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8. The Archaeological Context of the Tell Deir 'Allā Tablets

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ABSTRACT

The excavations at the site Tell Deir 'Allā in Jordan yielded several inscribed clay tablets. The first nine were excavated in two rooms that are part of the Late Bronze Age (LB) sanctuary. Recently more of this kind of tablets were uncovered in squares excavated at the southern side of the tell. Some of these tablets carried dots, while others had inscriptions. The signs with which the tablets were written seem to be deeply inscribed while the clay was leather hard with a sharp or pointed stylus. Vertical lines divide the undeciphered signs into groups. It has been cited that the script in which the tablets were inscribed is local. In addition to these tablets several Mycenaean pottery vessels have been excavated at Tell Deir 'Allā during the 1960's excavations. However, the tablets from the 1990's, 2000 and 2004 seasons were found in domestic houses built on the southern slopes of the site and did not yield any imported pottery vessels. This paper aims to study the archaeological context of these tablets excavated in both the LB sanctuary and in the domestic houses.

1. INTRODUCTION

The site of Tell Deir 'Allā is located in the Ghor of 'Abū 'Ubaydah on the eastern side of the Jordan Valley, 4 km north of the bridge over the Zerqa River (Fig. 1). Tell Deir 'Allā stands on the floor of the long north-south Rift Valley. Here, the valley floor is in general 4-5 km wide, *i.e.* extending from the Jordan River bed (Zor) to the slopes of the eastern mountains.

This surrounding landscape has good agricultural soils in most places and the very variable, but generally limited, rainfall (average 260 mm at the site) can be supplemented with irrigation water, provided by the Zerqa River (Fig. 2). The excavations of Tell Deir 'Allā have indicated that the site was inhabited from approximately 1700 till 350 BC.

Some of the biblical scholars identified Tell Deir 'Allā with biblical *Succoth* (Genesis 33:17, Joshua 13:27, Judges 8:5, I Kings 7:46). Franken, the first excavator of the site, has always insisted that the nature of the archaeological remains must first be understood before an identification with a site mentioned in the biblical texts made (1997, 137). In his opinion, the results of the excavations have not yielded proof for this identification. Actually, Franken agreed with F.M. Abel that the name *Ter'ela* or *Der'ela* mentioned in the Talmud (Palestinian Talmud *Shevuot* 8:2, 38-d) is the biblical site *Succoth* which should be identified with the site Tell al-Khsās located 2.5 km west of the modern village Deir 'Allā (Abel 1967, 55). This is based on the fact that both *Succoth* and *al-Hsas* have the meaning “booths” (Franken 1992, 126-27). Franken (1964, 422) suggested to identify the site of Tell Deir 'Allā with the biblical site *Gilgal* (1 Sam. 9:14). We cite below what Franken published: “On the present archaeological evidence there is as much to say for it being the Gilgal to which the men from Jebesh-Gilad went” (1964a, 422). Apparently, this contradicts what is already published by Franken himself, by saying we have to let the archaeological objects telling us their stories and not to enforce the biblical narratives on the archaeological facts.

The aim of this presentation is not to study the results of the archaeological excavations at the site, but to present a discussion on the archaeological context of the clay tablets excavated during the sixties, nineties and 2004 seasons.

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Fig. 1. A map, showing the location of Tell Dēr 'Allā

2. HISTORY OF FIELDWORK

The Tell Dēr 'Allā Archaeological Project is a joint venture of Leiden University (the Netherlands) and Yarmouk University (Irbid, Jordan) in co-operation with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan (Fig. 3). The excavations of Leiden University, directed by H.J. Franken started in 1960 (Fig. 4). After a gap following the fifth season in 1967, the excavations were resumed by Franken in 1976. Since 1979 they have been co-directed by G. van der Kooij and M.M. Ibrahim, first in cooperation with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, and since 1980 with the Yarmouk University. After excavations were stopped for some years, they were resumed in 1994 with a series of five seasons, ending in 2004 (co-directed by G. van der Kooij and, since 1996, Z. Kafafi).



