



الأساليب المعمارية الطقوس الجنائزية في تل أبو الذهب

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المركز الأمريكي للأبحاث الشرقية

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ملخص البحث:

يقع تل أبو الذهب ، الذي تم التنقيب عنه من قبل هيئة الآثار والتراث العراقية ، على بعد حوالي ٤٥ كم جنوب شرق الناصرية ، في المنطقة التابعة لناحية كرمة بني سعيد ضمن الاهوار العراقية. الموقع بيضوي الشكل ، ويتألف من جزئين ، التلال الشرقية والغربية ، إذ يقطعه نهر صغير . ضم المستوطن ، الذي تم التنقيب فيه على مدار ثلاثة مواسم (٢٠١١-٢٠١٣) ، مخلفات مادية غنية ومتنوعة ، بما في ذلك المخلفات المعمارية الخاصة والعامة ، والمقابر ، واللقى الأثرية ، مثل الفخاريات والحلي . و بناءً على الفحص المبدئي في الموقع للعمارة والفخاريات ، تبين أن الموقع يعود إلى العصر البابلي القديم. في هذه الدراسة ، سنقوم أولاً بدراسة نتائج التنقيبات الأثرية ، وتحديدًا فيما يخص العمارة والمقابر . ومقارنة هذه النتائج مع مواقع اخرى في المنطقة نفسها ، كما سنحاول إعادة بناء التنظيم الاجتماعي والاقتصادي للمستوطن.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العصر البابلي القديم، الاهوار، المعابد، المدافن والقبور، الاواني الفخارية، طقوس وعادات الدفن، الأعمدة الحلزونية.



Architectural and Funeral Practices At Tell Abu Thahab

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Abstract

Excavated by the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, Tell Abu thahab is located about 45 km to the southeast of Di Qar Province in the Iraqi Marshlands. The site is oval and is divided into two parts, the eastern and western mounds, by a small river. Excavated over three seasons (2011-2013), the settlement unearthed a rich and diverse material culture, including private and public architecture, graves, and artifacts, such as ceramics and jewelry. Based on a preliminary on-site examination of the architecture and the ceramic, the excavators concluded that the site belongs to the Old Babylonian period. In this paper we will first synthesize the excavation results, focusing on architecture and tombs. By comparing this data with other sites in this region, we will attempt to reconstruct the socio-economic organization of the settlement.

Keywords: Old Babylonian Period, Marshes, Temples, Cemeteries and graves, Pottery, Burial rituals and customs, Helical columns



Introduction

Tell Abu Thahab was excavated by the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage¹ between 2011 and 2013 and was directed by Taha Karim in Season One, Hussein Flaih, and Raed Hamed Abd Allah in Season Two, and Mohammed Salih Attia in Season Three.² The site is located about 45 km to the southeast of Di Qar Province in the Iraqi marshlands (Fig. 1). It is oval in shape, measuring 17.5 hectares (Al-Hamadani 2015: 160), divided into two parts by a small river (Fig. 2). Excavated over three seasons, archaeological work focused on two points: the first is at the tell's summit, and the second is on its western side. This work recovered rich material culture, including domestic and public architecture, graves, and artifacts, such as ceramics³ and cuneiform tablets.⁴ Located in an area characterized by competing political powers and overlapping cultural traditions, the site might have been occupied through the First Sealand Dynasty (1739 – 1340 BC) and Kassite period (1600 – 1154 BC) (Roux 1960: 27 – 30; Al-Hamadani 2014, 2020: 29). However, the architectural, ceramic, and mortuary data discussed here fit well in the Old Babylonian tradition (1830 – 1595 BC), therefore, providing an opportunity to reconstruct the settlement's socio-economic organization and offering a glimpse into the spread of the urban and literate lifestyle in the marshlands of southern Mesopotamia during this period.

¹ Season One team included Taha Karim Aboud, Ali Nasir Merza, Jamal Abdul Razzaq, Karim Oda Swadi, Aamer, and Abdul Razzaq. The team in Season Two consisted of Hussein Flaih Khalil, Ahlam Jabbar Ali, Abbas Mansi, Mohammed Salih Attia, Ali Hussein Yousif, and Yousif Abbas Jasim. Season Three was led by Mohammed Salih Attia and consisted of Nasir Merza, Aamer Abdul Razzaq, Adel Shaid, and Suhail Chaloob Abbas.

² The authors would like to thank the excavation directors for granting us permission to publish this material.

