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Tell Arbid: The Seventh Season of Excavations Preliminary Report

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TELL ARBID

THE SEVENTH SEASON OF EXCAVATIONS

PRELIMINARY REPORT

Piotr Bieliński

The 2002 campaign of excavations took place in the fall, as usual, and lasted from August 24 to September 30.¹⁾ This season our efforts moved from the “citadel”, or main tell, to a small secondary tell, area “A”, situated to its northeast. Explorations here in the first two seasons on the site had revealed a sequence of layers representing a later stage in the course of human settlement on Arbid and had led us to believe that a Mitannian settlement of consequence would be found here. The testing of this hypothesis became our primary objective for the seventh season of excavations at Tell Arbid.

1) The mission was co-directed by the author and Mr. Ahmad Serriye, the latter representing the Direction Générale des Antiquités et Musées of Syria. The staff included: Dr. Anna Smogorzewska, Dr. Dariusz Szeląg, Ms Agnieszka Pieńkowska, (all Warsaw University, Institute of Archaeology), Dr. Rafał Koliński (Poznań University, Institute of Prehistory), Mr. Andrzej Reiche (National Museum in Warsaw), Mrs. Dorota Bielińska (Research Center for Mediterranean Archaeology, Polish Academy of Sciences) and Mr. Khaled Ahmo (Regional Direction of Antiquities in Hassake), archaeologists. Joining the team were Dr. Joanna Piątkowska, paleozoologist, and Dr. Arkadiusz Sołtysiak, anthropologist (both Warsaw University Institute of Archaeology), as well as nine students of archaeology: Ms Agnieszka Szymczak, Ms Marta Momot, Ms Justyna Kościńska, Ms Monika Ozdarska, Mr. Hubert Czerski and Mr. Maciej Makowski (Warsaw University), Ms Adriana Roman (Poznań University), Ms Anna Bzowska (Warsaw University of Technology) and Mr. Philip Koch (University of Venice).

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PREVIOUS EXPLORATIONS IN AREA "A"

Excavations in the western part of area "A" in 1996 and 1997²⁾ indicated the presence of a Mitannian stratum containing some poorly preserved remains of structures just

above virgin soil. Covering it was an Assyrian-period layer, a post-Assyrian one, followed by two Hellenistic-period strata and some Roman-period occupation to

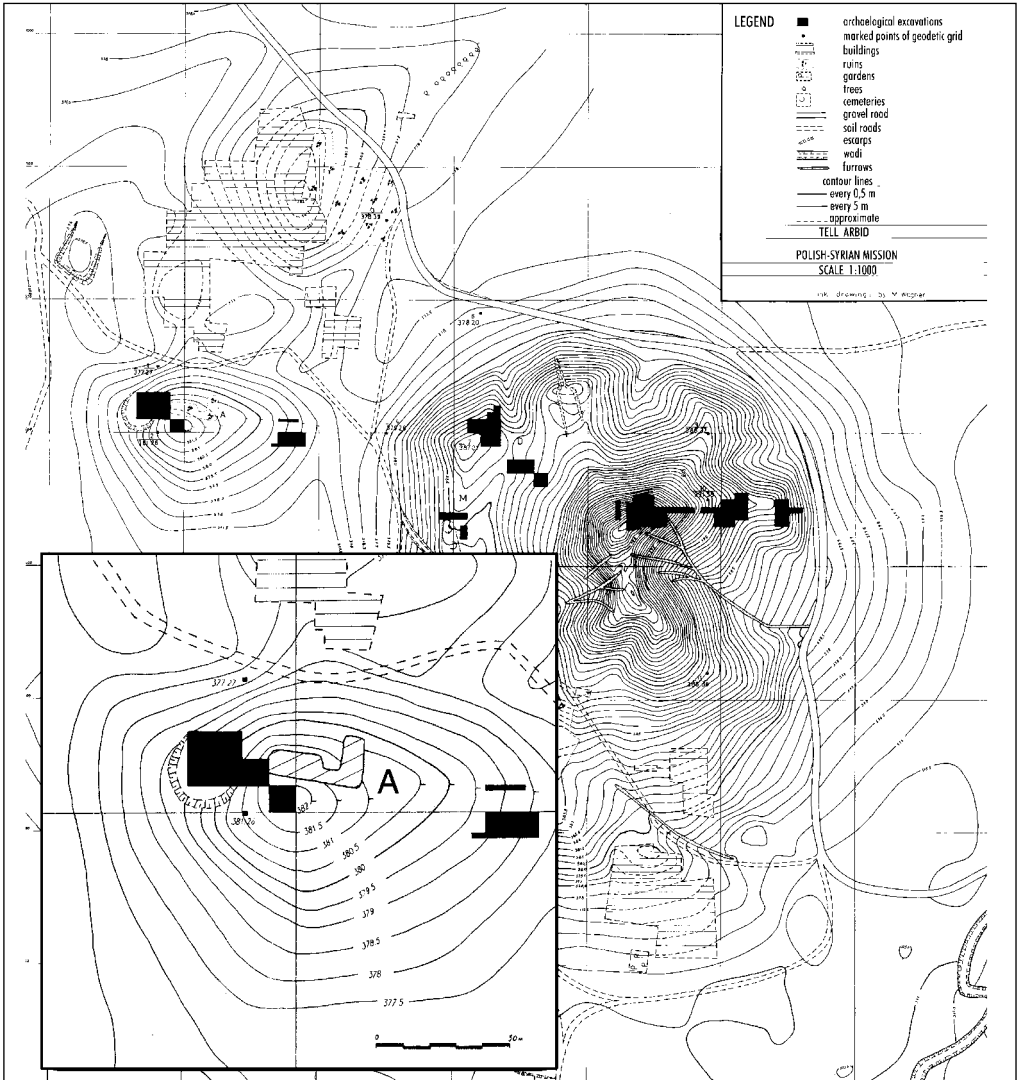


Fig. 1. Plan of area "A"
(Ink drawing M. Wagner)

