

Tell Qabr Abu al-‘Atiq: From an Early Dynastic City to a Middle Assyrian Fort  
5<sup>th</sup> Season Report of the *Proyecto Arqueológico Medio Éufrates Sirio* (2009)

Tall Qabr Abu al-‘Atiq: de la ciudad del Dinástico Antiguo  
a la fortaleza medio-asiria. Informe de la 5<sup>a</sup> campaña del  
*Proyecto Arqueológico Medio Éufrates Sirio* (2009)

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[During the fifth campaign of the Syrian-Spanish archaeological mission in Deir ez-Zor work was conducted in the Middle Assyrian fort (soundings) and the Early Bronze city (GPR survey) at Tell Qabr Abu al-‘Atiq, a site located at the entrance of the gorge of Khanuqa.]

**Keywords:** Middle Assyrian, “Administrative Pottery”, Mari, Early Bronze.

[La quinta campaña de la misión arqueológica sirio-española en Deir ez-Zor ha centrado sus objetivos en el estudio de la fortaleza medio-asiria (sondeos) y en la ciudad del Bronce Antiguo (prospección GPR) de Tell Qabr Abu al-‘Atiq, yacimiento situado en la entrada de la garganta de Khanuqa.]

**Palabras clave:** Medio Asirio, “Cerámica administrativa”, Mari, Bronce Antiguo.

The fifth season of the joint Syrian-Spanish archaeological mission in the Middle Euphrates in the province of Deir ez-Zor (Syria) took place from June 30 to July 28, 2009.<sup>1</sup> The goal of this campaign was

1. We wish to thank Dr. Michel al-Maqdissi, Director of the Department of Archaeological Excavations of the DGAM, and Dr. Bassam Jamous, General Director of Antiquities and Museums of Syria, for their kind help and support to carry out our research project. We are also very grateful to Osmane Aïdi Foundation, which provided us with accommodation, food, transport as well as workmen for our fieldwork in Deir ez-Zor. The supervision and diligence of Miss Rawa Batbouta (Chamtour, Damascus) decisively contributed, as always, to the success of this project. This season of archaeological work has been made possible also thanks to the financial support of the Spanish Ministry of Culture (General Directorate of Fine Arts and Cultural Heritage), the Xunta de Galicia (Project PGIDIT07PXIB167227PR), the City Council of Ferrol (Galicia), the University of Coruña (Campus of Ferrol), the Center for the Overseas History (CHAM) of the New University of Lisbon and the CCHS of CSIC in Madrid. Our gratitude goes also to the Spanish Embassy in Damascus and the Syrian Embassy in Madrid for their always kind support.

to carry out excavations and a GPR survey in Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq, a site located on the left bank of the Euphrates at the entrance of the gorge of Khanuqa, also known as the gorge of Halabiya, after the modern name of the Classical city of Zenobia (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup>

### 1. *Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq: previous works*

Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq is formed by a main hill of small size set at the western end of the site, and by a larger lower area of irregular shape caused by the erosion of the Quaternary terrace on which it was founded. Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq enjoys an excellent visual control over the valley which gives access to the gorge. An old meander of the Euphrates, today abandoned, can still be seen at the foot of the tell. The geostrategic value of the site was no doubt the *raison-d’être* of its occupation in ancient times.

A number of European travelers and scholars, such as Eduard Sachau, Gertrude Bell and Jean Lauffray visited Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq over the past two centuries, remarking the archaeological remains visible on the surface, namely potsherds and especially the foundations of walls and houses built with basalt blocks, gypsum and mud bricks.<sup>3</sup>

Kay Kohlmeyer is the first to have accurately dated Tall Qabr Abu al-‘Atiq to the Early Bronze Age in his report of the survey fieldwork carried out in the area between Raqqa and Halabiya in 1983 and 1984<sup>4</sup>. In a later study, the German archaeologist also pointed out the presence in this settlement of Middle Assyrian pottery<sup>5</sup>.

Finally, the survey undertaken between 2005 and 2007 by the Syrian-Spanish mission in the gorge of Khanuqa has confirmed the absence of Byzantine or Islamic pottery on the surface of the tell, contrary to the appreciation of Lauffray and other authors. The surface collections showed that the site was occupied during two main different phases: one dating to the Early Bronze and another one to the Late Bronze Age. Excavations on the site by the Syrian-Spanish mission began in July 2008<sup>6</sup>.

