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# 29. Town Planning in Third-Millennium Mesopotamia: A View from the Alluvial Plain

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**ABSTRACT** – *The urban history of Mesopotamia has the distinction of being the world's longest. At least from the fourth millennium onwards, the necessity to organize growing human communities compelled political authorities to intervene in the management of the space available, whether public or private. In some historical circumstances, this process took on spectacular forms, as in the Jezirah and later on in the arid margins of Syria, with the foundation of round cities. But it also occurred earlier and in a very different manner in the lowlands of Mesopotamia. This paper will briefly present some data from various sites (Abu Salabikh, Khafadjah, Tell Asmar), providing comparative evidence that illustrates the cultural diversity of 'Greater Mesopotamia' in the third millennium BC.*

**RÉSUMÉ** – *L'histoire urbaine de la Mésopotamie présente la particularité d'être la plus ancienne au monde. Depuis le quatrième millénaire au moins, la nécessité d'organiser des communautés humaines de plus en plus nombreuses a obligé les autorités politiques à intervenir dans la gestion de l'espace disponible, qu'il soit public ou privé. Dans certaines circonstances historiques, ce processus a pris des formes spectaculaires, comme en Jezirah et, plus tard, dans les marges arides de la Syrie, avec la fondation des villes circulaires. Il a eu lieu également, plus tôt et de manière différente, dans les basses terres de la Mésopotamie. Cet article présente rapidement les données issues de différents sites archéologiques (Abu Salabikh, Khafadjah, Tell Asmar), fournissant des éléments comparatifs qui illustrent la diversité culturelle de la « Grande Mésopotamie » au troisième millénaire av. J.-C.*

Mesopotamia, or more exactly, the alluvial plain of the Tigris and Euphrates which today corresponds to Southern Iraq, was a great evolutionary centre, in the same manner as were Egypt and, later, India, China, Mesoamerica, and Peru. Over a few millennia, relatively simple village communities were transformed into increasingly complex entities, until the appearance of urban societies, and later, states. Of all the known primary centres, Mesopotamia is the oldest, the best documented, and surely the one to which western civilization owes the most. Although it gave rise to the urban phenomenon, and in spite of a long history of field research (since 1842), we observe that little work has been done concerning the 'city'. There is neither a monograph (because not even the definitive publications of the sites can be considered as such) nor a major overview of the subject, and we are far from being able to paint a broad picture of the first cities in history.[1]

This surprising shortcoming, if one considers that Orientalists have been excavating cities for more than a century and a half, has several explanations. First, written texts, of which there were few in the beginning, subsequently become abundant from the second quarter of the third millennium. But they do not tell us about the city, simply because there is no need to recount what

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[1] Although dated and of little help when considering town-planning in the strict sense, Van de Mieroop 1999 should be mentioned as it provides a sound bibliographic basis and has the advantage of balancing the question with epigraphy. May & Steinert 2014 (almost without a plan) give recent references. Margueron 2013 presents a brief overview of many sites (and spreads the Syrian radio-concentric plan all over Mesopotamia: Larsa, Uruk, Ur, Tello, Asmar, etc.).

seems evident. So, these texts are of little help, and are always allusive and often ambiguous, even for the most recent periods. Immediately apparent are the considerable dimensions of Mesopotamian tells: accumulations of several tens of metres, formed by successive cities, the largest of which extend over hundreds of hectares, and in the face of which the means that archaeologists have at their disposal seem ridiculously inadequate. To make matters worse, the constant refining of excavation techniques, despite considerably extending the field of the archaeological investigation, has reduced both the rate and the size of excavations. Few sites have been investigated over a significant portion of their surface area, and the archaeologists, absorbed in preoccupations that seem more urgent to them, have not shown much concern for this aspect, which is judged to be insufficiently documented. Nevertheless, there are techniques that attenuate the necessarily restricted character of modern excavations; large-area excavation and geophysical survey, among others, are used more and more commonly. But Mesopotamia, unlike Syria, has scarcely benefited from these new techniques, due to the enduring political disorders that stopped research a quarter of a century ago.[2] Besides, the analysis of numerous old excavations remains to be made, and as the following examples sufficiently demonstrate, the data are available, which confirms that the issue is deep-rooted. In fact, in spite of stated objectives, Mesopotamian archaeology has only very recently truly integrated the city within its objects of investigation, having little inferred all consequences (in the strategic plan like on the set of analysis tools) from the fact that architectural and urban features are subjects, in the same way as others, of scientific analysis. This has never impeded the debate on the causes of the appearance of cities, the modalities of the process of urbanization, and the nature, role, and functions of urban centres. Yet, reading the expressed opinions, it is striking that so few of these are supported by material evidence, as many commentators have underlined.[3] In light of all this, it seemed useful to provide a concrete context to the debate and, most importantly, to open thereby a vast field of investigation.

Beyond its properly technical aspects, the urban space is conceived, first of all, in its socio-cultural dimension, as the result of specific social practices that tend to found a spatial order adapted to the society. Currently, to say that society does not proceed from the space, but projects itself into it, has become trite. Nevertheless, if the constructed space of the city has its own rigidity that induces a constant dialectic between man and his surroundings (if man makes the city, the opposite is also true), it is evident that economic, social, and political changes determine the evolution of urban forms. In order to understand the social reality underlying the plan, the analysis will attempt to read this like a text, interrogating the forms to make sense of them and thereby reconstruct some of the aspects of a particularly complex and multiform reality. With this aim, we have been inspired more by the methods of urbanistic analysis, which has been renewed in Europe during the last twenty years, particularly in Italy and France,[4] than by approaches found in the archaeological literature.

Regarding the method used for the analysis of the plans, this can be separated into various more-or-less successive phases: the establishment of the plans (because these are not 'given' to us and there is the long initial task of map reading), reconstruction, interpretation, comparison, and eventually ending in the definition of models. The challenge consists of confronting several levels of the structuring of space, the topography, the road system, and parcel divisions mainly, with the purpose of revealing regularities that, as they exist, testify to the intentions of social actors. In order to illustrate our intention concretely, we have chosen two sites, Abu Salabikh and Khafadjah, which form, from the methodological point of view, true case studies fully validating the applied approach.

In the first half of the third millennium, the urbanization process reaches its apex in the South, with the accelerated emergence of numerous urban centres, each one controlling the limited resources of their restricted territories which contained an ever-larger population, a situation that also occurred in Syria at approximately the same time, as this volume testifies. This situation induced a near-permanent state of war, such that the Sumerian cities, although in the heat of development and in close contact with neighbouring regions, were incapable of continuing with the colonial policy characteristic of the preceding Uruk period. These cities are better known than those of the fourth millennium, through some early, extensive excavations.

[2] Uruk was in 2001 the object of a geomagnetic investigation, with interesting preliminary results. See Fassbinder *et al.*, 2005.

[3] For example, Cowgill 2004; Smith 2003.

[4] For example, Mangin & Panerai 1999; Panerai et al., 1999; Pelletier & Delfante 2000; Allain 2004.

## *Abu Salabikh*

Abu Salabikh, a small city near the Euphrates, was the object of a particularly extensive excavation, whereby 30 per cent of the main tell was uncovered, which makes it one of the most explored sites of the Near East and the one that, at the moment, gives us the most precise idea of specifically Sumero-Akkadian urbanism.

Abu Salabikh is a composite site, that is to say made up of a group of six neighbouring tells (Figure 29.1). The data first enable us to understand the development of the occupation, according to the following model. The original agglomeration was founded at the beginning of the fourth millennium on both western tells, which in fact form one single tell (whose lower middle portion is under the alluvium). At that point in time, the city extended over approximately sixteen hectares. At the beginning of the third millennium (during Early Dynastic I), this establishment was abandoned for the central tells, which, although they are topographically different, both constitute poles of the same agglomeration, extending over eighteen hectares altogether. The elite took advantage of this operation to regroup in a different residential space, the South Tell, where a palace was discovered within a sizeable area of grand residences,[5] whereas most of the population was relocated to the north of this, on the Main Mound, in a rigorously planned new city; it is this part of the site that interests us here.[6] The new city lasts until the end of the third millennium, although it was progressively abandoned, as of the time of Akkad, to occupy the east tells. These also form a single unified agglomeration, though much smaller.

