

Excavations at Tall Munbāqa / Ekalte (Province of Raqqa)
1999 – 2010

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Introduction

At the Bronze Age city mound of Tall Munbāqa, ancient Ekalte, excavations were re-started in 1999 in the area between the top of the mound („Kuppe“) the inner city („Innenstadt“) and the North gate („Nordtor“). During six campaigns large areas were excavated. It was the second phase of excavations at this significant site on the left border of the river Euphrates, today Lake Assad.¹

Excavations were directed by Dittmar Machule (*Technische Universität Hamburg-Harburg*) and Felix Blocher (*Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg*). We would like to thank the members of the *Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées (DGAM)* at Damascus providing the excavation permit and supporting us in every way, together with the local authorities of the *DGAM* in Raqqa. We also thank our dear guardian family at Zreidjiye for constant help and support during all these years.

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For all campaigns (1999, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008, and 2010) preliminary reports were published under the auspices of the *Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft*.² Currently the final publication is in preparation.

Architecture

Geophysical prospections in 1993 showed a huge two-roomed rectangular building immediately south of the northern city-wall (fig. 1).³ Since all the previously excavated monumental buildings belonging to the type of *templum in antis* were situated on the top of the mound („Kuppe“), the new area was chosen in 1999 for excavation because of its urbanistic relevance. Our decision was supported by the fact that Late Bronze Age house plans in residential areas were already well known, from examples in the inner city (mainly „Ibrahims Garten“), in the outer city („Außenstadt“), and on top of the mound („Kuppe“).⁴

In 2010 the sanctuary with the temple („Steinbau 4“) and the square south of it presented themselves in impressive clarity (fig. 2-5, 16).⁵ The city square had the capacity to house

¹ For the first phase of excavations 1969-1994 and a general introduction see WERNER 1998, cf. also MACHULE & BLOCHER 2013. The final publications covering this first phase are CZICHON&WERNER 1998, 2008; MAYER 2001, and WERNER 2004. Further volumes are in preparation, e.g. MACHULE in prep.

² BLOCHER et al. 2000, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2012.

³ BECKER et al. 1994, WERNER 1998, plan on end-paper.

⁴ WERNER 1998, p. 57-69.

⁵ BLOCHER et al. 2012, p. 37 Abb. 2.

large groups of populace and formed a transit area from the North gate to the sanctuary, to the residential areas in the South and to the city centre on top of the mound in the West. A wall is confining the square (fig. 5) thus protecting the different buildings behind it.

The sanctuary or holy compound was situated immediately opposite the North gate and thus clearly oriented to the faithful or pilgrims coming from outside the settlement.⁶ The temple was the first building in the town they saw after they had passed the city gate. Pottery finds in the temple and from the area of the North gate point to the Middle Bronze Age as the period of foundation. It was in those times that members of the Rabbaeans, a nomadic tribe, were located for sedentary life at Ekalte (Yakaltum) by order of king Shamshi-Adad I of Assyria.⁷

Two stone pillars, so-called betyls (*baityloi*), are of particular interest (figs. 6-7). The larger one standing immediately in front of the stairs of the temple is carefully masoned.⁸ The smaller one is placed at the outside of the temple in a corner situation (see fig. 4) and is left in a rough state of treatment.⁹ These betyls certainly were objects of veneration or ritual for different pious groups inside and outside the compound.¹⁰

We suppose that this temple was the sanctuary of the city god Bakhlaka mentioned in the clay tablets from the site.¹¹ This building as well as the three other temples on the “Kuppe” are oriented to WNW, the point of reference probably being the impressing Djebel Arouda on the other side of the former river valley (see figs. 3-4).¹²

The large public place south of the sanctuary is still widely covered by huge layers of more or less sterile deposits (fig. 3). Based on the prospection results from 1993 (fig. 1) it was possible to define its Eastern (fig. 5) and Western separating walls and some of the rooms behind it in the excavation.¹³ In these rooms we found nothing spectacular contrary to our expectations that there should be an important secular building as a counterpart to the temple. Thus the public area seems to have offered space for a large crowd, keeping at the same time the privacy of the inhabitants of the town. Despite restricted evidence the houses bordering the place do not seem to have had functions directed at servicing people from outside of the town.

At the southern end of the square there was the rather narrow and probably guarded entrance via street no. 7 to the inner town (figs. 1-2), the main residential area of ancient Ekalte. There prior to 1994 a good sample of Late Bronze Age house plans and room inventories has been excavated.

Selected small finds ¹⁴

Already during the 1999 campaign, in the rubbish covering the temple area, was found the terracotta relief of a sitting god with a horned crown (fig. 8).¹⁵ Originally the piece has

⁶ See BLOCHER 2010.

