

EXCAVATIONS AT TELL TABAN, HASSAKE, SYRIA (6): PRELIMINARY REPORT OF THE 2006 SEASON OF WORK

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Introduction

The Kokushikan University Archaeological Expedition (Director, Hirotoshi Numoto) conducted the 6th season of excavation at Tell Taban between August and September 2006. Tell Taban is located in the Hassake Dam Salvage area and has been excavated by the Kokushikan University Archaeological Mission since 1997 (Fig. 1) [Ohnuma et al. 1999, 2000; Ohnuma and Numoto 2001; Numoto 2006, 2007].

The members of the Expedition were as follows: Hirotoshi Numoto (Director, Archaeology, Kokushikan University), Hideaki Shibata (Civil Engineering, Kokushikan University), Isamu Ono (Architectural Engineering, Kokushikan University), Shigeo Yamada (Assyriology, University of Tsukuba), Daisuke Shibata (Assyriology, Postdoctoral Fellow of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science), Nobuhiko Kitano (Conservation Science, Kurashiki Sakuyo University), Nozomu Ariga and Sanae Itoh (Students of Assyriology, University of Tsukuba).

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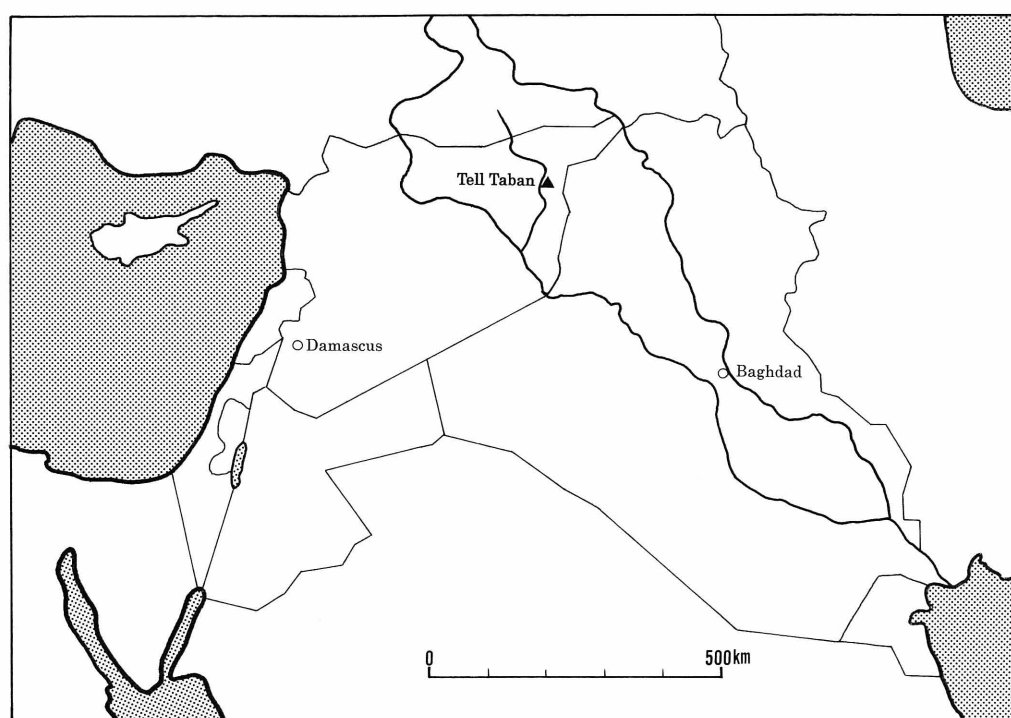


Fig. 1 Location of Tell Taban

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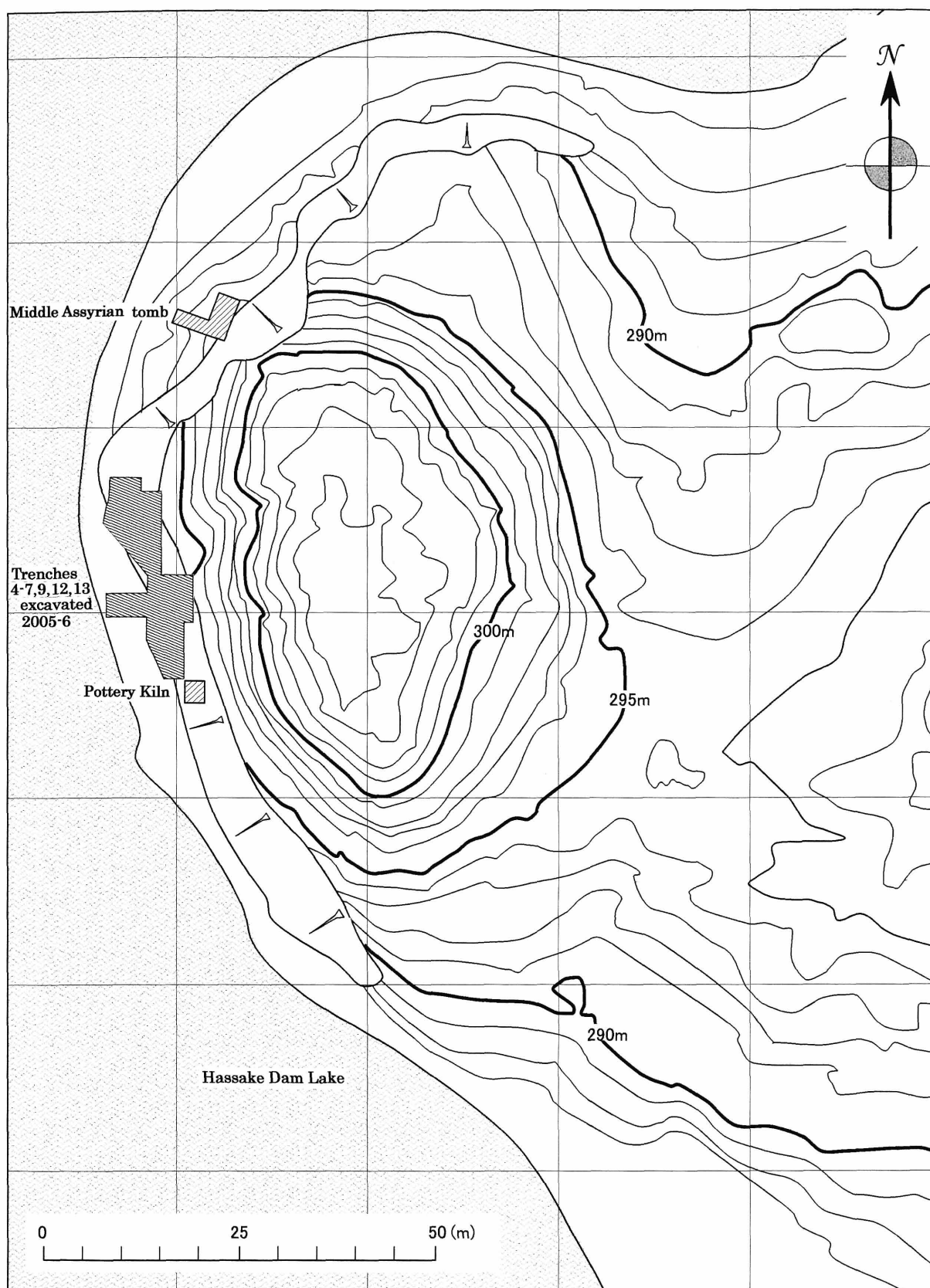


Fig. 2 Contour map of the western area of Tell Taban

in Northern Mesopotamia” Team Leader: Hirotoshi Numoto).

1. Summary of the 2006 Season

Since the Middle Khabur (Hassake) dam discharged water during the summer, the water level around Tell Taban was ca. 286.5 m above sea level at the beginning of the excavation. The water level continued to become lower during the excavation and it finally reached ca. 285 m above sea level by the end of September (Fig. 2, Pl. 7). The west side of the mound was eroded ca. 2 m than the condition we saw in 2005 due to the exposure to water during the winter when the dam water touch the west side [Numoto 2007]. Soil debris, which was eroded by river water, was accumulated on the edge of the mound and Trench 4 excavated in the previous season was totally backfilled by it. The edge of the mound where river water washed away the soil has revealed some new archaeological structures. We were able to collect 18 fragments of inscribed bricks from the area where river water receded. Around the shore near the pottery kiln which was excavated in the last season, we collected two inscribed brick fragments which bore a previously unfound name of the king. The fragments were found in fallen debris of the baked brick structure near the pottery kiln (Pl. 8a). The decipherment of the inscriptions revealed the king’s name “Enlil-šar-ilani” who was the latest king of the Middle Assyrian Period at Tell Taban (Pl. 8b)¹. This discovery strongly implies that the baked brick structure was this king’s tomb.