Inside the defensive wall of the Lower City,[7] which delimits a space of ten hectares, the urban settlement plan offers a particularly dense pattern (Figure 29.2), and to understand this, it is also necessary to examine the form taken by the house. More than a score of houses was excavated, and their study reveals that the house conforms to a perfectly defined model. The buildings, of regular geometric form, are sufficiently large (307 square metres on average) and are organized around a courtyard (Figure 29.3). These are smaller than at the time of Uruk (thirty-eight square metres on average versus eighty square metres), since the plan has more modest dimensions to have integrated such diverse elements, and the tripartite plan, in particular, so characteristic since the Ubaid, has here completely disappeared (but still persist elsewhere occasionally, like at Khafadjah, see below, and reappears widely in the second millennium). The houses have a unique access that leads to a relatively small room, generally associated with an annex that served as a kitchen. The entrance-kitchen often communicates directly with the courtyard, but in the largest houses one has to pass first through a corridor that arrives at a staircase that leads up to the terraces and then to a lobby interposed between the utilitarian exterior and the actual house itself. From the courtyard, it is possible to access several types of rooms, in accord with the degree of development of the plan. The courtyard provides access to one or another small to medium-sized rooms which themselves serve as storehouses, but also, in the case of the largest ones, as workrooms. The courtyard also leads to a small isolated room functionally bound to the water, judging by the covering of bitumen/asphalt (often perforated by a drainage) on the floor and walls, consequently. This could be the first appearance of a bath in Mesopotamian architecture.[8] The courtyard communicates essentially with two great rectangular rooms, set square to one another, generally in the corner opposite the entrance, and each one associated with one or two small annexed rooms. This it is the heart of the house, forming, along with the courtyard and entrance-kitchen, the basic model that is present in all the houses of the site. The two great rooms are not equivalent:

[5] See Postgate 1990, 104–06.

[6] The reasons for the displacement and refounding of the city are still conjectural. The excavators attribute the event to the remodelling of the local hydrographic network; indeed, a new channel was constructed in the third millennium (without being able to specify the precise date), some hundreds of meters to the east of the original site. But this seems to us insufficient to justify the operation and perhaps confuses the effects with the causes. Since it is known that the original (Uruk) smaller agglomeration was surrounded by a large wall, and that the most evident characteristic of the new city, outside the planning of the Lower City, was the creation of a truly separated high city almost as large (eight hectares), it seems that the natural expansion, still greater than the great necessity of space by the elites, visibly eager to occupy their own new site, could simply be the origin of this project. In any case, the site offers a particularly spectacular example of the brutal increase of the social segregation in the beginning of the third millennium.

[7] Which was built later, probably during the so-called Early Dynastic II period.

[8] The bath in fact appears during the Late Chalcolithic III/Middle Uruk but in an anecdotal way, in some elite residences (in Hassek Höyük, Forest & Vallet 2008, and Hamoukar, Reichel 2011, for example). It is during the Early Dynastic that its presence in the houses becomes ubiquitous.

one is always larger than the other (thirty-five square metres versus twenty-four square metres on average) and one of those rooms, the largest, for example, possibly corresponds to a reception room. The physicochemical analyses of the sediment demonstrate, nevertheless, that we are looking at a functional opposition, of a different kind than in Uruk, between the two great rooms of the house, with a living room where food is eaten, and another one, more specifically designated for sleeping.[9]

The Sumero-Akkadian house therefore shows a greater functional specialization of the domestic space than in preceding periods, and this development is accompanied by a reinforcement of the process of withdrawal of the family group on itself. Just one characteristic suffices to demonstrate the reality and the amplitude of this last phenomenon: the almost total disappearance of communication between adjacent houses, always present in the Uruk period[10] but attested here in an ephemeral way (only three cases). In addition, drainage was essentially carried out by means of vertical drains, a change from the Uruk and its networks of horizontal canals, showing once again the withdrawal of the nuclear family on itself, as water was now managed at a strictly domestic level. All these phenomena show, *de facto* one could say, the progressive decline of the social role of kinship, combined with the expansion and hierarchical structuring of the social body. In short, the triumph of the smaller and denser 'central plan' (around a courtyard) architectural formula over the Uruk compound model, can undoubtedly be seen as an adaptation to the imperatives of urban life. The house is now integrated within a much more dense and structured plot and is consequently more restricted than in the fourth millennium, as we will now see.

The large area investigated (almost three hectares) is subdivided into several large sectors. There are sectors to the south and the north, as well as an 'intermediate' sector to the east. An exhaustive description of the data is quite unnecessary, since the analysis shows that all the building complexes, from one side of the city to the other, conform to the same structural scheme. We will just provide an example from one of the best-preserved zones of the site, the north part of Sector E (Figures 29.4 and 29.5, zone to the north of Street 2 and west of Street 1). Now that we know the housing architectural model, we can read the plan without difficulty and state at first sight that the parcels are organized in east-west bands, so that the parcel division seems to be correlated to a regular plot which defines a vast rectangular division of approximately 150–60 metres by seventy metres. This block can be reconstructed (Figure 29.6) as four bands of ten parcels, comprising a total of forty houses, each with a module of 15 × 20 metres. The parcels of the central bands are served by a system of dead ends, whose distribution is not perfectly regular. This is the very first appearance of a layout absolutely typical of the so-called oriental city, a pattern that is indeed still to be found in the Arab city. However, the multiple deformations that can be observed were probably not originally there. With the passage of time (four or five centuries),[11] and after numerous reconstructions, the initial design was progressively altered, and although it is not possible to reconstruct the entire development, the plan enables us to distinguish two major phases in the history of the division: an A stage, undoubtedly close to the initial state, and a B stage, following the late opening of Street 4 that cuts the block (and leads to a city gate). Be that as it may, the plan is quite rigorous and our sample is sufficient to make a general reconstruction (Figure 29.7).

In the heart of the city, the constructions are organized in seven of these great blocks, flanked on either side by thinner rows of plots. The plan is orthogonal and symmetrical and adopts the structure of a ladder, with two main axes, on average 150 metres apart, parallel to the long sides of the whole town, and eight transversal streets interconnecting them, which enables us to reconstruct the missing gates. The main entrances to the city were located at each extremity of the north-south axes (the two northern gates were recognized during the excavation of the area) as well as to the centre of the long sides of this configuration. Such a regular layout implies a true *plan d'urbanisme* for the refounding of the town, and a reconstruction can be proposed

[9] See Matthews & Postgate 1994. Note also that to the contrary of the Uruk reception rooms, near the entrance and truly separated from the house, to preserve the privacy of the family group, the main rooms of the Early Dynastic house are both relegated to the deepest part of the building, which are accessible at the end of a long passageway which crosses the kitchen zone. They are systematically interconnected and neither of the two rooms displays the ostentatious adjustments (width of the openings, niches, etc.) that the Uruk reception rooms offered. It thus appears that reception in the Early Dynastic has probably lost, for the majority of the population, the demonstrative, ostentatious character, and the social importance that it had in the Uruk period.

[10] Vallet 1997a; 1997b; and 1998.

[11] The sector presents a minimum of seven successive Early Dynastic levels over six meters of deposit (Postgate 1977, 281–82; Postgate 1980, 95).

(Figure 29.8). However, while there is no doubt that this plan existed in the minds of the decision-makers, its actual implementation was obviously altered by several deformations (in the north of town, in particular, and in the east, with the break of the eastern axis), and an absolute conformity between the real plan and the theoretical plan is not to be sought.

