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Proche-Orient ancien:
réalités, symbolismes, et images*

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LIONEL MARTI

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Family Daily Life at Tell Mardikh-Ebla (Syria) during the Middle Bronze Age:

A Functional Analysis of Three Houses in the Southern Lower Town (Area B East)

Enrico ASCALONE, Luca PEYRONEL, Gilberta SPREAFICO

UNIVERSITY OF SALENTO, UNIVERSITY IULM OF MILAN,
AND UNIVERSITY SAPIENZA OF ROME

Introduction

Renewed excavations have been carried out since 2001 at Tell Mardikh-Ebla in Area B East (Fig. 1), where a well preserved domestic quarter dating to the Middle Bronze Age was already identified and partially brought to light at the beginning of the Seventies.¹ The work has been planned in a multi-disciplinary perspective aiming at obtaining not only an in depth reconstruction of the quarter and its life (through detailed study of residential architecture, archaeological materials and activity areas), but also of the environment and human landscape of Ebla during the Old Syrian period.²

The large amount of objects, installations, vessels and organic materials sealed *in situ* over the floors by thick layers of collapsed debris, burnt bricks, ashes, charred wooden remains hints to a sudden destruction by fire, the same destruction that affected other buildings of the city at the end of the Middle Bronze IIB (c. 1650–1600 BC).³ The good state of preservation of the houses, which walls stand in some cases to a height of 2,50 m (even complete doorways with the mud brick doorjambs and the lintel have been found), the rich assemblages retrieved on the floors and the

Author's note: The excavations were supervised by E. Ascalone, L. Peyronel and G. Spreafico with the collaboration of E. Felluca, C. Grasso, A. Inzillo, R. Lepre, S. Pizzimenti, and L. Romano and scholars of the Syrian Department of Antiquities together with students of the Universities of Damascus and Aleppo. We wish to deeply thank the Director of the Italian Archaeological Expedition at Ebla, Prof. Paolo Matthiae, who entrusted us with the task of continuing the dig of Area B East and allow us to study and publish the materials found in it. We also express our gratitude to Prof. Frances Pinnock for the useful suggestions regarding the pottery production of Middle Bronze Age. E. Ascalone, L. Peyronel and G. Spreafico wrote the introduction and the conclusion; G. Spreafico wrote the § on the first residential unit, L. Peyronel wrote the § on the second residential unit, E. Ascalone wrote the § on the third residential unit.

1. For a general reconsideration of the structures discovered during the old excavations on the light of the new evidences see now Baffi 2006: 78–79, figs. 6–10.

2. A preliminary outline of the new researches in Area B East is published in Peyronel 2008: 181–184. For a short description of a stonecutter's workshop identified in room L.9366 of the southeastern house unit see Peyronel 2012: 481.

3. On the siege and the final destruction of Old Syrian Ebla see Matthiae 2006, 2007, and 2009.



Fig. 1. Topographic Plan of Tell Mardikh-Ebla.

destruction deposits provide several clues for inferring the domestic activities performed in (Figs. 2–3).

The residential area is located in the south-western sector of the Lower Town at the foot of the Acropolis, between Sanctuary B2 to the West and the Southern Palace to the East.⁴ Perpendicular streets determined the regular form of large dwelling

4. For a description of these public buildings see Matthiae 1990 and 2004.



Fig. 2. Area B East, general view of the residential quarter.

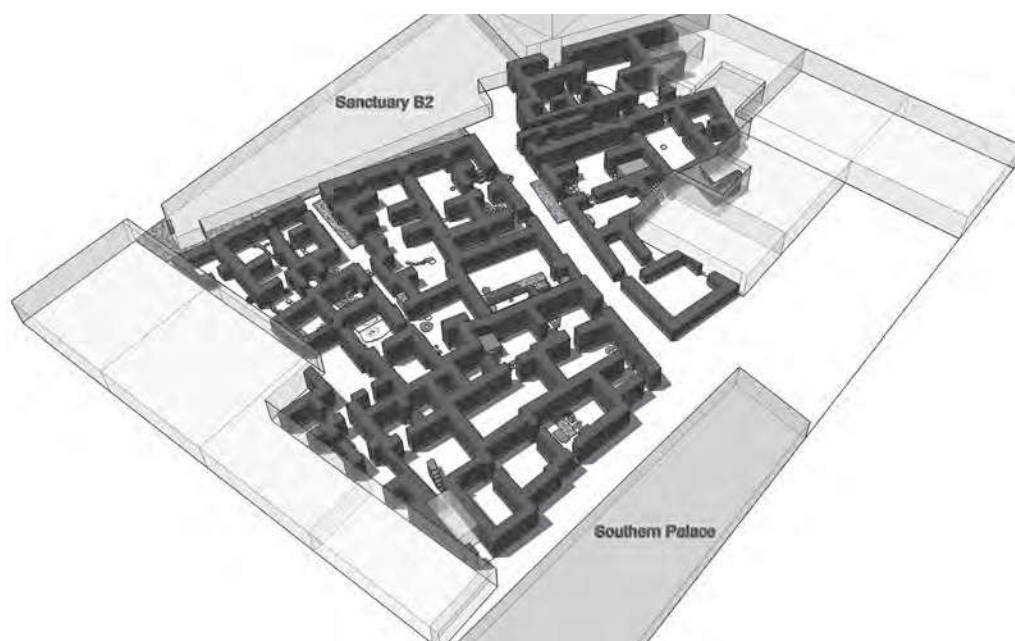
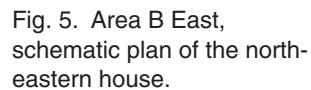