2) Cf. P. Bieleński, *PAM VIII, Reports 1996 (1997)*, 206-207; id., *PAM IX, Reports 1997 (1998)*, 213-214.

judge by the scant pottery evidence. Layers later than the Mitanni period are not present at all on the main tell, where occupation seems to have ended in Mitannian times. The remains from this period on the citadel are highly fragmentary and there are virtually no traces of contemporary occupation in other parts of the main tell. It was hypothesized, therefore, that the actual Mitannian settlement may have been situated in area "A". The discovery of two Mitannian burials (in 1999 and 2000) on top of the citadel mound³⁾ lent further credence to this idea. The burials displayed the same orientation

and both were of females buried with substantial sets of grave goods. The wealth of these grave goods suggested that the Mitannian settlement from area "A" must have been of some importance and was worth further investigation.

The excavations started in the old trench located in squares 28/18, 29/18 and 29/19, which was then extended to the west into squares 27/17 and 29/17, and northeast into square 28/19 (*Fig. 1*). In the eastern part of the area a slit trench, 15 m long, was opened in squares 29/27 and 29/28, and another, larger trench was excavated in squares 30/26 and 30/27.

FIRST MILLENNIUM BC REMAINS IN AREA "A"

With the exception of some modern pits disturbing the stratigraphy of ancient

layers, the most recent archaeological strata discovered during the reported season in



Fig. 2. Concentration of Hellenistic-period storage pits in area "A"
(Photo A. Reiche)

3) Cf. id., *PAM XI, Reports 1999* (2000), 276-277; id., *PAM XIII, Reports 2001* (2002), 281.

area "A" were of the Hellenistic period. Of the same date were numerous cylindrical- or bell-shaped storage pits, which had wrought havoc with the pre-Hellenistic remains. Most of the pits were concentrated in the western sector of the hill, which must have been a kind of granary area for the Hellenistic farm. Just to show how densely these features were packed, suffice it to say that there were at least nineteen in

an area measuring roughly 90 sq. m (square 29/19) (Fig. 2). In the trenches on the east side the pits were much less frequent, even being entirely absent from the easternmost square 30/27.

The pits, which could be even 2.5 m deep and attained maximum diameters of from 1.1 to 2.5 m, were evidently not all contemporary, as they actually cut into one another. They should be interpreted as

