Reading rubbish : using object assemblages to reconstruct activities, modes of deposition and abandonment at the Late Bronze Age Dunnu of Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria

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Chapter 1.
Introduction

This study aims to reconstruct the function and use of the Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu*, an Assyrian, government-controlled, agricultural settlement. Understanding its role in the local society and in the Assyrian empire at large will help in answering the question of how the empire maintained its control over annexed territories. This study is a systematic investigation of the architecture and finds from the site of Tell Sabi Abyad. Special attention is given to the reconstruction of modes of deposition of objects in order to assess what they tell us about past activities. The results are compared with the textual evidence from the site in order to provide a comprehensive interpretation of what activities were actually carried out in and around the *dunnu*. The study tries to contribute to the understanding of the Late Bronze Age settlement of Tell Sabi Abyad as well as to fundamental issues in the interpretation of archaeological contexts.

This study is part of the ERC funded project Consolidating Empire: Reconstructing Hegemonic Practices of the Middle Assyrian Empire at the Late Bronze Age Fortified Estate of Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria, ca. 1230-1180 BC (grant no. 282785) performed at the Faculty of Archaeology of Leiden University, The Netherlands. The project is directed by Dr. Bleda S. Düring and is concerned with the origins of imperialism, and with how imperial systems impacted on local communities. To explore these issues, one of the earliest empires in the old world, that of the Assyrians, is investigated. The Middle Assyrian Empire, like many empires, has been mainly studied from the perspective of its capital, these studies have focussed primarily on historical sources (Postgate 1992; Jakob 2003; van de Mieroop 2004: 196-74). This historical perspective on empire yields knowledge about topics that favour economic, military and elite themes (Smith and Montiel 2001; Glatz 2009: 128). In contrast to a historical approach, the *archaeology* of empire is focussed on how empires affect local communities and landscapes (Postgate 1992; Sinopoli 1994; Pfälzner 1995; Parker 1997; Smith and Montiel 2001; Parker 2003; Glatz 2009; Tenu 2009; Fales 2011; Brown 2013). This archaeological perspective offers insight into the expression of imperialism on a smaller scale, considering the local communities which are incorporated in an imperial system. These studies indicate that the imprint of imperial domination varies significantly per geographic region (Parker 2003; Tenu 2015). In this sense, the material remains offer a bottom-up perspective of the manifestations of empire.

At the site of Tell Sabi Abyad, in Northern Syria (Fig. 1.1), a fortified settlement, a so-called *dunnu*, from the Middle Assyrian Period (1350-900 BC) was excavated. The location of this settlement in the periphery of the Middle Assyrian Empire renders it a suitable case study of imperial systems in conquered territories. Also, the remarkable preservation of the architecture and the abundance of artefacts and charred botanical remains provide the opportunity to reconstruct daily life here in great detail. Within the framework of the 'Consolidating Empire' project a team of researchers has investigated several aspects of this *dunnu*. The research includes the reconstruction of the agricultural economy of the *dunnu* (Fantone 2016) as well as how

the aspects of the architecture influenced life in the *dunnu* (Lanjouw 2016). The cuneiform sources are studied by Frans Wiggermann (Wiggermann in prep.) and the overall synthesis is in the hands of Bleda S. Düring (Düring 2016). As mentioned above, the research presented here deals with the reconstruction of activity patterns within the settlement, by studying the architecture, deposits and finds from the *dunnu*.

Fig. 1.1: Plan of Tell Sabi Abyad with the excavation grid and the Level 5 architecture. The light grey trenches were excavated. On the inset the location of Tell Sabi Abyad is indicated with modern borders.

The current study is founded on decades of work by researchers during excavations and subsequent analysis. Not only has their work made this study possible, it also has had a profound influence on the nature and state of the surviving documentation. Because of its significance to the current research the following sections deal with the research history and field methods of Tell Sabi Abyad. Subsequently the historical background of the Assyrian habitation of the mound will be discussed after which an introduction to the methodology and the research aims of the current study will be presented.

1.1 Tell Sabi Abyad – research history

Excavations at Tell Sabi Abyad (literally: 'Mound of the White Boy') started in 1986 under the direction of Professor P.M.M.G. Akkermans, and focussed on the prehistoric occupation of the site. From 1991 onwards, a large part of the excavation targeted the Assyrian period. In total, some 80 trenches, each 10 by 10 metres, have yielded finds and architecture dating to the Assyrian occupation of the site, mainly on the south-western part of the tell. The site of Tell Sabi Abyad is situated in the north of modern Syria some 30 kilometres from the Turkish border (for more general information about Tell Sabi Abyad see Akkermans 1987; Akkermans and Rossmeisl 1990; Akkermans *et al.* 1993; Akkermans 1999; Akkermans 2006; Brüning and Akkermans 2010; Wiggermann 2010; Akkermans and Wiggermann 2015). The mound is situated along the perennial Balikh River which originates in a karstic spring at 'Ayn al-'Arus, close to the Turkish-Syrian border, flowing south until its confluence with the Euphrates at modern Raqqa, Syria. Tell Sabi Abyad is situated in the broad floodplain east of the river where the Balikh is met by the Wadi al-Hamar. The Late Bronze Age site is located on the largest of a group of four mounds, which are designated Tell Sabi Abyad I – IV. The main tell, designated by the Roman numeral I, is commonly referred to as simply Tell Sabi Abyad. The tell is some five hectares in size although the Assyrian occupation seems to be concentrated on the summit and covers only one hectare.