Fig. 3. 3D view of the residential quarter (Area B East).



Fig. 4. Schematic plan of Area B East.

blocks or *insulae*, divided into houses which shared walls. We have identified two South–North streets (L.2110 to the West and L.9669 to the East), a street running West–East (L.8651) and a smaller blind alley (L.8472) (Fig. 4). Houses were different in size and in shape; their design could be modified to fit changing needs, reflecting changes in the social hierarchy of the owners and family growth. Building phases are testified by doorways walled up, new walls and new rooms, and by replastering and reflooring. Despite the great variety in plan, it is possible to recognize a common



Here we briefly present the evidence from three dwelling units, proposing a preliminary reconstruction of the activities which took place in this area.

The first residential unit (Figs. 5–6) occupies the corner between streets L.8651 and L.9669, the last rising to the Acropolis and dividing the Southern Palace from the residential area. It was characterized by an irregular design, with a ground

6. See the remarks on the interpretative problem related to the existence of a second floor in Margueron 1997.

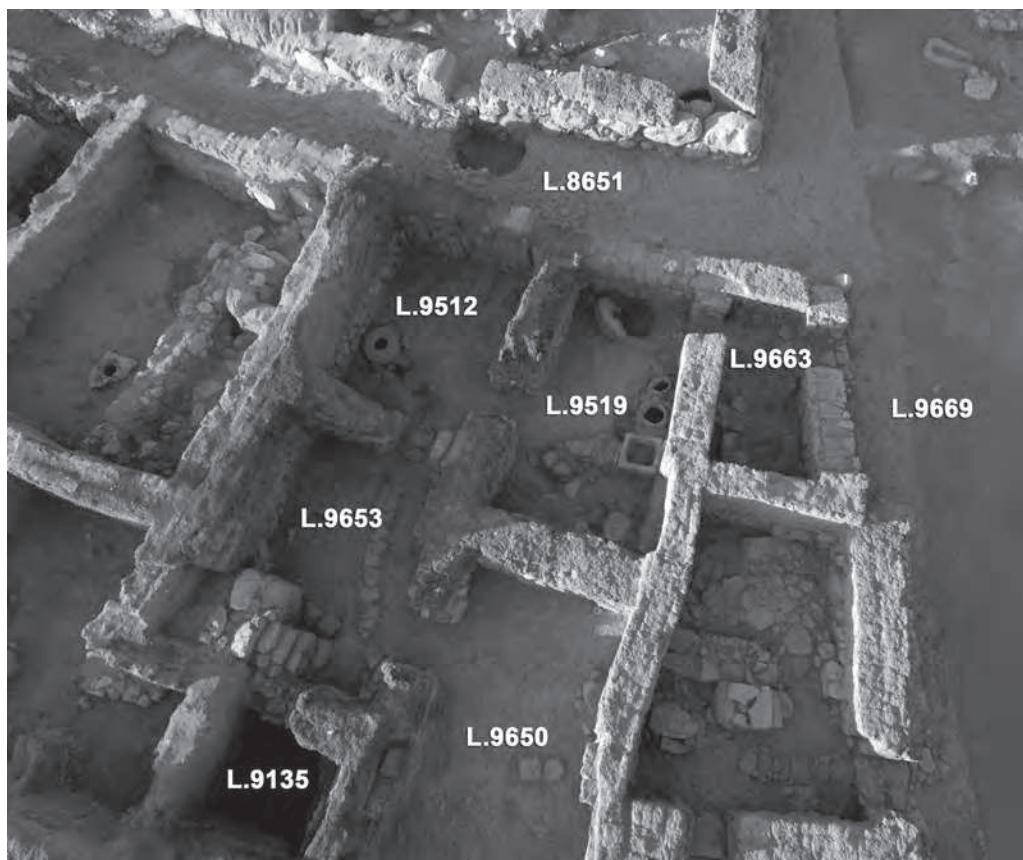


Fig. 6. Area B East, general view of the north-eastern house.

