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Tell Arbid: The Ninth Season of Syrian-Polish Excavations : Preliminary Report

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TELL ARBID

THE NINTH SEASON OF SYRIAN-POLISH EXCAVATIONS. PRELIMINARY REPORT

Piotr Bieliński

The ninth campaign of field investigations on Tell Arbid took place in the late summer and fall of 2004.¹ The first two weeks were concentrated on intensive magnetic prospection of the immediate surroundings of the main tell, carried out by a team from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Regular excavations, started concurrently, laid the greatest emphasis on the 3rd-millennium BC urban layers. The principal objective was to trace the transition from the town of Nineveh 5 (Early Jezirah II) date to remains of the Early Jezirah III a-b period. Work focused on Ninivite residential architecture in the northwestern section of the ancient tell (Area "D") and the somewhat later (Early Jezirah III) town district discovered on the eastern slope, in Area "SD" (Fig. 1). Previous trenches in these two areas were continued and extended and a few new trial pits were opened.

1 The season started on August 18 and ended on October 1. The staff of the mission was composed of: Dr. Dorota Ławecka, Dr. Dariusz Szlag, Ms Dorota Bielińska, Ms Zuzanna Wygnańska, Ms Agnieszka Pieńkowska, Mr. Andrzej Reiche, Mr. Łukasz Rutkowski, Mr. Maciej Makowski, archaeologists, and the co-directors, Dr. Ahmad Serriyeh and myself, as well as five archaeology students from the Warsaw University' Institute of Archaeology: Misses Małgorzata Wybieralska, Małgorzata Lopko, Monika Różańska, Marzena Markowska and Ewelina Mizak. For part of the season, we were accompanied by Ms Marta Zambello from Padova (Italy), who was working on some of the flint material from the first campaigns on Tell Arbid. Later we were joined by our regular collaborator, Dr. Arkadiusz Sołtysiak from the Warsaw University Department of Anthropology, who studied osteological material from the last two seasons. Last but not least, I should mention Mr. Tomasz Herbich and Mr. Paweł Gan from the Polish Academy of Sciences, who conducted a geophysical survey of selected parts of the site.

As every year from the beginning of our explorations on Tell Arbid in 1996, the expedition has benefited from the assistance (including substantial financial contribution) of our Syrian colleagues and associates from the Direction General of Antiquities and Museums. We owe special thanks to Dr. Tamam Fakush, Director General, as well as to Dr. Michel al-Maqdissi, Director of the Excavations Department, for their friendly interest and encouragement. Neither should we fail to mention here Mr. Abed Abdel Messih Bardo, Regional Director of Antiquities in Hassake, whose regular visits, friendly advice and constant support in solving numerous problems were invaluable.

GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

The survey covered the fields bordering the main tell on the west, north and east, as well as, for the sake of testing the method in the specific conditions of the site, some areas on the main tell, where the presence of archaeological remains was undoubted (Areas "D" and "W").

The extent of the ancient city has been of primary concern since the first season of investigations on Arbid. Our own field survey, conducted in 1996 for the purpose of preparing a contour map of the site, brought evidence of mostly Iron Age remains situated under modern fields within

