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TELL AHMAR IN THE MIDDLE AND LATE BRONZE AGE

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ABSTRACT

Structures dating from the Middle and Late Bronze Age have been excavated at Tell Ahmar (Syria) over the past few years. This paper focuses on three building complexes:

- 1. A series of structures forming a curving line on the acropolis of the ancient site. Some of the rooms of these structures were totally empty, others were used as storage areas. The date of these structures must be looked for in the Middle Bronze Age II.*
- 2. An approximately square structure subdivided in four square rooms of various sizes. This structure too should be dated to the Middle Bronze Age II.*
- 3. A four-room house comprised of three parallel rooms and a fourth transverse room further east. This house should be dated to the Late Bronze Age I.*

Research conducted on the acropolis of Tell Ahmar from 2004 onwards has revealed the existence of a well preserved stratification that can be dated to the end of the Middle and beginning of the Late Bronze Age. Evidence for this period comes from area M, in the western part of the main tell, as well as from trenches A28/A29 and S14 on the eastern slope of the tell.

Three architectural units were excavated, which are relevant to these periods. The most impressive of them was in area M.

AREA M - MIDDLE BRONZE AGE FORTIFIED STOREHOUSES

A large construction, consisting of a series of rooms set in line, was extending on the summit of the tell. The rooms were grouped into three units that will be referred to, from west to east, as Block 1, Block 2 and Block 3 (Fig. 1). Each block was slightly differently oriented in such a way that the entire structure formed a curving line (Fig.

* The present paper was written as part of a research programme of the Interuniversity Attraction Poles of the Belgian Federal Science Office.

2). It is not yet sure whether there were more blocks. This problem will be dealt with further below.

In the present state of research, two construction phases can be recognized. The lower phase has, in general, thicker walls than the upper phase. Only the upper, and last phase, has been entirely explored so far. It was destroyed in a conflagration that left marks of a heavy fire.

Block 1 comprised three rooms. The entrance was through the middle room (room 2). A doorway was opened in the western half of the outer south wall of the room. Its north wall was almost entirely destroyed by a later pit. To the west, a doorway gave access to room 3. More problematic was room 1. There was a doorway in the south-west corner of the room, but this doorway was blocked by carefully laid bricks, and no other access existed to this room. Fragments of beams were discovered in the debris that were filling the room. They may have belonged to a ladder or stairs that allowed access to the room.

Walls were very thick: four bricks, or 1.60 m, wide for the south wall and two bricks and a half, or 1 m, for the north wall. In a later stage, the north wall was enlarged by one brick, making it about 1.40 m wide.

A last observation must be made concerning the construction technique of Block 1. Its south wall was leaning towards the inside of the structure. This seems to have been intentional and not the result of a natural catastrophe or of a land slide.

Concerning the function of this building, it seems to have been used as a storage area. There were big jars as well as small vessels and grinding basalt stones, especially in rooms 1 and 3. Somewhat puzzling in such a context was the discovery of a bronze pin decorated with a human figure. A radiocarbon date derived from the analysis of a piece of charcoal from room 2 falls within a time range of 1780/1600.¹

Block 2 seems to have been built to make a transition between Blocks 1 and 3. It is slightly narrower than the two other blocks and the orientation of its east and west outer walls clearly shows that they were built when the other blocks already existed. The north and south walls were three bricks and a half wide i.e. about 1.40 m.

Room 1 was completely empty. No object and hardly any pottery sherd were discovered in this room. The same can be said about the two narrow rooms 2 and 3. Almost no finds were made in them and a layer of rocks was covering most of the surface. A function as a staircase is possible for these two rooms, although it is difficult to work out how the stairs could be organized in this space. The group made by rooms 1, 2 and 3 looks like a kind of casemate structure.