³ Only partially published in Taha et al. 2015. Results of Excavations at Tell Abu Thahab (First Season 2011). Sumer 2015: 37 – 39.

⁴ Cuneiform tablets from this site remained unpublished when we wrote this article. For brief comments on the tablets see Taha et al. 2015:39.



Fig. 1 Tell Abu Thahab



Fig. 2 The site of Tell Abu Thahab



Public Architecture

Excavations at the top of the tell revealed two large buildings with different floor plans and functions (Abood 2015). Area 1 revealed a rectangular structure, the Western Building, measuring 59 x 35 m built of limestone and plaster (Fig. 3). It consisted of five rooms surrounding a large open courtyard (Fig. 4 a-b). The courtyard's floor was paved with plaster, and its northern, eastern, and southern walls were decorated with 11 rectangular niches; each includes a pair of engaged spiral columns (Fig. 5). Seven engaged columns support the western wall. Toward the northwestern corner, a pair of columns stood on both sides of what seems to have been an entrance into the building. A second wall is located on this side; its function, however, remains unclear.



Fig. 3 Western Building ([unpublished excavation report 2011](#))

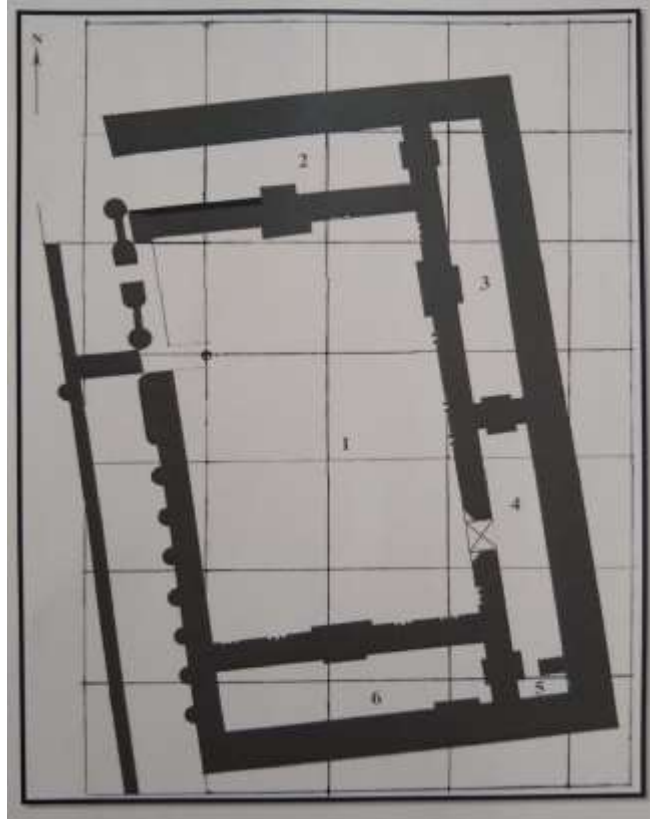


Fig. 4-a Western Building (after Alzubaidi 2017)

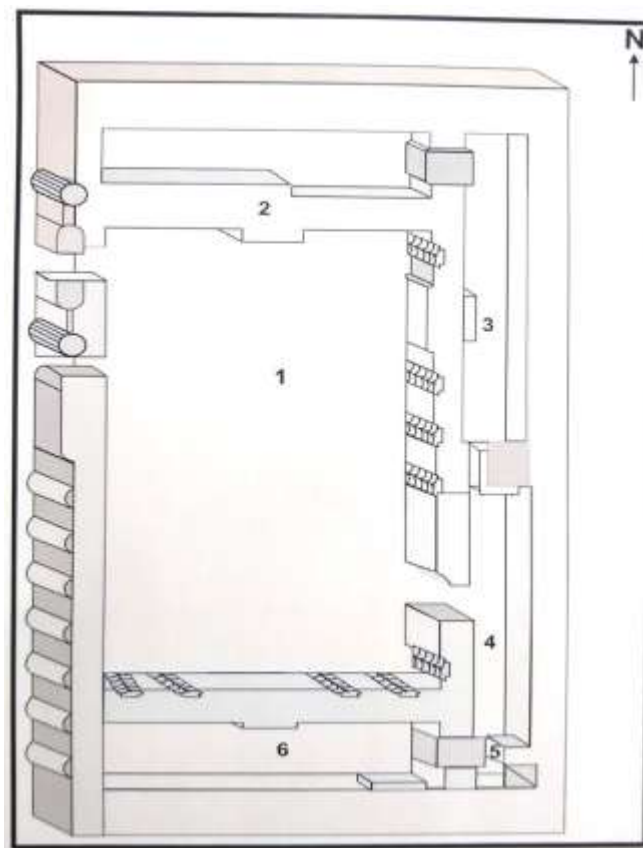




Fig. 4-b Reconstruction of Western Building (after Alzubaidi 2017)