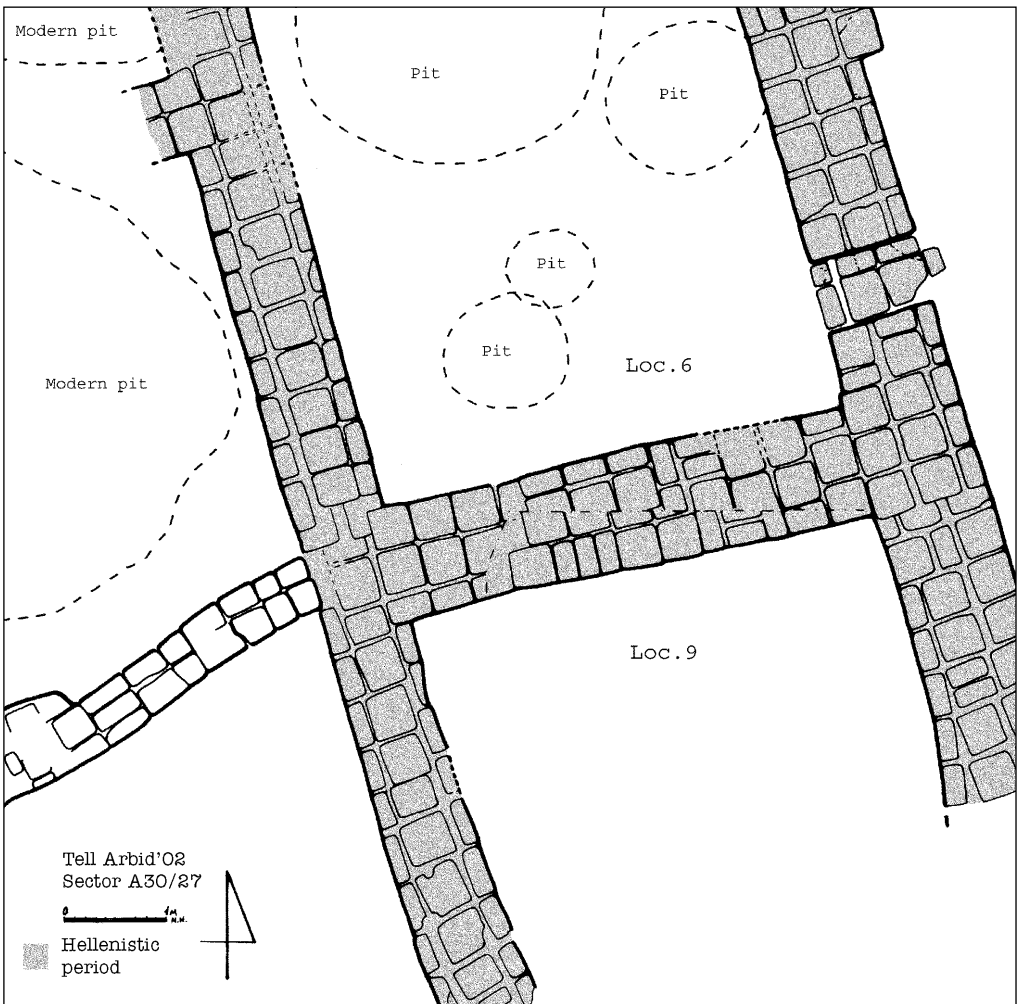


Fig. 3. Plan of the Hellenistic building from square 30/27 (Drawing D. Bielińska, H. Czerski and M. Makowski; ink drawing M. Wagner)

representing different stages in the functioning of the Hellenistic farm.

More substantial Hellenistic remains were explored only in squares 30/26 and 30/27 in the eastern part of the area. The stratigraphic sequence encountered here matched the two Hellenistic layers known from the western trenches. Of the upper one not much has survived. Some fragments of mud-brick walls and associated tamped-clay floor strewn with potsherds were cleared in a narrow test trench in square 30/26, just below the present surface. A house from the earlier Hellenistic stratum came to light in square 30/27. It was in much better condition, consisting of parts of two adjoining rectangular rooms, but with no trace of a doorway in the surviving section of the dividing wall (*Fig. 3*). The rooms

were about 4.6 m wide and at least 5 m long. The only preserved entrance is in the northern of the rooms (locus 9), in its east wall. At 0.7 m it was quite narrow and was later blocked with stone boulders. The other room (locus 6) appears also to have been entered through a doorway in the east wall. Some remnants of a mud-brick threshold were noted in the southeastern corner of the trench. On this basis the entrance may be said to be 1.35 m wide. The building walls were about 1 m thick and had been erected of mud brick, each 0.4 m square, set with fairly broad jointwork. In some places they survived to a height of 1.05 m (*Fig. 4*). Larger patches of a tamped-clay floor were preserved only in the southern room. The northern one contained some small pits and remains of a fireplace.



Fig. 4. Fragments of a Hellenistic-period house unearthed in the lower Hellenistic stratum in square 30/27. View from the west (Photo A. Reiche)

The Hellenistic-period occupation in the western half of square 28/19 (west side of the hill) was represented not only by the numerous large pits, but also by several domestic installations, like bins with plastered walls, *tannours*, and small pits, as well as a fragmentary structure encompassing at least two relatively small rooms.

The Neo-Assyrian layer that was observed under the Hellenistic strata in the eastern sector of area "A" confirmed the sequence of the stratigraphy already known from the western part of the hill. The foundations of an Assyrian structure were cleared under the Hellenistic house remains in square 30/27. They formed

