The main goal of the campaign was to explore the 3rd mill. BC sequence of occupational strata on the so-called citadel of Arbid paying special attention to the ceramic sequence of the Ninevite 5 period.

¹ The staff of the expedition included archaeologists, Messrs Andrzej Reiche, Rafał Koliński, Dariusz Szelaż, Łukasz Rutkowski, Ms Anna Smogorzewska, all from Warsaw University's Centre of Archaeology, as well as Mr. David Nelson Gimbel from Wolfson College (University of Oxford) and finally the two expedition co-directors: Ahmed Serriye and Piotr Bieliński. Also participating were two students of archaeology from the Institute of Archaeology of Warsaw University: Miss Joanna Lorynowicz and Mrs. ZuzannaWygnańska.

Over the course of the season the expedition profited as usual from the constant help (including considerable financial contribution) and friendly support of the DGAM in general and its Director General, Prof. Dr. Sultan Muheisen, in particular. We also feel much in debt to the staff of the Regional Directorate of Antiquities in Hassake and chiefly to its Director, Mr. Abed Abdel Messih Bardo.

This year we received important financial support also from the Harvard Semitic Museum, the BIG Bank in Warsaw and the Michałowski Foundation. To all these institutions I wish to express our deep gratitude for their invaluable help.

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To broaden the chronological and typological spectrum of our 3rd mill. BC collection of pottery, we decided to concentrate our efforts this year on the eastern slope of the main tell, that is, in the area of the 35 m long step trench explored since 1996 (sector "S": squares 36/55-36/56-36/57-36/58). An accumulation of deposits over 4.50 m thick was found, containing remains of no less than four occupational layers of Early Dynastic date. To complete this sequence, especially its earlier phase, six new test trenches have been opened on the slope, each of them 9.50 m long [Fig. 1].

Five of them, traced on precisely the same axis as the existing "S" trench, were situated down the slope eastwards of trench "S", while the sixth was located at the very top of the "citadel", slightly higher than the western edge of the "S" trench and obviously west of it. This last trench was conceived in order to be able to check what layers (if any) sealed the ED settlements of the Arbid "citadel" and to see what date could be assigned to the latest 3rd mill. BC occupation in this part of the site. Also the original "S" trench was extended 5 m, giving a total length of all trenches explored in the present season at some 100 m. This provides an important and informative cross-section through at least the upper layers preserved on the main tell of the Arbid site. This section comprises archaeological deposits over 21.5 m thick. All the new soundings have the same width as trench "S", i.e., 4 m, with the exception of square 36/61, which was enlarged to 9.50 m in places in an effort to trace some remnants of 2nd mill. BC structures found there. The total surface of all areas explored during the 1998 season amounted to nearly 310 sq. m.

The most recent archaeological remains discovered this year come from the trench in square 37/54 at the top of the "citadel". The rather flat top of the main tell is badly damaged by disturbances of different origin. Foremost of the factors is the strong erosion, especially in the northern and southern parts, to which the surface of the tell has been submitted ever since antiquity. Added to this are various human efforts made in this part of the "citadel" – modern pits (some of them quite deep) and burials of uncertain age, which disturb the local stratigraphy considerably. Consequently, archaeological excavations are extremely difficult, e.g. work in trench 37/54 revealed 14 burials, apparently later than the 1st mill. BC but not Islamic. The grave pits, which contained skeletons of adults, juveniles and infants, followed a chiefly E-W orientation, or else a SW-NE one. The bodies were deposited on their right side, with head to the west or southwest. There were no grave goods accompanying the skeletons. Despite all this, it was nevertheless possible to establish a basic stratigraphical sequence for the upper strata of this trench.

The uppermost layer contained fragments of mud-brick structures, the tops of which could be seen clearly on the tell surface prior to the excavations. Two walls, one about half a meter thick and another, much narrower one, took approximately the same course from NW to SE. They belonged to two separate buildings, of which the one with the thicker wall occupied the northeastern corner of the trench, while the second one was situated in its southwestern part. The former of the two most certainly extended to the east, but of the floors which must have been associated with it not much has survived. The situ-

