

Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq: A Middle Assyrian Fort in the Gorge of Khanuqa 6th Season Report of the Proyecto Arqueológico Medio Éufrates Sirio (2010)

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[In the sixth campaign, 2010, of the *Proyecto Arqueológico Medio Éufrates Sirio*, excavation was renewed in Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq, namely in the area of the Middle Assyrian building, our major focus of activity, and also a trench was run to determine whether or not the Early Bronze Age settlement at this very site had a city wall.]

Keywords: Middle Assyrian period, administrative pottery, cuneiform tablets, Early Bronze.

The sixth campaign of the Syrian-Spanish archaeological mission in Deir ez-Zor (Syrian Middle Euphrates) took place between May 14 and June 8, 2010¹. The main objective was to continue the excavation initiated in 2008 on the main hill of Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq, an archaeological site located at the entrance of the basaltic gorge called Khanuqa by the Arabs, in the province of Deir ez-Zor (figs. 1 and 2). Excavation works were also carried out at the eastern end of the “Lower City” of the site.²

1. *Excavations in the main hill*

During the 2010 campaign new diggings were carried out in the western part of the main hill. The goal was to extend the excavation area opened in the previous campaigns in order to progressively complete the identification of the plan of the Late Bronze Age brick building brought to light in 2008.

1. The authors wish to thank Dr. Michel al-Maqdissi, Director of the Archaeological Excavations Service of DGAM, and to Dr. Bassam Jamous, General Director of Antiquities and Museums of Syria, for their help and support to start this Project. We also wish to thank the Osmane Aïdi Foundation, particularly to Miss Rawa Batbouta (Chamtour) for the logistic support in Deir ez-Zor, which contributed decisively to the success of our work. The campaign was also possible thanks to the grants by the Xunta de Galicia (Projects 07 PXIB 167 227 PR and 10 PXIB 167 197 PR), the Ministerio de Cultura (Dirección General de Bellas Artes y Bienes Culturales), the Ayuntamiento de Ferrol, the CCHS-CSIC (Madrid), and the Centro de História de Além-Mar (Lisbon). We are also grateful to the Embassies of Spain in Damascus and of Syria in Madrid for their kind support. During the 2010 campaign the mission received the visits of His Excellency Juan Serrat, Ambassador of Spain in Syria, Dr. Pablo Martín, Director of the Instituto Cervantes in Damascus, and Professor Jean-Claude Margueron.

2. The staff during the sixth campaign included, apart from the present authors, Béatrice Muller, Eva Celdrán, María Quiñones, Víctor Rivera, Miguel Valério, and Jon Uranga.

Excavation work was continued in square X23, opened in 2009, and was initiated in the contiguous square Y23. The operations in this section of the tell have so far brought to light two occupation phases. The most recent corresponds to an Islamic cemetery formed by simple pit tombs, East-West oriented and marked on the surface in most cases by an array of stones. This year a total of nineteen tombs have been recorded (UE.135-138, 140-142, 145-156), of which the exact chronology remains uncertain. Nevertheless, the small finds in three of the tombs (UE.142, 150 and 155), namely a ring made of bone, a glass bracelet and a bronze pendant, seem to point to an early Islamic dating.

The next archaeological phase belongs to the Late Bronze Age II. The works done during this campaign had the purpose, on the one hand, to completely unearth rooms 1 and 3 of the building exposed in 2008 and, on the other, to extend and discover other parts of the building. The operations clearly identified five rooms, although some of them only partially excavated.

- Room 1. Rectangular area (2.85 x 5.80 m) delimited by walls UC.102, 104, 110 and 111³. Almost entirely excavated in 2008 and 2009, the work this year has identified in the corner of the walls UC.102 and UC.111 a craftsman's working area defined by the presence of a small basalt pestle still preserving the remains of red dye (fig. 3). The fragment of an iron oxide mineral fragment found next to the pestle suggests that some kind of activity to obtain red pigments was carried out in this area. To this context belong also a varied repertoire of pottery, basalt mortars, and an oven, all brought to light in previous campaigns.

- Room 3. Space delimited by walls UC.108, 109, 102 and 111 (fig. 4), defining a rectangular area of 18.89 sq. m. (2.85 x 6.63 m).