### 2. *GPR survey in the lower city*

The exploratory excavations carried out in the 2008 campaign in the area known as the “lower city” attested to an occupation dating to the Early Bronze Age. With the aim of gaining knowledge about the urban structure of this mid-third millennium settlement, a ground penetrating radar (GPR) survey was conducted during the 2009 campaign<sup>7</sup>. As is well known, GPR is a technique of short-range remote detection by means of a radar, already successfully used in other Syrian archaeological sites<sup>8</sup>.

The equipment used was a RAMAC-GPR with a 250 MHz antenna, equipped with a tachymetric wheel. To conduct the surveying work, the site was divided in 30 x 30 m squares, according to a GPR grid of parallel profiles separated by 50 cm. The surveyed area amounted to 47,545 sq m; in other words the

2. The staff during the 5<sup>th</sup> season of archaeological work in Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq included, apart from the present authors, Yarub Al-Abdallah, Ana García, María de los Ángeles Mulero, Victoria Pérez, Patricia Mora, Brais Alonso, Alexandre Novo, Mercedes Solla, Daniel Fernández, Jorge Sanjurjo, Sawsan Ashkar, Muhamed Fakhru and Sergio Cerra.

3. See, for example; Sachau 1883, p. 255, Bell 1924, pp. 66-68, and Lauffray 1983, pp. 72-73 and 81.

4. Kohlmeyer 1986, p. 54.

5. Einwag, Kohlmeyer and Otto 1995, p. 102, mentioned also by Tenu 2009, p. 210.

6. Montero Fenollós, al-Shbib, Márquez Rowe and Caramelo 2009.

7 The GPR survey has been carried out by the research group “Close Range Remote Sensing and Photogrammetry” of the University of Vigo, under the supervision of Prof. Henrique Lorenzo.

8. For instance in Tell Qarqur (see Casana *et al.* 2008).



team of surveyors covered 96,693 linear meters. Because the virgin soil was located a little over 1 m beneath the surface in the previous season excavations, the GPR survey reached a depth of 1.50 m.

The provisional processed data obtained from the fieldwork has allowed observing numerous structures in the radargrams, 3D models and slices. The majority of the detected elements are somewhat homogeneous regarding their depth situation, since all of them have been identified within the first meter.

The most relevant find has been the identification of an important construction in the eastern side of the settlement, importantly the least affected by erosion. It shows a large section of a circumference (fig. 2), which probably constitutes part of the ancient city wall, of about 6 m wide. The original, ideal circumference would have had a diameter of approximately 400 m, so that the enclosure would provisionally and tentatively define a walled city of some 12 hectares. Unfortunately the southwestern side of the city has disappeared as a result of the progressive and powerful action of erosion, making it impossible today to recover the complete layout of the wall in Tell Qubr Abu al-'Atiq. Other elements of the urban tissue have been identified aside from the section of the city wall, namely several streets with radial layout and several buildings, all within the walls of the city itself.

### 3. *Excavations in the main hill of the tell*

During the summer campaign of 2009 two areas have been chosen for excavation, both in the main hill of the settlement. The goal of these excavations was to continue the identification of the Middle Assyrian building, parts of which had been exposed in Area A during the previous season.

#### 3.1. *Area X23*

The excavation of Area X23 (10 x 10 m), which included an important part of former Area A (2008), helped confirm and define two different occupation phases on this part of the site: one of Islamic times and another of the Late Bronze Age. Earlier occupations cannot be ruled out and seem rather probable, to be checked or proved in future campaigns. The more recent of the two identified phases corresponds to an Islamic cemetery consisting of pit tombs east-west oriented that were marked on the surface by an array of stones.

Eleven tombs (UE.119, UE.121-126, UE.128-130 and UE.132) containing individuals of different ages were brought to light. The excavation did not yield any information yet allowing to date the cemetery. In some cases, the tombs, particularly the excavation of the pits, have done considerable damage to the lower archaeological levels. This is particularly the case of tomb UE.130, which cuts the main part of the wall UC.110, reaching as far as the floor level of Middle Assyrian times.