The 2006 season was concentrated on 6 trenches (Trenches 8 to 13) at the western eroded side of the mound. Since this season’s main result derives from the Old Babylonian pottery kiln in Trench 8 and the Middle Assyrian underground tomb in Trench 10, the following report will focus on the above two Trenches (Fig. 2).

2. Old Babylonian Pottery Kiln (Trench 8)

In this Trench, we continued our excavation on the pottery kiln which unearthed ten Old Babylonian clay tablets in 2005 [Numoto 2007]. The pottery kiln was found on the cliff face ca. 8 m south of Trench 4 (Pl. 9). The previous season excavated the area of 2.5 m (north-south) × 1 m (east-west) in the mud-brick built pottery kiln (from the fire hole towards the back). In 2005 it was impossible to extend the excavated area since the cliff face was standing ca. 5 m high. In this season fortunately the cliff face was eroded by river water and the height was reduced to ca. 2 m which made possible for the further excavation inside the kiln (Pl. 10).

The excavation revealed that the kiln has a rectangular ground plan measuring 3 m (north-south) × 2 m (east-west) (Fig. 3; Pls. 6a, 19). The kiln wall was ca. 60-80 cm thick and made of mud-bricks. The maximum remaining height was ca. 1 m (Fig. 4), but the half of the north and south walls and the both sides of the east wall were destroyed by a pit of later period from the upper layer (Pls. 4a, 5a, 6a, 19).

A total of 14 clay tablets were discovered in a fill of the kiln (Fig. 3; Pls. 1~5, 11~19). Among these tablets noteworthy find was a tablet in an envelope (Pls. 1, 2). The specimen was unearthed around the kiln’s north wall where the hard debris of the kiln wall (ca. 100 [length] × 60 [width] × 70 [thickness] cm) accumulated (Pls. 4, 13, 14). The tablet was complete (ca. 11.5 [length] × 6 [width] × 3 [thickness] cm) and the broken envelope covered one fourth of the tablet (Pls. 4, 14). Both tablet and envelope were well fired and had light brown colour (Pls. 1, 2, 4). After we joined the envelope with other collected fragments, around three fourth of the envelope was reconstructed (Pl. 1). Thus the remaining size of the envelope has become ca. 13 [length] × 7 [width] × 3.5 [thickness] cm. It is an important specimen to tell us the manufacturing method of the envelope and how the tablet fits into it. Directly beneath this tablet in an envelope, we found one third fragment of a large

¹ According to Yamada, the inscription reads: “Belonging to Enlil-šar-ilani, son of Aššur-ketta-lešer, the king”

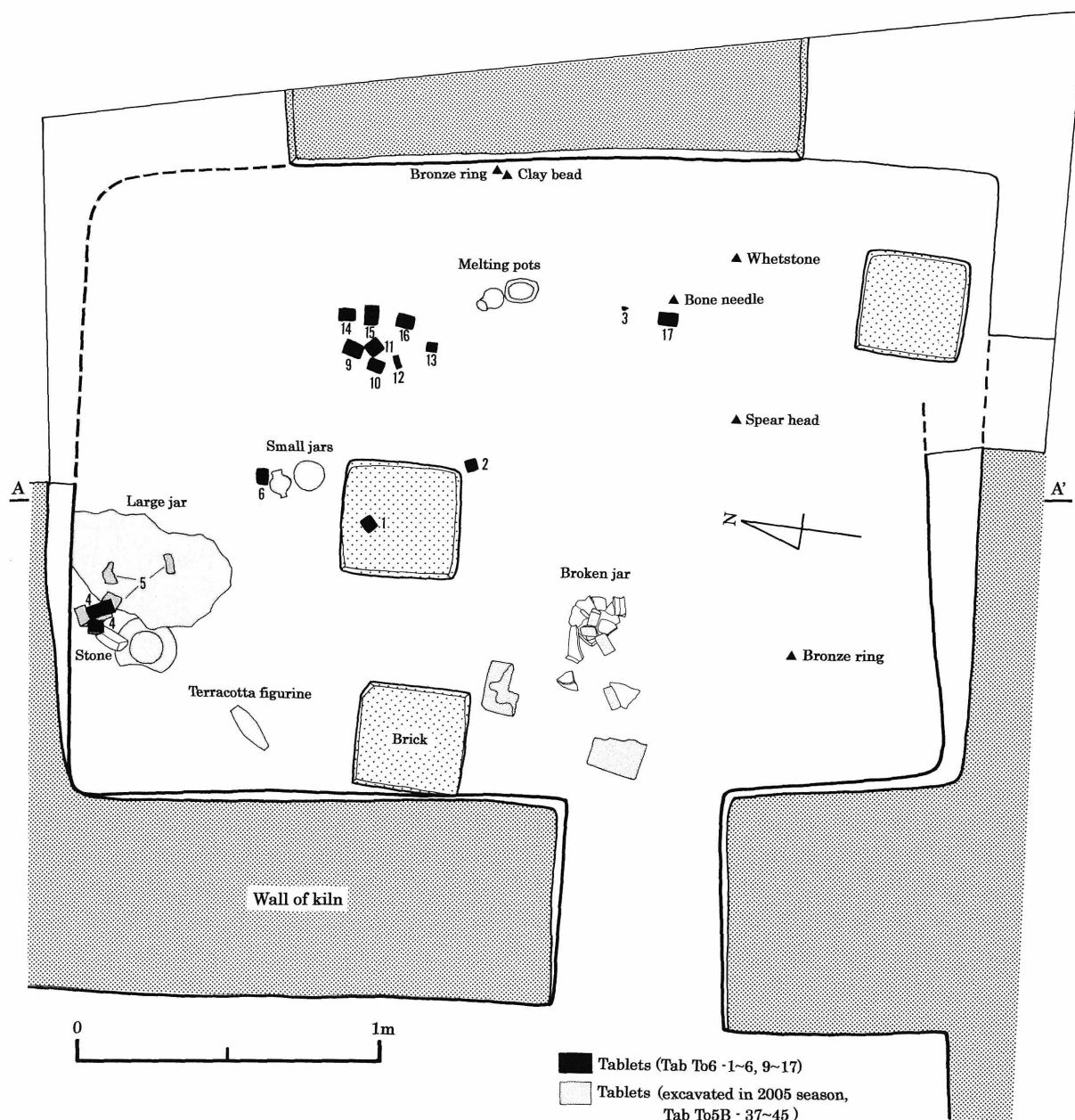


Fig. 3 Plan of the Old Babylonian pottery kiln

mouthed jar (Pls. 4a, 13a). This may imply that this tablet in an envelope was also stored in a jar like the tablets we found in the previous season [Numoto 2007]. Probably the tablets were stored in a jar and placed in a kiln to be fired for long storage. Other tablets had the size below 7×7 cm and seven of them were found in a cluster in a burnt layer (ca. 30×20 cm in area) just above the floor of the kiln (Pls. 5, 16, 17). This cluster of tablets may also be placed in a jar or a container to be fired in a kiln. The tablets of this cluster were generally dark brown in colour and were softer in fabric compared to the tablet in an envelope (Pl. 3). The decipherment of the contents of the tablets suggests that they can be dated to the Old Babylonian Period, more specifically the post-Hammurabi time.

Since, as mentioned above, the pottery kiln was poorly preserved due to a pit dug from the upper layer, the overall structure is unknown. It is important to mention that some artefacts, which include

