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The “Red House” of the Assyrian Provincial Center of Dur-Katlimmu

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One of the more crucial problems of ancient Near Eastern history and archaeology is the end of the Assyrian empire and the time immediately following it. For reasons not to be discussed here, the order of the eponyms of the final 35 years of the Assyrian empire still remains to be established.¹ Thus, historians are speaking of the “post canonical” period. The time following the collapse of the Assyrian empire is labelled the “Post-Assyrian” period by both, historians as well as archaeologists, thereby expressing best the uncomfot and uncertainty by which both feel confronted in interpreting historical as well as archaeological data.

The “*communis opinio*” found in many historical works is that the Assyrians virtually ceased to exist² because there was no further written or material evidence of them.³ On the other hand, the chronicles of the Babylonian king Nabopolassar⁴ leave it open to what extent “Assyria proper” was effected by his raids and fail to inform us about the intensity of his territorial control. Thus, we have a broad historical outline but are left guessing as to what extent exactly the new Babylonian sovereigns were administrating this vast empire which they inherited from the Assyrians, not to speak of the Medes who took over the northern part.

More recently, the site of Tell Sheikh Hamad (Fig. 1), the Assyrian provincial center of Dur-Katlimmu, has contributed new data to these problems. Situated at the south-central edge of “Assyria proper”,⁵ Dur-Katlimmu functioned as an administrative center ever since the Middle-

¹ A. Millard, *The Eponyms of the Assyrian Empire 910-612. State Archives of Assyria Studies Vol. II*, Helsinki 1994 with a contribution by R. Whiting, The Post-Canonical and Extra-Canonical Eponyms, pp. 72-78.

² R. Labat in E. Cassin, J. Bottéro, J. Vercoutter (eds.), *Die Altorientalischen Reiche III. Fischer Weltgeschichte Bd. 4*, Frankfurt a.M. 1967, p. 98; N. Postgate, *The First Empires*, Oxford 1977, pp. 133-134: “The fall of the Assyrian empire was hardly sudden, but its total disappearance as a political entity must have been a trifle unexpected. ... whereas Assyria vanishes without trace”; K. Kessler in B. Hrouda, *Der Alte Orient*, Gütersloh 1991, p. 150.

³ S. Dalley, Niniveh after 612 BC. *Altorientalische Forschungen* 20, 1993, pp. 134-147; A. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East II*, London/New York 1995, p. 545.

⁴ A.K. Grayson, Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles. *Texts from Cuneiform Sources Vol V*, 1975, pp. 87-98; more recently: N. Na’aman, Chronology and History in the Late Assyrian Empire (631-619 B.C.). *ZA* 81, 1991, pp. 243-267.

⁵ J.N. Postgate, The Land of Assur and the Yoke of Assur. *World Archaeology* 23, 1992, pp. 251-252.

Assyrian period.⁶ During the eighth century B.C. the settlement ground was enlarged by a 35 hectare big Lower Town II (Fig. 1). As the archaeological evidence indicates after 15 seasons of excavation in the Lower Town II, this enlargement served the grown administrative needs and not the domestic purposes of the population.⁷ In addition, some vague indications had pointed to a military function since the beginning of the excavation,⁸ but only texts excavated in 1997 leave no doubt that Dur-Katlimmu served as a garrison in Neo-Assyrian times.⁹

Moreover, the city of Dur-Katlimmu always seems to have been of some special significance to the Assyrian kings, ever since its foundation by Shalmaneser I. in the 13th cent. B.C. This notion, which has been expressed many times,¹⁰ is now strengthened by a recent study of K. Radner.¹¹ For this but also for strategic reasons, the place should have attracted the attention of Nabopolassar after he had conquered Niniveh in 612 B.C. and is said to have raided the province of Rašappa. It must have been of importance to him to gain control over the largest administrative center of the Lower Habur and of the southern steppe region of the Jezireh which was connected with the Assyrian king's road, the harran šarri, especially since he had had to crush an upheaval in Suhu the year before.¹²

This historical evaluation has been suggested ever since the somewhat sensational discovery of four unique tablets in a room which subsequently turned out to be the northwestern corner-room of what later became labeled the "Red House". Since the circumstances of its discovery and the tablets themselves are published elsewhere¹³ it may suffice here to summarize the evidence briefly.