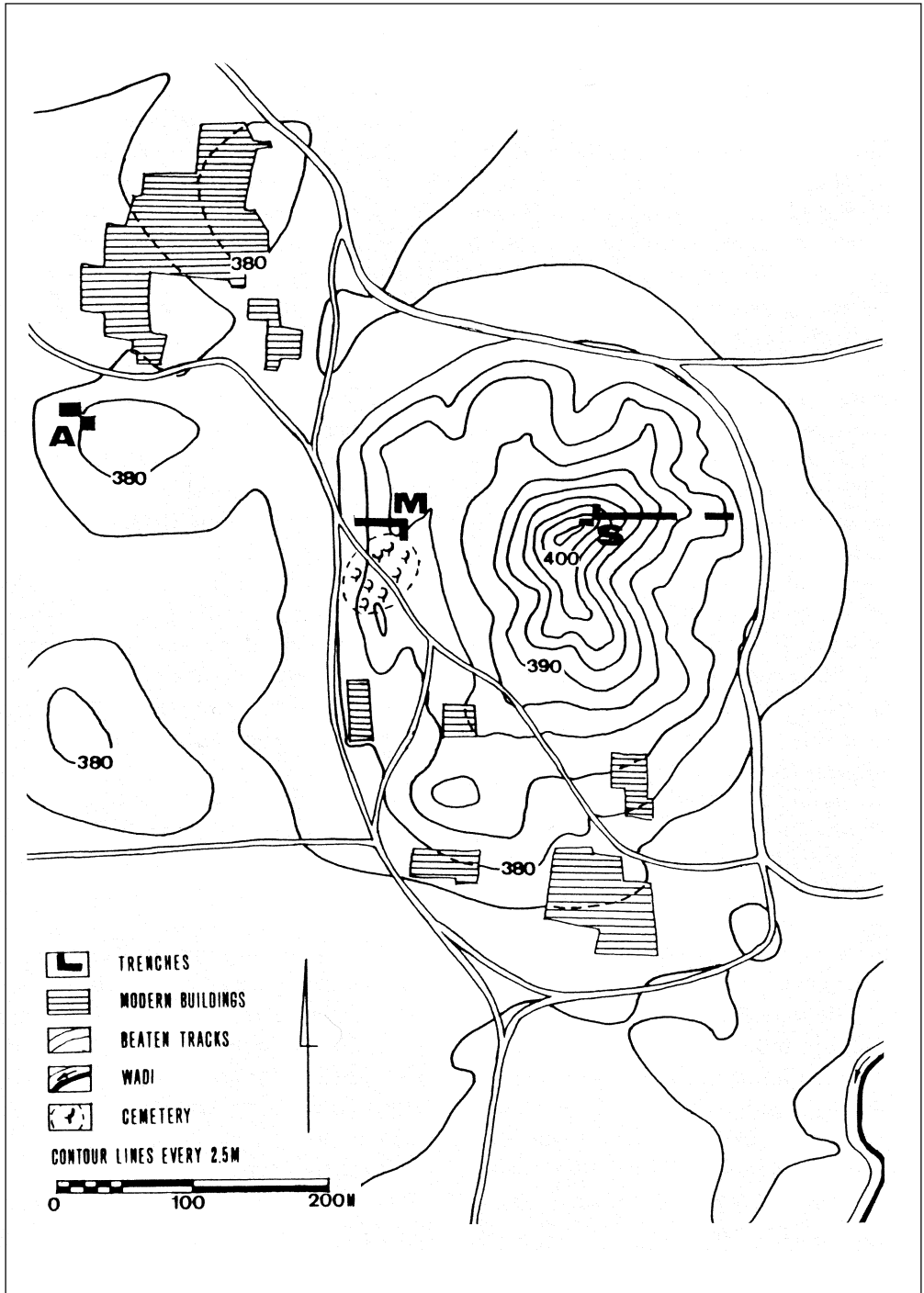


Fig. 1. Plan with localization of trenches
 (Drawing D. Pręgowski, M. Puzzkarski, Ł. Rutkowski)

ation was better with respect to the SW house as a large courtyard paved with sherds and pebbles was found on the western side of its exposed wall, as well as two fireplaces.

This layer (stratum I for this trench) can be dated to Mitannian times on the grounds of the pottery found here. Apart from frequent examples of typical Mitannian footed goblets, there were also fragments of painted Nuzi-style goblets, some of them with fine floral decoration. In the filling of one of the pits cutting through this layer, a 3rd mill. BC faience cylinder seal decorated with a linear ornament was found.