⁷ ZIEGLER 2009.

⁸ BLOCHER et al. 2007, p. 105-109 Abb. 8-12.

⁹ BLOCHER et al. 2007, p. 112-113 Abb. 13-14.

¹⁰ See e.g. DURAND 2005.

¹¹ MAYER 2001, TORRECILLA 2014.

¹² Concerning the temples on the “Kuppe” it was not yet possible to determine the deities venerated there.

¹³ BLOCHER et al. 2012, p. 38-44.

¹⁴ For the small finds from the excavations until 1994 see CZICHON & WERNER 1998, for the glyptic see WERNER 2004.

¹⁵ BLOCHER et al. 2000, p. 129 Abb. 5.

probably been part of a house model or similar. The deity is shown frontally wearing the typical Syrian coat with thick seams. Considering the many horns on his crown this god must have been an important one, perhaps Bakhlaka himself.

In one of the smaller rooms next to temple, room “b” (see fig.2, area 35/35), on the floor, we found a frit seal showing a drinking scene and, turned upside down, a mixed being with a human body and a cow’s head (fig. 9).¹⁶ While the drinking scene may point to the rituals in the temple, the hybrid could be interpreted as a being from the mythical sphere of the weather god. Bakhlaka was one of the many Syrian weather gods.

A comparable cow head is graved on the neck of a vessel found in room “c” (see fig. 2, area 36/35) of the temple compound and may point to the same phenomenon (fig. 10).¹⁷

A sealed clay bulla from the rubbish covering the cella room of the temple shows a typical seal design of the Mittani era (fig. 11).¹⁸ Three identical men in short dresses, a caprid and a guilloche, constitute the seal design.

In one of the cella soundings we found a small stamp seal made from frit showing a very simplified Egyptian *ankh* design (fig. 12a-b).¹⁹ This seal is, beside the pottery (see below), another hint to the Middle Bronze Age.²⁰

Finally from the rubbish covering the public space comes the small terracotta figurine of an equid carrying textiles or similar (fig. 13a-c), probably from the Late Bronze Age.²¹

Pottery ²²

The deposit of a group of pot stands and pots in a room (annex “a” to room “b” in the temple compound, see fig. 2, area 35/35) is worth mentioning (figs. 14a-b).²³ The vessels were hidden in a niche of a huge erratic stone wall behind a door blocked with mud brick. The blocking of the door has been ritually accompanied by a piece of bronze, a frit bead and five snail-shells from the river. The vessels have been produced on the potter’s wheel intentionally without bottom. The pot stands and some of the pots show a characteristically undulated lower end. The whole deposit may consist of cultic or ritual vessels that were taken out of use but could not be discarded for magical reasons.

Groups of Middle Bronze Age pottery have been found in the industrial area southeast of the North Gate and during the soundings in the cella of the temple, consisting mostly of small beakers (fig. 15).²⁴

¹⁶ BLOCHER et al. 2005, p. 105 Abb. 5.

¹⁷ BLOCHER et al. 2007, p. 124 Abb. 23.

¹⁸ BLOCHER et al. 2007, p. 120-121 Abb. 19 a-g.

¹⁹ BLOCHER et al. 2012, p. 67 Abb. 25.

²⁰ BLOCHER et al. 2012, p. 66-67.

²¹ BLOCHER et al. 2009, p. 93 Abb. 8.

²² For the pottery from the excavations until 1994 see CZICHON & WERNER 2008.

²³ BLOCHER et al. 2000, p. 128 and 130 Abb. 4 and 6.

²⁴ BLOCHER et al. 2012, p. 53 Abb. 14b.

Conclusions

The last six campaigns of excavations from 1999 to 2010 have confirmed the role of Tall Munbāqa (ancient Ekalte, in LBA, or Yakaltum, in MBA) as a small but vibrant town at the Djezire side of the Euphrates valley during the second phase of the Middle Bronze Age and the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1800 – 1250 B.C.).²⁵

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²⁵ For a recent chronological assessment of 2nd mill. B.C. Ekalte see WERNER&BLOCHER in press.

