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Preliminary results of the 2021-2022 campaigns at Larsa, Iraq.

Régis Vallet¹ and Antoine Jacquet²

Abstract

The works undertaken at Larsa in 2019 continued in 2021 during a 16th excavation campaign and in 2022 for two prospecting campaigns. Three trenches were carried out, devoted respectively to a supposed bridge visible in geophysics (Trench PZ), to the large temple B50 (Trench B50), and to the sector of sumptuary habitat further north (Trench B48-49). In the new Trench "PZ" (for "Pont de la Ziggurat") in the center of the city, a baked brick pier of the bridge crossing the Grand Canal in front of the Ziggurat was discovered and dates (inscribed brick) to the reign of King Sin-iddinam (1849-1843 BC). In B50, the exact area of the temple (7250 m²) and part of its plan were determined. It yielded inscribed bricks of King Sin-iddinam, which invites one to interpret it as the Gipar that this king had built for his daughter, an entum priestess of Shamash. In B48-49, work concentrated on the extensive clearing of B49. The residence covers 1480 m² and had several courtyards. A small room (1598) yielded the private archives of the owner's family, Etellum, grand vizier of kings Gungunnum (1932-1906 BC) and Abi-sare (1905-1895 BC). The violent destruction of the building sheds new light on the end of the latter's reign.

* * *

The works undertaken in 2019 in Larsa (Vallet *et al.* 2020, Vallet 2023) continued on the site during a 16th excavation campaign in November 2021 and for two prospecting campaigns in February and November 2022. Several programs are underway. We summarize the main results of some of them, mainly the excavation programs.

As Larsa, like many other sites in the region, was heavily looted and never properly prospected, two programs were dedicated to auditing its surface and to archaeological prospection. Both programs were completed in February 2022 and the results are currently being compiled. As they are the subject of a specific intervention (Giraud, Mura, forthcoming in these proceedings), we will only mention a few points of general interest here. The site has been heavily looted. There are 2,298 looters' holes on its surface, of which 1,678 were checked in the field. However, the looting was concentrated in the north-eastern part of the city, so the rest of the site was relatively spared. On the other hand, the scale of looting has fallen sharply over the last ten years, and has completely ceased since work resumed. Finally, there have been seven mechanized lootings (including a trench on the ziggurat), which is few compared with many other major sites. The situation is therefore better than might have been feared.

As far as the archaeological survey is concerned, unsurprisingly, most of the assemblage collected dates from the Middle Bronze Age (42%), i.e. from the city's heyday, the so-called Isin-Larsa and Paleo-Babylonian periods, from the first half of the second millennium. Pottery from the following period, Kassite, is also widely represented, at a level (33%) that comes as a surprise. It indicates, along with other evidence from the excavations, that Larsa, after an abandonment in 1738 BC, once again became a city of some importance in the 14th century, which was not reduced to a religious settlement around the E-Babbar sanctuary, as would be the case in the 1st millennium. The Uruk period is poorly represented, and the Ubaid not at all, which is probably due to their deep burial. The Early Bronze Age is attested in limited quantities (13%), but is present almost everywhere. The exact dimensions of the Sumerian city are still unknown, but it is certain that it was already one of the most important cities in the country, as indicated by the glyptic and historical data that mention it (Matthews 1993; Sallaberger, Schrakamp 2015). In November 2022, surveys showed that the site extended at the beginning of the 3rd millennium far to the north and west of Gungunnum's enclosure, and that this king, when he rebuilt the

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city in the late 19th century, shifted it several hundred meters to the southeast. Excavations in these ancient parts of the site have begun in November 2023.

The urban planning of the city accessible on the surface, that of the second millennium is the subject of a multidisciplinary program combining archaeological, geophysical and paleo-geographical approaches. Attention has so far focused on the envelope (the city wall) and the canal network, two fundamental elements of the urban space that maintain complex relationships. In this respect, the imagery resulting from geomagnetic surveys (on 73 ha cumulated in 2023) and photogrammetric drone surveys (on 1200 ha cumulated in 2022) played a determining role.

The ramparts of Larsa are known from historical data (royal inscriptions and names of years). Built by king Gungunum in 1912 BC (Sigrist 1990: 9-10), constantly maintained by his successors, they were razed by Hammurabi of Babylon when he took the city, after a siege of several months, in 1763 BC (Charpin 1989, 2023). Their existence, one century and a half, was therefore rather brief. The texts describe them as "high as a mountain" (Frayne 1990: 149). Despite this, apart from the four baked brick piles of the eastern gate excavated by André Parrot (Parrot 1933) and some sections recognized in the 1980s, they remained elusive. One could fear that Hammurabi's diggers, powerfully supported by erosion, had been overzealous (Huot, Suire 2019: 467).

