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Tell Arbid: Preliminary Report on the Eleventh Season of Polish-Syrian Explorations (2006)

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TELL ARBID

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE ELEVENTH SEASON OF POLISH-SYRIAN EXPLORATIONS (2006)

Piotr Bieliński

It was the first campaign of our excavation on Arbid to be held in spring and not as usual in the fall. It was at the same time one of the shortest field seasons in the history of our expedition. Finally, the objectives were different than in all previous campaigns, the emphasis being placed on documenting ceramic finds from the first ten seasons on Arbid. Excavations were conducted too, but on a much smaller scale than usual.¹ Research activities in the field were concentrated this year on Ninevite 5 period layers in areas SD on the eastern slope of the main tell and W on the southern side of the site.

1 The research strategy determined the composition of the staff for the 2006 season. The Polish team comprised archeologists: Dr. Dorota Ławecka, Dr. Anna Smogorzewska, Agnieszka Pieńkowska, Maciej Makowski and Łukasz Rutkowski, all from the Institute of Archaeology of the University of Warsaw, Andrzej Reiche from the Warsaw National Museum and myself. Joining us were six archaeology students from the University of Warsaw in the capacity of draftspersons: Małgorzata Dziadosz, Marzena Markowska, Marta Mierzejewska, Ewelina Mizak, Marta Momot, Łukasz Wojnarowicz, and Katarzyna Regulska, a student from the Poznań University. We were also joined by Matthias Aigner, student from Vienna University, who was working on pottery from the trial pits dug in 1999 by our Austrian colleagues. A large part of the ceramic material from the older seasons is now practically ready for publication. The effective operation of our mission was possible thanks to the encouragement and assistance of the Direction General of Antiquities and Museums of the Syrian Arab Republic. First of all, the warmest words of gratitude to Dr. Bassam Jammous, Director General, and to Dr. Michel Al-Maqdissi, Director of Excavations, for their continuous support and friendly advice. Not the least was a substantial financial contribution to the costs of the 2006 season offered by the DGAM. The mission is also indebted to Abdel Massih Bardo, Director of the Regional Department of Antiquities in Hassake, who helped to solve many of the practical day-to-day problems.

