CORRELATES OF COMPLEXITY

ESSAYS IN ARCHAEOLOGY AND ASSYRIOLOGY DEDICATED TO DIEDERIK J.W. MEIJER IN HONOUR OF HIS 65TH BIRTHDAY

Edited by Bleda S. Düring, Arne Wossink, and Peter M.M.G. Akkermans

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J.G. DERCKSEN, J. EIDEM, K. van der TOORN et K.R. VEENHOF

CXVI

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Diederik J.W. Meijer at work in Iraq. Photograph by Victor Klinkenberg.

Cover: Tell Hammam et-Turkman (Syria) seen from the south. Photograph by Ben Claasz Coockson.

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Urbanism in the Assyrian Homeland

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Freie Universität Berlin

This small contribution is dedicated to my colleague and friend Diederik Meijer who has so eloquently discussed many problems of the Ancient Near East. I will argue that Assyrian urbanism was not a haphazard act to satisfy the demands of royal glory and luxury but rather a deliberate and planned measure to create an urban landscape mirroring the social reality.

The nature of Assyrian urbanism

Assyrian urbanism consists of a phenomenon that has often been described by scholars and it might even be labelled a tradition: their kings created *administrative and residential capital cities* next to the germ cell of Assyria, the capital of Assur (*fig*. 11.1). This began chronologically with the implantation of Shubat Enlil by king Shamshi Adad I (1808-1776 BC) on Shekhna, modern Tell Leilan, today in NE Syria, and was followed by the foundation of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta by king Tukulti Ninurta I (1243-1207 BC) on virgin soil opposite Assur. It continued by the re-foundation of Kalhu by Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BC) on the mound of Nimrud, the erection of Dur-Sharrukin by Sargon II (721-705 BC) on virgin soil again, and the re-foundation of Ninua on the site of Nineveh by Sennacherib (704-681 BC), all of them situated east of the Tigris. Nineveh became the second largest city of Ancient Near Eastern history. With an extension of 750 hectares it was surpassed only by the 'biblical' city of Babylon which had an area of 800 hectares *intra muros*. By contrast, the capital Assur, remained small, in spite of an enlargement ('Neustadt'), and covered only about 70 hectares (*fig*. 11.1). While Assur doubtlessly constituted the religious focal point of the Empire, the administrative and residential capital cities have been explained as expressing the king's 'concept of royalty' (Oates 1972: 804). Beyond this ideology it has always been maintained that the administrative and residential capital cities mainly served the demand for luxury and prestige of the Assyrian kings.

While these historical facts and their interpretation are not the topic under consideration here they certainly cover only one side of the coin. Obviously the needs for more urban space grew with the permanent enlargement of the Empire together with the growing demands of administration and of demonstration of power. The flip side of this is that these capital cities were the pyramid peaks of a provincial system and of a centralized administration. The provincial system is known from cuneiform sources (Radner 2006-2008) but the archaeological evidence so far has not demonstrated what a provincial system consisted of and how it functioned. Doubtlessly, Assyrian urbanism was based on this provincial system but little work has been done to explain what made it so successful for more than seven hundred years, beginning ca. 1300 BC during the Middle-Assyrian Period and not ending with the collapse of the Neo-Assyrian administrative and residential capital cities in 612 BC. As the archaeological record of the provincial centre of Dur-Katlimmu has demonstrated meanwhile the Assyrian provincial system continued to

function under Late Babylonian sovereignty as it did before under Assyrian rule until the Babylonian empire was in turn taken over by the Achaemenids (Kühne 2006-2008).

Urbanism in the Assyrian homeland

The focus of this paper will be the 'Assyrian homeland' (Postgate 1995). It is geographically defined by the Jazira: the Upper-Mesopotamian steppe between Euphrates and Tigris, plus the East Tigris lands. Assur 'lies open on the west to the Jazira and its inhabitants' (Oates 1972: 800) while the other administrative and residential capital cities, starting chronologically with Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, are situated on the east bank of the Tigris. The landscape of the Jazira is not as smooth as it is often described but rather bumpy due to hilly regions, volcanic areas, deeply cut river and wadi valleys, numerous watersheds, and prominent mid sized mountain ridges. It currently receives between 400 and 100 mm rainfall annually, and this was probably similar in Assyrian times. It has been maintained that dry farming was the predominant form of the agriculture with irrigation only playing a marginal role (Oates 1972: 799; Garfinkel 2007: 53-4). However, it should be emphasised that numerous studies have demonstrated that rainfall agriculture within the 200 to 400 mm isohyets is risky and does not guarantee a good harvest unless supported by irrigation! By contrast, irrigation must be considered a necessity for the Assyrian economy, subsistence, and society (Bagg 2000), and the idea of Assyrian illiteracy on hydraulic technology seems to be one of the prejudices on the Assyrians that keeps being reiterated (Garfinkel 2007: 54).