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Captions

Fig. 1

Plan of Tall Munbāqa showing the LBA results of the excavations until 1994 (bold lines) and of the 1993 geophysical prospection (thin lines)

Fig. 2

Plan of the sanctuary (“Steinbau 4”), the public area south of it, and the Northern city-gate at the end of the 2010 campaign

Fig. 3

View over the North gate and sanctuary area from East, with Djebel Arouda in the background

Fig. 4

View over the sanctuary from South-East

Fig. 5

The Eastern wall bordering the public area, and the North gate from South

Fig. 6

The larger betyl in the sanctuary in front of the temple entrance (h. 1,2 m)

Fig. 7

The smaller betyl at the South corner of the sanctuary (h. 1 m) (compare with fig. 4)

Fig. 8

Terracotta relief showing a sitting god in Syrian coat (h. 12,2 cm)

Fig. 9

Frit seal with a drinking scene and a mixed being (upside down) (h. 1,9 cm)

Fig. 10

Sherd showing an incised drawing of a cow’s head (l. 17,6 cm)

Fig. 11

Clay bulla with a seal impression typical for the Mittani era (l. 5,4 cm)

Fig. 12a-b

Frit stamp seal showing a schematized *ankh* sign (l. 1,2 cm)

Fig. 13a-c

Terracotta figurine of an equid carrying textiles or mats (l. 6,2 cm)

Fig. 14a-b

Pots and pot stands from the blocked niche

Fig. 15

Middle Bronze Age pottery group from a sounding in the temple cella

Fig. 16

The sanctuary area at the end of the 2010 campaign, seen from North. In the background left the village of Skif

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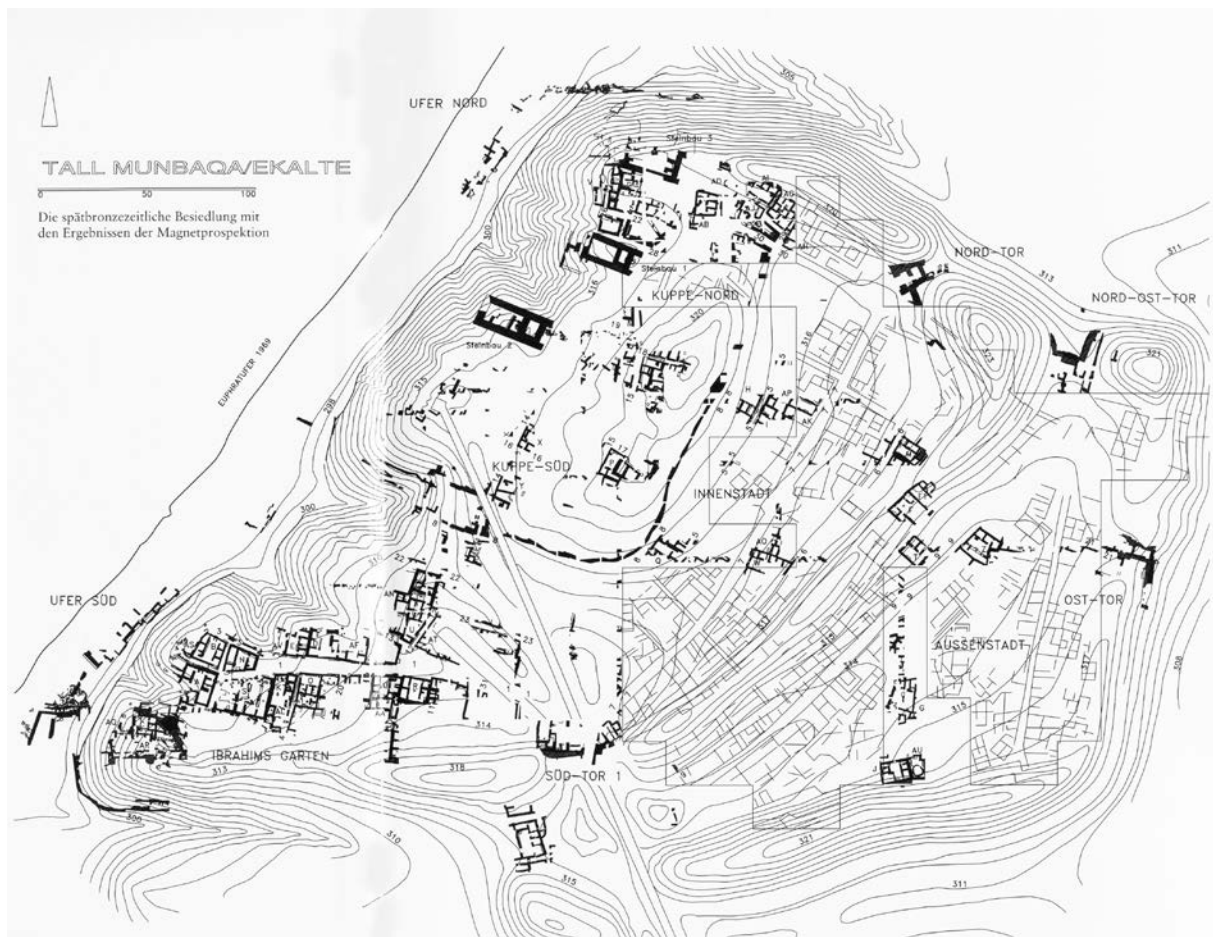