Fig. 5 Spiral Column, Western Building ([unpublished excavation report 2011](#))

The central courtyard opens into a rectangular room 4 through a doorway that was later blocked. In general, it appears that all rooms related to each other through doorways that were blocked at some point. In addition, like room 4, rooms 2, 3, and 6 might have had doorways that opened into the courtyard. No artifacts were found in this building, which suggests that it was subsequently abandoned. Several cuneiform tablets were found in the southwestern area near the building, but they remain unpublished. Although only partially excavated and despite the absence of material culture in the building, its floor plan and decoration recall other known architectural examples from Babylonia, such as the E.babbar temple complex at Larsa (Fig. 6 & 7). Excavations in courtyard I, the most complete, show that the structure was initially built in the Old Babylonian period and was later reconstructed by various Kassite kings (Arnaud 1978: nos. 18, 19; Arnaud 1981: nos. 4, 5). Like the Western Building, the court was entered through a large, buttressed doorway. Its interior façade was decorated with an elaborate series of engaged columns: some were molded in the form of spirals arranged opposite to one another- typical of



Babylonian religious structures. Scattered among the engaged columns were T-shaped niches (Calvet, 1984).

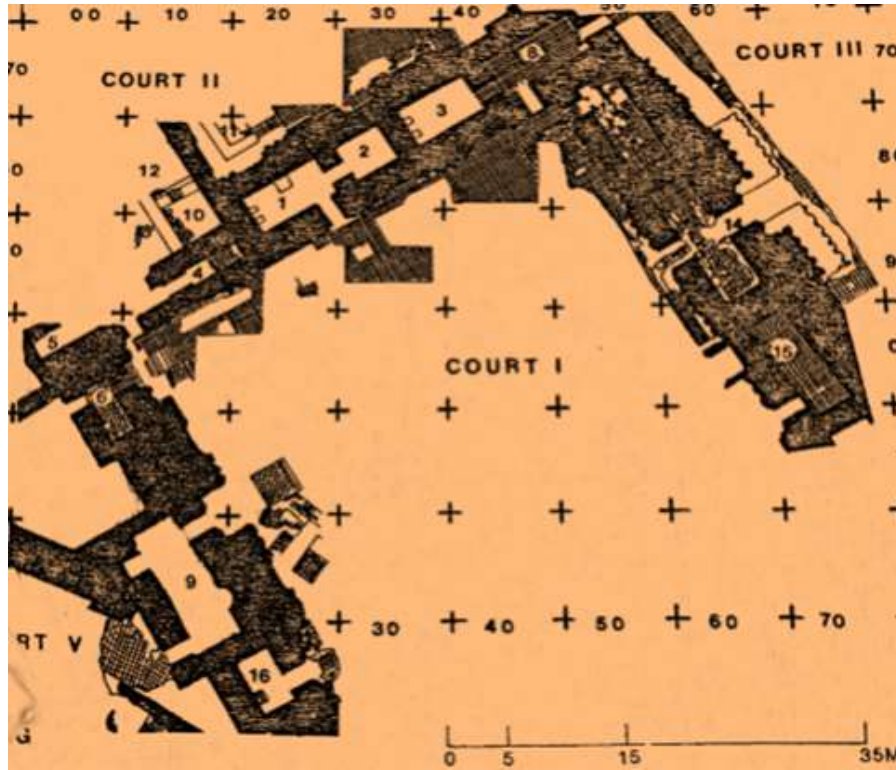


Fig. 6 Courtyard 1, Temple Complex of E.babbar at Larsa from the Kassite period (after Calvet 1984)