The excavation area in the central Lower Town II of Tell Sheikh Hamad/Dur-Katlimmu consists of two parts (Fig. 1, operation 5 and 6). Most of what was later labelled the "Neo-Assyrian Residences" was excavated between 1984 and 1987. After a break of five years during which the work was concentrated on the "Northeast Corner" of the Lower Town II, excavation was resumed in 1992 with one of the aims being to investigate the continuation of this complex to the east. What was thought to be an extension turned out to be a new building which had been superimposed on the eastern part of the "Neo-Assyrian Residences" which had been destroyed by fire. The western part of them was reused by the inhabitants of the new building which came to be labeled the "Red House" because the walls in some of the rooms of the western wing were tinted

⁶ H. Kühne, Tall Šeh Hamad - The Assyrian City of Dur-Katlimmu: A Historic-Geographical Approach. *Essays on Ancient Anatolia in the Second Millennium B.C. Bulletin of the Middle Eastern Culture Center in Japan* 10, 1998, pp. 280-307.

⁷ See *Id.*, note 6, p. 287.

⁸ H. Kühne, Tall Šeh Hamad/Dur-Katlimmu, die Wiederentdeckung einer mittellassyrischen Stadt. *DAM* 1, 1983, p. 159.

⁹ The Neo-Assyrian cuneiform texts will be published by K. Radner.

¹⁰ See note 6.

¹¹ K. Radner, Der Gott Salmānu ("Šulmanu") und seine Beziehung zur Stadt Dur-Katlimmu. *Welt des Orients* 29, 1998, pp. 33-51.

¹² W. Röllig, Zur Historischen Einordnung der Texte. *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin Vol. VII*, 1993, pp. 129-132.

¹³ H. Kühne et al., Vier Spätbabylonische Tontafeln aus Tall Šeh Hamad, Ost-Syrien. *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin Vol. VII*, 1993, pp. 75-150.

red. In many other rooms, the base of the walls was painted black and decorated with a step design in the corners while the upper part of the walls was either left in the yellowish white color of the clay plaster or tinted red. In rare instances, the higher parts of the walls were decorated with polychrome floral motifs like a rosette.

As mentioned above, the tablets were found on the floor of the northwest cornerroom XX of the "Red House" (Fig. 2). They are contracts about the sale of real estate.¹⁴ Their uniqueness is emphasized by the fact that they are written in Assyrian language, on an Assyrian form of administration, and by an Assyrian scribe, but they are dated to the years two and five of the reign of the Babylonian king Nebukadnezar II, that is the years 602 and 599 B.C. This indicates that the "Red House" was used during this period, that is the Post-Assyrian period, the time during which the Assyrians were extinct according to many scholars, but here they are attested even as active officers of the Babylonian sovereign.

Since the sealed inventory of the nearest destroyed room RR¹⁵ of the "Neo-Assyrian Residences" was Late-Assyrian by type and ware it could imply that the destruction was brought about by the king Nabopolassar on the occasion of his raid of the province of Rašappa in the year 612 B.C. If this would be accepted, the construction period of the "Red House" would be narrowed down to the years between 612 and 602 B.C., 602 being the *terminus ante quem*, anyway. In broader terms, the destruction of part of the "Neo-Assyrian Residences" and the construction of the "Red House" were events which took place near the close of the Assyrian empire or immediately after it.

By the time of the beginning of the reign of Nebukadnezar II the Neo-Babylonians had seized control over Dur-Katlimmu. But they left the Assyrian officials on their posts and let them handle their affairs as usual even with the administrative forms they were used to. A preliminary prosopographic study by K. Radner has indeed demonstrated that Assyrian families went on living and working in Dur-Katlimmu serving the Neo-Babylonian sovereign now. Archaeologically and culturally this in turn implies that one would expect to find a mixture of Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian elements in the "Red House" and this seems to be indeed what the evidence is.

The following is a preliminary analysis of the architectural plan (Fig. 2) and some special features of the "Red House". The building as it was exposed until 1997 covers an area of approximately 6.000 square meters. It is structured in three wings, which are, according to the progress of the excavation:

- a western wing, centered by courtyard OY,
- an eastern wing, arranged around courtyard LY, and
- a northern wing, centered by courtyard DW.

