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## Tell Arbid: The 2003 Campaign of Polish-Syrian Excavations Preliminary Report

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# TELL ARBID

## THE 2003 CAMPAIGN OF POLISH-SYRIAN EXCAVATIONS PRELIMINARY REPORT

Piotr Bieliński

*It was the eight field season in a row on Tell Arbid and the longest one yet.<sup>1)</sup> Our objective this year was to gain insight into the settlement of the 3rd millennium BC and the Nineveh 5 period in particular; hence our efforts were focused on the exploration of sectors where layers of this period had been identified already in earlier campaigns. The trenches in areas "D", "SD" and "SL" were extended and deepened, and a few new test trenches were excavated in the southern, as yet unexplored part of the main tell (designated as area "W") (Fig. 1).*

1) The season started on August 19 and lasted until October 5, 2003. The Polish side of the expedition included archaeologists: Dr. Dorota Ławecka, Dr. Anna Smogorzewska, Dr. Dariusz Szeląg, Mrs. Dorota Bielińska, Ms. Zuzanna Wygnańska, Ms Agnieszka Szymczak, Ms Aleksandra Oleksiak, Ms Agnieszka Pieńkowska, Mr. Andrzej Reiche, Mr. Łukasz Rutkowski, Mr. Hubert Czerski, and the author, as well as four archaeology students: Ms Marta Momot, Ms Marta Tchórzewska, Ms Monika Ozdarska and Mr. Maciej Makowski. On the Syrian side, Dr. Ahmad Serriye was accompanied by Ms Rabab Mualla and Mr. Elias Abdel Nour. Anthropologist Dr. Arkadiusz Sołtysiak joined the team for a time. As always, we benefited greatly from the unfailing help and friendly support of the DGAM in general and Dr. Michel al-Maqdissi, Director of Excavations, in particular. We are indebted to the staff of the Regional Directorate of Antiquities in Hassake and especially to its Director, Mr. Abed Abdel Messih Bardo.



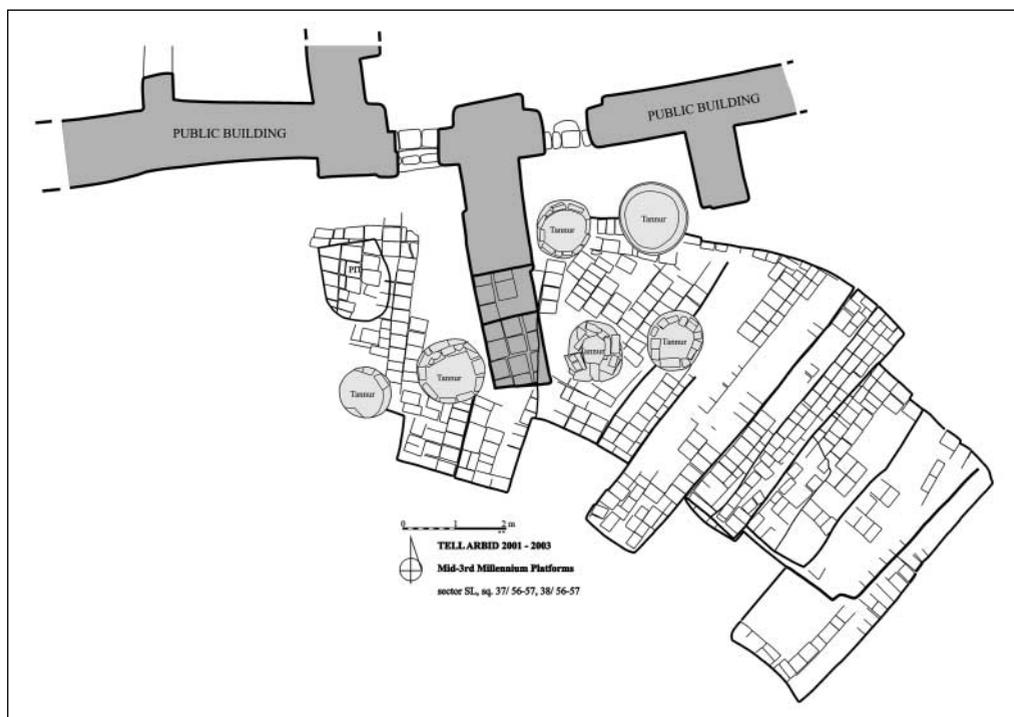


Fig. 2. Plan of the mud-brick platform in area "SL"  
(Drawing L. Rutkowski, inking M. Wagner)

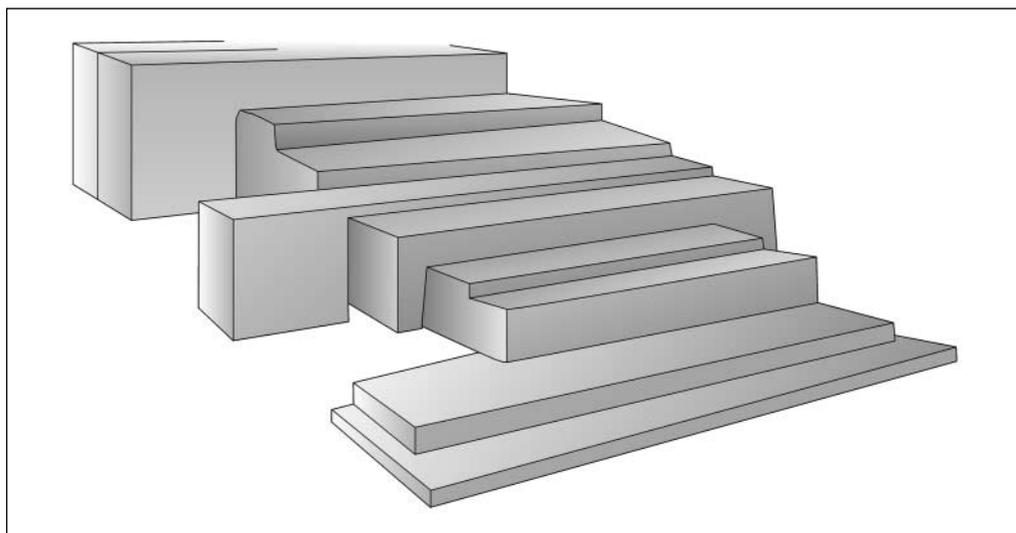


Fig. 3. Axonometric view of the platform in area "SL"  
(Drawing L. Rutkowski, inking M. Wagner)

dealing with a huge platform rather than a wall and certainly not a floor.