surface of about 121 square meters and a surface of housing of about 73 square meters. The house was subdivided into six rectangular rooms of different sizes, arranged so that to reach the last one you have to pass through all the other rooms. The entrance was from L.9669, through a door located just near the north-eastern corner of the building, giving access to a small vestibule. This arrangement represents the last phase of the house. In the first building phase the dwelling unit actually included only four rooms and was entered from the East–West street L.8651 through a door in the northern wall. In the second phase this door was walled up and two new rooms, the kitchen (L.9519) and the vestibule (L.9663), were added on the East, as testified by the different fabric, color and size of the mud bricks employed to build the new walls, the same kind of mud brick used to blocking the northern entrance.

Various activities related to food transformation were probably performed in the vestibule: foodstuffs were stored in the jar that originally stood against the northern jamb of the western door, while a small amount of cereals was placed over a wooden shelf in the north-eastern corner of the room. Cereals were lying on and covered by straw mats, whose charred remains were found during the excavation. Two basalt bowls and a limestone basin can be related to food processing. Finds from the second room, the kitchen, tell the story of food products from storing to consumption,



Fig. 7. Area B East, L.9519.

through processing and cooking (Fig. 7).⁷ A pot in the north-western corner and two store jars, the one lying against the northern jamb of the door communicating with the vestibule and another one in the central part of the room, were conveniently located near the food preparation area, holding food supplies for daily and immediate use. A basalt mortar, three millstones, and two pestles from the floor level were employed to process cereals. The position of a flat basalt stone semicircular in shape at the foot of the two hearths placed on a clay bench against the eastern wall suggests that the semicircular stone was used as a working surface in the process of food preparation. The two circular hearths (T.9672 and T.9673) were composed of two concentric terracotta walls partially embedded in a clay bench which contributed to maintaining the heat. We found also a cooking pot fallen inside the northern *tan-nur*, on which was clearly placed at the time of the sudden destruction that affected the house (Fig. 8). South of the two hearths, a large basalt basin was lying on the clay bench. The lower layer identified inside was dark in color and contained several charcoal, suggesting the basin was used to hold the fuel for the hearths. Other fireplaces could be possibly identified in the two circular clay installations with an upper opening situated in the central part of the room, partially surrounded by undressed stones and connected by a low mud brick bench.

The rainwater drainage system is well documented by two vertical clay pipes in the north-western and south-eastern corners and a stone channel crossing the earth beaten floor to the well. Similar evidence was provided by the two rooms (L.9512, L.9653) located to the West. Rainwater was collected from the roof into a clay pipe

7. For an analysis of the main types of fire installations at Ebla during the Middle Bronze period see Peyronel - Spreafico 2008.



Fig. 8. Area B East, *tannur* T.9672 with the cooking pot fallen inside.

in the south-eastern corner of the southern room and then flowed through a stone built channel to the well located in the northern room (Fig. 9). The well curb consisted of a dressed stone with a regular circular opening.

The northern part of the room with the well (L.9512) was used to store food supplies both for daily use and long-term storage. Products for daily use, mostly cereals, were stored inside two jars and five pots located over the floor along the walls (Fig. 10). In this part of the room there were also a jug and a small globular bowl with thin flaring rims.⁸ The space kept free at the center of the room was probably devoted to food processing, as we can infer from grinding tools recovered on the floor. The charred elements of a wooden structure and a large amount of barley, about 300 liters, were found collapsed over the storage vessels preserved *in situ* on the floor (Figs. 11–12). This material probably belonged to a wooden intermediate floor, on which the barley was placed for long-term storage, laid on and covered by straw mats, whose characteristic soft charred remains, grey in color, were identified over the barley and between it and the wooden elements.⁹

8. This kind of bowl is a diagnostic type of the last phase of Middle Bronze IIB at Ebla (Pinnock 2005: 41–42, tipo 1290). It is usually considered a drinking vessel although it could have been employed also to hold products when found in association with big preservation jars. In this case, another possible use is as a container of some substance useful to deter insect from food supplies. We thank F. Pinnock for her suggestions on the possible functions of the vessel.

9. A detailed analysis of the organic content of this storing place is published in Fiorentino et al. 2012. The storeroom contained a large amount of barley.



Fig. 9. Area B East, L.9512 (foreground) and L.9653 (background) from north. Note the clay pipe (left background), the stone channel and well P.9516 (right foreground).



Fig. 10. Area B East, L.9512 from east with the materials *in situ* on the floor.



Fig. 11. Area B East, L.9512, Syrian workers collecting the charred barley collapsed from a wooden structure at the time of the destruction of the house.