¹⁴ See *Idd.*, note 13.

¹⁵ Room RR is not indicated on the plan Fig. 2 because it was not reused during the period of the "Red House" but rather sealed by a passage which separated the "Red House" from the former "Neo-Assyrian Residences". Access from the passage to the "Neo-Assyrian Residences" was now provided through a door which lead to room QQ.

The excavation of the northern wing is as yet incomplete. Since the excavation of the rooms DY, NZ, PY, CY MY, MX, and NX in 1993 and 1994 it was believed that they would not belong to the "Red House" because they were clearly separated from the rooms of both, the western as well as the eastern wing. But after excavation of the large reception hall CW in 1995¹⁶ it was implied that

- another courtyard was to be expected north of it,
- that the main entrance of the whole building had to be looked for in the north since it had not been found in either one of the other wings, and
- that the accessibility of both of the other wings was only possible from the north via hall CW. This provided an important functional significance for hall CW which will be dealt with below.

During the season of 1997 it was first discovered that the anticipation of another courtyard north of hall CW was confirmed. More important, however, was another result: hidden under the balks had been two doors, one connecting the room DY with room MY and the second giving access from room MY to the courtyard DW. Thus, it was possible to state:

- The above enumerated rooms were indeed belonging to the "Red House". They were limiting the new courtyard DW to the west, and
- The large entrance leading from the open space OX to room DY was to be considered most probably the main entrance of the whole building. Room DY served as a vestibule.

The excavation of the rooms on the eastern flank of courtyard DW, especially room RV, seemed to offer an alternative to the entrance situation in the west at the beginning but resulted in an outlet for the drainage of the courtyard. Since they are not fully excavated, yet, there will be no comment on them. It is important to mention though that the northeastern corner room WV was discovered and partly excavated. In addition, the neighboring room TV was excavated so that it became possible to reconstruct the northern flank of the "Red House" as a straight line. Virtually on the last day of excavation, four cuneiform tablets and five Aramaic inscribed docketts were discovered in room WV. Three of the cuneiform tablets mention a person by the name of Rahimi-ili who was the owner of a chariot. With this high military rank present in Dur-Katlimmu, there seems to be no doubt any more that Dur-Katlimmu was a garrison town (see above).

A visitor entering the building via the vestibule DY had to make a turn of 100 degrees to pass through the room MY to enter the courtyard DW to head towards the reception hall CW. In the axis of the vestibule DY there is another room NZ which contained some special architectural features. The entrance lead towards an axis consisting of a wall which divides the room in two aisles. Both of them were vaulted with the vault still intact in the southwest corner. It seems that the vaulted aisles were rather low and accessible from the vestibule DY via arched doorways left and right of the entrance but on a lower level. Similar constructions were discovered in two

¹⁶ See the plan published in H. Kühne, note 6, p. 305, fig. 13.

more rooms, room PY and room KV. While the situation of room KV is very similar to room NZ except that it does not have a normal entrance, room PY is different. It is accessible from the courtyard DW via a small room YZ. The peak of the arched doorway between room YZ and room PY is about one meter high. Entering the vaulted aisles of room PY it was possible to stand upright. The two aisles were connected by an arched doorway in the central wall. While there are no indications of a superstructure in rooms NZ and KV it is certain that room PY had an upper story which was accessible via a staircase in room EY south of PY. It consisted of 16 well preserved steps which were paved with gypsum plaster. The construction of the staircase in relation to the room arrangement does not allow for any other solution. There can be little doubt that these special architectural features in rooms NZ, KV and PY indicate a function of storage most probably of perishable goods. The vaulting technique of room PY is an architectural and technological innovation which will be discussed elsewhere.

Returning to the reception hall CW it becomes obvious by studying the plan (Fig. 2) that this hall is closing off both of the other wings. The hall itself is the largest room of the whole building measuring 21 by 6 meters. Its entrance from the courtyard DW was flanked by two peculiar installations, consisting of "loop stones" which were founded in the pavement of the courtyard. The only parallel known to me is from the Sin temple at Khorsabad;¹⁷ its function is as yet undetermined. The only installation left within the hall is a niche near the southwestern corner of the room. Beside the size there is one more feature which allows a closer allocation of the hall, its relation to the staircase room IW which could be reached by passing through room PX which apparently served mainly as a distribution unit. The association which comes to mind by looking at this arrangement is obvious: there is a vague relationship with the Assyrian throne room scheme but there are more departures from that rule than connections.