However, against all expectations, our work has rediscovered and mapped the entire route of the ramparts (Fig. 1). The enclosure, made of unbaked brick, except for the internal facing of the gates, made of baked brick, runs for 5376 m, circumscribing an area of exactly 200 ha. It is impossible, due to the lack of excavations, to distinguish between what belongs to the different rulers. All that can be said of the visible layout, respected over time, is that it certainly reflects the last state of the enclosure. Four widths of the curtain wall are attested, of 10, 15, 20 and, in two places, 30 m. The 20 m width is the most frequent. What was the elevation of such a wide wall? An elevation of 10 m, that is a width/height ratio of 1/1 in relation to the narrowest sections, is in our opinion a strict minimum, corresponding perhaps to the original enclosure, that of Gungunum. 15 m, which remains below this ratio for the greater part of the wall, seems to us to be more probable. Should we consider more? In truth, there remains a witness to the elevation of the enclosure: "le Chameau". This 35,000 sqm fortress straddles the rampart, reaching an altitude of 22 m AMSL, while its lowest walls are 6.5 m AMSL, and the structure continues downwards. We therefore know that the fortress had an elevation of more than 15.50 m. Given the destruction and considerable erosion it has undergone, there is no doubt that it originally stood about 20 meters high. This does not imply that the curtain wall had an equivalent elevation everywhere, but heights greater than 15 m were reached in certain places of the fortifications.

In any case, the enclosure was provided with six main gates, fairly regularly arranged, four of which have been investigated. We will only mention two sectors. To the northwest, the rampart is provided with large bastions (15 m wide by 12 m projection), which are not regularly distributed but according to the needs. The wall is 20 m wide and the gate (B56), between two bastions, is of simple type, with single transverse room. To the east of the city, we returned to the area of the "Parrot" gate (B1), whose remains had been floating in the void since 1933. The rampart, again 20 m wide, has been discovered and the plan revealed shows that the remains cleared by Parrot constitute only the eastern end of the gate. The "Parrot" gate is in fact a rectangular fortress 80 m long and 35 m wide, straddling the rampart. The passageway, which has several offsets, and the ten or so rooms that flank it, were once again provided with baked brick facings - in fact real walls retaining the colossal mass of the raw brick of the rampart. The summit platform that can be reconstructed extended over 2800 sqm (at best), more than enough to accommodate a powerful battery of war machines. A glacis reinforced the defenses of the gate. In view of these elements, it is obvious that the "Parrot" gate was a defensive work of primary importance for the city. And for good reason: less than 100 m to the north, the city's main water supply source has been identified.

Since the reopening of the mission in 2019, the water supply of Larsa has been a central focus of field investigations, based on the contributions of geophysics, photogrammetry and geo-archaeological field study and archaeological operations (Vallet *et al.* 2020, Vallet, Cez, Darras 2022). Several hundred canals of all sizes (up to 22 m wide) were identified, associated with about fifteen basins of varying size, including a large intramural reserve of 26,000 sqm, at the northwest end of the site, and the city harbor (of 31,000 sqm) at its southern end. As these results are the subject of a separate communication (Cez, Vallet, Darras, forthcoming in these proceedings), we won't go into them here. One discovery relating to the urban hydraulic network must nevertheless be mentioned, as it is essential to the urban structure: the importance of irrigation within the city itself. In the entire north-western part of the site, on either side of the large P2 reservoir (Fig. 1), the land, empty of construction, is criss-crossed by a network of small canals, drawing more or less geometrical irrigated plots. This part of the city, which covers 18 ha, seems to have been devoted to agricultural activities, probably market gardening and horticulture rather than cereal growing. A study of some plots is planned.

