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Tell Arbid: Report on the Syrian-Polish Explorations in 2005 : The Tenth Season

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TELL ARBID

REPORT ON THE SYRIAN-POLISH EXPLORATIONS IN 2005. THE TENTH SEASON

Piotr Bieliński

The tenth campaign of joint Syrian-Polish explorations on Tell Arbid started as usual at the end of August and lasted until the first days of October.¹ The tenth season was devoted to the continued exploration, in all currently open sectors, of town remains from the 3rd millennium BC, meaning layers corresponding to the Ninevite 5 pottery period (Early Jazirah II). The overall objective was to establish the function of particular urban complexes and their continuation over time. Not the least, the stratigraphy of levels exposed in particular sectors of the site had to be correlated.

A secondary objective of the season was the search for earlier than Ninevite 5 remains, the presence of which had been suggested by Halaf potsberds discovered in strange stratigraphic positions, like for example Early Dynastic III mud-brick walls. A small concentration of potsberds attributed to Halaf culture had been noted some 600 m east of the main tell, in the middle of arable fields, but it did not seem a likely 'source' for the Halaf potsberds found in more recent bricks or rubbish on the tell. More importantly, neither the surface collection from the tell nor the finds from the trenches had yielded a single sberd attributable to any of the periods separating Ninevite 5 culture from the Halaf one.

Ninevite layers were explored in sectors "SD" on the eastern slope of the tell, "D" in the northwestern corner of the main tell and "W" in the southern part of the site (Fig. 1). Few new trenches were opened, most of the work being carried out in already dug trenches.

1 The mission as usual was headed on the Syrian side by Dr. Ahmad Serriyeh from the Direction General of Antiquities and Museums and the author on the Polish side. The Polish team for the 2005 season included archaeologists: Dr. Dorota Ławecka, Dr. Anna Smogorzewska, Ms Zuzanna Wygnańska, Mr. Maciej Makowski and myself, Mr. Andrzej Reiche and Ms Dorota Bielińska, and archaeology students (Warsaw University and Venice University): Ms. Małgorzata Lopko, Ms Marzena Markowska, Ms Marta Mierzejewska, Ms Ewelina Mizak, Ms Marta Momot, Ms Małgorzata Wybieralska and Mr. Łukasz Wojnarowicz, Ms. Monica Arrivabeni. A small team from Masaryk University in Brno (Czech Republic) joined in the explorations this season: Dr. Inna Mateiciucova, Mr. Martin Ježek, Mr. Petr Kostrhun and two archaeology students: Ms. Šarka Travníčková and Mr. Ivan Lassak.

We have benefited as every year from the continuous assistance (including substantial financial contribution) and friendly support of the DGAM in general and its Director General, Dr. Bassam Jammous, in particular. We are also much in debt to the Director of Excavations, Dr. Michel Al-Maqdissi, for his never failing interest and encouragement, as well as to the staff of the Regional Directorate of Antiquities in Hassake and mostly to its Director, Mr. Abed Abdel Messiyeh Bardo for always being ready to assist and advise whenever required.

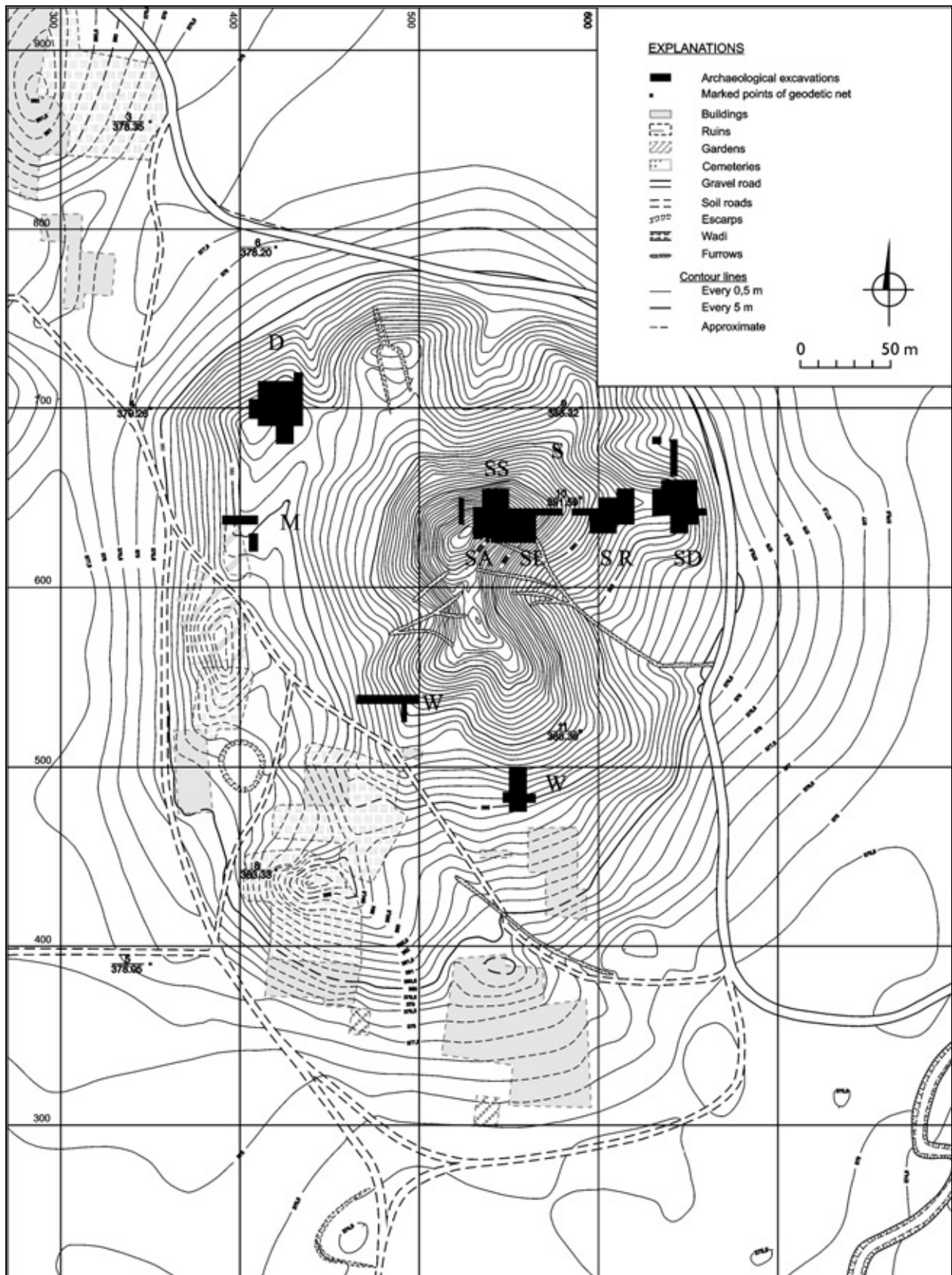


Fig. 1. General plan of Tell Arbid with localization of explored areas
(Drawing M. Wagner, updated M. Momot)

