

Piotr Bieliński

Tell Arbid: Preliminary Report on the Results of the Twelfth Season of Syrian-Polish Excavations

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TELL ARBID

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE RESULTS OF THE TWELFTH SEASON OF SYRIAN–POLISH EXCAVATIONS

Piotr Bieliński

The twelfth field campaign of Syrian-Polish archaeological explorations on the site of Tell Arbid lasted, as usual, seven weeks and can be counted among the most successful seasons conducted so far.¹ The investigation of 3rd-millennium BC urban remains continued to be the expedition's main objective, in continuation of the work carried out in the previous two seasons. This year, however, the focus was on layers with dwellings dating to the Ninevite 5 period. The results of the 2005 and 2006 campaigns proved that deposits from this period exceed 15 m in thickness (which corresponds to more than half of the present height of the tell) and cover almost the entire surface of the site (that is, about 14 ha). This makes the Ninevite 5 period one of the most important phases in the history of occupation on Tell Arbid.

Excavations were concentrated in two areas where in the last few years substantial parts of the Ninevite 5 town had been uncovered [Fig. 1]: Sector D in the northwestern part of the main tell and Sector W in the southern part.

1 The season started on August 22 and field investigations lasted through October 1. The Polish team was more numerous than usual, including Dr. Anna Smogorzewska, Dr. Dariusz Szlag, both from the Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw; Dr. Zuzanna Wygnańska, Dr. Łukasz Rutkowski, Marta Momot and Marzena Markowska, all from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw; Andrzej Reiche from the National Museum in Warsaw; Maciej Makowski from the Research Center of Mediterranean Archaeology, Polish Academy of Sciences and Agnieszka Szymczak (freelance). Student trainees included nine volunteers from the University of Warsaw: Marta Mierzejewska, Klaudia Szajkowska, Magdalena Lipińska, Katarzyna Hryniewicka, Magdalena Ostrowska, Dagmara Siatkowska, Joanna Reiche, Łukasz Wojnarowicz and Karol Zajdowski, as well as Mattia Raccidi from the University of Florence. Dr. Joanna Piątkowska-Malecka from the Department of Paleozoology, Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw, joined the team for two weeks to analyze animal bones from the last five seasons of investigations on Tell Arbid. The Syrian side of the Tell Arbid expedition was represented this year by two archaeology students from Damascus University, Nancy Badra and Raghad Bach, who helped out with drawing trench plans and pottery. The expedition was co-directed by Dr. Ahmed Serriyeh and the present author.

The joint Syrian-Polish expedition benefited as usual from the help and substantial financial contribution of the Direction General of Antiquities and Museums. Special thanks go to Dr. Bassam Jammous, Director General, as well as to Dr. Michel al-Maqdissi, Director of the Excavations Department, for their generous interest and encouragement. Last but not least, there is Abed Abdel Mesih Bagdo, Regional Director of Antiquities in Hassake, whose regular visits, advice and constant support in solving numerous problems proved invaluable.