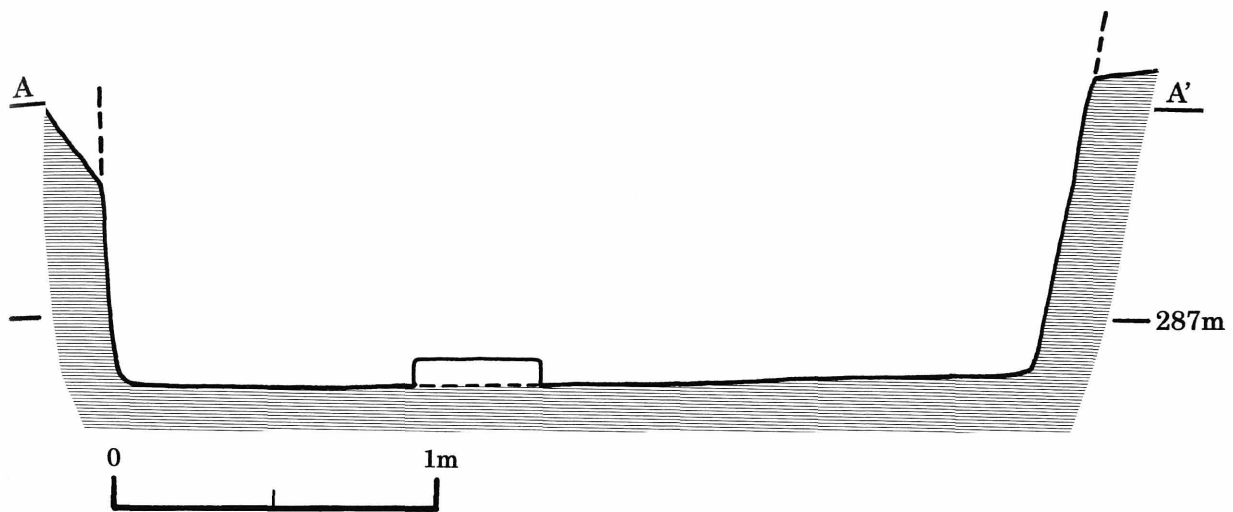


Fig. 4 Section (A-A') of the Old Babylonian pottery kiln

terracotta female figurine, bronze ring and spear head, clay bead, melting pots, whetstone, and millstone, were found from the floor of the kiln (Fig. 3; Pl. 20c, d). Considering the presence of such artefacts and the ground plan of the kiln, there was a small room (ca. 3×2 m) before the kiln was constructed. We can assume that after the room was abandoned, it was transformed into a pottery kiln. When we excavated the area northeast of the kiln (Trench 12), a gypsum plaster container was placed to the north of the west wall of the kiln and part of the room, which had a floor with accumulated ash on it, was identified. This implies that the area of Trenches 8 and 12 was a contemporary workshop compound.

3. Middle Assyrian underground tomb (Grave 9 in Trench 10)

Part of a brick structure was identified near the edge of the mound where river water touches. The area was ca. 21 m north of Trench 7 and we set a trench (Trench 10) of 6 (north-south) \times 5 (east-west) m in size to reveal the brick structure (Fig. 2; Pls. 21, 23).

Below the surface layer, three pottery kilns dated to the Neo-Assyrian Period were identified. Directly below these pottery kilns, we discovered a damaged underground baked brick tomb. Thus, the brick structure mentioned above turned out to be a large underground brick tomb (probably a tomb of the royal family) dated to the Middle Assyrian Period. The tomb was constructed by digging into the Old Babylonian Period layer and consisted of shaft entrance, gallery, and anterior and burial chambers. The shaft entrance, vaulted gallery, and anterior chamber were all in one line (east-west axis) and measured ca. 5 m. The burial chamber was orthogonally positioned (north-south axis) to the above mentioned structure group and measured ca. 6 (length) and 3 (width) m (Figs. 5, 6; Pls. 22, 24~29).

Similar type of brick tombs are reported from Assur, the capital of Assyrian Empire: the tomb of Middle Assyrian king, Assur-bel-kala, and the tombs of Neo-Assyrian kings, Assur-nasirpal II and Samshi-Adad V [Haller 1954: 171].

The entrance of the tomb was constructed by brick-built vertical shaft (1.5 \times 1.5 m) (Pls. 24, 25a). The remaining height of it was ca. 80 cm due to poor preservation (Fig. 6). The gallery measured ca. 2 m in length and ca. 1.5 m in width, and had a vaulted ceiling (Pls. 25b, 26a). The inner face of the gallery wall was badly damaged and the ceiling of the entrance has collapsed. The floor of the gallery was tilted towards the anterior chamber which measured ca. 1.4 [length] \times 1.3 [width] \times 1.2 [height] m and had a completely preserved vaulted ceiling (Pls. 26b, 27a). On the exterior

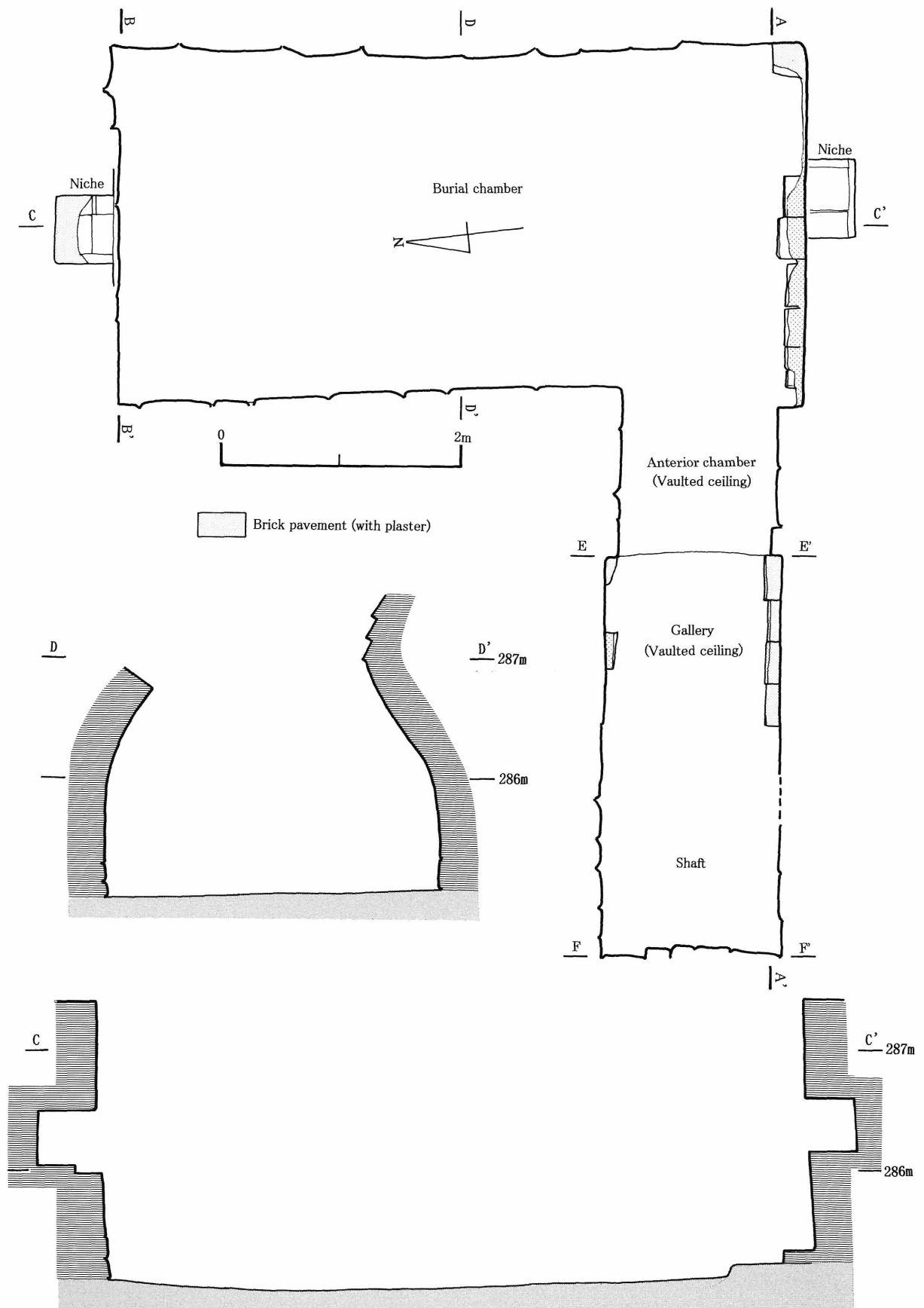


Fig. 5 Plan of floor and sections (C-C', D-D') of the Middle Assyrian underground tomb

