

Tablets and Tombs¹

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When Susan joined the Abu Salabikh team in 1985 she spent many hours in square 6H83 tracing the sequence of plastered floors in Room 70 of a large ED III house (**Fig. 1**). The quality of the floors and the frequency with which they were relaid indicated that this was a formal reception room, but unlike some other reception rooms, notably Room 39 in the Southern Unit, it did not hide beneath its floors one or more full-sized adult burials. This was in stark contrast to the kitchen lying directly to its west (Room 69), in which we located at least four adult sized grave shafts (Graves 220, 241, 235, 237). None of these still retained much if any of their human remains, but rather unexpectedly a number of cuneiform tablets were retrieved from the fill of the robbed out Graves 241 and 220. Fragments from five different originals were recovered, all unequivocally administrative, dealing with land and grain (Krebernik and Postgate 2009, IAS Nos. 550–554). Since all the graves must have been sunk from floor levels which had already been eroded before we arrived on the scene (i.e. from Level IB or later), and the robbing activities must have been later than each individual burial, the presence of administrative documents did not seem to us very informative about the nature of this space when the occupants of the house were handling the tablets, but on mature reflection perhaps their presence in a second-hand funerary context may not have been entirely coincidental.

Tablets in houses

Although in phase IC of the 6H House the occupants seem to have avoided burying family members under the floor of the main reception room, preferring to use the central courtyard, perhaps because of the sheer size of resting place that the presumed head of household merited, in Room 39 of the Southern Unit, which has the configuration and dimensions of a regular reception room, a succession of four graves were sunk side by side beneath the floor, including the rich and unrobbed Grave 1 (Martin et al. 1985, 19–37). Although here, in all probability a component of a temple complex, we would hardly expect a separate shrine or cella, the evidence for probably ritual activity directly above the grave foreshadows the situation some centuries later, when in Old Babylonian houses from Ur in the south to Sippar in the north the dead were housed in a subterranean vault, and the room above showed clear evidence of cultic activity, surely including libation practices attested by the texts. It was noted by Pedersén that at Ur a side chamber of the domestic cella was sometimes used to accommodate a household's collections of cuneiform tablets (Pedersén 1987, 47–48; 1992, 165; Woolley and Mallowan 1976, 29–30).

Pedersén's observations were prompted by his work on the integration of the Assur archives with their archaeological provenances. A