AREA "W" ON THE SOUTHERN SLOPE

The southern slope of the tell, which started being tested two years ago, is much gentler due to heavier erosion in this part of the site. Consequently, layers of the 3rd millennium BC can be found directly under the surface. In 2003, a sequence of two (or rather three) layers with Ninevite 5 architectural remains was discovered in the first trenches opened in what was designated as Area "W".² The walls in the southern end of square 52/56 were relatively thick and well plastered. Further exploration of the existing trench and work in three new ones in adjoining squares 53/56, 52/55 and 52/57 uncovered

a massive Ninevite structure, about 10 m long and 10 m wide. This fragment, much larger than initially believed [*Fig. 3*], comprises at least three rooms. In two of these there is evidence of two occupational levels making use of the same walls, separated by a leveling layer of rubble close to 1 m thick. The largest of the rooms (locus 7-52/57) is 4.50 m wide and at least 7.80 m long [*Fig. 2*]. In a later phase it had a finely plastered floor with at least one rectangular bin of mud brick standing upon it. Underlying this were at least two levels of well plastered floors and a rectangular pillar



*Fig. 2. Room 7-52/57 viewed from the west
(Photo A. Reiche)*

2 See PAM XV, *Reports 2003* (2004), 350ff.

made of mud brick, aligned with the longitudinal axis of the room [Fig. 4] and adjoined by a rectangular "heating place" set in the lower of the floors. A gap in the south wall of this room, filled with remains of a plastered wall, could mark the position of an entrance. Unusually for Ninevite architecture on Tell Arbid, the walls here were up to 1.50 m thick and preserved as high as 1.60 m in places.

Locus 8 (52/57) situated to the east of this room is quite narrow, measuring only c. 5.00 by 1.80 m. Architectural logic would suggest the presence of an entrance in a part of the east wall still concealed in the baulk separating two squares.

Two smaller cubicles (loci 15 and 21-52/57) were located to the north. They did not outlast the older phase of occupation of the structure and locus 15 (c. 2.40 m by at least 2.30 m) was completely filled in the upper part with broken bricks and ashes [Fig. 5]. Mixed in with this rubbish were some 240 clay bullae with impressions of cylinder seals, nearly all of them in classical Piedmont style [Fig. 6]. Door knobs are imprinted on the reverse of most bullae, while those which may have secured containers are clearly less numerous. The ceramic collection from the fill of loci 7 and 15 comprises Ninevite 5 incised pottery with many examples of fine-ware cups.

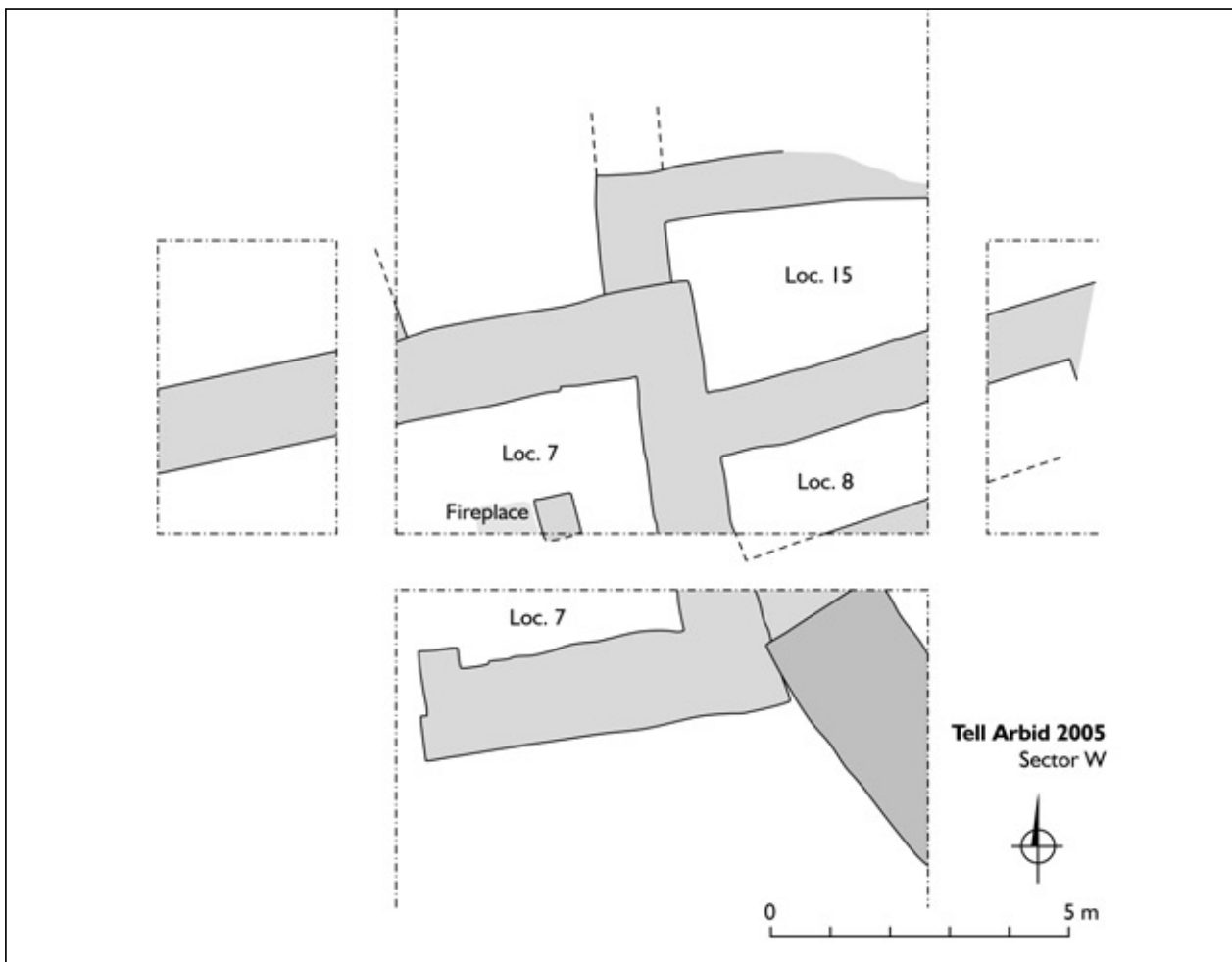


Fig. 3. Schematic plan of Ninevite 5 structures uncovered in the eastern part of Area "W" (Drawing M. Momot)

An apparently open space, either courtyard or else part of the outer surroundings of this sizable complex, extended directly to the south of the spacious locus 7. It revealed several levels of use. The massiveness of the walls did not exclude the presence of an upper storey, while the number of fallen fragments of white gypsum plaster discovered in the fill could support this idea.

By Ninevite standards on Tell Arbid, the structure uncovered in Area "W", which appears to extend farther to the north, was an administrative or ceremonial building of some kind.