The next phase corresponds to Late Bronze II. The works conducted during this campaign had the goal of defining the whole of room 1 of the building partially exposed in 2008, as well as the localization of new rooms, in order to learn about the size and nature of the building itself. The excavation uncovered four rooms in total, albeit only partially (fig. 3).

- *Room 1.* Enclosed by four walls (UC.102, 104, 110 and 111) that define a rectangular area of over 16 sq m (2.85 x 5.80 m).

Wall UC.102: width: 1.45 m; preserved height: 1.24 m; size of the mud bricks: 37 x 37 cm and 37 x 18 cm; building technique: use of stone blocks in the foundations of the wall and elevation formed by rows with an alternation of regular and middle-size mud bricks. This wall presents a small niche 30 cm deep and a pilaster 80 cm long and 17 cm wide. The mud bricks of this wall have a reddish external

appearance as a result of the fire that destroyed the room.

Wall UC.104: width to be determined in future campaigns; preserved height: 45 cm; length: 1.85 m; shape of the mud bricks: 40 x 40 cm.

Wall UC.110: width: 90 cm; preserved height: 90 cm; building technique: the western face of the wall is reinforced by four rows of small and big size stones (preserved height of 80 cm). The wall is partially damaged by two Islamic tombs.

Wall UC.111: width: 1.20 m; shape of the mud bricks: 39 x 39 cm; building technique: wall made of three rows of mud brick and stone foundation.

Floor UC.107: beaten earth.

Door UC.105: 100 cm wide; gives access to room 2.

Hearth UC.134: small, square-shape installation (38 x 37 cm), delimited by three gypsum blocks and two mud bricks. This fireplace was built against the wall UC.111.

During the 2008 and 2009 seasons a large repertoire of pottery consisting of storage jars, carinated bowls, deep bowls, etc., was found directly on the floor of this room. All this archaeological material was crushed by the final collapse and burned by the fire that destroyed the building. Near the house was found a circular basalt mortar together with its stone pestle (fig. 4). All this material is associated with the wall UE.110 as a result of the fire and the subsequent collapse that destroyed the room. The stratum of reddish color contains different, collapsed building elements: broken or complete mud bricks, lumps of clay with prints from the mat roof or upper floor, fragments of plaster and abundant charcoal.

- *Room 2*: excavated during the 2008 campaign. It is connected to room 1 through the door UC.105. This 3 m long area is delimited, so far, by three walls: UC.101, UC.104 and UC.102. Beaten earth floor (UE.106).

Wall UC.101: in the northwest limit of the hill and the excavation area a wall was found made of gypsum, basalt and limestone blocks. Its thickness varies between 75 and 100 cm. In view of its construction it seems to be a leveling or foundation mud brick wall that disappeared in the course of time due to the powerful erosion that affected the slopes of the hill.

- *Room 3*: an area 3 m wide, delimited so far by three walls: UC.108, UC.109 and UC.102.

Wall UC.108: its real dimensions are unknown since it disappears inside the northern wall of the trench; it preserves remains of gypsum plaster and forms a right angle with the wall UC.102.

Wall UC.109: width: 80 cm; shape of the mud bricks: 37 x 36 cm. This wall is parallel to the wall UC.102. It is partially cut by the pit of the Islamic tomb UE.124.

- *Room 4*: it is only defined for the time being by the wall UC.109 that disappears inside the northern and eastern walls of the trench. This wall is associated to UE.127, which is formed by fragments of mud brick and abundant charcoal. The excavation has brought to light a series of storage jars that were found under the remains of three fragments of a carbonized beam lying parallel to the wall (figs. 6 and 7). In this same context a cylinder seal was found carved with images of Mesopotamian deities; according to its style and design, the seal must be dated to the OB period.

### 3.2. Area X24

In the main hill a second area was opened with the purpose of delimiting and identifying the Middle Assyrian building exposed in the former, neighboring Area A, currently Area X23. It corresponds in the



general plan or grid of the tell to Area X24 (10 x 5 m). As expected, the works conducted here confirmed the two same occupation phases defined in X23, that is, one corresponding to an Islamic cemetery and another one dating to Late Bronze II.