The urban analysis also brings to light the growing functional specialization of different areas, in particular the grouping of trade and production facilities along some axes. This is the case with the southern block of Sector E (Figure 29.5), which is wider than usual, due to the addition on its northern flank of a row of workshops and stores,[12] an addition that led to the creation of a street inside the block, to serve the inner rows of plots, otherwise inaccessible. So, we see the logic of the plan, which betrays a clear project: the creation of a commercial and craft area along Street 2. This is the first appearance in the urban landscape of the souks that we still know today. It also provides some evidence for the very beginnings of a market economy. We can also identify granaries, near the city gates, which from then on were apparently major economic poles. In Sector A, just behind the north-east city gate, Building 19, which exhibits a typical compartment plan, is a storage complex/granary that covers an area of 310 square metres (Figure 29.9). This is much too large for the production of a single family, so this is undoubtedly communal storage. It is especially interesting that the neighbouring building (n° 18) is the largest house so far discovered on the site (685 square metres). Consequently, its plan is quite elaborate. The high social status of the occupants cannot be doubted, for in addition numerous seal impressions were found in the building, along with a small tablet for registering counts of grain.[13] On the other hand, we know from texts (sale contracts of land) that the society was divided into kinship groups, owning and managing the land estates, and that labour was remunerated by a system of donation, including grain. These groups had a hierarchy, with high-profile chiefs, sometimes bearing the administrative title of *sanga*, and sub-chiefs, invested with considerable authority giving them numerous privileges but also duties, in particular the redistribution of goods among their group, notably agricultural products.[14] The plan of Sector A strikingly reflects a social structure of this kind, with the communal granary as close as possible to the city gate for obvious practical reasons, the large house of a leader by its side, and behind, the rows of houses of the members of the group.

## *Khafadjah*

So, at Abu Salabikh a specific type of urban planning can be identified. But to be sure that we are dealing with a true model requires finding other examples, so we will turn now to Khafadjah. The case seems quite different at first sight: the site is bigger (about thirty-five hectares at the peak of its development), and the excavation less extensive (2.2 hectares at the most for the upper levels) and much deeper. Yet there is enough information to have a broad idea about it, even if most of the evidence relates to the area of the Oval Temple, an area that one could call a city centre, due to the differentiated functions, both private and public, of the buildings grouped there. Like Abu Salabikh, Khafadjah is made up of several tells, but the third millennium levels are concentrated on Tell A, to the north-east (Figure 29.10). The town developed from an Ubaidian village located in the highest part of the mound, to the south, where the Temple of Sin was built in the fourth millennium, although we know very little about these initial stages of the site.

From an urban point of view, only the sequence of houses is significant. The temples have, of course, to be included in the general sequence, but each represents a single building episode. The history of the site shows a three-phase development.

Phase 1 (from Levels 12 to 7) sees the first clear expansion of the site, at the very end of the Djemdet Nasr, with the lasting urbanization of the ground west

[12] They appear in the form of large rectangular rooms that organized in two rows that open directly onto the street. Rich in ash deposits, these rooms are provided with numerous facilities: vessels installed in the ground and ovens (and contain graves also). One of them, for example, is equipped with four ovens simultaneously, that is to say, much more than for an ordinary domestic use (see Postgate & Moorey 1976, 154; Postgate 1977, 284). All these characteristics invite interpretation of these rooms as workshops, which probably belong to the people who reside immediately behind (hence the graves), but certainly consecrated by activities of an extra-domestic order, as is evident in the regrouping throughout Street 2.

[13] Matthews & Postgate 1987, 112; Postgate 1984, 100, who consequently interpret the construction as a 'public' administrative building.

[14] For the related 'management groups', see Glassner 1985; Gelb 1965. For the acts of land transfer, see Bottero 1971; Gelb 1979; Gelb *et al.*, 1991; Steinkeller 1999; Steinkeller 2007. On the organization of labour, see Maekawa 1987; Sallaberger & Pruss 2015 (with references). On the case of Fara (where large houses similar to those of Abu Salabikh are to be found) and the mentions of the title 'lugal' in the same city, see Martin 1988; Martin *et al.*, 2001.

of the Sin Temple. Phase 2 (from Levels 6 to 3) sees a major step in the development of the city, giving official recognition to its probably continuous growth during Early Dynastic I, with the construction of the key urban 'facilities' that are the Oval Temple and the city wall. The data show that the city wall was built after the Oval Temple, most probably with the reconstructions of Level 5, for it clearly cuts the architecture rebuilt with the temple (that is the Level 6), and the western city gate (that can be partly reconstructed) is also clearly associated with the Temple. The important consequence of this is that, before the construction of the wall, the city extended more to the west, and its shape was probably more regular, especially on its western side, where the wall reaches deeply into the city. In any case, the construction of the Temple radically changed the area. Large (about three hundred square metres) and regular houses, of the same type as at Abu Salabikh, are now to be found to the east of the Temple.

From Level 4 onwards, we can get an idea of the whole area at the end of Early Dynastic II and the beginning of Early Dynastic III (Figure 29.11), and it can be seen that the situation to the north of the Oval Temple is quite different than to the east. Beside a few modest houses, most of the architecture here consists of clustered rows of small rooms, some connected in pairs, others isolated. Judging from our knowledge of the housing, none of these constructions can be interpreted as houses, and their purpose was probably economic: shops and storage space, a kind of souk just behind the western gate. But we have no data on the activities taking place here. Lastly, another kind of building must be mentioned, the so-called temples (of Sin, of Nintu, the Small Temple) scattered among the houses. It is debatable that they were temples in the way we usually understand that concept,[15] and it can be emphasized that none of these buildings has ever provided a single piece of evidence (like a foundation deposit or inscribed tablets or objects) showing that they really were temples. This does not mean that religion was absent here, as the Middle East always mingled politics and religion, but the buildings could have more to do with the management, by high-ranking people, of the kinship groups making up the city. Three observations can be made concerning these buildings. Firstly, we can identify more of these buildings than the excavators did: for example, Building XLV (Figure 29.12) near the Oval Temple and combining several long rooms (halls) around a courtyard (like the Abu Temple at Tell Asmar).[16] Secondly, some of these halls, provided with a podium, belong to houses which also contained mace heads (Houses XXII and XLVI, Figure 29.12). This is particularly interesting because it shows that there is not always a simple distinction between the public buildings and the private housing. Society is more complex, and the two spheres may be combined. Thirdly, these halls and buildings are grouped together in the area. Here, it must be recalled that no buildings of this kind were found on the Main Mound of Abu Salabikh, in spite of very extensive exploration, probably because they were all grouped on the South Mound, around the palace and possibly the temple.

So with Phase 2, the area became the city centre mentioned above, not because of the presence of the Oval Temple alone, but because it brought together prominent religious, economic, residential, and political functions. However, this functional centre lies at the edge of the city.

Phase 3 (Levels 2 and 1) sees several events that will once again change the organization of the area (Figure 29.13). To the west, the city gate has already been extended (since Level 3) inside the city, causing the destruction of the nearby buildings. To the east, a fire destroys the buildings between the Sin and the Oval Temple. The latter is given a stronger surrounding wall, and the Sin Temple an additional hall. However, most of the area is then occupied by a very specific compound of a unique kind, the Walled Quarter. On this occasion, the Nintu Temple and the Small Temple are voluntarily destroyed, and it is interesting to see that it probably took several years to decide what to do with the available land, because before its final destruction the Small Temple had been rebuilt, alone, after the fire. So, the Walled Quarter was perhaps a not so consensual project, and difficult negotiations probably went on between the decision-makers and the people involved. In any case the Walled Quarter is a well-planned compound that covers an area of 2300 square metres encircled by a surrounding wall. Because its construction was obviously decided by the highest authorities of the city, and because of its apparent association with the Oval Temple, the Walled Quarter is generally interpreted as the residential quarter of the elite, the officials of the Oval Temple.[17] But many arguments go against this inter-

[15] For an alternative interpretation, see Forest 1996b.

[16] Already noted by Henrickson (1981, 56) but without interpretation.

[17] For example, Henrickson 1981, 78; Henrickson 1982, 19.

pretation. Firstly, we can wonder why they waited so long to house these people, while House D was planned since the very beginning of the Oval Temple. Secondly, as far as we know (but for more recent periods), the priests and officials of temples were living in ordinary houses in town (like at Ur, for example).[18] Thirdly, the Oval Temple and the Walled Quarter are back-to-back: the entrance of the temple is to the west, in front of the city gate, while those of the Walled Quarter are to the south and probably east. Moreover, there is no passageway between the two (and House XLVI is not part of the Walled Quarter). Fourthly, and more important, the Walled Quarter groups thirteen dwellings of a very low social status: eleven with a tripartite plan, two with a courtyard, and most of under hundred square metres in size. Lastly, we must keep in mind that its construction there was to a certain extent accidental, as it followed a fire. So, there is probably no functional connection between the Oval Temple and the Walled Quarter, which is grouping together people with a very low status for a specific purpose, and the issue would be to determine what activity was involved here. In any case the Walled Quarter is striking evidence for social segregation. But it must be emphasized that the Mesopotamian city adapts very well to contrasting neighbourhoods, with, in the shadow of the Oval Temple, the secluded people of the Walled Quarter next to elite residencies (like Houses XLVI and D) and important public buildings like the Sin Temple.

