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Preliminary Report on The First Season of Syro-Polish Excavations on Tell Arbid

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TELL ARBID

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE FIRST SEASON OF SYRO-POLISH EXCAVATIONS ON TELL ARBID

Piotr Bieliński

Tell Arbid is a large site in northeastern Syria, some 45 km south of the town of Kamishliye and approximately 50 km to the north-northeast of the town of Hassake, capital of the governorate.

Tell Arbid was the object of archaeological investigations already once in the past, in the 1930s, when Max Mallowan surveyed a few mounds in this area and even dug a few test trenches before concentrating his efforts on Chagar Bazar and Tell Brak. The eight trenches that he dug on the site in 1936 were sufficient to identify Tell Arbid as an important urban centre of the 3rd and first half of the 2nd millennium BC. During his explorations Mallowan uncovered part of a dwelling quarter and some tombs of the ED period, as well as graves from the Hellenistic period. In the sixty years that have passed from the time Mallowan dug at Tell Arbid the local inhabitants have repeatedly found valuable artifacts, which for the most part entered the private market of antiquities. There are reports of statuette fragments, clay vessels and even a large stone basin decorated with the image of a snake. Some further surveys carried out during the eighties (including the one made by Dr. Bertille Lyonnet) furnished potsherds belonging to the Halaf culture period, Ninevite 5 and ED III material, Khabour ware sherds, Neo-Assyrian sherds and some Hellenistic/Parthian sherds. Results of earlier investigations, as well as the location and topography of the site were the most important factors determining the choice of Tell Arbid as the object of our future excavations.

The joint Syro-Polish archaeological expedition to Tell Arbid was established in the summer of 1996 by an agreement between the Direction General of Antiquities and Museums of the Syrian

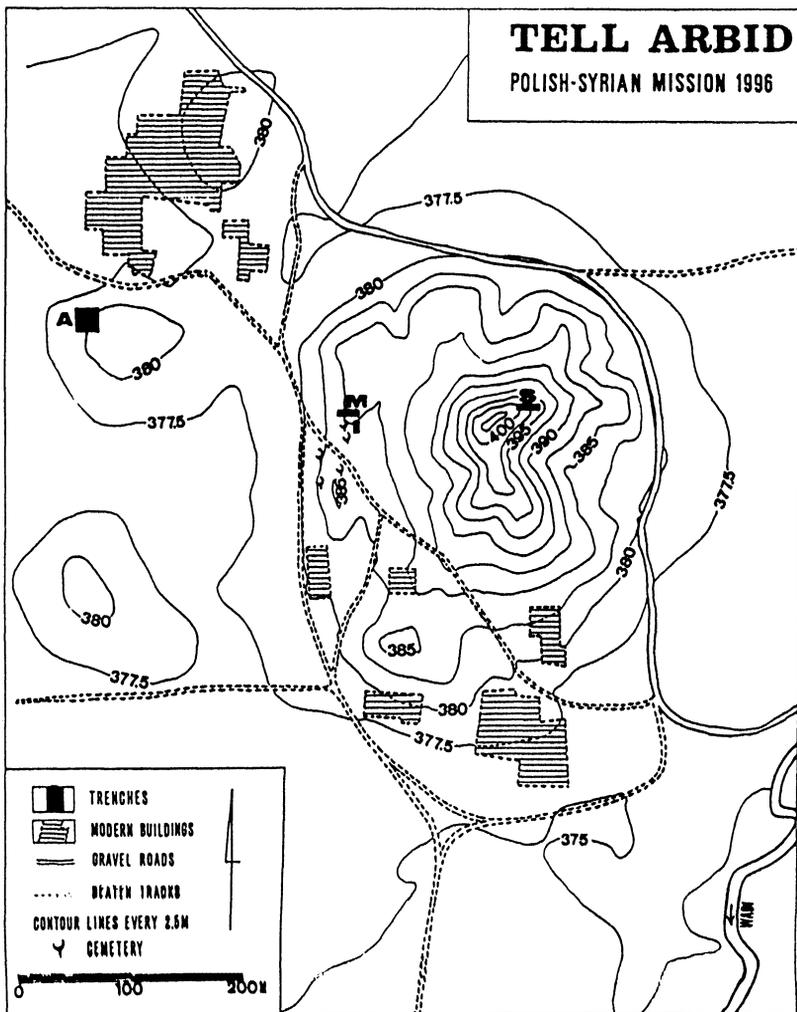


Fig. 1. Contour map of Tell Arbid.
Plan D. Pręgowski, ink drawing D. Ławecka.