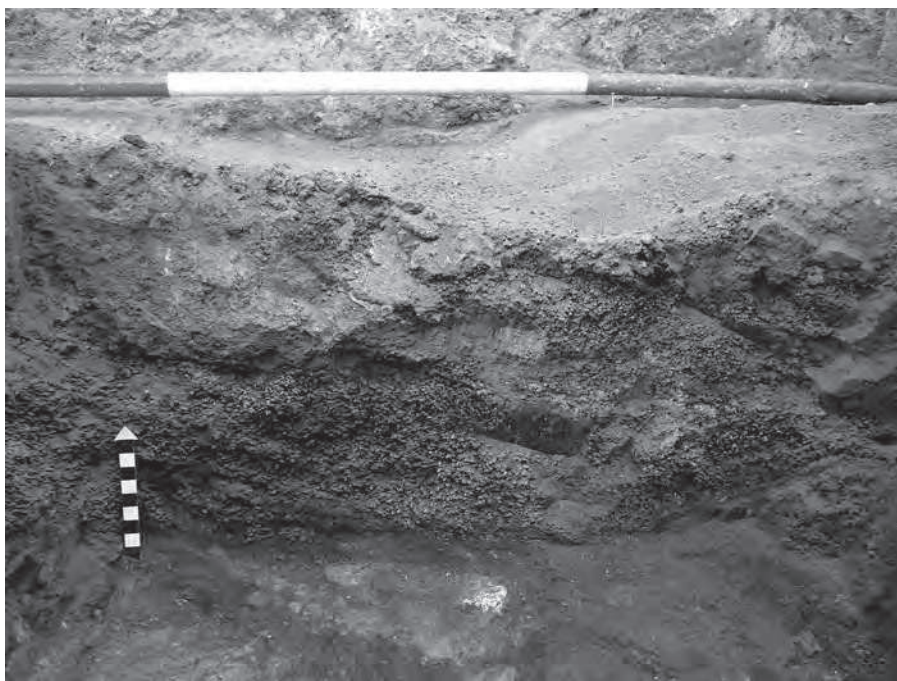


Fig. 12. Area B East, L.9512, particular of the charred barley level.



Fig. 13. Area B East, L.9650 from south with the materials *in situ* on the floor.

The southern room (L.9653) had a distributive function, providing access to a large room through the door on the eastern side, to a small storage space through an opening in the southern wall, and to the roof or, very probably, to an upper storey containing the actual living accommodation by the stone staircase in the south-western corner. Three complete store jars were preserved on the floor against the walls together with two globular bowls. Many potsherds recovered on the floor belonged to other storage vessels originally placed in the room. As in the other rooms, so also in L.9653 we found several grinding tools, such as querns, millstones and pestles.

The floor of the small room to the South (L.9135) was about 1 meter below the level of the rest of the house. The room was probably entered by a ladder connected with the upper opening in the northern wall and we can suppose was devoted to keep food and alimentary products in an appropriate condition of preservation, since three vessels were found on a plastered bench running along the walls.

The last room of the house (L.9650) was the largest one. It was probably a poly-functional space devoted to various activities (Fig. 13). Storing and food processing are documented by the presence of four storage vessels, a pestle and two querns, while administrative activities carried out in the house can be inferred by the finding of a cylinder seal. Five clay figurines, four bronze pins, some other personal ornaments recovered in the lower level over the floor tell us about the wealth of the house inhabitants. The plenty of food supplies found in the residential unit suggests



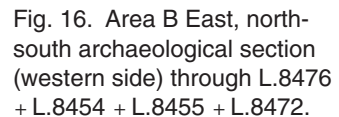
Fig. 14. Area B East, general view of the north-western house from north-west.

the owners had some control over the cereals production that probably took place in the fields located near the built-up area of the town. In this respect we cannot exclude that part of the alimentary products stored in the house were intended for sale in the neighborhood.

The North-Western House of the Central Insula

The western part of the central *insula* was occupied by a large domestic unit comprising 13 rooms at the ground floor. This unit shows several architectural phases, all dating from the Middle Bronze Age II and it was at one moment subdivided in two different houses, a northern and a southern one, the latter with the entrance opening on the East–West blind alley (Fig. 14). The southern unit was interested by several architectural changes, testified by the blocking of the vestibule and of the door leading to the street, and by a new entrance-door placed to the East. Moreover at the time of the final destruction it seems that it was already abandoned, as documented by the lack of destruction levels and by a stratigraphy characterized by packed mud bricks and mud with few sherds, without evidence of materials *in situ*. On the contrary, the northern unit was sealed by thick layers of collapsed debris and ashes and burnt wooden remains, with the original assemblage in its primary context.¹⁰ Our analysis will concern therefore only on the northern house, which is composed by seven rooms, with a ground surface of about 83 square meters and

10. Four samples of charred seeds chosen for AMS radiocarbon analysis were collected in the layers over the floors of the rooms L.8454 (LTL 391A – 1610–1390 Cal BC) and L.8650 (VERA 3552 and VERA 3553 – 1690–1510 Cal BC) and from the burnt materials inside T.8662 in L.8454 (LTL 390A, 1700–1520 Cal BC). For a list of C14 dates from Ebla see Fiorentino et al. 2008: tab. 4 and fig. 6; see also Peyronel 2008: 182, note 20.