With rooms 4 and 5, the situation becomes more complicated. Both rooms were filled with debris. It was clear that they had been used. It was also clear that the partitioning wall that separated them was an addition of the later phase. In an earlier stage, rooms 4 and 5 were one and the same room. The access was through a doorway placed near the south-west corner of room 4. Similarly to Block 1, the south wall of

1 The analysis was made at the Belgian Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage. Sample KIA-28274: 3390±35BP; 68.2% probability: 1740BC/1630BC; 95.4% probability: 1780/1600BC.

rooms 4 and 5 was leaning towards the inside of the building.

The material from rooms 4 and 5 essentially consisted of pottery.

Block 3 was also fairly complicated. Room 1 had no doorway. It was filled with burned debris, including charcoal and a large quantity of grain. On the floor of the room, there were sherds of a big jar and fragments of smaller pots, as well as a few mudbricks. A few complete vessels were found in the fill of the room. The most important finds, however, were a series of fifteen seal impressions and one cylinder seal, all discovered in the fill above the floor. Six of the fifteen impressions were made with the same seal. Several of the sealings had marks of fabric on them and can therefore be considered as having sealed bags. The grain, that was found in large quantities in room 1, was thus kept in bags. This fill went down to the floor of the lower phase, which is impossible to distinguish from the upper phase in this room.

¹⁴C analysis of some of the seeds from room 1 gave a time range between 1750 and 1530 for the destruction of the building.²

The seal with which six of the sealings were impressed was decorated with a scene comprising two parts (Fig. 3c). On one of them, a standing figure with its head covered by a kind of veil, was facing a seated figure with the same kind of veil and holding a branch. Between the figures, there was an Egyptian *ankh* sign below a crescent. The other component of the scene showed two standing figures on either side of a kind of trident that must have represented a stylized tree.

Four other seals were showing various figures of the Storm-God. On one of them, the Storm-God, on the left, was facing the Moon-God on the right (Fig. 3a). The Storm-God, shown with a curling pig-tail, held a mace in his right hand and two objects - an axe and a curving object - in his left. This was a common way of depicting the Syrian Storm-God in the Middle Bronze Age. The Moon-God was identified by the crescent that topped his headdress.

The style of these seals was predominantly Syrian, although some of them were more Babylonian in style.

The only actual cylinder-seal that came to light was completely different in style. Carved out of coarse limestone, it was decorated with a geometric pattern.³

Room 2 was empty and very similar to rooms 2 and 3 of Block 2.

Room 3 served as an entrance hall giving access to room 4. On the floor of the doorway between rooms 3 and 4 a jar sealing was found that was impressed with the same seal as the seal that impressed six sealings from room 1. The object closely followed the profile of a big jar with a tall neck, of which a few examples have been found in Block 1 and on the floor of room 1 of Block 3.

Rooms 1, 3 and 4 displayed marks of a heavy fire.

2 The analysis was made at the Belgian Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage. Sample KIA-36444: 3360±40BP; 68.2% probability: 1740BC/1710BC (9.2%), 1700BC/1600BC (59.0%); 95.4% probability: 1750BC/1530BC.

3 The seal and the seal impressions will be published by Adelheid Otto, whom I thank for accepting to undertake this publication.

Contrary to Blocks 1 and 2, there is no clear indication that the south wall of Block 3 might have been slanting.

One problem is to know whether a fourth block existed to the east of Block 3. Research is still in progress on this side. A room has been partly excavated to the east (designated as M9), but its walls were thinner, only two bricks wide, i.e. 80 cm, and its complete extension is unknown. There was a doorway in the south wall of the room and the space outside of the room was paved with irregular slabs. Walls oriented north-south were adjoining the south wall of the room to the south. They may belong to another unit extending towards the south or be a later addition to an existing unit. It is thus impossible, for now, to answer the question of a possible continuation of the series of blocks towards the east.