A first trench excavation intended to uncover hydraulic structures was opened in 2021, with the eastern pier of the B69 bridge as the target (M. Zingarello, L. Bachelot, M. Hrsomy). It is crossing the Grand Canal near the ziggurat, in the center of the city (Fig. 1). Four levels of occupation were recognized. Level 4 corresponds to the sought-after remains. The bridge pier, made of square fired bricks (33 x 33 x 8 cm), extends over 4 x 3 m but has only been partially excavated and its exact shape is not yet known. It has been cleared to a height of one meter, without its base having been reached. The depth of the canal is therefore not yet known. An inscribed brick of King Sin-iddinam was in place at the top of the structure (Fig. 2). To the east of the trench, a one-meter-wide wall of rectangular fired brick probably corresponds to the facing of the canal pier. The two structures, pier and quay, were associated by layers of fill containing Old-Babylonian ceramic material from the 18th/17th c. BC. It is thus established that the large canals of Larsa, due to lack of maintenance since the abandonment of the city in 1738 BC, were completely filled in at that time, to the point that it was possible to build over them. These remains are indeed covered by levels of the Kassite period, consisting of craft facilities devoted to the various stages of pottery manufacture, with kilns, basins, tiles and drains. It is, to our knowledge, the only pottery workshop currently known from this period.

The other excavation programs are concentrated to the northwest of the site. Our work allowed us to complete the plan of the E-Babbar, by identifying its enclosure and residential quarter, in the southeastern part of the complex. But our attention was focused a little further north, on a Tell close to the E-Babbar, B50, known since the prospecting of the 80s and which seemed promising. In 2019, pedestrian and geophysical surveys discovered a vast rectangular complex of 127 x 61 m (7250 sqm) composed of two buildings on either side of a huge courtyard of 43 m on each side (Fig. 3). The entrance to the complex is to the south, facing the E-Babbar 35 m away. The main building, measuring 61 by 45 m (2745 sqm), is to the north. In 2021, 825 sqm of it have been excavated (N. Ait-Said, M. Vobauré, R. Vallet), under the very fragmentary remains of a small Hellenistic temple located on top of its ruins. Entirely made of mud-brick, its walls are at least 2.3 m wide and 5.6 m for the façade, on the large courtyard to the south. The associated material places the use of the building in the 19th and 18th centuries BC (Fig. 4). Seven rooms and two courtyards are known at present. A band of rectangular rooms defines the façade, on the large courtyard, with a central recess, behind which is a large room 3032, certainly the vestibule of the building. A second row of rooms, perpendicular to the first, divides the building into two equal parts, delimiting two courtyards on either side of the building. The absence of a passage between the rooms left us perplexed, until we realized that we were excavating the second floor of the building. A sounding, down to the foundations, revealed that the building is preserved on 4.5 m of elevation (Fig. 5). An offset in the masonry of the walls, slightly thinner on the second floor in order to support the floors, marks the level of the second floor.

Only one room has been excavated so far (room 3019, 6.4 x 3.1 m), due to the enormous mass of fillings to be removed. It has yielded an Old-Babylonian economic text and ten inscribed bricks commemorating

the work of King Sin-iddinam in the nearby E-Babbar. Given the characteristics of this royal construction, we are dealing with one of the main temples of the city and the most likely hypothesis is that it is the Gipar, the temple-residence of the priestesses dedicated to the god Shamash (Charpin 2022), hence the inscriptions found.

The extent of the filling has prevented us from clearing the floors of room 3019 in their entirety for the time being, but we have gone deep enough to be sure that it is a blind room, with no possible access except through a wooden device from the upper floor. Two anchor holes in the north wall could be linked to the presence of this device, so it is possible that the hidden room corresponds to the temple treasure. Nevertheless, further extensive clearing of the temple floor plan in 2023 revealed that other rooms on the first floor were also blind, so that a significant proportion, yet to be determined, of the rooms on this level appear to have been devoted exclusively to storage, accessible from the floor above. To the west, on the slope of the Tell, a trench was dug to uncover the façade of the complex. This is 5.25 m wide and has a facing of baked bricks with a set of niches and double redans (Fig. 6). A sounding in the floors of the adjoining street showed that the construction had been preceded by earthworks, making a clean sweep of the previous buildings.

A little further north, it is the habitat that we are exploring, through the excavation of two large sumptuary residences in baked brick, B48 and B49, from the late 20th century. They are established along the cultivated area west of the city, which a raised fired brick roadway (R12) allowed to cross on dry feet to reach the western gate of the city (Fig. 1). Other buildings were associated with them, a granary to the west and various utility buildings to the east. Building B48 is a rectangular house of 682 sqm, comprising 19 rooms around a central courtyard (Fig. 7). Four rooms have been excavated so far, including two kitchens, each associated with one of the two large rooms of the house, the reception room at the front of the building (Fig. 8), and the family living room at the back. The building is a good illustration of the visceral conservatism of the ancient Mesopotamians, since it combines a courtyard plan with the ancient tripartite plan for the dwelling itself, a plan invented in the 7th millennium and which reappears here after having almost disappeared in the 3rd millennium.