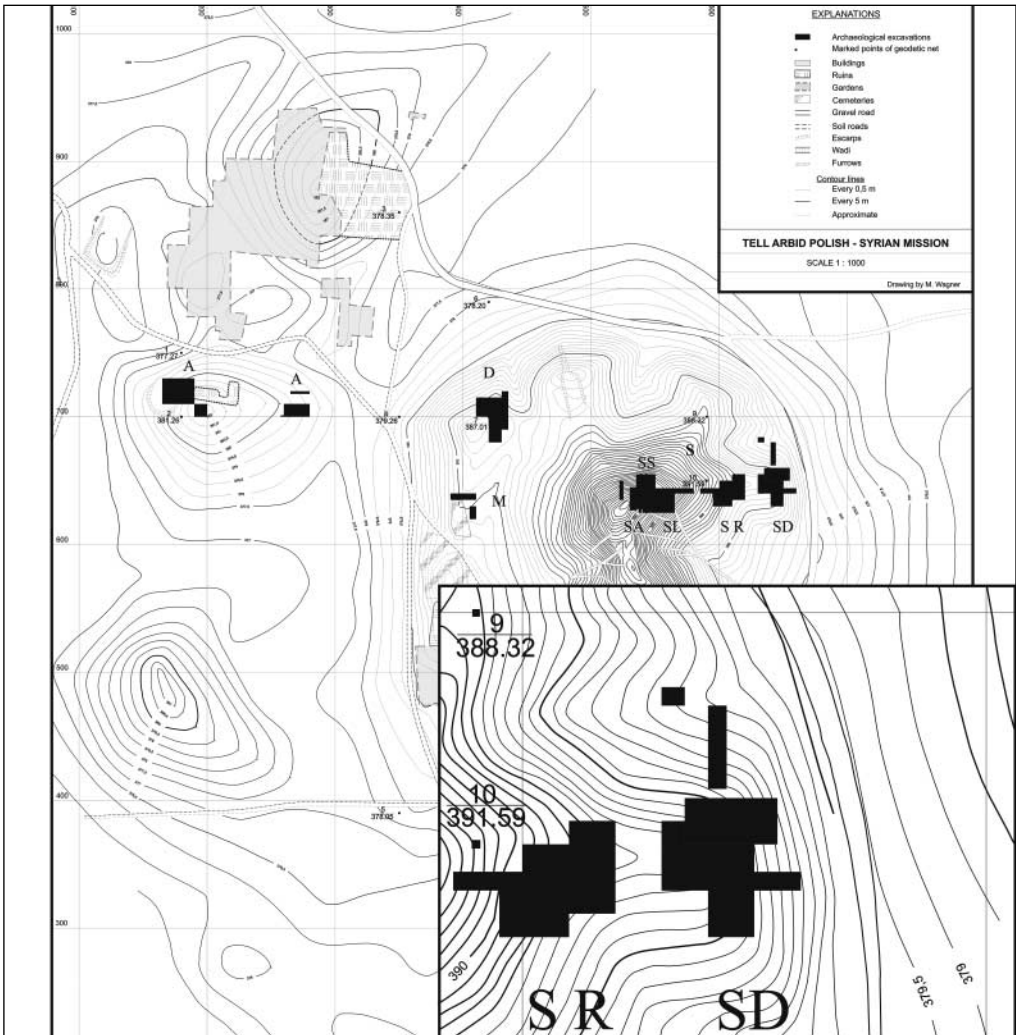


Fig. 1. Contour map of Tell Arbid showing the location of trenches in 2004 (Drawing M. Wagner based on map prepared by D. Pregowski)

a radius of c. 500 m around the main tell. Investigations in Area "A" (northwest of the main tell) in 1996, 1997 and 2002 confirmed the presence of occupational layers corresponding to the Roman, Hellenistic, Mitannian and Early Dynastic periods on this small mound, suggesting again that the fields around the main tell, already scarred by modern deep-ploughing, concealed archaeological strata corresponding to the cities that flourished on the spot in the 3rd and 2nd millennium BC. To put it

in a different way, an ancient "lower city" of considerable size could have existed around the main tell. Our hopes lay mainly in the western part of the site, where remains of a defense system protecting ancient Arbid in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC were expected. The results of similar geophysical surveys carried out recently in Tell Khuera and Tell Mozan had given us reason to hope, but unfortunately, in our case, the findings were not as conclusive.²

AREA "SD"

Excavations were continued in squares 35/64, 35/65, 36/64 and 36/65, and three new pits were opened in squares 33/65, 34/65 and 35/66. The total surface investigated during this campaign in area "SD" approached 350 sq. m.

The most recent archaeological features discovered in the sector this season should be dated to the Khabour-ware period. They were unearthed in the northwestern quarter of square 35/64. It was a pit, filled with Khabour-ware potsherds, cutting into a *pisé* wall only slightly older than the pit itself. Remains representing Late Akkadian and post-Akkadian phases in the history of human occupation on Tell Arbid (Early Jezirah IV a-c) were more numerous. Found mostly in square 36/64, these relics consisted of one small basin-like installation paved with potsherds and stones, four rather large pits in the central and northeastern part of the square and, finally, four simple inhumation burials. One of these contained the bones of a child without any accompanying grave goods (G 10) and two were secondary burials (G11 and G12), while

the fourth grave yielded a metal pin and jar of so-called pseudo-metallic type placed with the skeleton.

Better preserved architectural remains appeared in square 36/64 in layers of the Late Early Dynastic (III b) and Akkadian periods. Sections of mud-brick walls discovered in the eastern and southern parts of the square proved to complement the layout of houses excavated by the expedition a few years earlier in squares 35/65 and 36/65.³ The most important structure, the plan of which could be added to substantially as a result of the present excavations, was the Northern House of Late Early Dynastic III period. It now looks as if the northwestern corner of the building either extended further to the east or had another building built onto it while still operational. This adjoining structure consisted of at least three small rooms laid out in a row (loci 40, 54 and 56). Only their northern ends were explored within the limits of the present trench; even so, it is clear that each was built separately with walls touching on the walls of neighboring structures, giving in

2 For a report on the survey, see contribution by T. Herbich in this volume, 490-496.

3 See PAM XV, *Reports 2003* (2004), 338-341.



Fig. 2. View of the courtyard in square 36/64 with chambers 40, 58 and 54 on the right (Photo A. Reiche)

effect the impression of gradual and rather haphazard development. The actual construction technique was, however, very neat and exacting. None of the rooms had doorways in the north walls (suggesting that the entrance, if any, was from the south); locus 40, however, had no doorway at all. The evidence indicates that these structures were erected at about the same time as the "Northern House", that is, in the Early Jezirah III-b phase, and were rebuilt at least once, in Akkadian times.