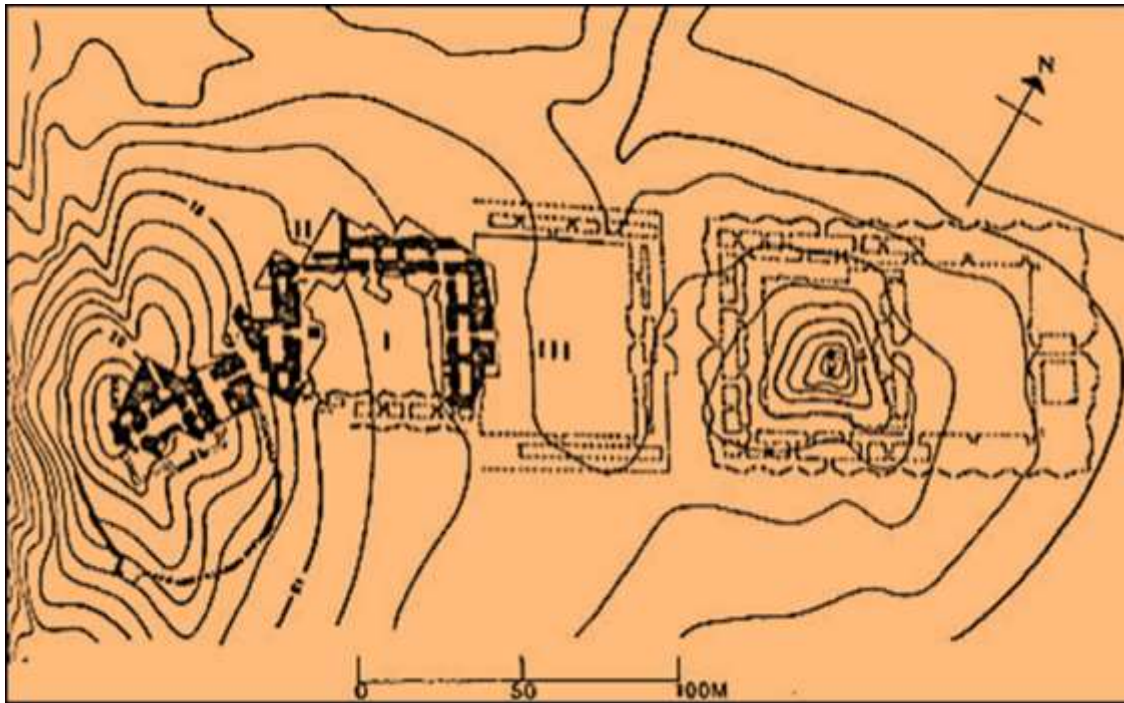


Fig 7 The Ziggurat and Temple Complex of E.babbar at Larsa during the Kassite Period (after Calvet 1984)

Decorated columns are well-known in Mesopotamian architecture. Examples of columns decorated with palm-tree trunks, for instance, were found at Uruk dating to the Uruk IV period. However, further employment of this motif as a decorative element in buildings does not appear in southern Mesopotamia until the Early Dynastic III period. At Mari, the tree-trunk columns appear at Dagan temple dating to ED III. As for the second millennium BC, tree trunk and spiral columns were mainly found in northern Mesopotamia in the early to mid-second millennium BC at Tell Al Rimah(Oats, 1967) and Tell Leilan(Weis, 1985) (Figs. 8 & 9). Engaged spiral columns were found in the temple at Tell Haddad in the Hemrin Basin, north of Babylonia, dated to the Old Babylonian period.(Sulayman ,2003-2004). They

appear in southern Mesopotamia during the Kassite period as a characteristic of religious buildings, such as Temple Inanna at Uruk (Fig. 10) and Enlil in Dur-Kurigalzu.(Clayden, 2017) Because of its unique floor plan compared with other buildings on the site and its wall decoration and floor plan in the context of the Old Babylonian religious architecture, we suggest that this building might have been a temple or part of a religious complex.



Fig. 8 Tell al Rimah Tell (after Oats 1967)