But the most unexpected discoveries came from building B49. The clearing of building B49 began in 2021 (A. Jacquet, P. Jaccard), to the south of an unexcavated plot of land that had been occupied intermittently, adjacent to the B48 residence. Although the building is partially covered with a sand dune and has been heavily damaged by looters and by a large wadi that runs through it, enough remains to know its extent: the house was almost a square of 40×37 m, or 1480 sqm (Fig. 9). The identification of several stairwells in the ground floor proved that the building had an upper floor or at least terraces. Several rooms of this exceptional residence are tiled with baked bricks and the use of bitumen coating is frequent. The construction is very meticulous. The mud-brick wall base is regularly made up of seven layers of baked bricks, four in the foundation and three in the elevation above the floors. Everything testifies to a construction of the highest standard.

The economy of the plan is discernible. The entrance of the house, which has yet to be excavated, is probably at the eastern angle of the building, where the northeastern façade projects outward, facing the official buildings not far to the east. The large rectangular central courtyard is offset to the east. With its baked-brick sidewalk along the walls, it measured 14×15 m, and occupied more than 210 sqm along the northeast façade of the house. The main rooms are to the west of the courtyard with, in the center, a huge reception room of almost 85 sqm (18×4.7 m) and, further west, the block formed by the living room and its antechamber, typical of the period. The smaller and more private rooms are to the north.

In two places, the excavation revealed the existence of an earlier building on which the last level of occupation was built, without however taking up its exact layout (rooms 1578 and 1617). Two more rooms were excavated in 2021. Room 1595 is a state-of-the-art water room, with a concave bitumen floor pierced in its center by a drain over 5 m deep. The ceramic material found in situ is dated to the Isin-Larsa period, and has provided the first element of dating for the building. As in all the adjoining

rooms, a thick layer of burnt destruction extended over its entire surface. The adjacent room (1598) was an archive room (Fig. 10). Its floor partially covered with baked bricks, revealed remains of burnt furniture: a wooden chest, a reed basket and some ceramics in situ dating from the Isin-Larsa period. It contained a large quantity of shards, animal bones and, especially, several dozen fragments of clay tablets, envelopes and sealings. The fragments were very degraded, evidently thrown on the floor and deliberately destroyed before the building burned down. They represent an archive of just under a hundred tablets. The historical depth of this archive is only about twenty years, from 1915 to 1895: three tablets date from the second half of Gungunum's reign (1932-1906 BC), namely years 17, 25 and 27. All other tablets with a year name are dated to his successor Abi-sare (1905-1895 BC), from year 1 to his 11th and last year (Fig. 11). So far, none of them dates from Sumu-El, which could give a clue as to when the house was destroyed and abandoned.

In addition to dates, the seal impressions, both on tablets and envelopes, have also been the subject of a particularly thorough study. The iconography is magnificent and deserves a study of its own. The corpus includes thirty-two seals and provides very important results for prosopography. The main figures in this archive are Etellum and his two sons Ikun-pi-Ištar (alias Ikun-piša) and Sin-šululi, who clearly were the owners and occupants of the house (Fig. 12). According to his personal seal, Etellum was appointed grand vizier (SUKKAL.MAH) by King Gungunum and remained in this position at least until the end of the reign of his son and successor, Abi-sare. Two other sons, whose names are unfortunately lost, are known by their personal seals. Etellum's wife, Ayalatum, was already known (See Mayr 2010, to be corrected with Földi 2016 and Charpin 2017; <https://www.archibab.fr/S880>). We are thus dealing with a very rare case for an elite family of this period, where the personal seals of the father, the mother, and four sons are known.

The other seals attested belonged to scribes, a priest, a merchant, etc., all members of the Larsa elite at that time. Some legends revealed new dignitaries and members of the royal family: two impressions of the seal of a princess named Rubatum were found. She was the cousin of king Abi-sare. Seal impressions of Ea-šar, son of Nur-Ea, and thus brother of the grand vizier Etellum, were also found. He is described, not as “servant” of King Samium, but as his utullum-“shepherd” (Ú.TÚL). Ea-šar was clearly the chief of the pastures of the kingdom of Samium. We have here an additional element that demonstrates the dimorphic character of the society of the kingdom of Larsa at this time, as has been well shown by P. Steinkeller (2004). Etellum, who occupied the function of “grand vizier”, was responsible for the sedentary part of the kingdom's population, while Ea-šar had authority over the part of the population that remained nomadic.

