

# Piotr Bieliński

---

## Tell Arbid: Second Campaign of Syro-Polish Excavations

---

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 9, 212-223

---

1998

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

## TELL ARBID

### SECOND CAMPAIGN OF SYRO-POLISH EXCAVATIONS

**Piotr Bieliński**

The first season of excavations on Tell Arbid in 1996 had generally confirmed the site chronology established by M.E.L. Mallowan, despite the fact that his explorations had been limited to the main mound and had ignored the secondary ones rising to the north and west. A survey carried out last year also proved a certain inaccuracy of the citadel plan prepared years ago by Mallowan's expedition.

At first glance, the discrepancies between the old and new plan seemed to be due to the heavy erosion of the slopes during the last forty years.<sup>1</sup> But a careful comparison of the two plans revealed that apart from erosion processes, which had indeed changed parts of the main tell, the size of the "citadel" on Mallowan's plan had been considerably underestimated. The current season, from 27 August until 6 October 1998, was devoted to a continuation of excavations in all three areas of Tell Arbid investigated in 1996.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See *PAM* VIII, 1997, p. 206

<sup>2</sup> The mission headed by Mr. Ahmad Serriyeh from the Directorate General of Antiquities on the Syrian side and Piotr Bieliński on the Polish side, included: Ms Anna Smogorzewska, Ms Dorota Bielińska, Ms Dorota Ławecka, Mr. Andrzej Reiche, Mr. Mirosław Olbryś, Mr. Dariusz Szeląg and Mr. Łukasz Rutkowski, as well as Ms Katarzyna Krzyżanowska, student of archaeology at Warsaw University, and Ms Wardo Djabr Duuba from the University of Damascus.

The Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums, beside a substantial financial contribution, offered its help and support. We feel much in debt first of all to Prof. Dr. Sultan Muhessen, Director General of the DGAM, for his continuous interest and friendly advice, as well as to Mr. Abdel Messiyeh Bardo, Regional Director of Antiquities in Hassake, for his regular visits and constant support in solving various problems.

We owe, moreover, special acknowledgements to Elektromontaż Export SA with its branch offices and President Jerzy Lewandowski. Without their financial support, the ac-

In area A, a small mound in the northwestern corner of the site, the main objective was a full study of the stratigraphy. Another key objective was to clear a bigger area of the Mitannian strata uncovered in 1996.

Two new trenches, measuring 9 x 9 m, were opened near the top of the mound. In the easternmost square (30/20), a relatively well-preserved Late Hellenistic layer was revealed just below the level of an abandoned modern house. The structure uncovered in this layer was part of a substantial building with walls up to 1 m wide. The outer wall of this structure, running approximately NEE-SWW, was constructed of three rows of big square mud bricks. A perpendicular wall, of the same width as the outer one, was found to run southwards from it, dividing the space to this side of the wall into two separate areas. This dividing wall was later reinforced by a narrower secondary wall built against its southwestern face. The southwestern area inside this building, at least 4.40 by 5.30 m big, most probably served as a courtyard. It had a sort of floor with the remains of several domestic installations, such as pits and a large bin made of mud brick. Also from this part of the trench is a Hellenistic bronze coin still to be identified. In the southeastern part of square 30/20, the space delimited by the building's walls is even larger (at least 6.00 x 4.40 m) and was probably also used as a courtyard. The whole area was tightly packed with bricks from the ruined walls and the floor surface was partly destroyed by some later pits. The debris yielded a woman's head of terracotta from the Hellenistic period (fig. 1a), as well as some potsherds of Roman cooking pots of the "brittle ware". An earlier Hellenistic layer was found only in the northwestern corner of this square, where a large wall (c. 1.80 m wide) was found to run parallel with the later outer wall of the Late Hellenistic Building.

---

complishment of our research program in the 1997 season on Arbid would not have been possible. We would also like to express here our gratitude to the Michałowski Foundation for its invaluable help.

