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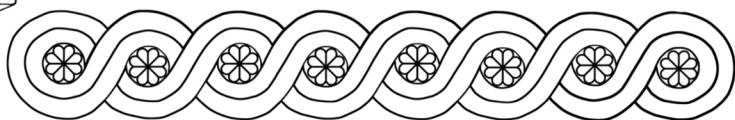
Volume 2

Field Reports

Islamic archaeology



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# Some Considerations on the Archaeological Area of Tulūl Al-Baqarat (Wasit, Iraq)

Carlo Lippolis<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The archaeological area of Tulūl al-Baqarat is located about 20 km south of the modern city of al-Kūt (Wasit Governorate, Iraq) and encompasses a series of mounds with traces of settlements datable between the fourth millennium BCE and the Islamic era. The main mound (named TB1) was extensively investigated by the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq (SBAH) from 2008 to 2010. The Italian Archaeological Mission of the Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino (CRAST) and the University of Turin, thanks to the patronage of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and the support of SBAH, has been active in the area since 2013 with the aim of documenting settlement patterns and the architectural layout of the main mound. Unfortunately, the latter has been strongly compromised by natural erosion, illicit excavations, and agricultural works and is poorly understood from an archaeological point of view.

## Introduction

Tulūl al-Baqarat is an archaeological area formed by a group of 10 mounds located 180 km south-east of Baghdad (Figs. 1, 2). Despite its ‘outlying’ position on the eastern margins of the alluvium, occupation in this area is documented over a time span stretching from the fourth millennium BCE to the Islamic period, confirming important settlement dynamics in this territory. At present, the mounds of Tulūl al-Baqarat represent one of the most ancient settled areas in the modern governorate of Wasit.

More than focusing on extensive excavation, the Italian archaeological activities undertaken between 2013 and 2019 aimed to investigate and reconstruct the main settlement dynamics in the area and its immediate surroundings.<sup>2</sup> In consideration of the significance of the architectural remains and the antiquity of settlement phenomena, a systematic survey and targeted excavations were carried out on the two main tells of the area (referred to as TB1 and TB7 in the Italian reports) in order to obtain a clearer picture of their cultural phases and general architectural layout.

Over the last few decades, illicit digging, heavy erosion phenomena, and agriculture have irreparably damaged the archaeological deposits of the entire area. Taking into account these factors, along with the remarkable lack of historical data on the region in which Tulūl al-Baqarat is located, the Italian archaeologists have strongly committed themselves to providing adequate documentation of the surviving archaeological evidence through sys-

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<sup>1</sup> Università degli Studi di Torino and CRAST.

<sup>2</sup> See the contribution by Eleonora Quirico in volume 1.

tematic surveys (TB7),<sup>3</sup> topography, laser scanning (used to record the entirety of TB1) and drone imaging over the past six years. Only the main mound of the area (TB1) had been extensively excavated by an Iraqi team<sup>4</sup> prior to the Italian investigations, between 2008 and 2010, with exceptional results. The Iraqi archaeologists also opened a single sounding atop the southern end of the mound named TB4, about 300 m south of TB1.<sup>5</sup>

### Mound TB1

Tell Baqarat 1 (TB1; Figs. 3, 4)<sup>6</sup> is the largest mound in the entire archaeological area and rises up to 13 m above sea level. Roughly circular in shape, it measures about 330 m along its north-south axis, and 270 m along its west-east axis. However, the original limits of the settled area are not clear; indeed, while the earliest traces of occupation date back to at least the third millennium BCE, the small mounds immediately south-west of TB1, namely TB2, TB3, and TB6, seem to have been settled during later periods (Parthian-Islamic). Moreover, it cannot be excluded that the settlement on TB1 originally extended further to the south-west and south/south-east, in an area that is now occupied by cultivated fields and well beyond its currently visible boundaries, possibly reaching TB4 and TB5 (see below).