TELL ARBID
SYRIA

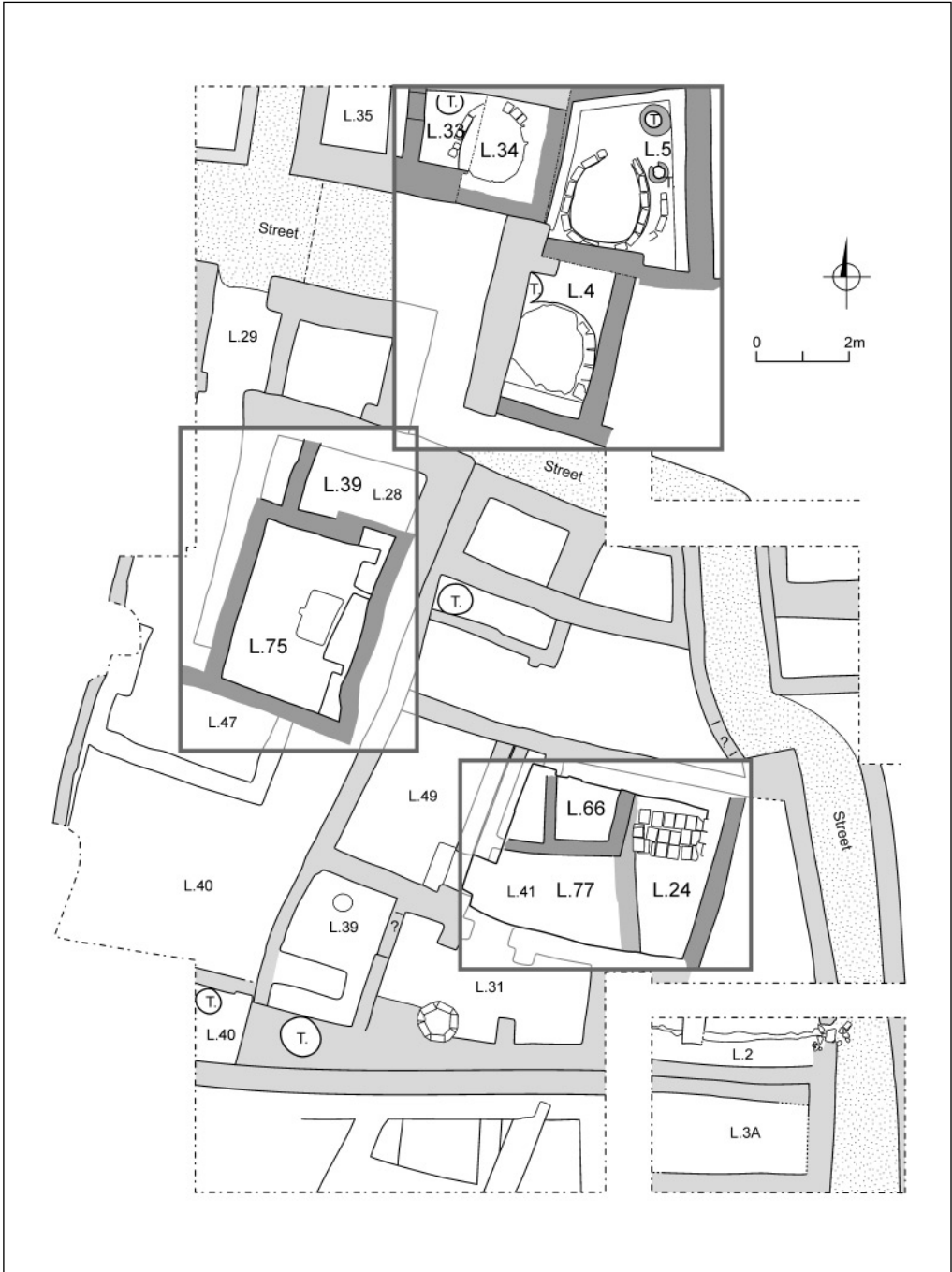


Fig. 1. General plan of Sector SD. Boxes mark areas of excavations in 2006
(Drawing M. Momot)

SECTOR SD – EASTERN SLOPE

Last year's exploration of Ninevite 5 structures in this part of sector SD (squares: 35/64, 35/65, 35/66, 36/64, 36/65, 36/66, 37/65 and 37/66) was continued, including removal of baulks and extension of trenches in order to expose a larger part of the 3rd millennium city (total of nearly 750 m²) [Fig. 1]. Some new Akkadian and post-Akkadian remains were also revealed. A Late Akkadian child's grave (G3), explored already in 2003, proved to be dug into one of the *pisé* walls. This discovery suggests that all of the *pisé* walls found in the western part of "SD" can be much earlier than previously supposed.

SOUTHERN PART

Testing below the floors of the so-called "Southern House" exposed last year (Bie-

liński 2007:467-469) revealed numerous remains older than the Ninevite 5 period to which the house has been dated. For example, another rather substantial pavement of regularly set mud bricks and some walls which may have reinforced the foundations were found below the floor of room locus 41-36/65 [Fig. 2]. Similar proof of reinforced foundations and slight changes in interior arrangement and position of partition walls were noted in nearly all of the investigated rooms of this house. The space used as a courtyard in the final stage appears not to have changed its function from the beginning. In the southern part of the building, the changes between the earliest and latest phase of use turned out to be few and minor in character.



Fig. 2. Ninevite brick pavement in locus 41-36/65
(Photo A. Reiche)