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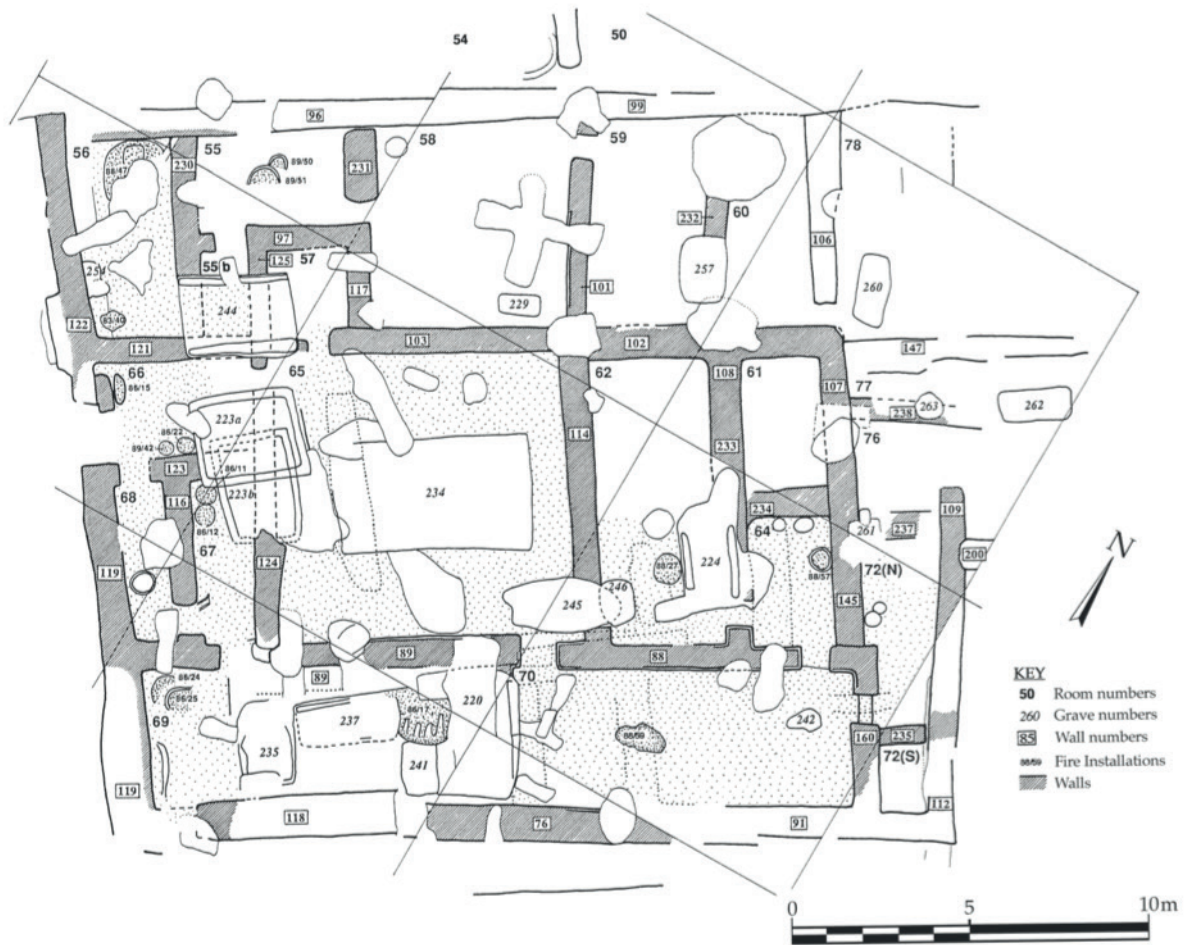


Fig. 1. Abu Salabikh 6H House Level IC. Drawing by: Abu Salabikh Archaeological Project.

tendency for domestic archives to be located in an inner room above the family vault in Neo-Assyrian houses at Assur was already noted by Walter Andrae (Pedersén 1992, 164), though not mentioned by later publications, and Pedersén's own work on the archives fully confirms this association. He is surely right to stress that the tablets were stored in the room above the funerary vault, and were not a component of the grave goods. Most private houses excavated at Assur belong to the Neo-Assyrian period, for obvious stratigraphic reasons, but there is an important Middle Assyrian residence in the town south of the Ištar Temple. Based on the two assemblages of tablets recovered by Andrae from this building, it has been convincingly identified by Pedersén as the house of Babu-aha-iddina (1992, 165–69). He has drawn attention to the curious fact that both the two main groups of documents

which, from internal criteria, clearly belonged in the archives of this highly placed member of the royal circle, were found immediately above the very richly furnished grave called *Gruft* 45. As he writes: “*Der Hausbesitzer legte seine Tontafeln in das innere Zimmer und unter dem Fußboden desselben Zimmers bestattete er seine Familie*” (Pedersén 1992, 166). The larger assemblage, located above the south-east end of the tomb, contained almost all the surviving letters written by Babu-aha-iddina to members of his staff, but in other respects the contents of the two assemblages are similar, both including bilateral sealed documents, unsealed memoranda, and a few letters from other correspondents (Postgate 2013, 204–09). While therefore the space above the vault may well have been used for the storage of tablets, we cannot claim that this was a place which provided maximum security.