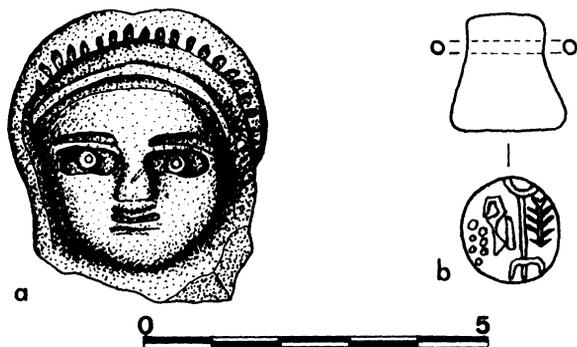


Fig. 1a. Hellenistic terracotta head found in square 30/20;  
 1b. Post-Assyrian stamp seal from a pit in square 29/19.  
 Drawings D. Bielińska and D. Ławecka.

Further to the north, in neighboring square 29/19, the Late Hellenistic layer identified in square 30/20 was absent, while the layer corresponding to the second Hellenistic layer in the other trench yielded some remains, a big wall and adjacent red-colored floor, in the south and southeastern part of the square. It seems that this wall belongs to the same building as the older Hellenistic wall found in the northwestern corner of square 30/20. On the southern side, this wall was reinforced at least in two points with narrower secondary walls that ran parallel to it. As there are no remains of perpendicular dividing walls, it was supposed that the room in this case was very big – at least 10 m long.

An even earlier occupation in area A is represented by a pisé wall, which served as a foundation for at least part of the Hellenistic wall. This pisé wall, as well as some fragments of mud-brick walls to the north of it, should be dated to a phase preceding the Hellenistic settlement on mound A, but certainly later than the Neo-Assyrian period. The whole northern and central part of square 29/19 was badly destroyed by as many

as eleven Hellenistic pits, some of them up to 2 m in diameter, quite deep and slightly larger at the bottom than at the top. These pits are filled with typical household refuse, such as ashes, animal bones and potsherds. An Assyrian cylinder seal and a Neo-Babylonian/Hellenistic stamp seal (fig. 1b), both of fired clay, were found near the bottom of pit no. 21, which also yielded a complete bone knife, most probably of Hellenistic date.

To judge by the results of the present season, the Hellenistic occupation of the site, which followed the 2nd millennium settlement, was quite an important period in the history of Arbid, borne out as it is by the rich collection of locally made pottery (fig. 2), red-slipped included, and the numerous terracotta animal figurines and coins.

In area M (western edge of the main tell, near the modern cemetery), efforts were concentrated on the exploration of the presumed 2nd millennium defense system surrounding the main tell. In his report, Mallowan had suggested that this city wall may have been as much as 45 m wide! In the previous season, four parallel pisé walls, each c. 1.60 m wide, were found and believed to belong to the 2nd millennium city fortifications. They followed the slope contour and seemed to form a kind of grid for the construction of the core of a defensive wall. Investigations were continued inside two old trenches (31/47 and 37/40) and in two new ones (9 x 4 m each) situated lower down on the western edge of the main tell. All four trenches ran latitudinally across the lowest part of the western slope of the so-called citadel.

In the easternmost trench (square 37/41), below the Khabour-ware period structures uncovered last year, the large pits that were discovered were filled with ashes and largely decayed mud-brick debris. Only at the eastern border of this trench was a fragment of a more substantial structure unearthed. It was part of a larger mud-brick building, which followed a regular orientation according to the cardinal points and which is largely concealed in the ground beyond the limits of the trench to the east.