Archaeological remains clearly preceding the raising of the Northern House, but evidently later than the Building of the Stone Entrance, that is, the alleged Early Dynastic III sanctuary, were observed within the confines of sector "SD" on the eastern slope of the tell.⁴ The stratum proved most evident in square 36/64, where a trapezoid courtyard (c. 8 by 5 m) was uncovered [*Fig. 2*]. It was bordered on the south by the row of later built rooms mentioned above (loci 40, 54, 56), while its north side was constituted by the wall of another structure of Early Dynastic III date, large sections of which were excavated last year in the adjacent square 35/64. This wall was later buttressed on the outside (that is, on the courtyard side) with a few additional courses of mud brick and some neatly built shallow buttresses erected c. 0.70 m apart. West of the courtyard there was a rather large chamber (locus 52-36/64), at least 3.50 m wide. Its south wall touched on the row of three loci described above, while the east one joined the said buttressed wall running north of the courtyard. Locus 52-36/64 is hitherto the only room communicating directly with the courtyard. Its relation to the other architecture around the courtyard is still unclear.

ENVIRONS OF BUILDING OF THE STONE ENTRANCE

Further work in squares 35/65 and 36/65, where last year the Building of the Stone Entrance was discovered under the remains of the Northern House and which the excavators interpreted as a possible sanctuary of the Early Jezirah III period, added some new details of plan. Most importantly, another room (locus 35-36/65) belonging to this atypical architectural complex proved to be attached to the south side of the alleged cella of the temple. It had the same brick floor as elsewhere in the building, and the same width (3.00 m). It is also clear now that the building continues to the south and southwest.

Clearing work on the western side of the courtyard revealed a bench, c. 1.00 m wide, running alongside the wall. It was made of mud brick and clay. Set in it was a narrow and shallow channel with a ceramic-sherd bottom. The fill consisted of a layer of gravel. More than 8 m of the length of this channel, which was c. 0.30 m wide, was found neatly covered with mud bricks. At the northern end, the bottom of the channel was paved with small stones and led under some stone steps entering the building from the street. It seems obvious that it was meant as rainwater discharge from the "temple" courtyard.

Directly to the east of the said complex there was an open area, which was used together with the building, presumably for some sort of domestic activities, as determined already in the previous season (round pits with vertical walls, averaging c. 1.00 m in diameter).⁵ There were two small rooms (loci 27 and 28-36/65) delimiting this area on the north and adjoining the eastbound street. Further pits, some reaching 2.00 m

⁴ See *PAM XV*, op. cit., 341-344.

⁵ See *PAM XV*, op. cit., 345.