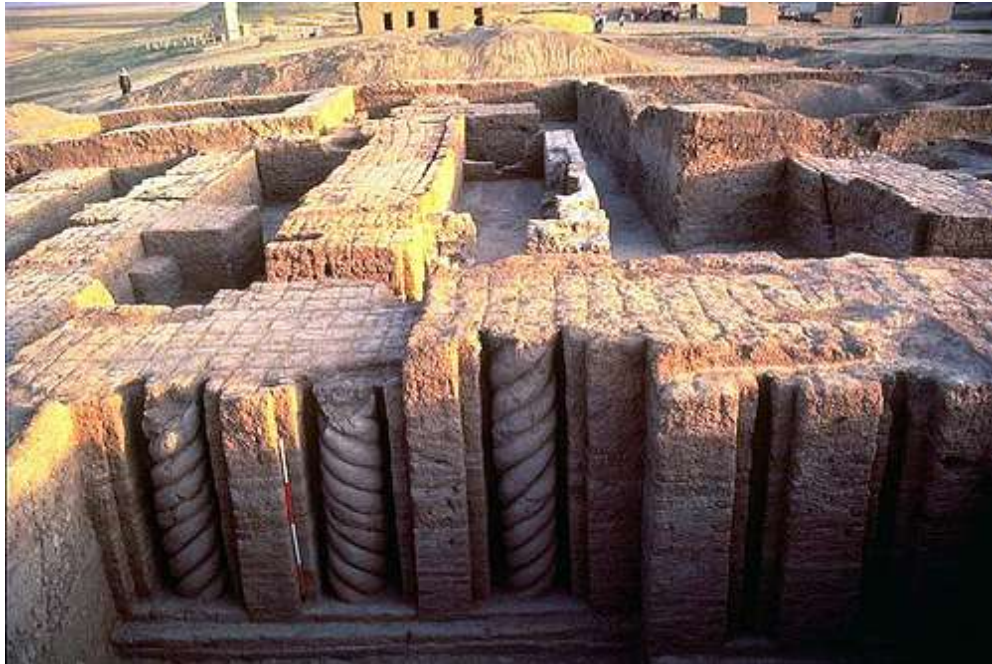


Fig. 9 Tell Leilan (after Weis 1985)



Fig. 10 Temple Inanna at Uruk (after Clayden, 2017)

In addition to the Western Building, excavators in this area uncovered a second structure to the east (Eastern Building) (Fig. 11). This building differs from the previous one in its floor plan and its rich material culture (Fig. 12). It consisted of rooms surrounding a central courtyard on three sides. The building's southern wall is decorated with niches and buttresses, so is the courtyard's northern wall, a typical feature of Mesopotamian temples. An entrance on the southwestern corner of this courtyard opens into room 2, which opens into five rooms connected through entries on their axis. Room 6 has benches lined (east-west) at the center, and it opens into a small rectangular room with a niche in the long wall facing the doorway. Several bell-shaped ceramic cups with holes in their bottoms and a ring near their rims were found stacked in room 6. The two rooms' layout and spatial relationship suggest a possible storage area.



Fig. 11 Eastern Building ([unpublished excavation report 2011](#))

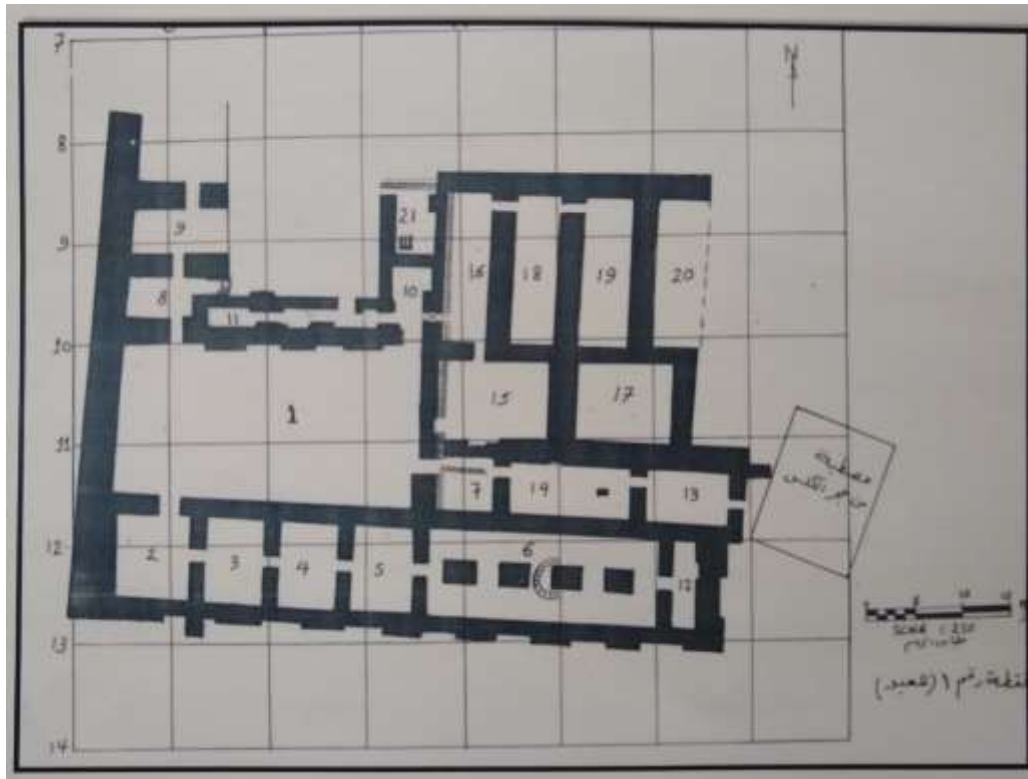


Fig. 12 Eastern Building (after Alzubaidi 2017)