- Wall UC.108: preserved height: 47 cm; building technique: use of stone blocks in the foundations and elevation formed by mud bricks. It preserves remains of gypsum plaster, notably in the corner with the wall UC.102. The dimensions of this wall are unknown for the moment, since it disappears inside the northern wall of the trench. Because the other three walls of the room have been exposed in their entirety, it is obvious that the entrance to this room is to be found in the still unexcavated part of this wall.

- Wall UC.109: preserved height: 80 cm; width: 80 cm; size of mud bricks: 37 x 36 cm; building technique: stone foundation and mud brick elevation.

- Wall UC.102: preserved height: 124 cm; width: 145 cm, narrowing near the corner with wall UC.111; size of mud bricks: 37 x 37 cm and 18 x 37 cm; building technique: stone foundation and mud brick elevation.

- Wall UC.111: preserved height: 92 cm; width: 70 cm; shape of mud bricks: 38 x 39 cm and 20 x 40 cm.

- Floor UC.116: beaten earth over a layer of gravel. The ground has a slight inclination to the North; indeed the level of walls UC.111 and UC.108 shows a difference of 20 cm.

- On the corner of walls UC.111 and UC.109 was found a sort of small platform made of mud bricks with a stone foundation. Close to the corner of walls UC.102 and UC.111 there was a circular hole (33 cm in diameter) dug into the floor (UC.120) whose bottom was covered by several stones, possibly meant to hold a storing jar.

- Directly on the floor of the room (UC.126) were recovered a series of pottery vessels of varied typology (fig. 5). But among the artefacts coming from this floor the most important were two cuneiform tablets (fig. 6) lying very close to wall UC.108, directly on the ground and partly covered by a carbonized

3. Montero Fenollós, al-Shbib, Márquez Rowe & Caramelo 2010, pp. 75-76.

wooden beam and two pottery vessels (a carinated bowl, and a bowl with perforated holes). All of the archaeological material from this room is associated with a level (UE.127) characterized by the massive presence of charcoal, clay fragments showing the prints of the wooden ceiling, as well as fragments of fallen mud bricks. This level evidences the final collapse of the building.

- Room 4. Room partially excavated and delimited so far by walls UC.109 and UC.123. Wall UC.123: mostly destroyed by a large Islamic tomb (UE.149). Preserved height: 60 cm; size of mud bricks: 38 x 37 cm. In the corner of this wall and UC.109 was found a mud brick (38 x 38 x 9 cm) standing on its small edge beside a flat stone on the ground. The function of this construction (UC.114) is not clear (fig. 7).

- Room 5. This room has been partially excavated both in width and in depth (the ground plan of the room is not yet clear). The enclosing walls are UC.111b, UC.119, and UC.122.

- Wall UC.111b: partially destroyed by the Islamic grave U.136. It preserves remains of plaster (fig. 8); excavated height: 52 cm; size of mud bricks: 20 x 35 cm.

- Wall UC.119: damaged by the Islamic tomb UE.150. Excavated height: 62 cm; size of mud bricks: 38 x 37 cm and 20 x 38 cm.

- Wall UC.122: excavated height: 30 cm; width: 2 m; size of mud bricks: 40 x 40 cm.

The area enclosed by these three built walls and the southern wall of the trench is covered with charcoal and fallen mud bricks darkened by the fire that presumably destroyed the building. This archaeological level seems to be the same recorded in Room 1 (UE.110).

2. *The cuneiform tablets*

The epigraphic material discovered in Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq during the sixth campaign consists of two clay tablets, catalogued with the inventory numbers TQA.10.X23.127.2 and TQA.10.X23.127.3. As already stated above, they were found on the floor of Room 3 together with other finds that were preserved in situ as a result of the collapse of the building. The two tablets are of small size (5.6 x 4.7 x 2.0 cm and 4.6 x 3.6 x 1.5 cm, respectively) and preserve almost completely their original shape. The clay of both tablets is of a beige or light brown colour and is in both cases unbaked. This partly accounts for the fragile state of preservation in which they were found.⁴ The two tablets are inscribed with an administrative text, and one of them bears some faint seal impressions.

The script, language and seal impressions are Middle Assyrian, as was to be expected given the archaeological context. Both records are dated also following the Assyrian system, viz. eponym years. Only one *līmu* is fully preserved and corresponds to the year of Abattu son of Adad-šumu-lēšir, that is, the eleventh year of the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I.⁵ (The texts have been studied and will be published by I. Márquez Rowe.)