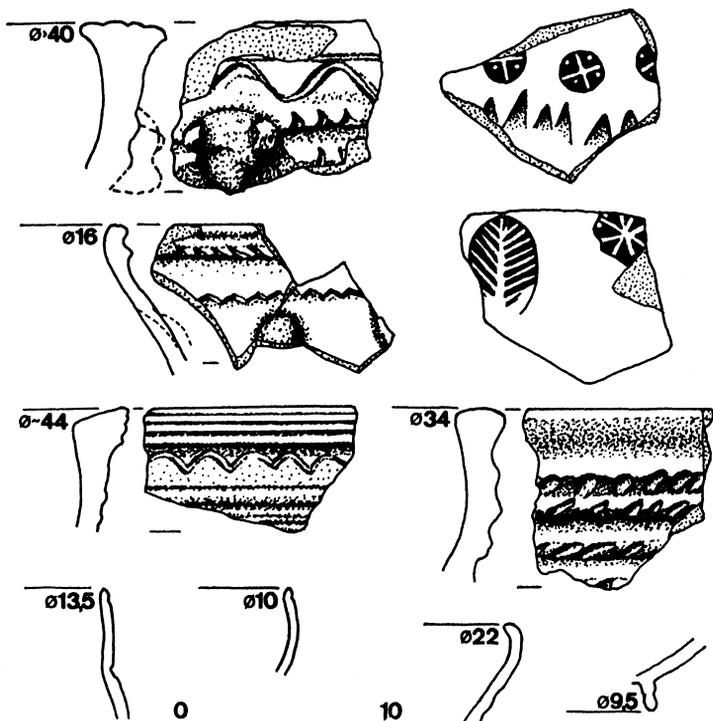


Fig. 2. Decorated Hellenistic pottery from area A – red-slipped sherds in the lowest row. Drawings D. Ławecka, Ł. Rutkowski.

The fragment discovered during the present season consists of three rooms of unknown dimensions. In the central one, a large complete storage jar with simple applied decoration on the body was found, intentionally turned upside down and accompanied by potsherds belonging to other storage vessels. Further to the west, in the next trench (square 37/40), the *pisé* walls were preserved to a height of over 1.50 m, while their upper parts had most certainly been eroded away. The space between them was filled with debris composed of

clay, ashes and decayed bricks. The walls had been erected on badly preserved remains of an older structure which can be dated also to the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. These remains, preserved in slightly better condition in the central and western part of the trench, are generally badly cut by later pits. Nonetheless, it was possible to distinguish two consecutive architectural strata, which will require more careful exploration in the future.

In the western end of square 37/39, a small fragment of a huge mud-brick wall was uncovered. It was originally at least 3 m wide and followed the contour of the slope; hence, it could have been part of a defense system. In such a case, however, we would be dealing with a fortification from before the 2nd millennium BC, as the ceramic material collected from its vicinity is undoubtedly of Early Dynastic date (Ninevite 5).

On the east side, two parallel walls set 2.40 m apart, join the above described wall at right angles. They are partly built of similar bricks as the massive wall. At present, it is unclear whether the perpendicular walls were added at a later date or all three walls were erected concurrently. The space between the walls, measuring about 4.40 x 2.40 m, forms a sort of a room closed from the east by a less substantial wall consisting of merely one row of mud bricks, superimposed on a small channel faced with stone and leading eastwards. The room was paved with stones and potsherds and during the 3rd millennium BC it was used for economic activities of some kind, as suggested by a variety of installations, such as a fireplace, small *tannur*, small pits and a storage jar.

Further elements of the same supposed fortification system of the 3rd-millennium BC city were unearthed in the adjacent trench 37/32. Here, a mud-brick wall about 1.20 m wide formed part of a large rectangular room, at least 4 m long and 2.20 m wide, located on the "outside" of this wall. It seems quite possible that this room formed a sort of casemate within the fortification wall.

In area S (step trench on the eastern slope of the main tell), investigations also focused on establishing the stratigraphy and