What neither group contains are conveyance documents, such as land or slave sales or marriage or adoption deeds, some of which undoubtedly existed and would have been of importance and value. A chance remark in one of the letters reveals that some real estate documents were stored in Babu-aha-iddina's own bedroom (KAV 102 [Schröder 1920]; see Postgate 2013, 212).

Tablets in palaces

What Pedersén has already observed in private houses may have some parallels in some palaces. Not at Assur, where the Middle Assyrian palaces were stripped to the foundations and in any case the royal family (after death) occupied the separate architectural unit called the *Königsgrüfte* (or in Assyrian the “House of the Kings”) appended to south side of the main palace. Nor does the Giparku at Ur – the locus classicus for funerary rituals for former occupants of a building, as recorded in the archives retrieved from it – provide a parallel because the archives came from Rooms C22–23, C25 and C26, quite separate from the cemetery of the departed priestesses in the centre of the NE side of the complex, alluded to by both Kudur-mabuk's daughter Enanedu and Nabonidus more than a millennium later (cf. Weadock 1975, 109–10),² and the large brick vault in the extreme south corner of the complex, in Room C43 (Woolley and Mallowan 1976, 62). The archives themselves were described as “business documents”, dealing “with issues of rations of all sorts from the temple storerooms” (Woolley and Mallowan 1976, 58, especially footnote 13 for the location of the tablets). Although the disjunction between archaeologist and epigraphist precludes identification of their

individual provenances, there is no doubt that some or all of these tablets were the 67 described by their editor with precision as “accounts concerning allocation of provisions from offerings” (Figulla 1953). As UET V.851, edited by Figulla on p. 88, tells us, 11 baskets of these accounts had accumulated over a period of two years in the reign of Abi-sare, so what remained to be discovered by Woolley was evidently only a small fraction, and it defies our understanding as to why those which did remain had survived. What is clear, though, is that these were not the type of legal document, such as conveyances of real estate or slave which would have been retained for their evidentiary value.

Moving a little upstream, we find a similar situation at Uruk. There the palace of Sin-kašid provides us with the best example of an Old Babylonian palace in Babylonia proper. Since its walls did not survive above their foundations, virtually nothing was recovered from the ground level of the palace which would give a clue to the activities carried out in the different rooms, so as so often we are left to put forward guesses based on the architectural layout. However, there was one class of artifacts which was recovered, because strangely they ended up below floor level in the holes left by the door-sockets, and that is the cuneiform tablets. The doorsockets (*Angelkapseln*) cannot have been the original storage place of the tablets: Falkenstein wrote that “*die Gruben, die nachträglich, zum Teil unter Zerstörung der Türeinrichtungen, vom Fußboden aus eingetieft worden sind*” (Falkenstein 1963, 5).

Most of these tablets have been painstakingly edited by Shirin Sanati-Müller over a period

² There is disagreement about the meaning of a critical line in this text, and specifically of one sign, ÛRI or ŠEŠ. In Frayne 1990, 299–301, line 34, we have u₄-ba únu šeš ba-an-tùm and the translation reads “At that time the place of the ‘Hall-that-brings-bitterness’, the place of those (who had gone to their) destiny, the former en-priestesses”, whereas Weadock (pace Frayne's comment on p. 299) prefers to read ÛRI: “At that time, as for the ‘Dining Room in which the urinnu-symbols are set up’, the place of the ‘fateful day’ of the ancient entus.” (Weadock 1975, 109). Frayne also cites an alternative proposal by Charpin, but the Weadock/Jacobsen interpretation remains my preference.