Another structure of undoubtedly Ninevite 5 date discovered in Area "W" was the huge mass of red bricks lying directly under the surface in squares 50/47 and



Fig. 4. Mud-brick pillar with adjoining fireplace in room 7-52/57 (Photo A. Reiche)



Fig. 5. Room 15-52/57 viewed from the south (Photo A. Reiche)

51/47 in the western part of the sector. In 2003 there was not enough time to investigate the extensive patch of dark-red colored soil around this structure. This was done this season, extending the old trenches and opening two new ones in squares 50/45 and 50/46. The structure, oriented E-W, turned out to be at least 20 m long and c. 12 m wide. The north-eastern corner was erected of bricks in a regular bond. The south side had been damaged by a later wall from the Khabour-

Ware period and adjoining it on the south were some possibly contemporary, narrow walls of unclear plan. No superstructure was discovered on top of this homogenous platform and its base was not reached this year. Its function is not clear at this point. All that can be said at this stage in the investigations is that a rather substantial platform exceeding 250 m² stood to the west of the impressive public building of Ninevite 5 date uncovered in the eastern part of the area.

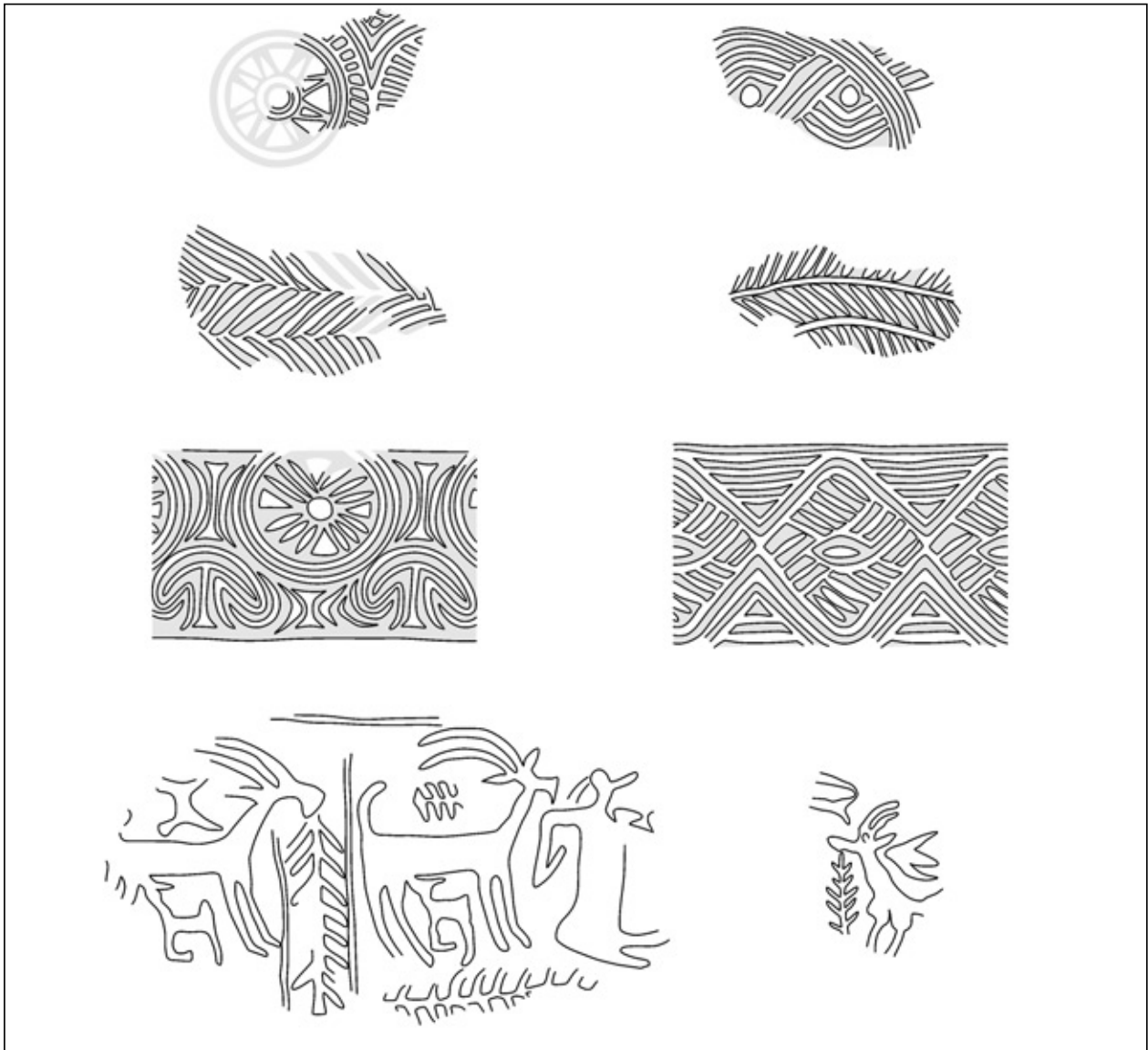


Fig. 6. Some of the bullae found in room 15-52/57 of Area "W"
(Drawing D. Bielińska, inking M. Momot)

AREA "D" - NINEVITE DWELLING QUARTER IN THE NORTHWESTERN PART OF THE TELL

New trenches were opened in squares 29/40 and 30/41 in an effort to establish the full plan of one of buildings bordering the main street running latitudinally across this sector. This very well preserved structure containing numerous domestic installations had been uncovered in part in square 30/41 already in 2003. Three rooms had been traced on the northern side and what was lacking was the western end and the southern part of the house.³ The cleaning of locus 8-30/41 traced the inner northwestern corner of the house, establishing thus its full length at 8 m. The street running past this house, which appears to have been the main latitudinal street in this quarter, was now traced as turning sharply south around this corner and becoming visibly narrower. The overall impression is that we have reached some kind of border of this dwelling insula.

The southern part of the house still remains to be excavated. It is likely that an open space, possibly an inner courtyard matching in length the combined width of all three rooms, was found here [Fig. 7]. A small cubicle (loc. 6 A-30/41), measuring c. 1.30 by 1.00 m, was built at some point in its eastern part. Two *tannours* were located in the uncovered part of the courtyard; in a later phase, a set of querns and grinders were abandoned there. The section through the southern part of the yard revealed an accumulation of up to 1.50 m, comprising several occupational levels made up of tamped ashes and potsherd pavings. These deposits, which should be dated to the Ninevite 5 period, perhaps even later in the topmost parts, cover the rest of this house.

At least three consecutive layers of 3rd millennium occupation were discovered at

the southern border of square 30/41. All of them were very rich in small finds and domestic installations, such as pavements made of potsherds, sets of basalt implements for grinding grain, storage jars set in usage levels or so-called "heating places". A fragment of another house dating from the latest Ninevite-5 period occupation or the beginning of the Early Dynastic III period, was discovered in the uppermost stratum. The ceramic material from this building consisted of some typical excised Ninevite sherds, as well as some ED III (flat bottomed cups) and metallic ware sherds.