The next layer (stratum II) was of Khabour ware period date. Remains of a dwelling were accompanied by fragments of two interesting installations. The first of the latter was a pottery kiln found near the northern confines of trench 37/54. The firing chamber, about 2.10 m long and over 1.80 m wide, had a finely made floor about 18 cm thick, composed of small fragments of limestone covered with a thick layer of smoothed clay. The outer wall of the chamber was constructed of a single row of mud-bricks and had a nearly oval outline. It seems possible that it was in fact a kiln with two firing chambers, of which only the southern one has been exposed, while the second one should be expected beyond the northern limits of the trench, assuming of course that it has not been eroded away as yet. The second of the two installations is increasingly more difficult to interpret. It was situated immediately to the east of the pottery kiln and it occupied the whole northeastern corner of the trench; parts of it still remain outside the limits of the trench. Designated as Locus 5, the basin was at least 2.60 m long and 2.00 m wide. The two parts of the basin (the eastern part is larger) communicated by a narrow passage about

0.90 m wide. The bottom of the basin slopes slightly to the northwest, toward a small oval pit not exceeding 0.70 m in diameter. It seems that all the liquids which could have been poured into this basin would have flowed to this pit. The structure was surrounded by a narrow *pisé* wall and was most probably erected in the open as a separate structure. The function of the basin remains unclear and requires further study. It is noteworthy that these two "industrial" installations were erected so close together, suggesting that in the Khabour ware period some intense economic activity had taken place in this part of the site. Both installations were built on a narrow street or rather lane, running E-W and paved with potsherds and gravel. On the other (southern) side of this street there was a house of which only the northern, exterior wall was unearthed within the limits of the trench. The surviving section of mud-brick wall is over 4 m long and 0.60 m high, and in the middle of its length there is an entrance about 0.70 m wide with a threshold made of bricks. The rest of this building extending to the south will be excavated in the coming season.

From this stratum came abundant ceramic material representing Khabour ware and a clay sealing, partly preserved, depicting a human figure (worshiper) turned towards a deity.

Immediately under stratum II, in the southeastern corner of trench 37/54, the tops of walls representing the next (III) occupational layer appeared. All that can be said for the moment is that this stratum also represents occupation of the Khabour ware period.

In view of the richness and complexity of the 2nd mill. BC deposits on the top of the tell, the Early Dynastic period layers could not be reached here this year.

Interesting relics of 2nd mill. BC human occupation on Arbid were also unearthed in

trench 36/59-60, which is situated immediately to the east of the main "S" trench. Remains belonging to at least three consecutive strata of the Khabour-ware period town were discovered.

Seemingly the most recent of these remains was a child burial (S-36/59-G1) found near the western border of the trench. It was a jar burial in a pit excavated deep into earlier occupational layers [Fig. 2]. A poorly preserved skeleton of an infant was found inside a big jar (c. 60 cm high). The orientation of the jar was latitudinal with the mouth to the west, while the skull of the child pointed east. Accompanying the bones were two small painted jars, three beads and a stone ring, while outside the burial jar, near its rim, there were another two painted medium-sized Khabour ware jars, one with a small bowl inside it [Fig. 3].

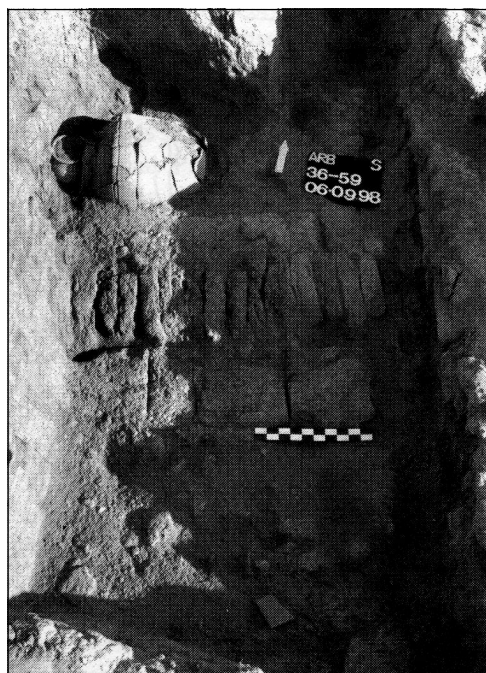


Fig. 2. Infant burial (G1) of Khabour-ware period date, found in trench 36/59 (Photo A. Reiche)

Most probably, the burial pit was excavated when the structures, representing the uppermost occupational stratum in this trench, had already been abandoned for some time. The discussed layer contained only stumps of mud-brick walls with no adjoining floors. Another Khabour-ware period grave unearthed in this trench during the present campaign presumably also corresponds to this layer. Like the former one, this grave (S-36/59-G2) is also situated in the western part of the trench and was constructed of mud-brick (c. 36 x 36 cm each). The grave chamber was c. 2 m long and 1.4 m wide. It was covered with bricks set on end and obliquely. There were two skeletons inside the grave chamber: human in the western part and animal, most probably belonging to a sheep, in the eastern part. The human skeleton was that of a child about 6-9 years old, lying with the head to the west. On the brick-paved bottom of the grave chamber, behind the head, there were two painted Khabour jars; beneath the bones, a bronze pin and several beads were found. A flint arrowhead originated from the fill.