Today, the landscape surrounding the tell is dominated by agricultural fields. Tell Sabi Abyad is located just north of the 250 mm isohyet line, at the edge of the zone in which rain-fed agriculture is possible. South of this line it is necessary to irrigate the soil to grow crops. This is not a strict geographical limit as there is a marked interannual variability in the amount of rainfall. This means that for some years rain-fed agriculture is possible at Tell Sabi Abyad but periods of drought have a large effect on yields. Irrigation may have been used as a supplementary water supply in most periods and is attested for in early botanical analyses and the textual references from the site (Van Zeist 1994; Wiggermann 2000: 176-9). Recent in-depth study of the botanical evidence however suggests that irrigation was not used extensively in the Late Bronze Age (Fantone 2016), which perhaps in turn suggests different environmental conditions at that time.

1.2 Excavation and documentation procedures

During the years of excavation at Tell Sabi Abyad, between 1986 and 2010, the original excavation techniques were retained. The tell had been divided using a ten by ten metre grid. Each ten by ten metre square, or trench, is identified using a letter on the west-east axis, and a number on the north-south axis (Fig. 1.1). During excavation, the trenches were dug leaving 50 centimetres of sediments on all sides for the establishment of section baulks. The section baulks between trenches therefore measure one metre in width and the trenches measure nine by nine metres. Trenches were excavated by a team consisting of one supervisor and usually five local workmen. The workmen used pick axes and shovels to excavate in horizontal spits.

Every 5-10 centimetres, or upon the discovery of a new soil type, the surface of the trench was cleared and observed for features. If the surface exhibited separate soil types these were excavated separately. In the case features such as wall remains were found, the feature was left standing and the soil around it was excavated. During every day of excavation the square supervisor was required to handle all administrative tasks such as the administration of finds and creating of field drawings. At the end of a working day the supervisor wrote his or her daynotes; a diary of the excavation work including a description of the decisions which were made and of the discovered objects and features. The administration of the excavated remains was based on 'Features' such as walls and ovens and 'Loci' (singular 'Locus'), separate soil types visible on the surface, often architecturally delineated. The excavated artefacts from spits were collected in 'Lots': a find number specific for the Locus or Feature and the spit the items were found in. A separate Locus number was assigned every time the soil type (during excavation often called 'Deposition') changed, and at least with every 20 cm spit.

Most finds from one lot were collected in zanbils (buckets) without recording the specific location of every individual shard or fragment. This was specifically done for the most commonly occurring finds: flint, ceramic shards and animal bones. Other artefactual finds, such as complete vessels, bone tools, or metal items were collected and administrated separately as 'Objects'. For every Object the elevation and precise location within the trench was recorded in the daynotes. Objects were described in detail on so-called object forms. The form contains an overall description of the object including metrics, context information and a sketch of the object (Fig. 1.2). Because the objects themselves are stored in Syria, and are not available for study due to the current conflict (Klinkenberg 2014), the object forms are used as primary source of information about the objects for this study. Two registration numbers are present for objects: one is given during excavation and is unique within the square for a particular year, the other is the number given to the object post-excavation and is known as the 'Masterfile number' (MF-number). The MF-number is made up of four elements: first a letter denoting its find category, then the two last digits of the year of excavation, an underscore, and finally a three digit (sometimes four) sequential number, for example P96_001 for the first administrated pottery object in the year 1996 (see also table 1.1).

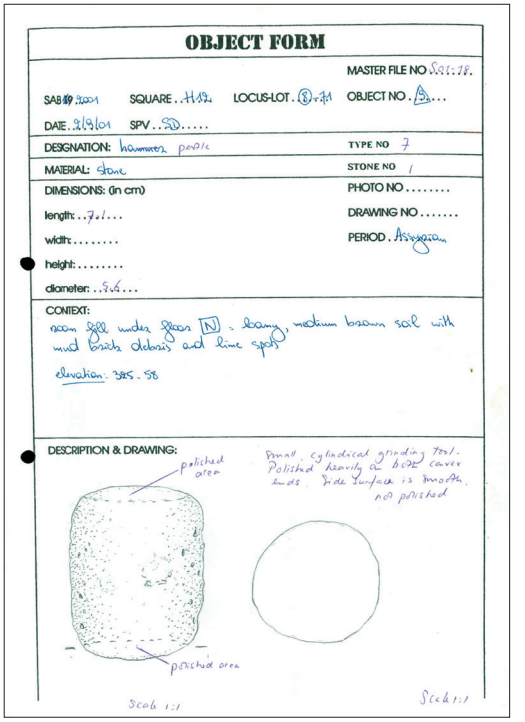

Fig. 1.2: The object form of object S01-18, a stone pestle. The form includes information about the measurements of the object, its find context and a sketch (from: Tell Sabi Abyad archive).