Over ten Islamic graves (UE.303, UE.304, UE.306, UE.309, UE.311-313, UE.316, UE.317, UE.319, etc.) were brought to light consisting of simple pits, marked by lines of stone blocks of medium and large size. No trace of material culture was found that could provide information on the chronology of this cemetery.

Regarding the Late Bronze Age phase, a beaten-earth floor was reached which probably corresponds to an open area in Middle Assyrian times. This area is divided by an array of stones northeast-southwest oriented whose function remains unclear. It is possible to see the stone foundation of a mud brick wall, today lost mainly as a result of the numerous Islamic tombs in the area as well as the effect of the erosion in this part of the tell. The interpretation as an open area is supported by the presence of a *tannur* or bread oven. The dating of this area to the Middle Assyrian period is based on the discovery of a jar in situ that belongs to this period. A basalt mill was also found in situ in the same context (fig. 3).

#### 4. Final considerations

The results of the PAMES field survey conducted between 2005 and 2008 have confirmed that man used, controlled, and settled in the region of Khanuqa since the late 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, thus improving previous scholarly appreciations. The occupation phases defined by our survey area the following: Ubaid, Middle and Late Uruk, Early Dynastic II-III, Shakkanakku period, Lim dynasty (Old Babylonian), Middle Assyrian, Roman-Byzantine and Islamic periods.

The continuity of occupation proves the economic and geopolitical importance of the surveyed area, from Tell Humeida a few miles upstream the gorge as far as Tell Abu Fahd a few miles downstream. The settlement in Tell Qubr Abu al-'Atiq, located on the left bank, is the result of the strategic and therefore historical relevance of Khanuqa. Because of its geographical position, close to an ancient meander of the Euphrates and to the gorge itself, Tell Qubr Abu al-'Atiq is a key site for the study of the processes of territory control that took place between the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> and the late 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC in the Middle Euphrates.

The preliminary results of the GPR survey of the Early Bronze Age lower city indicate that this is an ex-novo foundation and that it probably had a circular plan. Together with Mari and possibly also Terqa, Tell Qubr Abu al-'Atiq would constitute the third known example of a circular city in the Middle Euphrates area between the defiles of Baghuz and Khanuqa<sup>9</sup>. Since the northern border of the kingdom of Mari should in all likelihood be located in Khanuqa<sup>10</sup>, one can posit as a working hypothesis that the Early Bronze city at Tell Qubr Abu al-'Atiq was founded by the people from Mari around 2600-2500 BC to control the access to the kingdom from the northwest. According to this hypothesis, the circular city would have to be understood in the context of the territoriality of the kingdom of Mari in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC.

On the other hand, the archaeological works carried out during the 2009 campaign in the areas X23 and X24 have brought to light several rooms of a building destroyed by fire, whose collapse crushed on the ground a homogeneous pottery assemblage. The study of this assemblage has shown that it belongs to the so-called "Middle Assyrian administrative pottery". The main feature of this massively produced pottery, also called "official" or "standard", obviously is its great technological and typological

9. For cities with circular plans in Syria see Huot 2006 and al-Maqdissi 2009.

10. Margueron, 2006.



homogeneity<sup>11</sup>. It has been thoroughly studied and classified on the basis of the findings of the P building in Tell Shaikh Hamad<sup>12</sup>. It consists of coarse, quickly made, ware, with plenty of plant fiber temper, and presenting standardized forms: cups and carinated bowls, beakers with button base, bottles, pot-stands, etc. (figs. 4-7). It is the most common type of pottery in Middle Assyrian towns and colonies, and also well attested in capital cities such as Aššur and Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta. The chemical analyses of the pottery of Tell Shaikh Hamad demonstrate that the clay used in the manufacture is local and that the pottery is therefore not imported<sup>13</sup>. Given the great standardization of the Middle Assyrian official pottery, one may hypothesize that craftsmen from Aššur were sent to the provinces to produce what may be called an "Empire culture". In other words, the centralization of the Assyrian administration is visible in the light not only of written records but also of the pottery production.