Fig. 1

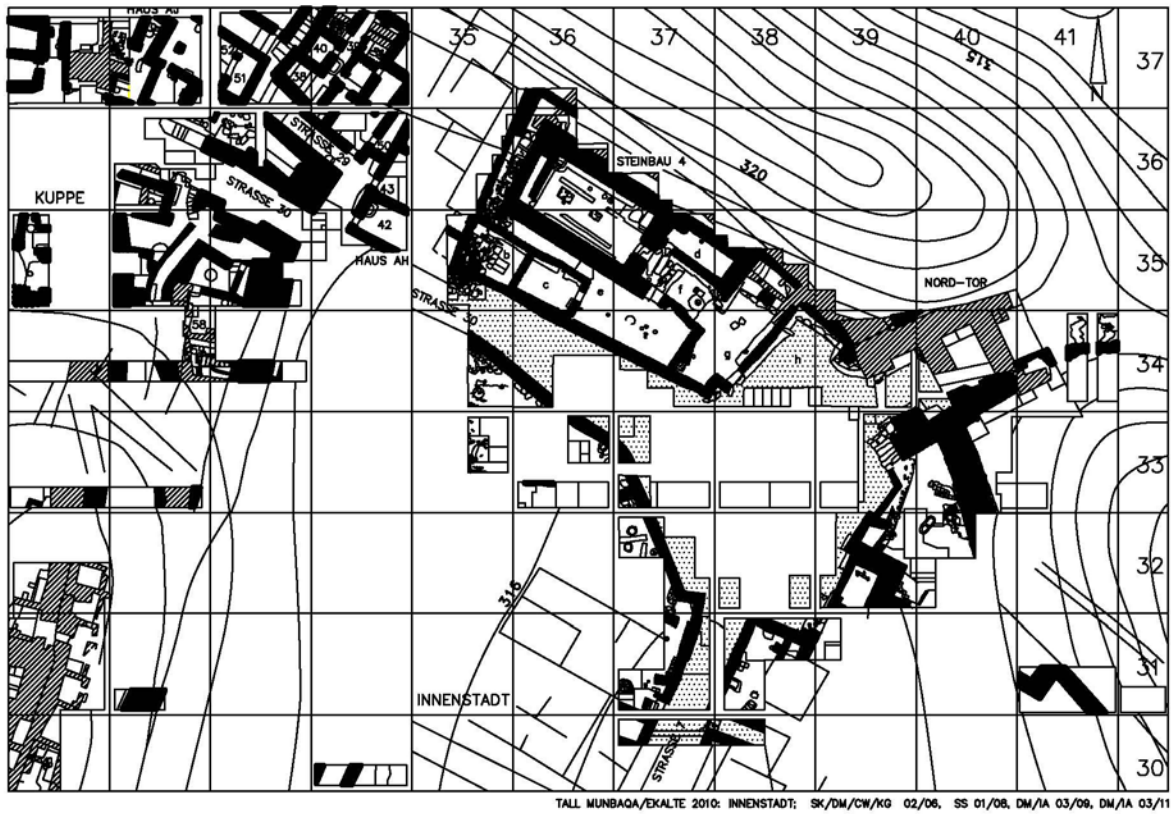


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