Object type	Masterfile letter
Beads and pendants	B
Figurines	F
Glass	G
Bone, horn and ivory	I (in some years the letter J was used)
Metal	M
Other clay objects	O
Pottery	P
Stone objects	S
Tablets	T
Varia	V
Seals and sealings	Z

Table 1.1: Object categories and their abbreviations in the Tell Sabi Abyad documentation. The letters are used in the Masterfile numbers.

Drawings of the architecture were made by both the square supervisors as well as by a professional illustrator. The illustrator produced the main plans of the trenches, showing the main architecture and a selection of feature and find locations. The square supervisors produced a drawing of their own square every day after excavating. These drawings are on a smaller scale and of less precision than the large plans. These daily drawings are of great value however because they depict all the minor architectural elements, all objects and the location and extent of the Loci.

1.3 Chronology and stratigraphy of the dunnu

Several meters of deposits at Tell Sabi Abyad were assigned to the Late Bronze Age. During and after excavation a periodization of these remains into several Levels was established. The periodization was connected to the information from textual sources, dating and contextualizing the Levels (Akkermans and Wiggermann 2015). During later in-depth study of the stratigraphy, Merel Brüning, Hanna Plug and Tijm Lanjouw have offered a revised edition of the architectural sequence (Brüning and Plug 2016). Additionally, the relation between the cuneiform tablets and the stratigraphic sequence was questioned (see below).

Unfortunately the revision of the stratigraphic sequence of the *dunnu* was performed after the current study was completed. Therefore the analyses presented in this research are based on the former stratigraphic ideas. Consequently, although for this study it was attempted to analyse all features and finds from one major stratigraphic phase of the *dunnu* (Level 5), the revised periodization indicates that these deposits in fact belong to several phases of occupation. In general, the sequences which were analysed for this study can be equated to the Levels 6A and 5 of the new periodization. However, there are some chronological differences between separate areas in the *dunnu*. Most importantly, while the start of the original level 5 in the north-west of the *dunnu* can be equated to the new level 6A, in the south-east of the *dunnu* the original level 5 is allocated to the new level 5. This means that although the sequences which are described in this study have a large chronological overlap, their start and end are not necessarily simultaneous. For a comprehensive overview both stratigraphic interpretations are presented here.

1.3.1 The original periodization

The original stratigraphic sequence (Akkermans 2006; Brüning and Akkermans 2010; Akkermans and Wiggermann 2015) of the *dunnu* was divided into seven Levels, five of which were considered to date to the Late Bronze Age (Fig. 1.3). From old to young, level 7 was interpreted as a Mittani period occupation of the site which consisted of a single tower on the summit with some ephemeral structures surrounding it. The building was interpreted as being a large farmhouse, used by a family who owned some fields surrounding the hill. It is unclear how long this structure had been in use but after some time it was abandoned and fell into disrepair. The ensuing Assyrian presence at the site was allocated to levels 6 – 3. Their initial occupation was illustrated by a significant construction phase which saw the renovation of the dilapidated tower. During this renovation the ground plan of the tower stayed largely the same although the front of the building was extended several metres outwards, renewing the entire façade. Another impressive architectural change was the erection of a palatial structure adjacent to the tower. This building was constructed with much thinner walls and consisted of courtyards and two extensive apartments, both fitted with bathrooms. Additionally, in this period the settlement was surrounded by an impressive high wall and a large and deep dry moat. These structures appear to indicate that the settlement was built to have a certain military or at least defensive appearance. A number of smaller structures were created within the main outer wall and the two central buildings. These structures were used as residential areas and for craft activities such as grain processing and pottery production.

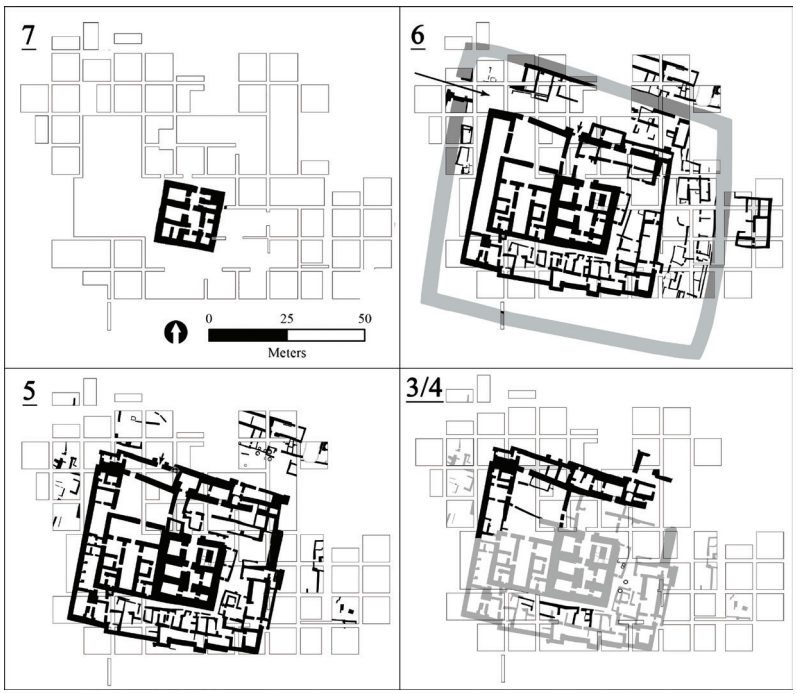

Fig. 1.3: The Late Bronze Age Levels of Tell Sabi Abyad according to the original periodization.