A comparative study of the pottery found in Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq shows clear parallels with the ceramic finds of phase I in Tell Shaikh Hamad, in the Khabur valley, and with the material from Tell Sabi Abyad, in the Balikh area<sup>14</sup>. It would accordingly allow us to date the assemblage of Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq to the beginnings of the Middle Assyrian I period. As a matter of fact, the first C-14 calibrated dates of a number of charcoal samples collected in 2008 are 1298-1026 BC and 1272-1019 BC<sup>15</sup>.

Finally the discovery of a cylinder seal in room 4 may indicate the presence of an administrative elite, confirming the political and economic importance of the partially excavated Middle Assyrian building. Despite the provisional data at hand, it is reasonable to argue that the building corresponds to the center of a fortified Assyrian settlement or *dunnu*, built to control this part of the Middle Euphrates valley. Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq may well have functioned as a military outpost of the Assyrian Empire to face the Hittites and the Babylonians, the two other conquering powers in this frontier zone in the Middle Euphrates. Either rival power or perhaps some nomadic groups from this tribal region may be held responsible for the final conflagration that destroyed the Middle Assyrian fort in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC.

The first two seasons of excavations in Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq have revealed the especial importance of the site that will allow us not only to better understand the territorial policies of the Assyrian kings in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, but also give us a chance to study the development of cities during the so-called "Second Urban Revolution" and re-evaluate the size and physiognomy of the kingdom of Mari in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC.

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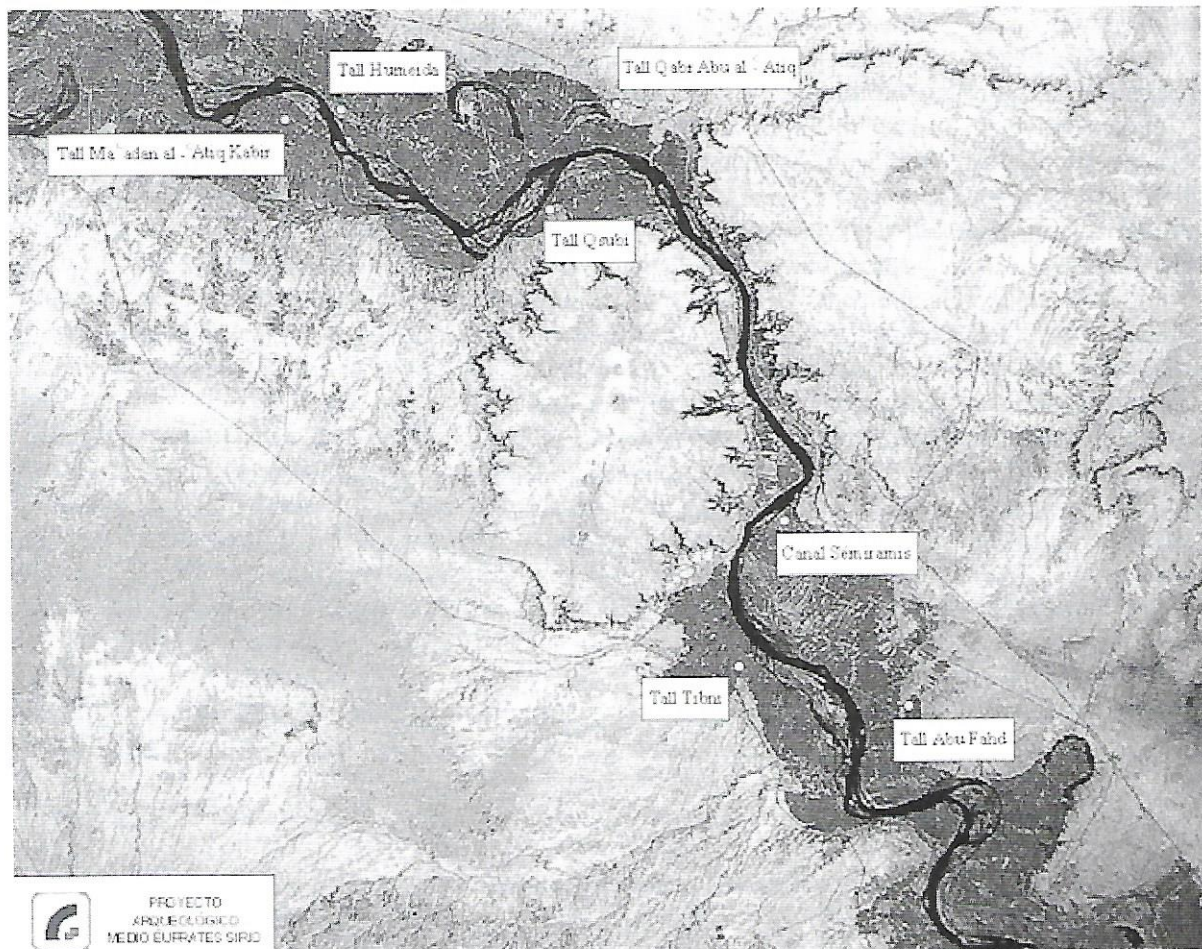