*Fig. 3. Fragment of a large building in square 36/55, seen from the south. Photo A. Reiche.*

on obtaining more information on the substantial building discovered in the westernmost part of the trench near the top of the tell. The trench was made longer to reach a total length of 30 m and was enlarged at the western end to a width of 9.50 m (square 36/55), uncovering a large fragment of the building in question. The eastern outer wall of the structure, running approximately N-S, is c. 1 m wide and reinforced on the outside with six more or less regularly spaced buttresses. The length of the building remains unknown (at least 11 m) as it disappears on both sides into the trench wall. Parts of at least five rooms were explored (fig. 3). The largest of these (locus 11) was 2.80 m wide and at least 4.20 m long. It had at least two doorways, one leading to a room in the southeastern part of the building and another one situated in the northern wall and leading to the room labeled as locus 13. The latter, which is 2.40 m wide and at least 4.20 m long, was divided into two parts by a false arch running N-S. Built against the eastern wall of locus 13 was a narrow mud-brick bench. On the north, locus 13 is closed off by a huge wall (c. 1.50 m wide), wider than the outer one, bearing remains of thick plaster on its northern face, presumably to indicate the presence of yet another room on this side. Practically, all the uncovered floors are in poor condition. The same can be said of the wall plaster and even of the walls themselves in the northern part of the trench. Damages are due to large refuse pits filled with ashes. In the opinion of the excavators, the structure was more of a public than private character. The absence of any domestic installations only serves to support this hypothesis.

The date of this building is a separate problem altogether. No good diagnostic ceramic material has been found as yet on the floors, forcing the chronology to be estimated on the grounds of pottery from the destruction layers filling the rooms and from a narrow street bordering the building on the east, both of which support a date in the late 3rd millennium BC.

In the course of the present campaign, the wall footing of the alleged public building was reached and found to be super-

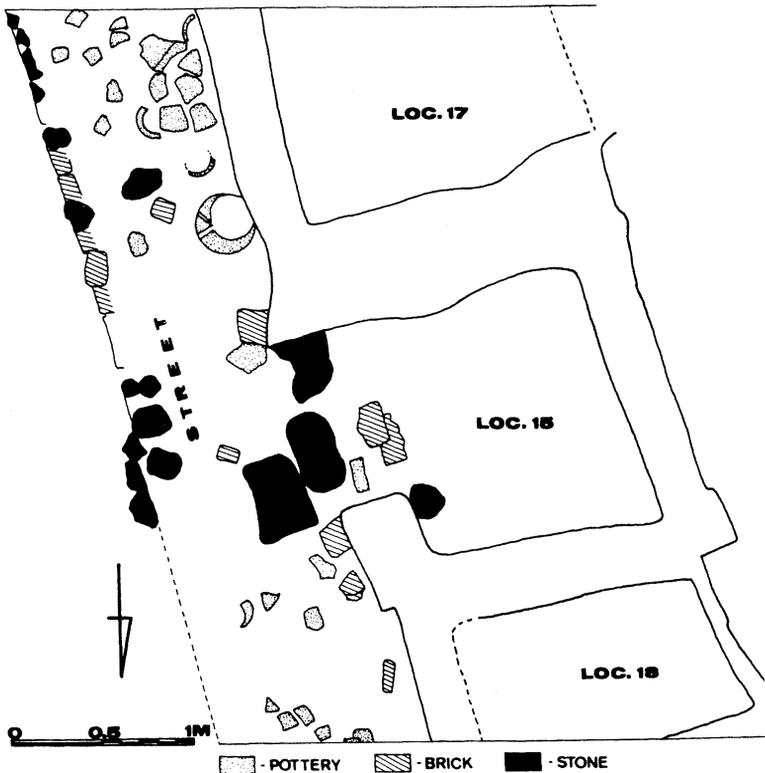


Fig. 4. Early Dynastic period cubicles in square 36/56 (area S).  
 Drawing D. Bielińska, D. Ławecka.