From the vestibule it is also possible to reach the main central space of the house and the roof by a staircase located on the western side. The central room (L.8454) is connected with a square room to the East (L.2126) and with the understairs to the North (L.8476). The destruction level revealing the sudden end of the house it is best represented by the fillings recovered in the central space, where it is possible to distinguish four main layers (Fig. 16): the upper one (3a) with materials from the collapsed mud-bricks, an intermediate layer (3b) with materials from the collapsed walls mixed with traces of burning and plaster fragments, and two lower layers with mud-brick fragments baked by fire, plaster pieces and a larger amount of ashes and burnt materials, such as charcoal and remains of foodstuffs. Directly over the floor burnt wooden remains, ashes, potsherds belonging to complete vessels, and objects *in situ* were found.



Fig. 17. Area B East, L.8650, particular of the jug found on the floor in the passage leading to the vestibule.

We can suggest the presence of a residential area in the eastern sector of the house, composed by an entrance room (L.8650), paved with stones, and equipped with a door opening from the inside, and by two rooms (L.8950+L.8953), in which a burnt level of mat and straw was found directly over the floor together with few objects and potsherds, suggesting the presence of straw mattresses. In the paved square room only few personal objects were collected, and in the passage leading to the vestibule a complete jug, together with a perishable container full of charred grains, were found on the floor (Figs. 17–18).

Most of the daily life activities were performed by members of the family in the main central room with the related understairs (L.8454+L.8476).¹¹ The latter was used as an accessory storeroom in which food supplies were kept in pottery vases, as testified by a clay vat, an ovoid jug and a large globular cooking pot found on the earth-beaten floor.

In the central nuclear-room water used in everyday life was gathered from a well. Basalt grinding facilities, such as three millstones, two pestles and a tripod bowl, concentrated in the south-eastern area of the courtyard, show that this space was used for food processing (Fig. 19). These tools were probably used to process

11. A detailed analysis of the central room of this dwelling has been presented in a poster at the 4 ICAANE in Berlin by the authors together with the palaeobotanists G. Fiorentino e V. Caracuta and we will published elsewhere. Cf. Caracuta - Fiorentino 2013: pp. 404–5, tab. 24.2, fig. 24.1.