The hinterland of the Assyrian administrative and residential capital cities is the steppe east and west of the Tigris. For historical reasons but also because of the archaeological record this paper focuses on the west: that is on the Jazira. Only by gaining territorial control over this region – extending roughly 400 km to the west, as the crow flies – did it become conceivable politically and military to expand further, beyond the Euphrates and towards the Mediterranean coast. The term 'steppe', however, not 'rural', was the antithesis to the term 'urban' as revealed in Assyrian as well as Babylonian cuneiform literature and poetry (von Soden 1979: 39). It was the metaphor for wilderness and chaos. To 'tame' or to cultivate the steppe was a major undertaking that needed more than just a political motivation of power – it needed a vocation that had to be embedded in an ideology. To settle down the pastoral nomads of the steppe implied much more than a simple process of sedentarization, it meant the transformation of a space of wilderness and chaos, i.e. the steppe, to an urban space of culture and normativity, a process which has not yet been addressed in research and is therefore poorly understood at present.

The transformation of the steppe

From the more recent archaeological record it seems that the Assyrians embarked on the transformation of the steppe at the latest by the beginning of the 13th century BC as indicated by the foundation of the provincial centre of Dur-Katlimmu most probably by king Salmaneser I who is well known as the founder of many cities (Kühne 2006-2008: 546; 2010: 115)[1]. This foundation has been considered as part of the Assyrian effort to restructure the occupation along the Lower Habur and to install a first provincial administration (Kühne 2010: 118, fig. 02). Salmaneser I and his successor Tukulti-Ninurta

[1] It should be remembered that it was this king who founded the city of Kalhu.

I seem to have invested heavily in the Lower Habur region: it is quite obvious from both the archaeological evidence and a Middle-Assyrian letter found at Dur-Katlimmu that a regional canal existed over a distance of some 150 kilometres that ended at Dur-Katlimmu (Ergenzinger, Kühne 1991: 186; Cancik-Kirschbaum 1996: 132; Kühne 2010: 118; Pucci 2010). On the basis of material culture it is beyond doubt that Dur-Katlimmu stood in close contact with the single Middle-Assyrian site of Tell Umm Aqrebe in the Wadi Ajij region (Pfälzner 1993) some 40 kilometres east of Dur-Katlimmu which covered an area of 15 hectares. This site indicates a successful penetration of the steppe by the 13th century BC as well as an initial effort of local cultivation and should be interpreted as a road station on a route to Assur which in the seventh century BC became part of the Neo-Assyrian king's road system (*harran sharri*).

The regional archaeological as well as cuneiform evidence from the Lower Habur very strongly suggests a continuation during the so called 'dark age' of the 12th to the 10th century BC in spite of the weakness of the central Assyrian court. The well known local dynasty of Tell Ajaja / Shadikanni documented in the cylinder of Bel-ersh, and the newly discovered local dynasty of Tell Taban / *Tabete* and Tell Bderi / *Dur-Ashur-ketti-leshir* doubtlessly demonstrate that these local potentates considered themselves nevertheless vassals of Assyria. Not only did the Middle-Assyrian Empire not vanish like the Hittite or the Kassite ones during the events at the beginning of the 12th century but it rather continued to be a regional power controlling the eastern Jazira and it generated the Neo-Assyrian dynasty without interruption. So the regional evidence of the Lower Habur proves that there is no 'dark age' in the history of Assyria which should put an end to this scholarly discourse.