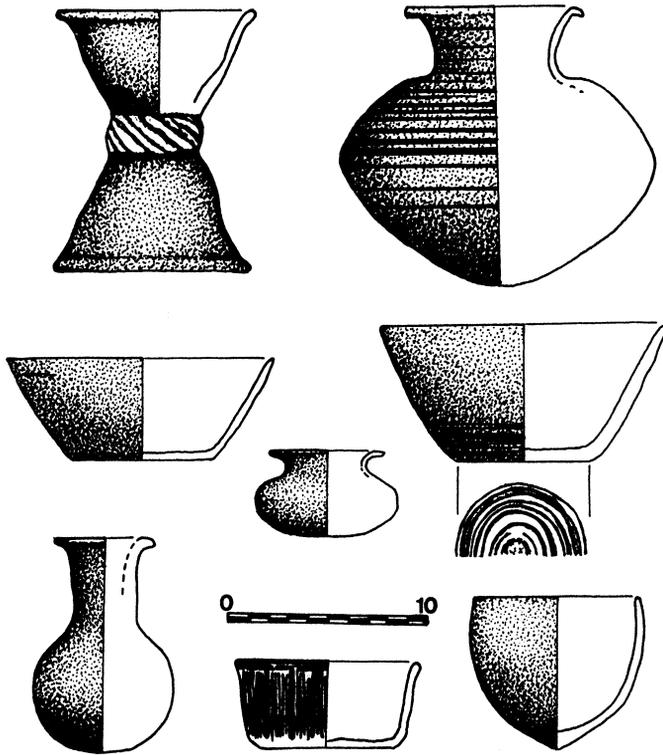
imposed directly upon the remains of older walls featuring a similar orientation. These earlier walls were in some places much wider (up to 1.40 m) and had internal buttresses of quite some substance. It is too early to say whether we are dealing here with a series of superimposed public buildings or else the ruins of an older structure of different function that were used later as foundations for another building.

What is clear is the date of this older structure, which was indisputably erected during the Early Dynastic period.

The street mentioned above, which runs parallel to the outer wall of the public building, was paved with potsherds. A large *tannur* was found on it, built against the outer wall of the structure. On the opposite side of the street, in square 36/56, an irregular group of tiny cubicles, separated by mud-brick and *pisé* walls, was discovered. They were arranged in three rows, forming a band nearly 5 m wide, delimited on the east by another narrow street about 1 m wide (fig. 4), also paved with potsherds and some stones. The size of these units (1.10 x 1.30 m on the average), as well as the finds suggest that they were used for storage purposes or some sort of industrial activity. A series of floors inside the cubicles and their slightly varying size are proof of frequent rebuilding.

The cubicles seem to be contemporary with the older structure underlying the public building and to some extent also with the public building itself. In the latest phase, which was most probably contemporary with the later phase of the public building, their number decreased in favor of increased individual size. One of the larger cubicles from the later phase had a floor paved with fired bricks and potsherds. It most probably contained some installation requiring the use of water. The installation seems to have been linked to a covered water channel, made partly of fired bricks, which presumably ran down the street bordering the cubicles on the east (some remains were observed in the north trench wall, in square 36/56). Some complete 3rd millennium vessels come from the surface of this street and from the nearby cubicles (fig. 5).

The level of this street was only slightly lower than that of the street to the west, apparently reflecting the original configuration of the "citadel" slope in the 3rd millennium. A building on the eastern side of the street was entered through a narrow entrance paved with baked bricks, forming a sort of threshold. Little more can be said of this structure, since most of it to the east disappeared along



*Fig. 5. Early Dynastic period vessels from the eastern part of area S.  
Drawings D. Bielińska, D. Ławecka.*

with the slope, which has eroded away in this area. What is evident, is that like the street, this building must have been erected in the Early Dynastic III period.

Another 3rd-millennium layer was reached further to the east, in a trench where the slope lowers quite abruptly. A well preserved fragment of mud-brick wall about 1.30 m thick and

running NNE-SSW, was found there, apparently erected to help in terracing the slope. To the west of it, there was an irregular room filled with ashes. Actually, it comprised parts of some other structures, which clearly preceded in date the eroded house described above. East of the terrace wall (square 36/58), another big structure was identified but not explored.

The discovery of the Hellenistic and post-Assyrian settlements in area A, as well as the accumulation of at least four 3rd millennium layers on the "citadel" slope seem to be of greatest importance for our knowledge of human occupation on the Tell Arbid site. It is noteworthy that until now no substantial remains of the 2nd millennium city have been found in the northern part of the "citadel", while the 3rd millennium deposits (already over 5 m thick) are quite rich and promising.