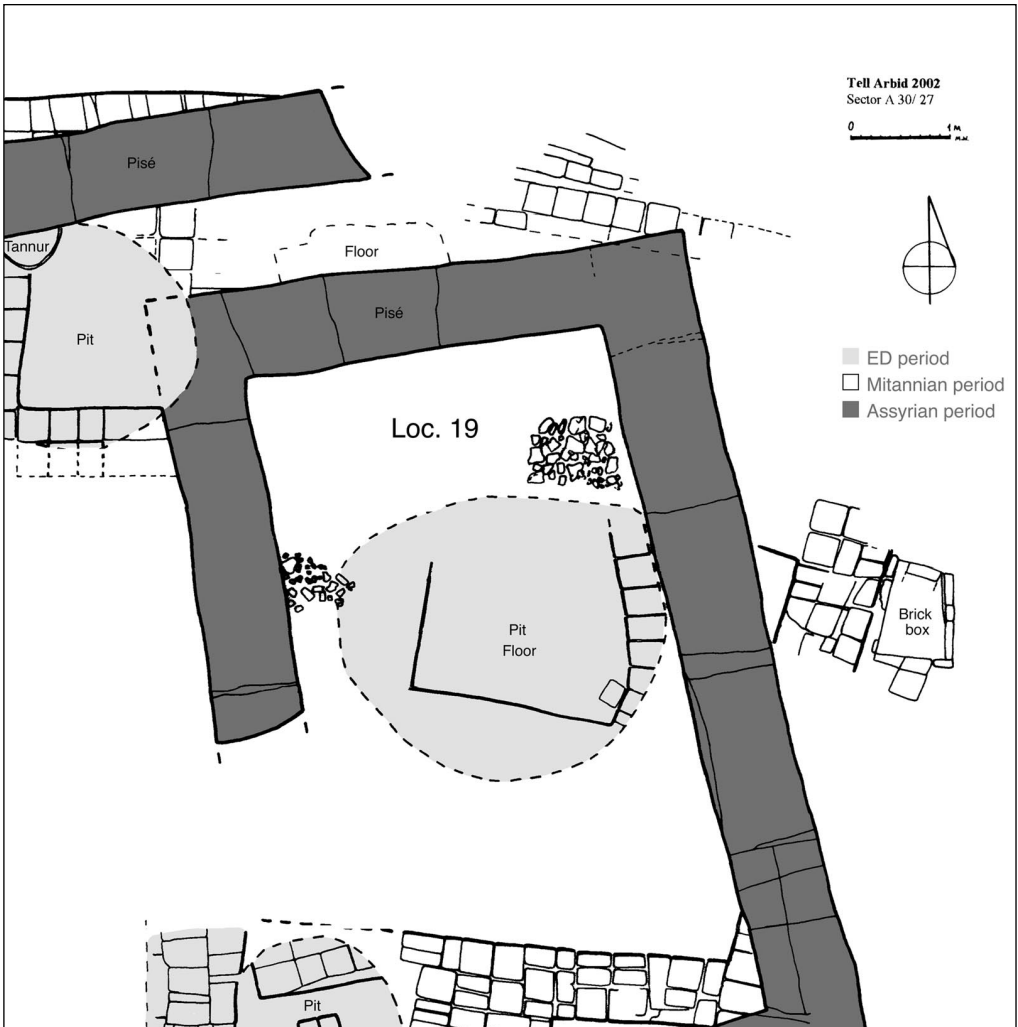


Fig. 5. Plan of pre-Hellenistic architectural remains discovered in square 30/27. Marked in light gray are later pits, at the bottom of which ED-period walls were found (Drawing D. Bielińska, P. Bieliński, and H. Czerski; ink drawing M. Wagner)

a kind of quadrangle of which the southwestern corner was already beyond trench limits. The *pisé* walls were approximately 1 m wide and seem to have belonged to a single-roomed house, which was most probably at least 8 m long and 6.5 m wide (*Fig. 5*). No associated floor levels were discerned. A similar foundation was found in the northwestern corner of

the trench and a part of a Neo-Assyrian mud brick wall was excavated in the northern part of square 29/27. In the western sector of the area, architectural remains of the same period were exposed in square 29/19, where further sections of an Assyrian building recorded in 1996 in squares 29/18 and 28/18 were now uncovered.

MITANNIAN LAYER IN AREA "A"

The more important, albeit heavily disturbed archaeological remains representing the Mitannian period were found this season in the western sector of area "A". The extent of destruction by later features, the Hellenistic pits in particular, exceeded even what had been expected after the first two seasons of work in the 1990s. The largest fragment of a Mitannian building unearthed this year, provisionally designated as the "Mitannian Northern House", was situated in squares: 28/17, 28/18 and 29/18. It had at least three rooms (loci 24, 24a and 32 in square 28/18 and locus 41 in square 29/18); other rooms may have been situated further to the north, beyond the limits of the present trenches (*Fig. 6*).

The excavated section is about 10.3 m long and about 5 wide, and was oriented slightly off to the northeast from the N-S axis. The walls, which survive to about 0.4 m, turned out upon analysis of the bonding not to have been homogenous. In the northern room (locus 24) the walls were narrower and there was moreover an evident eastward displacement by 0.15 m compared to the walls in the southern part of the house. Unfortunately, two Hellenistic pits had cut into the earlier walls, destroying the junction of these walls, as well as the partition wall between loci 24 and 24a. One may only suppose that the northern room of this house was of slightly

different date than the rest and had been added on later. In the western part of locus 24 (square 28/18), near the northwestern corner of the house, a door socket of basalt was found *in situ*. It marked the place where the main building entrance was located.

An interesting feature discovered in the same room consisted of a heating stove mounted on a low podium of mud brick in the southwestern part of the room (*Fig. 8*). The stove measured 0.3 by 0.3 m and its walls, about 3 cm thick, were made of clay. On three sides it was provided with a casing of bricks, while the fourth was left free.

Another interesting installation was located in locus 24a of the "Mitannian Northern House" (also square 28/18). It was a sort of drainage channel made of reused ceramic potstands and a fragment of ceramic pipe, designed to remove water from the building (*Fig. 7*).

On the west, the "Northern House" adjoined a large courtyard (loci 15 and 3 in square 28/18). The 7.4 by 7 m space was paved with pebbles, Mitannian pottery sherds, as well as some Early Dynastic period sherds. The paving lay on top of a thin layer of ashes, which in turn reposed directly on virgin soil. At a later stage of use, two or maybe even three rooms (loci 25 and 35 in square 28/18; locus 1 in