The meaningful results of the Iraqi excavations well reflect the extraordinary significance of TB1, which is clearly manifested in the monumentality of its structures, the high artistic level of its sculptural production (Bahar 2020) and its royal inscriptions (Alkhafaji and Marchesi 2020; Viano 2016; Devecchi 2016). Unfortunately, an accurate interpretation of this site is still heavily hindered by the lack of published data on its architecture and stratigraphy. The *Interim Report* on the archaeological investigations at Tulūl al-Baqarat, published in 2020, covers exclusively the activities carried out by the Italian expedition over the last few years (2013-2019; Lippolis 2020. See also Lippolis 2016).

The inscriptions of third- and first-millennium kings seem to confirm the significant sacral role of this site. Based on inscriptions brought to light during the Italian excavations, its monumental complex has been recently connected with the worship of Nin-ḥur-saġ, suggesting the identification of TB1 with the ancient Keš (Lippolis and Viano 2016). The chronology of Keš roughly corresponds with that established for TB1, although occupation at the site during the second millennium BCE is only evidenced by a few pottery sherds and terracotta figurines. In this context, it can be hypothesized that the imposing reconstruction of the Neo-Babylonian period obliterated and erased (?) the second-millennium levels, as is well documented for the third-millennium layers on top of the tell. The identification of TB1 with Keš requires a revision of the geo-historical reconstruction of the region and supports the recognition, recently proposed by Maurizio Viano, of Tell al-Wilaya as Irisagrig (Viano 2019).

There are many points that need to be clarified concerning both the chronology and the reading of the structures exposed by the Iraqi archaeologists. The interpretation introduced here is based on direct observation of the structural remains and their main features, whereas stratigraphic data from previous excavations remain largely unavailable.

3 TB7 was the only mound to be intensively surveyed, as illicit excavations affected only a minimal part of the site. TB1 and TB4 have been extensively damaged by illicit digging, while TB5 was almost completely destroyed by large-scale, invasive agricultural works, which razed 90% of its surface in 2014-2015.

4 Under the direction of Mr. Ayad Mahir Mahmood (SBAH, Baghdad).

5 No published data are available in relation to this sounding.

6 TB1: 32° 20'14.86 "N - 45° 43'17.48" E.

The chronological framework provided by pottery from recent stratigraphic investigations corroborates the presence of layers dating to the third millennium BCE (from the EDIII period to the Ur III period), uniformly distributed across the mound. The Neo-Babylonian reconstruction obliterated earlier architectural remains, especially on the top of the tell, while Early-Dynastic, Akkadian, and Ur III cultural levels and structures are apparently better preserved in the southern and northern sectors of the site.

TB1 stands out as a large religious complex located on a high terrace or system of terraces and composed of interconnected areas. In particular, three main sectors can be distinguished along its north-south axis (Fig. 3).

The southern sector is characterized by an open area with altars, basins, and stelae (the published fragments of sculptures and inscriptions come from this part of the tell). Based on the size and shape of bricks, several third-millennium cultural phases ascribable to the ED III-Ur III periods are documented in this sector. At its northern end, a monumental stairway made of baked bricks leads to the upper terrace (corresponding to the top of the mound). The stairway consists of two consecutive but independent sections (Fig. 5), built with fired plano-convex bricks of slightly different shapes. It can be proposed that the two flights of steps were constructed during two distinct building phases related to the progressive expansion of the terrace towards the south.

The stairway leads to the top of the mound, the central sector, which bears the remains of a large Neo-Babylonian building (interpreted by the Iraqi archaeologists as a temple, Fig. 6). Its construction likely obliterated and/or erased, at least partially, the structures dating back to the third millennium BCE (although some remains are still visible west and north of the Neo-Babylonian 'temple'). This building is flanked, to the east, by a paved way made of bricks and bitumen, which connects it with a further group of structures (the so-called 'northern complex'). The attribution of this 'processional' way to a precise building phase remains problematic since both plano-convex and square (Neo-Babylonian) bricks are here used side by side.

The northern complex presents a central mudbrick platform encircled by a double enclosure (Figs. 7-8). The interpretation of the associated structures is particularly challenging owing to their extremely poor state of preservation, with only the foundation levels surviving. The layout of the enclosure was reconstructed almost in its entirety thanks to data provided by new soundings and the analysis of Unmanned Aerial View (UAV) imagery carried out by the Italian archaeologists (Fig. 9). It cannot be excluded that further linear traces, visible on the outside of the enclosure in aerial images, correspond to an external enceinte or wall that might have originally surrounded the whole religious complex of TB1.