This child grave was dug into the second of the Khabour-period strata distinguished in this trench and it was partly responsible for some destruction in this layer. Still it was better preserved than the upper one. This second stratum contained fragments of narrow mud-brick walls which seem to belong to two separate structures erected approximately in the same time. One of them extended southwards, the other one to the north and west. At some point in time, when both these structures were still in use, a small *pisé* platform was erected in the middle of the trench. Its construction necessitated some modifications of the courtyard of the so-called northwestern building. The platform was presumably

intended as structural reinforcement for a possibly sliding slope, a supposition supported further still by a slightly earlier retaining wall of *pisé* brick, discovered at the eastern edge of the same trench. This latter wall, of a N-S orientation, was over a meter high and about one meter wide. It closely

resembles the *pisé* structures unearthed last season on the western slope of the "citadel" (sector "M") where a Khabour ware context was also in evidence.² It seems that at the beginning of the 2nd mill. BC, when Arbid was resettled or the already existing settlement at the base of the "citadel" was

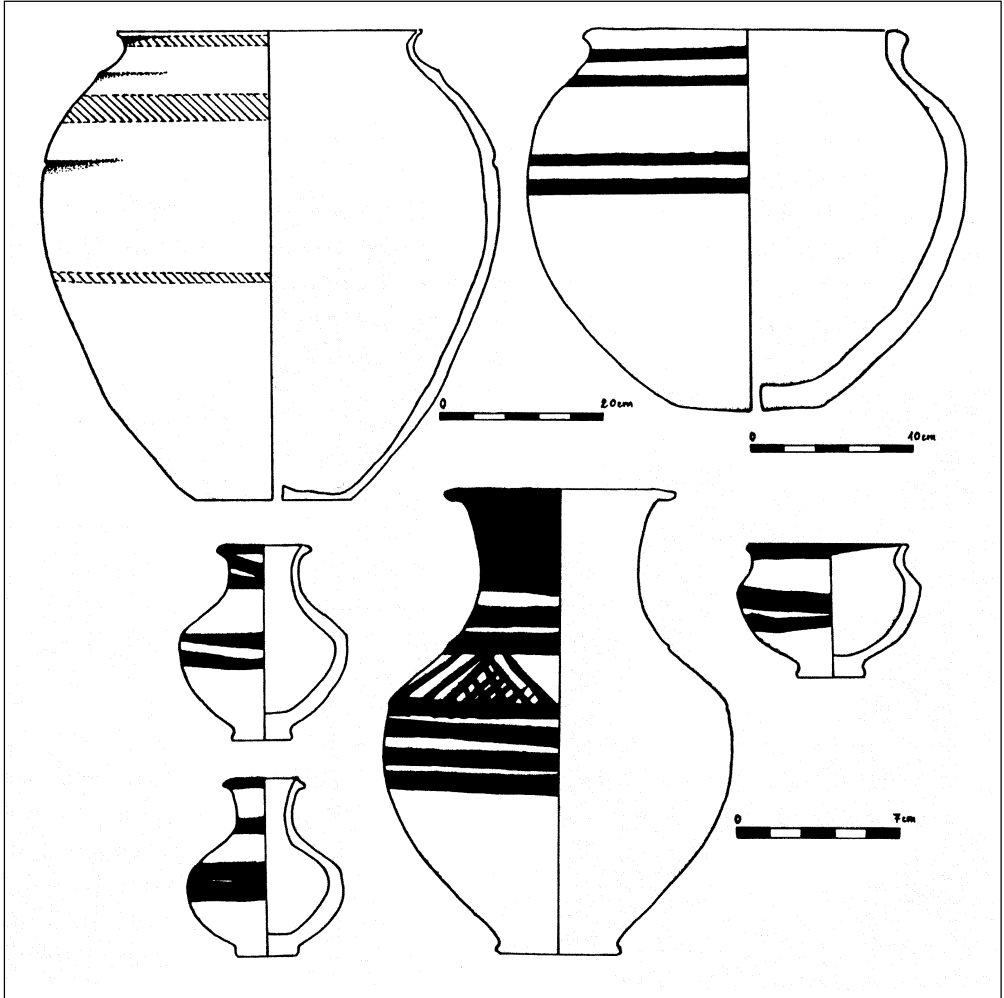


Fig. 3. Vessels from the G1 burial in trench 36/59
(Drawing Ł. Rutkowski, Z. Wygnańska)

² See PAM IX, Reports 1997 (1998), p. 215. After the 1997 campaign, I had thought that the *pisé* walls in the "M" sector were part of a 2nd mill. BC defensive structure; however, further investigations have suggested that they were rather part of a more extensive system of revetment walls.

enlarged, a series of such *pisé* retaining walls following the ground contours was erected in places where the sliding slope could have constituted a danger for new buildings below. Some of these walls may have been used for terracing purposes as well.