Fig. 1 Satellite image of the gorge of Khanuqa and situation of Tell Qabr Abu al-'Atiq.



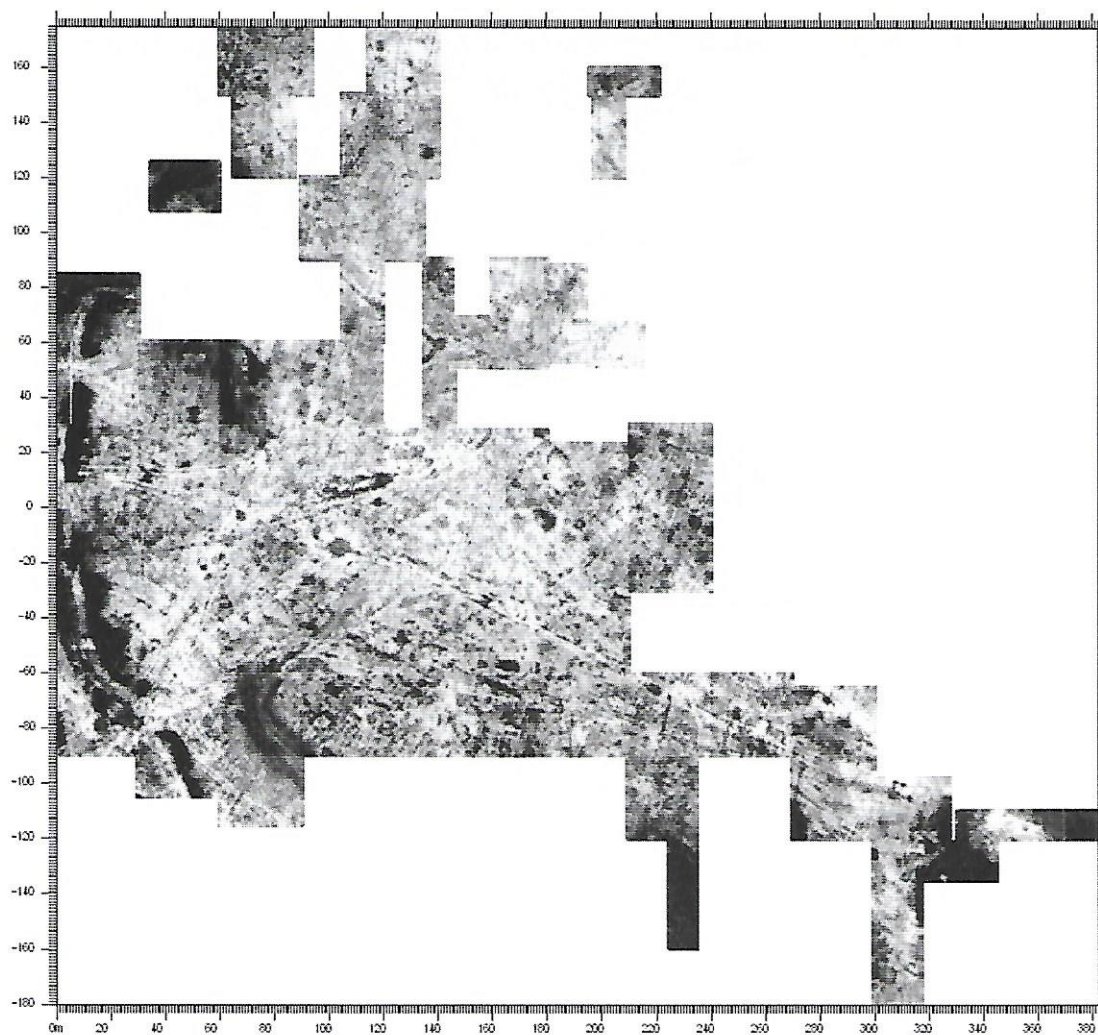


Fig. 2. Tell Qubr Abu