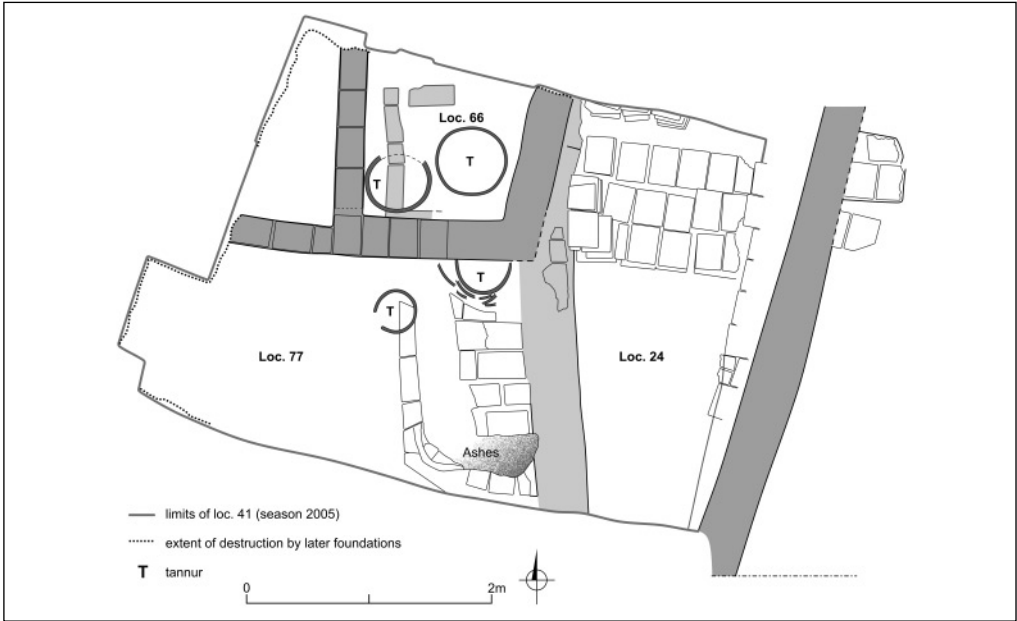


Fig. 3. Plan of architectural remains discovered below the "Southern House"
(Drawing M. Momot)



Fig. 4. Remains of Ninevite architecture and domestic installations under the "Southern House",
viewed from the south, stage of exploration preceding plan in Fig. 3 above (Photo A. Reiche)

This year's investigations also showed that below the "Southern House" there was another mud-brick structure with slightly different wall orientation and different character. Its rooms were much smaller and not so well plastered as in the case of the later house. Inside, there were numerous remains of domestic installations, including different sorts of tannurs, bins, platforms, heating places, fire places and grill-like installations. Once again locus 41-36/65 offers the best example. A relatively restricted area of c. 4.00 by 3.50 m, divided by thin partition walls into at least three cubicles, contained four small tannurs and one grill-like installation with adjacent bin [Figs 3, 4]. The nature of the remains found in this older Ninevite layer is very similar to what was unearthed in 2003 in area D.

The structures from the earlier layer appear to have been erected, at least on the eastern side, on a substantial accumulation of ashes. It is believed that the ashes were deposited intentionally to level uneven ground [Fig. 5]. If so, then some fragments of the walls exposed this year can be interpreted as strengthening foundations built upon the ashes.

NORTHEASTERN PART

The "Southern House" is bordered on the east by a narrow street running first N-S and then turning to the west and zigzagging towards the centre of the tell [cf. Fig. 1; for a plan of the whole tell, see Bieliński 2007: Fig. 1 on page 452]. Parts of this street, mostly corresponding to the ED III period, were cleared already during two former campaigns. A section from

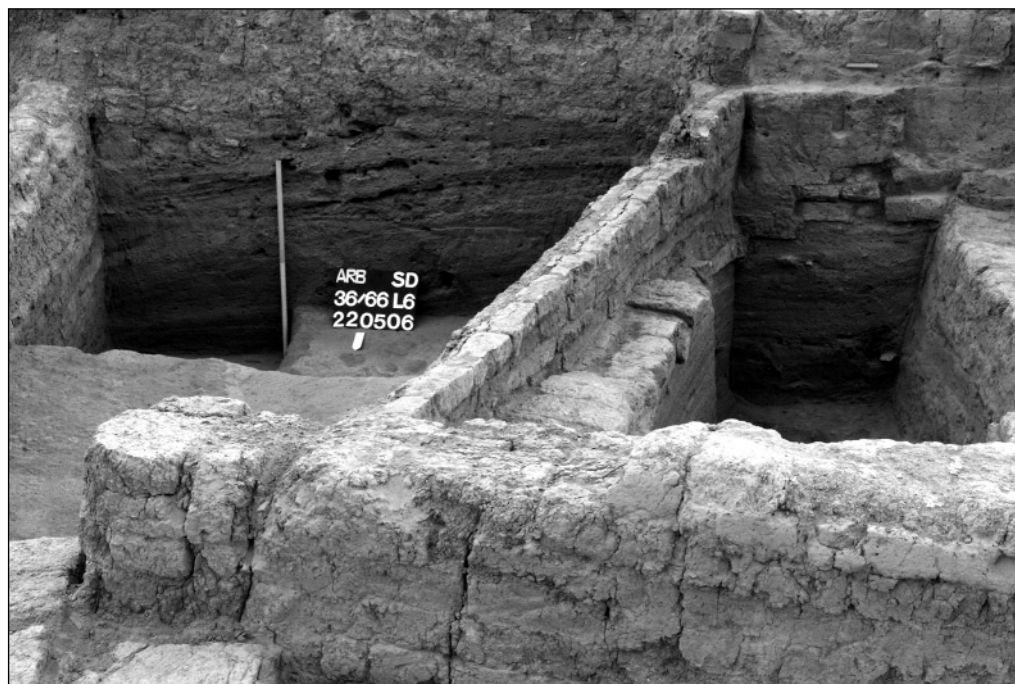


Fig. 5. Layer of ashes underlying the walls of the eastern side of the "Southern House" (Photo A. Reiche)