The massive construction, built of good quality mud bricks (measuring 32 x 24 cm), was at least 13 m long and over 8 m wide. It consisted of at least seven adjoining, although separately built segments of different length, all about 1.2 m wide (Figs. 2, 3). The best preserved segment, situated next to the kitchen area belonging to the “Public Building”, was over 2 m high. The foundations of successive segments suggest beyond any doubt

that the platform had been erected on an inclined slope falling away to the southeast. This indicates that it was a revetment structure, likely raised earlier than the “Public Building”, perhaps even before the building that was its direct predecessor (“Older Building”). Proof of this dating was provided by a burial (G1-38/56) discovered by one of the walls of the platform; the pit for the burial was dug already when the platform was standing. The grave goods included two broken Early Ninevite 5 vessels with incised decoration.

### AREA “SD” – EASTERN SLOPE OF THE CITADEL

Even more data on the 3rd millennium BC urban center on Tell Arbid was provided by the dig carried out in the bottom part of the eastern slope of the citadel. This part of area “SD” was investigated already in 1998 and 1999, when a considerable sector of well preserved domestic architecture of the

3rd millennium BC was uncovered, including houses of the Late ED III and Early Akkadian periods (Early Jezireh IIIb and IVa).<sup>2)</sup> Work was now continued in square 36/65 and in three new trenches opened in squares: 35/64, 35/65 and 36/64 (total excavated area 350 m<sup>2</sup>).



Fig. 4. Grave goods from burial G3-35/64 in area “SD”  
(Photo A. Oleksiak)

2) See PAM X, Reports 1998 (1999), 213; PAM XI, Reports 1999 (2000), 281-284.

In the western part of area "SD", the newly opened trenches yielded the youngest remains represented were connected with the Khabour ware period. Heavy slope erosion had left virtually no regular architecture, but there were burials, six in all, dug into the earlier layers in squares 35/64 and 36/64. Adults were buried in mud brick chambers with brick vaults (although not always), as well as in simple pits, while children, if not buried in the brick chambers, were placed in large vessels. Grave goods represented the standard in this respect, observed in other tombs of the Khabour-ware period discovered to date all over Tell Arbid. The adult skeleton in grave G7-36/64 was found together with pottery vessels, 30 bone rings – presumably part of a belt of some kind – deposited in the hip area, a few agate and carnelian beads, a bronze pin with round notched head and a bronze figurine of a four-legged animal.



Fig. 5. Clay rattle from grave G3-35/64  
(Photo A. Oleksiak)

A pottery kiln in the southwestern part of square 35/64 could also be attributed to the Khabour-ware period. The oval firing chamber, over 2 m across on the longer axis, is preserved to a height of 2 m. It was built of mud bricks and had an "entrance" lined with rather big stones. Two brick buttresses inside the chamber presumably held up the firing grid. Some heavily burned waste was found in the fill, but more research is needed before a precise dating can be put forward.

The burials and the kiln were dug into a layer dated to the Akkadian and post-Akkadian periods. Fragments of *pisé* walls were discovered in squares 35/65 and 36/64, in the latter case they even appeared to follow a more regular outline. This structure seems to have encased a rubbish dump that existed for a long time. Scattered remains of brick walls, pits and sections of a channel or alley paved with potsherds (square 36/64). Contemporary with these architectural remains were three graves, two of which (G1-35/65 and G1-36/65) were of Akkadian date. The adult skeletons had been laid in contracted position, their heads turned to the west. In one case, the grave inventory consisted of eight pots, in the other of seven. The third of the burials, a child's grave (G3-35/64) in the southern part of the square, was made in a big cooking pot and the skull, which had not been accommodated inside it, was covered separately with a large post-Akkadian sherd. The grave goods were composed of seven small vases, a circular pendant of bronze, a circular disc also of bronze, presumably intended as a dress appliqué, one golden earring and one silver one, not to mention a wealth of beads, 70 in all, including one golden one, three of lapis lazuli, close to 30 silver ones and almost 20 made of carnelian (Fig. 4). A less run-of-the-mill object in this grave was a rattle in the form of a bird (dove ?) (Fig. 5).