Passing through hall CW and room PX one was gaining access to the eastern wing of the building by entering courtyard LY. To the south, this courtyard was closed off by a kind of "propylon" consisting of the rooms UW and QW. The reason for this arrangement seems to be clear: the complete southern part of the eastern wing is one single unit centered by a separate courtyard EW. At its western end, a wide entrance gave access to room YX in which a staircase was leading up to a second floor or to the roof. The function of the neighboring rooms FW, UX, and BW was quite clearly that of storage; especially room FW was filled up with broken jars which must have been positioned originally around the central basin.

¹⁷ G. Loud, *Khorsabad I* (= *OIP* 38), Chicago 1936, figs. 98 and 102.

The reception hall of this unit is room TX, containing the characteristic features of this function, two recesses or niches in its northern wall, a fire place constructed of bricks, and - exceptionally - a threshold of stone slabs¹⁸ which were out of place and had suffered extremely under the heavy fire which had destroyed the whole hall. According to these features, room HW in the east of courtyard EW would have to be considered a reception room also, but on a much smaller scale. It does not seem to be accidental that both reception rooms (the large one TX via room JW and corridor LW) are connected with the only bathroom of the unit, room KW, which contained a well constructed outlet through the eastern wall. In room JW 31 dockets were excavated in 1995 in context with hundreds of jar sealings, some three hundred of which were seal impressed. A small number of dockets was also found in the corridor LW which besides leading to the bathroom KW gave also access to room PW, the southeastern corner room of the building. This room was filled with sherded jars, two of which were inscribed with ink as well as incised with Phoenician script and language, dating to the sixth century B.C. It also contained a few dockets of the same type as from room JW.

The courtyards EW and LY were both drained towards the east, their channels being united under the floor of room OW to be continued on the outside along the northern front of rooms HW and MW. In the southeast of the courtyard LY a well supplied the inhabitants with fresh water. The distribution function of courtyard LY becomes apparent by looking at the western end of it: here it gave access to the western wing via the staircase room EY which was mentioned above. Passing through room EY one was entering the largest courtyard OY which covers an area of 400 square meters around which the rooms of the western wing are arranged. This access is the only one. Corridor GV in the southeast of the courtyard OY separates the western from the eastern wing and served only as a passage for the drainage of the courtyard OY; it never had been an entrance because its floor was sloping to the center so that it was not passable and its southern end was blocked by a wall of large stones.

Next to the access to the courtyard OY is a unit consisting of a single room VZ and a sector of the courtyard marked by a thin wall. This unit apparently functioned as a kitchen, the sector in the courtyard furnishing several tennurs for baking bread. The northwestern corner of the courtyard is consisting of two room units. The one west of the kitchen VZ encloses the reception hall KZ, room YY, corridor BY, and the bath AY. The following unit consists of the anteroom LZ, the reception hall TT, room RZ in the southeast, and of the rooms PP and XX in the north of hall TT. This second unit attracts attention for several reasons:

- The entrance from the courtyard OY to the anteroom LZ is three meters wide and was covered by a threshold of fired bricks which were paved with plaster.

¹⁸ Very similar ones especially concerning the decoration around the recess of the doorposts were found in Assur, cf. W. Andrae, *Der Anu-Adad-Tempel in Assur* (= *WVDOG* 10), Berlin 1909, p. 76 Abb. 74 or in Khorsabad, cf. G. Loud, *Khorsabad*, p. 92, Fig. 101.

- The passage between the reception hall TT and room RZ is two and a half meters wide and does not furnish a door so that the two rooms, TT and RZ, form a L-shape plan which is not recovered anywhere else in the "Red House".
- Since the rooms PP and XX were used for storage - there is a plastered storage pit in XX which was covered with beams - the whole unit appears to be incomplete since there is no bathroom or kitchen.

Taking into account that the first unit is furnishing a bathroom and that the kitchen is placed separately both units could be interpreted as one complex or the northern complex of the western wing.