Rooms 7, 14, and 13 appear to be part of the sacred rooms in the building. A door socket was found in the northern corner of the western entrance that connects room 7 with the courtyard. Ceramics and clay lumps with reed impression, most likely the inside of reed baskets, were found in the middle of the room. In room 14, an altar built of bricks and plaster (30 x 20 x 8 cm) was uncovered with three steps leading to its summit (Fig. 13). A ceramic plate and a fruit stand were found in front of it. A jar and a bitumen mass with traces of reed indicating a basket were located on its southern side. A niche, 10 cm wide and 1 m high, coated with plaster, was found in the northern wall of this room. Room 23 opens to a rectangular mastaba. These findings indicate that rooms 7 and 14 may have had some sacred function and that this altar might have been a place where a deity statue once stood along with its offerings.

The entrances on the northern wall of the central courtyard open into a group of rooms of various shapes and sizes (rooms 8, 9, 11, 10). In space no. 8, remains of the staircase were found, consisting of three steps paved with baked bricks that were recovered leading up to possibly the roof. A total of 4 niches were located throughout this building. A niche was found in the southern wall of room 11 and another in room 12. Similar niches were found in the south and western walls of room 15; each is 2 m wide with a floor paved with bricks.



Fig. 13 The altar in room 14, Eastern Building ([unpublished excavation report 2013](#))



Rooms 16, 18, and 19 appear to have witnessed intense domestic activities, including cooking and storing food and goods. Many ceramic jars, plates, and pots of various shapes and sizes were found against the walls in room 16. Fragments of pottery and animal bones, including fish bones along charred dates mixed with ash, covered the various floors of this room. A spindle disc found near an oven was also located in this room. A cylinder seal, small jars, and fragments of glazed ceramics were also found here. Finally, an oval grinding stone made of sandstone was recovered here. This high activity room connects with other building parts through three doors leading to rooms 15, 18, and 10. Rooms 15 and 10 appear to have had fewer domestic activities when compared to room 16, suggesting that the latter served these rooms and other parts of the building.

The building's religious characteristics, including the niches and buttresses, the altar, and the connected mastaba, suggest that it must have been a temple part of a religious complex with some rooms devoted to religious purposes. In contrast, other rooms seem to have provided services to the temple staff and visitors.

Domestic Structures

Excavation area 2, located on the western side of the tell, consisted of a large complex of rooms of domestic nature (Fig. 14). This is a large building with several rooms of various shapes and sizes. Metal artifacts and ceramics were found throughout the structure, providing insight into its function. Some of the rooms had floors paved with hard mud, such as room 1, where a few copper arrowheads were found. A door socket was located near the entrance in Room 2, and a gold pendant was found on its floor, most likely part of a necklace. The pendant consists of eight small rosettes surrounding a larger one at the center.⁵ Other rooms, such as no. 3, had floors paved with mud bricks. About 50 cm beneath the floor, two drains built of bricks and coated with plaster on the inside were found running east-west across the room (Fig. 15).

⁵ No image of the pendant has been published, but the excavators compared it with the example found at Dilbat, dating to the Old Babylonian period, and currently at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](https://www.metmuseum.org)