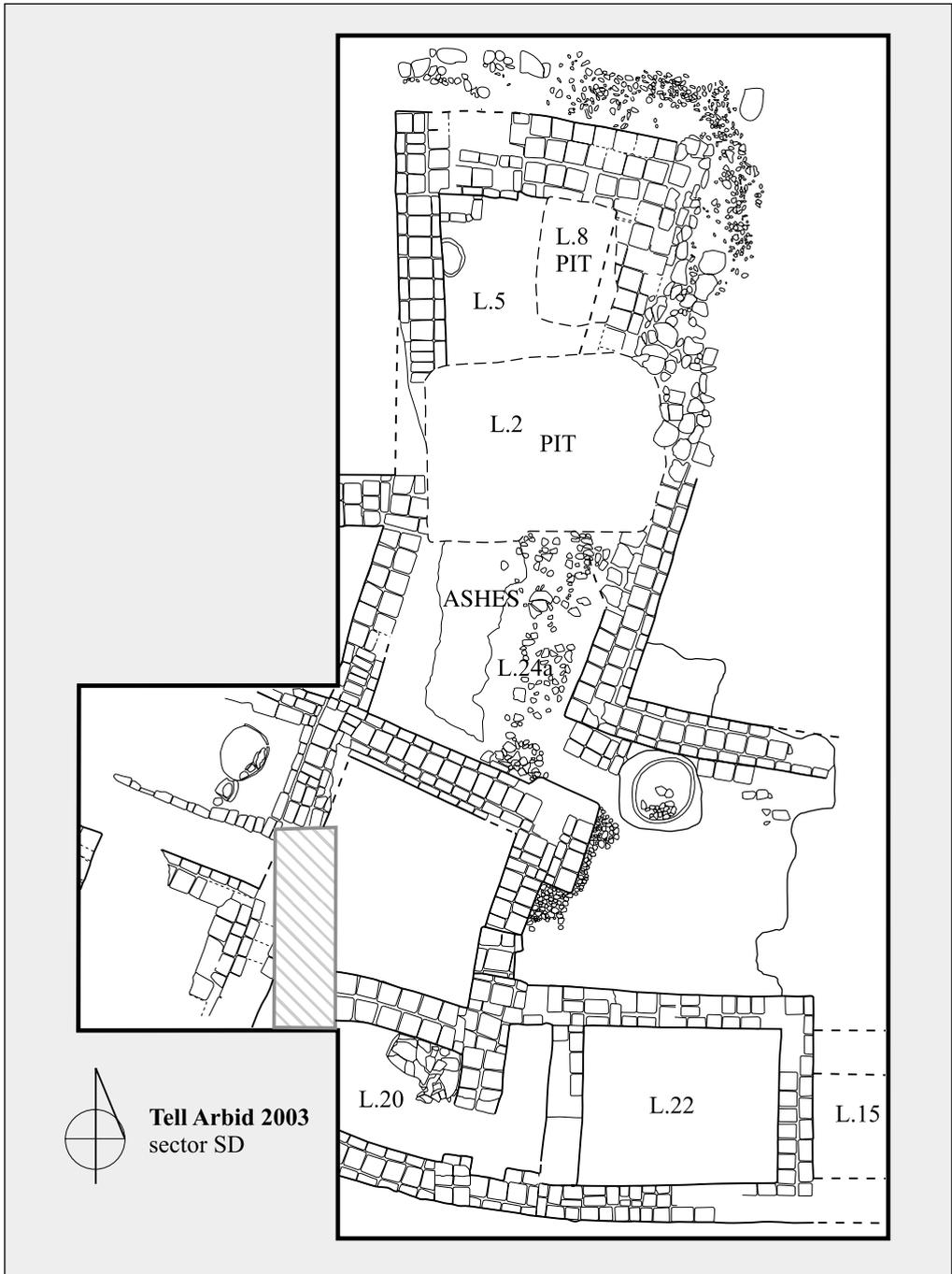
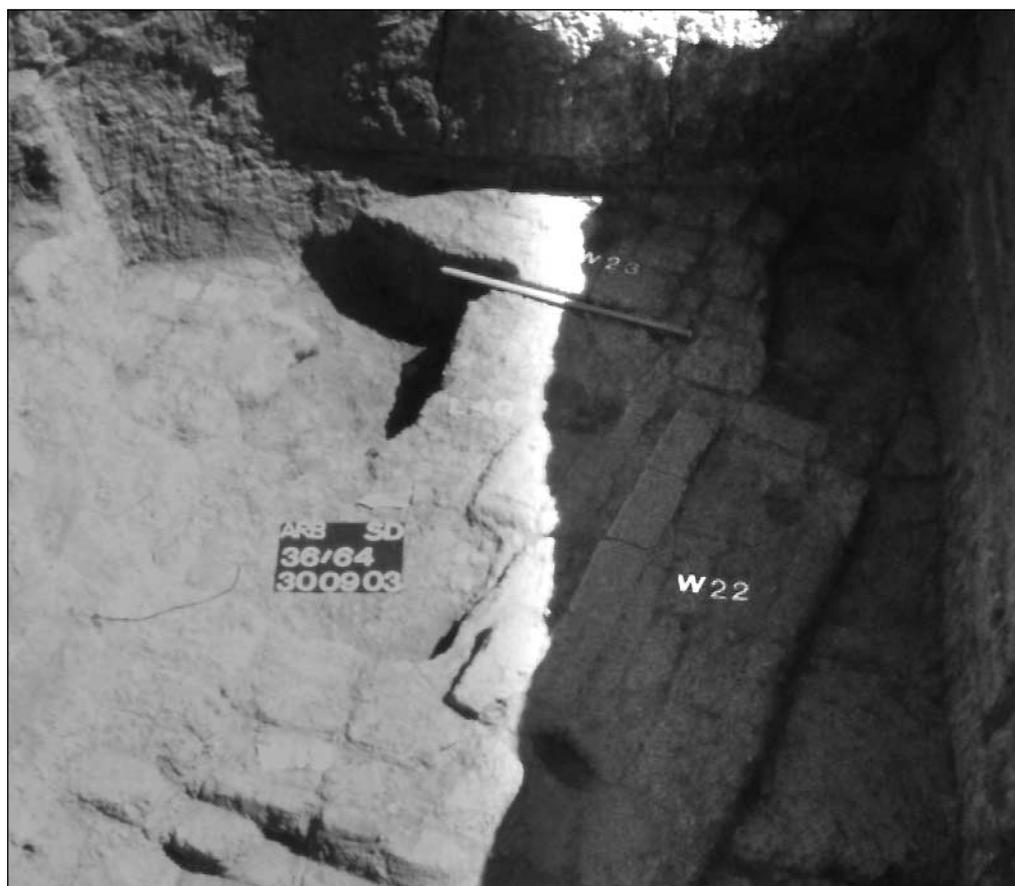


Fig. 6. Plan of the “Northern House” in area “SD” (squares 35/65 and 36/65) after the 2003 season (Drawing M. Momot, D. Ławecka and M. Wagner)

The season's fieldwork also permitted the plan of a Late ED III house (the "northern" one of the habitation complexes discovered in this area in 1999) to be clarified. Yet another room (locus 5) was cleared on the northern side of the building, in square 35/65. It had a doorway in the northern wall with steps in the entrance. The southwestern boundary of the complex was also traced this season (in square 36/64). In the courtyard (locus 24a), there was a sewage channel lined with big blocks of basalt and limestone, leading to the northeast and outside the structure; it was at

least 5 m long and was intended as a means of discharging excess rainwater (*Fig. 6*).