To finish with trench 36/59-60, the third Khabour-period stratum should be mentioned at this point. It yielded small fragments of two parallel mud-brick walls running southward in the southeastern part of the trench. The walls were set less than 1 m apart; between them and already in the trench wall, some larger bones were noticed.

To sum up, it is important to note that trench 36/59-60 is the first place on Arbid where an accumulation of Khabour ware-period occupational layers has been identified. Among the interesting small finds from this trench there is a slightly damaged cylinder seal of the Early Dynastic period. This small stone cylinder decorated with typical Piedmont-style floral motifs was found in the subsurface layer, meaning that a clear stratigraphic context was missing. The same has to be said of the three cylinder seal impressions on bullae found practically on the surface and presumably displaced by erosion. The poorly preserved impressions were also of 3rd mill. BC date. Finally, the third area, where a larger fragment of structures representing early 2nd mill. BC occupation on Tell Arbid was uncovered during the present campaign, is situated immediately to the east of the above-described trench. It consisted of two neighboring trenches designated 36/61 and 36/62. As the remains belong to a single architectural unit, the two trenches will be treated here together. All of the walls were erected on a level much lower (c. 1.80 m) than the Khabour period structures uncovered in trench 36/59-60. In our opinion, this

again confirms the hypothesis that some sort of terracing had taken place on the eastern slope of the site during the Khabour ware times, the objective being to separate the steep mass of the so-called "citadel" from the more extensive terrace at its base where the "Khabourians" thus gained more space for their new buildings. The structures unearthed in trenches 36/61 and 36/62 were built in this new space which we shall refer to as the "upper city" to distinguish it from the mound proper called the "citadel".

The mud-brick walls found inside the limits of trenches 36/61-62 consist of remnants belonging to at least four separate architectural units. With one exception, the walls follow an orientation according to the cardinal points. The largest of the units was designated as House 1. It was at least 17 m long and not less than 5.10 m wide. The full plan has yet to be revealed. Nevertheless, what has been explored of the south end together with outer wall permitted some conclusions concerning the general layout. It originally consisted of at least three rooms, one of which was later partitioned into two smaller compartments. The largest of the rooms measured about 4 x 3.50 m and it can be assumed that the latter figure constituted a standard width for all the rooms in this building. The walls were finely built of square bricks measuring 36 x 36 cm and "half-bricks" measuring 36 x 18 cm. They were generally two bricks wide and regularly bonded in every brick layer and at the corners. Doorways usually 0.60 m wide of rooms lying in line along the southern external wall of House 1 were pierced in the dividing walls. Two were found in relatively good condition. All the other structures were erected taking advantage of the walls of House 1. Attached to

the western wall was a corner of a large room or even a separate building designated as locus 5. It measured at least 2.50 x 2 m and its walls were built of a single row of 36 x 36 cm bricks. It is oriented slightly differently than House 1 as its walls follow a NW-SE orientation. Locus 5 was somehow connected with House 1 as suggested by a doorway in its eastern wall, closely corresponding to an entrance in the southwestern corner of House 1. Locus 5, must have been constructed when House 1 was already in use; the same must be true of all the other structures siding it on the south. The biggest among them is House 2. Only its western end was situated within the limits of our trenches, more precisely, inside trench 36/61. House 2 was erected of similar bricks as House 1 and its external wall had the same thickness, i.e., two bricks. In its western part, this external wall was at a later date reinforced with an additional row of bricks on the south side. In the middle part of the trench, inside House 2, there was a kind of large courtyard (locus 3) paved with bricks and at least 4.75 m long. It seems that locus 3 occupied the northeastern corner of House 2. It is also possible that the entrance to this unit was situated on this side. Further to the east there lay an open space with a big tannur and still further east, another house. Only the northern part of this House 3 could be traced in the trench; consequently, we can say that it was at least 5.50 m long and consisted of at least two rooms. Its walls were less regularly constructed than those of House 1, though the same size bricks were used.