3. *Excavation work in the lower city*

The GPR survey made in 2009 identified an important construction work, namely a large section of a circumference, in the eastern end of the tell.⁶ This image corresponds from a topographic point of view

4. After the tablets were unearthed they were taken to the DGAM in Damascus where Mr. Ghassan Abdel-Aziz, to whom we wish to express here our most sincere gratitude, has admirably and masterfully restored them.

5. See most recently Bloch 2010.

6. Montero Fenollós, al-Shbib, Márquez Rowe & Caramelo 2010, pp. 74-75.

with a slight elevation of the ground. This fact and the curved shape of the construction suggest that this could be identified with the remains of the circular city wall of the Early Bronze Age settlement.

To determine whether or not these were the remains of the IIIrd millennium BC city wall, excavation was initiated in different trenches, namely squares BF 28, BG 28 and BH 28, all located in this area of the lower city of Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq. The planned excavation work could not be completed during the course of this campaign, but it has revealed the existence of several archaeological levels. The first one corresponds to an area covered by mud bricks of different size (UC.404), on which are preserved a number of stones that belonged to walls (fig. 9) that were damaged by erosion (UC.400). Although it is difficult to date these remains, it seems likely that they belonged to a small settlement of a late period, possibly to be associated with the Islamic cemetery on the main hill. A huge fill of gravel, pieces of gypsum stone, and mud bricks sloping westward defines the second level (UE.401). The evidence of a third level of occupation is a large oven (UC.408). Close to it were found the remains of a mud-brick wall (UC.409) with large basalt stone foundations, 80 cm long (fig. 10). Although its excavation could not be completed before the end of the campaign it seems possible that it should be dated to the Early Bronze Age.

4. *Conclusive remarks*

The archaeological work carried out so far in Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq has identified three different phases of occupation of the site:

—Phase I: an Islamic cemetery on the main hill, possibly associated to a settlement of small proportions on the eastern side of the lower city.

—Phase II: a building of the Late Bronze Age period on the main hill. There is no evidence so far of a LBA occupation in the lower city.

—Phase III: a city of the Early Bronze Age period in the lower city.

The Syrian-Spanish mission has concentrated the first three campaigns (2008-2010) on the excavation of the main hill, that is to say, of phase II. Excavation work in this part of the tell has brought to light a number of rooms belonging to a mud-brick building that was destroyed by fire. For the time being two complete rooms have been revealed (Rooms 1 and 3), and three have been discovered only partially (Rooms 2, 4 and 5). Rooms 1 and 3 are rectangular and have a similar size: 16 sq. m (2.85 x 5.80 m) and 19 sq. m. (2.85 x 6.63 m) respectively. Although only a small area of the building has been excavated, it is tantalizing to draw a comparison with Building P unearthed in the western slope of the citadel of neighbouring Tell Sheikh Hamad, considered to be the palace of the *sukkallu* Ashur-iddin. The building according to its excavators dates to the Middle-Assyrian I period.⁷ One of the sectors is formed by a series of six rectangular rooms (called C, D, E, M, N, and Q) that show a remarkable similarity in size and shape with Rooms 1 and 3 in Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq (fig. 11).⁸

The destruction and subsequent collapse of the building in Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq have sealed and preserved on the floor of the excavated rooms all the movables, especially pottery and stone artefacts, used at the time by its inhabitants. As a matter of course it is an archaeological material of exceptional value from the chronological point of view since it forms a closed and homogeneous association. The correlation

7. Kühne 2006-08, p. 550.

8. Pfälzner 1997, p. 110.

of the study of the pottery typology, the absolute 14C dating, and the eponym preserved in the cuneiform tablets will provide a consistent chronology within the frame of the Late Bronze II period.