The end of Level 6 was considered to be characterized by a general lack of upkeep. The subsequent renovation was considered the onset of level 5. In this period the *dunnu* was also extended. The dry moat had filled up with refuse and soil and was built up in this phase. Especially the northern part of the *dunnu* was altered in layout and appearance. The main entrance was moved from the centre of the north façade to the west, where it was more or less in line with the monumental residence, perhaps denoting a change in function of this entrance. In general the phase is characterized by a larger number of small structures and additions to existing structures. The military or defensive nature which seemed to be important at the initial construction of the *dunnu* was no longer manifested to the same extent. Also the end of this phase, Level 5, was characterized by a dilapidated state of the architecture. Additionally, around the same time a large fire had broken out in the residence and in the central tower building, basically ending the use of these buildings.

Later phases are less well known due to processes of erosion and disturbance. It is clear however from architectural remains and finds which postdate level 5, that in subsequent phases the *dunnu* was still functioning to some degree. Although the central structures of the *dunnu* were in ruins, in the north of the settlement houses were being renovated and inhabited during levels 4 and 3. To what extent these later levels should be considered to represent a continuation of the *dunnu* as an institution is questioned in this original sequence. The settlement in these phases is considered to have lost its former 'grandeur' and to have functioned as a farmstead (Akkermans and Wiggermann 2015: 103). Erosion of the southern part of the *dunnu* however obscures how a large part of the settlement functioned at this time and although several important buildings were not usable anymore, the discovery of rich burials and several cuneiform tablets from this period indicate that there was at least some continuity in function and use.

The architecture and finds from levels 2 and 1 were considered to represent post-Assyrian phases, possibly Hellenistic in date.

1.3.2 Relating the stratigraphy with the textual sources

Dating of the levels was performed by correlating the periodization with information from cuneiform tablets which were found at the site (Akkermans and Wiggermann 2015). The textual evidence describes how the *dunnu* was originally owned and controlled by the King of Hanigalbat and viceroy of the Assyrian Empire, a post consecutively held by Aššur-Iddin (ca. 1233-1200 BC), Sulmanu-musabsi (ca. 1200-1197 BC) and Ili-pada (ca. 1197-1183 BC). Some of the excavated documents were inscribed with a date on which the document was written. In these cases a limmu, a year designation in the Assyrian calendar, was included, providing a secure date for them. Others could be dated based on other datable elements from the documents such as king names or references to certain known events. It should be taken into account however that the dates which are given by the documents do not date the moment of deposition but only the moment when they were written. It often occurs that a group of tablets

which are found together in an archaeological context have wide-ranging dates. The dates on the objects should therefore be taken as a date post-quem for the archaeological deposit.

Based on the occurrence of a text from the first decade of the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I (1233-1197 BC),1 the onset of level 6, and with it the construction of the *dunnu*, was dated to approximately 1225 BC. The end of level 6 is marked by letter T02-032, describing the mourning for Tukulti-Ninurta I, and the presence of a new king, Aššur-nadin-apli. Consequently, the end of level 6 and the start of level 5 is dated to 1196-1194 BC. During level 5 the *dunnu* is owned and controlled by Ili-pada, King of Hanigalbat.

It was proposed by Akkermans and Wiggermann (2015) that the events at the *dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad were triggered by the main events within the Assyrian aristocracy. Around 1185 BC Ili-pada died, but the kingship (and the *dunnu*) was not inherited by his son Ninurta-apil-Ekur; instead he was exiled from the empire. His exile lasted only until the year 1183 BC in which a major power shift occurred in Aššur, and the throne of Assyria was taken by him, thereby joining the kingship of Hanigalbat with that of Aššur. It seems that the focus of this new owner of the *dunnu* shifted to the political centre in Aššur, and the *dunnu*, located in the periphery of the empire, lost its former importance. This is supposed to be reflected in the poor state of the *dunnu* architecture in what is called Level 4 and 3. This reasoning leads to the postulation that the end of level 5 and the start of Level 4 can be dated to the first years of the reign of Ninurta-apil-Ekur: around 1180 BC. The end of Level 3 has tentatively been set by Akkermans and Wiggermann to around 1125 BC (table 1.2).

Level	Description	Dates
3 and 4	Restoration and use of northern buildings	1183-1125 BC
5	Reconstruction of the *dunnu* and subsequent fire	1195-1183 BC
6	Initial construction and subsequent decline of the *dunnu*	1225-1195 BC
7	Mitanni phase building	…-1225 BC

Table 1.2: Dates of the architectural Levels of the original periodization of Tell Sabi Abyad (after Akkermans and Wiggermann 2015).

1.3.3 The revised periodization

Based on an in-depth study of the stratigraphic remains of the site, a revised periodization was established (Brüning and Plug 2016). The revised sequence (Fig. 1.4) is similar to the previous in that the same numbering system was used and where possible related to the same architectural changes.