The large, trapezoidal *temenos* (about 100 x 60 m; its layout was accentuated on aerial images by applying filters and enhancing contrast: Fig. 9) seems to consist of concentric walls delimiting rooms and corridors, as also attested by excavations on its eastern side. Remains of mudbrick walls within the enclosure suggest the presence of structures all around the central platform (today still 5-6 m higher than the surrounding area), which was only scraped/partially excavated by the Iraqi archaeologists and interpreted as a *mastaba* or ziggurat.

Based on pottery and the size of bricks, the northern complex can be dated between the late Early-Dynastic/Akkadian and the Ur III periods, while no evidence of a Neo-Babylonian phase emerged here.

The western and eastern slopes of TB1 remain, at present, virtually unknown, as they have been heavily damaged both by illicit digging and natural erosion. However, third-millennium levels were also registered on two other mounds immediately south and west of TB1 during preliminary surveys: TB5, a tell that will be further considered below, and TB4, where only a small sounding was opened and revealed layers with plano-convex bricks and polychrome (Scarlet Ware) pottery sherds (likely to be dated between the Jemdet Nasr period and the early stages of the Early Dynastic period). In light of this datum, it can be suggested that, during the third millennium BCE, the occupied area stretched beyond the limits of TB1, including TB4 and/or TB5 as well.

Concerning the issue of the identification of TB1, Keš is mentioned in a series of documents dating back to the second millennium BCE. For example, it is referred to in some of the epithets of Hammurabi;<sup>7</sup> in the year name of Rīm-Sîn II B, who was crowned in Keš;<sup>8</sup> in a letter from Rīm-Sîn II to Amurru-tilati;<sup>9</sup> and in the recently published royal inscription found on a fragmentary statue of Samsuiluna, which mentions Keš<sup>10</sup> and adds new data on the revolt led by Rīm-Sîn II against the Babylonian king in southern Mesopotamia.<sup>11</sup>

Taking all these aspects into account, it could reasonably be expected to find significant evidence of second-millennium levels at Keš/TB1. On the contrary, the Old-Babylonian period is barely documented on TB1, and exclusively in the form of scattered materials (terracotta figurines, few cylindrical seals, and pottery sherds). As mentioned above, this may be explained by assuming that the settlement was larger in ancient times or that, at a certain point, it shifted slightly to the west, in the area that is currently occupied by TB5. Here, a preliminary survey revealed the presence of materials dated between the end of the third millennium BCE and the first centuries of the second millennium BCE. Unfortunately, this large mound was completely leveled for agricultural purposes in 2014.

### **Mound TB7**

Archaeological investigations in the Tulūl al-Baqarat area also focused on a mound named TB7,<sup>12</sup> located just 1 km south-east of TB1 (Figs. 10, 11). Despite the lower occurrence of illicit excavations on TB7 compared to other tells in the area, heavy erosion negatively affected the preservation of structures.

The main features of the site suggest its identification as a rural settlement, with residential and productive units flanked by a monumental sector, which is placed atop an elevated area roughly at the center of the tell. The presence of structures delimiting the settlement, perhaps to be interpreted as a wide ditch bordering the site, is highlighted by the strong color contrast between their outline and the surrounding ground in aerial images.

Architectural remains, pottery, and other materials point at a main Early Uruk (Late Chalcolithic 2) occupational phase, homogeneously documented in all the sectors

7 E.g. ‘Lord of the scepter and the crown, who had made him perfect Mama [lady of Keš]’ and ‘the one who realizes the plans of Keš’; CH iii 30-35.

8 For Rīm-Sîn’s year names see Sgrist 1990.

9 BM 85324/AbB 13, 53-II.

10 According to this inscription, Samsuiluna destroyed Keš – ‘Ninhursag’s Gate’ and, most likely, executed Rīm-Sîn there.