Fig. 2. The area located to the east of Tell Dēr 'Allā

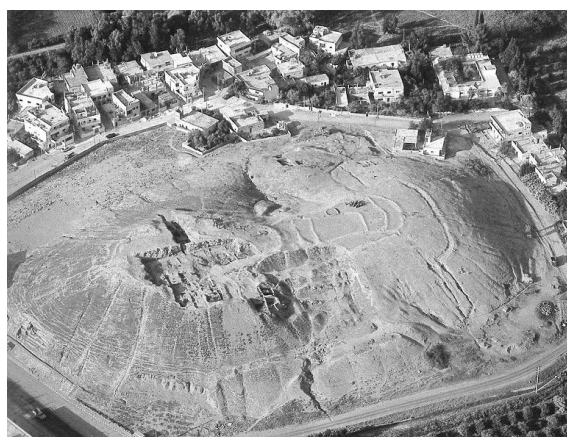


Fig. 3. Aerial view of Tell Dēr 'Allā showing the excavated areas (after Kennedy and Bewely 2004)

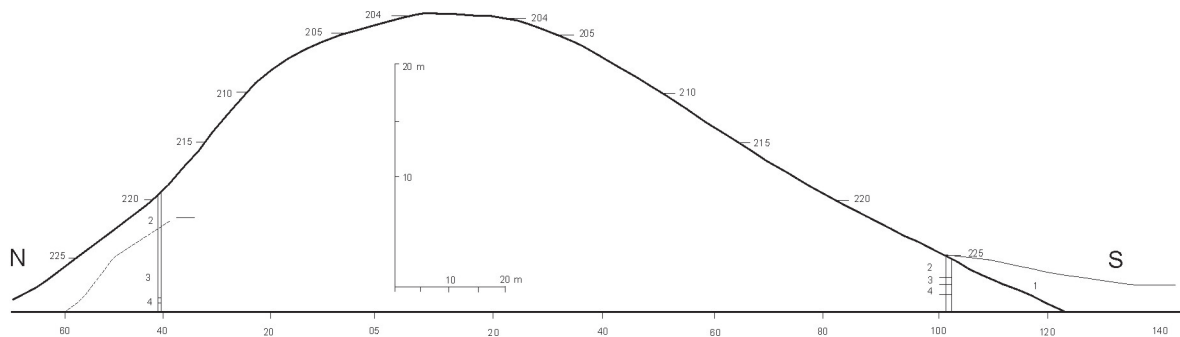


Fig. 4. North-south section through the tell (after Franken 1992)

3. THE TELL DEIR 'ALLĀ TABLETS

On April 14th, 1964 Henk Franken, the excavator of Tell Deir 'Allā, announced the discovery of tablets (Franken 1964b). The 1960's excavations at the site Tell Deir 'Allā yielded eleven clay tablets. The first nine were excavated in two rooms, which were part of the LB sanctuary. Recently, more of this kind of tablets was uncovered in squares excavated at the southern side of the site. Some of these tablets carry dots, while others have inscriptions. The signs, with which the tablets were written, seem to have been deeply inscribed while the clay was leather hard with a sharp or pointed stylus. Vertical lines divide the still undeciphered signs into groups. Due to the fact that some of the clay tablets were found at the site squashed in the maker's hand, some bear deep finger imprints and has no inscribed signs but only dots (Franken 1992, 58), it may be assumed that they were locally inscribed.



Fig. 5. The clay tablets of Tell Deir 'Allā

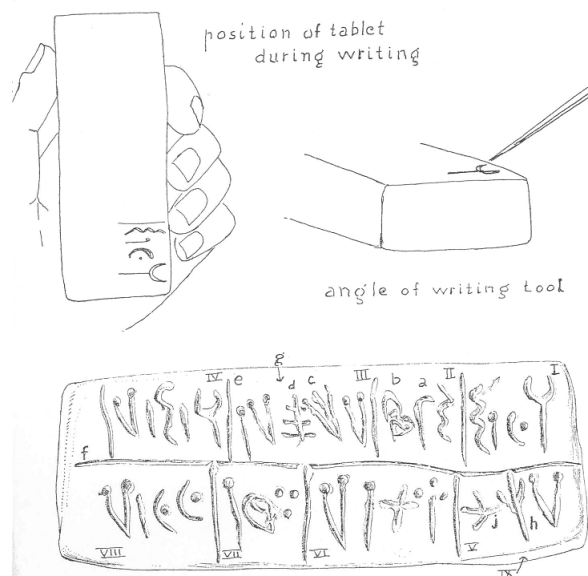


Fig. 6. Inscripting the Tell Deir 'Allā tablets (after Franken 1965)