Ninevite 5 times was cleared this year [Fig. 7] and it now seems that the street grid in this part of the 3rd-millennium BC city was established in the beginning of the Late Ninevite 5 period; it remained so with only minor changes until the end of the millennium. Bordering the street on the east and north are rows of small cubicles, mostly c. 4.00 x 2.00 m, probably serving some domestic purposes. Many of these have no doorways, suggesting a possible storage function, while others contained tannurs. Their planning appears rather chaotic, as if these units were connected with some neighboring houses. A few were cleared during the 2006 season, e.g. loci 4 and 5-35/66, and 33 and 34/-35/65 in the northern part of the sector [cf. Fig. 1]. Three of them contained large oval hearths, which were initially believed to be ovens,

next to the tannurs (for a discussion of these and other hearths and tannurs found at Arbid, see contribution by D. Ławecka in this volume) [Fig. 6]. These hearths, about 1.50 m long, were enclosed by not



Fig. 6. Hearth in a domestic unit in the northern part of sector SD
(Photo A. Reiche)



Fig. 7. Longitudinal street running east of the architecture explored in sector SD
(Photo A. Reiche)

very thick walls which narrowed toward the top. The units were repaired and restored at least twice or thrice during the Late Ninevite period, but they remained in domestic use.

Adjoining these units on the east (square 35/66) is a group of small rooms located on either side of a narrow corridor with a N-S orientation. One of the rooms opens onto this corridor, which has a mud floor. The architecture uncovered so far belongs undoubtedly to a bigger complex still of unknown size, which can be assumed to have been a house.

A rare find is this sherd of a clay jar with a seal impression on the shoulder, noticed by accident² among the sherds

constituting the ED III filling of the part of the street excavated in 2004 in the northern part of sector SD, in square 34/65 (Bieliński 2005: 483-484) [Fig. 8].

WESTERN PART

In the western part of sector SD, explorations were concentrated mostly on the remains of an alleged shrine found two years ago below a curious, heavily plastered mud-brick platform with semicircular niche (locus 47-36/65) (Bieliński 2005: 481 and Figs 3-5). The platform was dated to the Late Ninevite 5 phase of human occupation on Arbid. It was found to cover a small room that had a long and narrow corridor connecting it to an E-W street



Fig. 8. Sherd with seal impression from the fill of a street in square 34/65
(Photo A. Reiche)

2 I am indebted to Prof. Harvey Weiss for his careful scrutiny of the trenches during his visit to the site, which resulted in his discovery of this piece.

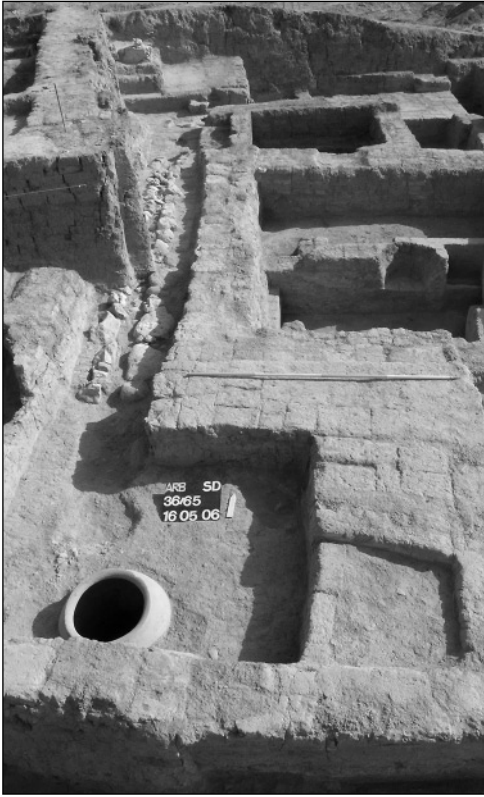


Fig. 9. Alleged shrine under plastered platform, view from the south (Photo A. Reiche)