All the buildings described above seem to have been in use for a relatively long time, particularly House 1. This conclusion draws from a careful study of the floor sequence in locus 13, a large room in the

southeastern part of House 1. Four consecutive floor levels were distinguished, the lowest having been laid on a thick accumulation of pebbles and potsherds. In the western part of this building, the floor level was reached only in locus 6 where on a low bench made of bricks a nearly complete "Ishtar bed" made of unbaked clay was found.

All these structures belong to a single stratum and should be interpreted as part of the Khabour-ware period town on Tell Arbid. The quality of the masonry indicates that at the beginning of the 2nd mill. BC it must have been one of the richer quarters in town.

To see what kind of occupational layer could be expected beneath the remains already discussed, a limited test trench was dug in the eastern end of 36/62. The layer revealed there also represented Khabour-ware period occupation: some remains of small rooms with narrow bonded walls. Finds from the fill include a medium-sized painted Khabour ware jar bearing untypical decoration – crescent-shaped stripes crossing obliquely wide horizontal bands. The only known analogy so far comes from Chagar Bazar, a site only some 15 km away from Arbid.

Digging deeper in the northeastern corner of trench 36/62, we reached the top of the next stratum, which also proved to be of Khabour-ware period date.

To summarize the findings from trenches 36/59-60 and 36/61-62, it has to be assumed that at least on the eastern slope of the main Arbid tell an important accumulation of Khabour ware period occupational deposits should be expected in the future.

To close the discussion of investigations in trenches 36/61-62, we should men-

tion some 3rd mill. BC finds, mostly from the uppermost parts of fill from rooms belonging to the stratum I buildings, hence assumedly displaced by erosion from higher up on the slope, where 3rd mill. layers were in evidence right on the tell surface. These finds include some interesting pieces, like the two clay *bullae* with poorly preserved impressions of cylinder seals and one complete cylinder seal bearing ornamental decoration.

Despite extended efforts, we were unable to reach even the top of Early Dynastic deposits in three trenches situated to the east of the original "S" trench. In this respect, we were much more lucky in the two easternmost trenches explored this year, i.e., 36/65 and 36/66, where a sequence of nine consecutive 3rd mill. BC strata was uncovered. Only the upper three layers were exposed in trench 36/65, while the seven lower ones were investigated in 36/66. Both trenches are located at the eastern edge of the terrace on which the Khabour-period

houses of 36/61-62 had been built, in a place where the slope steepens abruptly, giving easier access to the lower strata, and where erosion has fortuitously swept away 2nd mill. BC layers. The entire surface here had been disturbed considerably by different kinds of pits, mostly of Khabour-ware period date. Some of them were cut very deep into the earlier layers. Such pits and erosion are responsible for significant destruction of the two upper 3rd mill. BC strata in this area. The architectural remains of the Early Dynastic period city on Arbid were limited to some fragments of mud-brick and pisé walls forming no coherent plan. Despite the devastation, it was possible to collect from subsequent floors a relatively rich assemblage of Late ED III pottery with some Early Akkadian pieces on the topmost floor. Only in stratum III was the bigger part of a more substantial building uncovered. It consisted of a large courtyard with adjoining room entered through a doorway one meter wide [Fig. 4].

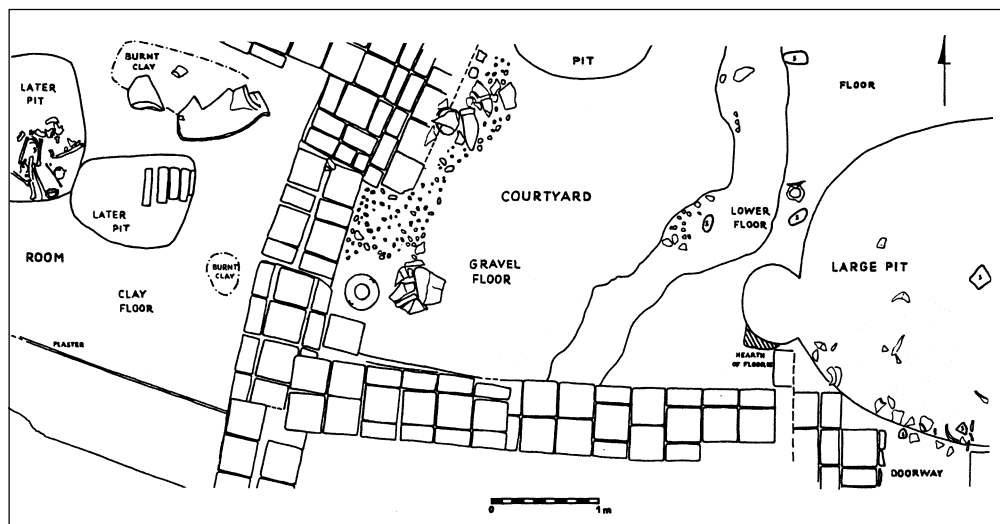


Fig. 4 Plan of Stratum III architectural remains from trench 36/65
(Drawing R. Koliński, Ł. Rutkowski)