Fig. 2. The Palace of Sin-kašid at Uruk. Tombs in red, tablet locations in green. After: *Fügert and Sanati-Müller 2013*, Abb. 41.3. © Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, C. Krug.

of 12 years, and she has recently given us a valuable survey of the entire assemblage (*Fügert and Sanati-Müller 2013*). Although plainly in at best secondary contexts, these were not entirely random, and it seems clear that their separate locations must reflect the distribution of scribal activity (whether writing or reading) across a number of sectors of the western half of the building (**Fig. 2**). In Room 35, from where the largest number came (over 200 pieces), the hole by the door socket was as much as 1.5 m deep, and the excavators were under the impression that the tablets had been deliberately placed there, rather than thrown in. They included documents from the

administration of cereal production (*Sanati-Müller 1988*), supply of fish (*Sanati-Müller 1989*), the working of metals, especially silver but also gold and copper (*Sanati-Müller 1990*) and various other commodities. From Room 30, by the doorway leading out onto Courtyard 23, came a collection of 141 numbered pieces sealed by a layer of carbonized palm wood and sherds. These were administrative texts dealing with reeds and wood (*Sanati-Müller 1996; 2000*). From Corridor 12, just inside the western wall of the palace, came a variety of economic texts and letters, including some royal correspondence (*van Dijk 1962*). These were edited in *Mauer 1987*.

One asks oneself, where are the important family archives? Evidently not here, and it raises the possibility that this palace was primarily an administrative building, and not the residence of the royal family. They must have had their own assets in human resources (i.e. male and female slaves) and real estate which would normally be backed up by carefully preserved tablets conferring legal title.

At Mari, the Old Babylonian palace *par excellence*, the issue is not so much where the tablets were, as where they weren't, and as it happens the one clearly funerary construction was in the smaller palace called by Margueron the Little Eastern Palace, which was planned and erected from the start with in-built brick vaulted tombs. Although no human remains or grave goods remained, it is thought that these must date to the period of the *šakkanakku*, and with their Akkadian names and their legitimacy inherited from the Dynasty of Akkad it would not be surprising if the rulers of the *šakkanakku* dynasty practised urban style intramural burial.

It is intriguing, therefore, that beneath the main Mari palace of which Zimri-Lim was the last incumbent, there appear to be no signs of burials. It is true that the kings were concerned to carry out the funerary *kispum* rituals for their dynasty and preceding dynasties, including the Kings of Akkad, and yes, the secondary chamber alongside their throne room was no doubt devoted to their ancestral cult, but *sauf erreur*, there are no reports of tombs under the floors. I suspect the reason for this is that the *šakkanakku* dynasty was replaced by full-blooded Amorites (the Lim dynasty), and that along with their ethnic identity they followed the traditional funerary customs of the nomad. We don't have any written sources informing us about Amorite burial practices, unless we believe the Sumerian literary trope which says of the Amorite that "*He has no house during his life, and when he dies he will not be carried to a burial-place*"

(ETCSL [The marriage of Martu](#) 137–38). This is of course prejudiced propaganda, but it certainly does not suggest that they buried their dead under urban houses.

Qaṭna

At the time of Sin-kašid and Zimri-Lim the Amorite domination of the Near East stretched from Uruk up the Euphrates past Mari far to the north-west at Tuttul and across the desert via Tadmor at least as far as Qaṭna. If the Late Bronze Age rulers there inherited Amorite traditions, it did not apply to burial practices, since in the 14th century the massive palace was associated with multiple inhumations in subterranean crypts (see the plan in [Pfälzner and Dohmann-Pfälzner 2011](#), 64, Abb. 1; **Fig. 3**). Two of these stand out: beneath room DA in the NW corner a small antechamber (labelled FK) gave access to an underground burial space carved out of the natural rock, and now named *Gruft VII*. Deep on the floor were the bones of more than 70 individuals, both sexes, young and old, and over 1000 grave goods including gold jewellery and Egyptian vessels. The mere fact that the occupants of this tomb were buried here strongly suggest that they had been residents of the palace in their lifetime, and the quality of some of the grave goods indicates that some of them must have been members of the elite, if not the nuclear royal family. It seems possible that the tomb is located close to a residential sector of the palace which would accord with this, but that is scarcely certain; there was little if anything to betray the precise function of Room DA itself through which the crypt was reached. The other major funerary discovery is the *Königsgruft*, opened in 2002. This collective royal tomb was not directly accessed from one or more rooms of the palace, but rather constructed like an appendage on its north corner, in a vault partly created in the natural *jebel* beyond the north-western limit of the regular layout. It was accessed by a long narrow corridor, leading down through multiple doorways from one of the main courts (Halle A) to