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[1] Following Akkermans and Wiggermann (2015, 89) in this work dates from the Middle Chronology (Boese and Wilhelm 1979; Boese 1982; Freydank 1991) are adhered to. All dates given are BC.

Level 7 is still considered to be represented by the central tower building. At some point after construction of the tower the surrounding wall and moat were constructed. Although they were constructed later than the tower, possibly they were in use simultaneously. The construction of these additional features is considered to represent the onset of Level 6C.

The major renovation of the central building and the construction of the residence and other buildings along the perimeter wall were placed into Level 6B. The original tower-like building was therefore first incorporated into the larger *dunnu* architecture before being renovated. The construction of the smaller structures along the perimeter wall was related to renovations of this wall, particularly in the south. Further elaboration in the north of the *dunnu*, including the repositioning of the main entrance to the *dunnu* was considered to have taken place somewhat later, in a period dubbed Level 6A. In the earlier periodization these renovations had been placed in Level 5.

The architectural layout of the start of Level 5 in this new periodization resembles the original Level 5 plan. There is however one major difference. In the original periodization Level 5 commenced with the construction of the associated buildings. In the revised periodization these constructions are placed in level 6A. Level 5 in this revised periodization starts with a second use phase of the same architecture. In the north-west of the *dunnu* for instance the representative function of the residence had already been lost at the start of level 5. Also an important official structure, known as the 'office of Tammitte' (see paragraph 3.2.4), was out of use during this new phase.

The end of Level 5 is, similar to the old interpretation, demarcated by the large conflagration and ruined state of many buildings at some point. The succeeding habitation levels are also still dubbed 4 and 3. Although these later phases are less well known from the architectural remains, it is clear that several buildings were constructed in the north of the *dunnu* and some structures from the previous phases were still in use despite their dilapidated state.

1.3.4 A revised relationship between the texts and the archaeology

The relationship between the texts and the archaeology had not been studied in great detail before. It was for instance not clear in what manner the tablets had been deposited. Also the stratigraphic position of the tablet contexts was not studied in detail. Linking the information from the two (historical and archaeological) datasets was based mainly on preliminary stratigraphic notions and a three-tiered sequence in both lines of evidence. The contexts in which tablets were found, however, do not seem to corroborate the temporal sequence as it had been suggested by Akkermans and Wiggermann (2015).

Tablets concentrations were found in several contexts. Some of these contexts date to the earliest Levels of the settlement, other to the latest. As they formally indicate only a date post-quem of their deposition into the ground, the start of some Levels can be dated along that line. A full discussion of the evidence is given in chapter 4 so here a short indication will suffice (table 1.3).