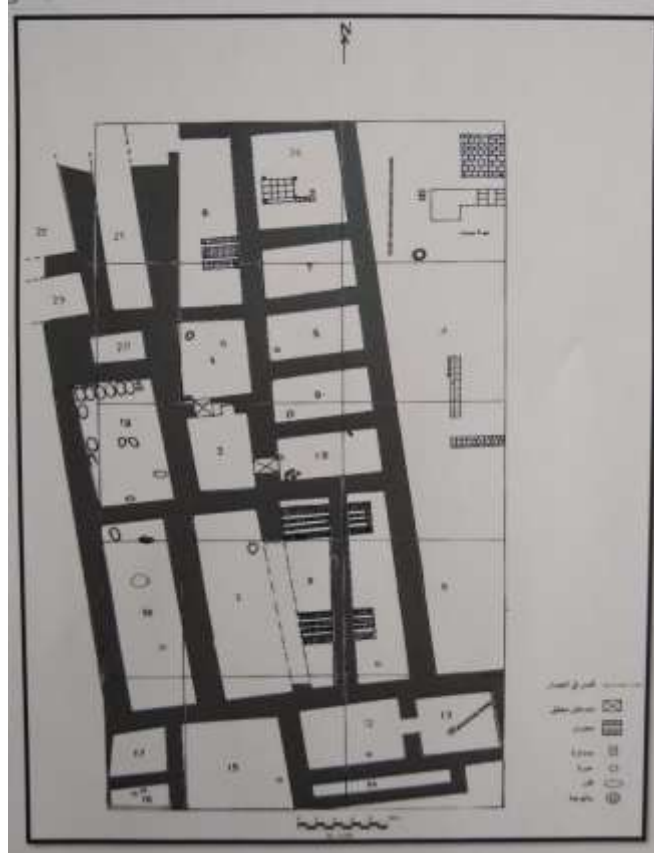


Fig. 14 Domestic Building (after Alzubaidi 2017)





Fig. 15 Room 3, Domestic Building ([unpublished excavation report 2011](#))

Room 6 on the northern end of the structure contains a similar drain paved with plaster; however, the drain runs west-east, extending under the room's eastern wall. Another drain was found in the open courtyard, uncovered to the east of the building. This, too, was built of bricks, and its inside was paved with plaster. This drain ran toward the east into an unexcavated part of the site. In addition to drains, ovens were found both inside and outside this structure. In room 24, a rectangular feature built of brick was found. Each of its four corners includes a small oven. In addition, an outdoor oven was found in the open spaces located to the east of the building. This oven is 76 cm in diameter and is built of mud brick with burned material found inside.

The southernmost part of the domestic building consisted of what seems to be a second architectural unit (rooms 13- 17). A sizeable spherical storage jar was found on the floor of room 12. Inside it, a small cylindrical jar along with ceramic and bone fragments were found. Next to a large storage jar, two animal jaws were found in this room. Another large storage jar was found in room 15 with smaller ones, most of them broken. Remains of fire pits were uncovered in this room. Finally, another pair of spherical storage jars were found in room 16, with fragmented ceramics inside. Two brick drainages were located on the floor of room 13. With such features and material culture, it appears that this area must have been a storage and service area.

Whether one or two units, the floor plan of this structure and the various architectural features along with the type of artifacts found throughout its rooms suggest a domestic building or a house with a workshop or storage rooms. Because of its proximity to the temples at the top of the tell, this building might have provided services and supplies to the temples and their occupants.

Burials & Mortuary Practices

Moving to mortuary practices at the site, about 25 graves of various sizes and shapes were recovered. Almost all these graves came from the domestic structure located in excavation area 2 on the western side of the tell (Fig. 14). Pit, jar, pot, and oval coffins were found throughout the building, with the latter being more common (Fig. 16). Room 19 presents an interesting case, where 14 graves were found 50 cm below the room's floor (Fig. 17). Among these, a group of 11 graves was placed near the room's northern wall. These were one-size oval coffins with thick walls and rings running around their outer face. They all were coated with bitumen on the inside and sealed with ceramic lids. Unfortunately, the graves were found empty of their inhabitants



and any grave goods that might have accompanied them (Fig. 18). The large holes in several coffins and the disturbed human remains found nearby suggest that they might have been looted in antiquity (Fig 19). A grave consisting of a large pot covered with a ceramic lid was found near the room's southern wall. It contained two small animal bones and two small teeth, most likely of a snake. In addition, two burials in oval ceramic jars sealed with a lid were located near the room's western wall. One of them was empty, while the other had human bone fragments, probably of a small child, along with a few glass, agate, and lapis lazuli beads. Similar grave types were found in rooms 3, 4, and 18. All but one pit grave was found in the middle of room 4. This was a circular pit where a skull was found along with a ceramic plate and three jars.