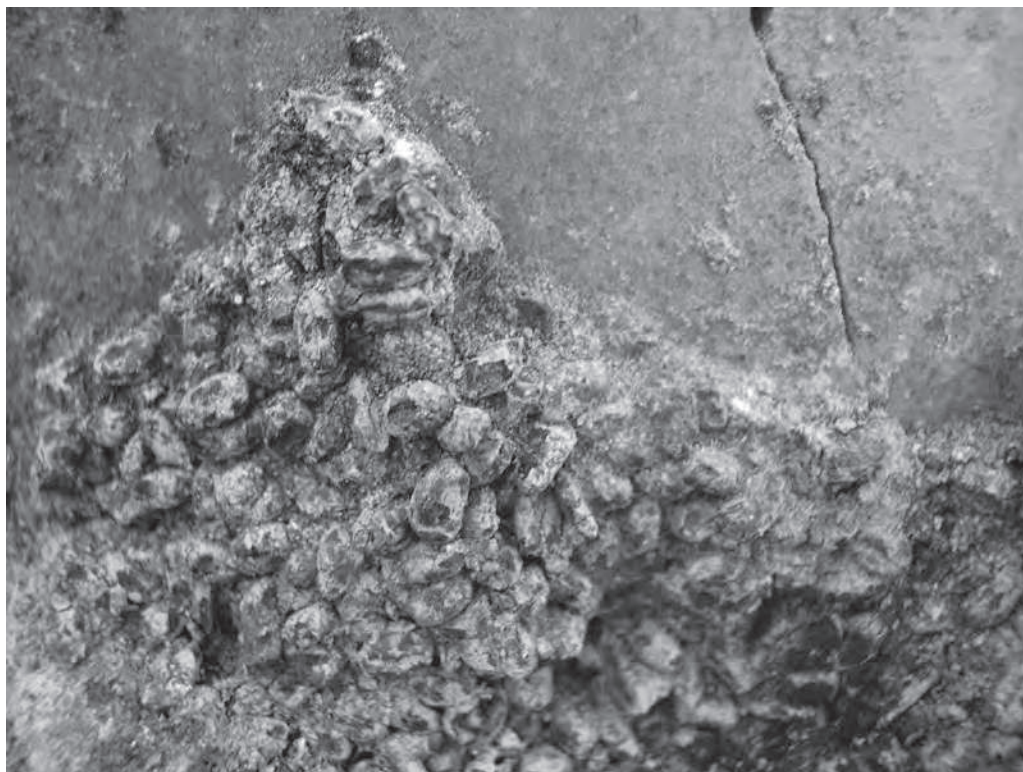


Fig. 18. Area B East, L.8650, particular of the charred barley grains, originally held in a perishable container, found attached to the jug located in the passage leading to the vestibule.

barley and wheat: pestles were used to pound grain in the basalt bowl, and then it was probably ground to a coarse flour with the millstones on a saddle quern.

The cooking and consumption of meals is testified by a *tannur*, placed at the middle of the northern side, and by several cooking pots (T.8662) (Fig. 20).¹² The horse-shoe shaped hearth was formed by an external terracotta *bordure*, which encircled the inner core, both partially embedded in the floor. A globular cooking pot was probably used for cooking food over the *tannur*. Its thin base should have favoured heat passage, while the thick rim should be helpful for moving the pot. A large bowl full of charred caryopses of barley was found in the north-west corner of the room.

The systematic collection of earth samples reveals that cereals were kept into perishable containers and pottery vessels, before to be processed with grinding tools. On the contrary, the archaeobotanical assemblage of *tannur* was characterized by chemical alterations related to seeds included in dung used as fuel, typical in arid regions.¹³

12. See Peyronel - Spreafico 2008: 214, fig. 3.

13. The fuel used includes dung together with a variety of wood species (*olea europea*, *prunus cf. avium*, *fraxinus sp.*, and *pinus halepensis*): Caracuta - Fiorentino 2013: tab. 24.2. A detailed micro-archaeological analysis on Iron Age cooking installations from Southern Levant has been recently published by Gur-Arieh et al. (2014).

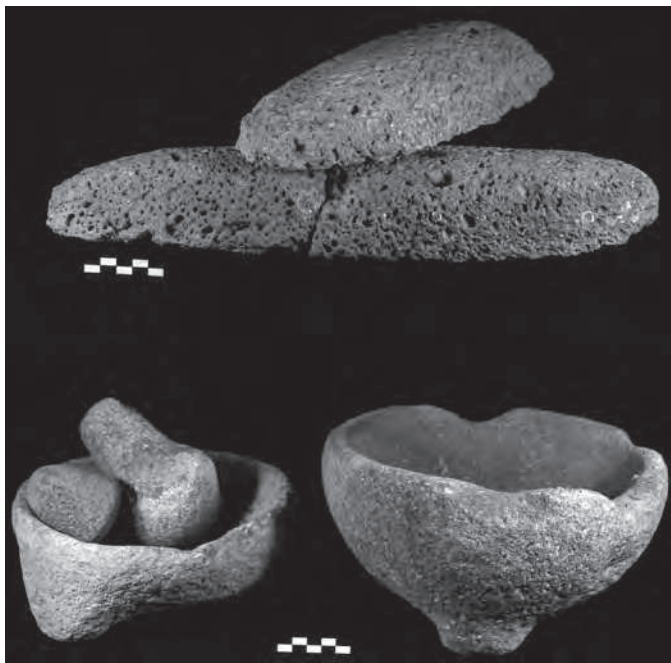


Fig. 19. Area B East, grinding tools from L.8454.

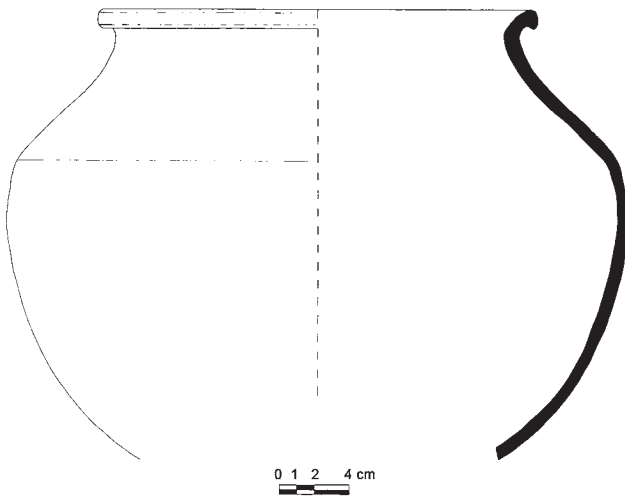
Few items testify for personal ornaments and objects of the owners, including two bronze pins, two clay chariot wheels and a chalcedony bead. However the high-rank of the family is indicated by a small globular bowl whose rim was cut off in order to fit a cuneiform tablet with its envelope (Fig. 21).¹⁴ The bowl was probably put on a wooden furniture or shelving placed in the courtyard, as documented by several burnt small beams, about 3 cm in diameter, collapsed over the floor of the central room. The furniture was made of olive-tree wooden posts and rafters together with straw mats, on which object were placed.