Room M9 must have been of great significance, however, as is shown by another collection of seven seal impressions discovered in the debris that were filling the room. Among them, six were made with the same seal showing two bearded genii with hair curling on either side of their head (Fig. 3b). They were wearing a short tunic and a flat cap. A dotted pattern filled the space between the legs of both genii and two motifs were inserted between the figures: a star between their heads and a kind of flower between the lower part of their bodies. A guilloche pattern delimited the scene. The scene was carved in a way that was unusual although not unknown. The direction of carving was perpendicular to the axis of the cylinder and not, as was more often the case, parallel to it, so that the scene was lying on its side, and not immediately visible in the right position, when the seal was rolled horizontally on a soft clay surface.

The only other seal impression coming from the same room was made with a seal decorated with five standing figures, one to the left facing the others to the right.

These seals were carved in typically Syrian style and most of them had the conical shape that was typical of door-sealings. The rough surface of some of them showed that they had been applied on the mud plaster of the wall, next to the door, and not on the wood of the door leaf.

The same question concerning the continuation of the structure formed by the three blocks can be asked about its western end. To the west of Block 1, a construction, designated as M8, was uncovered that was not really part of the rest. There was a gap of a few centimetres between its east wall and the west wall of Block 1, and the walls of this structure seem to have been thinner. However, it is difficult to make a global judgement on this point because only the width of the east wall of the structure is known. The north wall has been partially damaged by a pit and there was no west nor south wall. On these sides, the space was delimited by sorts of mudbrick screens. One, to the south, was one brick wide and was resting on a stone footing. The other, to the west, was in two parts. Its northern part, about two bricks and a half wide, was continued to the south by a thinner line of bricks. Both partitioning walls were later additions built against the north and east walls. To the south, a stone pavement was going down towards the inside of the room. Excavation could not be continued in western direction because of the presence of an Iron Age pebble mosaic and of

modern houses. Any how, the dig is getting very close to the edge of the tell.

A few installations gave indications on the function of this space. In the north-east corner, there was a kind of earth basin delimited by small bricks forming a curving line. A jar was standing next to it to the west. Against the west partitioning wall, there was an oven of the tannur type and, to the south, another earth basin or trough. Large basalt grinding stones were lying on the floor. All this points to this room being a kitchen.

A last observation must be made. In the north-west corner of room M8, there was an infant burial.

The structure that was erected to the west of Block 1 looked more like a domestic structure than like an official storage area as the three main blocks did. The official buildings did not extend beyond Block 1 to the west.

If the three, or four, blocks are considered together, a few observations can be made. For Blocks 1 and 3, the south wall was thicker than the north wall. For all blocks the access was only from the south. For Blocks 2 and 3, a few rooms were casemate-like structures. It looks as if the entire complex had both a storage and defensive function. However, it cannot be part of a protective rampart because their position is too central on the summit of the tell (Fig. 4). If they had been part of a rampart, we would have expected to find them closer to the northern edge of the mound. They may have been part of a fort erected on top of the tell, even though there was no clear indication that associated constructions extended to the south.

The presence of the sealings as well as the presence of large quantities of grain in Block 3, room 1, and the nature of the ceramic material recovered from the three blocks showed that they were storage structures participating in a sophisticated administrative system.⁴ They may have been fortified storehouses.

All these structures disappeared in a catastrophic fire, but they do not seem to have completely vanished from the scene. There is no indication of a reoccupation or a reconstruction of the three blocks after their destruction by fire. However, on either side of the complex small houses were built, that did not occupy the space or even part of the space where the blocks once stood. This is particularly clear in the western part of the area, where a small street, a kind of alleyway littered with pebbles and pottery sherds, was made between Blocks 1 and 2, on one side, and the later houses M1 and M2 on the other.

It can thus be provisionally suggested that Blocks 1, 2 and 3 as well as structures M8 and M9 were destroyed by a violent fire towards the end of the Middle Bronze Age and that, a short time after this destruction, at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, new buildings (M1, M2, M3 and M4) were built on either side of the ruins left by the blaze.