11 Lambert and Weeden 2020: 24-26, 30 and 39. According to this inscription, the core of the uprising has to be placed much farther north and east than previously thought.

12 TB7: 32°19’53” N - 45°44’00” E.



(Bruno 2020; Di Michele 2016). A later and apparently less substantial re-occupation of TB7 can be associated with the Parthian period.

Significant data come from Sounding S3, in the north-western sector of the site (Fig. 12), where structures belonging to a large building with residential and productive functions, named Building A, were brought to light (Lippolis *et al.* 2019). The building, which is characterized by multiple phases and sub-phases, can be roughly dated to the Early Uruk period (Quirico 2020). The presence of 13 sub-floor pit burials, in a few cases well preserved and provided with grave goods, allowed a preliminary reconstruction of Early Uruk mortuary behaviors at the site (Ragazzon 2020). Of particular interest is the practice of placing a well-polished stone tray or a red-ware bowl with a spout behind the head of the deceased, which could be reconstructed from some of the funerary contexts (Fig. 13).

As already mentioned, the excavation of S3 exposed part of a large building (Figs. 11, 12). The interpretation of its function as mainly residential is based on the utilitarian nature of the associated objects, the general layout of the structures, and the presence of productive installations and burials in some of the rooms.

Except for the evidence relating to the late re-occupation of the area during Phase III (Parthian period), attested primarily by some artisanal structures distributed across S3 and including a drainage channel and a large drainage pit, the remaining materials indicate cultural uniformity during Phases I (Sub-phases a-b) and II (Sub-phases a-c), which are both referable to an Early Uruk chronological horizon.

The most significant difference between these phases is to be detected in the function of spaces, which seems to have been chiefly residential in Phase I and more orientated towards artisanal/productive activities in Phase II (especially in the northern sector).

As regards Phase I, the oldest occupation phase to be extensively documented in the investigated area, interesting transformations in the internal layout of Building A allowed the identification of two sub-phases (a and b), both suggesting a residential nature of relevant structures, but each characterized by a completely different spatial organization.

While the reconstruction of the internal plan of Building A during the most recent sub-phase (Ib) is mostly clear, the precise identification of structures belonging to Sub-phase Ia is more complex. Indeed, structural interventions between the two sub-phases must have involved the leveling of pre-existing walls. In both its sub-phases, the building was characterized by the presence of several open spaces, seemingly surrounding it, provided with numerous *tannur* ovens and other fire installations.

Phase II, as previously discussed, was primarily investigated in the northern sector of S3; various work installations were brought to light in this area, including large pottery kilns containing kiln waste, mudbrick benches, and facilities for the storage and/or drying of foodstuffs. Despite the indisputable use of this sector as an area destined for processing and production activities during Phase II, it is still possible to hypothesize some form of domestic occupation in the remaining part of Building A.

The presence of coherent wall alignments visible east and west of the excavation area in aerial images hints at the existence of additional buildings and at a certain complexity of the settlement in this part of the site.<sup>13</sup>

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13 Based on plans and stratigraphic considerations, it can be hypothesised that the structures excavated at the north-eastern end of this area originally belonged to a different building neighbouring Building A.

Finally, significant settlement continuity in the S3 area is suggested by evidence of more ancient anthropic levels, identified within a deep trench dug in one of the rooms of Building A, which revealed copious amounts of stratified pottery sherds and thick layers of ash. The continuous and prolonged occupation in this sector, together with the size of the settled area, well reflects the significance of TB7 in relation to a better understating of life and settlement dynamics during the early stages of the fourth millennium BCE.

In the central part of TB7, a roughly oval elevated area rises up to 4 m above the surrounding plain (Figs. 11, 14). It measures 38 m along its south-west/north-east axis and 57 m along its north-west/south-east axis. The elevation, heavily eroded by water and wind, exhibits an irregular top with a central depression running parallel to its north-eastern and south-western sides. The north-western and south-eastern sides present less steep and slightly lower slopes, heavily washed away by the action of rainwater.

Several structures were originally leaning against this central elevation, at least on its south-eastern side, where excavations covered a sloping area of about 20x30 m and revealed a rather complex layout of walls, sometimes articulated in niches, belonging to different Early Uruk phases.