The content of the texts does not reflect the responsibilities of the grand vizier but only the management of the residence. Most of the texts are accounting documents: these receipts correspond to the internal management of the household (rations to the teams of workers, food for the livestock, etc.). Expenditures are most often ordered by Ikun-piša; the majority of receipts are sealed by Išme-Sin and Ili-puzri, who must have been two intendants. The correspondence is limited to three fragmentary letters, two of which are addressed to Ikun-piša, one being sent by Etellum himself. There is also a letter envelope addressed by Išme-[...] to Išme-Sin. Finally, we found some contracts.

To our knowledge, this is the first time that the residence of a head of government is discovered in Lower Mesopotamia. The texts do not say when the house was built, but it can be hypothesized that residence B49, like B48, dates from the time when Gungunum reshaped Larsa. Epigraphic findings, on the other hand, allow us to date the abandonment of the building to the end of the reign of Abi-sare, in 1895, or to the very beginning of the reign of his successor Sumu-El. The continuity between the reign of Abi-sare and that of Sumu-El has generally been put forward (Fitzgerald 2002: 55-56). Etellum may have remained in office for some time under his reign. But the lack of texts dated to Sumu-El and the violence with which room 1598 was ransacked and the entire house of the grand vizier burned down raise the question of whether the prime minister in office under the two previous kings could be ousted quickly after Sumu-El took power. It should indeed be noted that nowhere does Sumu-El claim to be the son of

Abi-sare as one would expect according to the rules of succession. The question today is whether he took power by force.

To conclude, the new means available to archaeology have allowed us to make great progress in our knowledge of the city. The veil is beginning to be lifted on all the skill of the ancients in hydraulic engineering, while the reign of King Sin-iddinam takes on an unexpected relief in the history of the city. It seems more and more clear that the city does not conform at all to the hackneyed model of the Mesopotamian city, with its dense, homogeneous fabric, tightly enclosed within its walls. Rather, an 'archipelago' structure is emerging, with structurally and functionally differentiated neighborhoods loosely united within a vast enclosure. It is possible to see in it the making of a hybrid society (Steinkeller 2004), marked by the nomadic origins of its Amorite ruling class. Beyond the discoveries, and the details of their interpretation, we can now work "à la carte" in Larsa. The limits of the city are fixed and we know what we can find, or not find, in its different sectors. This is a major change from the past and a lasting achievement that will be of benefit to all research in the future.

Acknowledgments

The results we have just summarized are the result of a team effort of which we could only mention the main members. About forty European and Iraqi researchers and engineers participate in the Larsa-Uwaili program. May they find here the expression of our deep gratitude. The mission found a very warm welcome and was tremendously helped by all our Iraqi friends and colleagues. We would like to express our warmest thanks to Dr Laith Hussein (SBAH Chairman), M. Ali Obeid Shalgam (Director of excavations of SBAH), Ms Luma Joda (SBAH), Dr Luma al-Duri (National Museum) and Dr Ali Murad (National Museum) in Baghdad, to Chamil Ibrahim (Dhi Qar SBAH chairman), Haeder Kazim (SBAH) and Tahir Kwin Anid (former Dhi Qar SBAH Chairman and supervisor of the mission) in Nassiriya.