4. INSCRIBING THE TABLETS

Franken argued that the tablets were inscribed at the site of Tell Deir 'Allā. He wrote: "The additional find of a tablet, which had been crushed in the hand of the scribe and thrown away, makes it highly probable that the tablets were written in Deir 'Allā." (Franken 1964b, 378). The scribe used a carefully smoothed surface to deeply incise the characters. One of the well preserved tablets measures 13x5x2 cm and the text is divided into two parts with dividing lines between the words (Fig. 6). It has been argued that the text written on the tablets should be read from right to left and that the writer held a tool (perhaps made of bone) obliquely at a right angle to the long axis of the tablet (Franken 1965, 150).

5. THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The tablets excavated by H.J. Franken during the 1960's were found in the LB sanctuary complex at the northern slopes of the site. The excavator recognized several building phases in the sanctuary structure. The complex of the sanctuary consisted of a cella and several rooms annexed to it. The earliest phase of the building was constructed in the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, directly over an artificial mound, which allows the cella of the temple to rise approximately one meter above the surrounding structures (Franken 1964a, 417). Franken claimed that the sanctuary had been used by pastoral nomads during the last phase of the Late Bronze Age. He added that this sanctuary had a central function where tribes living in the vicinity gathered for festivals (Franken 1964a, 419).

Actually, the results of the recent excavations at the southern slope of the tell proved that the site was occupied by fully sedentary people during this period of time. In addition, it is well known that in the area located in the vicinity several large LB III settlements have been excavated, *e.g.* Tell al-Sa'idiyyeh and Tell 'Abū al-Kharāz. This gives the impression that Franken's claim that the Tell Deir 'Allā sanctuary had been built to serve a central sanctuary for nomadic people living in the area during the Late Bronze Age should be reconsidered.

It seems that the sanctuary was destroyed by an earthquake that caused a very strong fire. A collection of pottery vessels, cylinder seals, beads, gold rings and an Egyptian faience vase bearing the cartouche of the Pharaoh Taousert (*c.* 1214-1194 BC) were encountered inside the cella of the sanctuary (Fig. 7) (Franken 1992, Fig. 3-9.5).

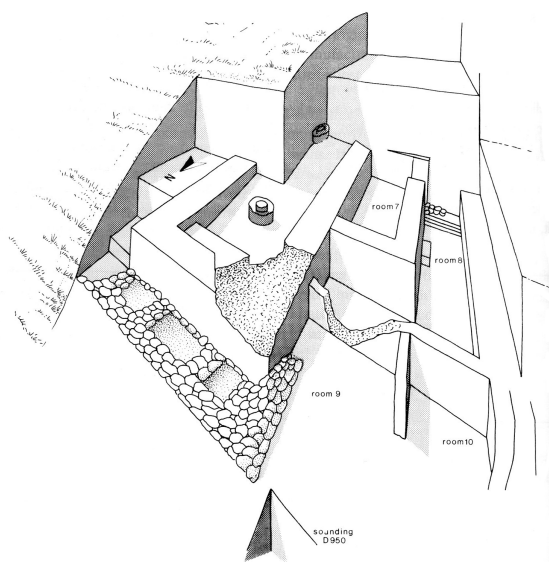


Fig. 7. A reconstruction drawing of the cella (after Franken 1992)

To the east and west of the cella several rooms were also excavated (Fig. 7) and produced archaeological objects such as local and imported Mycenaean pottery vessels, cylinder seals and worked bone objects. In two of the rooms (E4 and E5) located to the east of the sanctuary, eleven clay tablets were found. Only three of those tablets were inscribed, while the rest bears no inscriptions. The rooms located to the west of the cella were rather small, irregularly shaped and full of archaeological objects (Franken 1964a, 420). The tablets were encountered buried in the debris that covered the floors of the two rooms. Franken thought that these rooms belonged to the temple complex and should be considered as treasury rooms (Franken 1992, 53). Franken mentioned that, in addition to the Mycenaean pottery vessels found in the complex, three other vessels are of particular importance. These are a very large vat with many handles, a very high stand (altar?), which had been painted with red palm trees, lattice and geometric designs (Franken 1964, 421, pl. IX) and finally, a red painted pilgrim flask. One of the paintings on the flask represents a man leading a goat and a dog. Moreover, shrine houses have also been encountered in this building. As regard to the tablets encountered in room 4, they are eight in number and are all stored at the Amman Museum (Fig. 8).