The structures and the archaeological material (pottery, bricks, clay cones, terracotta cylinders) found on the central elevation of TB7 relate to the same cultural horizon identified elsewhere on the site. In particular, the ceramic material that emerged here is homogeneous and dates back to the first centuries of the fourth millennium BCE, a period after which the site experienced a very long phase of abandonment before being partially reoccupied only in Parthian times.

Since its earliest phases, the settlement on TB7 seems to have been characterized by the presence of a central platform or terrace. Although the ancient structure(s) on its top has now completely disappeared, its importance is suggested by its position and by the discovery of fragments of mudbricks bearing a painted decoration (Fig. 15).<sup>14</sup>

Finally, it is still unclear on which side of the terrace the main access was located. Even though it cannot be completely ruled out that its top could be reached from the south-east (perhaps precisely from one of the points where depressions in the ground are today marked by wadis), the existence of a monumental entrance on this side must be excluded. On the other hand, the presence of the above mentioned fragments of painted decoration near the north-western end of the terrace, which has not been investigated yet, could indicate that the main access was to be found on this side.

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14 The small fragments found in Sounding S1 allowed the reconstruction of a decorative, oblique chequer-board pattern in white, black and red; see Lippolis 2020: 200-201.

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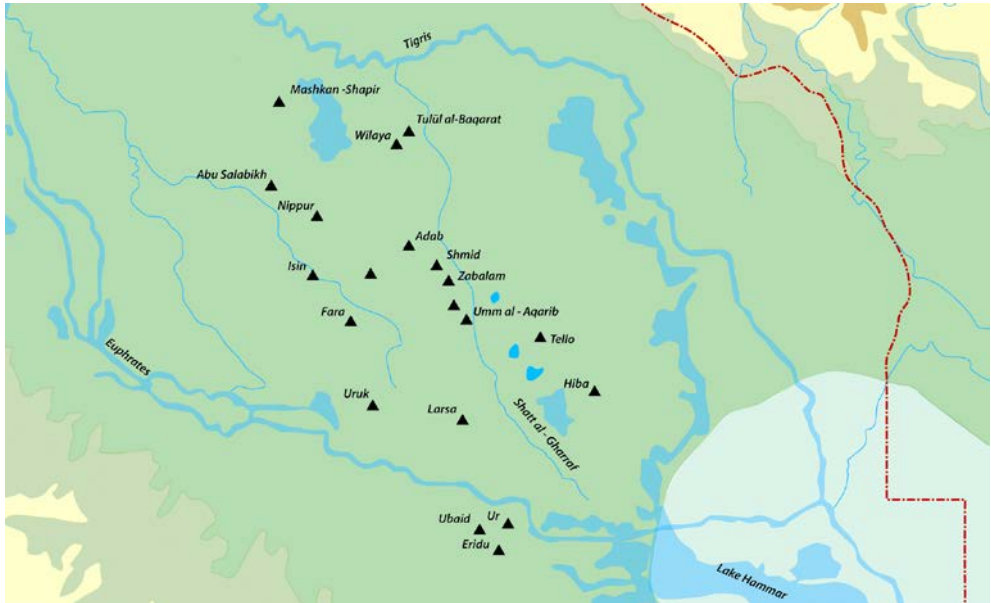


Fig. 1: Map of southern Mesopotamia with the location of Tulul al-Baqarat (drawing C. Fossati)