This northern complex is opposed by a southern one, again consisting of two units which are connected by a small door. The first unit is arranged around a small separate courtyard WZ which was paved with fired bricks and drained to the west via a channel passing through room TY. At the eastern side of the courtyard WZ are three small cabinets, the central one furnishing a well, the northern IX and the southern LX ones being equipped with tennours. Access from the big courtyard OY to the unit was provided via rooms SZ and the cabinet IX. On the western flank of the small courtyard WZ is the reception room TZ which in turn gives access to the bathroom SS and to another room MZ. The southern side of the courtyard WZ is flanked by the rooms VY and UY which probably functioned as storage and working rooms. Between room UY and the cabinet LX there is a small passage AW which provides a small door to the second unit of this complex. Entering it from here, there was a corridor ZX leading to the second largest reception hall XZ in the north and towards a second corridor RX in the south which lead to the largest bath SX of the whole "Red House". Encircled by the corridors ZX and RX is the room QX which was only accessible from the reception hall XZ and which served as a storage. The hall XZ had two niches in its northern wall and a direct access from the main courtyard OY.

To sum up the evidence, the major points seem to be:

- The "Red House" has a tripartite ground plan, consisting of a northern, a western and an eastern wing. The building is free standing with the exception of two points: at the eastern end of the southern flank, there is one building attached centering around courtyard ZW. There is evidence of a second building on the eastern flank of the "Red House". The excavation of both buildings is not completed yet. The shape of the building is somewhat irregular. Its façades are characterized by recesses in the southern façade and protrudences of rooms along the western and the eastern flanks which come to form a kind of zigzag pattern along the western flank. It should be stressed that there seems to have been no need for the architect to adjust to any space limitations by older building substances except perhaps in case of the two buildings mentioned above and that the whole "Red House" seems to have been designed and constructed in a single act. Therefore the irregularity of the ground plan should be considered a conscious act.

- The main entrance of the building seems to be situated sideways, on the western flank of the northern wing. This position has to be considered an un-Assyrian feature. There were two more miniature entrances from the outside to the building: one situated in the northwest corner of the western wing entering room XX, the other one in the southeast of the eastern wing entering corridor LW from the courtyard ZW.
- The equipment of the reception halls are standardized by three features: The thresholds of the entrances are constructed neatly, the door-posts of the double winged doors were surrounded by relieved rings of pottery, apparently replacing the Assyrian stone slabs; the niches which are always integrated in the oblong walls, and the fire places constructed of fired bricks.
- The water supply and the drainage system of the building are remarkable. There are two wells for fresh water within the building, one in the central cabinet of courtyard WZ, the other in the southeast corner of courtyard LY and at least four bathrooms (AY, SS, SX, KW) probably including toilets, the largest being room SX in the western wing. Their floors are nicely plastered, incorporating in room KW the threshold and the door-post surrounding. The drainage of the bathrooms but also of the courtyards is always neatly constructed. Bathroom SS and courtyard WZ are the only ones drained to the west; the big courtyard of the west wing, OY, is drained to the south/southeast through the passage GW; the drainage channels of the courts LY and EW of the eastern wing are united and lead to the east; court DW of the north wing is drained to the east, through room RV.
- The function of the northern wing of the “Red House” is - even without the completion of excavation - to be called official. The other two wings seem to have served both representational as well as domestic purposes. It will have to be left to an analysis of the equipment and contents of each of the rooms to determine the function of each wing of the “Red House”.
- A fierce conflagration made an end to the “Red House”. Heavy traces of it can be noticed almost in every room, especially in the reception halls. The only larger part to be reoccupied on a higher level is the former room QX, which received a new entrance from the south, some parts of the corridor ZX, room LX, and the well in KX. In the northwest corner of room QX, three Aramaic inscribed *ostraca* were discovered on the floor. According to W. Röllig they should be dated to the 5th century B.C. thus being contemporary with the Achaemenid period.
- Having placed the date of construction of the “Red House” to the very end of the Neo-Assyrian period or more probably to the years immediately following the collapse of this empire, and finding it destroyed and selectively reoccupied during the 5th century B.C., the “Red House” should have been utilized mainly during the 6th century. This date is confirmed by the texts dated to the king Nebukadnezar II mentioned at the beginning of this paper but also by the Phoenician inscriptions found in room PW. It may be speculated that the fierce destruction of the building by fire may be viewed in relation to the overtaking of the supremacy by the Achaemenides.