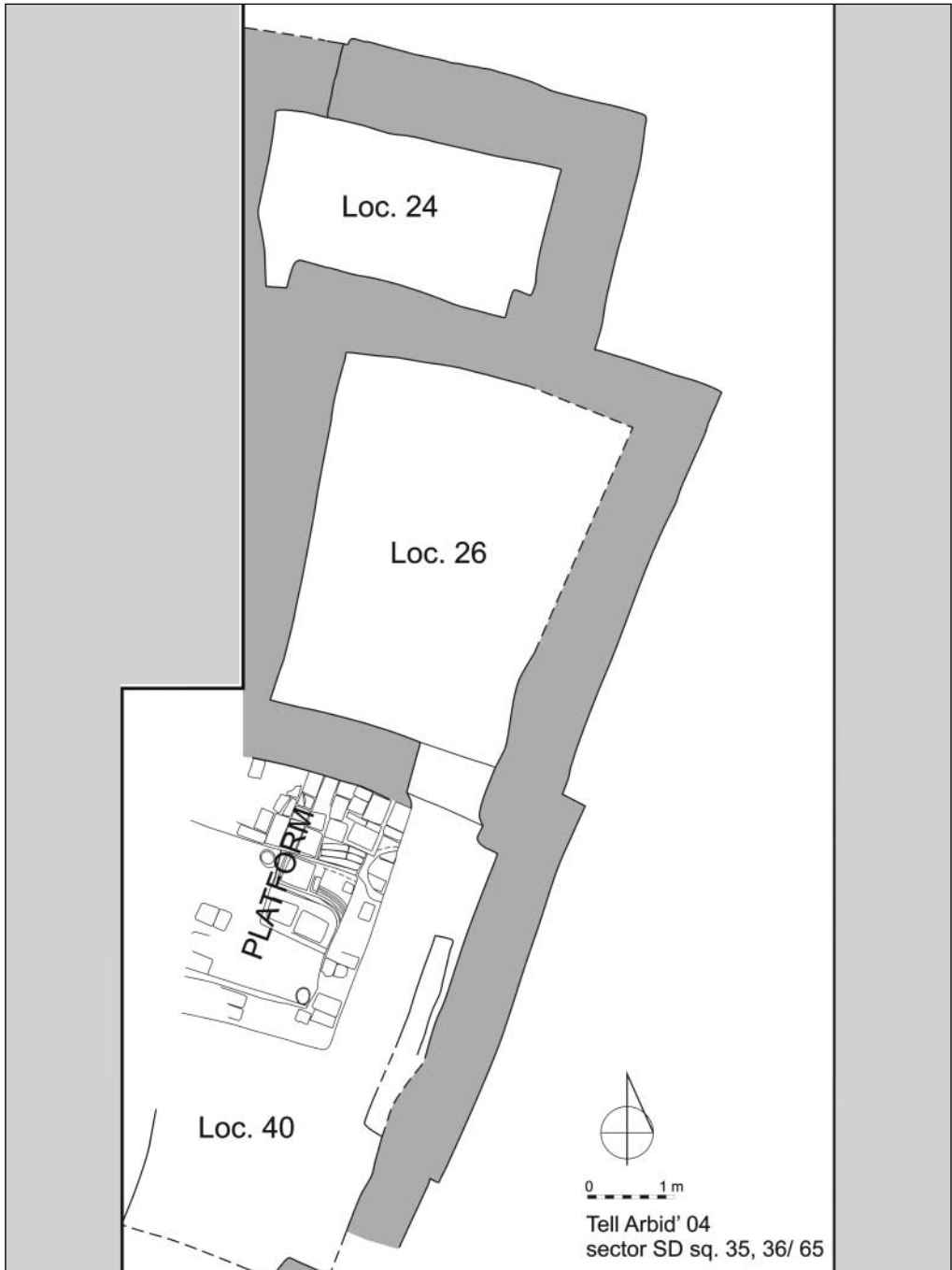


Fig. 3. Plan of the structure underlying the Building of the stone entrance
(Drawing M. Wybieralska, D. Ławecka, computer processing M. Wagner)

in diameter, were discovered this year, giving a total of seven. Scattered irregularly around the area, these pits with smaller brick-lined pits inside them must have served to store some easily perishable food.

PREDECESSOR OF BUILDING OF THE STONE ENTRANCE

Dismantling the walls of the Building of the Stone Entrance opened the way to investigating an earlier layer with the ruins of a preceding building. It had the same layout, at least in the northern and eastern parts, and the same thickness of the walls as the later structure. The Building of the Stone Entrance was erected on top of it, the outer dimensions of both buildings being exactly the same and only the inner layout differing to some extent. Instead of an oblong building with more or less triangular courtyard adjoining it on the north and northwest, there was what appears to be a three-roomed construction with no place for an open courtyard. What was in a later phase the northern part of the courtyard was at this point a kind of anteroom (locus 24-35/65), measuring c. 3.20 by 1.80 m and leading from the main entrance to the next room of trapezoid shape (locus 26-35/65) lying further to the south [Fig. 3]. This next room was much larger than the vestibule. It was more than 4.00 m long and about 2.80 m wide. The entrance was also different, there not being any steps in the older structure. Further to the south there was a third room (locus 40-36/65) belonging to this older unit. A massive buttress and a threshold separated it from the previous room. It must have been at least 6.20 m long, but for now the southern limits have yet to be defined. This locus contained a curious platform, about 3.40 by 1.50 m, made of mud brick and clay, and plastered repeatedly [Fig. 4]. It

seems not to have been flat on top, but rather composed of a few steps. A centrally positioned square mud brick with three sides thickly coated with plaster appears to have been placed at the topmost point of this platform. It may have served as a base of sorts for some vertical structural element, or else a stand for some important object. The front of the platform was worked into a semicircular niche with a two-tiered stepped profile, cutting c. 0.35 cm back into the platform [Fig. 5]. Below the upper layers of plastered bricks forming the surface of the platform, there was an empty space filled with broken bricks and rubbish deposited on a kind of floor together with two nearly complete jars. This "empty" space was nevertheless limited by a kind of wall skirting the entire platform in its later phase. It is not to be excluded that this border of bricks enclosed an earlier form of this platform and was restored when the later phase was constructed. At least one of the jars discovered below the surface of the platform was of the Ninevite 5 incised type. Further studies are needed to determine the function of this platform, but its cultic role is evidently tenable, even if more trivial solutions cannot be excluded.

Except for the vessels from below the upper surface of the platform, there was nothing from the floor levels of the older edifice excavated in squares 35/65 and 36/65 that could provide a clue to its function.

The open-air area with receptacles found east of the Building of the Stone Entrance appears to have been built over in the times of the predecessor. The remains did not survive in good condition (partly because of the later bins) but they apparently formed one or two multi-room houses [Fig. 6]. Plastered floors in good condition survived in some of the rooms.