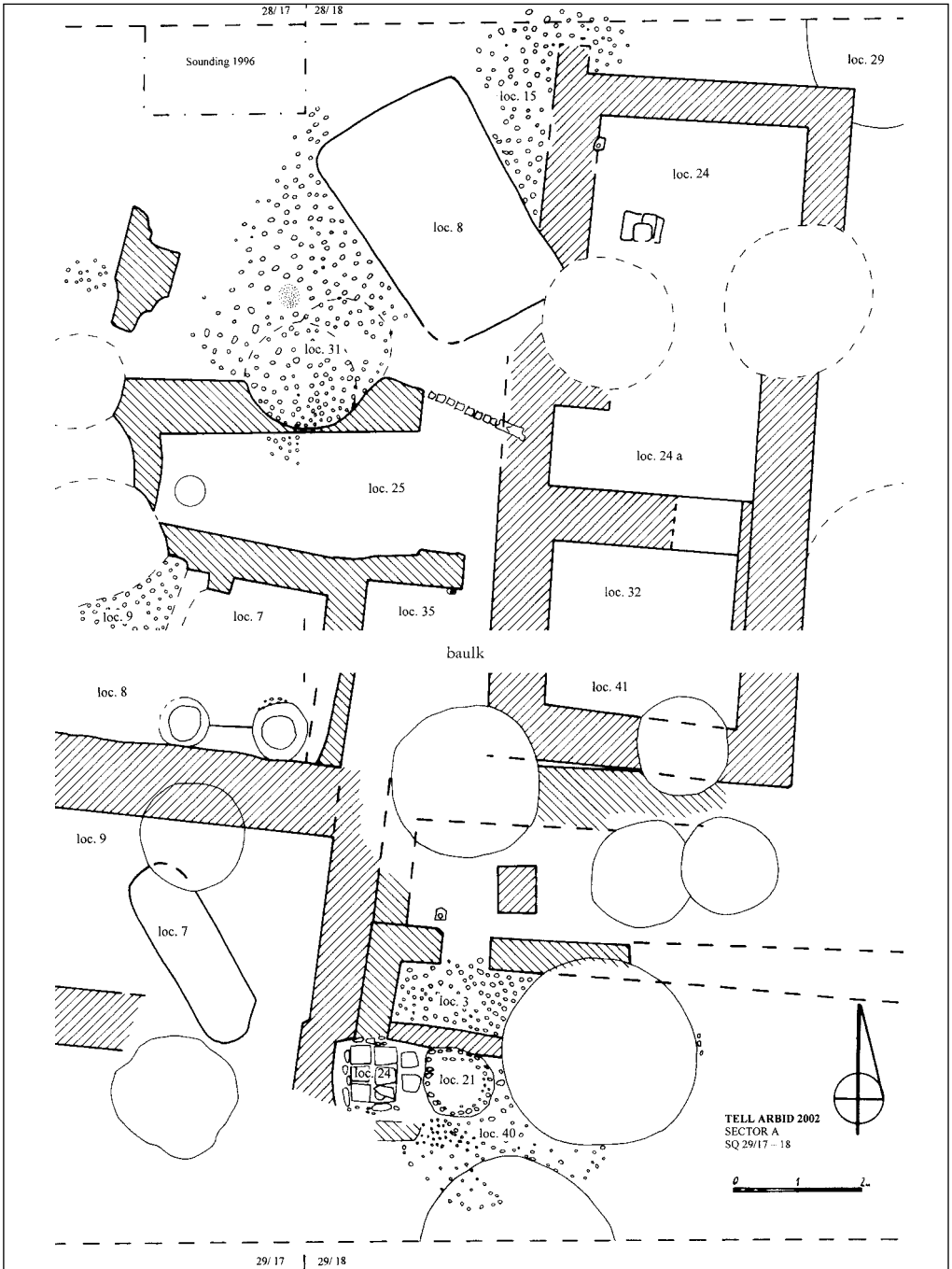


Fig. 6. Plan of Mitannian houses in the western part of area "A". Note separate loci numbering in two trenches (Drawing A. Szymczak, M. Momot and A. Reiche; ink drawing M. Wagner)

square 28/17) were erected in the southern part of the courtyard. These were fairly irregular units, locus 25 being trapezoidal, for example, but in general they had the same orientation as the “Northern House”. Their function appears to have been strictly domestic, unlike the rooms in the main body of the “Northern House” which are more likely to have been used as living rooms.

The remains of Mitannian structures unearthed to the south of the complex described above were in much poorer shape. Except for a small bathroom previously revealed in this part of the sector, there was no other room with complete plan (cf. *Fig. 6*). It is clear nonetheless that the stumps of mud-brick walls, severely damaged by later pits, belonged to another architectural unit. At its core there appears to have been

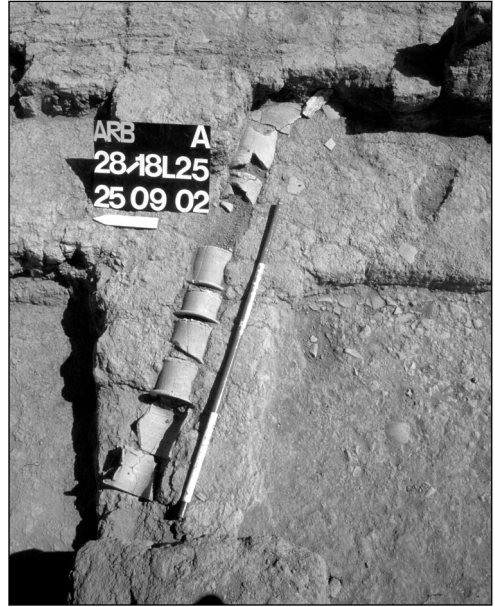


Fig. 7. Drainage channel in locus 24 (square 28/18) (Photo A. Reiche)