- The whole occupation ground of the central part of Lower Town II was reused as a necropolis during the later part of the second century B.C. to the third century A.D. Some 700 graves have been registered so far, nearly half of them have been prepared for publication.¹⁹

¹⁹ M. Novák, A. Oettel, C. Witzel, Der Parthisch-Römische Friedhof von Tall Šeh Ḥamad. *Berichte der Ausgrabung Tall Šeh Ḥamad/Dur-Katlimmu Vol 5*, in press.

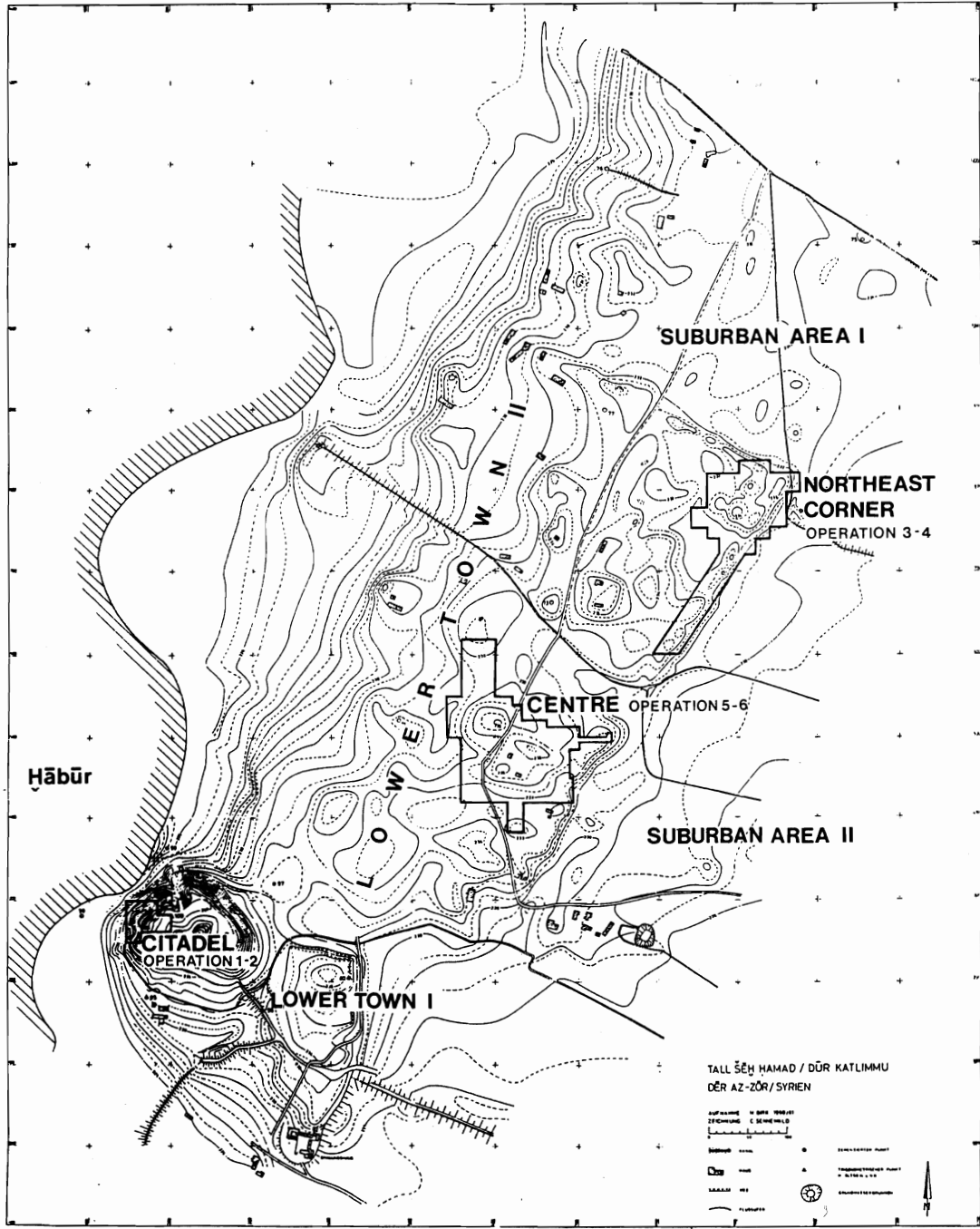


Fig. 1 Topographical map of Tell Sheikh Hamad/Dur-Katlimmu with indication of excavation areas.