Fig. 7. Inner courtyard of a Ninevite-5 period house in Area "D"
(Photo A. Reiche)

3 See PAM XV, op. cit., 345-348.

The uncovered part, much damaged by erosion and later grave pits, comprised a thick wall (c. 0.80 m) running for a length of c. 10 m, presumably the outer north wall of a house extending into the baulk here. In the next layer below, discovered fragments of constructions of Ninevite 5 date included a large room (locus 37-30/41; c. 5.10 by 2.50 m) with finely plastered walls [Fig. 8]. A rectangular fireplace bordered by bricks on edge and clay mixed with gravel was set into the gray tamped mud floor. No entrances to this room could be located and it is still not clear whether it was actually a closed space or some kind of open yard.

This year's work in sector "D" has contributed new data to the settlement strati-

tigraphy in this part of Tell Arbid. Under the heavily eroded layer dated to the Khabour Ware period, cut up extensively by grave pits from the Hellenistic period, there is a fragmentarily preserved Akkadian layer (Early Jazirah IV) and an Early Dynastic III layer. These are superimposed on at least four layers representing Ninevite 5 settlement (Early Jazirah II) from the excised-pottery phase and most importantly, the earliest Ninevite levels are still nowhere in sight in this part of the mound [Fig. 9]. With walls surviving near to 2 m in height, the third layer from the top should be considered, at least for the time being, as the best preserved of the lot.



Fig. 8. Room 37-30/41 viewed from the south
(Photo A. Reiche)

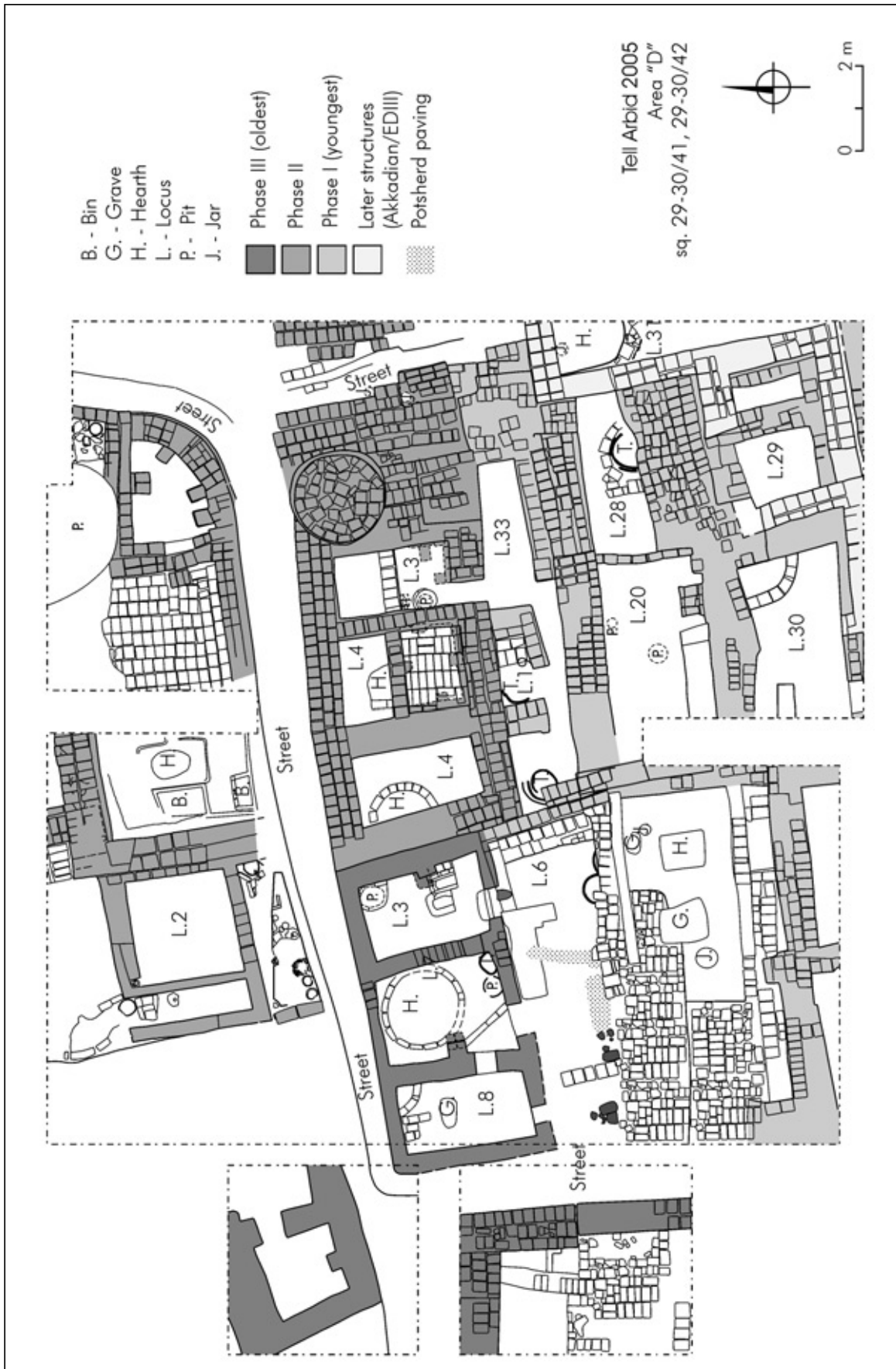


Fig. 9. Schematic plan of Ninevite-5 period dwelling quarter in Area "D" with subsequent phases
 (Drawing A. Smogorzewska and M. Wagner)

AREA "SD" ON THE EASTERN SLOPE OF THE TELL

The stratigraphy established for this area in the effect of the investigations in 2004 was based on the so-called Northern House, which is dated to the Late Early Dynastic III period, corresponding to the Early Jazirah IIIb in the chronology developed for the Syrian Jazirah. The preceding Building of the Stone Entrance originated in all likelihood from the Early Jazirah IIIa and the underlying building, designated provisionally as Building of the plastered platform⁴ undoubtedly from Ninevite 5 (Early Jazirah II), in similarity to all the directly preceding structures which are so

far unnamed. This stratigraphical sequence concerns the main part of sector "SD" and it has now been complemented by the investigations in the northern part of the area where layers of Ninevite 5 date, clearly earlier than the lowest Ninevite level in the main part of the sector have been traced. Nonetheless, the link between the two sequences still escapes us.