The courtyard (locus 1) was at least 4 m long and 3.10 m wide, while the room (locus 10) was about 3 m long and at least 2 m wide. Two other rooms at the southern edge of trench 36/65 are presumably part of the same house; as only small sections were uncovered within the limits of the trench, their exploration will be continued in the coming season. Locus 10 contained a large rectangular hearth (measuring c. 1.50 x 0.50 m) situated near the northeastern corner of the room. The masonry of this architectural unit is of extremely good quality with proper bonding of all the walls and corners. The bricks used for construction measured 32 x 32 cm, but there were also half-bricks used to work out the bond. The courtyard floor was treated with the same care and skill. The topmost of four consecutive floor levels was composed of a layer of fine gravel covered with pebbles and potsherds, and among them three clay *bullae* bearing cylinder seal impressions. The only one on which the impression could be recognized easily was decorated with repre-

sentations of human figures set in two registers one above the other. The main axis of the decoration is in this case perpendicular to the axis of the cylinder seal itself [Fig. 5, right].

In style and iconography, this impression resembles in many respects the Early Dynastic III sealings from Ebla. Crushed vessels were also found on this floor and several turned out to be mendable, including a small carinated bowl, semi-globular bowl with handles and a beautiful 35 cm-high Metallic Ware jar.

The complete plan of this house will never be known as its eastern part has already been swept away by erosion, but what remains of it on the other sides should be cleared in the next season. A large pit situated on the western edge of trench 36/66 forms a separate stratigraphic unit separating stratum III from the next 3rd mill. BC layer in this area. This pit (designated as Locus 4) contained a considerable amount of ED III A sherds, including some complete vessels like, for example, two fine-ware cups. There were also some clay *bullae* on

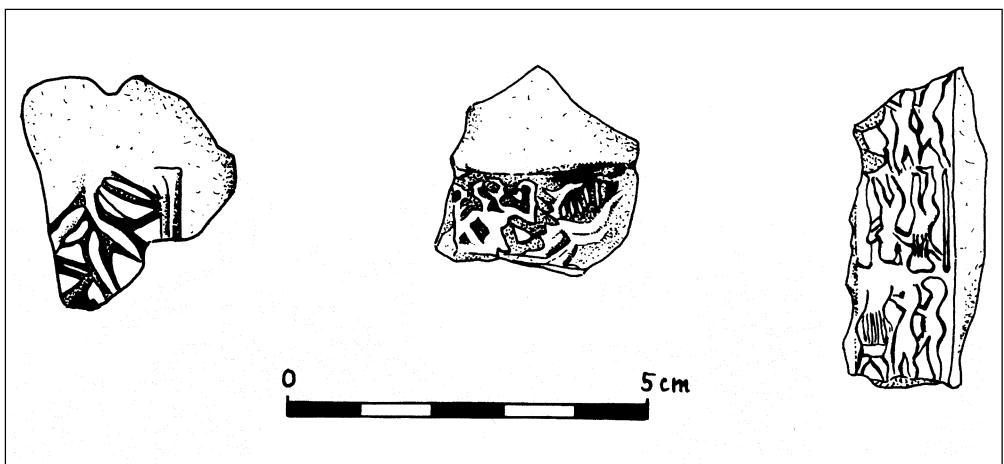


Fig. 5. Seal impressions on 3rd millenium BC clay bullae from trenches 36/65 and 36/66 (Drawings J. Lorynowicz, Z. Wygnańska, P. Bieliński and D. Bielińska)

which fragments of seal impressions could be observed. The most clearly impressed seals bore geometric and floral decoration [Fig. 3, left], but there was also a seal impression on a fired jar, more precisely on its shoulders. It depicted two horned quadrupeds with geometrical motifs in the background.