Architecture, presumably also of domestic nature, was discovered west of the "Northern House". Two such contemporary complexes were located in the southern part of square 36/64, one composed of at least three rooms, the other of two at least. The orientation of both paralleled more or less that of the "Northern House" (*Fig. 7*). Further exploration in the coming season should clarify the interrelations between these two complexes and the "Northern House".



*Fig. 7. Fragments of ED III structures discovered in square 36/64 (Photo A. Oleksiak)*

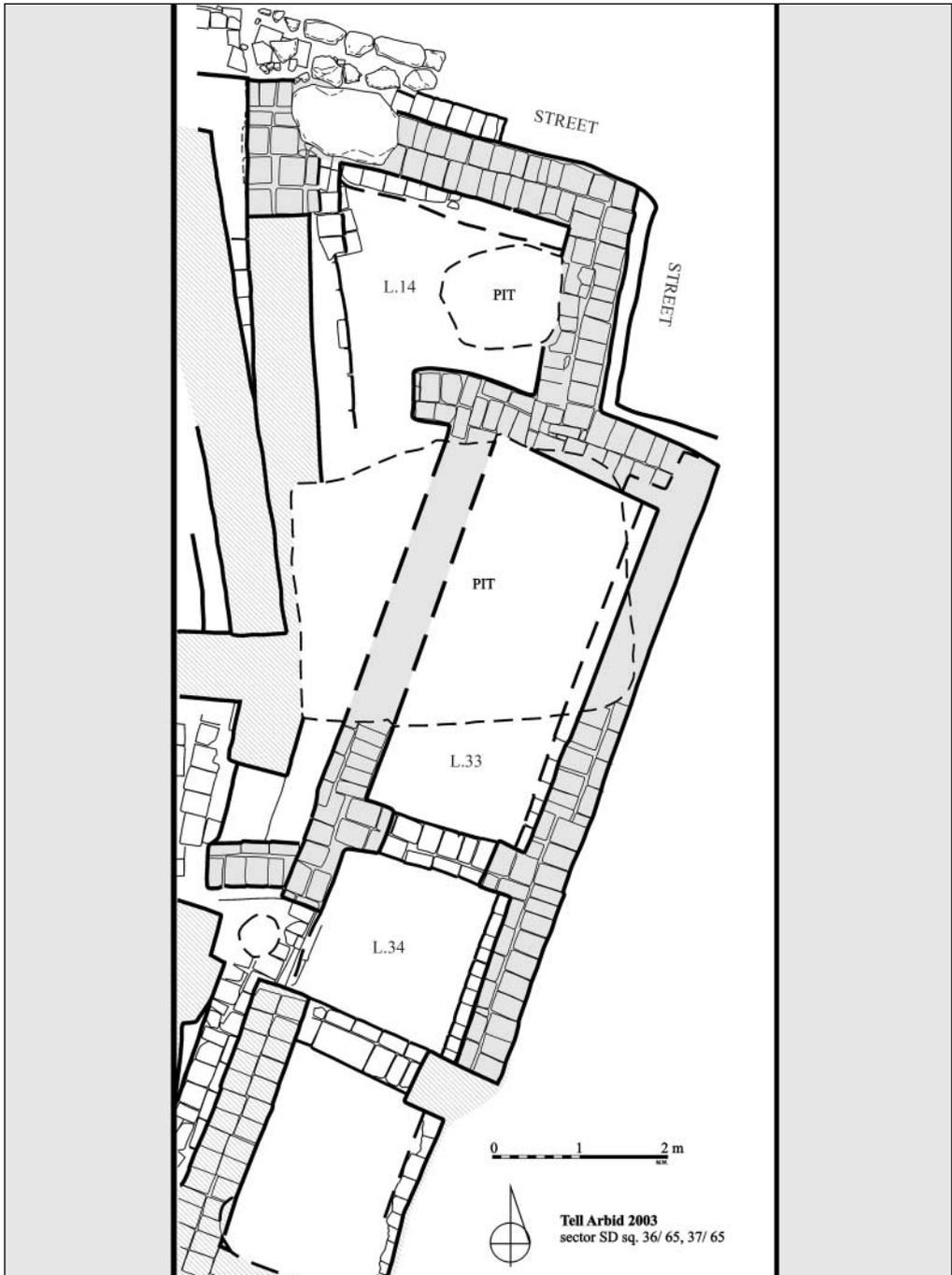


Fig. 8. Plan of building with stone entrance in squares 35/65 and 36/63  
(Drawing M. Momot, D. Ławecka and M. Wagner)

## AREA "SD" – BUILDING WITH STONE ENTRANCE

The building uncovered in squares 35/65 and 36/65, directly under the "Northern House" of the end of Early Jezireh IIIb period, followed a similar orientation, that is, NE-SW, and was heavily damaged by a later quadrangular pit dug in the courtyard of the "Northern House". The earlier building is small and elongated in shape, 8 m long and 3 m wide. It is composed of two rooms set in a row, one larger and one very small, communicating by a narrow doorway. A courtyard of roughly triangular shape extended northeast of the building (*Fig. 8*). The entrance to the building had been destroyed by the later pit, but there is every reason to think that it was situated in the western wall, near the northwestern corner of the structure, reinforced with a substantial buttress on the outside. The

alleged doorway led to the bigger of the two rooms and from it through a centrally situated passage to the next room, which measured c. 2 x 2 m. The remains of a narrow passageway, still to be fully excavated, suggested the presence of a niche or small annex in the west wall of this room. In the latest phase of this complex, the interior was paved with regularly arranged bricks forming a floor or a bedding under a floor that has disappeared entirely.