TELL ARBID

SYRIA

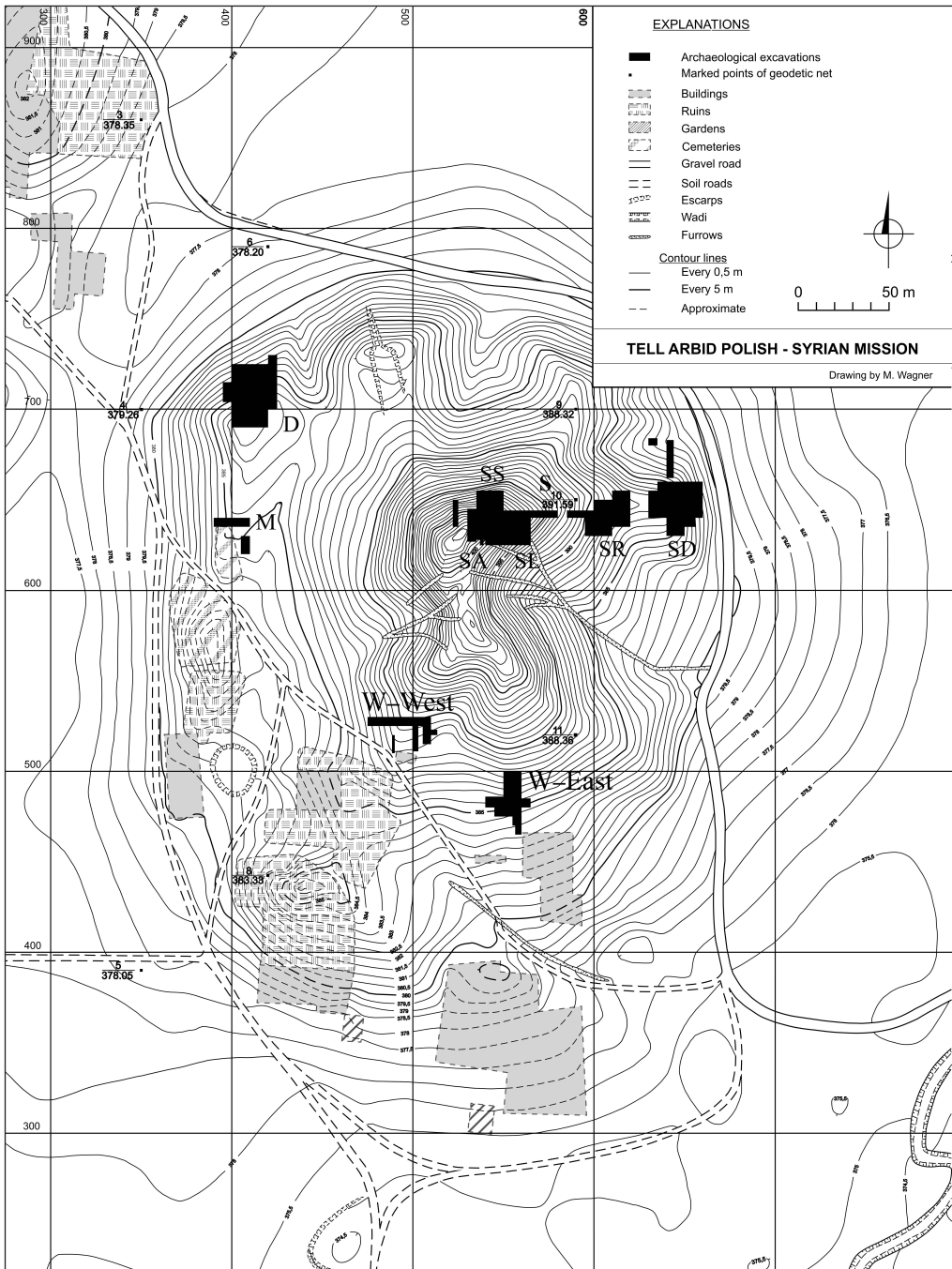


Fig. 1. Contour map of the main tell at Tell Arbid showing the location of excavated areas (Drawing M. Wagner, based on plan by D. Pręgowski, updating M. Momot)

SECTOR D: NINEVITE 5 RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT

Investigations continued of a large house, which is an exceptionally well preserved example of late Ninevite 5 residential architecture. The northern and southern parts of this building had already been uncovered in 2003 and 2005 (Bieliński 2004: 345–348; Bieliński 2007: 457–459). Now, the southern and southwestern parts were excavated in square 30/41, enabling a full reconstruction of the ground plan and providing sufficient data for phasing the internal remodeling. In conclusion, the building, referred to in the documentation as the Ninevite North-Western House, can be said to have been erected on the plan of an irregular quadrangle, almost a trapezoid. Its outer walls reached a maximum of 9.50 by 8.00 m and the surface of the ground floor measured approx. 56 m² [Fig. 3].

The building could be accessed from an alley turning off the main street and running towards the western part of the house. One of two entrances found there, perhaps the main one, led through a hall into an inner courtyard, while the other one led into a small room in the southwestern corner of the house [Fig. 2]. The household rooms lay along the northern side of the courtyard, whereas on the south, along the street, there stretched the largest room of the house which measured approx. 5 by 2 m. It seems that it, too, came to be used for domestic activities, although this was not the original purpose [Fig. 4].

Access to this room had been provided initially by two entrances, one leading from the courtyard, the other from a side room which itself was accessible from the street. Later, the passage from the side room was blocked. The latter doorway has been preserved in its entirety, including the height which is approx. 1.50 m. Judging

from other surviving examples, this seems to have been a standard in Tell Arbid architecture of the 3rd millennium BC. The roughly square courtyard of the Ninevite North-Western House (3.20 by 3.00 m) organized communication inside the house. It seems that the aforementioned side room, accessible directly from the street, may have also held a stairway leading to an upper level, be it a roof or an upper floor.

Three subsequent construction phases have now been distinguished in the excavated late Ninevite 5 strata in Sector D. The Ninevite North-Western House belongs to the oldest of these, which can be further divided into two subphases.

A new trench opened south of the Ninevite North-Western House in square 31/41 was intended to explore Late Ninevite 5 period structures, the northern fragments of which had been discovered in

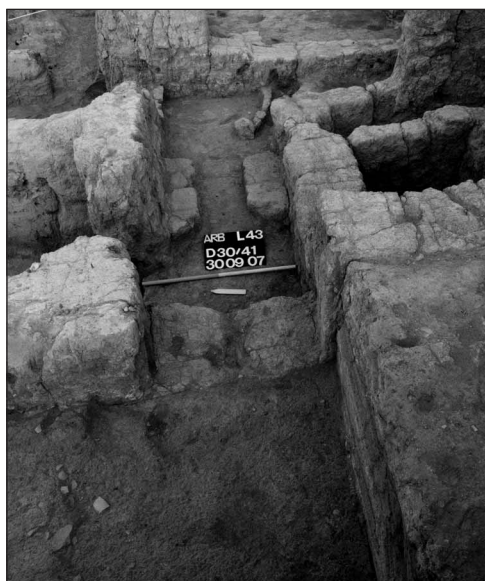


Fig. 2. Main entrance to the Ninevite North-Western House (Photo A. Reiche)