As said already, the lower strata of this ED sequence were unearthed this year only in trench 36/66. In the middle of it there was a narrow street (about 1 m wide) made of ashes mixed with potsherds. It ran approximately north-south, dividing into two separate groups the architectural remains found in this trench. On the western side of the street, layer IV of our sequence was represented mostly by a thick deposit of dark ashes. Fragments of two rooms of irregular shape appeared only in the lower part of this stratum. They might have been open courtyards reserved for some domestic activities. The next, fifth stratum contained fragments of structures which served the same purposes. On the eastern side of the N-S street, in four consecutive strata, a larger building, which seems to have been repeatedly repaired and rebuilt, was uncovered. The part of the house uncovered within the confines of trench 36/66 also served domestic purposes. An open courtyard contained a whole series of tannurs and large rounded ovens which were rebuilt several times. The floors associated with these domestic installations yielded a rich collection of Ninevite 5 pottery representing the earliest phase of 3rd mill. BC occupation on Tell Arbid. Indeed, the importance of the 36/65-66 area lies in the quantities of well-stratified 3rd mill. BC pottery found here. Also of significance is the number of clay sealings originating from this area.

Third millennium strata – at least three occupational strata representing the Ninevite 5 period – were explored this year also at the eastern end of the original "S" trench, in trial pit 36/58, where they came to light under some poorly preserved structures of the Khabour-ware period. Part of the trench with these older remains had substantial walls of ED period date bordering it on east and west, all oriented NNE-SSW and generally conforming to the slope in this part of the "citadel". On the western side two such walls came to light (W1 and W9) set some 0.50 m apart; both should be considered as revetment walls. Such a function is not so evident in the case of the eastern wall (W2) which was erected some 7 m further to the east, on the eastern edge of trench 36/58. In the uppermost of the Ninevite 5 layers, the space between the described walls was occupied by a kind of courtyard, its floor consisting of several layers of tamped clay with potsherds, as well as of ashes mixed with clay. There were also some small waste pits.

The lower stratum in the same area contains remains of structures built against wall W2 at the eastern end of the trench. There are fragments of three small rooms, or rather cubicles, and a narrow courtyard. The rooms are roughly square in shape and have been rebuilt and restored on a number of occasions. One of the rooms, measuring barely c. 1.60 x 1.40 m (locus 22) probably served as a kitchen. On its floor made of tamped clay with ashes there were patches of dark ashes and along one of its walls a low clay banquette. Near one of its ends, in the corner of locus 22, the upper part of a large Ninevite 5 chalice on a stem was discovered. After the stem had been broken off, the remaining part of the vessel was mounted on the floor with the aid of a

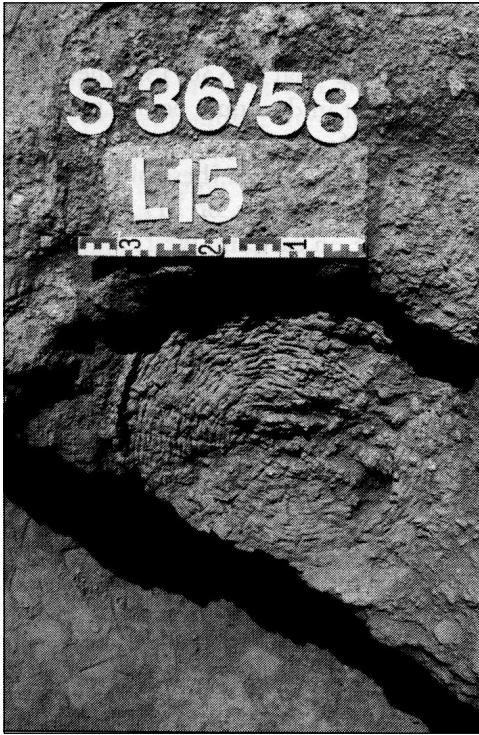


Fig. 6. *Infant burial in trench 36/58, below the floor of a Ninevite 5 period room (Photo A. Reiche)*

lump of clay, turning it thus into a fixed receptacle. The vessel was of good quality and adorned with elaborate incised decoration. In another room (locus 19) uncovered in this stratum, a child burial of Ninevite 5 period was found below the floor level. It was a small pit with mud-plastered walls containing a round basket in which the body of an infant had been deposited in strongly contracted position [Fig. 6].

Of the basket itself not much has survived except a clear impression of its bottom in the mud.

Large quantities of kitchen ware sherds collected from this area, as well as the size and nature of the architectural remains suggest that in the Ninevite 5 period this part of the town was occupied by dwelling quarters furnished with numerous domestic installations. The complicated stratigraphy of this trench certainly requires further clarification in the future.

Reassessing, the 1998 field season on Tell Arbid has revealed the whole stratigraphic complexity of the 3rd and 2nd mill. BC towns on the site.