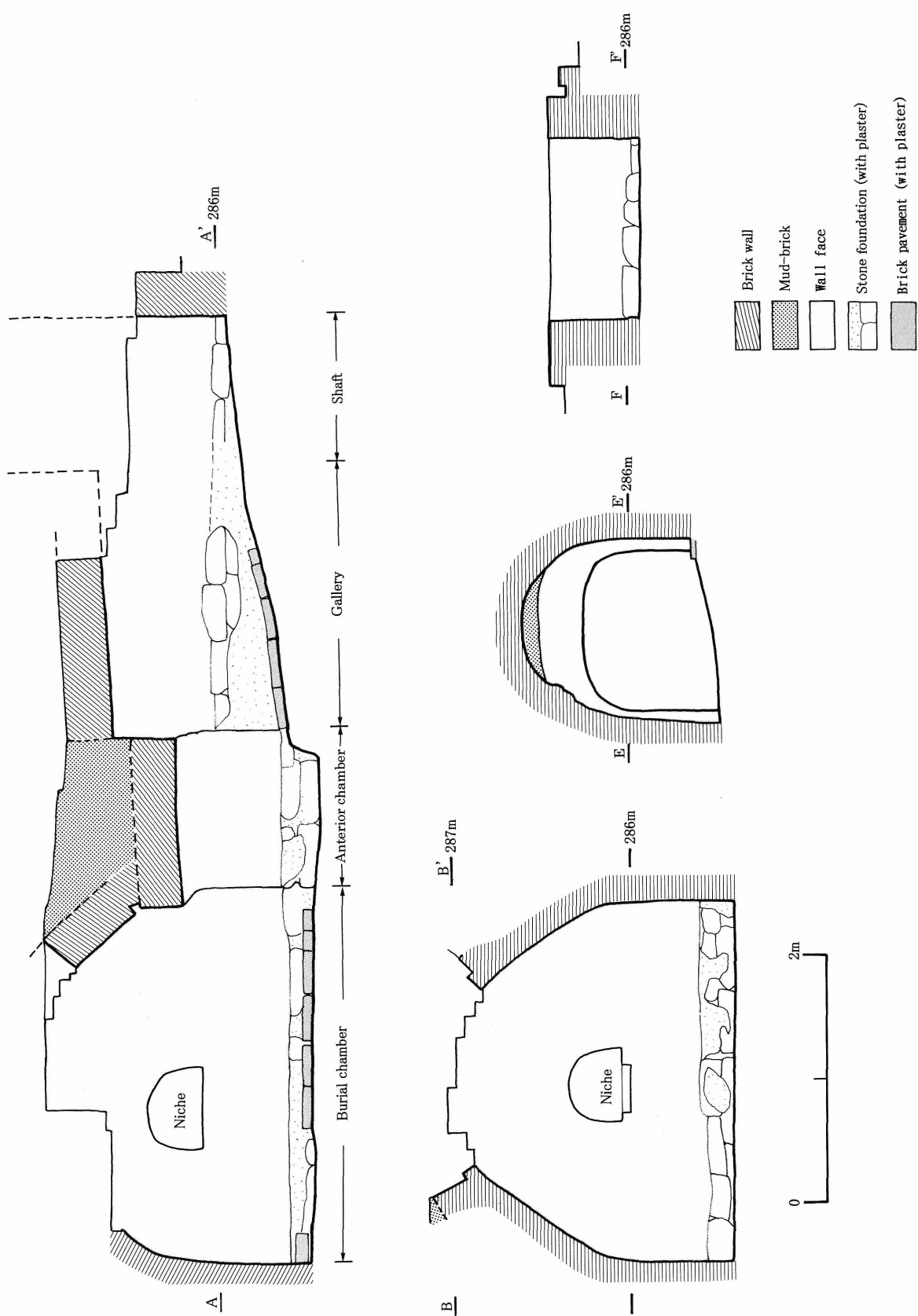


Fig. 6 Sections (A-A', B-B', E-E', F-F') of the Middle Assyrian underground tomb

side of the anterior chamber ceiling, mud-bricks were laid to reinforce the ceiling (Fig. 6; Pl. 22). Probably similar reinforcement was conducted on the gallery ceiling which now lost. The shaft and the gallery were totally filled with soil, but the soil entered into the anterior chamber had left the space of ca. 20 cm below the ceiling. The soil of the gallery and the anterior chamber was packed hard and contained abundant Middle Assyrian potsherds and animal bones.

The burial chamber of the tomb had a rectangular ground plan (Fig. 5; Pl. 28). Both sides of the walls had the remaining height of ca. 2 m and tilted to the inner side ca. 1 m from the floor level (Pl. 29). Although the vaulted ceiling was completely collapsed (Pl. 33), its original height was probably ca. 2.5 m. Although there was a small niche (ca. 60 [width] × 50 [height] × 40 [depth] cm) with a vault-like ceiling at the central part of both north and south walls, no artefacts including inscribed gravestone were found (Pl. 31).

The tomb was constructed in a following way. First, two tiers of limestone slates (ca. 50-60 [length] × 20 [thickness] cm) were built and above this, the mud-brick structure using two types of bricks (ca. 35 × 35 × 5-6 cm and ca. 32 × 32 × 5-6 cm) were constructed (Pl. 30b). The bricks were well built and clay or gypsum plaster was used as a joint. Some remains of gypsum plaster were found on the interior surface of the walls, suggesting that the original walls were all covered with such plaster (Pl. 32). The same thing can be said for the brick floor where part of the plaster was remained (Pl. 30a). The coffin was probably placed in the main chamber, but it was totally destroyed together with the brick floor.

Considering the size and structure of the tomb, we expected some rich burial goods. However, due to heavy destruction, some semiprecious stone and gold beads, potsherds and several human bone fragments were recovered (Pls. 6b). Only the presence of semiprecious stone and gold beads gives a glimpse of what was once a tomb of the royal family. The fill of the burial chamber was well packed and contained numerous fallen brick fragments and Middle Assyrian potsherds (Fig. 8; Pl. 33b). A noteworthy find was the inscribed brick which contained the name of crown prince “Enlil-apla-ušur” who was the son of king Etel-pi-Adad in the 12th century BC² (Pl. 34b). The inscribed brick was found near the floor level of the burial chamber (Pl. 34a). The form and the quality of the inscribed brick suggest that it was the foundation inscription. If this is so, then the deceased person of the tomb was probably the crown prince. In the upper layer of the fill of the burial chamber, we identified the accumulation of layers of the Middle Assyrian Period. This probably implies that the tomb was destroyed or robbed soon after it was built.

4. Conclusion

The total number of cuneiform inscriptions found in the 2006 season was 44 which include 16 clay tablets, two clay envelopes, 25 inscribed bricks, and two cylinder inscriptions. The decipherment of these inscriptions suggests that the clay tablets and envelopes are dated to the Old Babylonian Period, while the inscribed bricks and cylinder inscriptions are to the Middle Assyrian Period.

The Old Babylonian tablets from Tell Taban present the first such examples in the Middle and Lower Khabur region, and the decipherment of the contents will surely contribute to the understanding of political and economic history of the region and beyond. Most of the clay tablets were correspondences, and some other tablets of administrative-legal nature contains the dates (year, month, and date). Such evidence makes possible to place various pottery types found in the pottery kiln into more precise chronology. Therefore, the results from Tell Taban apparently not only contribute to the chronology and pottery study of the Middle Assyrian Period, but also to those of the Old Babylonian Period. The layers dated to the same period as the pottery kiln was found in the north trenches excavated in the 1997 and 1998 seasons as well as in all trenches in the west eroded area

2 According to Yamada, the text read: “Etel-pi-Adad, king of the land of Mari, built it for Enlil-apla-ušur, his son.”

of the mound [Ohnuma et al. 1999, 2000]. Thus, the settlement of the Old Babylonian Period was probably much larger than that of the Middle Assyrian Period. The 2006 excavation results together with the decipherment of cuneiform inscriptions (see Yamada article in this volume) unravelled that Tell Taban was in fact “Ṭabatūm” often found in the Mari archives and was one of the strategic points along the Middle Khabur area.

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Catalogue of Pottery Specimens in Figs 7 and 8

(Fig.7)

1. Small jar (melting pot): from pottery kiln in Trench 8 (Old Babylonian); buff (10YR7/4) / reddish brown (2.5YR4/5) surfaces and core; large amount of very fine sand inclusion; handmade; well baked on lower part of outer surface; not uniform on shape of body; bronze remained in inner surface of the bottom; Max. diam. 5.8cm; Height 7.2cm; complete; identical with pottery in Pls. 16a,17a.
2. Small jar (with groove incision): from pottery kiln in Trench 8 (Old Babylonian); greenish grey (5Y9/2) and cream (2.5Y9/3) surfaces; large amount of very fine sand and sparse vegetable (1mm) inclusion; well baked; wet-smoothed on lower part of body after scraping; string-cut base; Max. diam. 7.4cm; Height 8.8cm; complete; identical with pottery in Pls. 15a, 20a.
3. Painted small jar: from pottery kiln in Trench 8 (Old Babylonian); greenish buff (7.5Y8/2) surfaces; buff grey (10YR6/2) core; blackish brown paint (7.5YR4/2) ; a little very fine sand inclusion; well baked (over fired); wet-smoothed on lower part of outer surface of body after scraping; pallet-cut on bottom; row of triangles with slant lines; Max. diam. 8.4cm; Base diam.3.1cm; identical with pottery in Pl. 20b.
4. Small beaker: from pottery kiln in Trench 8 (Old Babylonian); creamy buff (7.5YR8/3) surfaces; buff (5YR6/5) core; sparse very fine sand inclusion; fine fabric; over fired; Max. diam.7.5cm; 1/2 extant.
5. Small jar/beaker: from pottery kiln in Trench 8 (Old Babylonian); greenish grey (5Y8/2) outer surface; buff grey (7.5YR6/2) inner surface and core; sparse very fine sand inclusion; fine fabric; scraped on lower part of outer surface of body using wheel-turn; Rim diam. 8.2cm; 1/2 extant.
6. Base of jar/beaker: from pottery kiln in Trench 8 (Old Babylonian); greenish grey (5Y8/2) surfaces and core; sparse very fine sand inclusion; fine fabric; scraped on lower part of outer surface of body using wheel-turn; over fired; complete bottom.