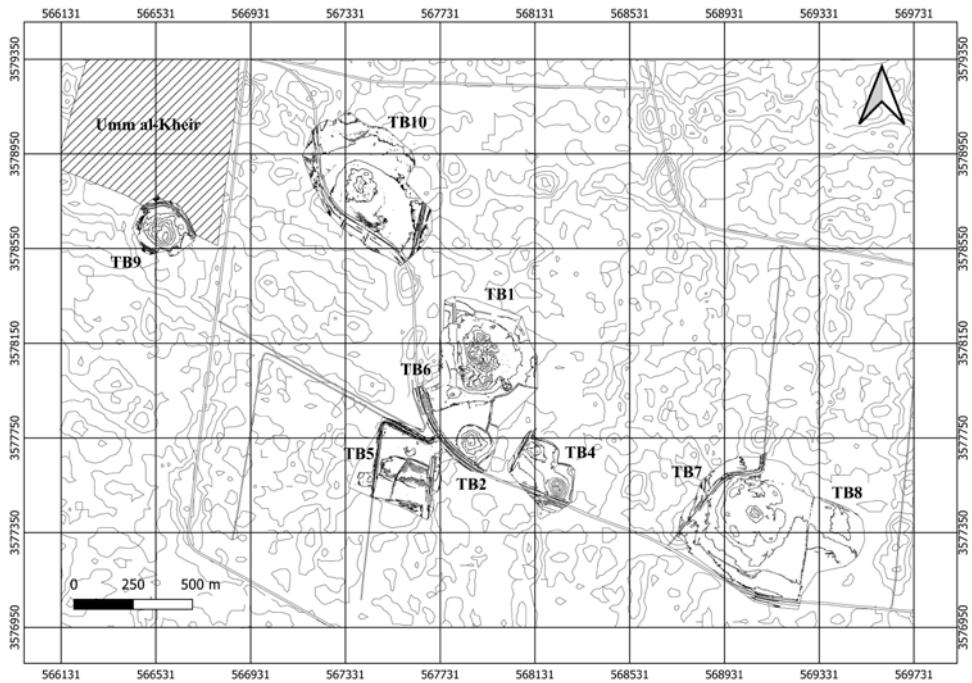


Fig. 2: Topographical map of the archaeological area of Tulul al-Baqarat (M. Furlanetto)