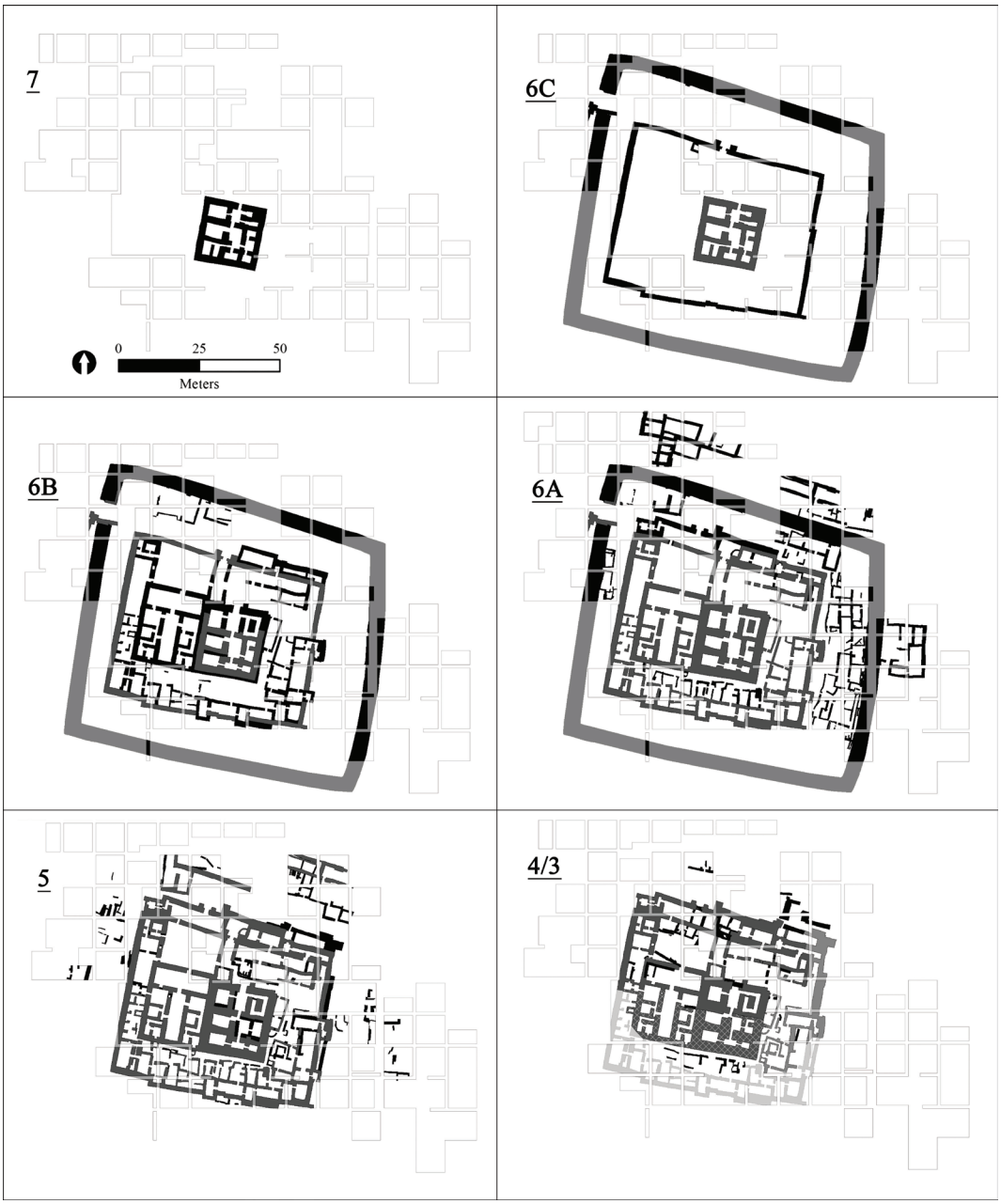

Fig. 1.4: The Late Bronze Age Levels of Tell Sabi Abyad according to the revised periodization.

In addition to the cuneiform tablets several ^{14}C samples were analysed to aid in dating the sequence (for an extensive discussion see Brüning and Plug 2016). Eight samples were analysed at the Centre for Isotope Research in Groningen of which six yielded a reliable result. The samples indicate a start date for level 6C of 1297 ± 64 calBC. Other samples date the later phases 4 and 3 at the end of the twelfth century BC.

1.3.5 Implications for the current research

The research presented here was based on the original periodization of the site. Because the level 5 deposits from that sequence covered the majority of activities carried out in the *dunnu* and because it was a horizon which could easily be followed through the settlement, it was decided to focus only on this time-slice. From the detailed analyses mentioned above it has appeared that the 'level 5 architecture and finds' belong to several different levels in the new periodization. Importantly, the new subdivision has indicated that the original Level 5 deposits should be assigned to younger levels in the north-west and to older levels in the south-west. Within single sectors (see below) the stratigraphy has remained largely the same but the correlation between sectors described in this research should therefore be taken with caution, for an up to date interpretation Brüning and Plug 2016 should be consulted.

Level	Dates
3	…
4	…
5	1184-… BC
6A	…-1184 BC
6B	1209-… BC
6C	…-1209 BC
7	…

Table 1.3: Possible dates of the architectural Levels of the revised periodization of Tell Sabi Abyad.

1.4 The *DUNNU*

Within its short life span, ca. 1225-1125 BC, the *dunnu* underwent many architectural modifications, most notably, the filling up of the moat and apparently an increasing complexity of its internal structure. At its apex in level 5 the *dunnu* housed a large number of workshops and residential structures. By contrast, there were a number of moments the *dunnu* had seemingly lost its importance and buildings had fallen into disrepair. The frequency of building activities at the *dunnu* has led to a high-resolution archaeological imprint. Some walls were preserved more than three meters in height with vaulted doorways sometimes still in place. Newly laid floors were often placed on top of old ones and a great number of seemingly *in situ* finds originated from these successive floors in all of the buildings. The short-term and high-resolution chronology from the site is rarely available in archaeology. Rather than large-scale processes which are usually the object of archaeological research, the archaeological remains of the Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu* offer insight into short-term events (Braudel 1966; Murray 1999; Lucas 2008).

Reconstructing the architecture of the *dunnu* is facilitated by the well preserved architectural remains. During and after abandonment large amount of objects were deposited on the floors of these houses and other structures. With the collapse of architecture in the *dunnu*, these objects were trapped inside the debris. Judging from some excavated contexts, objects may have been left on the floors of some structures during abandonment of houses in the *dunnu*. A grand total of almost 10,000 Middle Assyrian objects were excavated at Tell Sabi Abyad. Due to the speed with which objects and architecture were covered by collapsing architecture and sediments, later, natural processes which influence the state, location and

presence of objects have had a limited effect on the archaeological remains. These natural, post-depositional processes such as erosion and decay have often been clearly recognizable, therefore their influence was reconstructed with relative ease. In some cases, for instance, large pits and erosion features have cut through older contexts.

Among the find material the earlier mentioned large corpus of cuneiform tablets was found. These have revealed the names of the successive owners of the settlement and they hint at its function and use. In the role of a private estate the complex and its surrounding agricultural fields served as a production centre for their owner. The agricultural estate was reconstructed to have measured 36 km2 in size with a labour force of some 900 dependants (Wiggermann 2000, 183). Its size reflected the wealth and importance of its owner; most *dunnu*s were probably much smaller (Düring 2015a). The Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu*, in addition to its agricultural function, served a function in the Assyrian Empire as a military stronghold. It functioned as an army hub and, because of its location at the fringe of the empire, goods were custom-cleared here before they were taken further into the empire. There probably were several other *dunnu*s spread across the land, some of which are known from texts from the Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu*. These other *dunnu*s bear the names of their founders or the name of a god such as '*dunnu*-Aššur'. The name of the *dunnu* at Tell Sabi Abyad is not yet known, it is always referred to as 'the *dunnu*' (Wiggermann 2000, 172).