(Bieliński 2007: 463-466). This single-roomed structure, c. 3 x 3 m, and a courtyard bordering it on the south were cleared completely this year. The structure also included a corridor over 6 m long and about 1 m wide, down which ran a channel clad with bricks and stones, the latter including basalt mortars and other stone objects of domestic use [Fig. 9]. Curiously, instead of discharging waste water from the alleged shrine into the street, the channel collected it in a large storage jar dug into the floor of the room. A waste collector seems an improbable interpretation for this facility, given the fact that this structure was erected relatively far

away from the street, on a small courtyard. Indeed, its function remains unclear, unsupported as it is by any specifically interpretable artifacts apart from sherds of some Late Ninivite luxury wares. The most probable idea still is that it was a small local shrine accessed from the street, via the said passage.

Immediately to the north of this structure, in the underlying layer, part of another building of similar orientation, but completely different layout was uncovered. One whole room was cleared and part of another (loci 75 and 39-35/65), both from the Ninivite 5 period [cf. Fig. 1]. The room (locus 75-35/65) measures c. 3.50 x 2.50 m and has a rectangular heating place in the center [Fig. 10]. There appears to have been a doorway in the southwestern corner. The north wall has a semicircular niche cut into it, just next to a rectangular bin fitted into the corner of the room. Standing against the east wall are three big rectangular platforms [Fig. 11], the central one of which resembles an altar. At the final stage, this particular platform was nearly 1.00 m high, about 1.00 m long and c. 0.60 m wide, but it is clear that initially it had been about 0.50 m longer. The two lateral platforms were much smaller. The walls and installations in this locus are all finely coated with thick layers of white plaster.

The presence of platforms and the fact that they were plastered, the evidently larger size of the central one compared to the lateral ones, the shape and position of the heating place and finally the absence of any pottery finds or other artifacts from the floor level lead one to consider the function of this chamber. The installations inside this room are hardly typical and it should be assumed that it was a shrine from the Ninevite 5 period, not unlike a sanctuary

known from layer 3 at Tell al-Raqa'i (cf. Schwartz 2000: 163-170). Its presence in this spot (and an earlier structure of the same kind below cannot be excluded at this point) would explain the nature of all subsequent building here through the later part of the Early Dynastic III period. It seems that sanctuaries bigger and smaller were erected here for several hundred years on what was apparently "hallowed" ground. It should be noted that locus 75-35/65 represents the same layer of Ninevite 5 culture as the above-mentioned group of small units excavated below locus 41 of the "Southern House". In both cases, we are faced with a complete change of urban layout in this part of Ninevite Arbid, a change that concerned particular buildings, but apparently not the street grid which demonstrates a certain stability of the communication network on the tell.

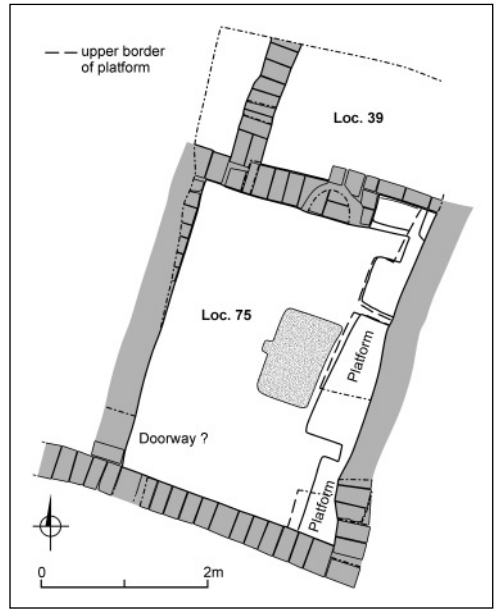


Fig. 10. Plan of locus 75-35/65
(Drawing M. Momot)



Fig. 11. Ninevite 5 period shrine (locus 75-35/65) seen from the west. Note the thick layers of gypsum plaster on the central platform and wall backing it (Photo A. Reiche)

At the western edge of the sector, a short stretch of a N-S street was uncovered, opening into a relatively wide street that runs to the west toward the central part of the mound. The latter street appears to be

an extension of the street that borders on the north an insula excavated for the past few years in sector SD. The part uncovered in the last few days of this year's campaign looks more like a cul-de-sac than an artery.