Once the structure and history of the area of the Oval Temple is established and placed in the city plan, we obtain a general understanding of the Early Dynastic site. We have enough data indeed for that: several sections of the city wall, the approximate position of its eastern wall, the position of three city gates and the layout of several main streets (Figure 29.14). In fact, on the city plan that emerges, only one street has to be reconstructed *ex nihilo*, by pure symmetry: the eastern main axis. All the rest is actually there. So, while we can state that we are not dealing here with a refoundation, that the city is larger than Abu Salabikh and that it follows its own history, it is nonetheless quite clear that it shares with Abu Salabikh the same general layout: a more-or-less rectangular shape, with city gates in the corners (at each end of the long axes) and in the middle of the long sides, and a street layout in 'ladder pattern', with several transversal streets (in particular the one running from the western gate). In the present case, however, the planning was not implemented at once but progressively, during the expansion of the city during Early Dynastic I, which means that the growth of the city was supervised, at least for its main features, by the authorities.

## *Other Examples*

To further the discussion, we should turn to Tell Asmar, but this site deserves a long and detailed study which would be out of place here. In fact, it has roughly the same type of plan (Figure 29.15), with some local peculiarities, such as the oval shape of the city to the north. Asmar provides new information. The domestic architecture is more varied, and beside the tripartite and courtyard-centred plan, there is a different kind of house, closer to the type found in Northern Mesopotamia (as for example at Melebiyeh).[19] Small storage features occur among the houses, but all the buildings are aligned into more-or-less regular blocks. The northern palace, just behind the northern gate, shows that here also the periphery is privileged rather than the centre, due to its proximity to the countryside, in accordance with the agricultural basis of the society.

So, we have enough examples of this type of plan to be sure that it represents a true urban model, probably characteristic of small and medium-sized towns (say from ten to sixty hectares). This plan, perhaps invented in central Mesopotamia at the very beginning of the millennium (but information about the South is lacking), spread to the north, and probably the best example of its diffusion into Northern Mesopotamia is to be found at Titriş Höyük, in Turkey, on the east bank of the Euphrates near Samsat.[20] Around 2400 BC, the northern part of the site, the 'Outer Town', extending over sixteen hectares, was completely rebuilt and given a regular plan, of the same type as discussed above, except that the orientation was east-west rather than north-south (Figure 29.16). The Mesopotamian influence is also noticeable in the fact that the houses on the site adopt at the same time the courtyard-centred plan well known in the alluvial plain, with the two main rooms at right angles, opposing the entrance (Figure 29.17). Needless to say, this planning, so radically different from the radio-concentric plan that develops in Syria at the same time, is a good illustration of the cultural diversity of 'Greater Mesopotamia' in the third millennium.

[18] Charpin 1986.

[19] Lebeau 1993.

[20] Algaze *et al.*, 2001, with references.

## *Conclusion*

To conclude, it is evident that we are far from the stereotyped image, transmitted over a long time through the archaeological literature, of a disordered Oriental city, in contrast with the planned Greek or Roman city.[21] From the fourth millennium, Mesopotamia laid the foundations of a true urban science. The Urukians invented military architecture, the hierarchical structuring of public thoroughfares, and the laying out of regular parcel divisions.[22] But the possibilities of intervention of the authorities were doubtless extended over just a few centuries. During the third millennium, it is clear that Sumerians and Akkadians undertook more massive urbanism operations. At Khafadjah, the construction of a great Oval Temple destroys the previous design and implies the rehabilitation, to use a modern term, of the surrounding area. At Abu Salabikh, the population is resettled at a new site, rigorously planned with a 'ladder pattern' layout, according to the outline of the primary routes. This is not a typological classification *a posteriori*, but a true urban model, that the architects of the time had thought out well, since we can recognize other examples of this orthogonal planning at Khafadjah, Tell Asmar, and Titriş Höyük. This model, probably adhered to by cities of modest and average size, suggests by its simple existence that there must be other types of urban layout and illustrates the unsuspectedly advanced degree Mesopotamian urbanism had attained in the first half of the third millennium.

Beyond the mapping questions, the analysis of the settlement plans enables us to consider a certain number of characteristics that are doubtless constants of the Southern Mesopotamian cities during the period. In particular, it is clear that built space is developed to the point of reducing free space to the strict minimum imposed by the necessities of circulation, that is to say the road design. In fact, there is no evidence for an area that could be considered a public space where the population could meet. The great monumental constructions have sufficient free space, but they are isolated on platforms and surrounded by walls inaccessible to common mortals. Only the city gates are sometimes provided with small places to facilitate passage. There is no area in the city where people can converge, and community activities (celebrations and markets) probably have specific places outside the city, near the entrances. The city is conceived according to an exclusively practical vision, and its plan does not have any symbolic dimension at this time. We would have a great problem in finding a cosmic directionality within urban forms so irregular, or rectangular. Here, there is neither *cardo* nor *decumanus*, and Mesopotamian urbanism does not completely grasp the notion of centre. On the contrary, it is the periphery that counts, in accordance with the agricultural foundations of the society. The entrances attract granaries, storehouses, and many of the workshops. The symbols of power, temples, palaces, and assemblies, are pushed towards the periphery and further outside the city, forming a separate urban pole (Abu Salabikh). Altogether, the city appears as a closed area, without true public buildings. Temples and palaces are not 'public' spaces (a completely anachronistic notion). Few people are authorized to enter these monumental constructions, and in any case, they do not form areas where the population would be urged to assemble. The city is withdrawn into itself and offers a city-dormitory image where only certain craft industries have a place.

In addition, one of the most interesting aspects of this type of study is that careful analysis of the settlement plans enables us to get a glimpse of how management of urban space was based on the social organization of the population. As we have seen, certain texts indicate that the society was segmented into hierarchical kinship groups, each managing the dominion of the lands that belonged to it; private property did not exist. In fact, we think the city plan forms a concrete translation of this social organization from the fourth millennium (and much earlier).[23] On the other hand, the houses are contiguous in such a way that the reconstruction of a house has consequences for the neighbouring houses. The construction involves whole blocks, which supposes collectively managed campaigns of reconstruction. These repeated campaigns seem hardly compatible with the existence of private property, and it is clear that the inhabitants maintain only usufruct rights to the parcel they occupy. The urban ground, like the rural area, belongs to the group. A surprising fact can also be taken as a proof of this. There is no example of a parcel or a building division being attributed as the result of inheritance. A totally different situation appears in the second millennium. In Nippur for example, the parcels are divided between heirs, which in the long run produces deformed plans.[24] At the beginning of the third millennium, private property still did not exist

[21] On this *topos*, Van de Mieroop 1999, 4–5.

[22] Vallet 1997a; 1997b; and 1998.

[23] Gawra XII; Rothman 2002.

[24] Stone 1981; 1987.

and the parcels were neither transferable nor divisible (but the collectivity can decide to suppress them), and this is certainly an explanation for the permanence of the plans over the course of the centuries. In the case of numerous descendants, the norm must therefore have been dispersal, explaining the spectacular spatial dynamism in several sites.

Altogether, the urban analysis (beyond the detail of the interpretations, debatable by nature) seems to contribute irreplaceable data of all types. Meticulous reading of the plans gives access to the conception, realization, and management of space, and all this in a properly historical perspective, especially in the Near East, where tells are true palimpsests that record change faithfully. Consequently, the social, political, and economic structures of the societies, because they are necessarily transposed into physical space, are perfectly accessible even in the absence of texts, so that the creation of a sound urban paleogeography is not unreasonable. Be that as it may, much work still has to be done before we can define Mesopotamian urbanism in a truly satisfactory way in the diversity of its practices. Yet in spite of the current difficulties, we are resolutely optimistic because archaeology is a young science whose cognitive potential has yet to be fully exploited.