Urbanism in the Jazira in the Neo-Assyrian period

During the Neo-Assyrian Empire it is obvious that the Assyrians had succeeded in gaining territorial control over the Jazira. They did not obtain this goal without another major effort which is well documented in the erased but still legible part of the inscription on the stele of Adad-Nirari III (805-783 BC) from Tell Rimah (*fig*. 11.2). The inscription is unique in describing the conceptualization and functioning of a settlement system which by and large follows the principles of Christaller (Christaller 1933[1968²]). In a recent study (Kühne 2010) I have applied the statement of the inscription (in the translation by Grayson 1996) about Dur-Katlimmu and its 33 villages on the archaeological record of the Ajij survey (Bernbeck ed. 1993) which produced 31 sites with Neo-Assyrian occupation and deduced a settlement system from it (*fig*. 11.3).

The evidence demonstrates as *pars pro toto* (Kühne 2010: 126) that every province of the empire was strictly organised according to a settlement hierarchy, the peak of which was the active administrative and residential capital city. In western thought it probably would be assumed that it should have been easier to introduce and enforce this system in a region which still had to be cultivated, i.e. the steppe, than in conquered regions with a strong cultural tradition. But the Jazira was inhabited by nomads and this social group had its own rules and habits which they will defend when necessary. To transform the space of wilderness of the Jazira to a space of culture according to Assyrian ideas was by no means easier than transforming cultivated regions. All these transformations seem to have occurred along the same lines: once the region had become an Assyrian province a centre was founded mirroring – where ever possible – the topographical layout of the

administrative and residential capital city with the citadel situated in the southwest corner and a palace of an Assyrian ground plan therein.

It seems that Dur-Katlimmu was deliberately prepared for the function it was supposed to fulfil within the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The occupation ground within the walls was extended by the foundation of the Lower Town II to about 60 hectares during the 10th to 9th centuries BC. From there on the Lower Town II is continuously occupied over a period of roughly 400 years, surviving the collapse of the Assyrian Empire into the dawn of the Achaemenide Empire. A stratigraphic sequence is well established and can be synchronised with absolute dates provided by cuneiform texts that were discovered in stratified deposits which furnish a reliable historical framework (Kühne 2006-2008; Kühne, Radner 2008; Radner 2002).

The shape of the city became that of a rectangle with the citadel situated in the southwest corner (*fig*. 11.4). Either during the reign of Adad-Nirari III (805-783 BC) or shortly thereafter, probably during the governorship of Nergal-eresh (803-775 BC), a complete reorientation and rebuilding of the Lower Town II occurred which was to form the townscape of the 8th to 6th centuries BC.

The excavated architecture of that period consists of a spacious palatial residence in the North East Corner covering an area of 3800 m² which incorporates a *Bit Hilani* like structure. Two more mansions in the northwest and in the west are separated by an open area from which a street leads via an area of workshops to another open area in the south (*fig*. 11.5). Contemporary with this ensemble are the so called 'Neo-Assyrian residences' in the Central Lower Town II. This complex consists of four 'houses' with a total area of 3500 m² (Kühne 2006-2008: 548). In the southern courtyard of House 1 remains of a garden were discovered (Kühne 2006). East of the 'Neo-Assyrian residences' the so called 'Red House' was excavated, a mansion covering an area of 5400 m² (Kühne 2006-2008: 549). The building was superimposed on the eastern part of house 4 of the 'residences' which were reused with some architectural and functional changes. On the ground of cuneiform evidence the utilization of the 'Red House' dates to the Post-Assyrian period.

These large scale excavations revealed that the Lower Town II was structured generously by large buildings, streets, and open spaces which served public as well as residential purposes of expensive tastes. This impression is reconfirmed by the plan of the geophysical survey conducted in 1999 to 2003[2] (*fig*. 11.6).[3] It demonstrated that the urban layout of the Lower Town II was dominated by large buildings of the type already excavated.

The textual evidence (Radner 2002) clearly indicates that the social upper class was functioning and residing in the Lower Town II. It consisted of high ranking officials of the central government headed by the 'confident' of the king and their personnel, a branch of the Assyrian intelligence service, and officers of elite charioteer troops (Radner 2002: 9-14). In addition provincial officials are recorded. Some archaeological evidence points to industrial workshops. However, no buildings were found which could be interpreted as residential quarters of ordinary people.

[2] In cooperation with the company Eastern Atlas.
[3] By courtesy of the company Eastern Atlas.