1.5 The Assyrian Empire

At the start of the 14th century BC Assur was a city state under the dominion of the empire of the Mittani. This empire, which was called Hanigalbat by its neighbouring states, stretched from the Mediterranean in the west until Arrapha, modern Kirkuk, in the east (Kolinski 2015). For some time the empire was considered one of the main kingdoms of the Bronze Age, along with that of the Egyptians, Hittites and the Babylonians (van de Mieroop 2004: 143). Internal conflict however diminished the power of the empire. Two brothers, Tushratta and Artatama, lay claim to the throne of Mittani. This resulted in the separation of the empire in a western and eastern part. This severely weakened the power of the Mittani and both parts were soon incorporated in other political systems as vassal states. The western part was under control of the Hittite Empire and the eastern part was made a vassal of Assyria, under the direction of king Assur-Uballit (1353-1318 BC). It was with the reign of this king that Assyria started to develop into a major player in the international scene. The territorial expansion of the Assyrian state did, however, not start until the middle of the 13th century.

Three kings in particular were responsible for the first imperial expansions of Assyria. At first the lands of Hanigalbat were made into a vassal state by Adad-Nirari I (1295-1264 BC). Textual sources indicate that the ruler of this area, Sattuara I, king of Hanigalbat, at some point rebelled against this dominance. After subduing this rebellion and the capture of Sattuara I, Adad-nirari released him on the condition of regular tribute payments. Apparently at this time, there was no desire for total territorial domination of the area (Jakob 2015: 178).

The former Mittani area, however, remained troublesome. After the death of Sattuara his son Wasasatta revolted against the Assyrian domination. Adad-nirari campaigned into Hanigalbat again but was less forgiving to this new king. The Assyrian response included the complete destruction of the town of Iridu, home of Wasasatta, and the annexation of eight cities in the Habur triangle (Szuchman 2007: 5). The west of Hanigalbat was still under the rule of the local king, Sattuara II. Backed by the Hittites this part of Hanigalbat continued to be a problem for the subsequent Assyrian monarch. This Assyrian king, Salmaneser I (1263-1234 BC), therefore campaigned into this area and demonstrated his rule by the destruction of numerous settlements and the establishment of new administrative centres in these western parts of Hanigalbat. A decline in settlement density in the Balikh valley has also been revealed in various survey projects (Lyon 2000). It is possible that this was the result of the military campaigns of Salmaneser I (Kolinski 2015). After these conquests the Assyrian domination reached to the Euphrates River, and its territory directly bordered the Hittite Empire. It is in this period and context that the *dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad was probably established (Akkermans and Wiggermann 2015).

When the son of Salmaneser I, Tukulti-Ninurta I (1233-1197 BC), came to the throne of Assyria the western parts of Hanigalbat were largely consolidated within the Assyrian territory. The administration of this part of the empire was in the hands of a branch of the royal family of Assur. These administrators took over the title 'king of Hanigalbat' and were also known as Grand Vizier or the viceroy of Assyria (Jakob 2003: 59). The capital of this expanse was located at Dur Katlimmu, near the confluence of the Habur with the Euphrates (Kühne 1983). As mentioned above these successive kings of Hanigalbat owned the *dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad. The kingship of Hanigalbat, and with it its semi-autonomy, was abolished when the successor to this throne merged it with that of Assur. This king, Ninurta-apil-Ekur, thereby finalized a process of slow and reluctant annexation of the western parts of Hanigalbat into the Assyrian Empire which had started over a century before.

As is clear from the above, the Assyrians did not attempt to fully include Hanigalbat into their territory at the start of their dominion over the area. Western Hanigalbat was first made into a vassal of Assyria. Later, after uprisings in the area, the Assyrian military power was displayed by the destruction of some settlements. Other settlements were however allowed to remain, under the condition of loyalty to the Assyrian crown. Despite the demonstrated Assyrian military superiority over these areas, full territorial control was apparently not aspired. Rather, vassalage was economically more efficient and the areas could function as buffers between Assyria proper and enemy states such as that of the Hittites.

After the ultimate colonization of Hanigalbat by Salmaneser, the region was placed under the rule of a branch of the royal family. Hanigalbat thereby transformed from a state under the indirect rule, or yoke, into part of the core region, or lands, of Assur (Postgate 1992). Similarly, the degree of imperial rule changed from the use of the region as a buffer state, to hegemonic or indirect rule as a vassal state and ultimately culminated into direct territorial rule as an Assyrian province (Parker 2001: 254).

The transformation of a newly conquered area from buffer zone to province was by no means a natural progression of imperial dominance. Control over newly conquered territories was established by means of varying practices (Parker 2003; Düring 2015b: 310) which could range from complete colonization to the creation of a vassal state. In the Balikh area the final strategy included the establishment of new settlements and the introduction of a new population (Lyon 2000; Düring 2015b: 309). However, the southern part of the Balikh valley may still have functioned as a buffer zone, illustrating the flexible approach of the Assyrians with conquered territories (Düring 2015b: 310).