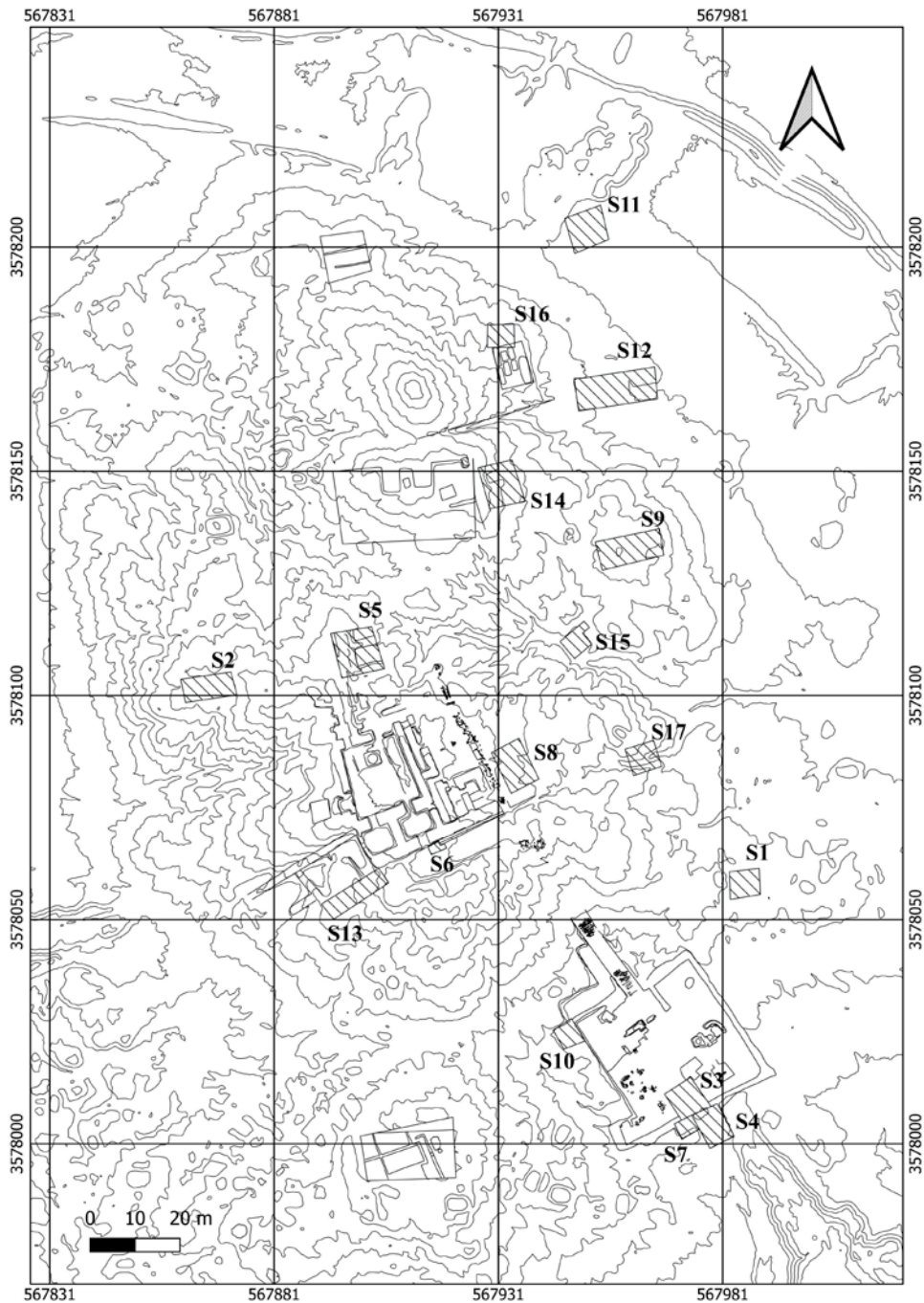


Fig. 3: Topographical map of TB1 (C. Bonfanti, M. Furlanetto)



Fig. 4: Aerial view of TBI from south (archive CRAFT)



Fig. 5: TBI: the stairway leading to the upper terrace (archive CRAFT)



Fig. 6: TBI: aerial view of the 'temple' from south (archive CRAFT)



Fig. 7: TBI: aerial view of the 'northern complex', from north-east (archive CRAFT)



Fig. 8: TB1, northern complex: sounding 12 (2019, archive CRAFT)

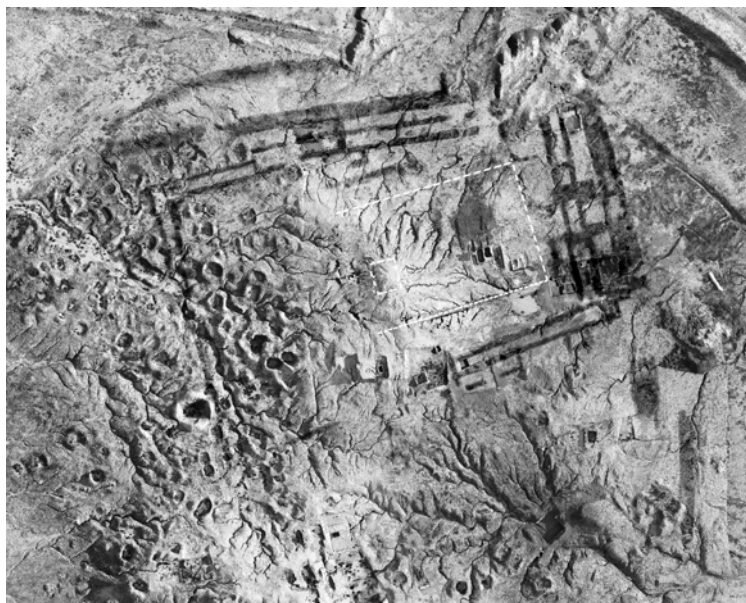
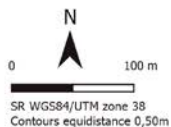
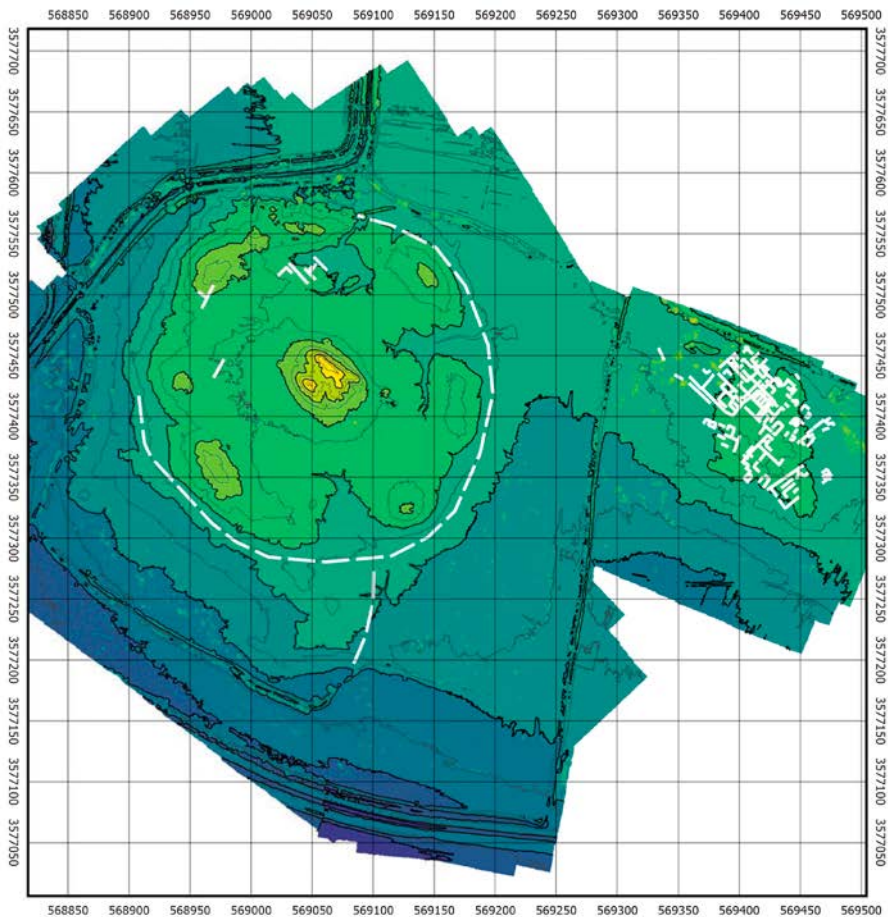