Fig. 4. *The mud-brick platform in locus 40 of square 36/65*
(Photo P. Bieliński)

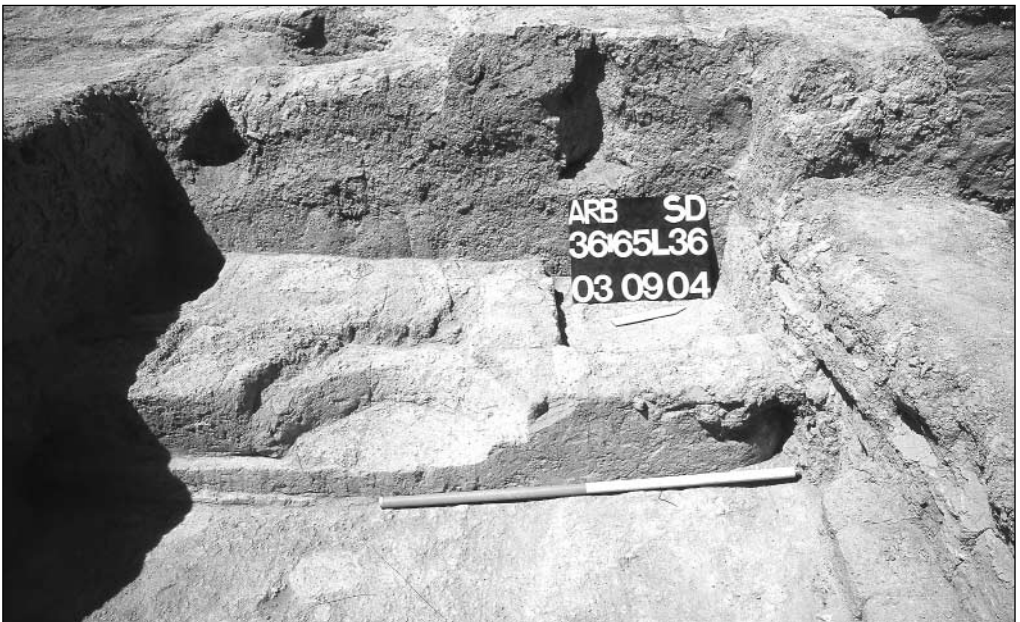


Fig. 5. *Semicircular niche cut into the platform in locus 40*
(Photo A. Reiche)

3RD MILLENNIUM STREETS IN AREA "SD"

Previous work in Area "SD" had uncovered sections of two streets from the Early Dynastic III period, joining in front of the Building of the Stone Entrance. One was partly paved with stone slabs.⁶ The present explorations afforded a unique opportunity to study the street system of a 3rd millennium city in the Syrian Jezirah. The streets were excavated both westward and northward, two trial trenches being opened for the purpose in the northern part of Area "SD", more specifically in squares 33/65 and 34/65, and a new quarter of square 35/64 being explored.

The small section of later 3rd millennium city explored so far has revealed the existence of two different kinds of streets. One was a broad street, like the one

in square 35/64. It was close to 2.00 m wide and paved with sherds laid in a layer of tamped clay. A strip half a meter wide, made of larger stones, ran alongside one edge, forming a kind of pavement.

A different kind of street, rather an alley about 0.80 m wide, was uncovered this season in trial pits excavated in squares 33/65 and 34/65. Running down the ancient slope toward the north, this alley was lined on either side with house walls with no doorways [Fig. 7]. Sherds paved the clay surface; poorly preserved traces testified to the presence of a shallow and rather narrow sewage channel running down the middle, in a few places lined with stones. The corners of all the side streets or cul-de-sacs intersecting with this alley were reinforced with massive stones designed to protect them from running rainwater.



Fig. 6 View of the area east of the Building of the stone entrance; circular bins and remains of earlier architecture seen in the foreground (Photo P. Bieliński)