The entrance to the complex was 1.3 m wide. The threshold consisted of a large stone block, from which you descended three stone steps to the level of the street (*Fig. 9*). The latter was rather a small square, c. 6 x 2.5 m, lying at the intersection of three narrow alleys, one running west, another south and the third straight



*Fig. 9. Stone-paved street and the steps and threshold of the "building with stone entrance" (Photo A. Oleksiak)*

from the building entrance to the north. This last alley, clearly integrated with the entrance to our complex, was paved with limestone slabs. Nothing like this has ever been discovered at Tell Arbid. The pottery assemblage was not very rich and quite dispersed, yet it provided a dating for the structure in the Early Dynastic IIIa. Neither was there anything in the assemblage that could help to identify the function of the complex. It was most certainly not an ordinary residential house. The extensive use of stone in its construction, not seen elsewhere in ED III buildings on Tell Arbid, and the form of the structure with a “bent axis” type of entrance and courtyard bring to mind the

sacral buildings known from the Diyala region. At present, it is not clear whether this structure was in fact a small cult complex, perhaps a neighborhood cultic center, or an entirely different kind of building. For the present, we shall refer to it as the “Building with stone entrance”, even though the temple hypothesis appears quite likely. Clearing of the western boundary of the structure should give us an idea of the earlier phases, evidence of which came to light in the sides of the later pit that had damaged the structure. On the east, the building was adjoined by areas of a domestic function, not interconnected structurally with the complex in any way. In one of these contemporary areas, two

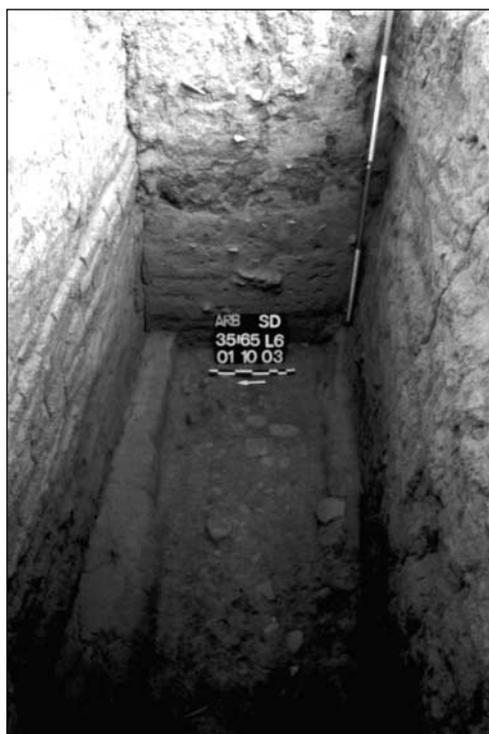


Fig. 10. Lower level of the “eastern” street in area “SD”; successive street levels seen in section in back wall of trench (Photo A. Oleksiak)



Fig. 11. Clay model of a covered wagon found in area “SD” (Photo A. Oleksiak)

round brick facilities sunk below ground level were noted. Inside each of these features, which both measured about 1 m across, there was another, smaller pit (dia. c. 0.5 m) lined with bricks. The absence of ashes and traces of burning excludes identification with any kind of furnace. These were rather “thermoses” of sorts, serving to store easily spoilt products in a cool place.

Of the three alleys mentioned above, only the one running south and turning eastward was explored in more detail. It was 1.25 m wide on average and was used as

a passage for a long time preceding the last construction phase of the “Building with stone entrance”. In the earlier period of its existence, the walls of the houses aligned with it were reinforced at the base with narrow clay benches forming a kind of curb in the alley (*Fig. 10*). If one disregards the grave inventories, the small finds from area “SD” were modest, to say the least. One exception was an intact clay model of a covered wagon (*Fig. 11*), undoubtedly of Early Dynastic III date, even though discovered in unclear stratigraphic context near the eastern edge of the area.

## AREA “D” – CITY DISTRICT OF NINIVEH 5 DATE

Area “D” in the northwestern corner of the citadel continued to be explored in the same four adjoining squares where investigations had been ongoing for the past few seasons (squares 29/41, 30/41, 29/42 and 30/42) with the heaviest emphasis being laid on the northern part of the area. The main objective here was a habitation district of Niniveh 5 date, fragments of which had been uncovered in 2001-2002.

Cutting through the uncovered architecture from east to west is a major street paved with potsherds; at its eastern end, this tract arches away to the north with a cul-de-sac opening off it to the south. House entrances were situated in this cul-de-sac (*Fig. 12*). On the southern side of the big street, fragments of at least three houses were noted during previous fieldwork. This season, the function of the mysterious multiroom structure with brick platforms situated at the corner of the paved street and the cul-de-sac was determined. A better understanding of this part of the ancient town followed from this discovery, as the building turned out to be a small granary, c. 10.8 m long and 7.2 m wide. The grain-storage facility, which presuma-

bly served the needs of the local inhabitants, consisted of five rooms, one narrow and apparently open corridor and at least two brick platforms intended for drying grain. A deep circular pit with brick-lined bottom, found in the northeastern corner of the complex, was not of Hellenistic date contrary to our earlier suspicions, but should rather be identified as a Ninevite-5 silo. It seems that in the late phase of the granary, the silo was excavated in one of the platforms used for drying grain, becoming an integral part of the facility. The entrance to the granary complex led from the cul-de-sac into a corridor (loci 33-30/42), no wider than c. 1 m along the entire length, which was close to 8.5 m. From it the other rooms were accessed: loci 3-29/42 and 5-29/41 had regular doorways, while the others apparently had trapdoors in the roofs. A small brick construction (locus 19-30/42) by the northern wall of the street may have supported a set of steps that led up to the roof.

All the rooms explored this year were of evidently domestic character. Locus 5-29/42 was unquestionably a grain store. It had no



doorway, measured 1.9 x 1.5 m, and had internal buttresses reinforcing the walls, which have been preserved to a height of 1.6 m. The pavement was made of mud bricks. The buttresses seem to have been added at a later date and their splayed tops suggest that they were intended as a support for the roof, presumably made of some perishable material. The fill of this small room contained large amounts of carbonized grain.

Loci 4-29/42 and 4-30/41 must have served a similar storage function. The loci 4 and 5 in square 29/42 initially formed a single unit, only later subdivided to create a smaller room (locus 5-29/42). The grain-storage facility also included a room

(locus 3-29/42) intended for the processing of stored foodstuffs. It was one of the rooms entered from the corridor and measured 2.7 x 1.5 m. It had survived in good condition, the walls revealing fine plastering and the floor covered with a gypsum plaster. Two quadrangular clay bins were found in the northern part of the room and a small round pit and smashed jar in the southern part (Fig. 13).