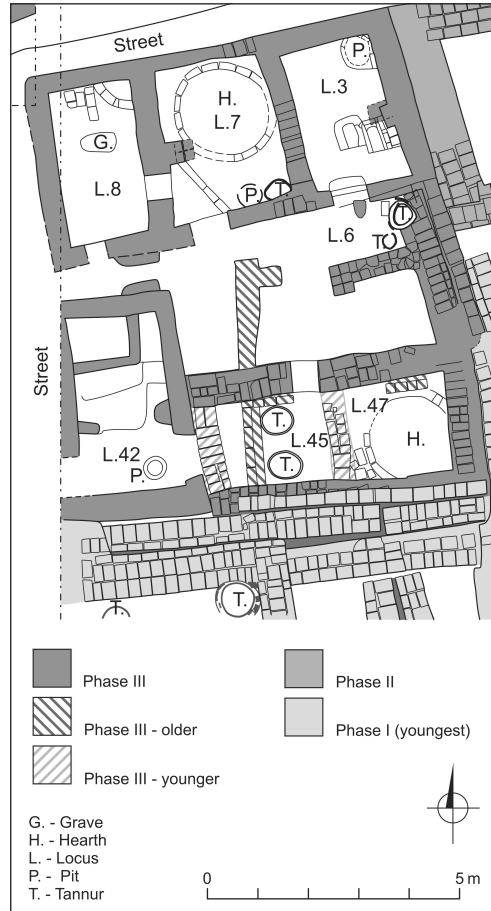
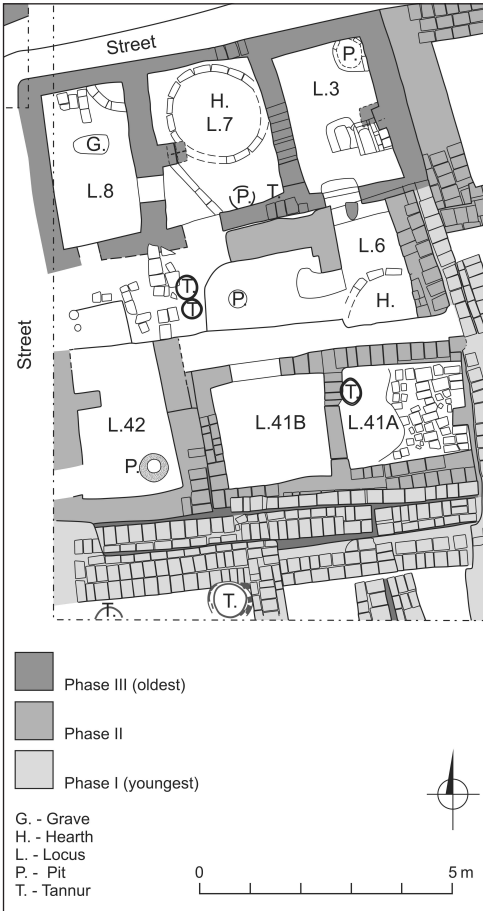
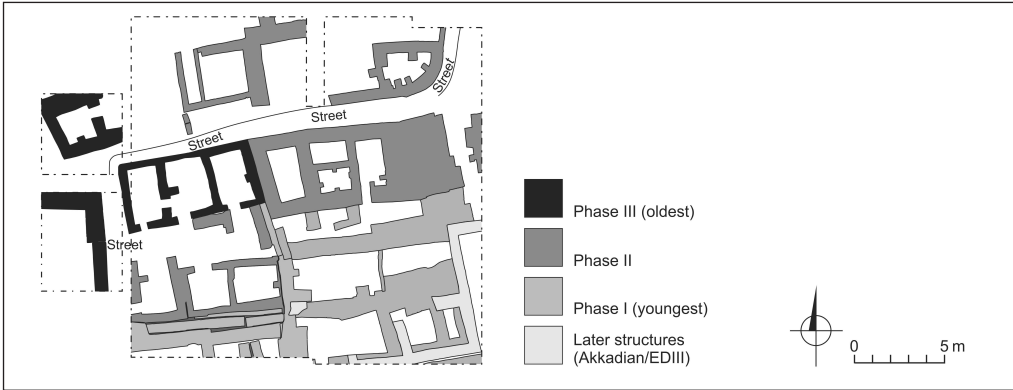


Fig. 3. General plan of Sector D (top) with the Ninevite North-Western House blown up to show the general phasing (bottom left) and subdivisions of phase III (bottom right) (Drawing A. Smogorzewska and M. Wagner, updating M. Momot)



Fig. 4. *Ninevite North-Western House seen from the south; courtyard and three rooms with domestic installations in the background (Photo A. Reiche)*

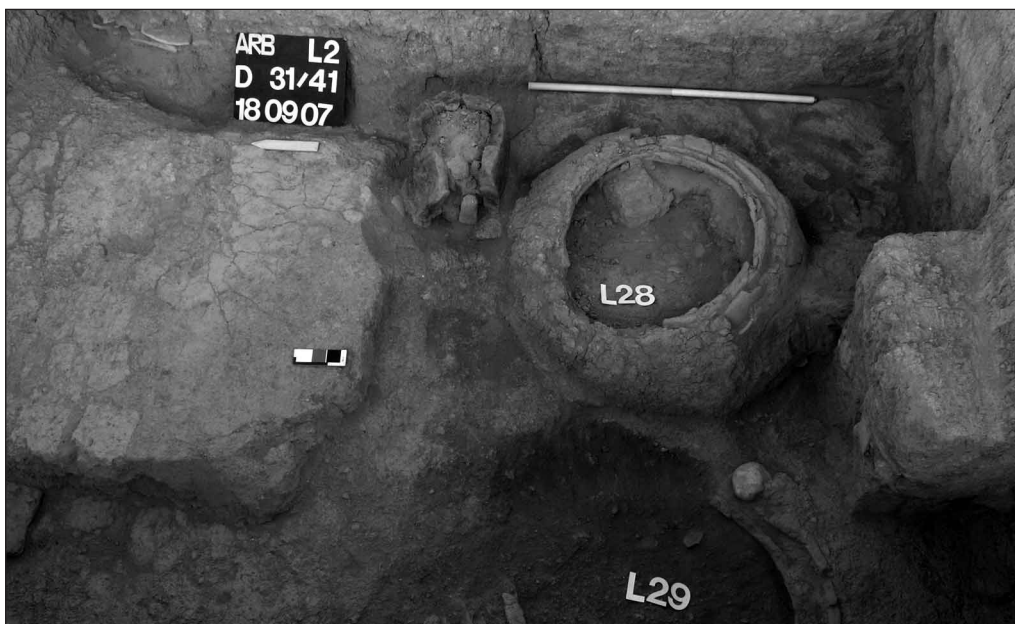


Fig. 5. *Akkadian-period room with tannurs and an andiron from the Northern Complex, square 31/41 (Photo A. Reiche)*