Another room opening on the central courtyard (L.2126) escapes any functional interpretation, since it was empty, with the exception of several wooden burnt remains over the floor, perhaps pertaining to a shelving: the chamber, which could be closed from the inside, as indicated by a basalt door-socket, can be therefore considered a kind of peculiar storing room or alternatively a space for sleeping.

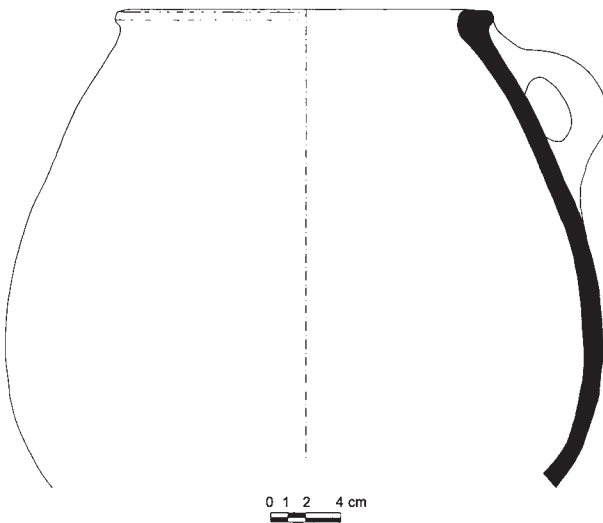
The House at the End of the Blind Alley

Lastly, we consider briefly a third house, located at the eastern end of the blind alley (L.8472) just at the center of the southern *insula* (Fig. 22). The house, with a ground surface of about 92 square meters and a surface of housing of 57 square meters, included a large room with a well (L.8972), entered through a long corridor (L.8752), three subsidiary rooms opening on the central space (L.9146, L.9126, L.8971), a small square space in the south-eastern corner (L.9143, probably a storing room) and a kitchen (L.8756) connected with the entrance corridor (Fig. 23). As

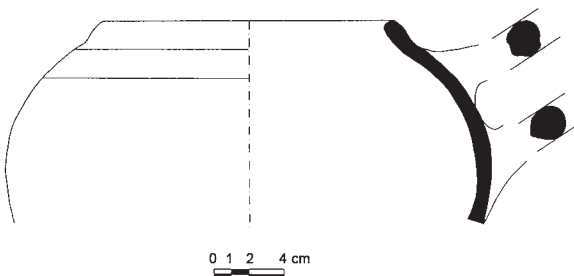
14. The cuneiform tablet bears a private contract dealing with land and house properties and it was sealed with a cylinder seal related to the late Old Babylonian style: Peyronel 2008: 183–184, fig. 9.



TM.03.B.828/1 - P.9



TM.02.B.851/1 - P.1



TM.02.B.851/3 - P.7

Fig. 20. Area B East, cooking pots from L.8454.



Fig. 21. Area B East, the globular bowl with the tablet and its envelope found in L.8454.

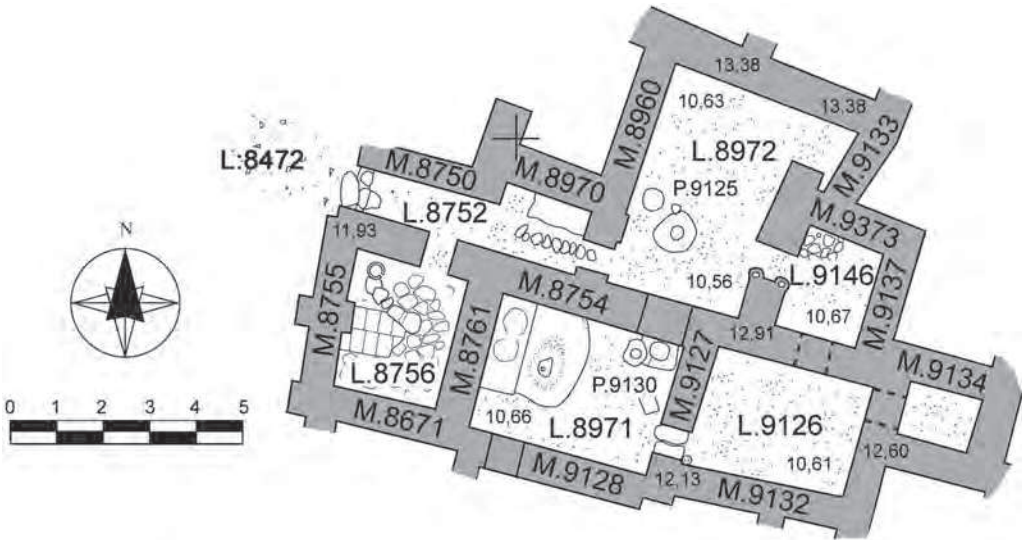


Fig. 22. Area B East, schematic plan of the central house located at the end of the blind alley L.8472.