Another building of Nineveh 5 date was found to adjoin the granary on the west (square 30/41). It was aligned with the same E-W street and consisted of three rooms (loci 3, 7, 8-30/41), uncovered already last year.<sup>3)</sup> Further explorations demonstrated that the floor levels in these



Fig. 13. Room for processing foodstuffs in the grain storage facility of Nineveh 5 date in area "D" (Photo A. Reiche)



Fig. 14. One of the rooms of a Ninevite-5 house adjoining the granary in area "D" (Photo A. Reiche)

3) See PAM XIV, Reports 2002 (2003), 312 and Fig. 10.

three rooms were much lower than previously thought and that the door openings were situated differently. It has been made clear that the house consisted of more than four rooms, the three lining the street being of clearly domestic function. Centrally in locus 3-30/41, which occupied the northwestern corner of the house, there were two horseshoe-shaped hearths and an adjacent brick platform (*Fig. 14*). The northeastern corner of this room, which measured 3 x 1.8 m, was occupied by a small round pit with brick-lined edges. The walls, rising to a height of 1.5 m, as well as the floor and all the installations were coated with white plaster. Characteristic Ninevite cups and animal bones were strewn across the floor. A door with a brick step and threshold led from this room southward and a "window" cut in the west wall connected it with the next room on the west, locus 7-30/41. The

latter room, measuring 3 x 2.4 m was largely taken up by a big round fireplace (dia. c. 2 m); a thin brick wall in one of the corners set off a place for dumping ashes from the fireplace.

Both these rooms were bigger initially, before being partitioned into smaller loci in a later occupational phase. It is difficult to ascertain whether both had roofs or whether one was an open courtyard, but it is clear that the house underwent some rebuilding during its existence. All the domestic facilities were equally well preserved as in the granary. The assemblage from these houses is noteworthy – the floors from the last period of use were littered with many whole or virtually whole Ninevite 5 vessels, which could suggest that the inhabitants had left in somewhat of a hurry. At the same time, there is no evidence of any evident destruction anywhere in the buildings explored so far.

## NORTH PART OF AREA "D"

The investigations also extended to the architecture situated north of the E-W street, which seems to have been a central artery in the district. Due to heavy slope erosion at this point, little was expected, but we felt an exploration of this part was essential for understanding the nature of the Ninevite-5 district as a whole. Two new trenches, 29/41 and 29/42, were opened. In the eastern part of the second square, we found our E-W artery arching away northwards. Northwest of it, sections of a house were uncovered (*Fig. 15*). The eastern boundary of the house is made up of an irregular room resembling a quarter circle in plan (locus 6-29/42), adapting in shape to the course of the street. Presumably because of the inconvenient shape, the wall was buttressed in three

places on the inside. A single doorway, 0.7 m wide, joins this room with the neighboring locus 7-29/42 on the west; this room was at least 3 m long and 2.9 m wide, and featured a fine brick pavement. The northern and western boundaries of the room are still covered up in the baulks. Further west of this complex, in square 29/41, another two Ninevite 5 period rooms were cleared; they do not appear to be part of the complex nor to be both part of one complex. Locus 1-29/41 featured some domestic installations – a big rectangular hearth and two rectangular bins built of bricks standing on edge.

Expectedly, the condition of the Ninevite architecture in this area is not spectacular, yet it is sufficient for further investigations in this area to be justified.