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Figures begin next page >>>

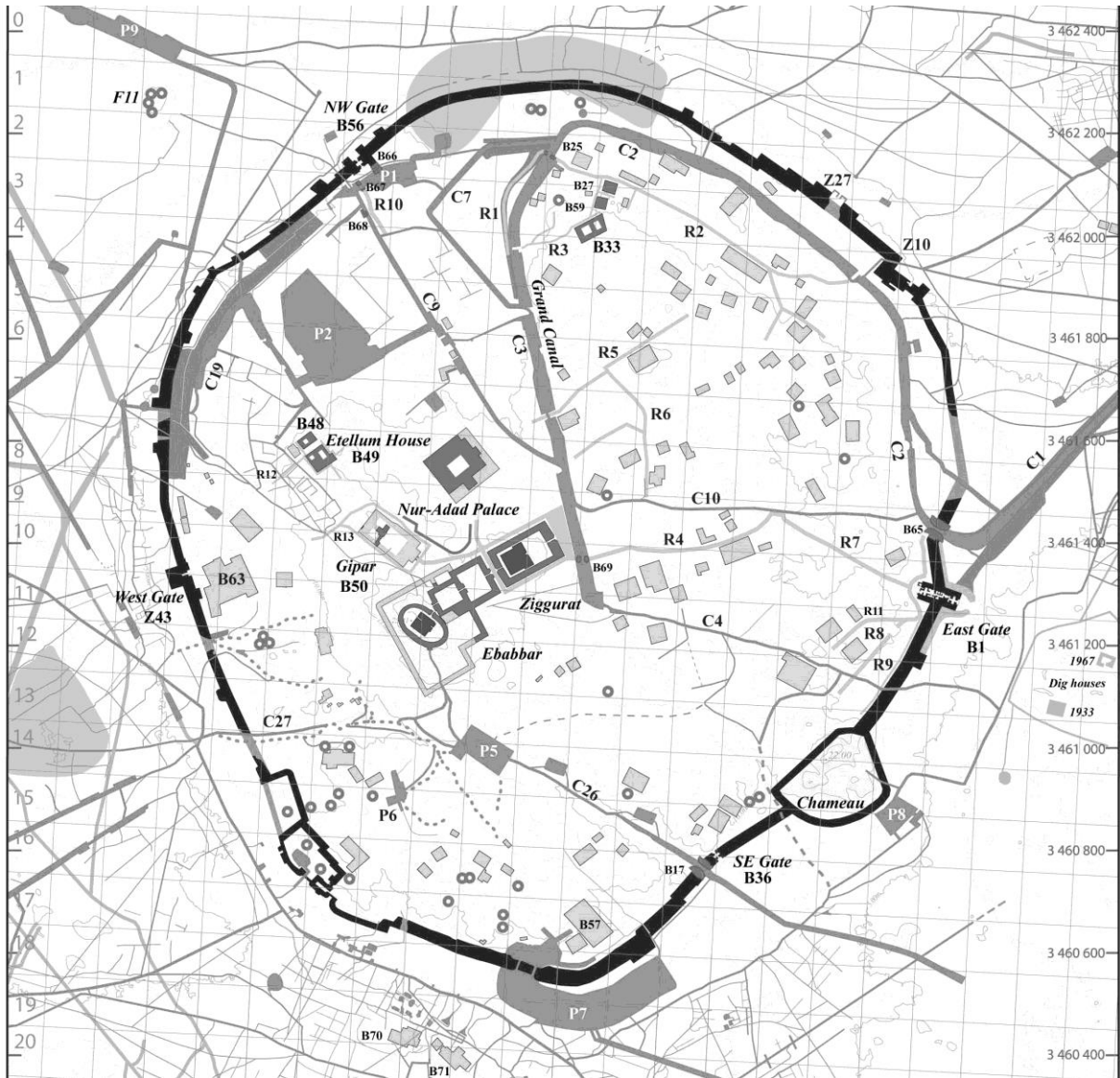


Fig. 1: New general plan for Larsa (extract, 2022). Squares are 50m square, north is at the top.



Fig. 2: Trench PZ, top of the eastern pier of bridge B69, from the west. The inscribed King Sin-iddinam brick is to the right of the scale.