THE ROYAL PALACE OF QATNA

Reconstructed Plan G7



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Fig. 3. The 14th century palace of Qatna. Funerary chambers in red, access corridor in orange, tablet locations in green. After: Pfälzner and Schmid 2019, 145, Fig. 54. © Universität Tübingen, IANES, Qatna-Projekt, P. Pfälzner.

a deep entrance shaft guarded by two statues. Here too, the quality of the grave goods leaves no doubt that among the occupants were members of the royal family, if not actually the king of Qatna. As in *Gruft VII* the funerary gifts and the deceased were not covered with soil but exposed to the air, making it easy to re-open the *hypogeum* and introduce fresh occupants.

What we see here is perfectly compatible with Mesopotamian traditions, though with a strong western flavour. The palace was no doubt the principal residence of the royal family, and it was logical and traditional to bury them beneath it. Re-excavating the floor surfaces at irregular intervals to accommodate the most recent deaths can never have been convenient, and the space beneath individual living rooms would not have been enough for the royal dynasty. Hence a dedicated funerary chamber was incorporated in the design of the building, where it would be highly secure and shielded from intrusion, but would not interfere with daily life. In this it resembles the Little Eastern Palace at Mari, but instead of placing the tomb under the centre of the residential space, a site has been found which is marginal to the main occupation zone, but still accessible via the narrow corridor from one of the principal reception halls. *Gruft VII* is also set apart in its own marginal space, under small cells of uncertain purpose, rather than inserted beneath the floor of a residential room like the graves at Ur or Uruk. The association of these funerary chambers with the main palace building, but not directly beneath the principal ceremonial and residential rooms is reminiscent of the situation at Middle Assyrian Assur where the “House of the Kings” was an appendix attached to the south side of the palace complex.

As for tablets, the remarkable inventories of jewellery and precious stones from the 1924 season came principally from *Le Sanctuaire* (now Room P) in the north corner of the main courtyard (Hall C), identified as the shrine of

Belet-ekalli (see [Du Mesnil du Buisson 1928](#), Pl. II and Pl. VII.2, 23–24; with an additional example found in 2003 out of context: [Richter 2004](#)). On the other hand the majority of the tablets recovered by the international project in 2002 were found at one of three spots in the access corridor of the *Königsgruft*. The corridor itself was from 2–2.5 m high below the roof, both floor and roof sloping down to reach the deep entrance shaft at the north end. Obviously the tablets were not found exactly where they were written. The majority of the administrative texts were found directly adjacent to the west wall of the corridor, between the southern access door and the central door, in or above three pottery bowls in which they must have been resting. Close to these to the south-east (“*unweit südöstlich*”) were the royal correspondence of Idadda and some other tablets, while two outliers were in the corridor about 20 m further to the north ([Novák and Pfälzner 2003](#), 148–51; [Richter 2009](#), 110–11). The excavators believe that they must have fallen into the corridor from a ground-floor chamber along with the roofing structure of the corridor, composed of wooden beams, reed mats and clay plaster, and they comment that because the documents were in open bowls (and not in a closed jar or on wooden shelves) they were not in a final storage place but “work in progress”.