(Fig.8)

7. Bowl: from Middle Assyrian level in Trench 10; greenish grey (5Y8/2) surfaces and core; a little fine sand and large amount of vegetable (1-5mm) inclusion; pallet-cut on bottom; Rim diam. 9.7cm; 2/3 extant.
8. Bowl: from Grave 9 (Middle Assyrian) in Trench 10; greenish grey (5Y8/2) and creamy buff (10YR8/4) surfaces; creamy buff (10YR8/4) core; a little fine sand and large amount of vegetable (1-5mm) inclusion; pallet-cut on bottom; Rim diam. 12cm; 1/4-5 extant.
9. Bowl: from Grave 9 (Middle Assyrian) in Trench 10; reddish buff (2.5YR6/6) and greenish cream (5Y9/2) outer surface; light buff (7.5YR7/4) inner surface; a little fine sand and large amount of vegetable (1-5mm) inclusion; containing chalky particles; pallet-cut on bottom; Rim diam. 14cm; 1/3 extant.
10. Bowl: from Grave 9 (Middle Assyrian) in Trench 10; creamy buff (10YR8/4) and cream (2.5Y9/2) surfaces; light buff (5YR7/6) core; a little fine sand and large amount of vegetable (1-5mm) inclusion; wet-smoothed on outer surface of body after scraping; pallet-cut on bottom; Rim diam. 14cm; 1/2.5 extant.
11. Bowl: from Grave 9 (Middle Assyrian) in Trench 10; greenish cream (5Y8/2) surfaces and core; a little fine sand and large amount of vegetable (1-5mm) inclusion; wet-smoothed on outer surface of body after scraping; pallet-cut on bottom; Rim diam. 24cm; 1/6 extant.