Fig. 9: TB1, northern complex: the external layout of the enceinte is enhanced by filters and contrast





**Tulūl al-Baqarat**  
**TB7 and TB8 - Map of walls photointerpretation on DEM 2019**

Fig. 10: Topographical map and DEM of TB7 (C. Bonfanti, M. Furlanetto)



Fig. 11: TB7: aerial view from north-west (archive CRAFT)



Fig. 12: TB7, sounding S3: view from south (2019, archive CRAFT)



Fig. 13: TB7, sounding S3: sub-floor pit burial (archive CRAFT)



Fig. 14: TB7: aerial view of the central elevation, from south-east (archive CRAFT)

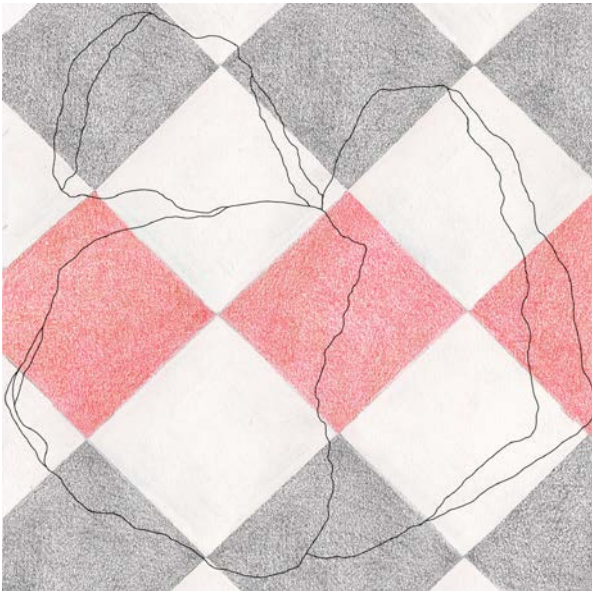


Fig. 15: TB7, central elevation: reconstruction of the painted decoration (drawing C. Fossati)