While conceding that the opinions of excavators formed in the presence of the full facts in the ground should normally carry higher credibility than a reinterpretation by someone who was never there, the reconstruction of events here does invite some doubts. Accepting that the burnt debris filling the corridor (and the photo at [Novák and Pfälzner 2003](#), 149, in colour at [Pfälzner 2009](#), 170, gives an idea of its depth) derives from the roofing materials of the corridor itself, are we to suppose that this same roof structure also formed the floor of a ground-level room or rooms directly above the corridor? This is the implication of the wording in [Novák and Pfälzner 2003](#), 148 “*die aus Auflagebalken*,

Schilfmatten und Lehm Schlag bestehenden Konstruktionen der Korridordecke sowie des darüber liegenden Bodens des Erdgeschosses”. On the one hand, it is not self-evident that the traditional roofing materials of a Middle Eastern building – beams, reed mats (see **Fig. 4**, where palm fronds are also employed) and mud (**Fig. 5**) – would be the ideal flooring materials for an overlying space in a royal palace. To be honest, I have no fixed idea of what the architects would have devised in this situation, but I doubt if it would have been identical with their normal roof construction. Indeed a partial resolution of my ignorance here is supplied by the remarkable remains of inter-storey flooring constructions uncovered in the NW sector of the palace: here, in rooms DC, EO and EP substantial timbers had been used to install the ceilings of the lower storey to act as the floors of the main rooms at ground level, and there seem to be no reports of the reed mats and mud plaster noted in the corridor ([Dohmann-Pfälzner and Pfälzner 2011](#), 15, 20–24).

On the other hand, one should also consider the possible layout of rooms at the ground level. The published plans of the palace understandably show the sloping corridor in the same image as the ground floor rooms to each side– principally BE to the east and AG and Q to the west. An area of flooring is shown in each room (these floor patches are not visible in **Fig. 3**, but shown on the plan in [Pfälzner 2009](#), 166), especially against the east walls of AG and Q, and the unbroken wall line there would seem to imply that their east wall also supplied the west wall of the corridor, with a similar situation in room BE beyond the corridor’s east wall. Where then is the ground-level room in which the tablets would have been sitting when the palace burnt? Doubtless there is an answer, and understandably a simplified building plan partially reconstituted from Du Mesnil du Buisson’s original excavations, can hardly do justice to the complexity of the facts, but it seems unlikely that there was an exact replica of the

corridor itself at ground level, so the question remains: did rooms Q and AG, or room BE, in fact extend across the top of the corridor wall so that part of their contents could collapse into the filling of the corridor, or was there no structure immediately above the corridor, leaving an open passage separating the two sectors of the ground-floor layout?

In the light of this, it might be worth considering whether the cuneiform tablets had actually been stored on shelves within the corridor itself, and only fell into the thick band of ash as their support was also incinerated. The reports I have read don’t indicate how high in the debris filling of the corridor the three ceramic bowls and their associated tablets were found, but if it was below some or all of the roofing beams, this does seem a possible alternative scenario. Be that as it may, even if instead the tablets had been kept in a ground floor room, it would have been directly above the access to the royal crypt, and in this sense it is broadly parallel to the situation described by Pedersén for both the Middle Assyrian and the Neo-Assyrian periods at Assur. How significant this might be is a question which will be addressed in the conclusion.

Nimrud

If we look for further parallels, we can revert to the Neo-Assyrian world where Pedersén began, but move some way up the social ladder. In 1989 Muzahim M. Hussein revealed a vaulted tomb beneath Room 57 of the North-West Palace at Kalhu (**Fig. 6**). Named Tomb III, this had been constructed as the funeral chamber of Shalmaneser III’s mother, Mullissu-mukannišat-Ninua, the (or a) wife of Assurnasirpal II, presumably in the latter half of the 9th century. Although the stone sarcophagus and the tomb chamber proper were virtually empty, the ante-chamber had been used subsequently for further inhumations, accompanied by extremely rich grave goods ([Oates and Oates 2001](#), 86). More than one inscribed item indicated that this



Fig. 4. Making a roof – Abu Salabikh 1976. Photo by the author.



Fig. 5. The final layer of mud – Tell al-Rimah 1971. Photo by the author.