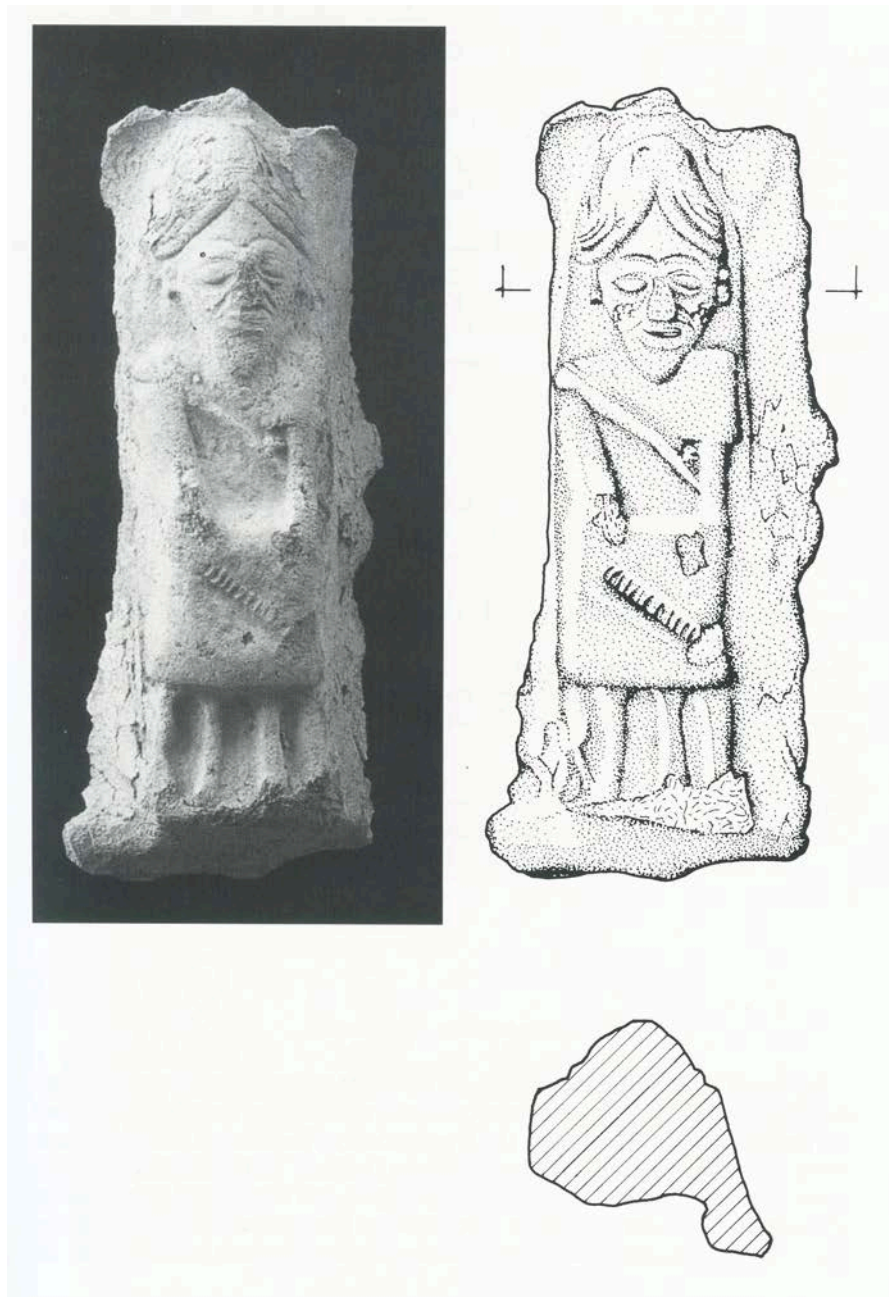


Fig. 8

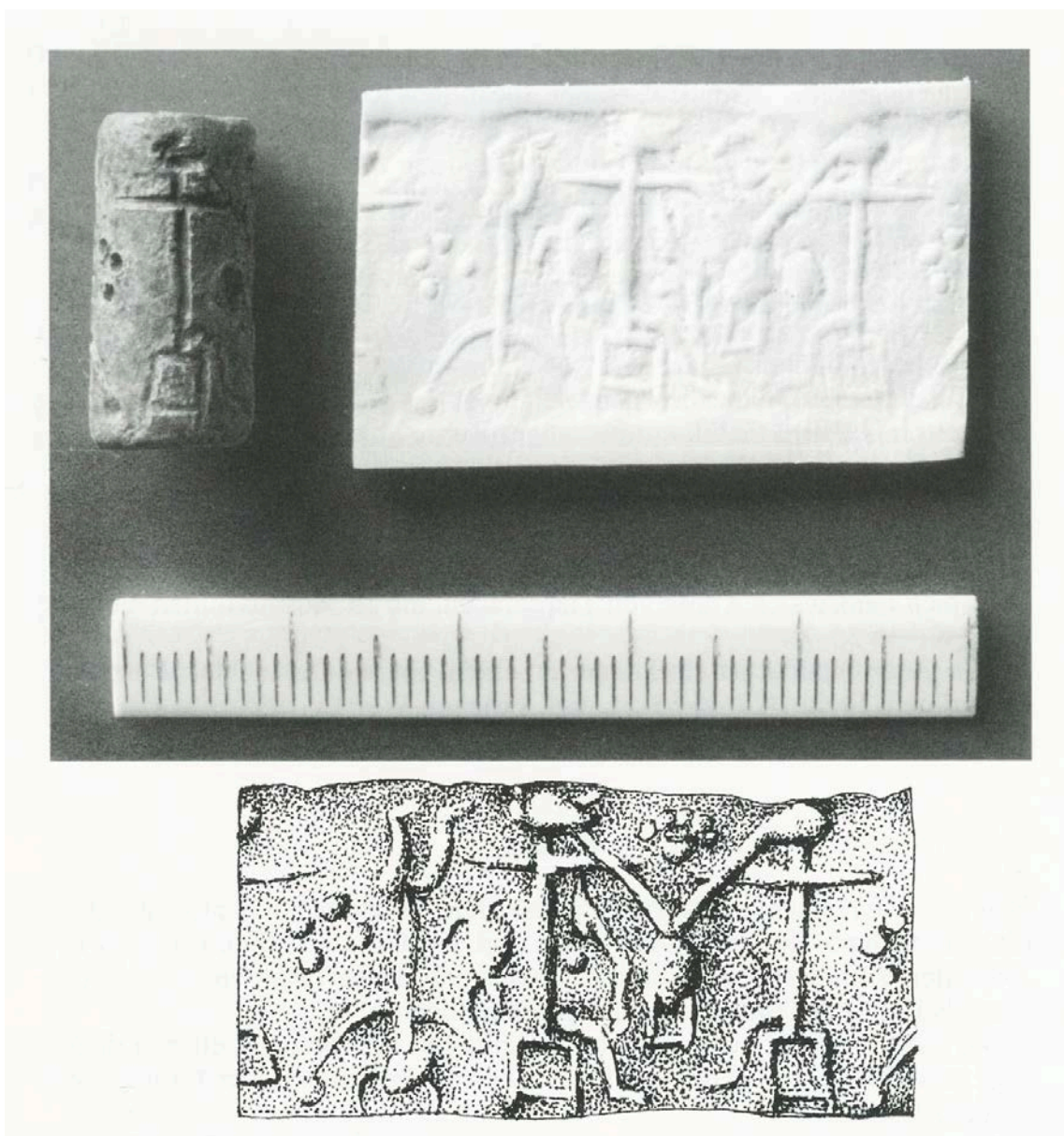