4 The MBA pottery from Tell Ahmar will be studied by Silvia Perini as part of her Ph.D. dissertation.

AREA S - A MIDDLE BRONZE AGE HOUSE

A domestic structure was excavated in trench S14 on the eastern slope of the tell. Although it cannot be totally ruled out that the structure extended further north, the plan of the building, as it has been exposed, seems to be almost complete (Fig. 5). More than two thirds of the structure would thus have been excavated last year (Fig. 7) and these excavated remains joined those excavated several years ago in the long trench dug along the slope of the tell. The house comprised four rooms of unequal size.

The main entrance might have been in the west wall of room 1, although the outer wall of the room was so badly damaged that it is impossible to reach any certainty concerning this. The material found in the room included pottery, among which several complete small jars, and basalt implements, especially a tripod stand and objects in the shape of a flatiron. A child burial was found under the floor against the east wall of the room.

A paved doorway in the south wall of room 1 gave access to room 2, the floor of which was slightly lower than that of room 1. The south wall of the room has been washed away by erosion. Its exact position can only be guessed at. A jar was sunk in the ground in the north-west corner of the room and, next to it, a clay sealing was found. The scene that decorated the seal had been carved in the same way as the seal with two genii from room M9 mentioned above, i.e. perpendicular to the cylinder's axis. The scene was composed of two registers. The main register showed three figures in a short tunic marching to the right. Above them, the second register showed three bird figures, possibly ducks, carved in the "traditional" way, i.e. parallel to the axis of the cylinder. A band of "metopes" and "triglyphs" marked the horizontal limit of the scene.

Another paved doorway led from room 2 into room 3, which was slightly lower than room 2. It was used as a kitchen. It had been split into three parts (marked a, b and c on the plan). Part a was a kind of passageway from which it was possible to go to an open space to the south (marked 4 on the plan) through a doorway in the south wall of the room. In this area, now largely eroded away, part of the food preparation process was carried out. A small wall perpendicular to the south wall of room 3 was probably intended to protect something, possibly an oven that has not been discovered. From part a of room 3 it was also possible to go to parts b and c of the room. Part b was separated from part c by a block of bricks of which it is impossible to say whether it was a wall or just a table. Against the north face of this block of bricks there was an oven of the 'tannur' type and, against its east face, a basalt grinding stone. Part c was isolated from part a by a line of stones of which, again, it is impossible to say whether it was the base of a wall or, in this case, a kind of step.

Two child burials were found in room 3, one in the north-east corner of the room, the other in the south-west corner.

A charcoal sample from room 3 was analysed and gave a date between 1760 and

1630.⁵

Room 5, which was on the same level as room 3, was split into two parts separated by a partitioning wall. The most intriguing of these parts was part a. It contained bricks laid in parallel lines but not forming a real wall. A possible explanation was that they served as a support for stairs leading to an upper storey. If this was the case, the house of S14 might be a good candidate to illustrate a type of house that is represented by house models found in North Syria and especially in the Euphrates valley. It shows a house that has an upper storey covering only its back rooms, leaving the front part of the house at ground level. Rooms 1 and 2 could thus have been covered by such an upper storey.

The ceramic material recovered from this house is very close to that from the structures found in area M.

Traces of heavy fire have been found in each of the four rooms. The house of S14 was thus destroyed in a big conflagration as the contemporary structures in area M. Given the similarity observed between the ceramic material from both areas, it must be the same catastrophe that affected them. An indication of its cause might be found in room 1 of the S14 house. All along the east wall of room 1 ran a depression that must have formed at the time of destruction. It did not result from a later land slide on the edge of the tell. This is demonstrated by the fact that the gap was filled with soil the colour of which had been made reddish/yellowish by the blaze. It is also demonstrated by the fact that the material from the gap was similar to that found in other parts of the house. In other words, it had slipped into the gap at the time of destruction. The wall itself was leaning towards the east (Fig. 6). A very plausible cause for all this might have been an earthquake. The entire tell may have been shaken by an earthquake at the end of the Middle Bronze Age, that caused a violent fire. However, as A. Tourovets pointed out to me, similar damage might have been caused by the collapse of the upper parts of the building itself. The question is still open.