Fig. 23. Area B East, general view of the central house from east.

in the other residential units, the large central room (L.8972) was a poly-functional space, used for rainwater collection, food processing, and short-term storage of food products, as testified by the finding of a vertical clay pipe connected to the well, several fragments of preservation jars scattered over the floor, two pestles and two grinding stones.

The other rooms were devoted to functionally specialized domains. The two eastern rooms (L.9146, L.9126) were used for long-term storage and food processing. Five pestles, two basalt grinding stones, and a mortar together with the stone bench located in the north-western corner of room L.9146, whose surface shows clear working traces, are related to food transformation. Moreover, the large amount of pottery fragments related to more than seven different preservation jars found on the floor in both the rooms suggests a storing function of these spaces.¹⁵

A storing room can be considered also for the small square *locus* in the south-eastern corner of the house (L.9143), which however was found empty.

An unusual installation, composed by a large bench connected to a well paved plastered surface sloping down to a flat stone with a shallow hollow at the center, was found in the large room at the center of the southern side (L.8971) (Fig. 24). Two large jars embedded in the bench and the rainwater drainage system connected to the well suggest that some activity related to the use of water and storing of other liquids was carried out there. The western room (L.8756) was used for cooking, both on the horse-shoe shaped hearth placed in the north-western corner and

15. Archaeobotanical analysis carried out on samples from L.9126 have identified the presence of barley and cereals together with olive stones in the room. On processing foodstuffs in a MB house at Tell Tuqan see Ascalone 2008: 78–88 and 2011: 29–31.



Fig. 24. Area B East, L.8971 from south.

on the mud-brick platform south of it (Fig. 25). The mud bricks of the platform are larger than those used for building walls, and their paste is more finished. The brick surface within a semi-circular trace of burning was glazed by an intense heath, suggesting that the platform was used as a fireplace, possibly covered by a bell-shaped clay installation.¹⁶

Another kind of fire installation identified just outside the house, in a small independent room (L.8757) opening on the blind alley, is quite interesting to make a comparison. The lower part of the large oval installation, whose walls were of a mixture of clay and rubble, takes up almost all the space within the room (Fig. 26). We can suppose it was a dome-shaped bread oven used by all the people living in the residential area. Communal bread ovens are documented by ethnographical researches in modern Palestine and Jordan villages.¹⁷ The bread oven is shared by many families, since its full functionality is maintained only if the oven is always heated by fire or coals and it should be very expensive for a single family. So women go to bake their bread in turn bringing a part of fuel.

Conclusion

The evidence from the three residential units of Area B East shows that there was a great variety in the plan of the houses of the central *insula*, which were

16. Spreafico - Peyronel 2008: 216–17.

17. Dalman 1935: 76–77; McQuitty 1984: 261–264, fig. 6; 1994: 68–69, figs. 12–13.



Fig. 25. Area B East, L.8756 from east.

similar in size (from 83 square meters to 121 square meters) and in the number of rooms (6–7 rooms for dwelling unit), but presented an unlike general design and a different inner circulation. Houses were interested by continuous modifications both in size of the residential units and in the functions of the rooms. Transformations were aimed not only at reducing the area of the original dwelling in order to create smaller residential units, as happened for the north-western house, but also, as testified by the north-eastern unit, at widening the surface of the original unit adding new rooms. Moreover changes could concern also the upper level of the dwelling, involving the widening or a different arrangement of the living space.

Generally all the houses considered present large areas devoted to storing food supplies, which seems to have been a prime concern in the life of their inhabitants, possibly suggesting the direct involvement of the households in agri-



Fig. 26. Area B East, L.8757 from east.

cultural production. Besides daily-life activities, like food processing and cooking, finds from the domestic units testify that inhabitants attended also other activities. The tablet from the north-western house, a cylinder seal from the north-eastern one and three balance weights from the central residential unit located at the end of the blind alley L.8472 points to the involvement of the dwelling owners in administrative activities. The hypothesis that the inhabitants of the domestic quarter belonged to a social élite seems to be confirmed by the finding of several valuable objects, e.g. fragments of inlays (from the north-eastern and the central houses), a beautiful pin-case made of bronze and bone (from the north-eastern house) and an alabaster container (from the central house).

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