Fig. 9



Fig. 10

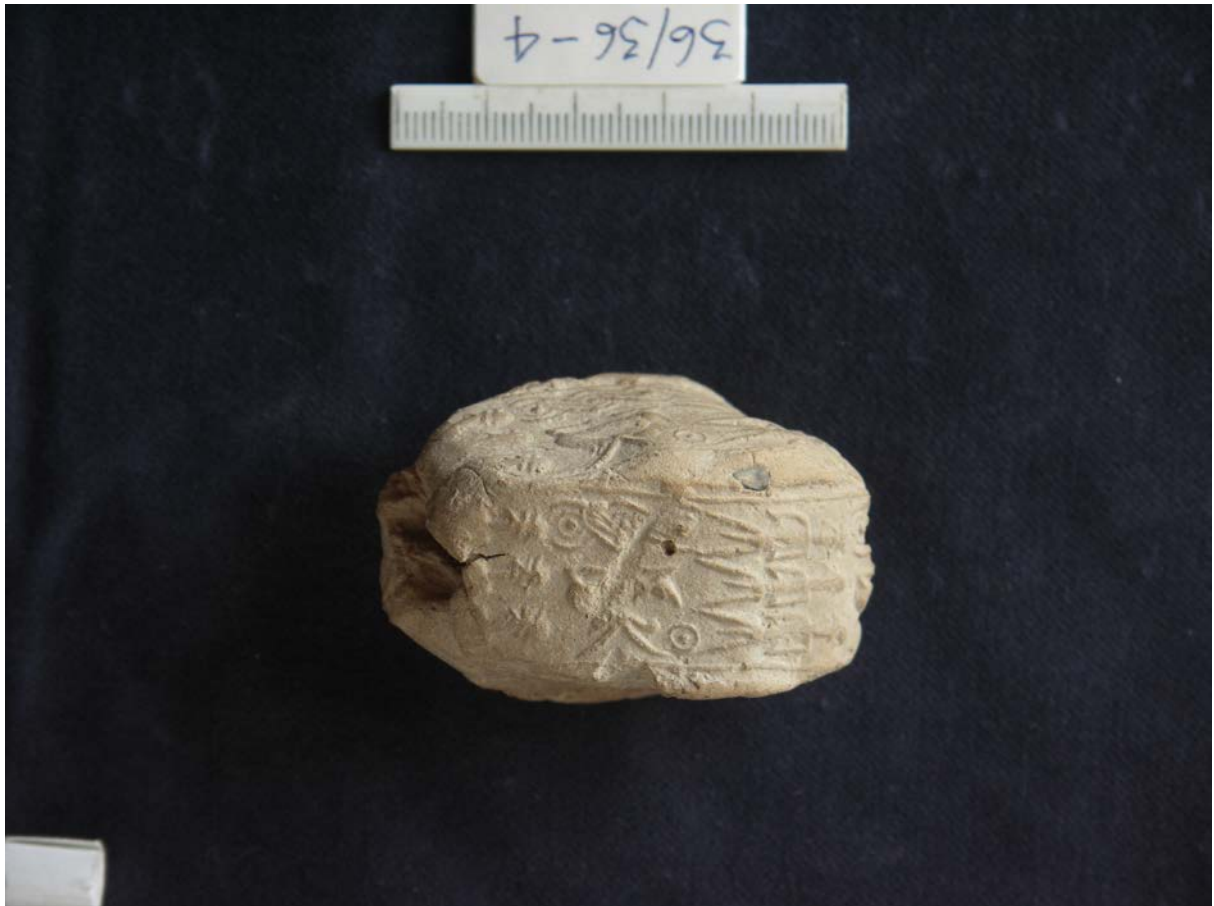


Fig. 11



Fig. 12a