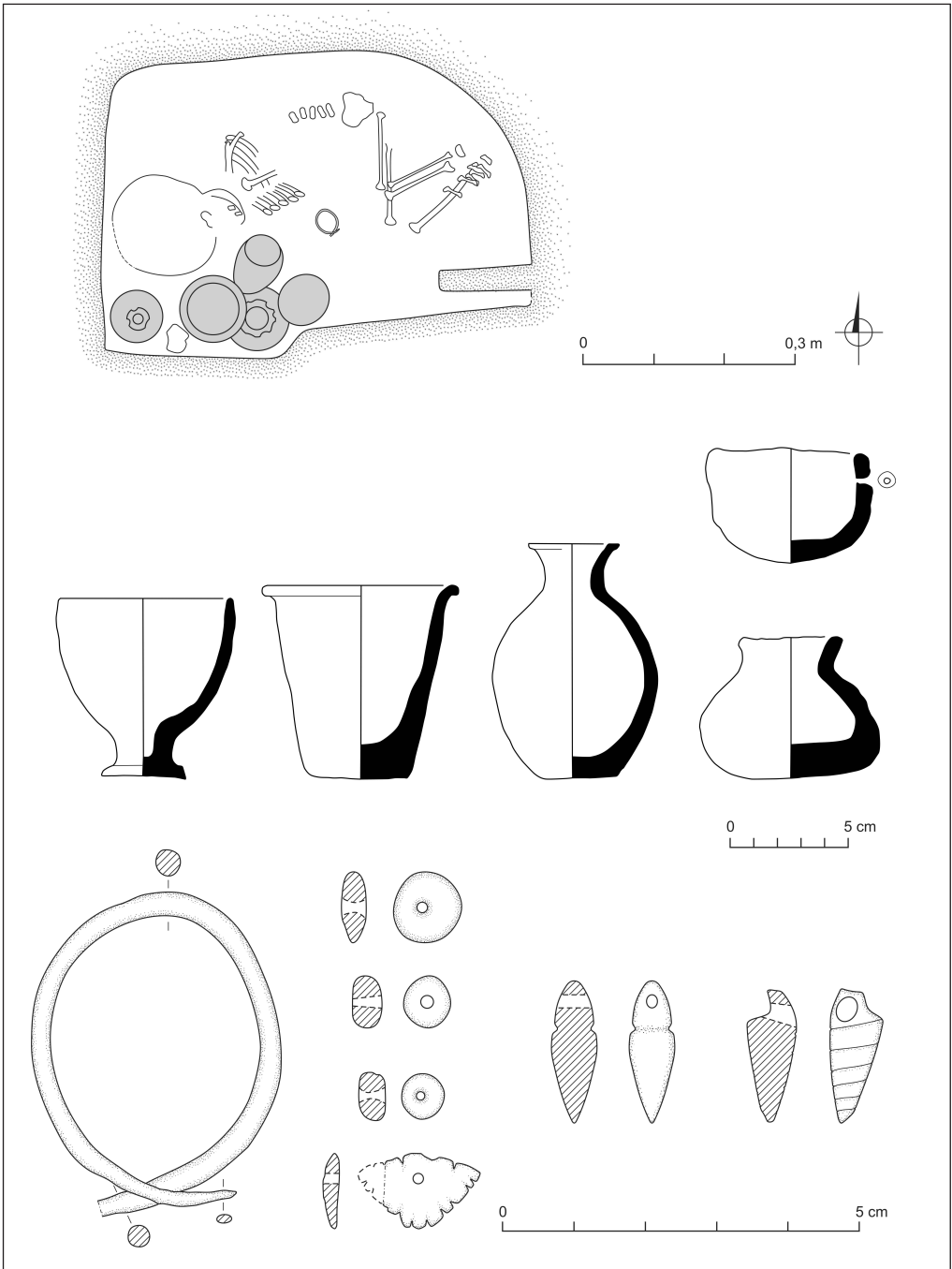


Fig. 6. Grave G4-31/41 with equipment (Drawing M. Makowski, M. Mierzejewska and E. Wojnarowicz, digitizing M. Momot and A. Smogorzewska)

2005 in the southern end of square 30/41. The top layer in the new trench contained Khabur Ware period remains: mainly *pisé* walls, consisting of numerous segments set on different foundation levels. It seems that in some cases the tops of these walls may have served as an occupational level, although they could hardly have been erected solely for this purpose. The fragmentary 3rd millennium BC structures reached beneath the Khabur Ware layers in the western and northern parts of the trench appear to have been in use during the successive Akkadian and Early Dynastic III periods. The uncovered remains belong to two adjacent house complexes dubbed Northern and Southern respectively.

Despite rebuilding and modification of the internal layout, the two houses seem to have preserved basic elements of the plan and sometimes also the function of some rooms from the Early Dynastic III through the Akkadian period. *Tannurs* are good examples of this continuity as they were consistently placed inside the same room within each house. In two rooms with *tannurs*, one dating from the Akkadian phase (in the Northern Complex) and one

from the Early Dynastic III phase (in the Southern Complex), horseshoe-shaped andirons in different states of preservation were discovered near the *tannurs* [Fig. 5].

A suite of three rooms in a row were excavated in the Northern Complex (loci: 2, 19 and 26–31/41), one of these being a courtyard. The entrance to the house is in its northern part, which had been investigated in the previous season. In the Southern Complex, four small rooms were investigated. The house was accessible from the west. It probably opened onto a small street which had functioned in the same spot since the Ninevite 5 period.

Work in square 31/41 within the Northern Complex yielded a few graves from the Akkadian period. Two among them, graves of infants, were discovered beneath the floor of locus 22–31/41 (a room), while a third burial, that of an older child, was dug in the wall of the same room in a later phase of the Akkadian period. In the latter grave (G4–31/41), the contracted skeleton was found with a bronze bracelet, beads of lapis-lazuli, carnelian and shell and five pottery vessels: two jars, two goblets and a cup [Fig. 6].

SECTOR W–WEST: NINEVITE BRICK PLATFORM

The western part of Sector W (the distance between the excavation trenches in Sector W on the southern slope of the tell called for a subdivision into the W–West and E–East parts to facilitate the documentation) was first investigated in the season of 2003, when traces of a massive brick structure from the Ninevite 5 period were found in two squares (48/51 and 49/51). Excavations undertaken again in 2005 and 2006 proved it to be a vast structure built of bricks of different quality with no discernable traces of usage on the surviving surface to identify

its function (Bieliński 2008: 558–559) [Fig. 7]. Trenches opened now in five squares: 48/49, 48/51, 48/52, 49/49 and 49/52, aimed at determining the full extent of this feature and reconstructing provisionally its original height. At selected points the homogeneity of the structure and the kind of mud bricks used in particular sections were checked by probing, while the outer face of the structure was followed in a number of long trenches.