Conclusion

In conclusion it may be stated that the 'tradition' of the Assyrians to create *administrative and residential capital cities* certainly prompted an urbanisation process of the homeland by upgrading the existing central places, founding new ones, and creating settlement systems (Postgate 1974: 237-238; Kühne 1994; 2010). Mark van de Mieroop (1997: 260) has aptly stated: 'In Assyria the political powers created the cities; in Babylonia the cities created political power.' Indeed, the main difference between the urban landscapes of Assyria and Babylonia seems to be that the city states of Sumer were a traditional element of the state formation of Mesopotamia. However, had the Assyrian homeland in pre-Assyrian times not been urbanized? Should we not visualize the large and powerful cities of the Early Bronze Age Jazira as equal partners in the historical achievements of southern Mesopotamia? In any case, this does not minimize the merit of the Assyrians in transforming the steppe of their homeland into an urban landscape with a strict hierarchical order and culminating in the Neo-Assyrian achievement. In the *longue durée* of history only the Assyrians succeeded in fully incorporating the Jazira into their Empire.

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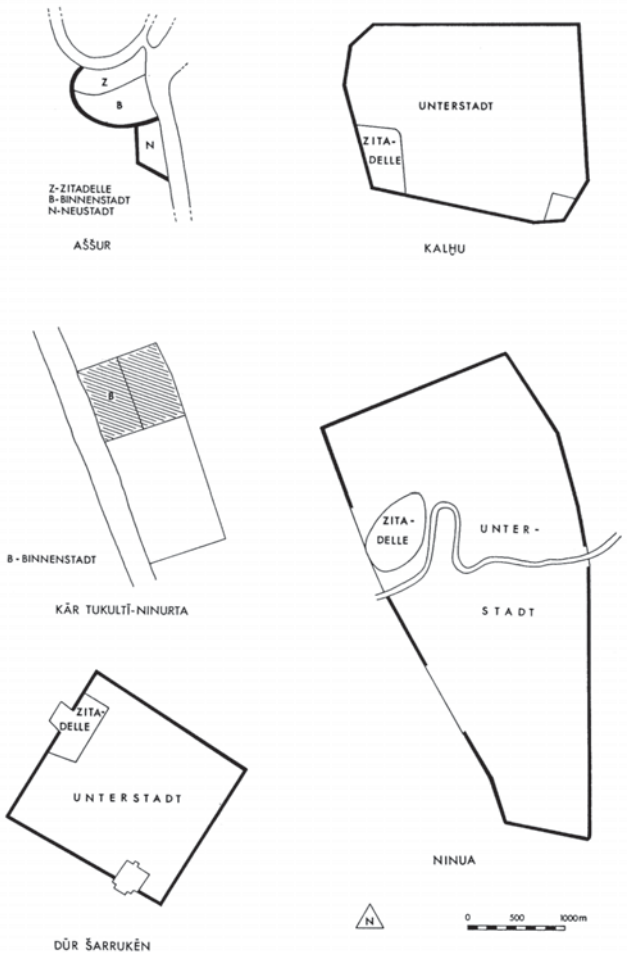

Fig. 11.1: Assyrian Capitals and Royal Residences (Kühne 1994: fig. 2).