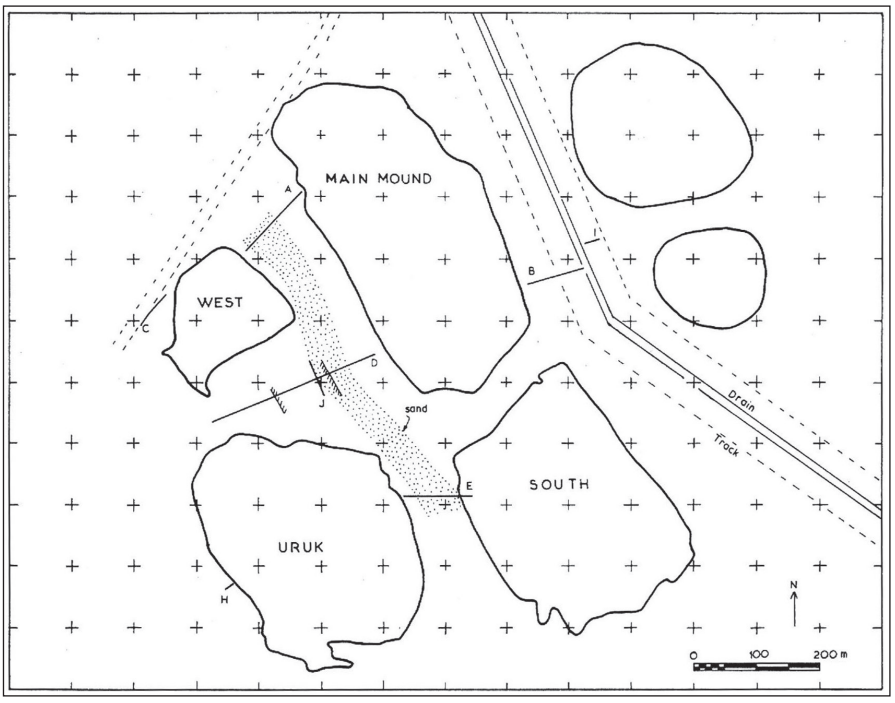
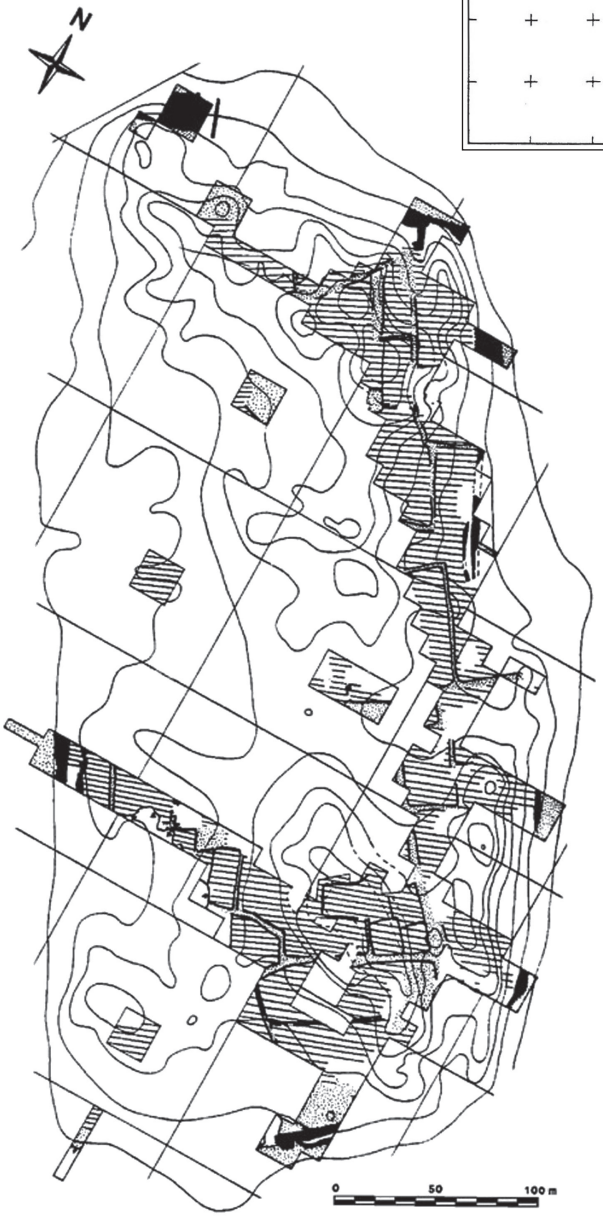



Figure 29.1: Abu Salabikh, map of the site showing the alignments of the geological samples (© Wilkinson 1990, 78 fig. 2).

Figure 29.2 (below): Abu Salabikh, general plan of the Early Dynastic Lower Town on the Main Mound (© Postgate 1990, 96 fig. 1).



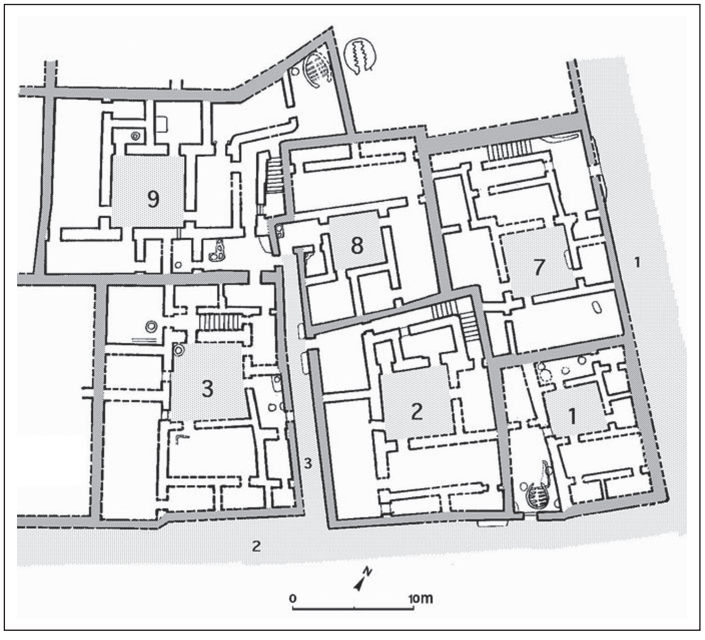




Figure 29.3: Abu Salabikh, reconstructed plans of the houses to the south-east of the northern block of Sector E (© After Postgate 1980, 89 fig. 1).

Figure 29.4: Abu Salabikh, plan of Sector E (© Postgate 1990, 98 fig. 2).

Figure 29.5: Abu Salabikh, partially reconstructed plan of the parcels of Sector E (© Drawing: Régis Vallet).

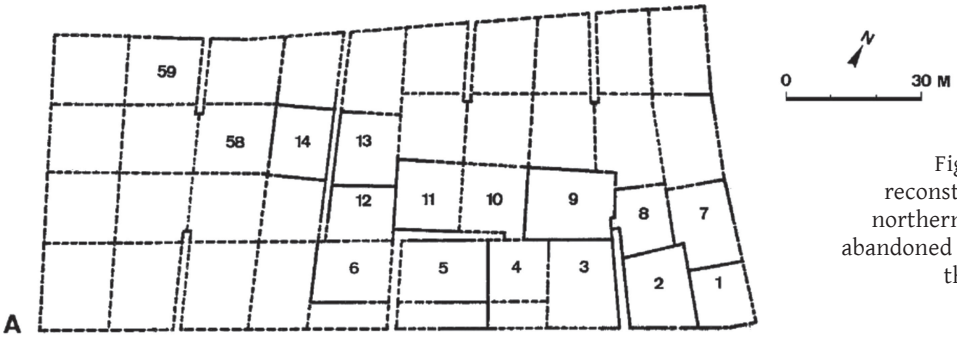



Figure 29.6: Abu Salabikh, schematic reconstruction of the development of the northern block of Sector E — short arrows: abandoned parcels; long arrows: expansion of the block (© Drawing: Régis Vallet).