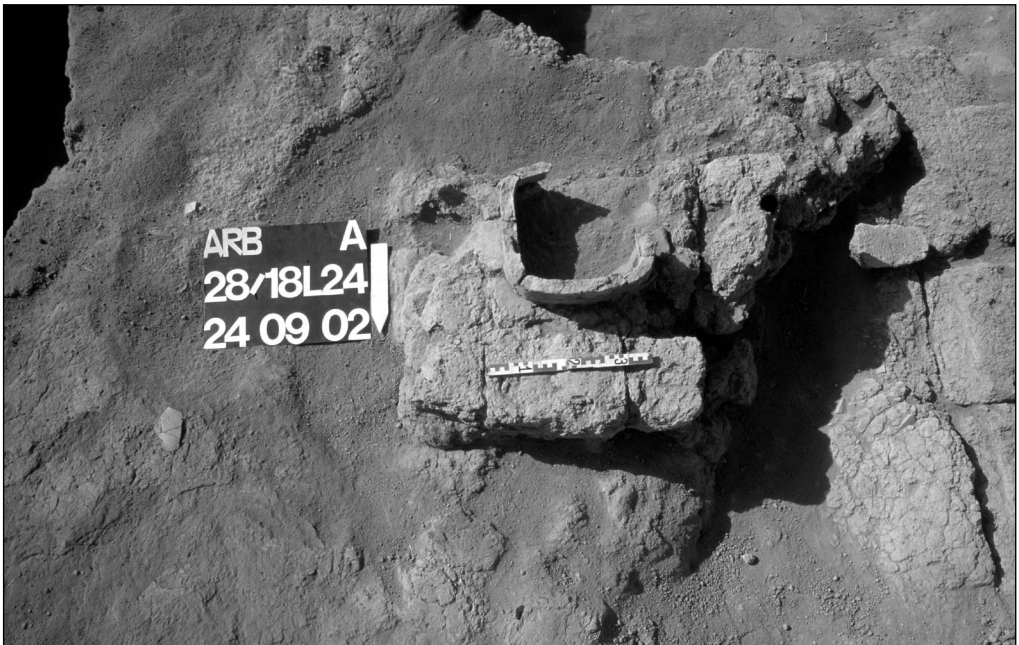


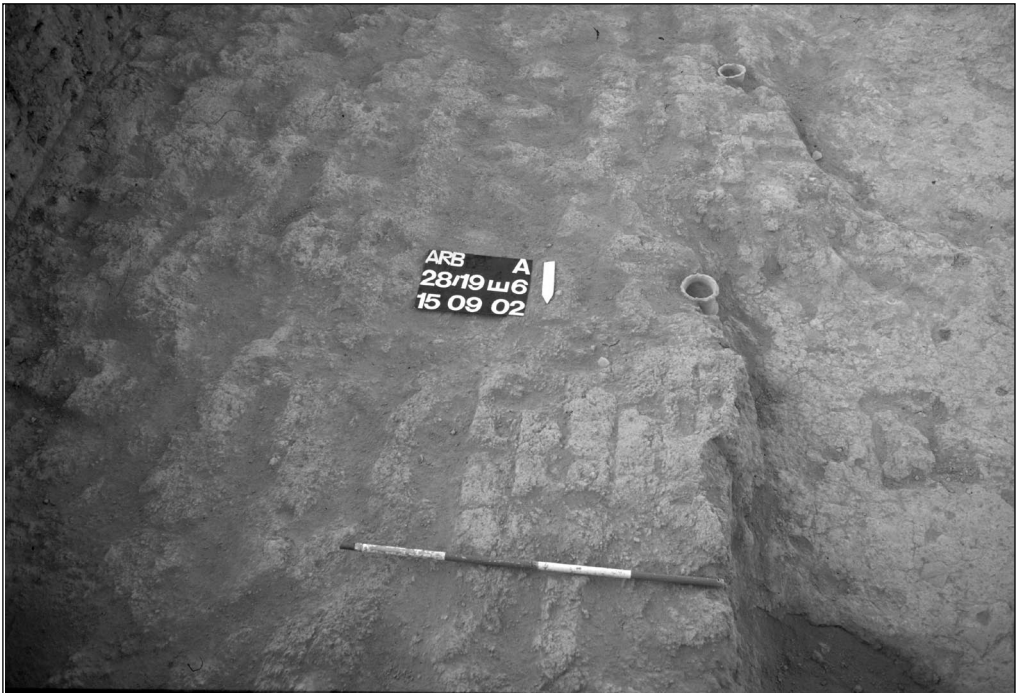
Fig. 8. Mitannian heating stove found in room 24 (square 28/18) (Photo A. Reiche)

a courtyard (locus 40 in square 29/18), measuring approximately 4.7 by 3.8 m and paved with sherds and pebbles. There is also evidence of an older phase of this courtyard and the same cannot be excluded for the whole unit.

Excavations on its western side, in square 29/17, yielded a fragment of Mitannian structure with foundations set some 0.4 m below the surface of the older courtyard of the southern architectural unit. Instead of being part of an earlier stratum of Mitannian occupation at Tell Arbid, these remains actually appear to be contemporaneous with the above-described southern unit, thus providing proof of artificial terracing of the natural slope, which was formed of a very hard virgin soil. The terraced step was perhaps

necessary at some point in time to extend to the west the so-called "southern unit".