Excavations in 2005 were concentrated in squares: 32/65, 33/65, 36/64, 35/65, 36/65, 37/65, 36/64, 36/66 and 37/66. The insula developing around the Northern Building in the Early Dynastic III had

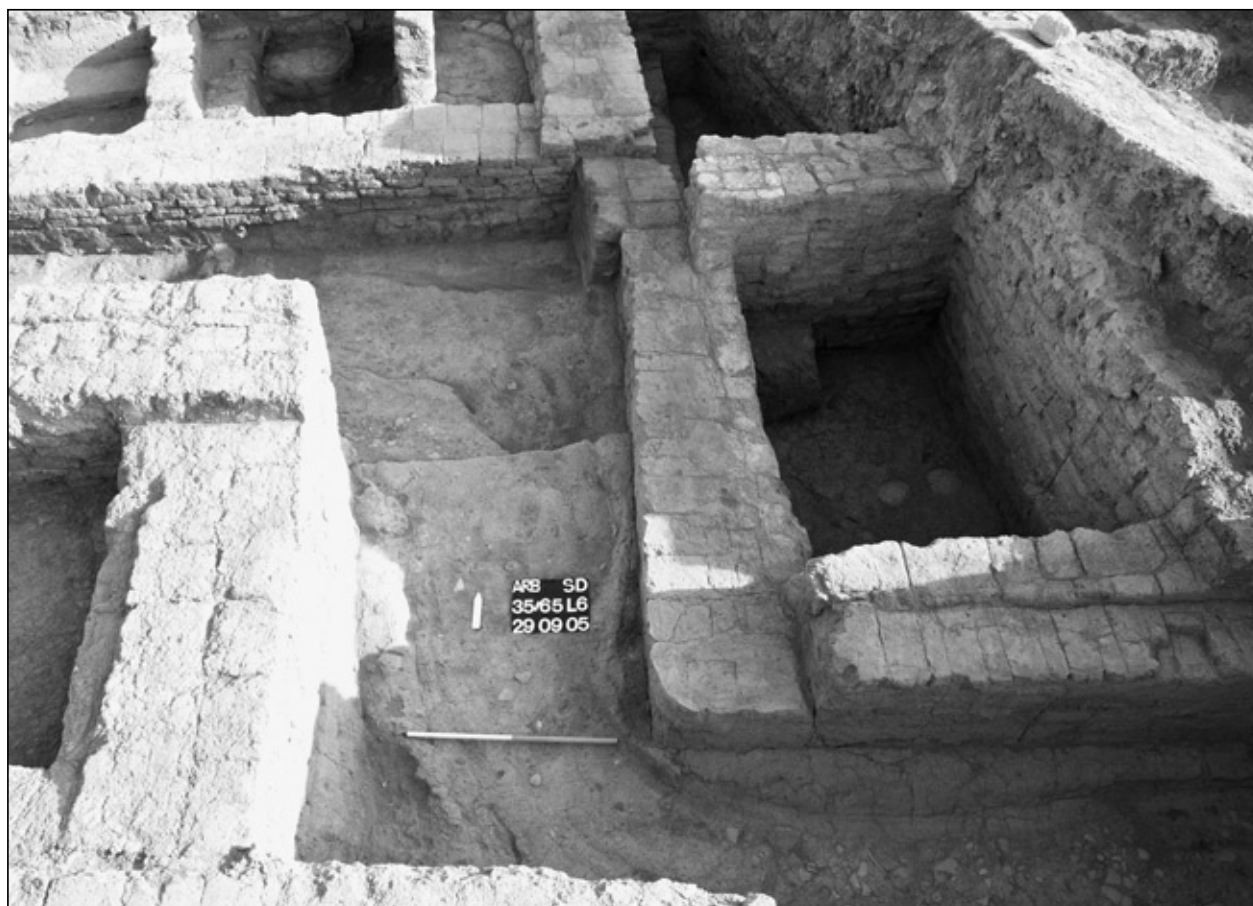


Fig. 10. Ninevite 5 period street in Area "SD"
(Photo A. Reiche)

4 In the report for the 2004 season it was referred to as "predecessor of the Building of the Stone Entrance", see PAM XVI, Reports 2004 (2005), 480-481.

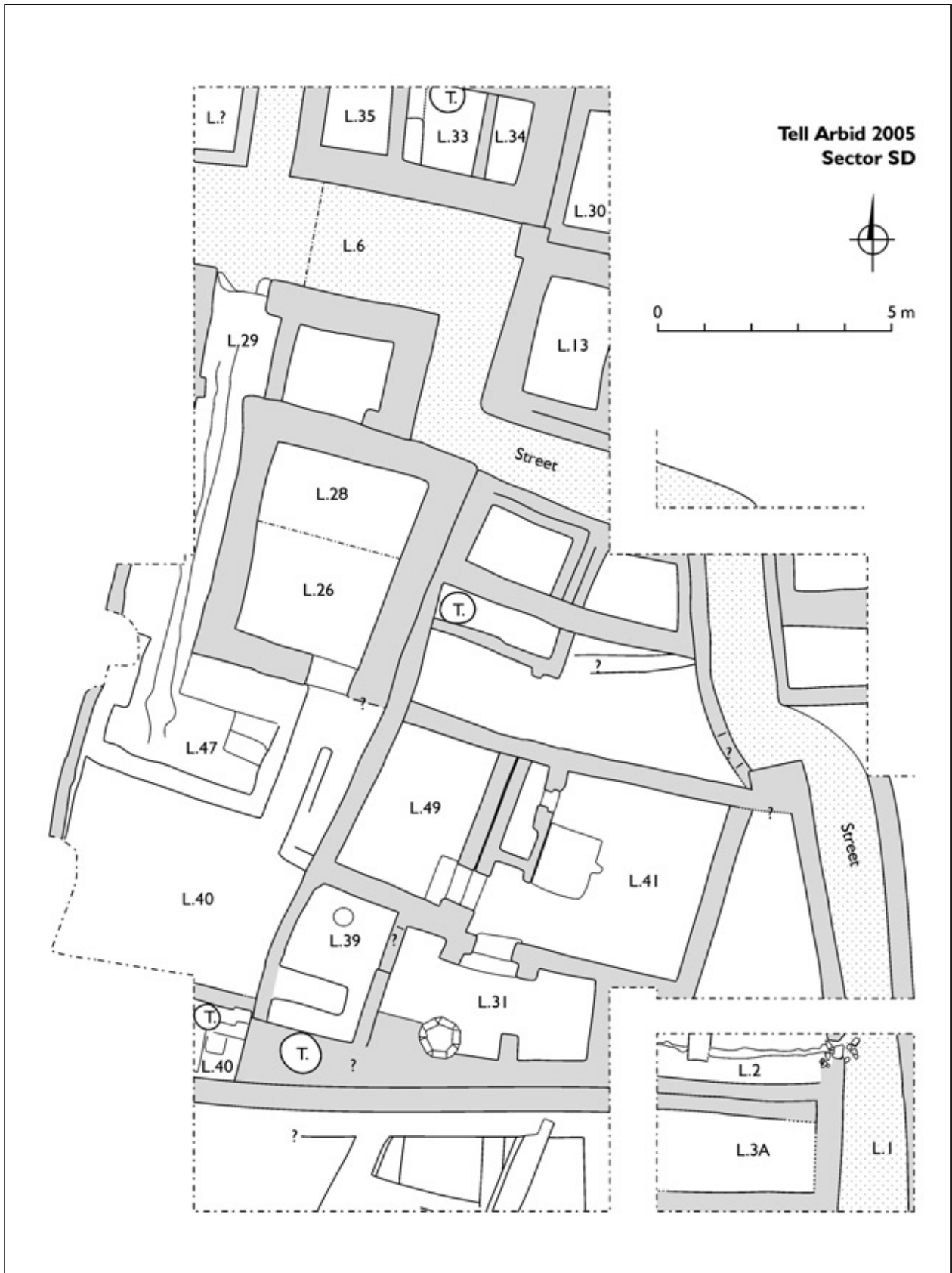


Fig. 11. General plan of the central part of Area "SD" after excavations in 2005
(Drawing D. Ławecka and M. Momot)

already been traced along its northern boundary and now part of the eastern border was established [Fig. 11]. The street running along this elevation was close to 2.50 m wide, narrowing down to c. 1.25 m a few zigzag bends further to the south. Testing in the northern part revealed a stable street network continuing in this sector from Ninevite 5 times until a very late stage of Early Dynastic IIIb. Traces of a narrow channel and mud "benches" reinforcing the bases of walls, especially at the bends in the street, have been preserved [Fig. 10]. A number of small cubicles discovered to the north and northeast of the street presumably served some domestic or storage function. Three of these, designated as loci 33-34 and 35-35/65, belonged to a single architectural complex.