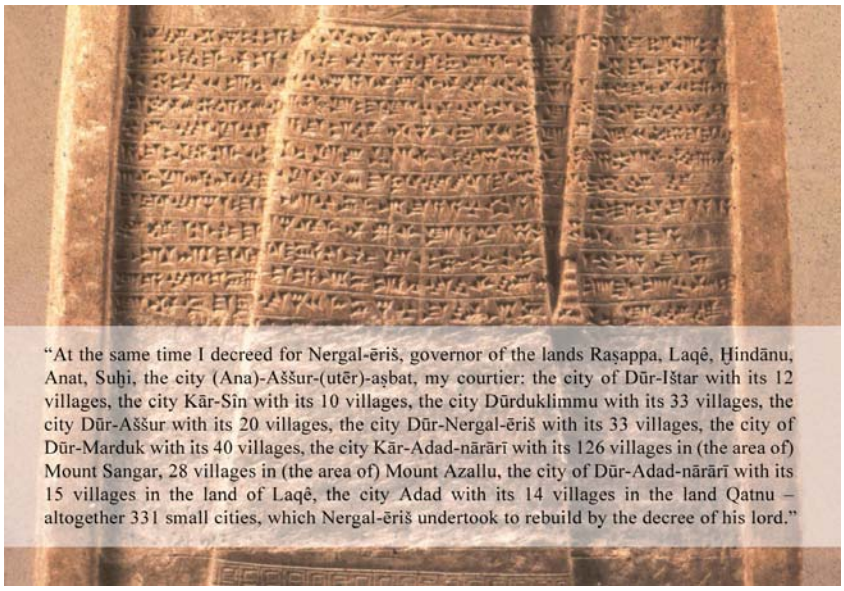

Fig. 11.2: Stele of Adad-Nirari III of Tell Rimah (photo: Seton-Williams 1981: fig. 109; inscription: Grayson 1996).

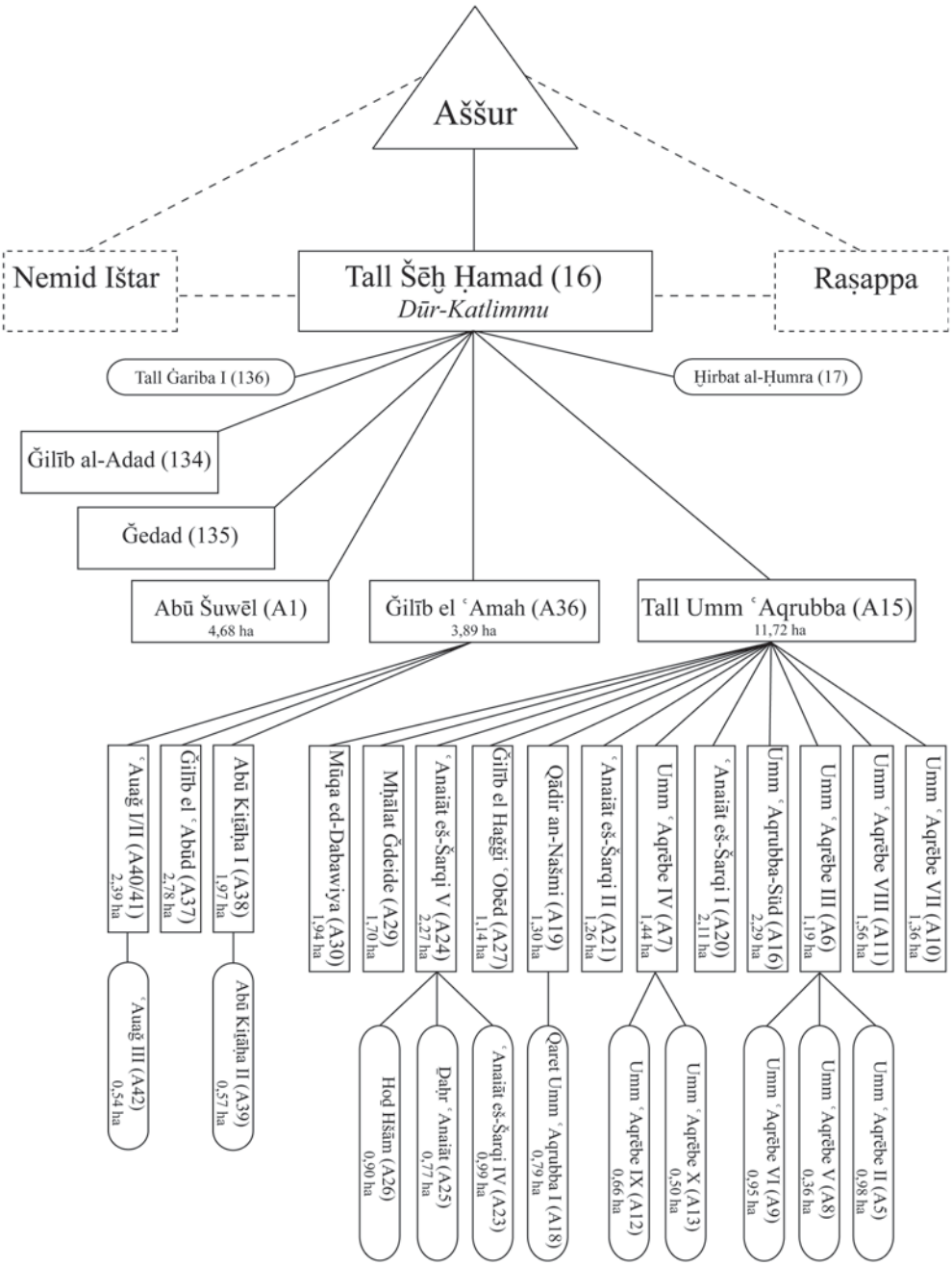

Fig. 11.3: Structure of five tiered settlement system of the capital Assur.