al-'Atiq. Provisional results of the GPR survey.

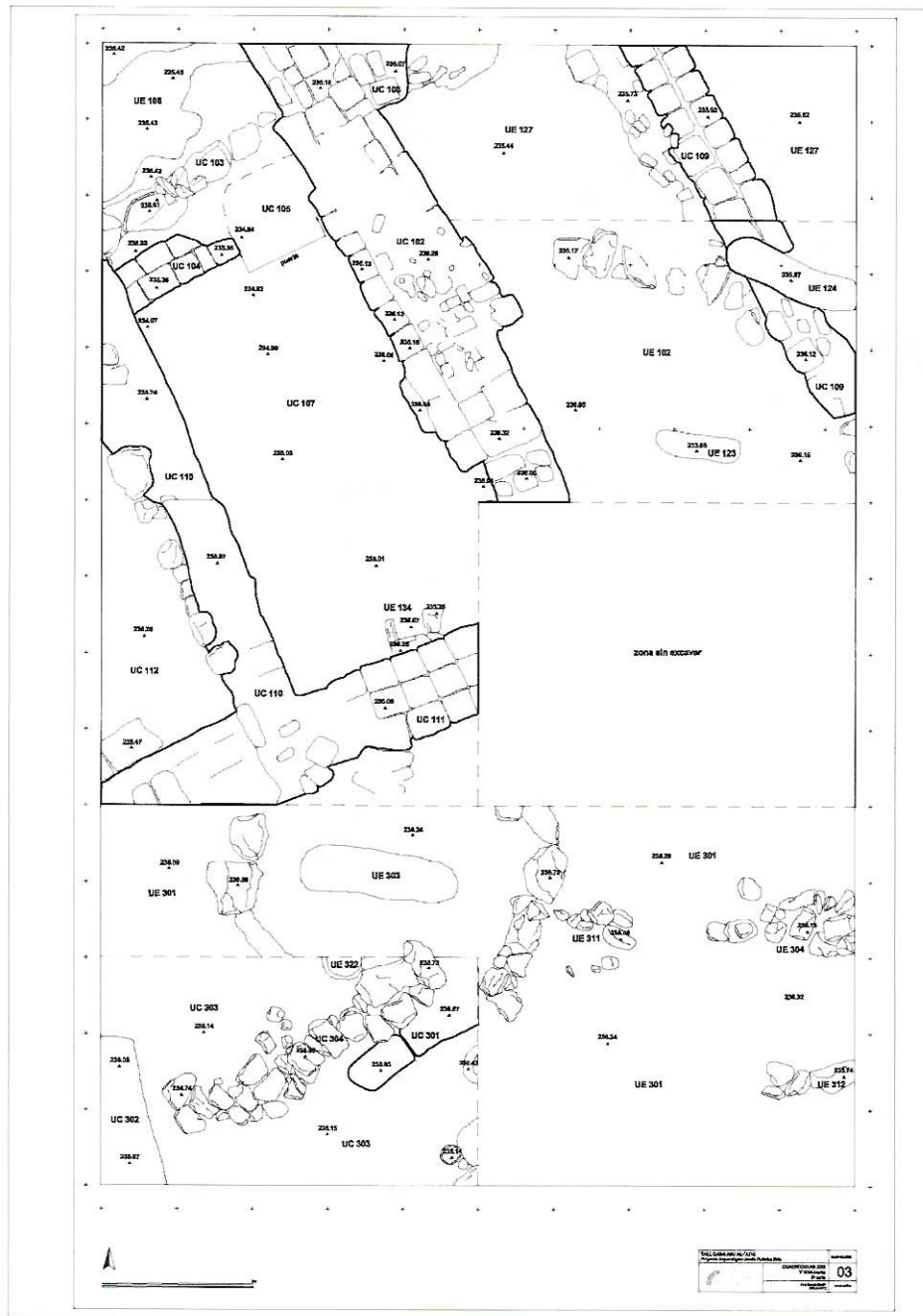


Fig. 3. Tell Qabr Abu al-Atiq. Areas X23 and X24. Middle Assyrian building.