Contrary to expectations, the ‘platform’ (the term is used for lack of a better



Fig. 7. Fragments of a Ninevite 5 brick platform discovered in 2005–2006, viewed from the south (Photo A. Reiche)



Fig. 8. Plan of uncovered fragments of the platform in sector W-West (Drawing E. Rutkowski)



Fig. 9. Southern end of a street running along the eastern face of the Ninevite 5 'platform' in Sector W-West (Photo A. Reiche)



Fig. 10. Southern face of the 'platform' in square 49/51 (Photo A. Reiche)

designation for a structure the function of which remains obscure) proved to be irregular and heterogeneous, composed of several segments seemingly not erected at the same time. Each segment, which is more or less regular in itself, appears to have been constructed separately. Walls of quality bricks formed a skeletal framework, either square or rectangular, but at least 7 m long, filled in with bricks of inferior quality [Fig. 8]. It is also possible that the walls serving as the framework of each segment were actually the remnants of older brick structures. At some point, when this area was leveled, these remnants may have been filled with poor-quality bricks and incorporated into the 'platform'. Of the nature of these putative earlier structures nothing can be said so far.

Bordering the 'platform' on the northeast is a narrow street which turned out to be a dead end, ending abruptly after just a few meters in front of an eastward-projecting segment of the platform, instead of running the full length of the eastern façade, as supposed last year [Fig. 9].

The full extent of the 'platform' was not established and all that can be said is that the eastern end must lie farther east than expected. The length, from east to west, reached 26 m, while the width approached 16 m. The height can be said to have exceeded 1.80 m in places. The northern face of the 'platform' follows a roughly regular line, while the southern face is anything but regular and straight [Fig. 10]. The function of this massive Ninevite 5 period structure remains obscure.

SECTOR W-EAST: NORTHERN PART

Work at the northern end of the eastern part of Sector W concentrated on a fragment of Late Ninevite 5 residential complex used until the beginning of the Early Dynastic III period, situated in square 51/56. Previous exploration in the 2003 season had uncovered the central part of the complex, including a sizable courtyard (3.70 m by at least 5.20 m) surrounded by rooms on three sides (Bieliński 2004: 350–351). This courtyard had been damaged by a large Khabur Ware period pit as well as slope erosion processes, yet it yielded some traces of poorly preserved domestic installations. During the 2007 season, another layer of 3rd millennium BC structures was revealed. Walls were oriented along the same lines as the previously excavated younger structures which now appear to have followed the general outline of the older buildings [Fig. 11]. In some of the rooms a stratum of ashes clearly separated the two layers, the earliest floor of the younger phase resting directly upon it.

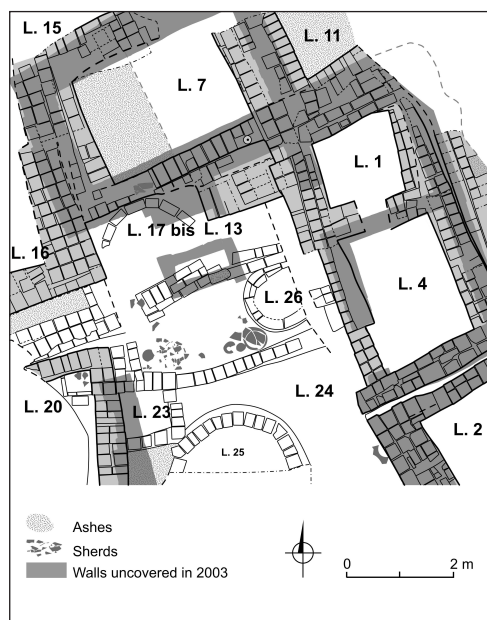


Fig. 11. Plan of Ninevite 5 structures in square 51/56 (Drawing Z. Wygnańska and M. Markowska, digitizing M. Momot)



Fig. 12. Younger phase of a courtyard with domestic installations in a Ninevite 5 period house in the southern part of square 51/56, view from the west (Photo A. Reiche)

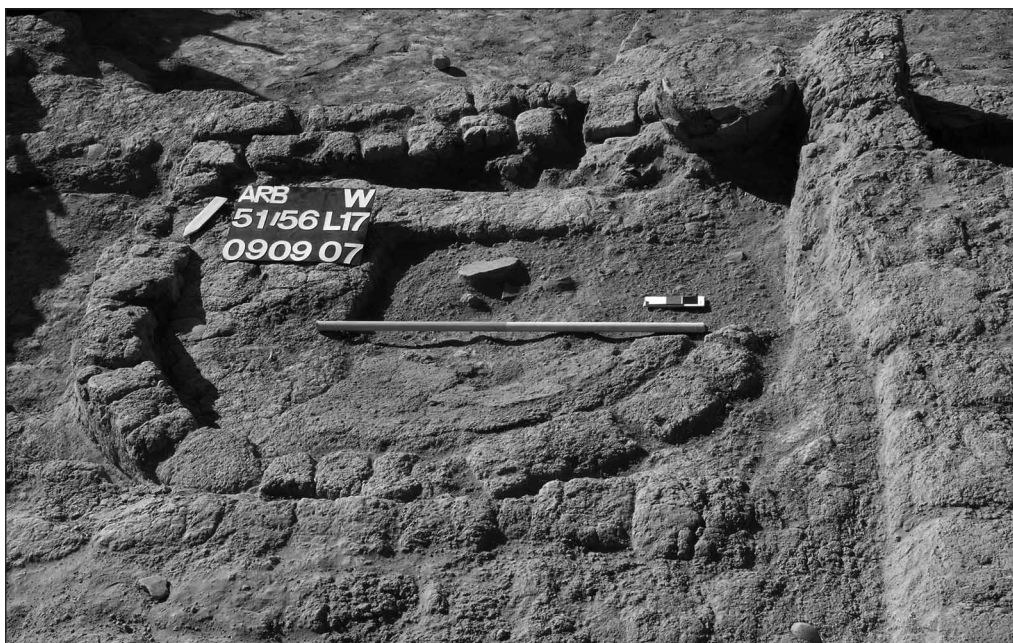


Fig. 13. One of the domestic installations in the courtyard of the older Ninevite 5 house in square 51/56, probably for roasting grain (Photo A. Reiche)

In the older phase, the central courtyard of this complex also served various domestic uses. Yet the installations discovered there are of a different character than their later counterparts, although they may have served a similar purpose [Fig. 12]. The latter seem to have been for roasting grain, as attested by large quantities of charred grain found around each of the five installations discovered in 2007. At the center is a circular or semicircular layer of burnt clay mixed with gravel, encircled by a thin mud-brick wall. At least one cooking pot was sunk into the ground nearby, and a small patch of the surrounding floor was paved with potsherds [Fig. 13]. The different installations are stratigraphically connected with subsequent phases of courtyard use. In each of these phases the installations occupied a different part of the courtyard.