Excavations in square 28/19, east of the "Mitannian Northern House", brought to light what seems to be a floor paved with upended bricks or a virtually complete fallen wall, presumably the west wall of a Mitannian building situated some 10 m east of the "Northern House". If it is indeed a tumbled wall, it appears to have collapsed westwards on a nearly flat surface that helped to preserve it more or less intact (*Fig. 9*). Obviously, the area between the "Mitannian Northern House" in square 28/18 and the building to which the fallen wall had belonged must have been free of structures or installations of any substance. Either this was a large courtyard or else the housing complexes of the Mitannian



*Fig. 9. Fallen Mitannian wall exposed in square 28/19
(Photo A. Reiche)*

settlement on Tell Arbid were spaced quite loosely. The fallen block of wall counted 37 rows of narrowly-jointed mud bricks, giving a total height surpassing 3 m, although there is no way to be sure that this was the actual height of the standing wall. An even more interesting find were two complete Mitannian potstands set between the bricks of the fallen wall, in a line some 0.25 m from the supposed top and about 1.5 m apart. Their state of preservation and their position (perpendicular to the face of the fallen wall) suggest that they were not simply abandoned on the surface onto which the wall had collapsed, but that they had been part of the wall structure and had fallen together with it. Assuming this interpretation is correct, the potstands may have been used as ventilation holes placed just under the eaves of the house.

Modest remains of Mitannian-period buildings were found also in the eastern sector of area "A", in square 30/27. There, below the Assyrian *pisé* foundations mentioned above, the top of a Mitannian stratum was revealed, containing fragments of mud-brick walls from a putative architectural unit (cf. *Fig. 5*). The walls were partly destroyed by the Assyrian foundations as the latter were evidently dug into the Mitannian layer. Near the outer face of a section oriented NE-SW, a kind of bin made of upended bricks and dug far below the base of the Mitannian walls was excavated. As it was made of the same kind of bricks as those used in Mitannian walls, it is deemed to be of the same date. No traces of floors associated with the Mitannian houses were found in this square.

THIRD MILLENNIUM BC REMAINS IN AREA "A"

Previous explorations of area "A" had left the excavators convinced that no older occupation than Mitannian was to be found in this part of Tell Arbid. In 1996, virgin soil had been reached just under the Mitannian stratum at the western edge of the area. It was thought that the numerous Early Dynastic period potsherds used in the pavements of Neo-Assyrian and Mitannian courtyards in the area had been brought to the site with the clay that the early settlers preferred for their brick-making (instead of the extremely hard local clay) and which they excavated at the main tell or another small mound situated some 100 m to the north. The latter hill, now occupied by a modern village, had most certainly been inhabited during the 3rd millennium BC. The results of the present season, however, have not borne out the earlier hypothesis.

Early Dynastic sherds were found just above virgin soil and occasionally in quite high concentrations practically in all the trenches excavated this year in area "A". Stumps of mud-brick walls (one with an associated patch of floor) were also found, but nowhere was there a larger section of an Early Dynastic-period dwelling. Instead, just beneath the Mitannian stratum and disappearing under the baulk separating squares 28/18 and 28/19 (at the northern limit of both trenches), an Early Dynastic pottery kiln was discovered. Enough of it was cleared (pending a full exploration in the future) to say that it was oval in shape, at least 4 m long and over 2.5 m deep, having a well preserved trapezoidal "entrance" to the firing chamber in its east side. It had been dug deep into virgin soil.

The picture of Early-Dynastic occupation in area "A" that has developed from an analysis of the present finds – provisional at best and in need of confirmation by further excavations – would have this sector at the western

outskirts of the site used as an industrial quarter in the 3rd millennium BC. It should be assumed that there had been more kilns situated in the area and that the quarter had never been densely populated with dwellings being rare and far apart.

THIRD MILLENNIUM BC STRATA IN AREA "D"

The continuation of work in area "D"⁴) situated in the northwestern corner of the main tell covered an extension of the trench from the previous season westward into squares 29/42, 30/42, 29/41 and 30/41. The total investigated surface reached 185 sq. m. The objective was to trace the south edge of a Ninevite-5 lane that had been discovered here and which due to slope erosion to the north of the trench could not be explored further in that direction (excluding a determination of its width). Excavations following the south border of the alley unearthed a row of three middle-sized rooms, measuring approximately 2.2 by 2.6 m. They were only partly cleared and traces of associated floors could be discerned. The house facing the sherd-paved alley discovered last year was now completely exposed and another house of the period, consisting of four rooms, was recorded further to the north (*Fig. 10*). A concentration of broken vessels was noted in the southwestern room of this building.

Before the Ninevite 5 stratum was reached in the southern part of the sector (square 30/42), it was necessary first to clear the rest of the Khabour-ware period occupation. Two children's graves were unearthed, one of them, G3, found to contain the bones of a newborn and a 5-year old, accompanied by four small painted jars, some bone rings and beads. The underlying 3rd millennium BC layers, of which the topmost one was obviously Akkadian, as was evident already after the 2001 season, yielded some architectural remains standing in the southeastern corner of the trench. The walls, surviving to 0.4 m in height, belonged to a single domestic structure composed of at least three if not four rooms. The mud bricks used in the construction of the Akkadian walls were 0.32 m square and of much better quality than those used in Ninevite 5 period houses. The stratum corresponding to Early Dynastic occupation in this part of the site was represented almost exclusively by ceramic material.

"OLDER BUILDING" IN AREA "SS"

Some minor investigations were carried out inside and under the so-called "Older Building" excavated last year in area "SS" on the top of the citadel.⁵) A study was made of the

plastering and bonding of the walls of the one room of the "Older Building" excavated to date (locus 11 in square 36/55). The meticulous cleaning of the walls yielded

4) A Ninevite-5 period dwelling quarter bound on the north by a lane paved with sherds had been cleared here in 2001, cf. *PAM XIII*, op. cit., 293.