6 See PAM XV, op. cit., 343-345.

TELL ARBID
SYRIA

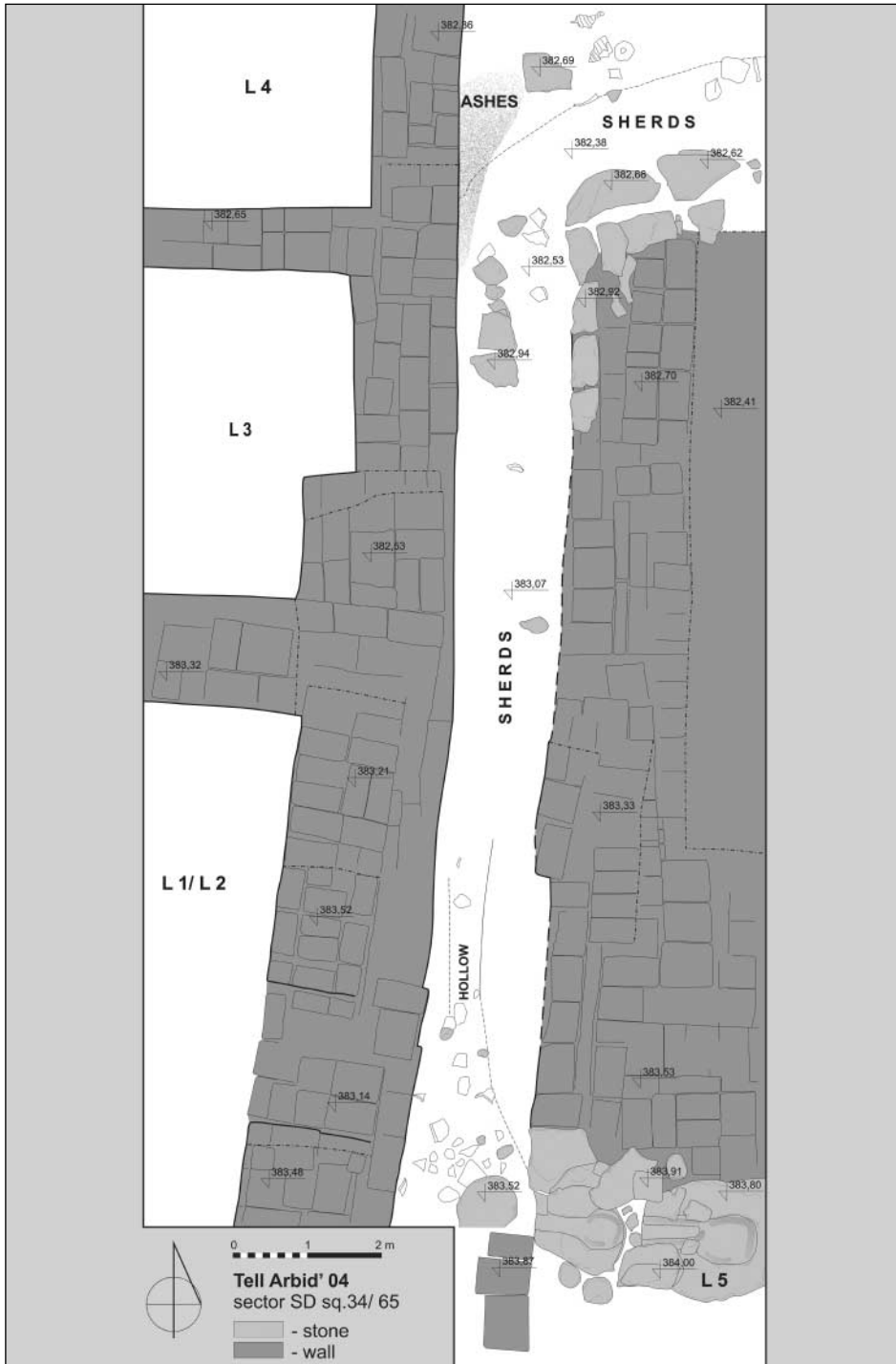


Fig. 7. Alley of Early Dynastic III date uncovered in square 34/65
(Drawing L. Rutkowski, computer processing M. Wagner)

Streets of the first kind evidently constituted the communication network of the district, while those of the second kind were more like open channels for the evacuation of excess rainwater and sewage. It should be noted that the fragment of street excavated a few years back in Area "D" and dated to the Nineveh 5 period (Early Jezirah II) and earlier is of yet a different kind. It was paved with a thick layer of tightly packed sherds, which were used to the exclusion of everything else whenever leveling works were unavoidable and the street level had to be raised.

The alley described above was discovered to run immediately on top of some well preserved architectural remains of the Early Jezirah II phase [Fig. 8]. It proved beyond all doubt that with the decline of

Ninevite 5 settlement, some fairly drastic changes were introduced in the town layout. The new streets obviously disregarded any earlier urban communication network. It should be added that the said remains of Ninevite 5 architecture uncovered in the test pit in square 33/65 represented two successive phases of this period. Belonging to the upper one was the corner of a bigger building, presumably habitational, composed of more than three rooms. The orientation of the architecture in the lower Ninevite layer differed slightly from that of the later buildings. Fragments of two houses were revealed in the trench, but none of the rooms was cleared in its entirety. The thickness of the two layers from the Early Jezirah II period discovered during the current season in square 33/65 was 1.50 m.