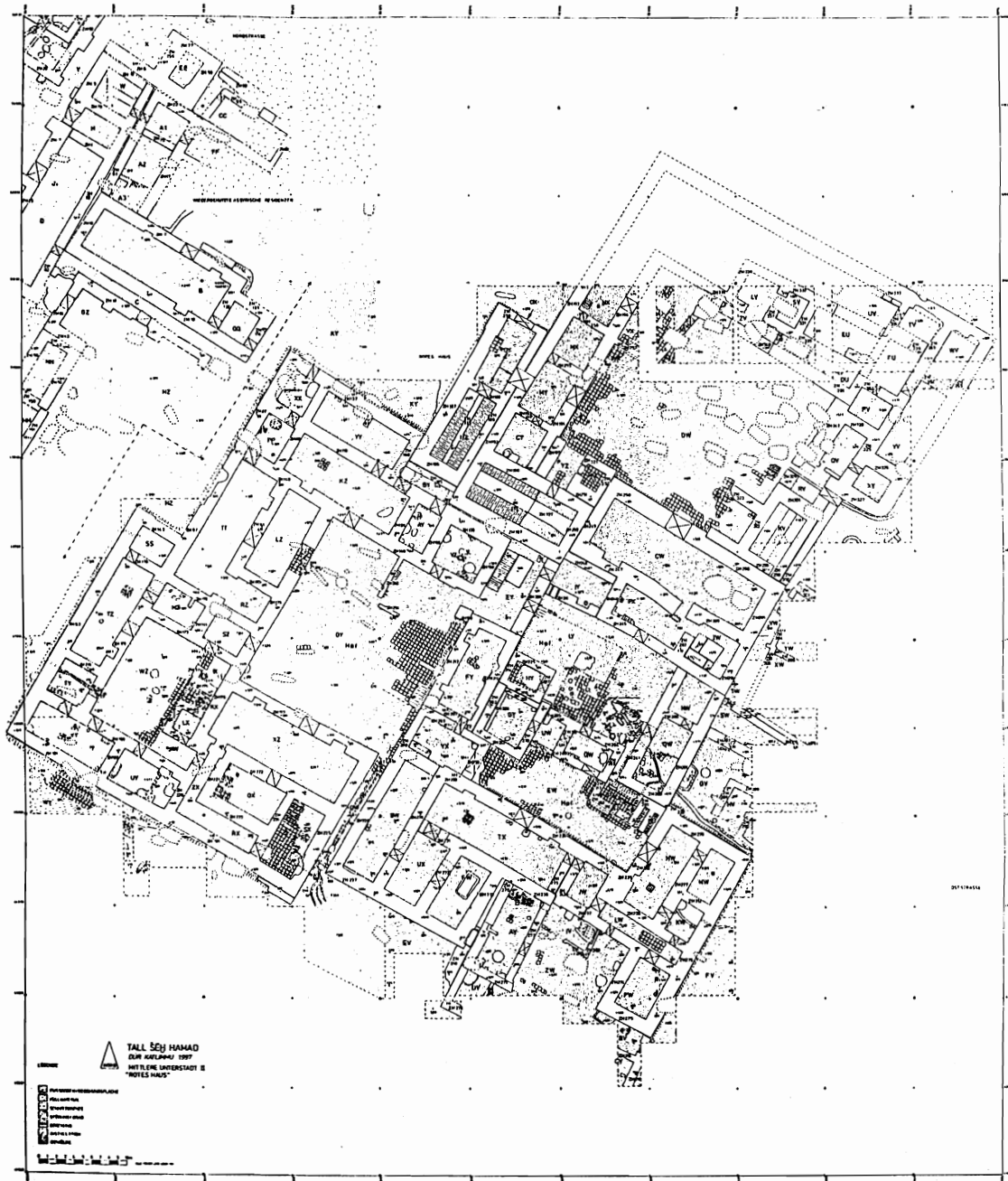


Fig. 2 Lower Town II, operation 6, "Red House", schematic ground plan.