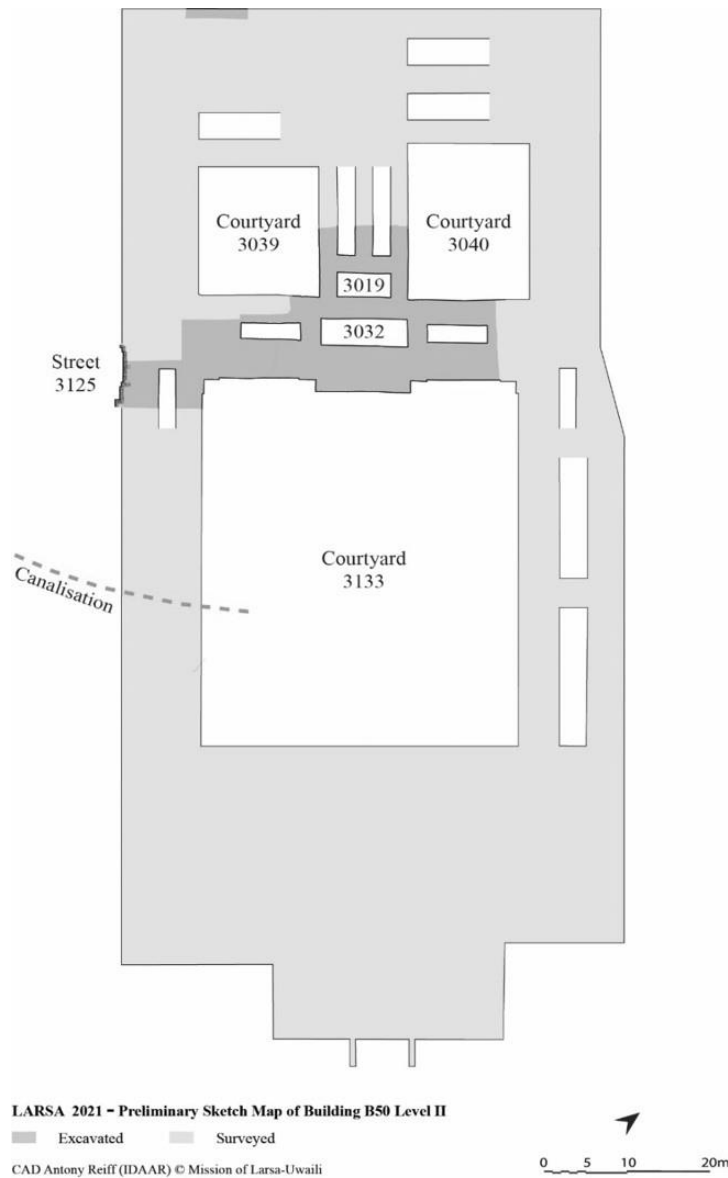


Fig. 3: General plan of building B50 (R. Vallet, A. Reiff, 2022).



Fig. 4: B50, “Larsa” goblet from Room 3019 (H: 18.5 cm).

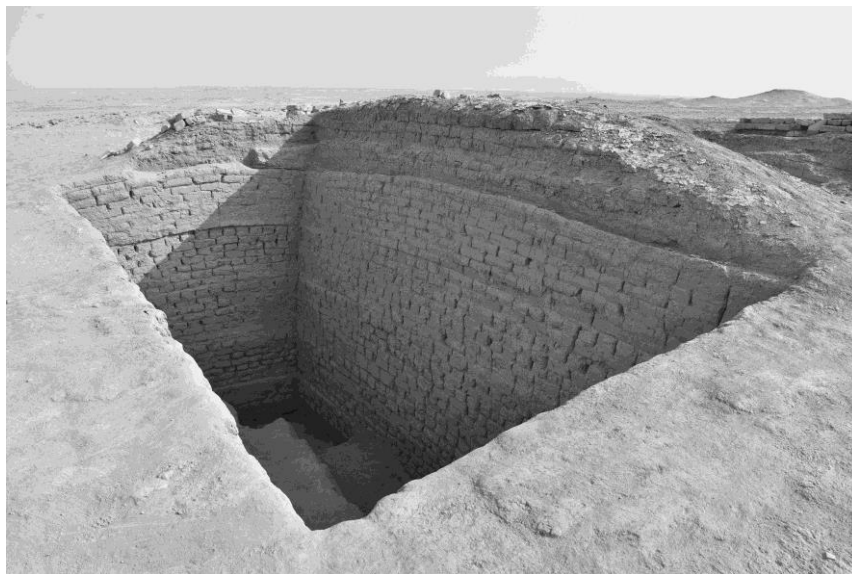


Fig. 5: B50, Room 3019, from the northwest. The first floor is entirely preserved.



Fig. 6: Baked brick facing with niches and recesses on the west façade of temple B50.