The pottery found inside the older-phase rooms suggests that the complex

should be dated to the very beginning of the Late, if not the end of the Early Ninevite 5 period. In the upper layer, kitchen ware prevails in the pottery assemblage to the virtual exclusion of any fine ware. The opposite is true for the earlier phase, in which Early Ninevite 5 fine ware fragments are very numerous indeed. The layer of ashes dividing two levels of Ninevite 5 occupation in square 51/56 has yielded clay *bullae* impressed with cylinder seals, as well as some clay tokens. More *bullae* with seal impressions were found in the vicinity of some of the installations described above.

Further excavations are needed to establish the full size of this complex. A preliminary analysis of the stratigraphy of the northern part of sector W-East indicates a certain gap between the two phases of Ninevite 5 occupation.

SECTOR W-EAST: SOUTHERN TEMPLE

The most interesting structure by far among those investigated this season is the so-called Southern Temple discovered directly to the south of square 51/56 described above (already probed in 2003, 2005 and 2006 in squares: 52/56, 53/56, 52/55 and 53/56, (Bieliński 2007: 435–436). Analyses of the stratigraphy and the ceramic finds have suggested a date for this building in the earlier phase of the Ninevite 5 period (characterized by incised pottery). With external dimensions of 10 by 7.25 m, it was the largest single room of the Ninevite 5 period discovered so far on Tell Arbid. The original function of this building with its exceedingly thick wall (reaching 1.60 m in width) was revealed after a careful cleaning of its interior this season.

The room, measuring 8.00 by approx. 4.50 m inside, formed a slightly irregular rectangle with a narrow entrance situated roughly in the middle of the southern wall [Figs 14, 15]. The doorway, which is approx. 0.40 m wide, needs further cleaning to clarify the western edge.

In the eastern part of the room to the right of the entrance, standing on the longitudinal axis of the structure was a finely plastered block of mud bricks (1.08 by 0.70 m and approx. 0.70 m high), initially interpreted as a pillar. It is now clear that it was a kind of altar. Its two western corners were grooved on their entire height, while its top was covered with plaster [Fig 16]. A nearly square hearth with sides approximately 1 m long, apparently bordered

by a low mud-brick wall, some 0.40 m wide, is located in front of it.

On the floor by the southern face of the altar, remains of a nearly complete incense burner were found. It was made of thickly plastered, unbaked clay [Fig. 17] in the shape of a small column, 0.73 m high. The diameter ranges from 0.26 m at the base to 0.18 m near the top. A small oval bowl about 0.14 m deep and approximately 0.25 m in diameter was worked into the top surface.

In the western part of the room, not far from the entrance, there was a kind of a freestanding partition wall running perpendicularly across the room. It was 4.40 m long and 0.80 wide. The southern end touched on the wall of the room, while the northern one finished about half a meter before the northern wall. Thus, it divided the room into a larger, "main" part in the east with the altar and the hearth, and a smaller space to the west measuring approx. 1.70 by 4.50 m.

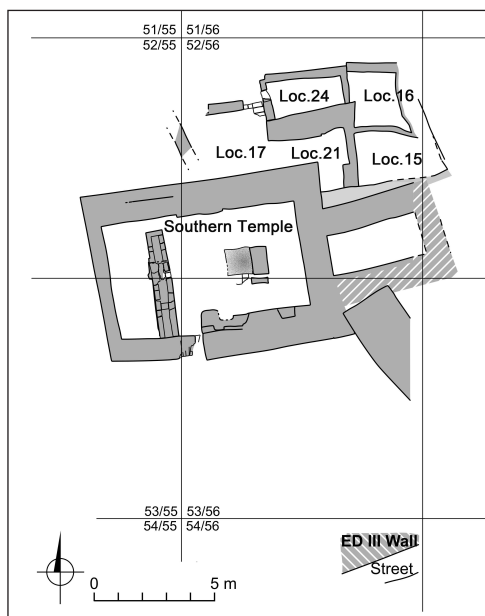


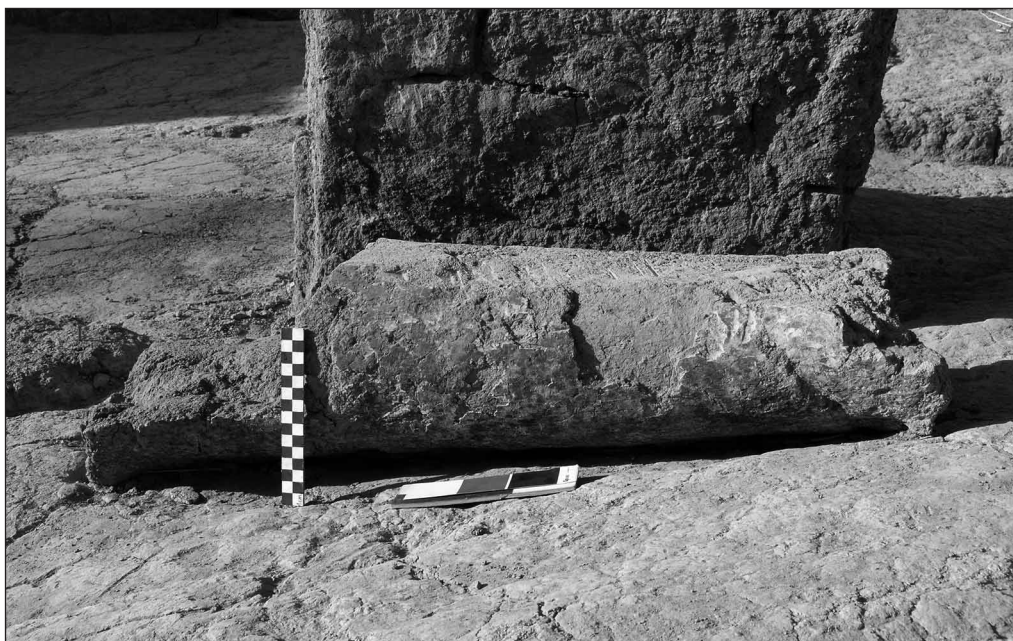
Fig. 14. General plan of the Southern Temple and its surroundings (Drawing M. Momot)