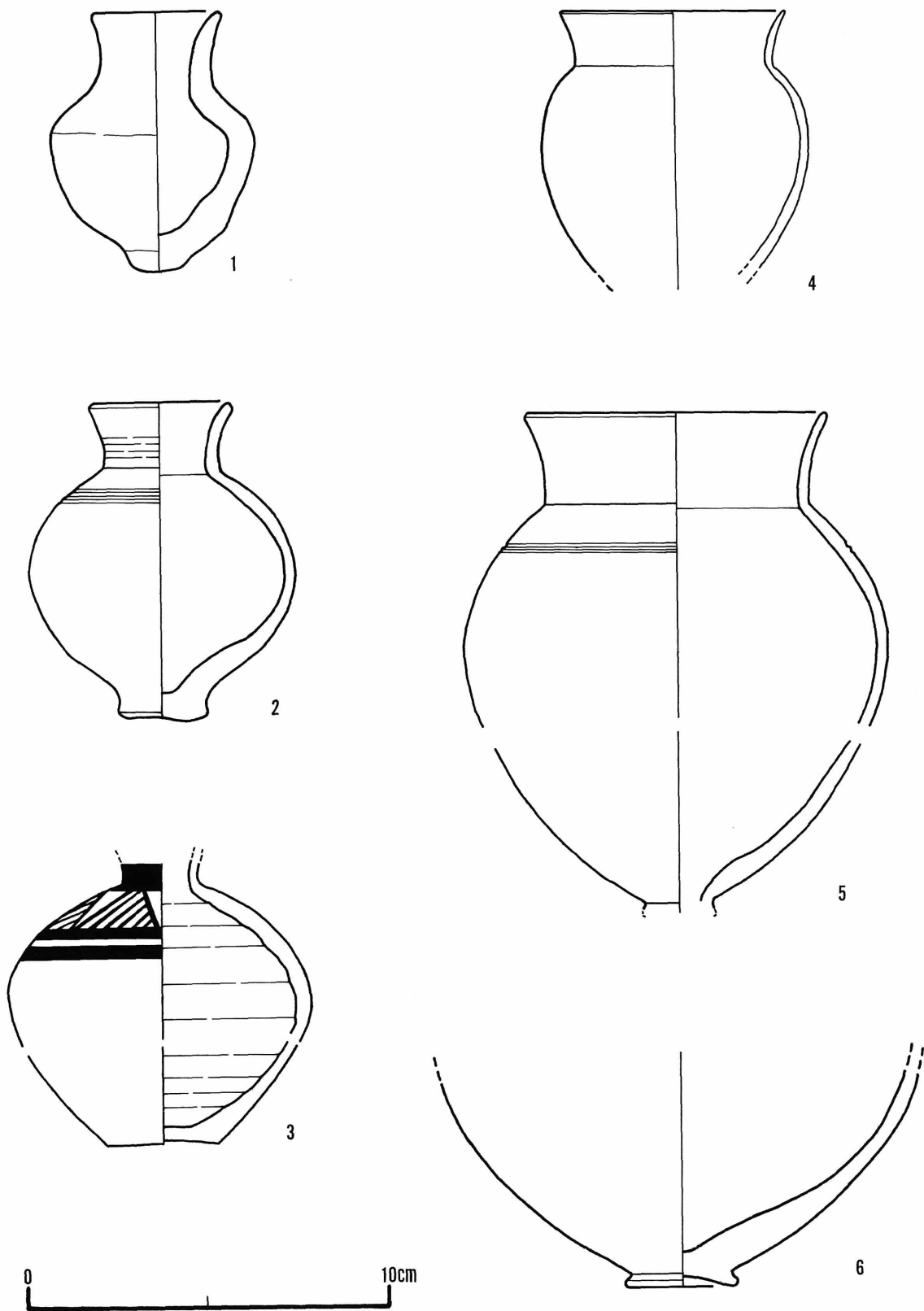


Fig. 7 Pottery from the Old Babylonian pottery kiln

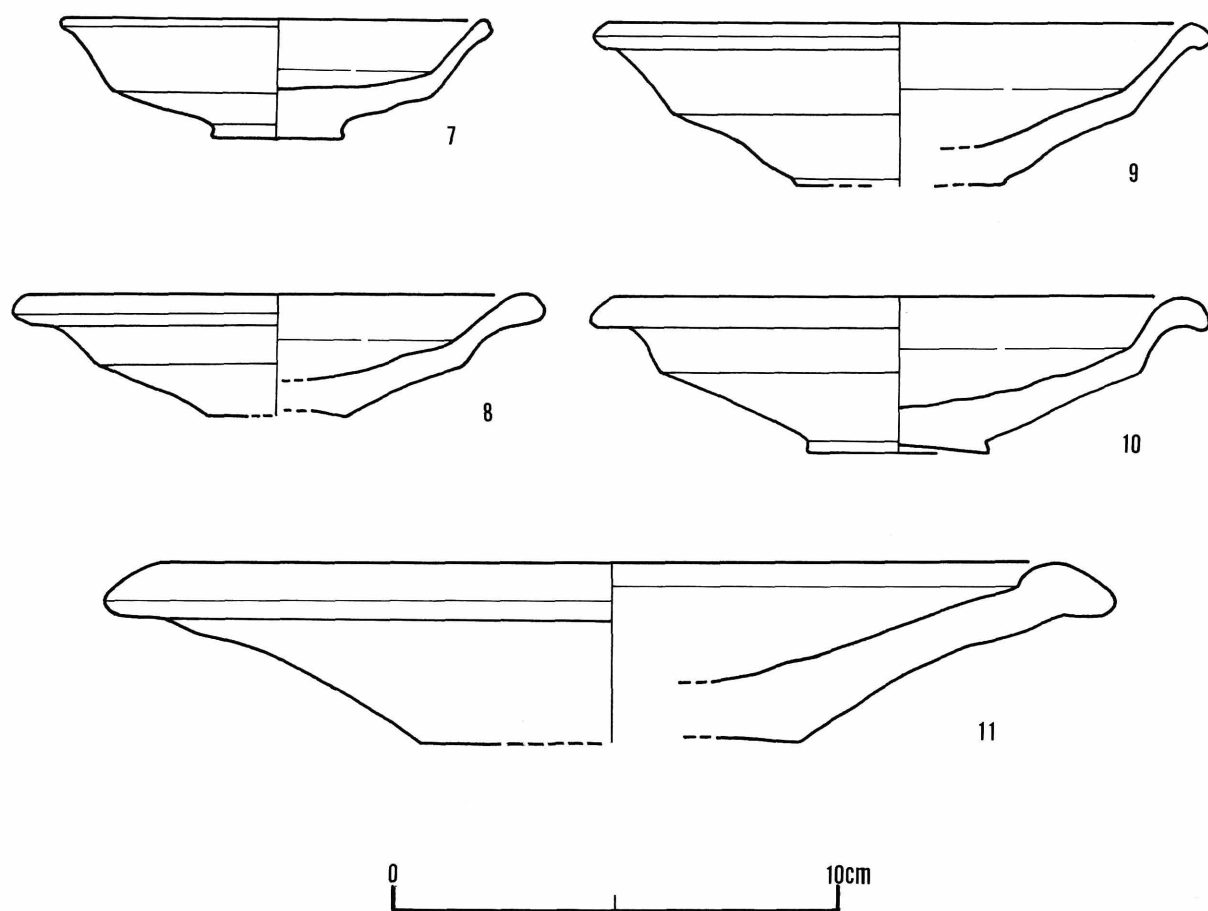
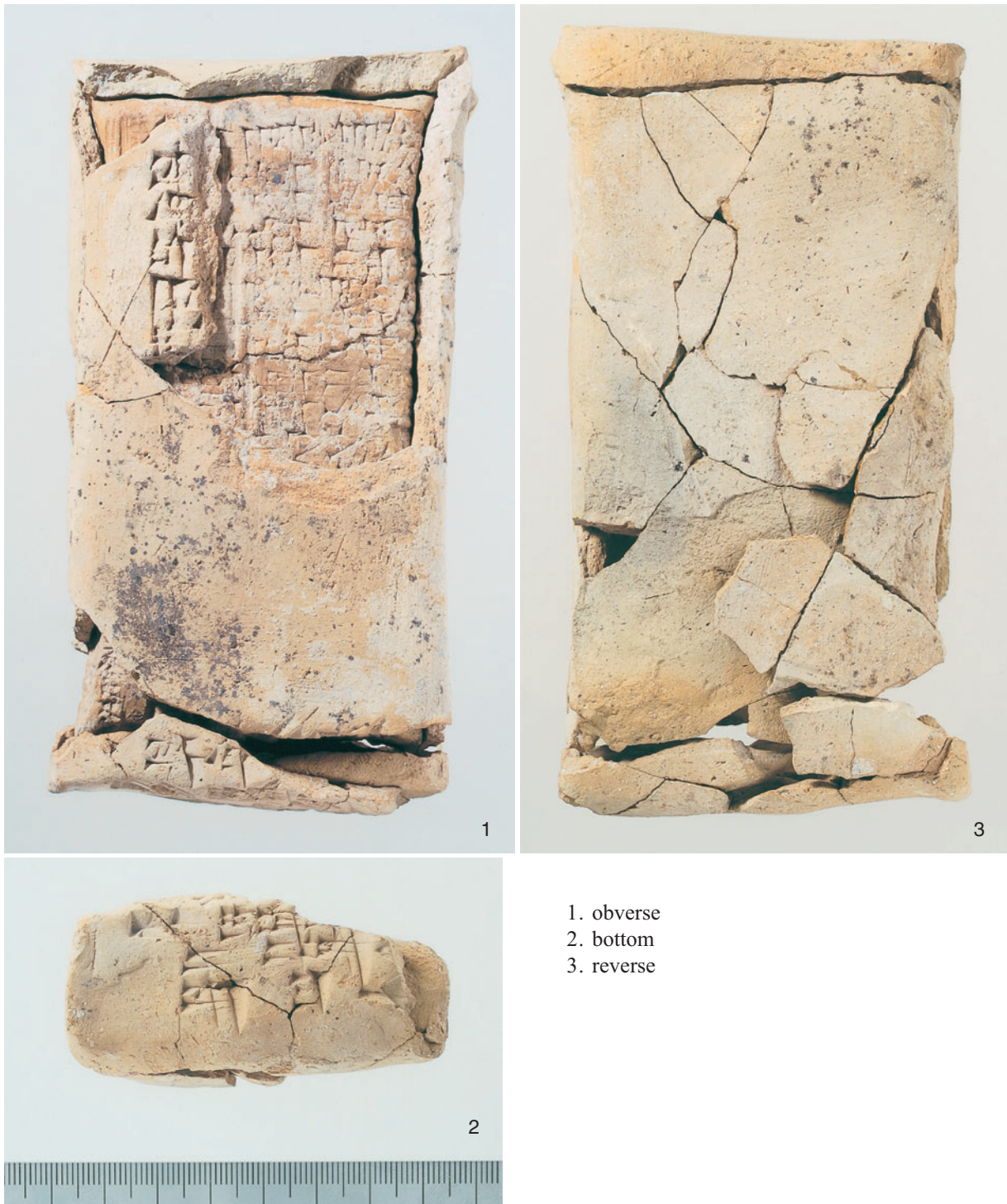


Fig. 8 Pottery from the Middle Assyrian underground tomb



Old Babylonian tablet (Tab T06-4) and its envelope (Tab T06-5) from pottery kiln



1. obverse
2. bottom
3. right side
4. reverse
5. top
6. left side



Old Babylonian tablet (Tab T06-4) from pottery kiln



Old Babylonian tablets (Tab T06-1, 2, 3+17, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12+14, 13, 15, 16, 18) from pottery kiln

Pl. 4



a. Old Babylonian tablet (Tab T06-4) and its envelope (Tab T06-5) from pottery kiln



b. Old Babylonian tablet (Tab T06-4) and its envelope (Tab T06-5) from pottery kiln



a. Old Babylonian tablets from pottery kiln



b. Old Babylonian tablets from pottery kiln (Tab T06-9, 10, 11, 12+14, 13, 15, 16)



a. Pottery kiln, after excavation, from the south



b. Fragments of gold ornaments from the Middle Assyrian underground tomb



a. General view of Tell Taban, after the 2006 excavation, from the west



b. General view of Tell Taban, from the east



c. General view of Tell Taban, from the south



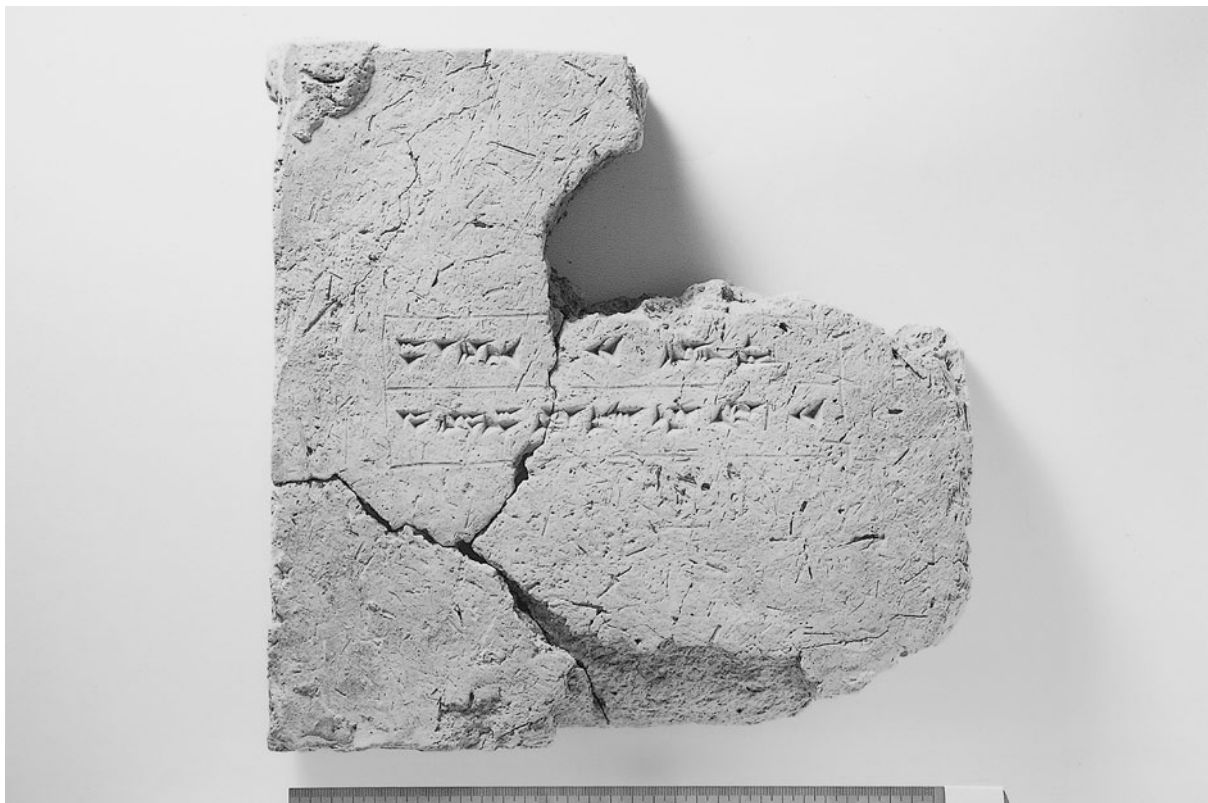
d. General view of Tell Taban, from the north