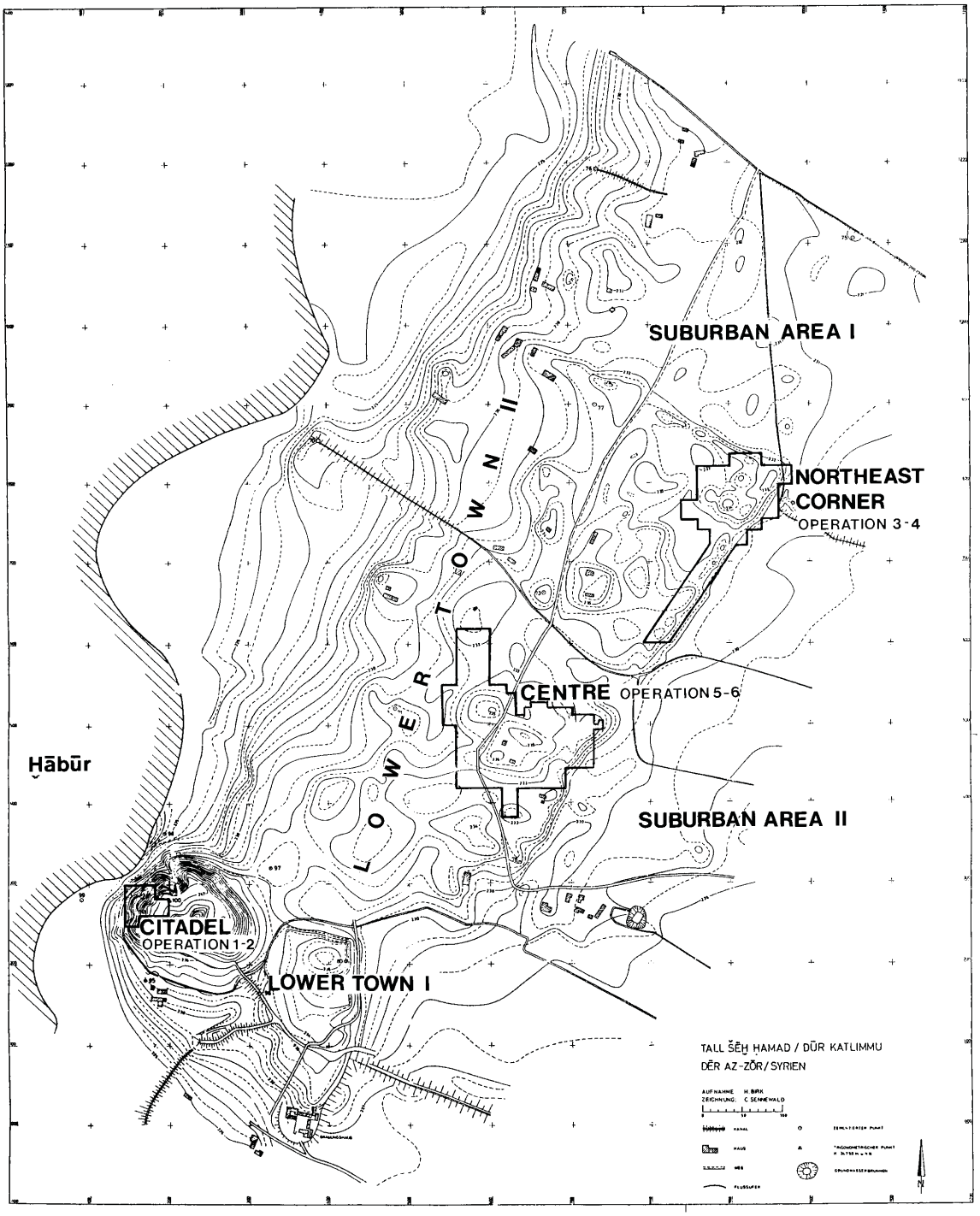

Fig. 11.4: Topographic map of Tell Sheikh Hamad and excavation sectors.