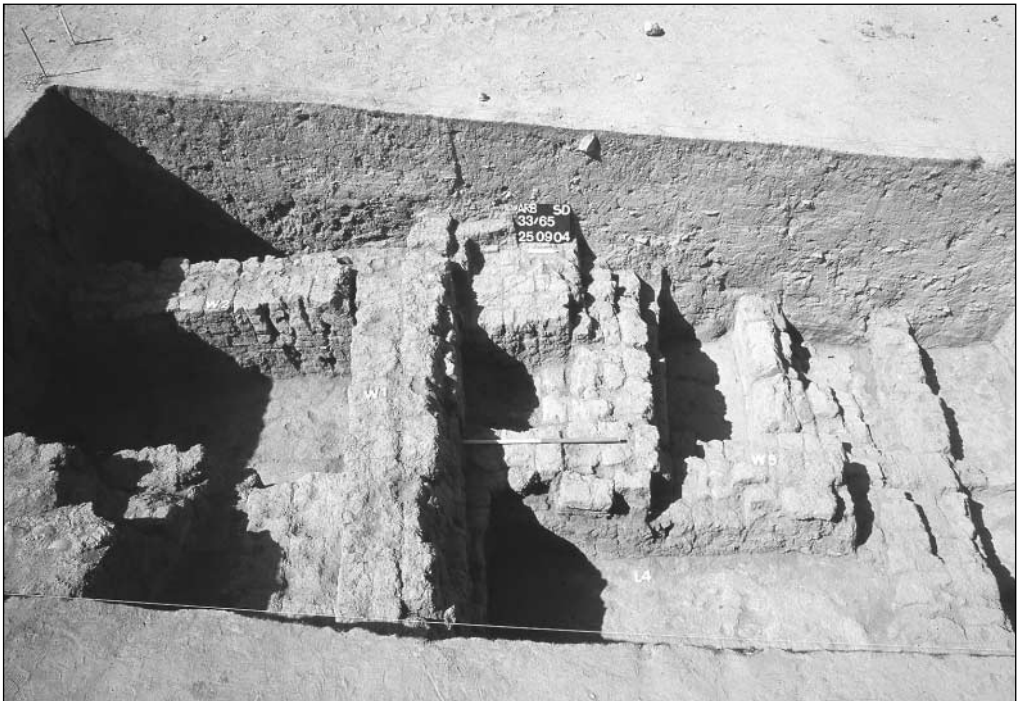


Fig. 8. Architectural remains of the Niniveh 5 period discovered below the level of the Early Dynastic alley in square 34/65 (Photo A. Reiche)

AREA "D"

Continued investigations of the Ninevite 5 period quarter in the northwestern part of the main tell (Area "D") concentrated firstly on opening a new square in the southern part of the sector to check the southward extension of the Ninevite quarter. Equally high on the list of priorities was the continued work in the northern part of the sector, where last year two houses of the Ninevite 5 period started being uncovered. Two others were now revealed and further work was done on clearing the main street cutting across this part of the Ninevite 5 urban complex on Tell Arbid. This street, while somewhat winding in places, retained its initial width for most of the distance [Fig. 9]. Similarly as in the case of the later streets in Area "SD", the houses were entered from short transversal cul-de-sacs instead of opening straight off the main street.

To reach Ninevite 5 remains in the newly opened square 31/42 in the southern part of the sector, it was necessary first to remove the poorly preserved later remains. This was the chief objective in the 2004 season. The latest feature on this spot was a Hellenistic grave (G1-31/42) found in the southwestern part of the square. The chamber, built of typical period bricks of large size, contained nothing but the skeleton of a young male. This was surprising in itself, as all the other Hellenistic burials discovered on Tell Arbid, whether during Mallowan's excavations in the 1930s or by the Austrian and American expeditions working here later, had yielded a rich inventory of grave goods. Despite tidy building, as in all other contemporaneous tombs on the site, the only evidence of any special treatment of the deceased was a piece of

lead stuffed up the nose, presumably instead of the traditional obolus.

Next in terms of finds chronology was another grave, dated by the pottery to the Khabour-Ware period. This burial found in the northwestern corner of the trench (recorded as G2-31/42) proved much more interesting. The pit under the tomb was revealed to cut very distinctly into the earlier Khabour-Ware layer. It encompassed the burial chamber, as well as shaft situated next to the entrance. The vaulted burial chamber, c. 2.50 by 1.50 m, was raised of single rows of square bricks [Fig. 10]. Inside the chamber there were two human burials: one consisting of disarticulated bones pushed against the north wall, the other in anatomical order, lying more or less in the center. This is clearly suggestive of secondary burial. The grave goods included a bronze pin, ceramic jar and bowl, and a clay censer in the form of a hut or shrine. These objects, and likewise the three jars and bowl from the shaft outside, appeared to belong to the second (later) of the two burials. The shaft constituted a particularly curious element, it being the first case on Tell Arbid of a Khabour-period grave being found with a shaft. The vessels found in the shaft could suggest that funeral rites in the Khabour Ware culture included some form of offering presented in front of the burial chamber.

As mentioned already, the burial had been excavated into an earlier Khabour Ware layer, containing in the western part of the square two massive platforms made of *pisé* brick and three fragments of thick walls made of the same building material. In the central and eastern part of square 31/42, a fragment of a Khabour-Ware period house was uncovered. It comprised at



Fig. 9. The western part of a street from Nineveh 5 times, discovered in Area "D"
(Photo A. Reiche)

least three rooms and a courtyard with a *tannour*. The top of cultural layers attributed to the 3rd millennium BC was reached practically only in the neighborhood of one

of the pisé platforms; the cleared tops of mud-brick structures suggest a date in the Akkadian period (Early Jezirah IV a-b) for these remains.