WESTERN PART OF THE SECTOR

The western part of the sector, covering mainly squares 36/64 and the southern part of 35/64, contained architecture adjoining the Northern Building and earlier the buildings preceding it on the west. In square 36/64, cleaning of a small courtyard with a group of small rooms lining it on the south and west [Fig. 12] revealed that locus 40-36/64, which had no entrance, was actually a silos, built contemporarily with the Northern Building, cutting deeply into Ninevite layers. The earlier architecture on the spot was heavily damaged. The three rooms on the west remained relatively unchanged throughout the Ninevite period undergoing only slight modifications, unlike the eastern and northern parts of the courtyard



Fig. 12. *General view of square 36/64 from the west*
(Photo A. Reiche)

which were altered in a variety of ways from level to level, especially in Ninevite times. These small chambers (loci: 54, 58 and 59-36/64) were an average c. 1.75 m long and at least 1.50 m wide, with no entrance leading straight from the courtyard. The last two contained domestic

installations preserved in excellent condition: a small plastered *tannour* accompanied by a set of pots and a small cooking oven in the first room and a double basin for rinsing in the other one which was distinguished by the fineness of its plastered walls and floor [Fig. 13].

BUILDING OF THE PLASTERED PLATFORM AND ITS SURROUNDINGS IN THE CENTER OF THE AREA

In the period corresponding to the plastered platform uncovered in neighboring square 36/65 in 2004, the western part of the courtyard in square 36/64 was occupied by structures and

installations strictly connected with the building of which the platform was part.⁵ The platform itself, upon thorough cleaning of its western end, turned out to be part of a small freestanding, single-



Fig. 13. Domestic installations in rooms 58 and 59 in square 36/64
(Photo A. Reiche)

⁵ See PAM XVI, op. cit., 481 and Fig. 3; see also note 4 above.

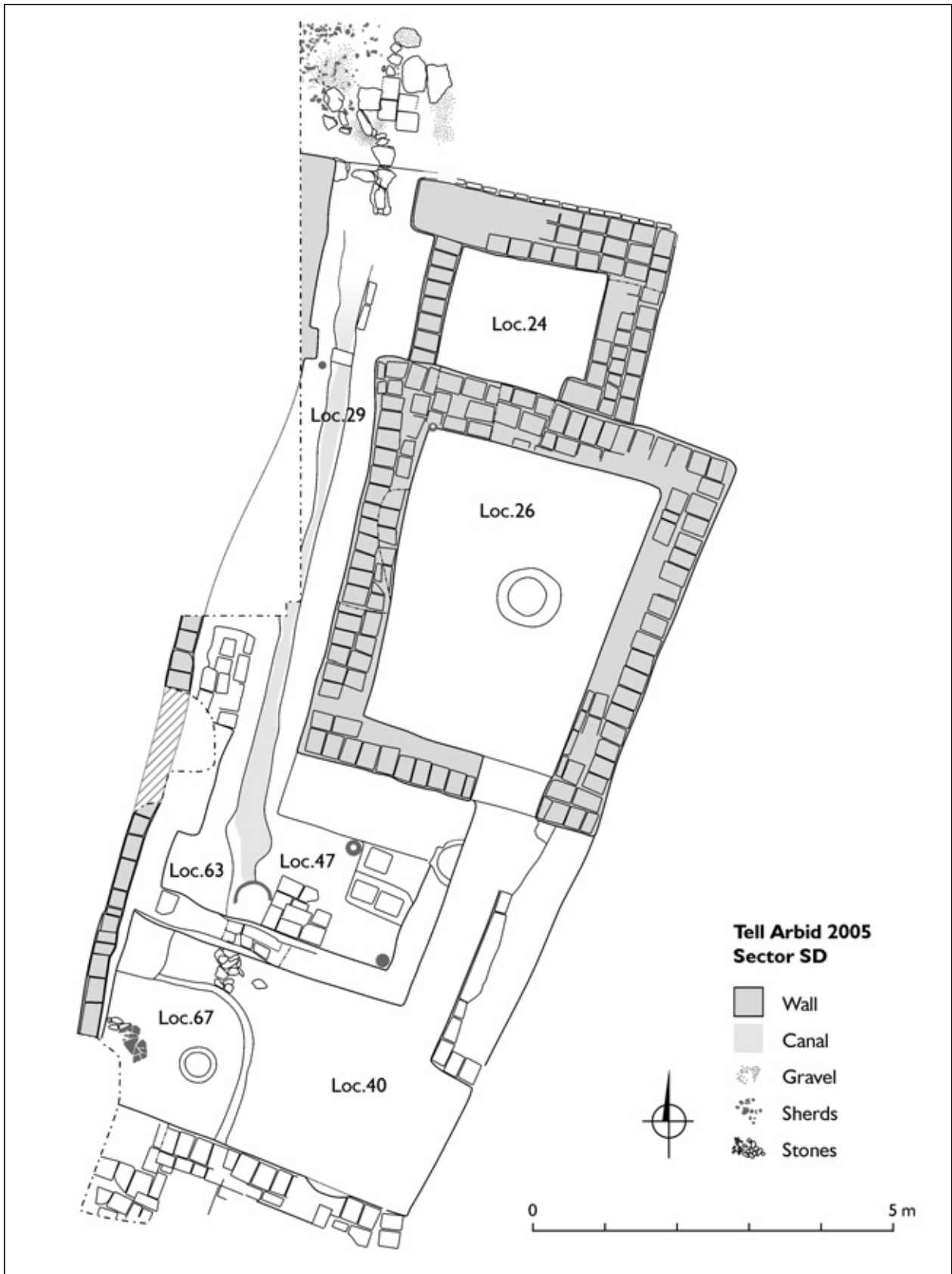


Fig. 14. Plan of the Building of the Plastered Platform complex
(Drawing D. Ławecka and M. Momot)



*Fig. 15. Building of the Plastered Platform viewed from the north
(Photo A. Reiche)*

chambered structure (located at the edge of two squares, hence the designation of the locus 47-36/65+63-36/64), measuring c. 3.50 by 2.60 m [Fig. 15]. As it was a separate architectural complex different from what came later, the term Building of the Plastered Platform has been coined for it (and the entire corresponding level in Area "SD"). It was most certainly not habitational. The northwestern part was taken up by the said platform, which was repeatedly replastered, and a wide bench lined the north wall on the inside [Fig. 14]. An entrance in the northwestern corner led