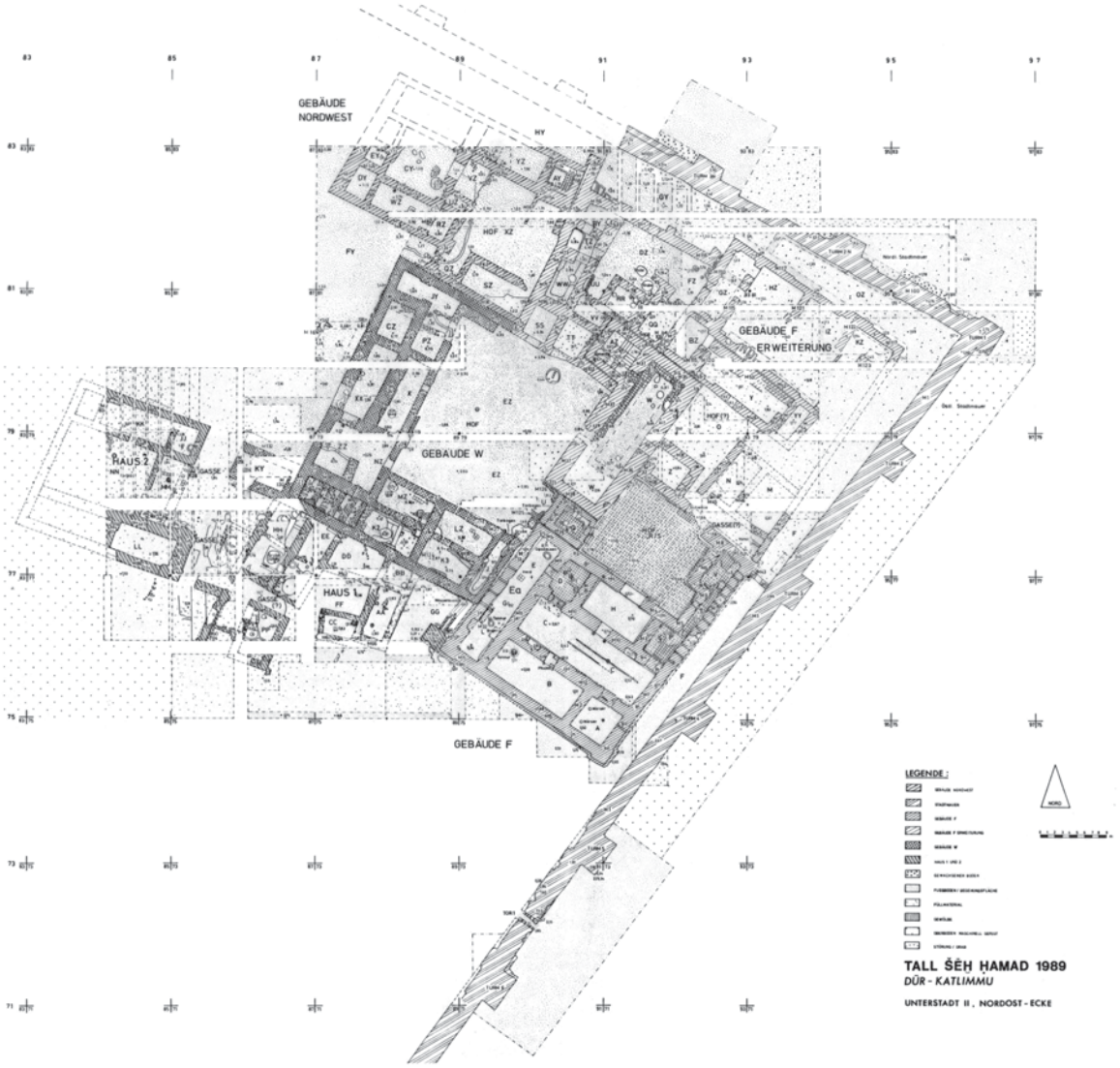

Fig. 11.5: Tell Sheikh Hamad Lower Town II: Excavation sector 'north east corner'; urban structure 8th-7th centuries BC.

Fig. 11.6: Tell Sheikh Hamad geophysical prospection 1999-2003
(by courtesy: C. Meyer,Eastern Atlas).