Arab Republic and the Warsaw University represented by the Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology.¹

The first season of explorations on Tell Arbid had three principal aims. The most important one was to establish the precise topography of the site and compare it with the map published by Mallowan in the report about his activities in northern Syria.² Precise measurements taken this year served to prepare a 1:500 topographic map of the site (Fig. 1). Its total surface was found to exceed 38 ha and comprises the following:

- 1) citadel or "main" tell, as one might prefer to call it, measuring c. 440 x 300 m (surface of over 12 ha) and rising over 30 m above the present surface;
- 2) "lower town" occupying the western part of the site and measuring about 220 x 360 m, and finally
- 3) at least four secondary small mounds on the outskirts of the site.

One of the two modern villages, which currently exist within the site limits, is located on the largest of the mounds, which measures over 150 m in diameter and rises about 6 m.³ Even a cursory compar-

¹ The 1996 Tell Arbid mission comprised six archaeologists, four archaeology students and one topographer. The staff included: Ms Anna Smogorzewska, Mr. Mirosław Olbryś, Mr. Andrzej Reiche, Mr. Dariusz Szelaż, archaeologists from Warsaw University; Mr. David Gimbel, Oxford University; Ms Agnieszka Zysek, Ms Ewa Wiewiórka, Ms Joanna Lorynowicz, Mr. Leszek Talko (all students from Warsaw University's Institute of Archaeology); Mr. Dariusz Pręgowski (engineer-topographer) and, finally, Mr. Ahmad Serriye from the Direction General of Antiquities of the Arab Republic of Syria and the author, who acted as co-directors of the mission. The mission profited from the generous help and constant support of the General Direction of Antiquities, for which we are very grateful.

We owe also special acknowledgments to Elektromontaż Export SA and its president Mr. Jerzy Lewandowski, as well as AJRPOL and its president Mr. Maciej Strojnowski for their financial support, which was essential for the success of our explorations.

² M.E.L. Mallowan, The excavations at Tall Chagar Bazar and an archaeological survey of the Habur Region, *Iraq* IV (1937), fig. 3.

³ The smaller, southern one of these villages (see map) existed there already in the 1930s, while the northern one was not established until the 1960s.

ison of the plan published by Mallowan with the plan established by our topographer shows that the erosion process has advanced considerably since the 1930s with a large part of the site being affected, mostly by intensive cultivation of the fields by modern farmers from both Arbid villages.

Therefore, our second goal on Arbid this year was to prevent further destruction of the important areas of the site, such as a spot situated in the northwestern part of the site, where a small mound about 8 m high and measuring c. 100 m in diameter was being used by modern villagers as a source of clay for brickmaking. Large pits dug quite recently have damaged considerably the entire western part of this mound. Investigations in this area, our "A", served a dual purpose. While limiting any further damage to archaeological strata, they provided us with a stratigraphical sequence for this part of the site to compare with the sequence from the "main" tell. We opened a large trench, 20 x 10 m, set on the western slope of the mound, where over twenty modern and older pits had largely destroyed the ancient layers. The ceramic material collected from the surface of area "A", as well as from the fillings of the pits themselves, ranges from the Early Dynastic to Early Islamic, including Khabour, Mittanian and Hellenistic examples on the way. Despite the chronological scattering of the potsherds from this spot, excavations revealed evidence of just two main occupational layers, both from the 2nd millennium BC. It seems that the lower one was situated directly on culturally sterile soil, which was reached some 8.50 m below the top of the mound. In the upper layer, a large courtyard paved with potsherds set in grey clay was found to occupy the western part of the area. The courtyard was at least 5 x 4 m. On the south, it abutted a group of two and possibly even three narrow rooms belonging to some larger structure. The rooms (approx. 4.50 x 2.00 m) have walls composed of three rows of mud bricks. A sherd-paved

floor was uncovered in one of the rooms. The lower layer was exposed only in the western part of the area, where fragments of at least two mud brick houses and a narrow street were unearthed. The orientation of the mud-brick walls in this stratum is slightly different from that observed in the upper one. The most interesting architecture to be revealed in the lower layer was a bathroom with toilet, discovered in the southwestern corner of the trench. Small finds from area "A" include a small fragment of a clay *bullae* with two incomplete impressions of the same cylinder seal, evidently a Mitannian cylinder of the 17th/15th century BC.