Fig. 12b

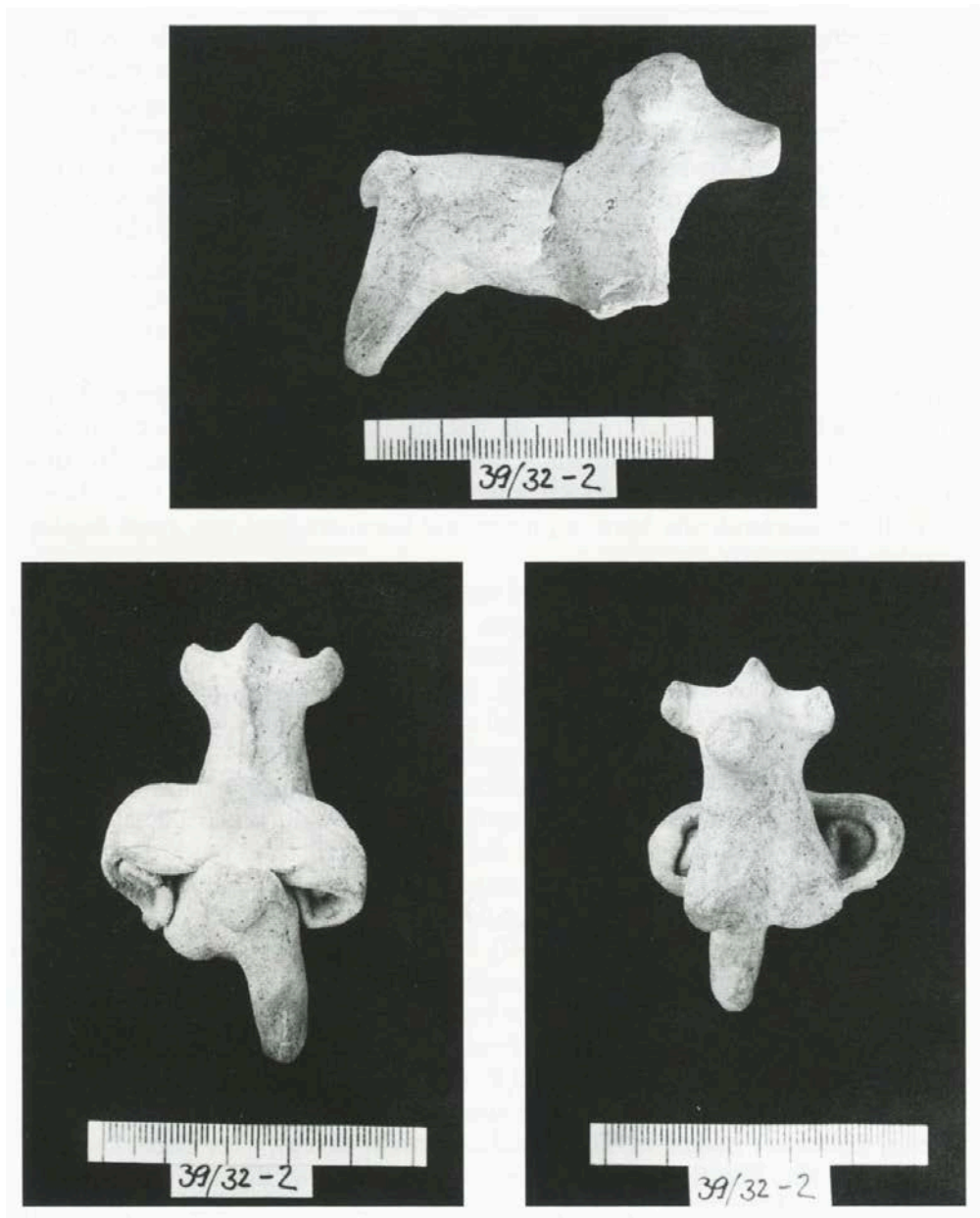


Fig. 13a-c

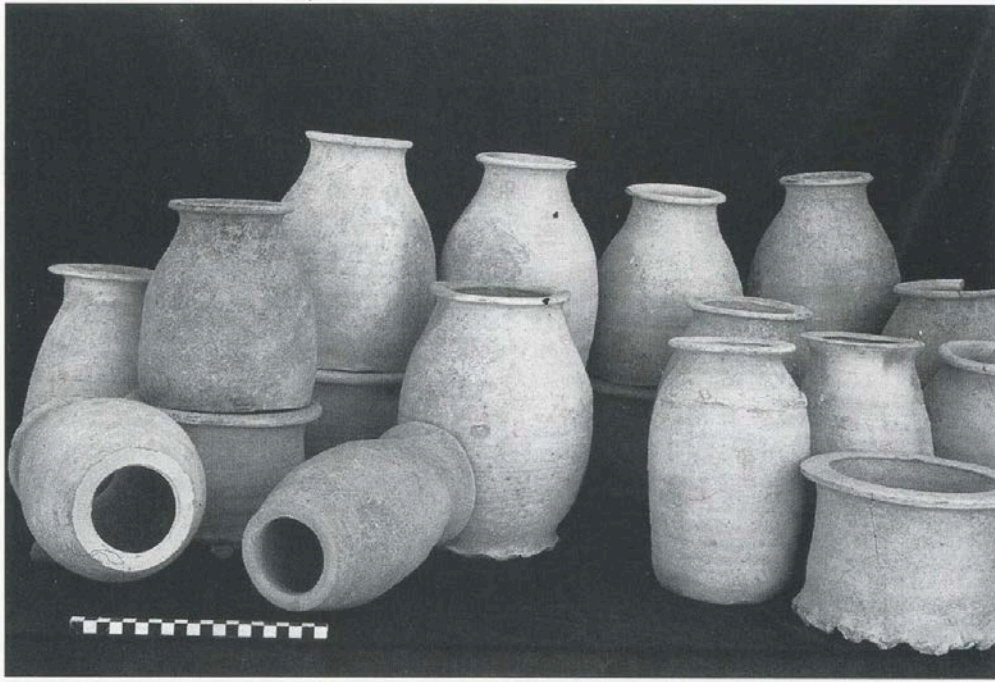