The Assyrian colonization of the Balikh valley was supported by a military presence throughout these lands in the form of chariot groups roaming the countryside, while large army bands were available on dispatch (Jakob 2015: 181). Among the new settlements which were established there, were large private estates (the so-called *dunnu*s) which functioned as agricultural production centres to provide resources for their private owner. Equally, *dunnu*s would service the empire at large by providing agricultural surplus, by functioning as a road station for military bands and caravans and to serve as nodes in the intelligence network. With the Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu* being no exception, the agricultural lands of these settlements were worked partly by serfs deported from other parts of the empire (Akkermans and Wiggermann 2015).

Survey work which was carried out in the area indicates that most of the Middle Assyrian settlements in the Balikh valley concentrated in the area north of the modern 250 millimetre isohyet line (Lyon 2000). The Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu* was a large settlement within a dense distribution of newly constructed small hamlets along the Balikh River. One of these hamlets which was probably under control of the Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu* was located at Khirbet es-Shenef (Bartl 1990). The colonization of this area therefore included a substantial agricultural project. Apparently the establishment and the maintenance of this undertaking required sporadic grain subsidies from the Habur area (Lyon 2000: 101). Additionally, there was a threat of attacks by local tribes. These attacks are clearly attested in the textual sources from Tell Chuera, ancient Harbe (Jakob 2015). This settlement was located in between the Habur and the Balikh and probably functioned as a road station along an important route between these two agricultural areas (Klein 1995). It follows that a considerable effort was made for the annexation and consolidation of the west of Hanigalbat.

The Assyrian hegemony in the west was however short-lived; around the year 1197 BC Tukulti-Ninurta I was assassinated and a period of unrest broke out in the empire. This period coincides with the general decline of societies in the Mediterranean, commonly known as the Sea Peoples period or the Bronze Age Collapse (Sandars 1978; Liverani 1987; Tainter 1988; Cline 2014). Through time the Assyrian Empire fell into decline and the western and northern provinces were lost to various tribes that were previously oppressed (Brown 2013). By 1050 BC the Assyrian Empire had lost much terrain and it was not until 859 BC that the Assyrian Empire regained its strength and earlier extent again (Liverani 1988; van de Mieroop 2004: 226). In later centuries the Assyrian Empire was to become the largest empire of its time, conquering nearly the entire expanse of the Near East, including Mesopotamia, the Levant and Egypt. With these conquests the Neo-Assyrian Empire set the stage for later empires in the same region and can

be viewed as having created the blue print for successive empires such as the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid empires (Liverani 1987; Postgate 1992; Liverani 2001; Düring 2015b: 1).

The historical account of Mesopotamia has been described as an alternating sequence of imperial domination and relative independence (Barjamovic 2013). This may be a simplified view of the past as, for local communities at least, life was not only determined by the actions of the imperial powers. Additionally, this historical perspective focusses on the events and themes which were important to the ruling elite. The population which was present in these areas was however not solely directed by the empire. Life in these communities was for a large part not concerned with the topics which appear in the historical documents. By default, the historical perspective is biased towards an elite view of society. It could, therefore, be argued that a different approach is required in order to investigate the impact of imperial strategies on populations in conquered territories. It is believed that the material remains which are analysed in archaeological research offer a perspective which is less biased towards the ruling elite.

As a formal element of Assyrian imperial strategy in a peripheral zone of the empire, the Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu* can inform us about the way Assyria attempted to impose its rule on local communities and which effects this had. Whereas historical accounts are largely concerned with the elite and the messages they wanted to convey, the material remains provide a perspective of activities and individuals in the *dunnu*, impartial to social or economic standing. This study may therefore be seen as yielding a bottom-up perspective of Assyrian imperialism (Klinkenberg and Lanjouw 2015).

1.6 Research aims and questions

The aim of this research is to better understand the intended function and actual use of the *dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad for the local society and in the Assyrian Empire at large. A thorough understanding of its function and use will help in clarifying which imperial strategies were undertaken by the Assyrian Empire in order to control the region. Additionally, it will illustrate how local society was influenced by these imperial practices.

To achieve this the architecture and finds of the site are examined using a comprehensive and systematic methodology. How the finds were deposited and how they relate to activities will play a central role in this research. One of the aims is therefore to set up a framework for the reconstruction of deposition processes in order to reconstruct past activities.

An additional theme is that the activities in the *dunnu* have changed through time and space. Some activities were performed more in one phase than in another and the location of activities within the *dunnu* also changed through time. The diachronic changes within the Level 5 *dunnu* will be charted to reveal the changing role of the *dunnu* in the local society and in the empire at large. The interpretations based on the archaeological evidence from this study will be compared to the information which derives from textual sources. The combined evidence will be used to explain the function and use of the *dunnu*.

In short the main research questions are:

- What was the function and use of the *dunnu*?
  - What activities were carried out where in the *dunnu*?
  - What are the diachronic changes of these activities?
  - How do these activities reflect the position and function of the *dunnu* in the local society and in the Assyrian Empire?
- To what extent is the archaeological evidence representative for reconstructing activities in the past?
  - How do the objects from the Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu* relate to ancient activities?
  - How does the information from the archaeological evidence differ from the textual sources?