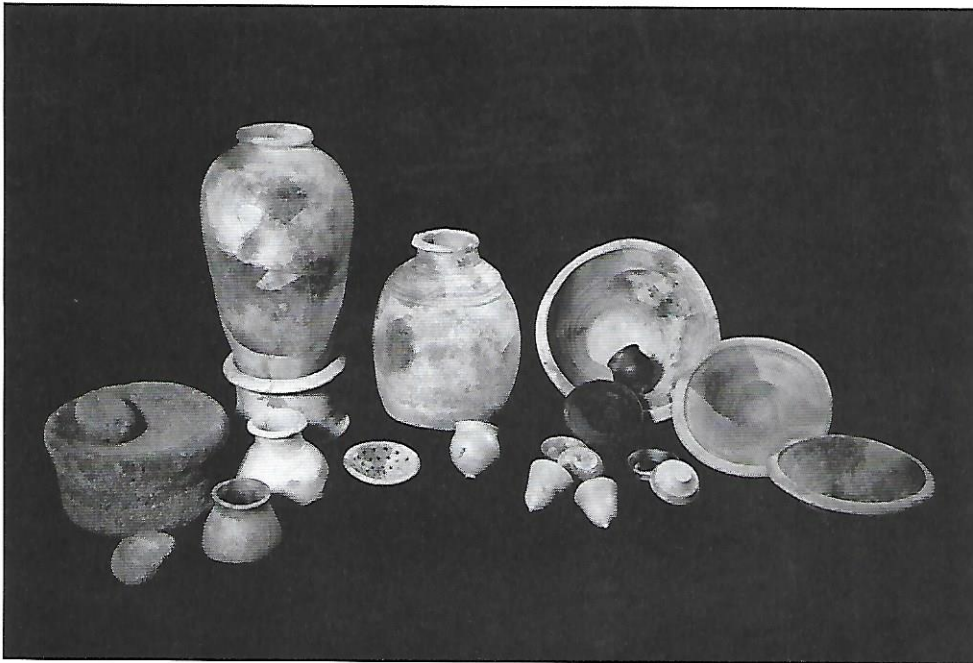


Fig. 4. Tell Qubr Abu al-'Atiq. Objects found in room 1 of the Middle Assyrian building.

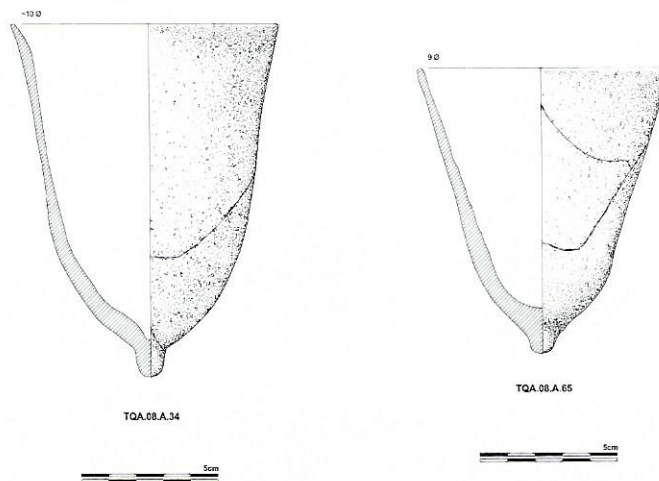


Fig. 5. Tell Qubr Abu al-'Atiq. Middle Assyrian beakers.



Fig. 6. Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq. Jars found in situ in room 4 of the Middle Assyrian building.



Fig. 7. Tell Qubr Abu al-‘Atiq. Restored pottery from room 4 of the Middle Assyrian building.