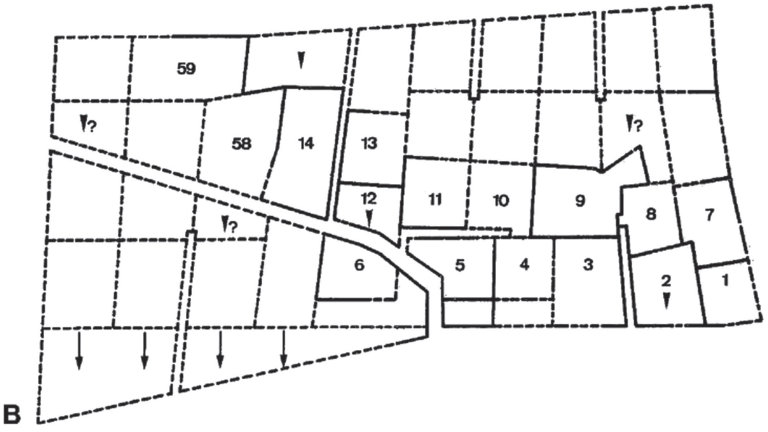
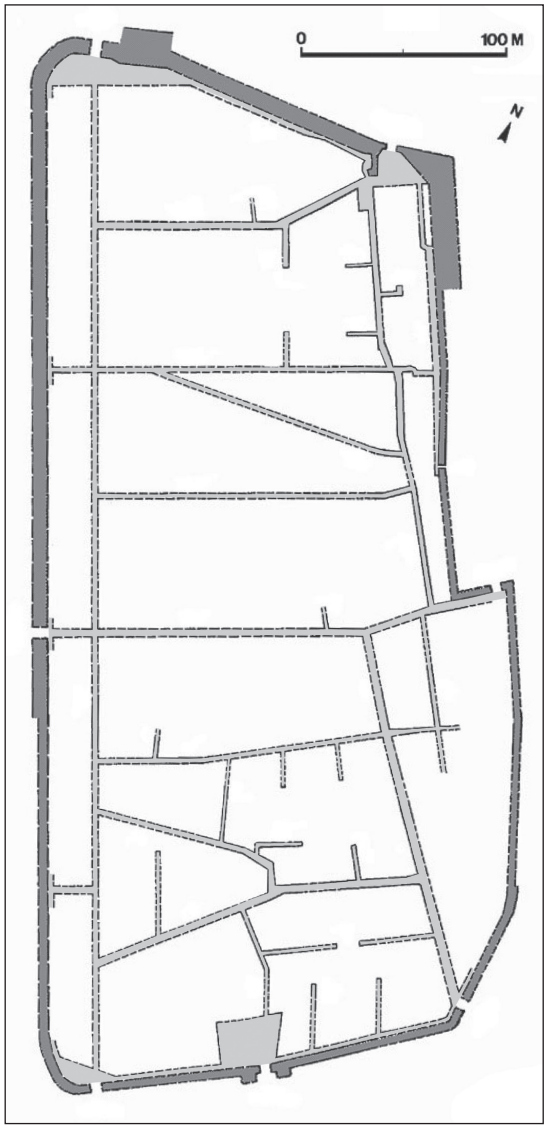



Figure 29.7 (below): Abu Salabikh, partially reconstructed plan of the Lower City on the Main Mound (© Drawing: Régis Vallet).



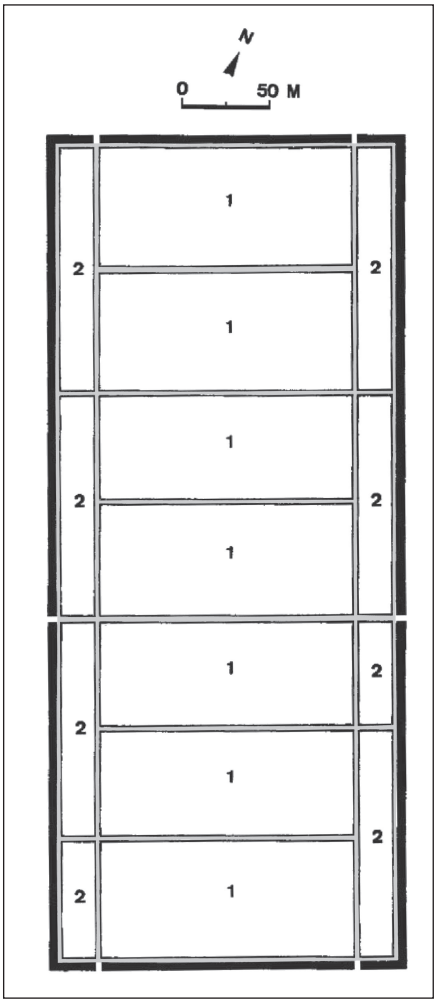




Figure 29.8 (right): Abu Salabikh, reconstruction of the original master plan of the Lower City on the Main Mound; only the primary routes are represented — **1)** central blocks with four rows of parcels; **2)** lateral blocks with two rows of parcels (© Drawing: Régis Vallet).

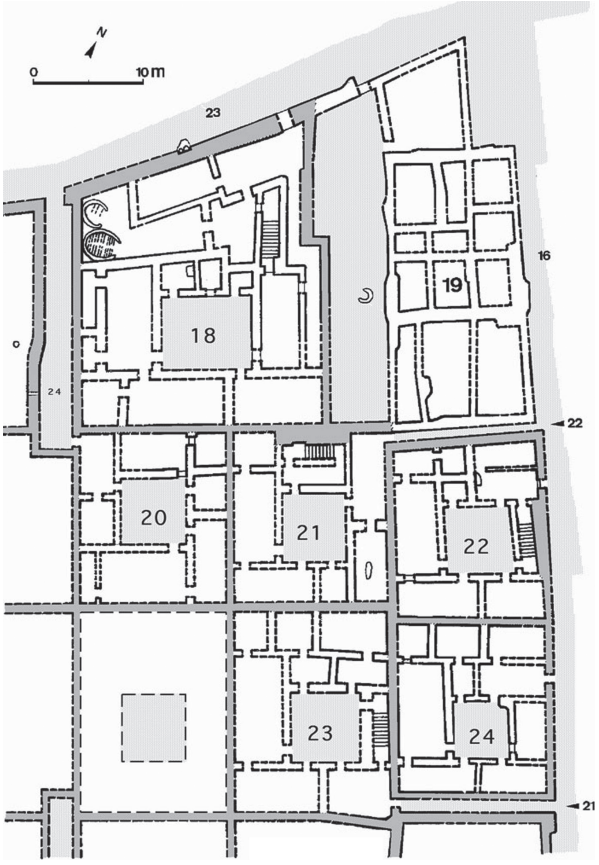



Figure 29.9: Abu Salabikh, partially reconstructed plan of the houses and the granary (19) at the north-east of the western block of Sector A (© After Matthews — Postgate 1987, 111 fig. 6).

Figure 29.10: Khafadjah, plan of Tell A (© Delougaz *et al.*, 1967, Plate 1).

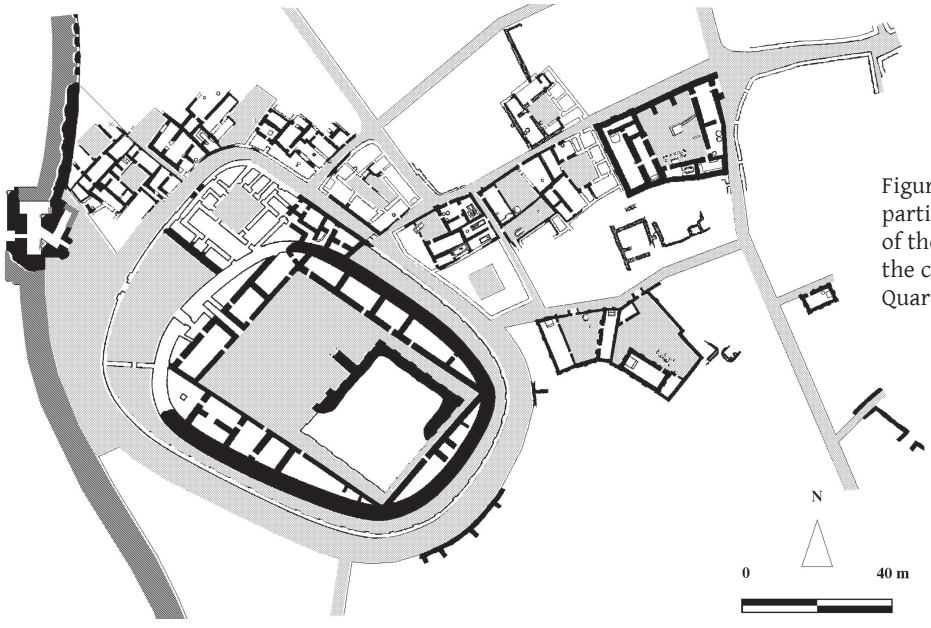



Figure 29.11: Khafadjah, partially reconstructed plan of the Oval Temple area before the construction of the Walled Quarter (© Drawing: Régis Vallet).