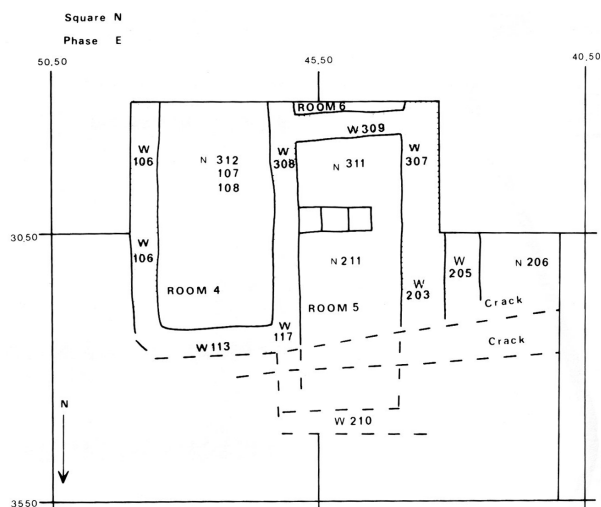


Fig. 8. Rooms 4-6 located to the east of the cella (after Franken 1992)

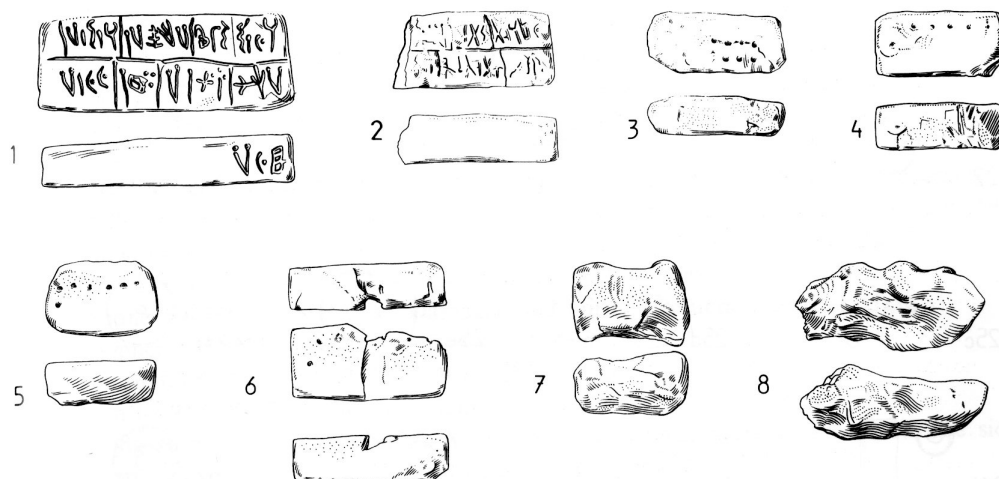


Fig. 9. Eight tablets found in room 4 (after Franken 1992)

One of the 1994 season goals of excavations (Fig. 10) at the site was the search for cemeteries related to the site and to excavate the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age strata (Ibrahim and Van der Kooij 1996, 16). During this season an inscribed clay tablet (Fig. 11), dated by the excavators to around 1200 BC, was encountered in the debris at the edge of a high standing wall close to the floor of the house in square C/P 13.6 located at the south western side of the tell (Fig. 10 and 12). In the same layer a number of objects including a spindle whorl, a flint sickle-blade, a basalt pestle, a small haematite stone and an Egyptian seal impression were excavated. The area in which these objects and the tablet were encountered has been interpreted by the excavators as a place which was connected to metal work, storage and possibly trade (Ibrahim and Van der Kooij 1997, 108).