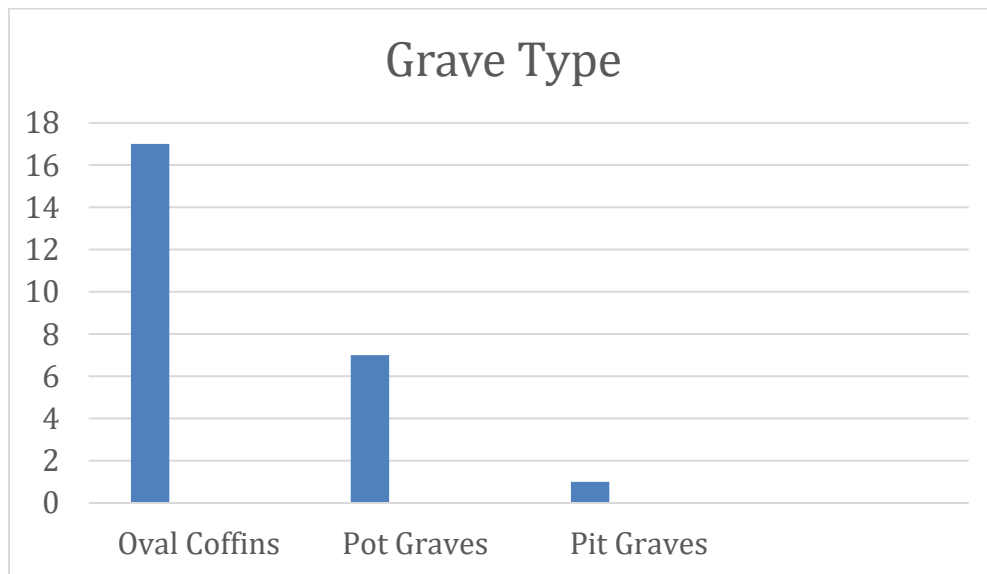


Fig. 16 Burial Type and Number



Fig. 17 Room 19, Domestic Building (unpublished excavation report 2011)





Fig. 18 Oval Coffins, Room 19, Domestic Building (unpublished excavation report 2011)



Fig. 19 Jar Burials, Domestic Building (unpublished excavation report 2011)

It appears that three grave types were used at Tell Abu Thahab, the oval coffins sealed with ceramic lids and coated with bitumen, pot and jar burials, and pit burials. More common were the first two types. The grave types at Tell Abu Thahab confirm the typical Mesopotamian grave types known in the south.⁶ The simplest form of burial, the inhumation of an individual in a simple earth pit, can be found in all periods of Mesopotamian history. Burial within ceramic containers was always popular. In many cases, these jars were simple household vessels that were used as graves. Because of their small size, infants were almost exclusively buried in regular household jars. Ceramic sarcophagi, generally in a bathtub shape with an oval outline and straight or sloping sides, covered with a ceramic or wooden lid, are attested from the Early Dynastic period onward (Potts, 1997). The form of these graves remained largely the same until the second millennium, when sarcophagi with one straight and one curved end appeared. Unfortunately, not enough human remains were recovered to provide insights into deceased age,

⁶ Strommenger E. 1964, "Grabformen in Babylon." *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 3: 157- 173.; Strommenger, E. 1971, "Grabbeigabe (I. Irak und Iran)." *RLA* 3: 605- 609.



body treatment, or rituals at burial time. In several cases, grave goods were looted, and what remains were limited to beads and ceramics, suggesting typical burial offerings found in burials in Mesopotamia.

Conclusion

Although part of an extensive salvage excavation campaign launched by the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage in the Marshlands before they were reflooded in 2013 and after, Tell Abu Thahab provides insights into the social and economic life in southern Mesopotamia during the late second millennium BC. The architectural remains suggest that the site was a large settlement with temples and possibly other public buildings during the Old Babylonian period. The two large buildings in Area One with their elaborate decoration and floor plans and the cuneiform tablets suggest the presence of religious elites occupying extensive facilities. On the other hand, the domestic units in the lower Area Two indicate living quarters and domestic functions. The various ovens, many ceramics, and the drains in excavation Area Two suggest service/storage/ or production areas that might have supplied the needs of the temples at the top. All the burials found on the site were recovered in this building supports its domestic and informal nature.

Such a large Old Babylonian settlement located this deep in southern Mesopotamia is significant because it provides evidence of the spread of urbanism and literate elites beyond the main Babylonian cities. Indeed, this region must have supported a complex urban lifestyle through agriculture and trade with neighboring areas, including Elam, Arabia, and the Arab Gulf. It also suggests that the gulf shoreline was further south during this period, contributing to the unsettled discussion of the gulf borders.

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