Fig. 16. Courtyard 40-36/65 with domestic installations, viewed from the south (Photo A. Reiche)

to a narrow corridor just about 1 m wide, running north for a length of more than 8 m and giving onto a wide street. A shallow drain ran down the center. The street entrance was roughly in the same spot where all the entrances to the later buildings would be found. A few Ninevite jars were found on the surface and two larger jars were sunk into the ground. The courtyard around the building (locus 40-36/65) was 6.80 m long and c. 5.70 m wide. The southwestern corner was set off by an irregular curving wall (locus 67-36/64) and in it a conical hollow carefully lined with clay was found [Fig. 16]. A doorway led off from the courtyard into room 26-35/65, adjoined by the Building of the Plastered Platform itself. In this phase both this and the neighboring room 24 were furnished with brick floors and their overall plan was not different from the chambers built on top of them in the next phase. Their street facades on the north and west, reinforced with cladding of vertical bricks, will remain unaltered throughout all phases from the Building of the

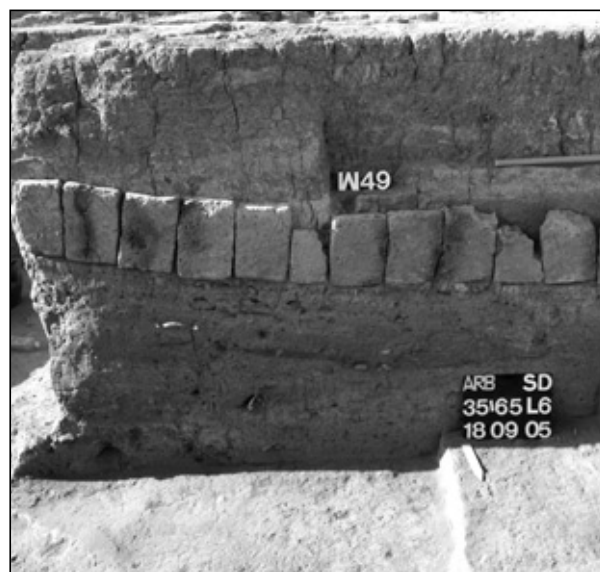


Fig. 17. Mud brick protecting the outer face of locus 24 (Photo A. Reiche)

Plastered Platform to the Northern Building [Fig. 17].

Having excluded habitational and most likely also domestic function for this structure, we are required *par force* to wait for more data before drawing the ultimate conclusions concerning its function in the chronological phase in question.

SOUTHERN HOUSE IN THE EASTERN PART OF THE AREA

Located in the eastern part of the area, immediately to the east of the Building of the Plastered Platform, was the contemporary (Early Jazirah II) Southern House. This structure, which is dated to a recent phase of the Ninevite 5 period based on pottery finds, is composed of five rooms and a sort of courtyard. On the east it borders a narrow street, known already

from the 1998 step trench [Fig. 19]. The complex measures c. 12 by 8 m. It was entered from the said street through a narrow vestibule that was finely paved with pebbles (locus 2-37/66) and was furnished with a sewage drain [Fig. 18]. The big squarish chamber 41-36/65 (c. 4.60 by 4.00 m) was furnished with a large square fireplace or rather heating place by its west wall. A small space no more than 0.70 m wide occupying the northwestern corner served as a communication hub giving access to the next chamber through a doorway in the southwestern corner and another two chambers (loci 31 and 39) accessed up a high step in an entrance located in the south wall [Fig. 20]. Locus 31 is a long trapeze in plan, 4.50 m long and c. 2.50 m wide at the widest point. Two buttresses in the eastern part divide it



Fig. 18. Stone-paved corridor of the Southern House, giving onto a street (Photo A. Reiche)

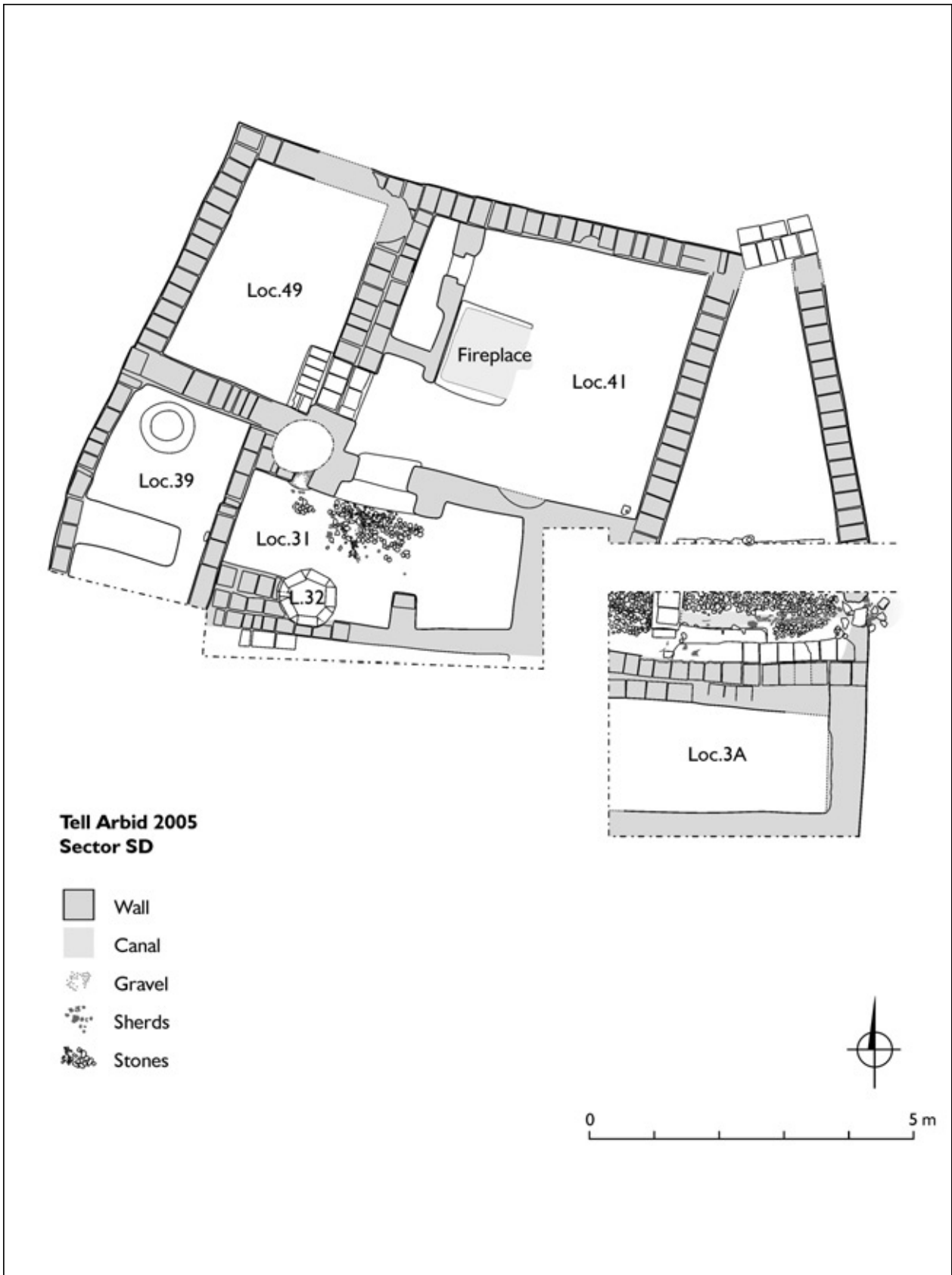


Fig. 19. Plan of the Southern House in Area "SD"
(Drawing M. Momot)