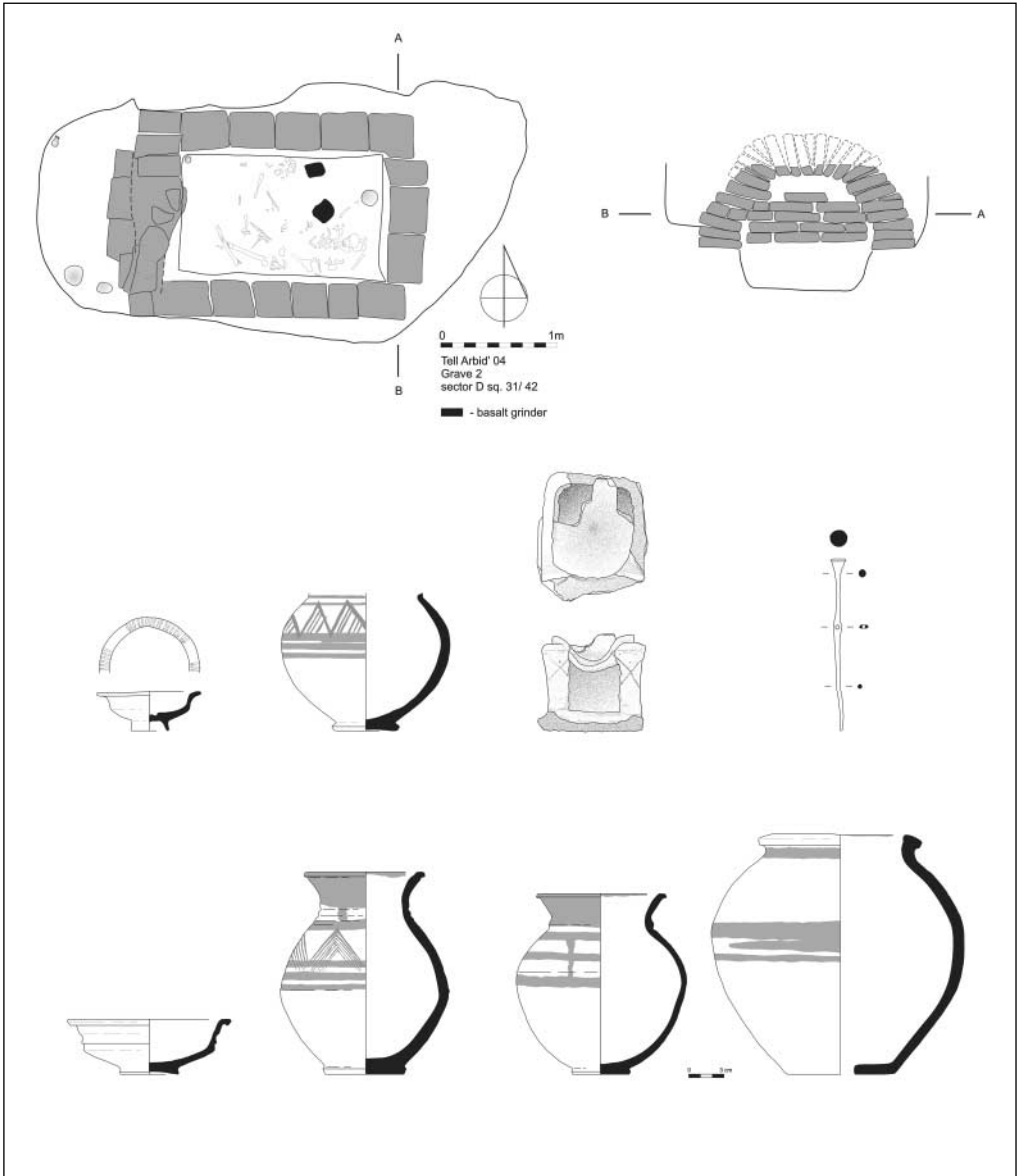


Fig. 10. Plan and section of grave G2 from square 31/42 and the grave goods
(Drawing E. Mizak, M. Markowska, computer processing M. Wagner)

SUMMARY

The results of the ninth season of work by a joint Polish-Syrian expedition on Tell Arbid have contributed to the stratigraphical analyses of settlement on the site in the 3rd millennium BC. Despite evident continuity in settlement pattern between Ninevite 5 and Early Dynastic III cities, it is now clear that some general changes took place in the organization of residential quarters. It also seems tenable to suggest

that, at least in the Early Jezirah III period, each of the districts surrounding the center of the town with its alleged acropolis must have stood on its own small, separate tell. Confirming this concept are the streets presently discovered in Area "SD", which sloped to the north, toward the outer perimeter of the town. Further in-depth studies are necessary to interpret the two strange structures discovered in Area "SD".