A preliminary study of the pottery has shown that the repertoire belongs to the so-called “Middle-Assyrian administrative pottery”. It includes standardized forms such as carinated bowls, deep bowls, carinated cups, beakers, bottles, and potstands. This varied repertoire of Middle-Assyrian standard pottery is here found for the first time in the Syrian Middle-Euphrates region; typological comparisons must therefore be made with finds from sites in the Balikh, Khabur and Tigris areas.⁹ The forms from Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq are to be related to the pottery from levels 5 and 6 in Tell Sabi Abyad (from the reigns of Tukulti-Ninurta I and Enlil-kudurri-ušur);¹⁰ phases MA I (Shalmaneser I and Tukulti-Ninurta I), MA Iia (Tukulti-Ninurta I and Ashur-nerari III) and MA Iib (Ashur-nerari III and Ashur-dan I) from Tell Sheikh Hamad,¹¹ and level A1 in Tell el-Rimah (Shalmaneser I and Tukulti-Ninurta I).¹² This preliminary study shows that most of the pottery types belong to the typology of the time of Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243-1207/1233-1197 BC), and more particularly to its late phase. This chronology agrees well with the eponym (Abattu son of Adad-šumu-lēšir) with which is dated at least one of the two cuneiform tablets found in this campaign.

As regards the 14C dating, the charcoal samples analysed from the fire that destroyed Room 1 collected during the 2008 campaign throw the following results: 2950±40 BP = 1298-1026 BC and 2945±40 BP = 1272-1019 BC.¹³ One should note that these radiocarbon dates agree with the ones published from the Middle-Assyrian levels of Tell Sabi Abyad, viz. 2985±25 BP = 1320-1120 BC and 2940±20 BP = 1260-1050 BC. In both cases, however, the intervals are too broad to draw any definite chronological conclusion.¹⁴

Concerning the Middle Assyrian building in Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq it is obviously too early to draw final conclusions. Nevertheless, given, on the one hand, the privileged strategic situation in the Euphrates valley controlling the gorge of Khanuqa and, on the other, the political situation of the time, in particular vis-à-vis the Hittite territorial control in Syria, it seems natural that this was an outpost with a clear military function. It was very likely a *dunnu* or fort linked to the Assyrian expansion policy towards the west. The destruction of this fortified outpost most probably occurred by the end of the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I, as a result of some border conflict in the Middle Euphrates region. The other part in the conflict may have been the Hittite troops posted in the country of Ashtata, the Kassite army coming from the region of Terqa and Mari, or also the nomadic tribes which could have had a destabilizing effect on the consolidation of the Middle Assyrian occupation in the area.

The excavation of the main hill of Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq is undoubtedly a key project to reevaluate with new data the process of territorial expansion of the Assyrians during the XIIIth century BC. The Assyrian presence in the Middle Euphrates valley, mentioned by Adad-nirari I, Shalmaneser I and Tukulti-Ninurta I in a number of their inscriptions¹⁵, was so far not reflected in the archaeological record of the region.¹⁶ The excavation of Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq in the Syrian Middle Euphrates valley has changed the

9. Pfälzner 2007, pp. 250ff. and Anastasio 2007, fig. 14-16.

10. Duistermaat, 2008, p. 95.

11. Pfälzner 1995 y 2007.

12. Postgate, Oates & Oates 1997, p. 26.

13. Radiocarbon dates have been carried out in the Angström Laboratory of the University of Uppsala. 14C analysis of charcoal samples from Rooms 3 and 4 are forthcoming.

14. Duistermaat 2008, p. 95.

15. See e.g. Grayson 1987, A.0.76.3: 41; A.0.77.1: 85; A.0.78.23: 29.

16. Tenu 2009, pp. 239-255.

situation and thus opens new opportunities and perspectives to study the territorial policy of the Middle Assyrian kings, particularly of Tukulti-Ninurta I.

Finally, regarding the works on the Lower City of the Early Bronze Age, the trench run in 2010 has not given conclusive results. However, the partial excavation of a wall made out of large basalt blocks and mud bricks, situated exactly where the GPR survey identified in 2009 a large construction 6 meters wide, leaves open the possibility of locating the IIIrd millennium BC wall in this sector of the tell during the next campaigns.