into two parts. Buttresses also flank the entrance with threshold from unit 41. Opposite the entrance was a low brick bench with adjoining brick head of a well or conical pit measuring 0.85 m across and not exceeding 1.50 m in depth. The function of this installation has yet to be ascertained. The eastern part of this room was furnished with a pebble floor. All of the walls of the Southern House were very finely plastered. Buttresses were also a frequent feature despite carrying no structural import. Curiously, the floors in the various rooms were on different levels forcing the use of steps and high thresholds to assure ready access. The overall impression is of a Ninevite 5 dwelling of a higher standard than normally encountered on Tell Arbid. Moreover, the absence of many domestic installations suggests that the domestic activities inside this

building must have been quite limited. Indeed, the house may have served as a residence occupied perhaps by the people who assured the functioning of the next-door Building of the Plastered Platform.

TEST TRENCH IN THE NORTHERN PART OF THE AREA

The Ninevite architecture discovered last year in square 33/65 was so much lower than in other parts of the area that it afforded an excellent opportunity to test for the earliest Ninevite settlement on Tell Arbid and possibly trace earlier phases, if any. Colleagues from the Masaryk University in Brno extended an old test trench to cover also the southern part of square 32/65 and discovered four successive strata of Ninevite date underlying the two already identified in 2004. The combined thickness of Ninevite



*Fig. 20. General view of the Southern House from south
(Photo A. Reiche)*

5 layers in this part of the mound, comprising six cultural levels, reaches 4 m. Excavations revealed dense architecture forming at least two separate dwelling units. In the fifth layer from the top there was a fragment of long narrow room (locus 12/13-32/65) with round heating place over 1 m in diameter. Next to it there was a large jar sunk into the floor and 25 whole or fragmentary vessels including small jars and drinking cups [Fig. 21].

The lowest, sixth layer comprised two small chambers of which the eastern one was preserved to a height of more than 2 m. Its plan and dimensions would be repeated in four successive layers. It was furnished

with inside buttresses on the north and south walls, evidently arching toward the top. The floor of this room was on a lower level than sterile soil as established during the first season of work on Tell Arbid in 1996, indicating that the original lie of the land had been sloping away to the east. The level below this earliest floor consisted of a very damp silty layer with small bits of pottery, identifiable mostly but not entirely as Ninevite ware. The trench was desisted at a depth of 4.50 m without reaching sterile soil. The nature of the layer underlying the floor of the eastern room could not be identified this year.

OTHER WORKS

Last but not least, Czech colleagues tested a Halaf-period site which had been located some 600 m to the east of the main mound.

The remains appeared to be heavily damaged. A separate report will be published from this work.

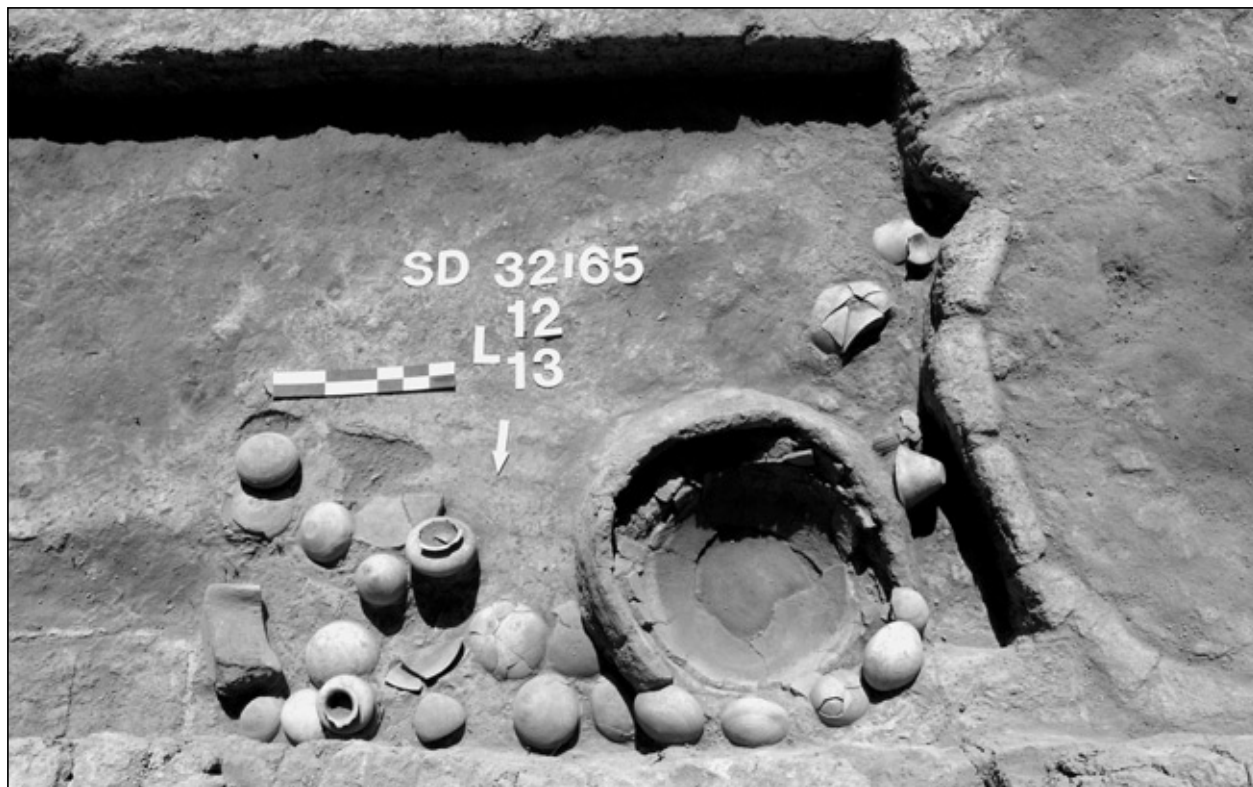


Fig. 21. Ninevite 5 cups and small jars found in a test pit in square 32/65 (Photo A. Reiche)

SUMMARY

To sum up the results of the tenth season of excavations on Tell Arbid, it should be emphasized that the *floruit* of Tell Arbid fell undoubtedly in the Ninevite 5 period when it was a flourishing urban center with different and diversified quarters showing the complexity of its structure: common

dwelling in Area "D", monumental structures in Area "W" and the curious architecture in Area "SD". While the data requires further analysis, there can be no doubt that the excavations on Tell Arbid offer a rare opportunity to view urban Ninevite 5 culture in the Syrian Jazirah at close range.