The second area of Tell Arbid, where further damages had to be prevented, was a modern cemetery located on the western edge of the "main" tell. This cemetery had been established only a few years ago and tended to develop towards the center of the tell; hence we hoped to persuade the villagers to stop digging graves in this sector, while achieving a scientific goal at the same time. This was to investigate the Middle Bronze Age period fortifications, which (according to Mallowan's report) should be c. 40 m wide in this area. The three trenches in area "M", as we designated it, covered a total of 175 sq.m. In the northeastern part of the area, just below the actual ground surface, the tops of some poorly preserved mud brick walls belonging to some larger structure were discovered; only two modest rooms were included within the limits of our trenches. Given their small dimensions (2 x 1 m and 2.50 x 1.25 m) both rooms must have served storage purpose. On the south, the structure comprising these two rooms was reinforced with a *pisé* wall, which bordered in turn on some sort of narrow street paved with potsherds. The layer can be dated to the Khabour ware period. Further south, this stratum was badly damaged by erosion and the two other more substantial fragments of architecture that were exposed consisted of a partly preserved mud brick room with a floor also of mud bricks and of an equally poorly preserved fragmentary round structure (diam. c. 2.50 m).

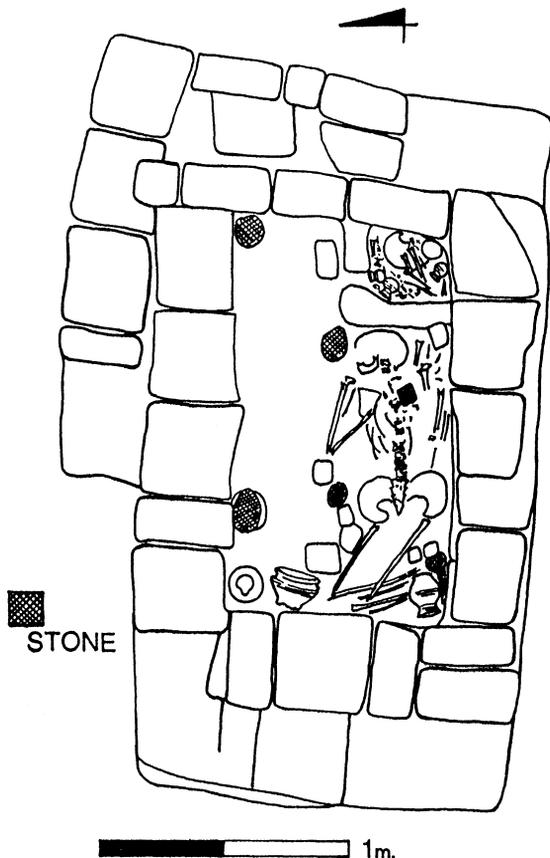


Fig. 2. Plan of the Khabour ware period grave from area "M".
Drawing E. Wiewiórka.

In the same layer but in the western part of area "M", a Khabour ware period grave was discovered (Fig. 2). The mud brick chamber (2.20 x 1.60 m) contained the skeleton of a woman and the bones of two children placed in a kind of small bin made of mud bricks set on end in the southeastern corner of the burial chamber. The woman's body was accompanied by five painted vessels: three jars, one bowl and one beaker,

while three painted miniature jars were found in the children's compartment (Fig. 3).

The first remains that could possibly be associated with the fortifications mentioned by Mallowan were discovered in the western part of the area just below this grave. These remains consisted of at least two parallel *pisé* walls each about 1.60 m wide, separated by segments of a larger wall made of mud brick. As only the top of this stratum was reached this year, nothing more can be said about this structure now.