AREA A - A LATE BRONZE AGE FOUR ROOM HOUSE

A few metres to the east of trench S14 and slightly higher in absolute elevation, another house was excavated in trenches A28 and A29. The stratigraphic relationship between this house and the house in S14 was not clear because a large Iron Age pit, more than 10 m in diameter, destroyed the stratigraphic connection between the two areas. Despite similarities in the ceramic material, there are some changes that support the idea that the building was erected at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age.

The plan is almost complete except for the east corner (Fig. 8). The walls were all built in mudbricks resting on a stone base (Fig. 10). Actually, the stones were encased in the brick wall. On either side of the base, the stones were hidden by a

5 The analysis was made at the Belgian Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage. Sample KIA-36445: 3410±20BP; 68.2% probability: 1740BC (68.2%) 1685BC; 95.4% probability: 1760BC (95.4%) 1630BC.

screen that was half a brick wide. The only visible stones were kinds of orthostats that were reinforcing the north wall at the corners and in the middle of its outer face. Similar stones lined the sides of the entrance in the west wall of room 2. From there, a few steps led down into the house. Two construction phases could be identified in this building. During the earlier phase, it was possible to go from room 2 to room 1 through a doorway placed at the east end of room 2's north wall. There was no direct access from room 2 to room 4 and the way one could get from room 2 to room 3 remains problematic. The only access to room 4, as far as we can judge, was from room 1.

An extremely puzzling feature of this house must be mentioned: it was built on a slope without that, in the earlier phase, any attempt had been made at levelling the ground. The west end of rooms 1, 2 and 3, was about one metre higher than their east end. Only room 4 was erected on flat ground. The walls of the three parallel rooms were following the slope so that their east end was lower than their west end. Floors were carefully coated with mud plaster and also followed the slope. No steps had been made to facilitate circulation within the rooms. The only steps were the stone steps in the entrance to room 2.

Another feature deserves attention. Near the north-east corner of room 4, on top of the stone base of the wall and below the bricks, the remains of a very young child, probably a baby, were discovered (Fig. 9). The bones were too crumbly to allow a proper study of the skeleton, but it was clear that they had been deliberately deposited there. Two small vessels were discovered near the body. Although it cannot be entirely ruled out that a later burial cut through the bricks until it hit the stones, it is not impossible either that the baby was buried within the wall when the house was under construction. The reason for this is unclear. Was it a human sacrifice? Or, given the practice of burying children below the floor of common houses, was this child buried in the wall because the house was not yet finished and the interment could not be made under the floor?

The plan of this house is not isolated in Syrian-Palestinian architecture. Three long parallel rooms perpendicular to one larger room are strongly reminiscent of the so-called "four-room house" or "Israelite house" of Iron Age Palestine. However, the comparison cannot be maintained, because the function of the various rooms was not the same. In the Palestinian "four-room house", the three parallel rooms were used to store commodities, shelter animals etc. and the residential part was either in the fourth room or on an upper storey. Such a distribution of functions was not observed in the A28/A29 house. Rooms 1 and 2, at least, were of a domestic nature. A better comparison can be made with a type of house that was found, for instance, at Late Bronze Emar and, more recently, Tell Bazi. However, this comparison is not entirely satisfactory either, because the three parallel rooms are longer than their possible counterparts at Emar and Tell Bazi.