Fig. 15. General view of the Southern Temple from the south (Photo A. Reiche)



*Fig. 16. Altar and hearth in the Southern Temple
(Photo A. Reiche)*



*Fig. 17. Clay incense burner found by the altar in the Southern Temple
(Photo A. Reiche)*

A small niche (0.30 by 0.24 m), about 0.20 m deep, in the eastern, “outer” face of the partition wall was aligned with the altar. As the partition wall is preserved to a much lower height than the remaining walls of the room, it is not possible to establish if it had also originally been lower than the others or not.

Around half a dozen layers of carefully plastered floors exposed within the room revealed another interesting detail. In the corners behind the altar and, to a lesser degree, in the corners behind the partition wall, the floor level was intentionally raised with layers of mud bricks.

The building seems to have been cleared before abandoning, as very few potsherds could be found either on the floors or in the overlying fill. The few that remained represented Ninevite 5 incised fine ware.

Considering the above, the conclusion is that this building should be interpreted as a temple located in the southern part of the Ninevite 5 city on Tell Arbid. In many respects it resembles a Ninevite 5 period shrine discovered on Tell Brak in layer 5 of test pit HS 4 (Matthews 2003: 102).²

As far as we can tell, there is an open space, presumably a courtyard, more than 7 m wide, in front of the Southern Temple. Its eastern end was cleared this year. On the south it was bordered by a wall parallel to the temple façade (a short stretch of this wall, approx. 1.30 m wide, was located in square 54/56). The wall and a street of similar width running alongside it are both of a later date than the Southern Temple and, based on pottery evidence, should be dated to the beginning of the Early Dynastic III period on Tell Arbid. This means that they cannot be considered part of the original enclosure of the Southern Temple precinct. Interestingly,

the wall and the street are set considerably beneath the floor level of the temple, suggesting that the sanctuary had been built on a raised platform or a mound of older ruins. In consequence, even after a few centuries, there is still a marked difference between its floor level and that of the structures adjoining the (presumed) temenos on the south. More exploration is planned in the area in the coming season.

To the north and west of the cella there is a series of rooms built in a similar fashion as the shrine itself. Some wall tops had been cleared two years ago but it was only during the present campaign that their relation to the complex of the Southern Temple was studied. Immediately to the east there is a narrow room with finely plastered walls. The fact that its floor is located much deeper than the floors of the temple and that no traces of an entrance were found may suggest that it had served as a granary. Further to the north, in square 52/56, there is a series of three small rooms (loci 15, 17 and 21–52/56) erected against the walls of the temple [Fig. 18]. Some of them are connected by doorways. The floor level was reached in only one of them (locus 17–52/56), but the presence of mud-brick steps in a doorway leading northwards is enough to suggest that the ground may have risen in a northward direction, causing the rooms to be erected on different levels [Fig. 19]. Nevertheless, it is clear that the presumed complex of rooms stretches northwards, into square 51/56, where the remains of a Late Ninevite 5 dwelling with a large courtyard and its predecessor are being explored. Further investigation of this complex will be possible only after the complete removal of younger remains.

2 The size and proportions of the two temples are similar, but the placement of the altars differs. It seems that the Tell Brak temple is slightly younger than the Southern Temple at Tell Arbid.

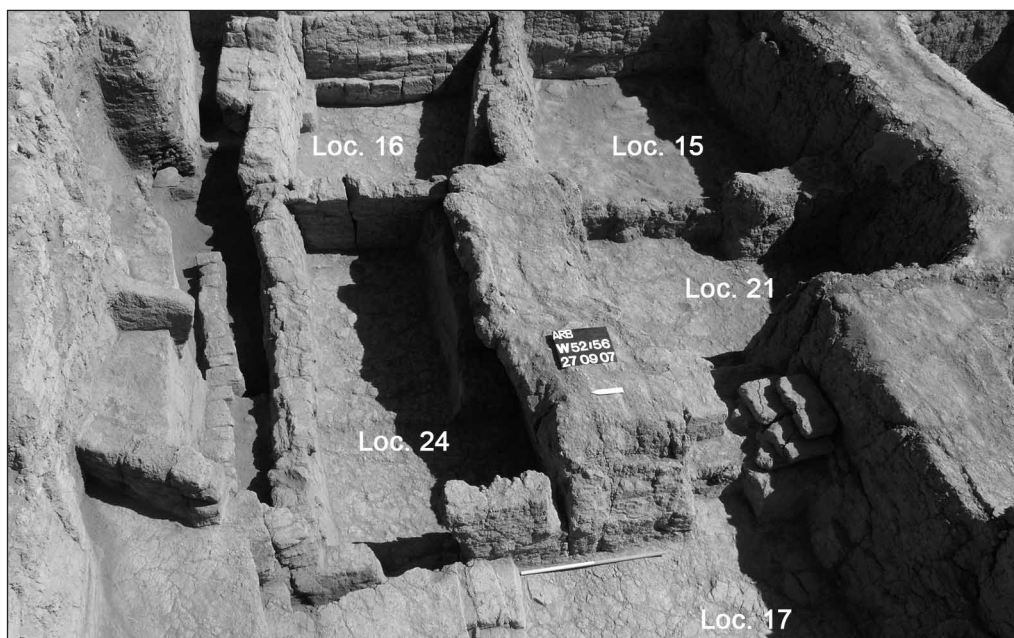


Fig. 18. Rooms bordering the Southern Temple on the northeast
(Photo A. Reiche)