Our third goal this year on Tell Arbid was to establish the stratigraphic sequence on the "main" tell. A long step trench was excavated on the eastern slope of the citadel, in an area which we labeled "S", which was selected because of the steep slope that descended from the very top of the mound. In view of the conditions, the trench was only 4 m wide and 20 m long. In its western part, closest to the top, an almost 4 m thick deposit of debris and rubbish was explored. It was composed of successive layers of clay, broken bricks and ashes. The collected ceramic material consisted mostly of Khabour ware pottery, but there were also 3rd millennium BC sherds, as well as two painted Halaf sherds. It seems that for some time in the 2nd millennium BC this part of the citadel was used as a waste area for all kinds of debris from the vicinity. On the east, this dump was bordered by two parallel *pisé* and mud-brick walls, seemingly erected to prevent the rubbish from slipping down the slope. In the eastern part of the "S" trench, an area containing *tannurs* and pits was cleared. The installations seem to be at least contemporaneous with the two walls limiting the debris on the east.

Below the accumulation of waste in the western part of trench "S", the tops of some very well preserved mud-brick walls belonging to a single structure were reached. One of these walls, running approximately N-S, is about 1 m thick and was reinforced on the east with three substantial buttresses. It might be the

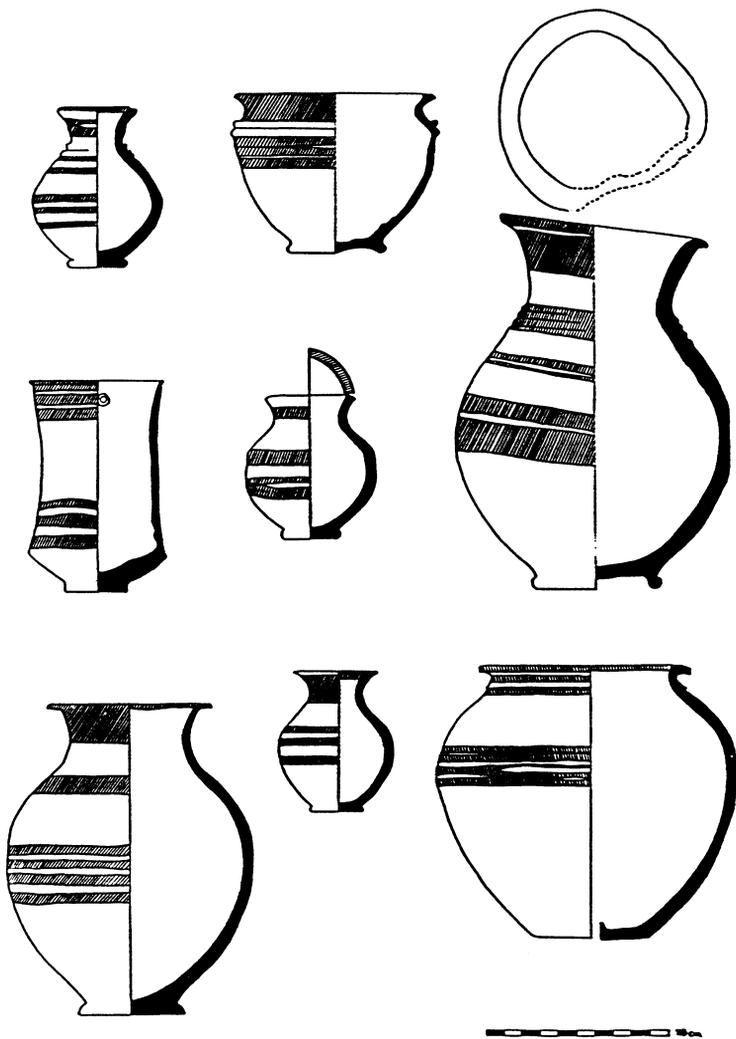


Fig. 3. Pottery found in the Khabour ware period grave from area "M".
Drawings E. Wiewiórka and P. Bieliński, ink drawing
M. Puzkarski.

outer wall of a building. The inner walls are thinner (over 0.60 m wide) and divide the space revealed within the limits of the "S" trench into three rooms. The largest of these units was at least 4 m long and not less than 2.50 m wide; of the others only the corners have been uncovered. Any dating of this structure will have to wait until the floor level is reached, because the ceramic material from the fill is inconclusive in this respect.