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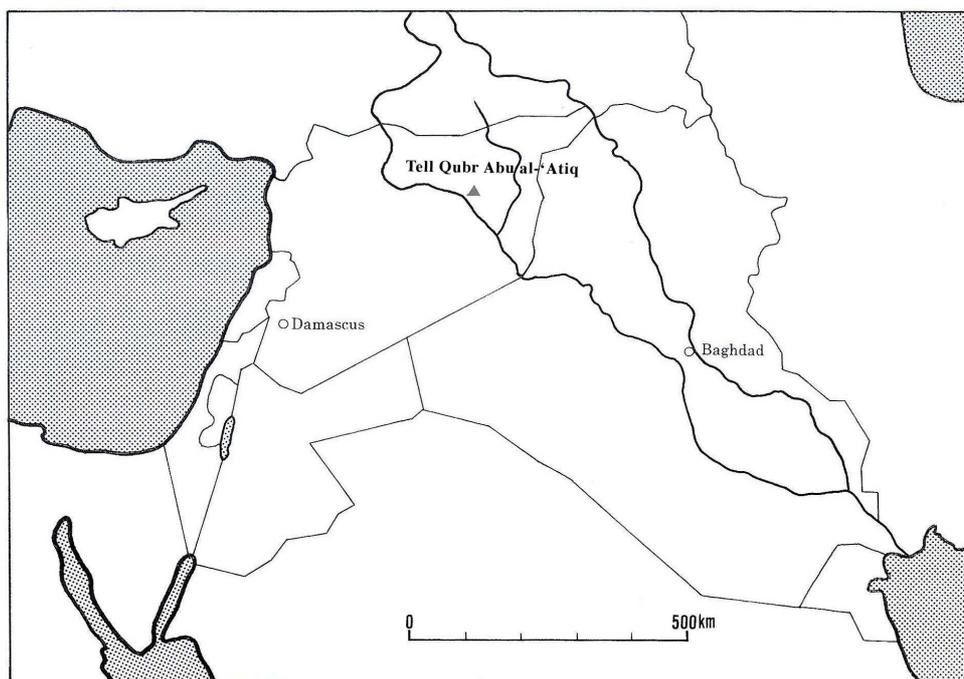


Fig. 1 Situation of Tell Qubr Abu al-'Atiq.

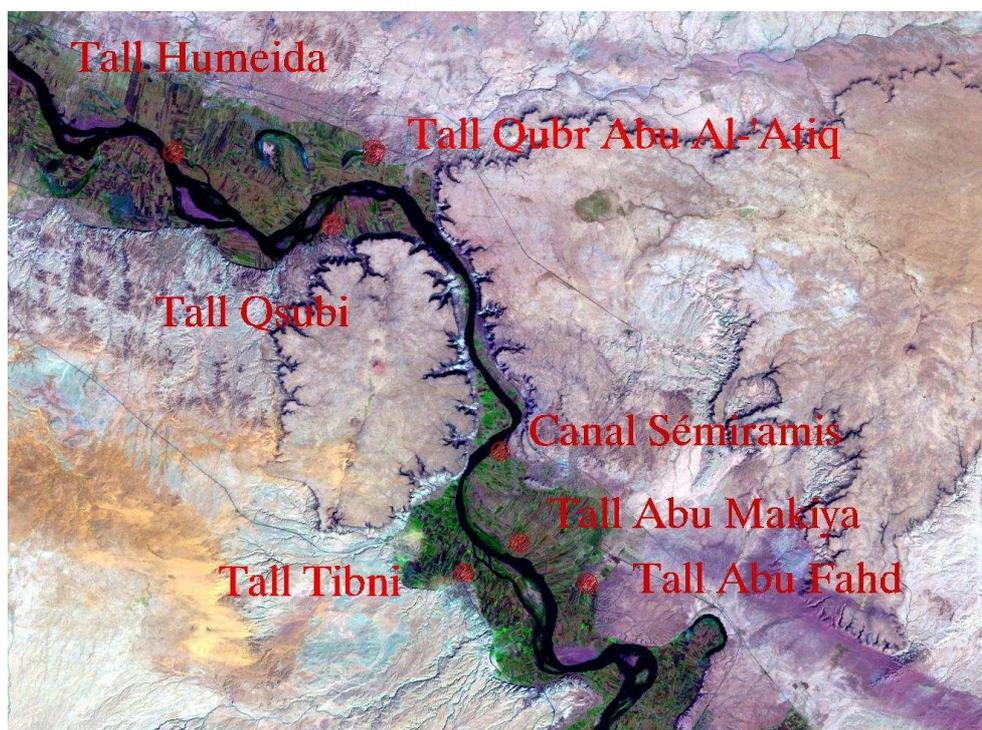


Fig. 2 Tell Qubr Abu al-'Atiq and the Khanuqa gorge.



Fig. 3 Basalt pestle with red pigment. Room 1.



Fig. 4 General view of Room 3.



Fig. 5: Objects found in Room 3.