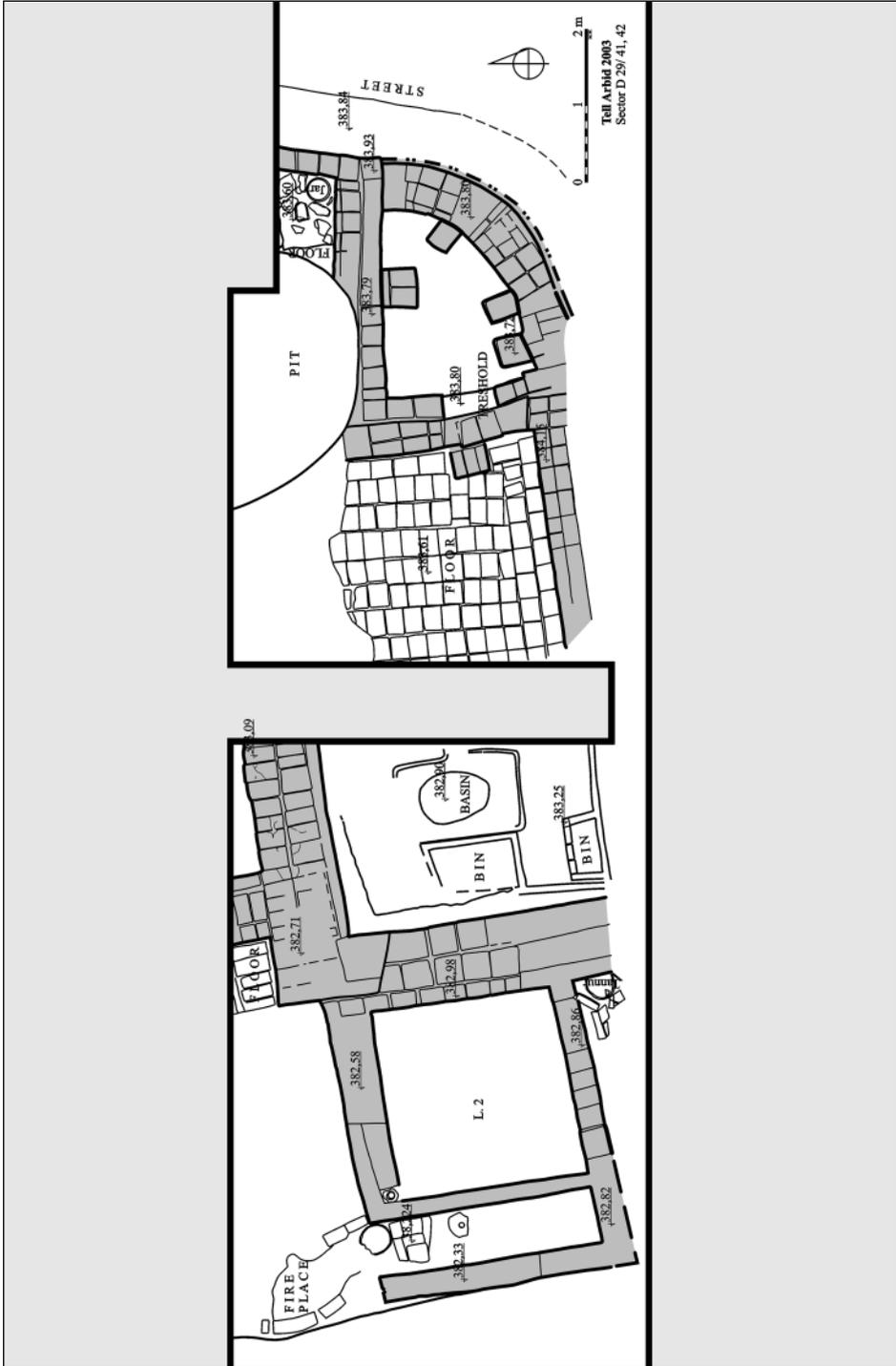
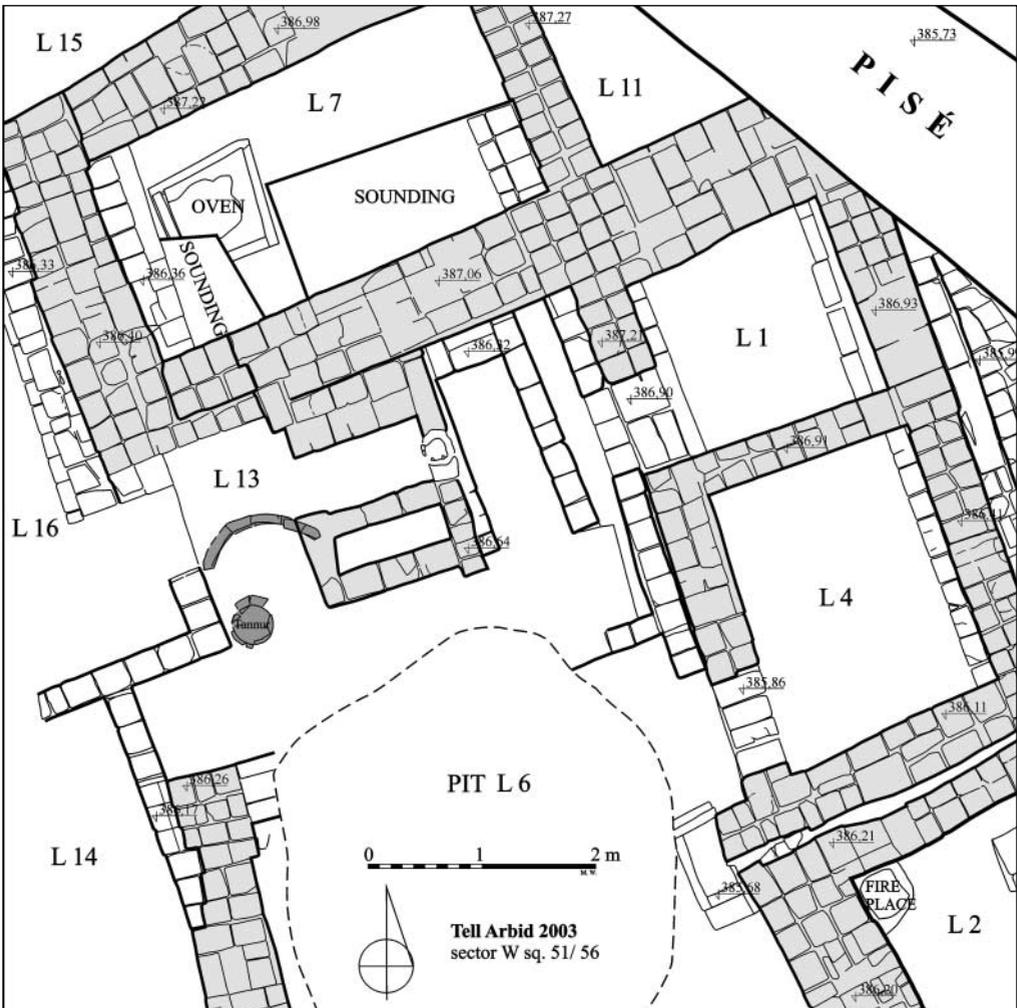


Fig. 15. Ninevite 5 period houses in the northern part of area "D"  
(Drawing P. Bieliński and M. Wagner)

## AREA "W" – SOUTHERN PART OF THE MAIN TELL

So far this part of the tell had not been subjected to systematic explorations, mainly because of evident erosion of the slopes. Two new trenches, 51/56 and 52/56, were now opened in the southeastern section of the main mound, on a southward falling slope at the northern edges of the modern village (cf. *Fig. 1*). Layers of Nineveh 5 period date

were discovered immediately under the ground surface. In the northern of the squares, a large section of a big housing complex was found to be heavily damaged by later, presumably Khabour-ware period pits and *pisé* walls sunk into the ground, as well as limited fragments of two other complexes. The main complex (*Fig. 16*),



*Fig. 16. Plan of the architecture excavated in square 51/56 of area "W"*  
(Drawing M. Wagner)

measuring c. 9 x 8 m, remained in use for a long time, as evidenced by numerous alterations and renovations representing at least three occupational phases. It was composed of at least four rooms and a courtyard full of domestic installations, such as *tannours*, fireplaces and brick bins, as well as a section of floor paved with potsherds. In one of the rooms of this house complex (locus 7-51/56), there was a rectangular installation encased in bricks standing on end and featuring a burnt-through floor. Nineveh 5 pottery was found in all the levels identified inside this house. In a fragment of neighboring house discovered in the southeastern corner of the square, two burials were noted, one of ED III period date and one slightly earlier.