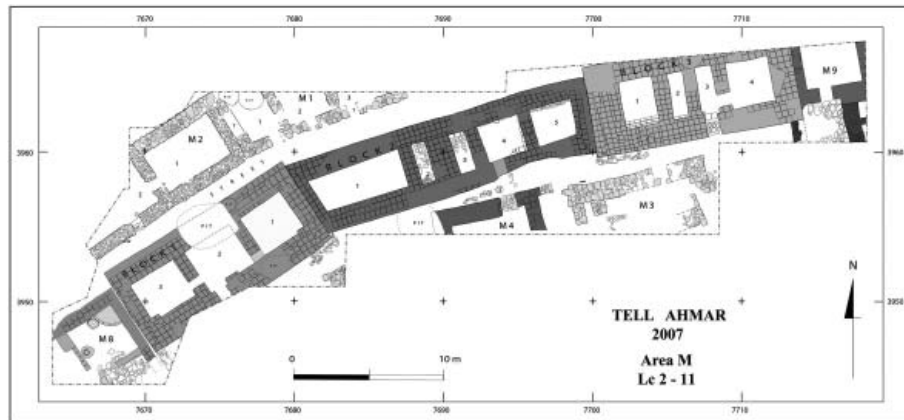


Fig. 1: Plan of the Middle Bronze Age building excavated on the tell of Tell Ahmar.

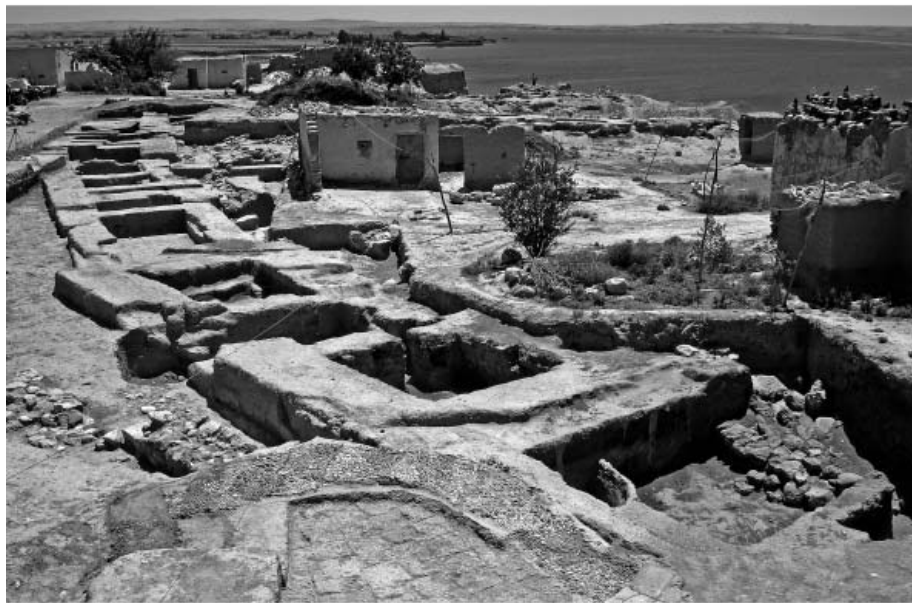


Fig. 2: The large Middle Bronze Age building seen from the west.

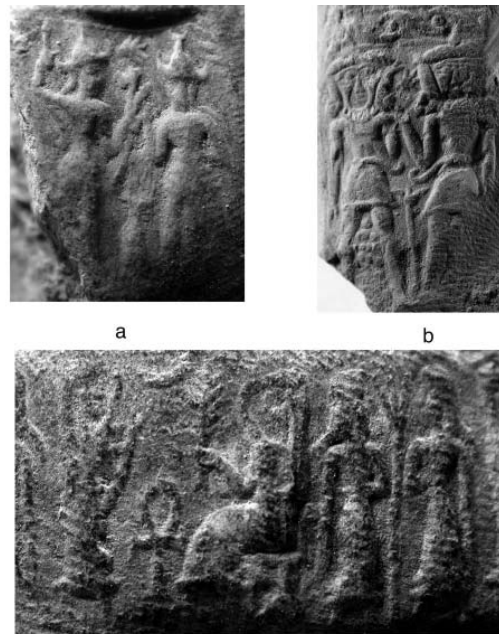


Fig. 4: Area M: seal impressions from the Middle Bronze Age structures.