Fig. 6: Cuneiform tablets *in situ*. Room 3.



Fig. 7 Detail of Room 4.



Fig. 8 Partial view of Room 5.



Fig. 9 Mud-brick surface and stone walls, possibly Islamic. Lower city.



Fig. 10 Section of Early Bronze Age wall. Lower city.

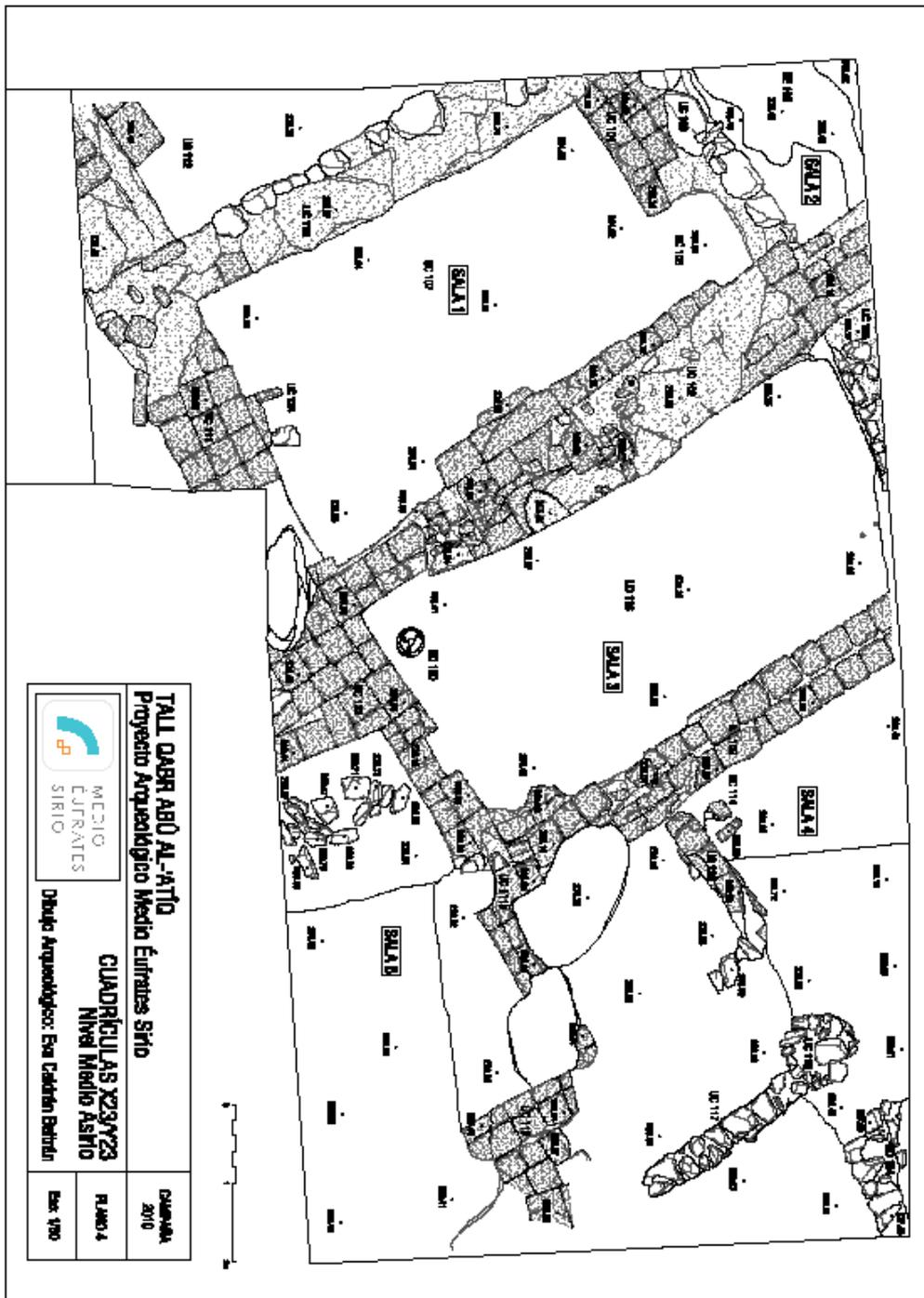


Fig. 11 Plan of the Middle Assyrian building after the campaign of 2010.