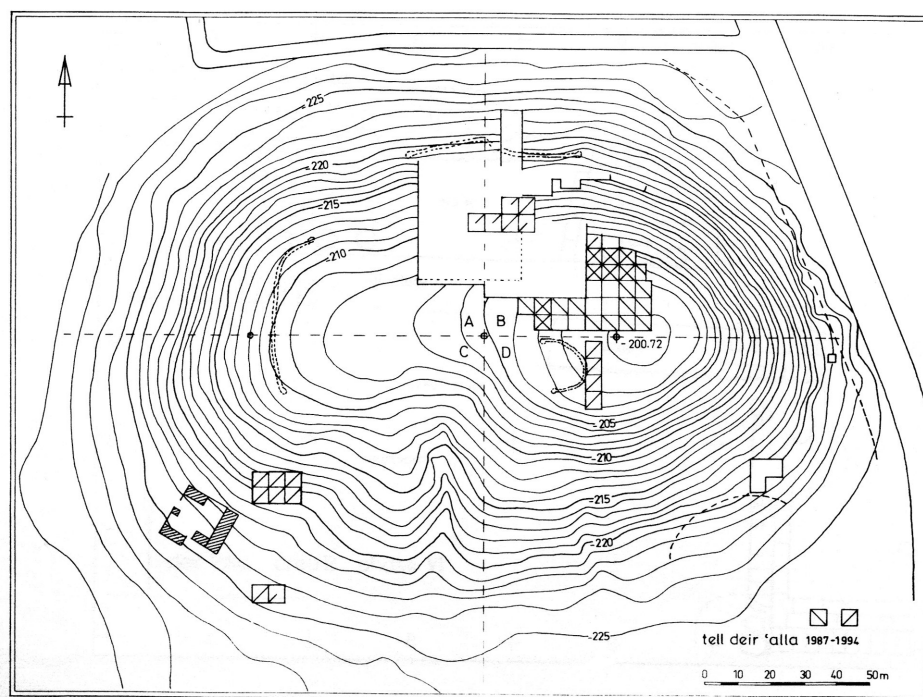


Fig. 10. Excavated squares in the 1987 and 1994 seasons



Fig. 11. Tell Deir 'Allā tablet found in 1994

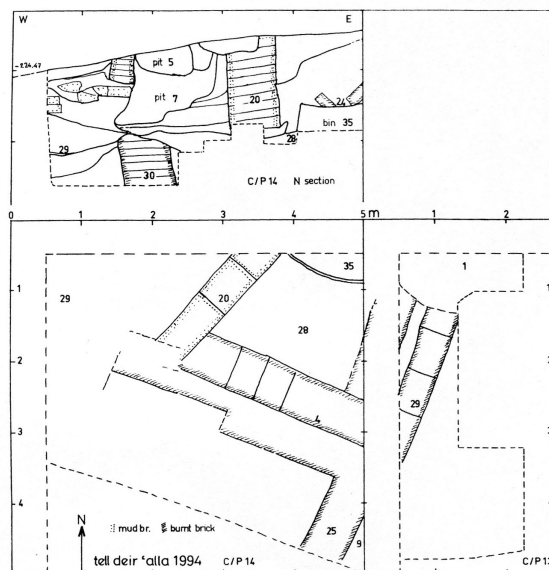


Fig. 12. Squares C/P 13 and 14 and northern section drawing (after Ibrahim and Van der Kooij 1997, fig. 14)

The 2004 excavation season was the fifth in the renewed series that took place from 1994 onwards and concentrated on the LB remains at the western part of the southern slopes of the site. The extension of the test trenches that were made during earlier seasons (1996, 1998 and 2000) in the western half of the southern slope, aimed at better understanding of the final phases of the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age and to balance the view that was developed based upon the 1960's excavations at the northern slope.

The middle area of the southern slopes of the tell (area C) showed a very large room (at least 10x6 m) with 1.3 m thick walls that was heavily burnt and destroyed by an earthquake (c. 1180 BC). In this large room (Fig. 13) more clay tablet fragments were excavated (Figs 14-17), two of them fitting to three fragments from the previous season, thereby comprising two complete tablets.

Two fragments of other tablets were encountered in a very thick layer of burnt wall and roof rubble (Kafafi and Van der Kooij 2009, 14). In this layer, close to or on a floor level, many clusters of pottery sherds,



Fig. 13. Area C, squares K6-K4 on the southern slopes of the tell



Fig. 14. Clay tablet fragments in situ



Fig. 15. Clay tablet fragments found in 2000 and 2004 seasons

a biconical jar and a large fragment of a clay tablet were found. In addition, another clay tablet fragment was found while removing the baulk separating squares C/K5 and C/K6.

The function of this room that also had adjacent rooms is still unclear. Much better understood are the rooms (Fig. 19) of the immediate rebuilding after this phase, which happened still just before the Iron Age. The rooms included a food storing and preparation space, including large jars that had contained an oily liquid and a large saddle quern with matching runner – both made of the locally available (Zerqa bed) sandstone.