5) Cf. id., *PAM XIII*, op. cit., 289-290.

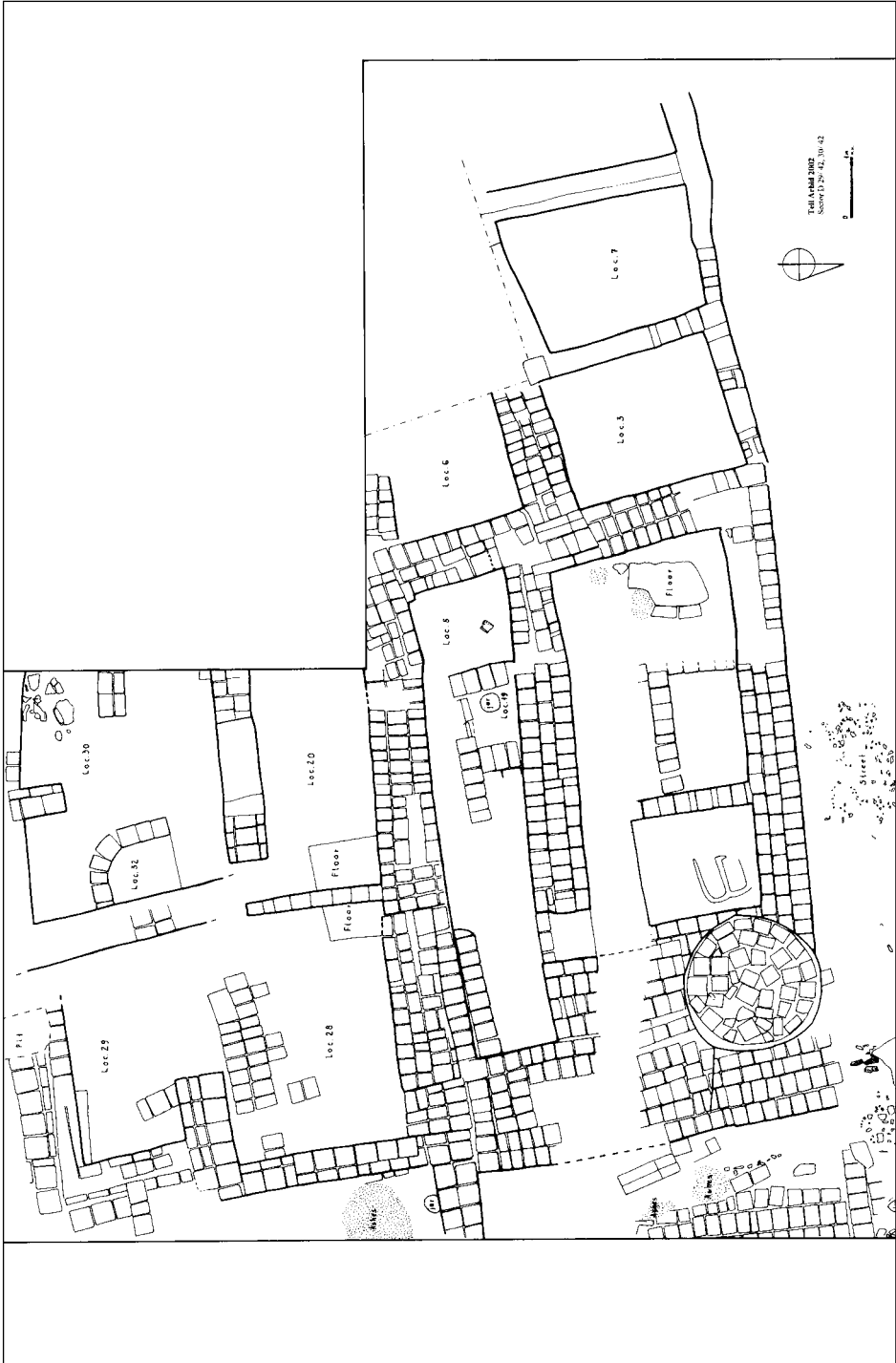


Fig. 10. Plan of the Ninevite 5 stratum in area "D"
(Drawing M. Ozdarska; ink drawing M. Wagner)

a fine Early Dynastic cylinder seal with a depiction of an animal contest, but finding the floors in this room proved a more difficult task. Either the floor had never been of the hard kind or else it had disintegrated with time, or had been destroyed when the room was abandoned and filled with debris. The search for a floor revealed the base of the walls in the locus, but no substantial

foundations (*Fig. 11*). Thus it became evident that the “Older Building” had not been preceded by another structure of similar plan, the walls of which could have served as foundations for the “Older Building”. Instead, the tops of two older mud brick walls were revealed, representing at least two different phases of earlier 3rd millennium BC occupation on Tell Arbid.

SUMMARY

Summing up the seventh campaign of excavations at Tell Arbid, it should be emphasized that the results have confirmed some earlier suppositions, while undermining others. Perhaps the most important discovery is the presence of Early Dynastic period remains – and absolute lack of

Khabour ware period occupation – under the Mitannian layer in area “A”. Furthermore, the restricted character of Hellenistic settlement on Arbid is astonishing when confronted with the relative wealth of the grave goods found in Hellenistic-period graves at the site.



Fig. 11. Base of the northern wall of locus 11 in square 36/55 in the so-called “Older Building” on the main tell (Photo A. Reiche)