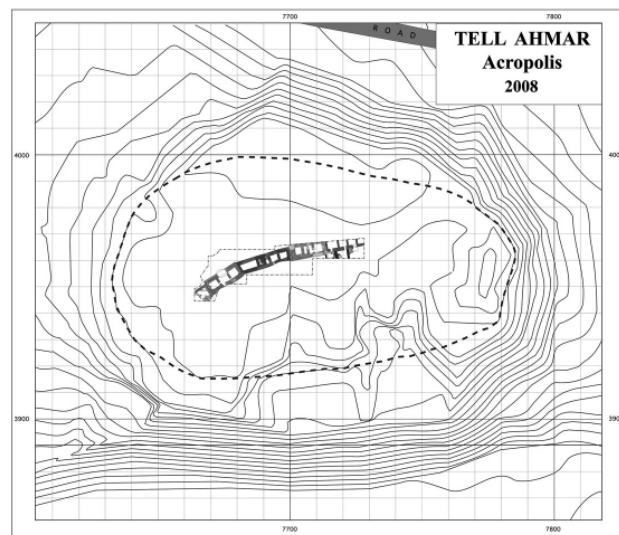


Fig. 4: Map of the tell showing the position of the MBA storehouses. The dotted line marks the approximate boundaries of the top surface of the tell before the French excavations.

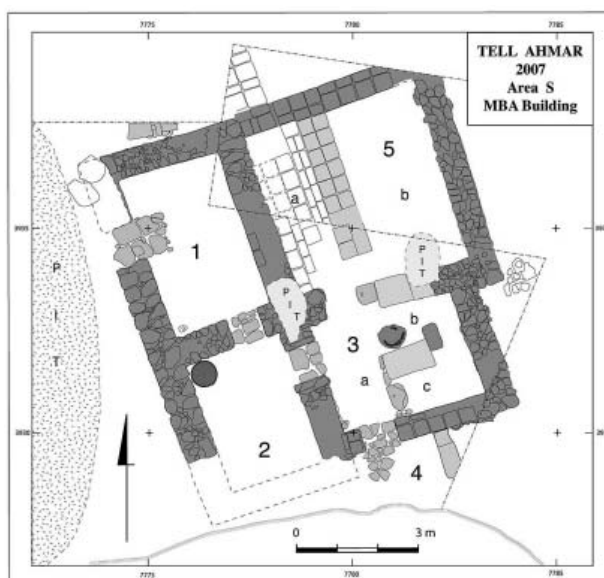


Fig. 5: Area S: plan of a Middle Bronze Age house.

Fig. 6: Area S: Wall and doorway between rooms 1 and 2 of the Middle Bronze Age house, seen from the south.



Fig. 7 Area S: Middle Bronze Age house, seen from the north.



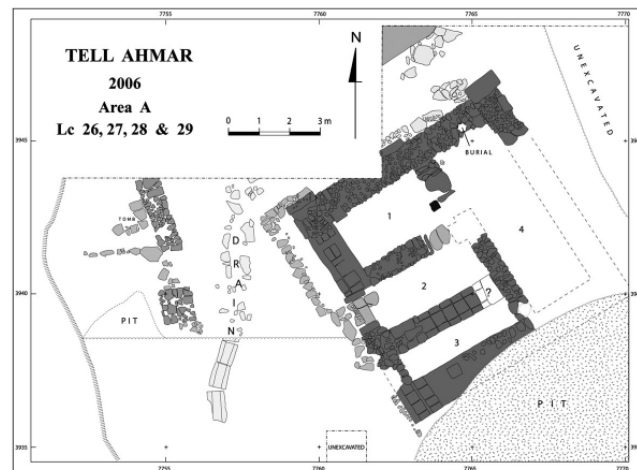


Fig. 8: Area A: plan of a Late Bronze Age house.

Fig. 9: Area A: infant burial in a wall of the Late Bronze Age.



Fig. 10: Area A: Late Bronze Age house seen from the east.