In the other square 52/56, immediately to the south of the described Nineveh 5 structures, no contemporary architectural remains were identified. The area was riddled with later pits and heavily damaged by slope erosion; in Ninevite times, it

appears to have been used as a rubbish dump, mainly for discarding ashes. The assemblage included fragments of burnt clay *bullae* with seal impressions typical of Nineveh 5 style. Although the impressions represent four different cylinder seals, the motif is the same: a characteristic rosette (*Fig. 18*).

More architecture of Ninevite 5 date was encountered in the southern part of square 52/56. It appears to belong to two adjacent complexes. The outer northern wall is over 1 m thick. A room (locus 7-52/56) discovered in the southwestern corner of the square featured finely plastered walls and floor, and a rectangular pillar inside it. The neighboring room had a fine brick pavement (*Fig. 17*). Sound construction and a striking fineness of the gypsum plastering, not observed in other Ninevite 5 period buildings excavated so far on Tell Arbid, open the way to a hypothesis about the non-residential character of the newly uncovered structure.



*Fig. 17. Southern part of square 56/52: walls of a Ninevite 5 period building (Photo A. Oleksiak)*

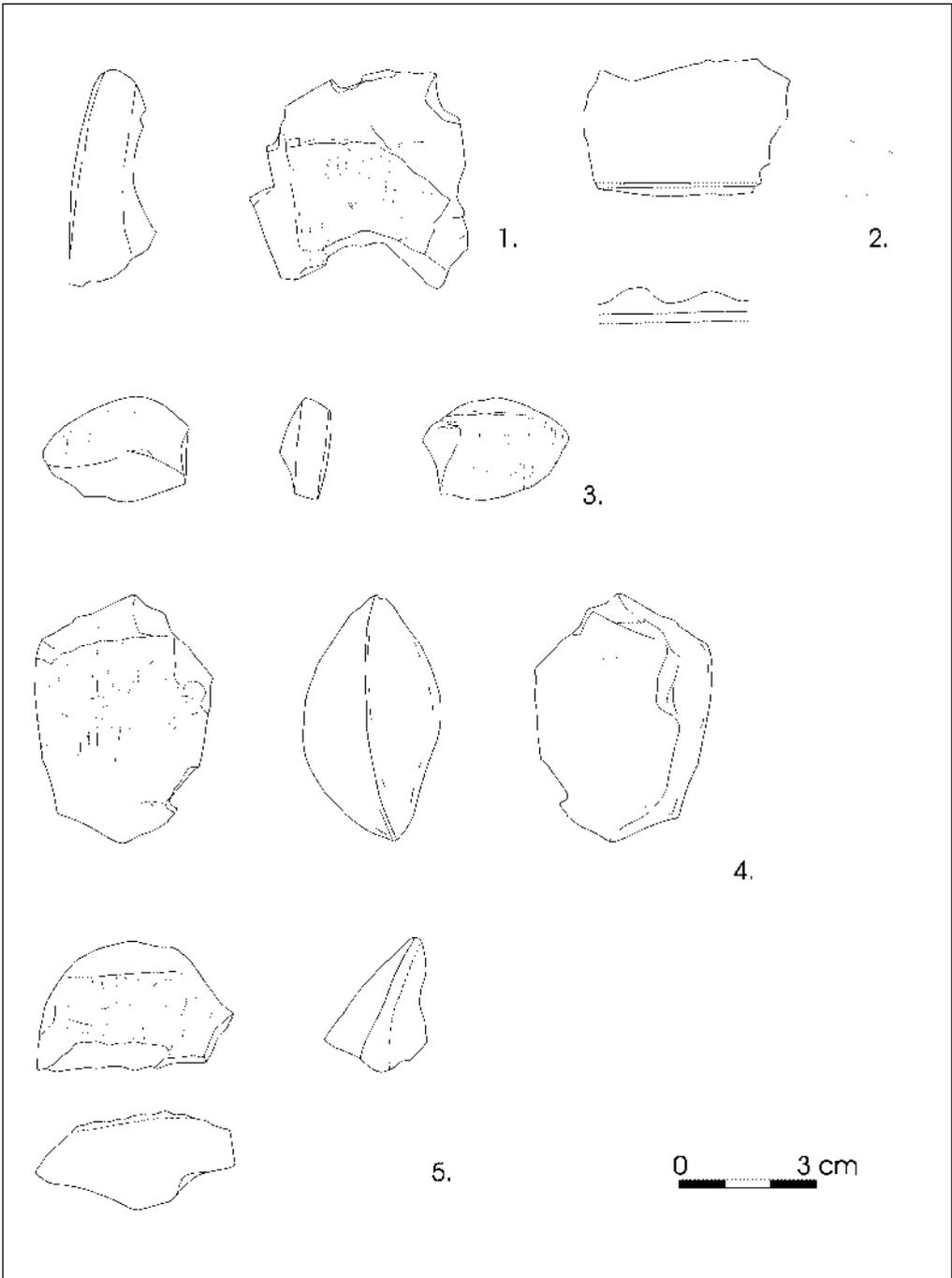


Fig. 18. Seal impressions on clay bullae found in area "W"  
 (Drawing M. Ozdarska, inking M. Wagner)

## SUMMARY

The eight season of excavations on Tell Arbid has added extensively to knowledge of urban occupation on the site in the Early Djezireh II–IIIb periods, that is, Nineveh 5 and Early Dynastic III according to the conventional periodization. The sizable extent of the town has been confirmed for the times of Nineveh 5 incised and excised ware culture. The town appears to have been divided into small districts that were furnished with granaries serving as grain-storage facilities for the use of the indigenous population. In the later part of the 3rd millennium BC, the town center must have been dominated by an ‘acropolis’ of sorts, its slopes reinforced with specially constructed terraces. On the summit of this

eminence, there was a structure, provisionally designated as the “Public Building”. Of interest is the “Building with stone entrance” of Early Dynastic III date, discovered in area “SD”. Assuming our preliminary interpretation of this complex is borne out in the course of further research, we would be dealing with a “district” temple that would have been contemporary with other “central” sanctuaries presumably to be found on the ‘acropolis’. While only further investigations can bring answers to these questions, we cannot but recognize the full richness of the forms of urban life evidenced by the ruins of the 3rd-millennium BC town on Tell Arbid.