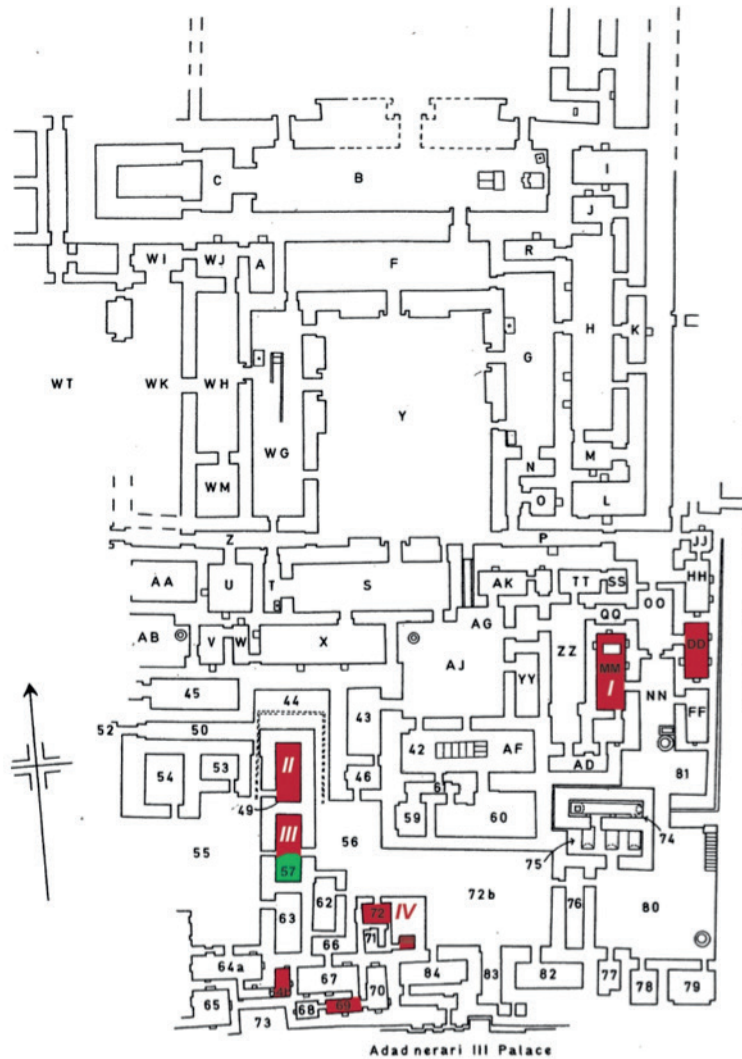


Fig. 6. The North-West Palace at Kalḫu, showing tombs in red and tablet location in green. After: Oates and Oates 2001, 60. © Joan and David Oates.

secondary usage dated to the 8th century, with the latest inscription on a duck weight from the reign of Tiglath-pileser (744–727 BCE). From the floor of Room 57 directly above the tomb the excavators recovered a large number of cuneiform tablets, 55 of which are edited in Ahmad and Postgate 2007. Except for one dating back to 844 BCE, the datable texts in this collection also belong in the 8th century, the latest to 736 BCE but the majority from before Tiglath-pileser, in the first half of the century. Some belong to the archive of a palace scribe called Nabu-tuklatua, with documents dating from 800 to 747, while others, especially the later tablets, would have belonged to a variety of individuals. The

common characteristic which is shared by all but three of the documents is that they are conveyances: sales of real estate or slaves. Such tablets were valuable as constituting proof of ownership in perpetuity and would have been carefully preserved.

Conclusions

It is therefore hard to resist the conclusion that in the domestic wing of this royal palace some members of the ruling elite were using the space directly above a royal tomb as a secure place for their valuable documents. The examples of both Kalḫu and Qatna demonstrate that if one of the motives for

intramural burial was to protect the tomb from robbery and destruction, it was sometimes surprisingly successful. In each case the success must have been due initially to the stable dynastic succession which assured the security of the access, and then to an abrupt political break which erased the local memory of the palace and what was in it. What the builders of the palaces and their tombs were unable to foresee was the inquisitiveness and persistence more than 2000 years later of archaeologists.