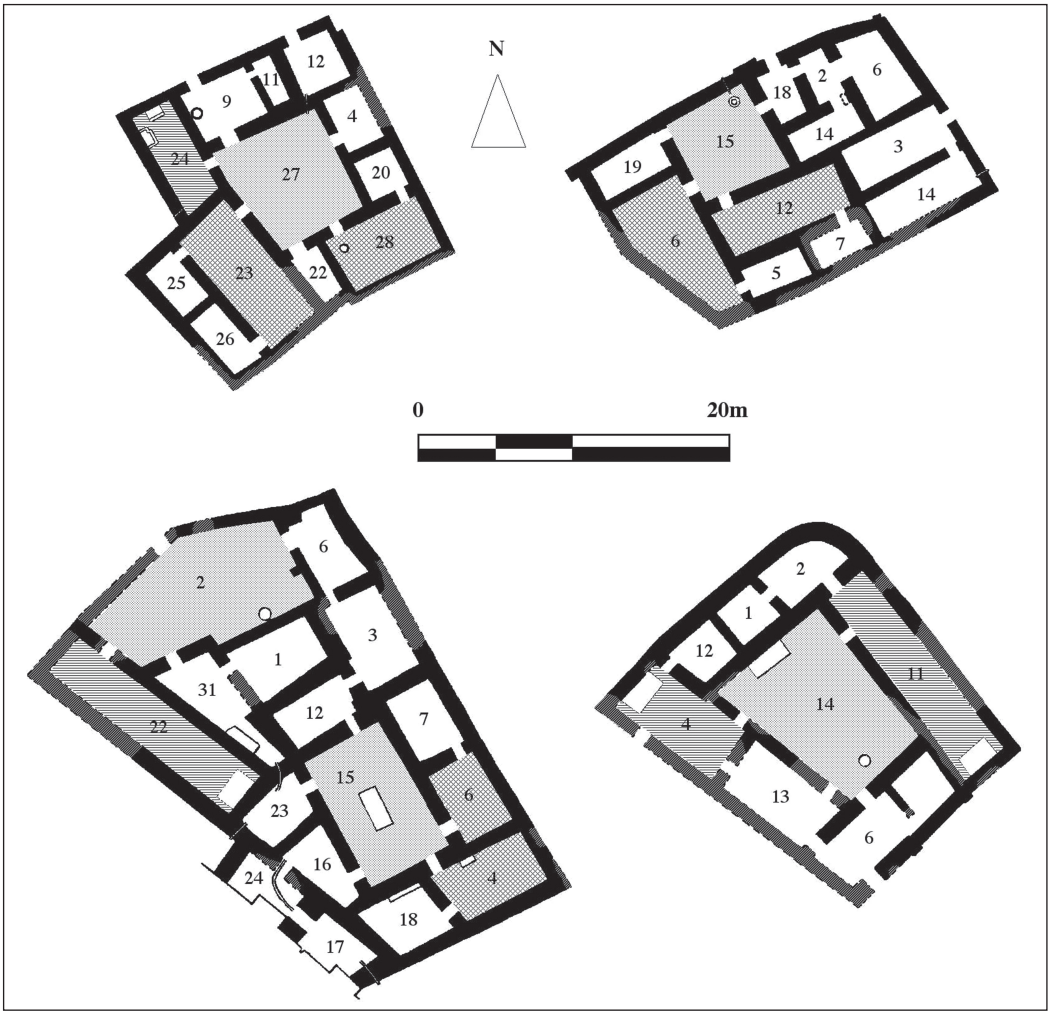



Figure 29.12: Khafadjah, **a)** House XXXVIII (Level 4); **b)** House XXXIX/XL (Level 4); **c)** House XLVI (Level 2); **d)** Building XLV (Level 2); the courtyards are in grey, the two main living rooms crosshatched and the audience halls hatched (© Drawing: Régis Vallet).

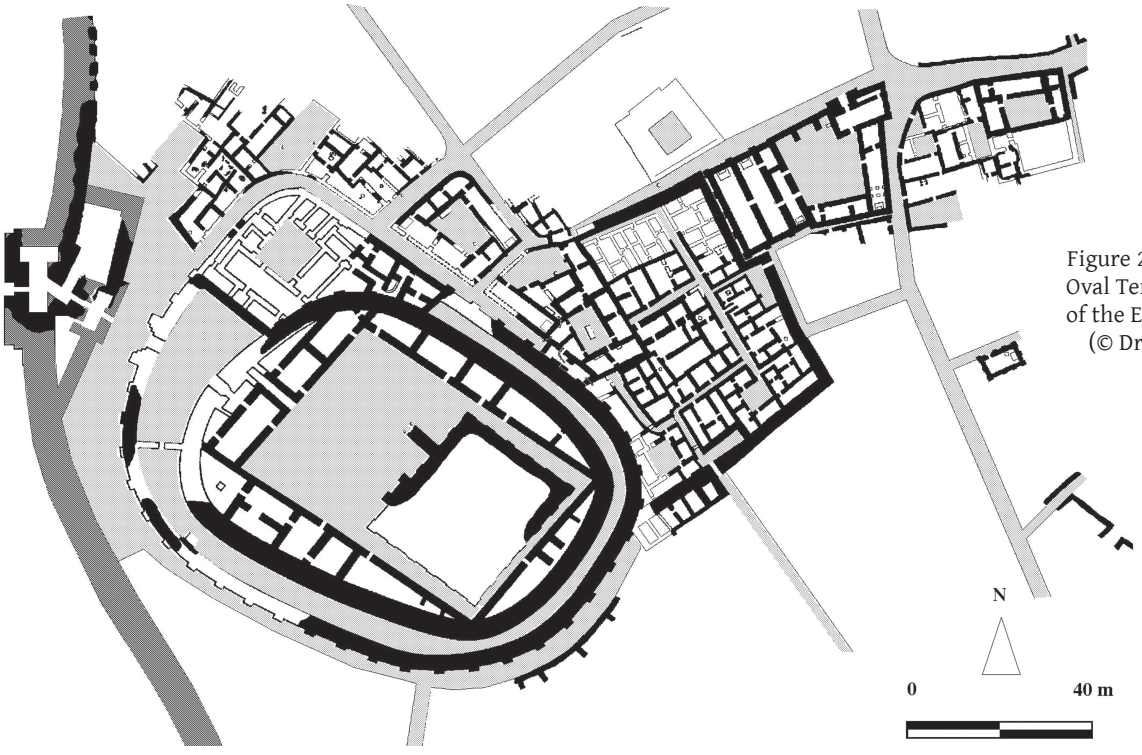



Figure 29.13: Khafadjah, the Oval Temple area at the end of the Early Dynastic period (© Drawing: Régis Vallet).