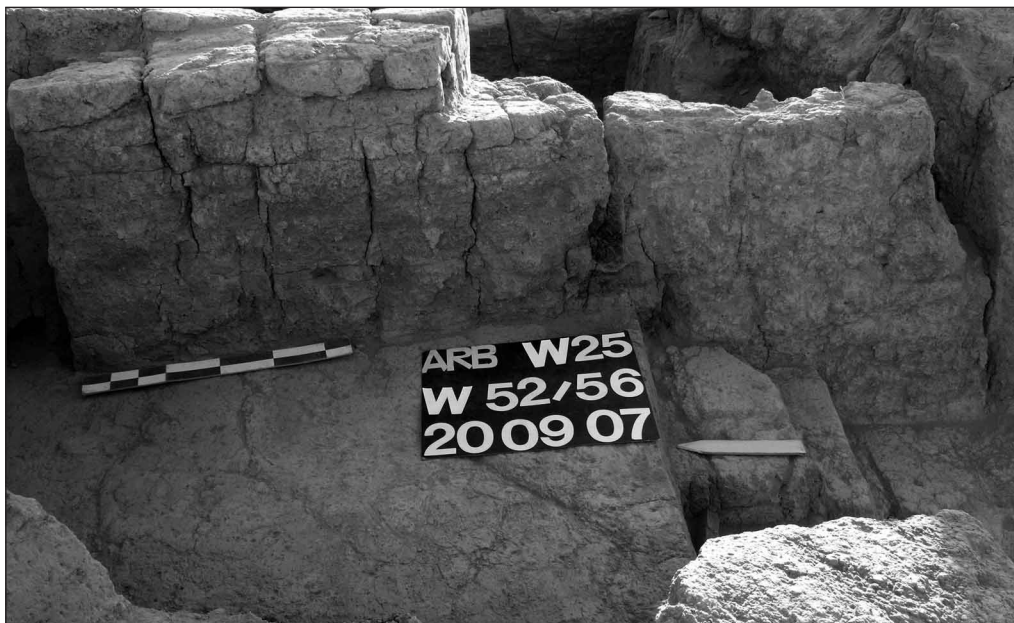


Fig. 19. Mud-brick steps in a doorway in locus 17-52/56, leading northwards
(Photo A. Reiche)

A Ninevite 5 burial (G5-52/56) was discovered this year, dug into an accumulation of ashes partly covering the complex [Fig. 21]. It contained the skeleton of an adult woman, accompanied by a set of three Late Ninevite 5 vessels representing it seems the terminal phase of Ninevite 5 pottery [Fig. 20].

On the northwest, the walls of the Southern Temple abut remnants of a much later architectural compound which should be dated to the Late Ninevite 5 period. Its fragment discovered this season includes a vast room (locus 25-52/55) measuring approx. 5.30 by 4.60 m. At least one of its walls features regularly spaced inner buttresses [Fig. 22].

No less than two building phases have been attested and it seems probable that more phases can be expected beneath the lowest floor level reached this year. Some

of these earlier phases may prove to be contemporary with the Southern Temple.

In the fill of locus 25-52/55, and in the remaining Ninevite 5 period rooms uncovered in Sector W-East and described above, numerous *bullae* impressed with Ninevite 5 cylinder seals were found. Such a concentration of *bullae* in a limited area further stresses its importance, especially



Fig. 20. Late Ninevite 5 vessels discovered in burial G5-52/56 (Photo A. Reiche)

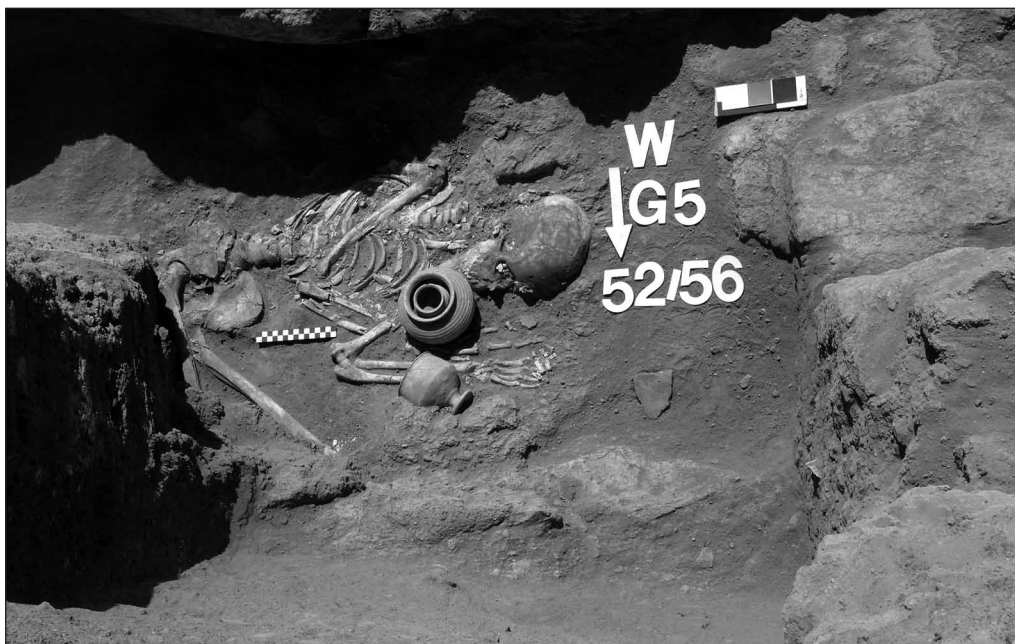


Fig. 21. Late Ninevite 5 burial dug into a layer of ashes in square S2/56 (Photo A. Reiche)

considering the fact that all other Ninevite 5 areas so far investigated on Tell Arbid have yielded only a few dozen such impressions.

Following this season's fieldwork in Sector W–East, it has become clear that after the temple was abandoned this part of the Ninevite town on Tell Arbid was turned into a dump for ashes (whence came most of the *bullae*). This period of abandonment could

not have lasted long, however, because the region again became a site for building activities during the phase of Ninevite 5 culture characterized by excised pottery. The new houses often used remnants of older walls as foundations. It is not clear whether the ash dumps were rubbish or an intentional deposit to level the area under new structures.



Fig. 22. Late Ninevite 5 period room with internal buttresses to the northwest of the Southern Temple (Photo A. Reiche)

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