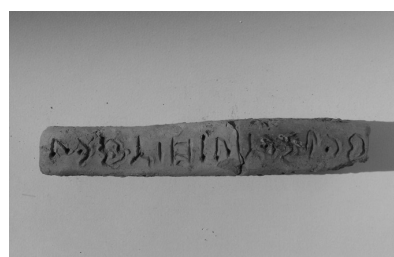
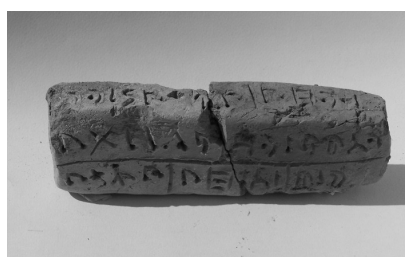


Fig. 16. Two fragments of one clay tablet

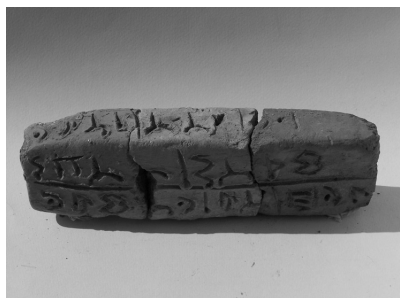


Fig. 17. Three fragments forming one clay tablet

6. CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned above, the tablets excavated by Franken during the 1960's were found in the LB sanctuary complex excavated at the northern slopes of the site. According to the published information about their archaeological context several imported objects such as Mycenaean pottery vessels, cylinder seals and other objects such as an altar were also found. Franken argued that the sanctuary in which the tablets were found belonged to semi-nomads living in the vicinity of Tell Deir 'Allā. However, other tablets were excavated during the 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000 and 2004 seasons in domestic houses built on the southern slopes of the site and which did not yield any imported pottery vessels. In addition to the LB local pottery vessels, other domestic objects were also encountered (Kafafi 2008; Kafafi and Van der Kooij 2009).

As a result of the Tell Deir 'Allā excavations and the excavations conducted at other LB sites in its vicinity, such as Tell al-Mazār, Tell al-Sa'idiyeh and Tell 'Abū al-Kharāz, we believe that Tell Deir 'Allā served as a permanent settlement during the last phase of this period. Also, the nature of the excavated archaeological data is very similar to other LB sites, especially those located in the Jordan Valley. Apparently, the presence of the Tell Deir 'Allā tablets at the site indicates, that the site was occupied by a group of people who had contact with surrounding regions. The tablets, however, have their own style of writing, which raises the question whether these clay tablets were inscribed at the site itself or imported. If the answer is that the dwellers of the site were the inscribers, then we may allow ourselves to hypothesize that they had the same origin as the people who made the metal objects found at Beth Shean and Tell al-Sa'idiyeh and manufactured the Mycenaean vessels encountered in the sanctuary complex. If the answer should be no, then we may think that the people of Tell Deir 'Allā had long distance trade contacts and imported the tablets as well as the other imported objects. At any rate, the tablets belonged to the inhabitants of Tell Deir 'Allā, the local inhabitants of ancient Jordan despite their religion or origin.

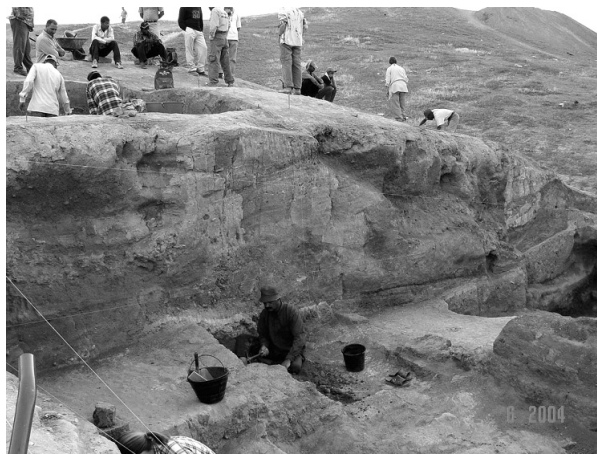


Fig. 18. Area C, square K5



Fig. 19. A room adjacent to the large room in area C

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