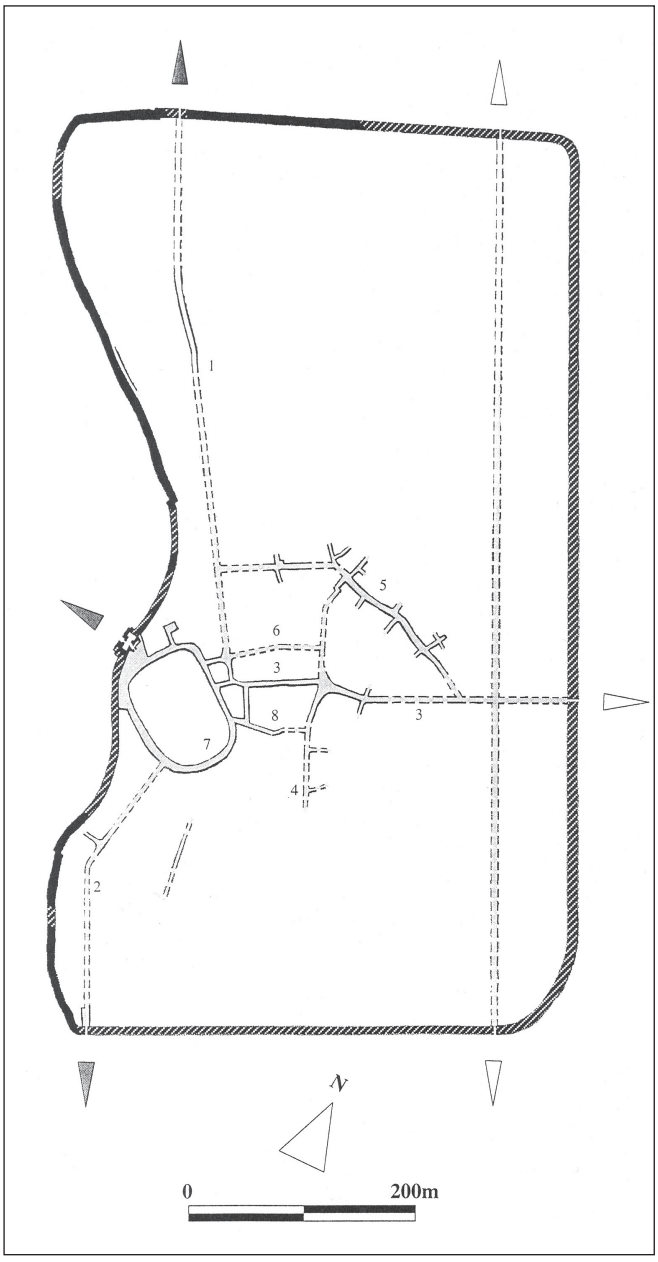



Figure 29.14: Khafadjah, partially reconstructed plan of the city at the end of the Early Dynastic period (© Drawing: Régis Vallet).

Figure 29.15: Tell Asmar, general plan of the third-millennium city, with the reconstructed contour of the town wall and some major routes (© After Delougaz *et al.*, 1967, Plate 23).

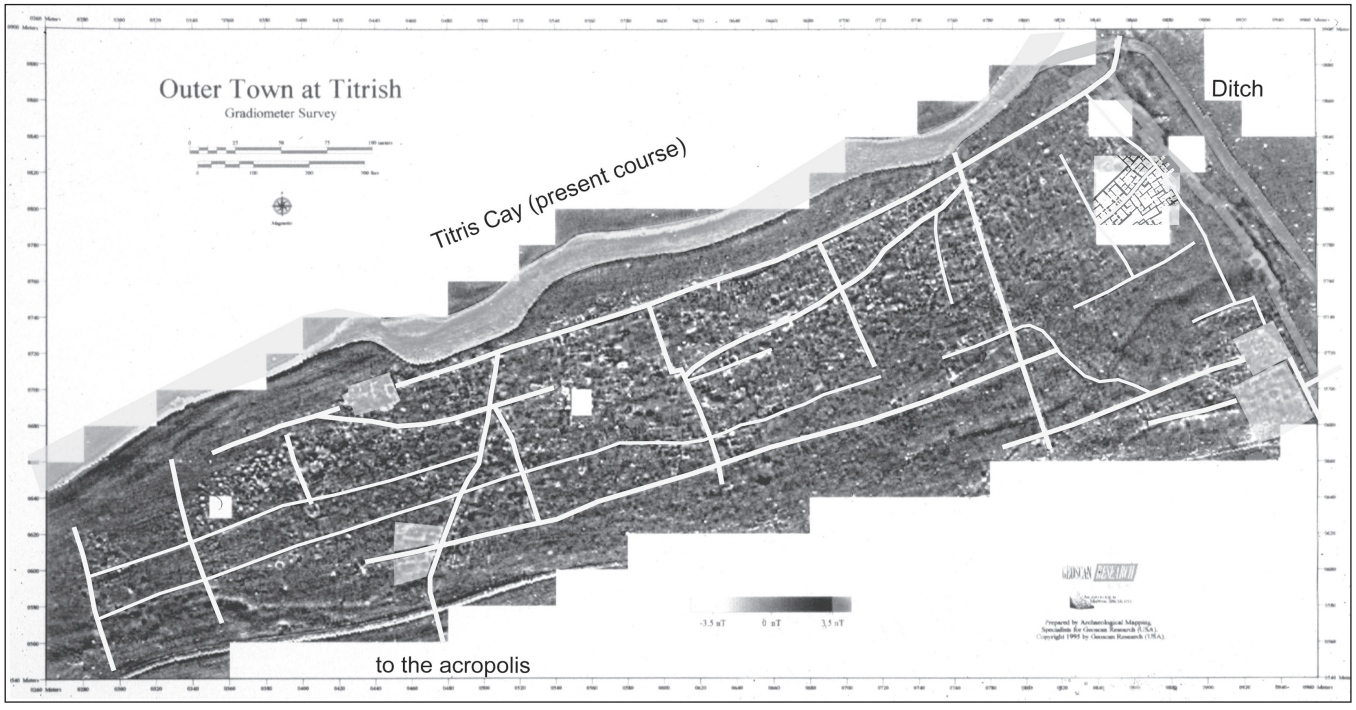



Figure 29.16: Titriş Höyük, geomagnetic plan of the Outer Town showing some major routes and features (© After http://www3.uakron.edu/titris/TitrisMag.htm).

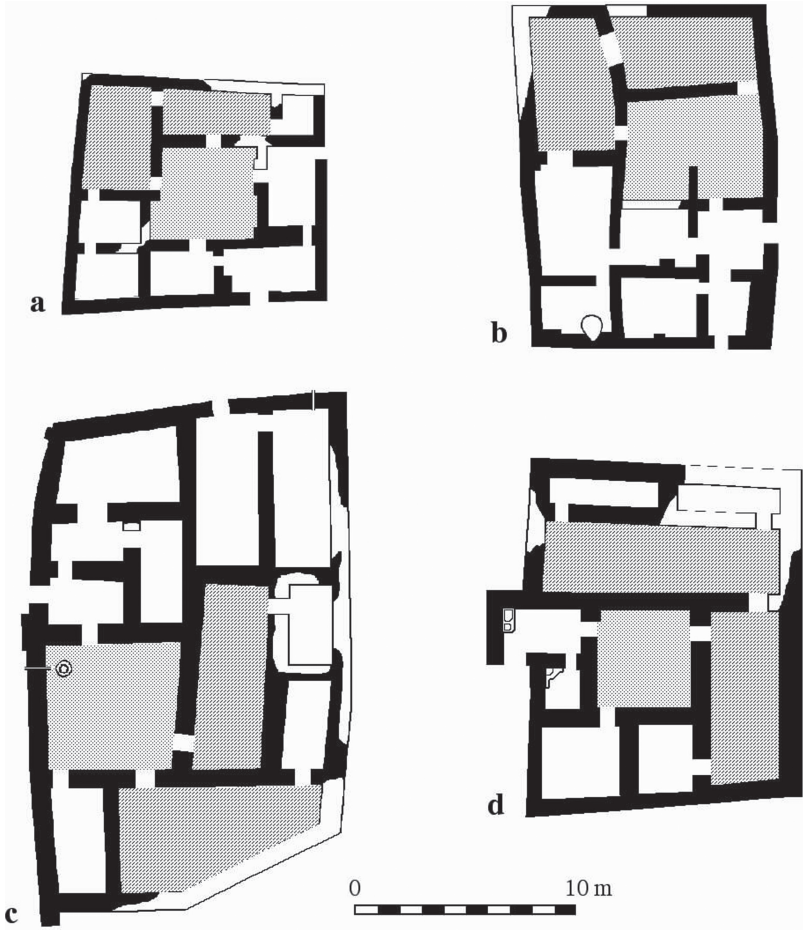



Figure 29.17: Comparisons of house plans in Titriş Höyük, Khafadjah, and Abu Salabikh. Courtyards in grey, living rooms hatched — **a)** Titriş Höyük, Lower Town House 2; **b)** Titriş Höyük, Lower Town, House 1; **c)** Khafadjah, Level 4, House XL–XXXIX; **d)** Abu Salabikh, Area E, House 2 (© Algaze *et al.*, 2001, 85 fig. 4).

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