SECTOR W – SOUTHERN SLOPE

Explored in this part of the site was a huge platform, fragments of which had been discovered first in 2003 and investigated more intensively in 2005 (Bieliński 2007: 455-456). This structure which was built during the late Ninevite 5 period seems to be at least 25 m long and about 12 m wide. Checking for the foundations of this structure in square 48/51, where the presumed northeastern corner of the platform had been recorded earlier, revealed yet another part of this structure, preserved at a depth of only about 0.20 m below the top of the platform core. In the end effect, another 2.50 m were added to the width of the structure. The lower step is oriented differently from the main part (NE-SW instead of N-S), but there is no doubt that it belongs to the same structure [Fig. 12]. It now appears that what was taken in 2005 to be the “complete” outline of the platform is in fact a later stage when the original orientation was changed. In its most recent phase, the core of the platform, which was constructed of reddish gritty bricks typical of the Ninevite Arbid, was apparently sheathed in a protective covering consisting of two-three rows of better-quality yellowish bricks. While the foundations have not been reached as yet, the platform now measures 1.50 m in height. It must have been much higher, however, considering the top level of a newly discovered Ninevite street bordering the lower step of the platform on the east. The

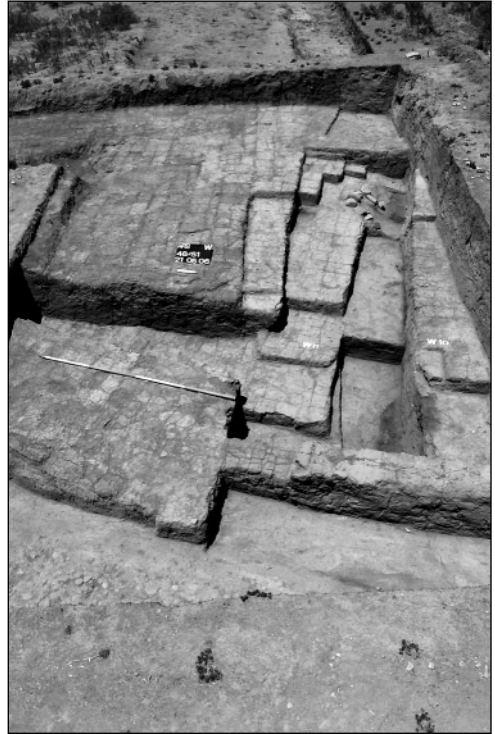


Fig. 12. The northeastern corner of a platform in the western part of Sector W after the 2006 season (Photo A. Reiche)

street was about 1.50 m wide and it ran from northeast to southwest [Fig. 13].

Excavations in this southern sector of the site were conducted also in squares 53/56 and 51/56, where fragments of a larger Ninevite structure were discovered in 2003 and 2005. The southwestern corner of a large room with free-standing

pillar and fireplace (locus 7-52/56) was found in square 53/56 [Fig. 14]. This discovery has placed the dimensions of locus 7-52/56 at 8.50 x 4.50 m, making it the largest single Ninevite-period room excavated so far on Tell Arbid. The entrance was most probably set in the south wall, nearer to the southwestern corner of the room, where some bullae with impressions of cylinder seals were discovered. The same trench also revealed some stumps of other walls belonging to the same structure as locus 7-52/56, indicating that it is in fact only part of some much larger architectural unit extending northward and southward.



Fig. 13. Ninivite street bordering on the east the northwestern part of the platform discovered in Sector W (Photo A. Reiche)



Fig. 14. Inner southwestern corner of locus 7-52/56 in Sector W (Photo A. Reiche)

AREA SOUTH OF THE TELL SUMMIT

Surface clearing in a part of the mound just south of the tell summit, which was only slightly lower than the top itself, exposed a pebble pavement and the base of an adjoining mud-brick wall. A section c. 7.00 m long and about 2.50 m wide was cleaned [Fig. 15]. Potsherds found between the

pebbles suggest a date in the post-Akkadian period, further confirmed by the leveling under it, which is quite similar to that of another pebble pavement, discovered in the ruins of the so-called “Public Building” in sector S and dated to the same period.

RECAPITULATION

Summing up the results of the 2006 field season, it may be said that despite its short and limited character, it has contributed to an understanding of the city of Arbid in Ninevite times. Foremost, there is the Ninevite shrine (locus 75-35/65) in sector SD, which has proved the continuity of

a tradition of small sanctuaries existing in this part of the town. The form of these shrines changed from layer to layer, but they were all built more or less on the same spot. Again, it may be assumed that these were small local shrines operating in a given district of the town on Arbid.



Fig. 15. Pebble pavement exposed beneath the surface of the southern part of the tell summit (Photo A. Reiche)

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