e. General view of Tell Taban, from the north west



a. Inscribed brick from debris of the baked brick structure



b. Inscribed brick



a. Western area of Tell Taban



b. Western excavated area (Trenches 8, 12, 13), after excavation



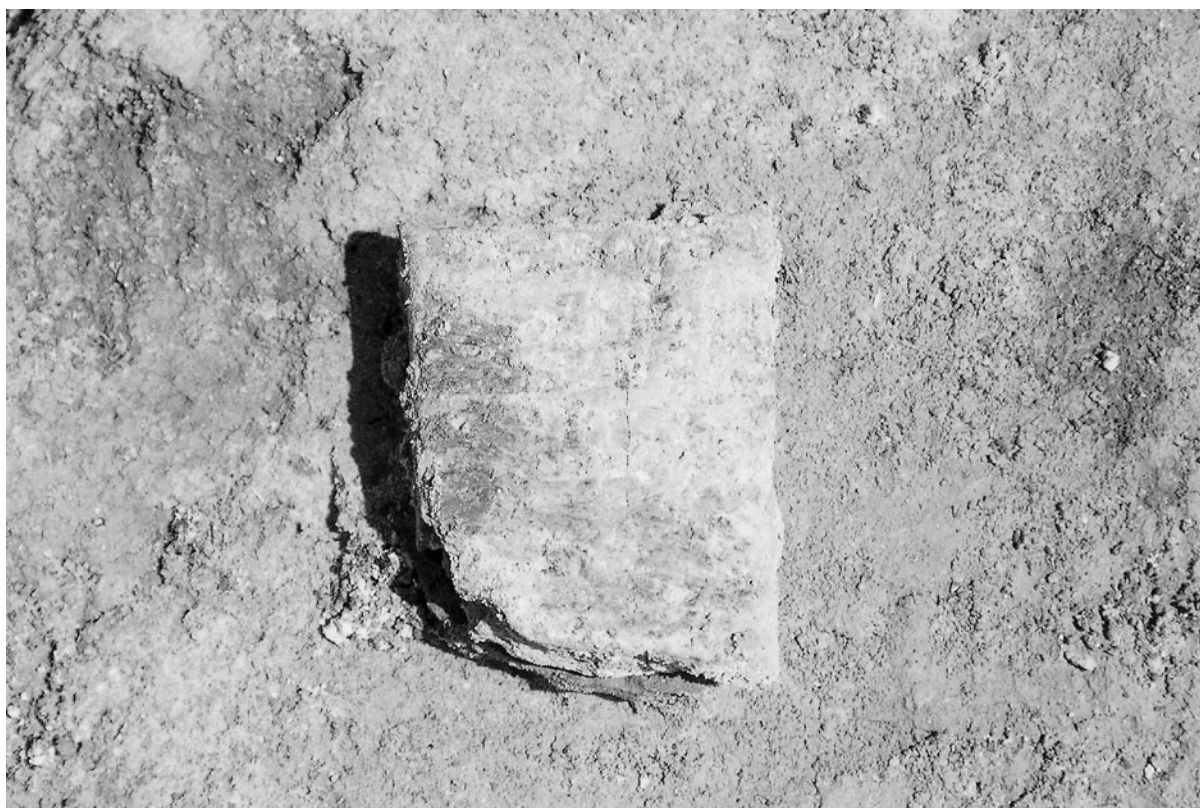
a. Pottery kiln in Trench 8, after the 2005 summer excavation



b. Pottery kiln in Trench 8, before the 2006 excavation



a. Old Babylonian tablet (Tab T06-1) from pottery kiln



b. Old Babylonian tablet (Tab T06-1) from pottery kiln



a. Old Babylonian tablet (Tab T06-2) from pottery kiln



b. Old Babylonian tablet (Tab T06-2) from pottery kiln



a. Old Babylonian tablet (Tab T06-4, 5) and fragment of large jar from pottery kiln



b. Old Babylonian tablet (Tab T06-4) and its envelope (Tab T06-5) from pottery kiln



Old Babylonian tablet (Tab T06-4) and its envelope (Tab T06-5) from pottery kiln



a. Old Babylonian tablet (Tab T06-6) and small jar from pottery kiln



b. Old Babylonian tablet (Tab T06-6) from pottery kiln

Pl. 16



a. Old Babylonian tablets (Tab T06-3+17, 9, 10, 11, 12+14, 13, 15, 16) and melting pots from pottery kiln



b. Old Babylonian tablets (Tab T06-9, 10, 11, 12+14, 13, 15, 16) from pottery kiln



a. Old Babylonian tablets (Tab T06-9, 10, 11, 12+14, 13, 15, 16) from pottery kiln



b. Old Babylonian tablets (Tab T06-9, 10, 11, 12+14, 13, 15, 16) from pottery kiln



a. Old Babylonian tablet (Tab T06-3) from pottery kiln



b. Old Babylonian tablet (Tab T06-17) from pottery kiln



a. Old Babylonian tablets from pottery kiln, from the south



b. Old Babylonian tablets from pottery kiln, from the north



a. Small jar from pottery kiln



b. Painted small jar from pottery kiln



c. Terracotta figurine



d. Terracotta figurine from pottery kiln



a. North western area of Tell Taban



b. North western excavated area (Middle Assyrian underground tomb in Trench 10)



a. Middle Assyrian underground tomb, from the east



b. Middle Assyrian underground tomb, from the north



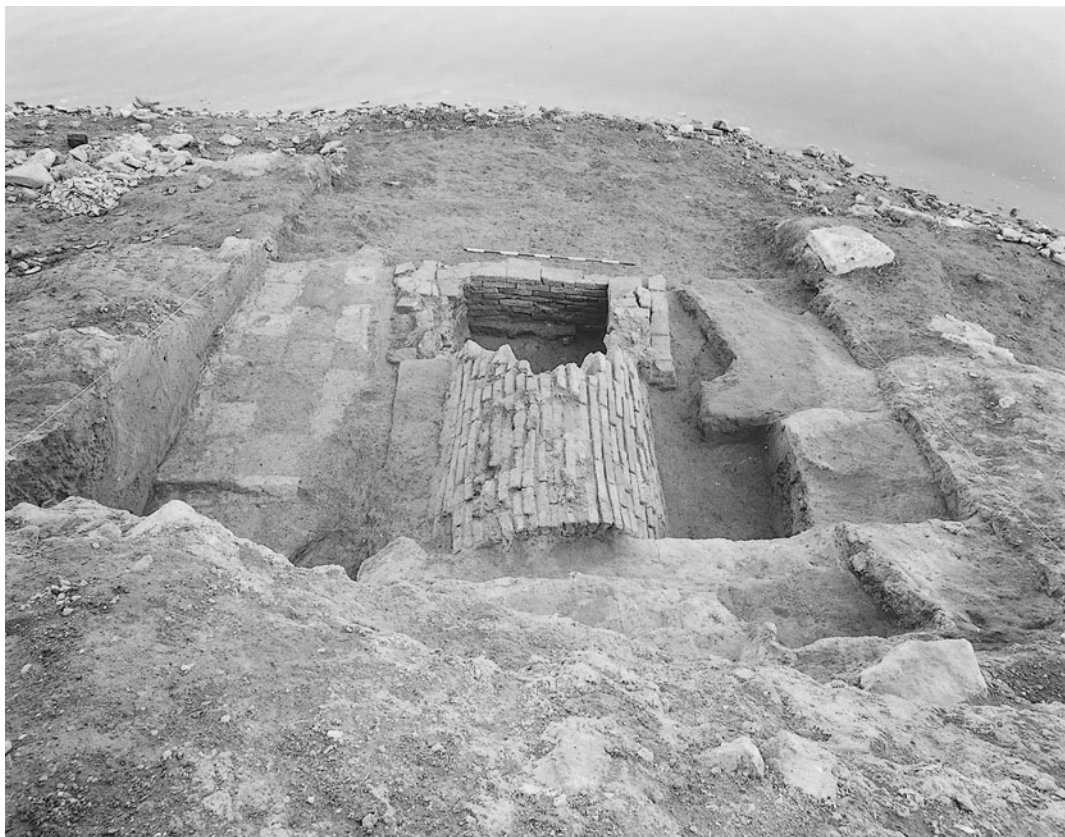
a. North western area of Tell Taban, before excavation



b. Debris of brick wall of the Middle Assyrian underground tomb, before excavation