Fig. 14a

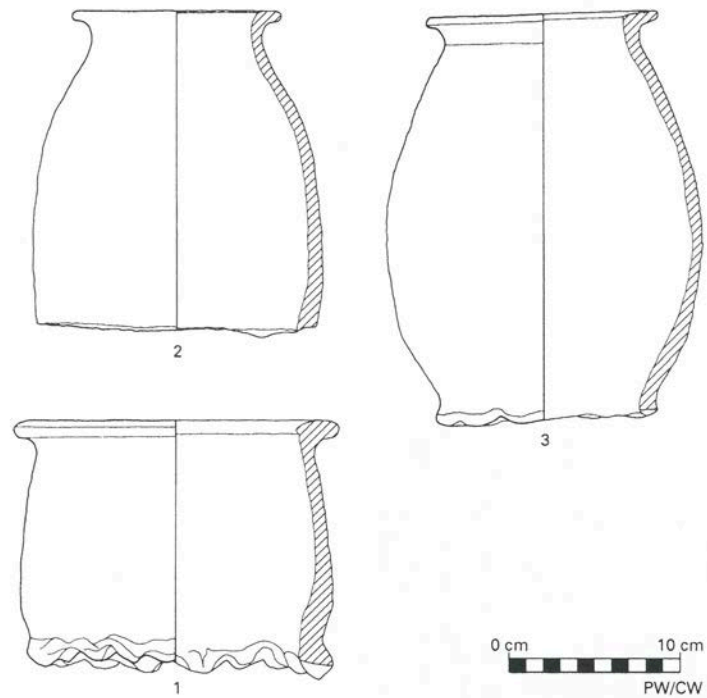


Fig. 14b



Fig. 15



Fig. 16