But why were tablets kept above the family vaults? Pedersén refrains from speculating as to the reason or reasons for this association. Two broad explanations suggest themselves. It is conceivable that the sector of a house, or a palace, devoted to the resting place of members of the family or of the larger household, was perceived as a numinous zone, and that items stored there would benefit from the protection this afforded and deter interference. The situation in the Old Babylonian houses, not just at Ur but e.g. in Sippar, where a family shrine would be located immediately above the family vault, indicates that the cultic zone could transcend the house floors and what lay below may have dictated what lay above – a case of *super hoc ergo propter hoc*. Placing an archive in a side chamber accessed from the ground floor shrine could be seen as exploiting the cultically protective environment. Yet there is no clear evidence known to me that in the Middle and Neo-Assyrian buildings the room above a tomb was devoted to cultic activities. Here then a more mundane explanation might suppose a more negative attitude under which the sector of a building above the tomb(s) was perceived as unsuited for everyday living, and, to coin a phrase as a “dead zone”, which was not frequented and very likely relatively inaccessible from the outside. This would provide an ideal environment for the storage of documents which were valuable but did not need to be regularly consulted. Is it merely that both the archives and the ancestors needed to be deposited inside the house but in

a place where they were undisturbed except when the family needed to have access to them? Even if there was not a direct causal link between tomb and tablets, in the sense of a conscious desire to provide numinous protection for valuable assets, it could still be that a space directly overlying a tomb was not felt appropriate for everyday living and hence offered itself as a convenient archive room.

To revert to Room 70 at Abu Salabikh, since no cuneiform tablets were recovered from the relevant IC phase of the 6H House (unlike phase IB), it is fruitless to speculate where, if they existed, they might have been kept. Moreover, it appears that in the house during this IC phase this main reception room was not used for burials, unlike Room 39 in the Southern Unit with its four parallel grave shafts. One is led to ask where, if anywhere, in the 6H House the domestic shrine or at least domestic rituals were located: the small hearths noted in Room 70 do not exceed what one would normally expect of a secular reception space. By comparison with the 5G House, towards the southern end of the Main Mound, where Room 1, accessed from the north end of the main reception room (see plan in [Postgate 1990](#), 102), does show signs of use for cultic activity, one might look for a small room leading off Room 70. Indeed Room 72 in the SE corner of the 6H House was accessible from the east end of Room 70, as the floor surfaces traced running continuously across the threshold attest. Unfortunately, apart from a simple low partition wall (Wall 235) there were no features in Room 72 which marked it out, neither fire installation nor brick construction, and its northward extension rather contradicts the impression of a secluded cubby hole. To the west, in the subsequent IB reconstruction of the house, at least four graves were sunk below the floor of Room 69, which may by this time have become a reception room rather than the original kitchen; at least four if not all five of the administrative tablets from here came from the fill of Grave 241. This had itself been

cut by the west side of Grave 220, and we can therefore be sure that the tablets reached their position at a time when this space was still being used for intra-mural burials. Could this suggest that here already in the Early Dynastic period some reception rooms which hosted family inhumations were becoming “off limits” for daily living and so could serve as a convenient storage space for documents? The other tablets from the IB phase of 6H House were an incantation which had fallen down the lavatory in Room 68, the archaic “tribute list” IAS 546, and IAS 555, a house sale fragment (Krebernik and Postgate 2009). These last two also came from the back fill of a tomb (Grave 223), but they are too incidental to support any speculation. Taken all together, the evidence from Abu Salabikh cannot be said to do more than pose the question, but the green and orange floors in Susan’s reception room remain an integral component of the struggle to match the facts in the ground with what really went on in the homes of our early literate citizens.

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