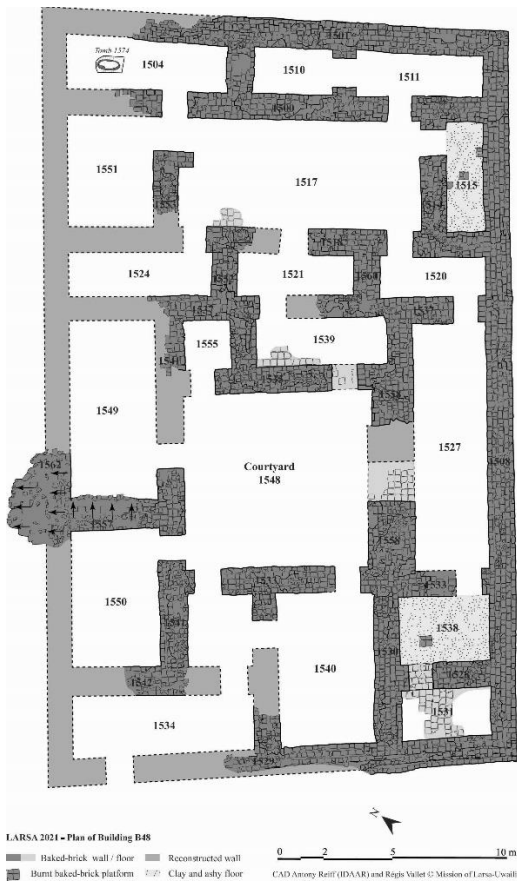


Fig. 7: Restored general plan of B48 (R. Vallet, A. Reiff, 2022).

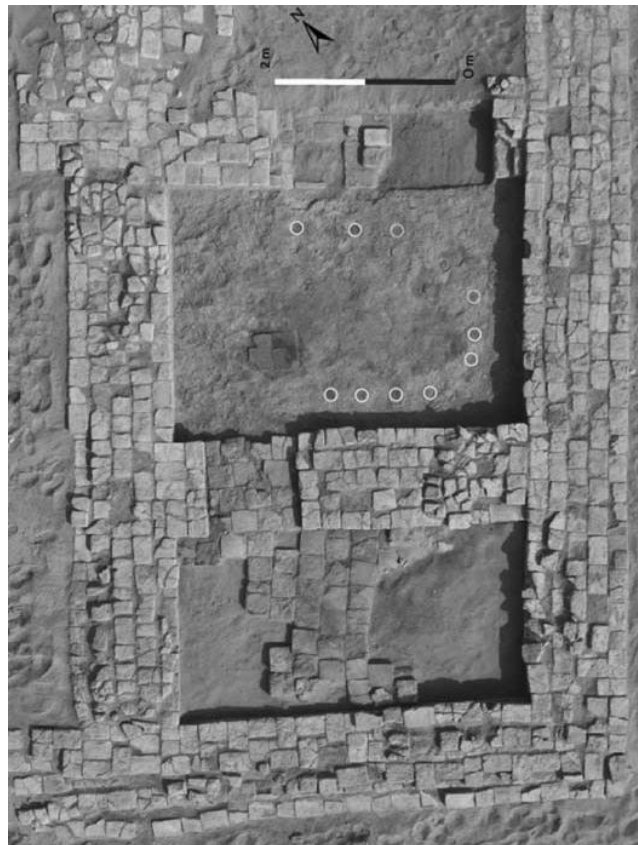


Fig. 8: B48, the 1538 kitchen (right) and its tiled cellar (left). The white circles indicate the location of the posts supporting the shelves.

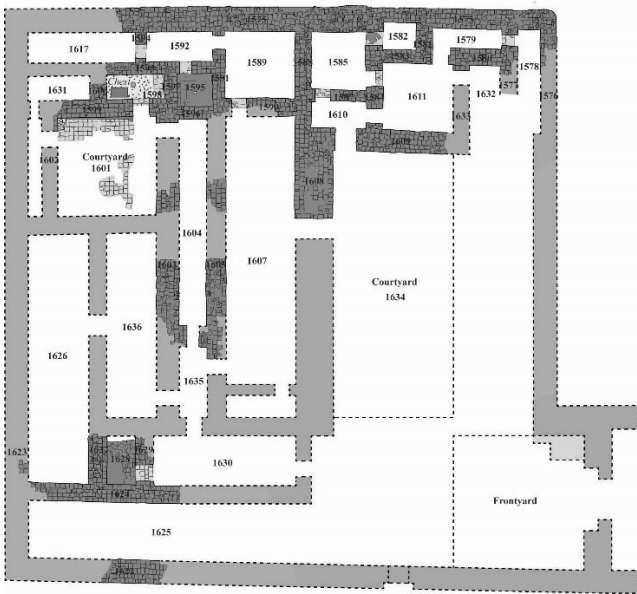


Fig. 9: Partially restored plan of B49 (R. Vallet & A. Reiff, 2022).



Fig. 10: B49, excavation of the archive room 1598. In the foreground, the remains of the wooden box (1.15 x 0.80 m) which must have contained the tablets.



Fig. 11: B49, archive room 1598, tablet dated to the reign of Abi-sare.



Fig. 12: B49, archive room 1598, impression of the seal of Ikun-pi-Ishtar.