a. Shaft and gallery of the Middle Assyrian underground tomb, from the west



b. Shaft and gallery of the Middle Assyrian underground tomb, from the east



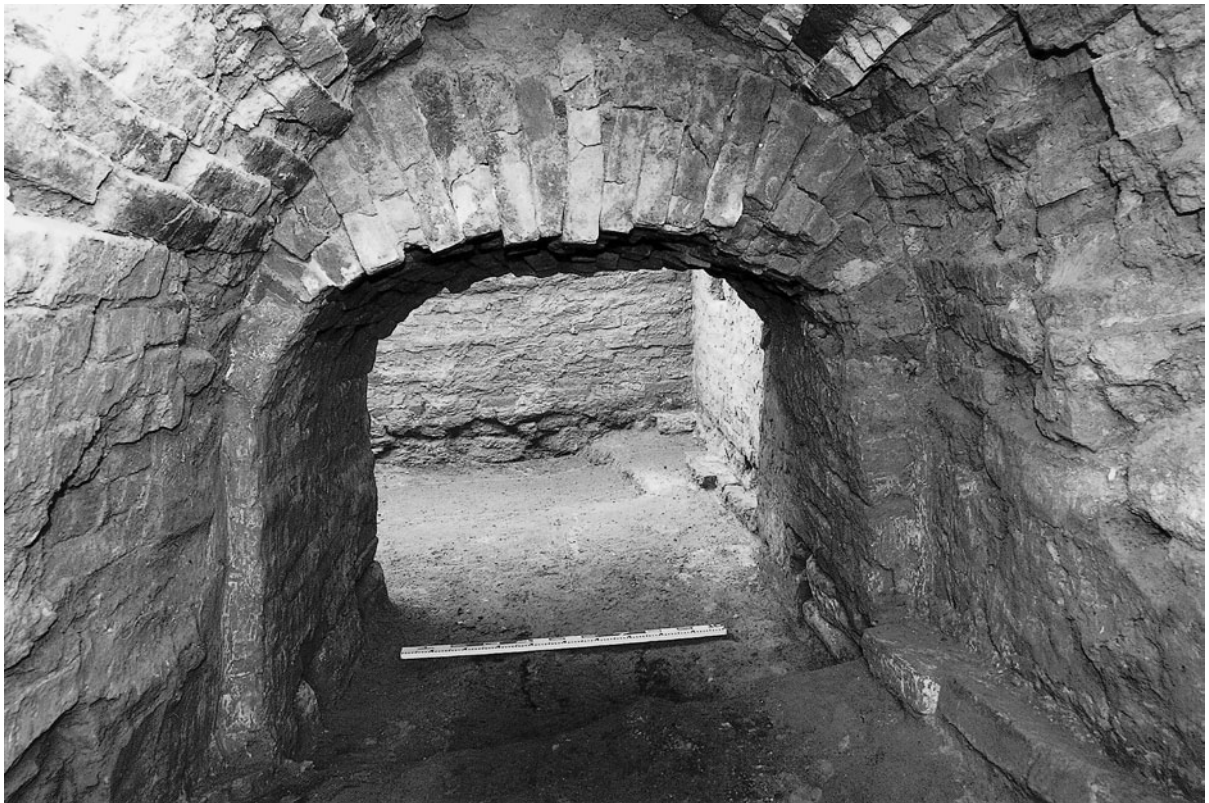
a. Shaft and gallery of the Middle Assyrian underground tomb, from the west



b. Gallery of the Middle Assyrian underground tomb, from the west



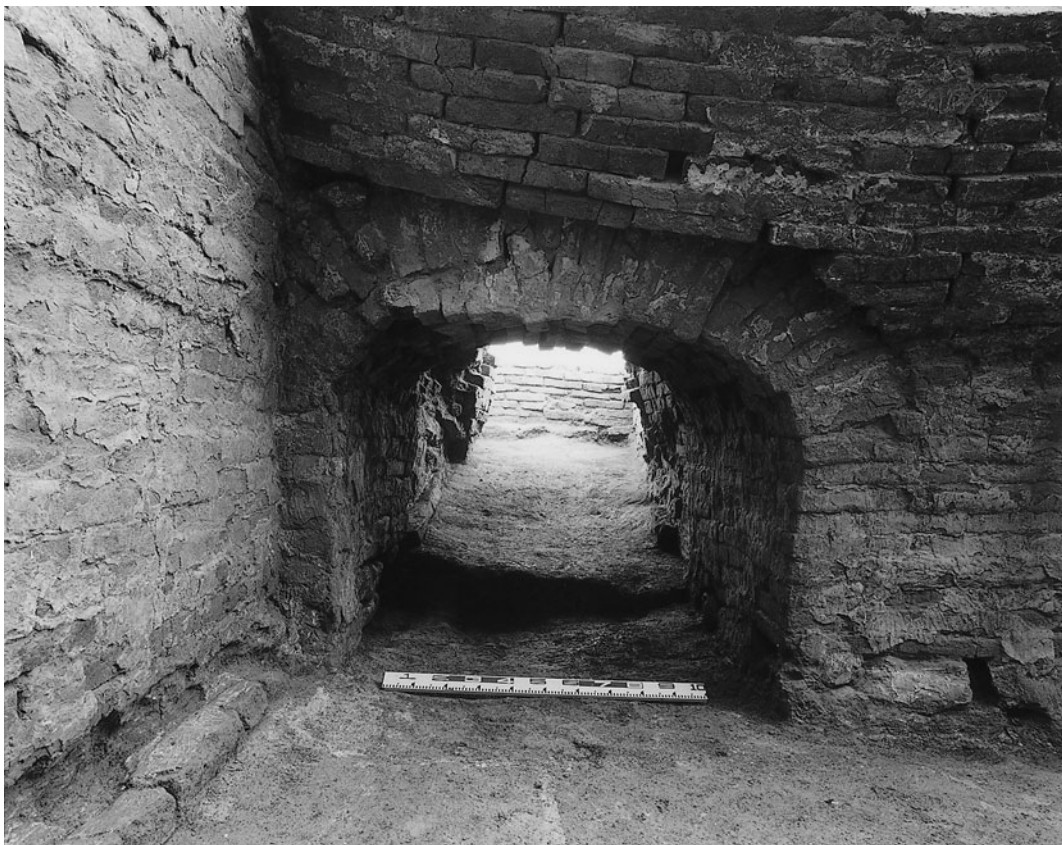
a. Vaulted ceiling of gallery of the Middle Assyrian underground tomb



b. Anterior chamber of the Middle Assyrian underground tomb



a. Burial chamber and anterior chamber of the Middle Assyrian underground tomb



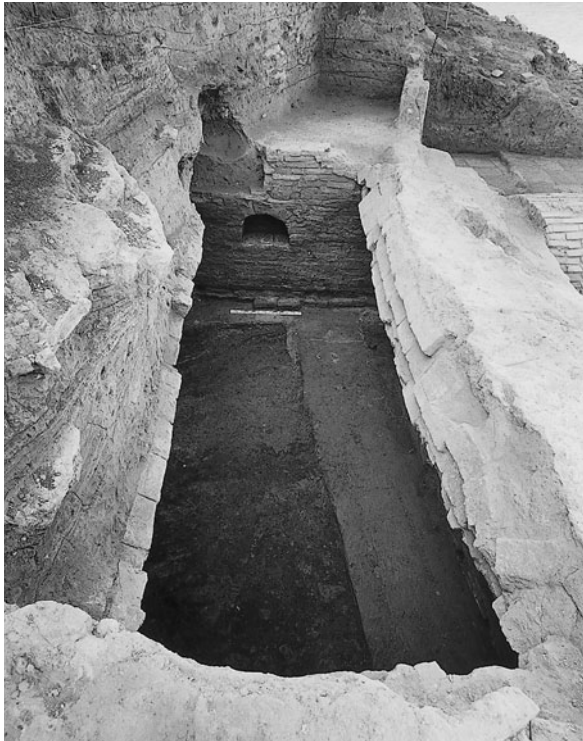
b. Anterior chamber and gallery of the Middle Assyrian underground tomb, seen from the burial chamber



a. Deposit of collapsed brick wall of tomb in the burial chamber, from the north



b. Deposit of collapsed brick wall of tomb in the burial chamber, from the south



c. Burial chamber of the Middle Assyrian underground tomb, after excavation, from the north



d. Burial chamber of the Middle Assyrian underground tomb, after excavation, from the south



a. Burial chamber of the Middle Assyrian underground tomb, from the north



b. Burial chamber of the Middle Assyrian underground tomb, from the south



a. Trace of the brick pavement and southern wall face in the burial chamber



b. Western wall face of the burial chamber



a. Niche of the southern wall face in the burial chamber



b. Niche of the northern wall face in the burial chamber



a. Gypsum plaster on the wall face in the burial chamber



b. Stone foundation and gypsum plaster on the wall face in the burial chamber



a. Collapsed bricks of vaulted ceiling in the burial chamber



b. Deposit of collapsed bricks in the burial chamber



a. Inscribed brick from deposit of the burial chamber



b. Inscribed brick from the burial chamber