



# The Hirbemerdon Tepe Archaeological Project 2008: A Preliminary Report

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The Hirbemerdon Tepe Archaeological Project 2008: A Preliminary Report

Nicola LANERI - Jason UR

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# THE HIRBERMERTON TEPE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT 2008: A PRELIMINARY REPORT<sup>1</sup>

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Hirbermerdon Tepe is a site located along the left bank of the upper Tigris river valley, about 40 km. southeast of the modern city of Bismil, at the southeastern limit of the river valley where the natural limestone formation rises towards the Tur 'Abdin, creating a perfect landscape for a combined subsistence economy that includes agricultural activities along the river terrace and pastoral and hunting activities in the uplands. In addition, even though the site is characterized by multiple phases, its major archaeological period of occupation is the early second millennium B.C, when both the Outer Town and the High Mound were occupied.

In 2008, the archaeological work at Hirbermerdon Tepe continued following

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1 First of all, we would like to thank the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Turkey for its support, the permit for archaeological work at Hirbermerdon Tepe in 2008 and, especially, Nilüfer Babacan for her incredible help and Umit Yarci of the Van Museum who acted as the Ministry's representative in the field. The project was jointly planned with the Archaeological Museum of Diyarbakir, as part of the Ilisu dam project, and we send our warmest acknowledgments to the Museum Director Mehmet Arif Bilicli, Nevin Soyukaya, and Şeref Yumruk. Moreover, the project is performed in collaboration with Dr. Mark Schwartz (of Grand Valley State University). We owe our deepest thanks to the Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (ISIAO), Grand Valley State University (GVSU), Harvard University, and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their financial and logistical support. We would also like to thank Dr. Stefano Valentini (University of Florence, Field Director), Dr. Anacleto D'Agostino (University of Florence, Pottery Specialist), Dr. Joshua Wright (Stanford University), Emily Hammer (Harvard University), Remi Berthon (University of Reim, Archaeozoologist), Guido Guarducci (University of Florence, Illustrator), Francesca Gulli (ISIAO, Database manager) and all the other team members of the Hirbermerdon Tepe Archaeological Project, the people of Sahinler and Ahmetli.

the premises traced in the previous six years of work and have been based upon a broader understanding of the role the site had in the history of the upper Tigris river valley. During this archaeological campaign, the Hirbemerdon Tepe Archaeological Project was focused on defining and further investigating the following points:

- 1) To enlarge the exposure of the area of the architectural complex dating to the Middle Bronze Age in the High Mound (Area A). In particular, archaeological excavation was performed in the public/ceremonial sector located in the southern part of the complex.
- 2) To begin with the excavation of the Step Trench AB-AC that will cut through the whole High Mound and guarantee a better understanding of the chronological phases of occupation in this area of the site. In so doing, we decided to first test the area north of the architectural complex to better define the phases of occupation occurring before the construction of the architectural complex at the beginning of the second millennium B.C.
- 3) To continue with the regional survey of the area surrounding the site of Hirbemerdon Tepe.

#### *Excavation on the High Mound*

The investigation on the High Mound aimed at extending the eastern limit of the architectural complex of the Middle Bronze Age. In so doing, we excavated a 20x10 m. trench positioned along the main E-W section (Fig. 1). As noticed in the previous archaeological campaigns, the latest archaeological loci correspond to a series of badly disturbed architectural features belonging to the Medieval/Islamic period and the Iron Age phase. While the Medieval/Islamic is recognizable only in a few patches of walls and little material culture (e.g., Glazed Ware),<sup>2</sup> the levels belonging to the Iron Age phase are more complex to identify and are comprised of an Early

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2 For a better understanding of these later phases, we are planning the excavation of a step trench starting from the 2009 season.

Iron Age/Neo-Assyrian period, a Late Assyrian and a post-Assyrian (i.e. Late Iron Age or Hellenistic) phase. The first period is marked by a series of architectural features that appear to be associated with working activities and by the presence of mostly local pottery (e.g., Grooved Ware and holmouth jars) and Common Ware of the Neo-Assyrian period; the Late Assyrian phase has shown a few architectural features, pottery and an iron dagger similar to the one found at Ziyaret Tepe (Matney *et al.* 2007: Fig. 20); while the latest part of this Iron Age horizon is mostly characterized by the presence of intrusive pits and one infant burial.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the material culture associated with this later phase is represented by different variations of painted ware (e.g., jars with long painted triangles framed by horizontal lines) that belong to a broad post-Assyrian horizon visible at numerous other sites of the upper Tigris region (Matney *et al.* 2007: 43-44).

However, the most important archaeological phase at Hirbemerdon Tepe is represented by the Middle Bronze Age and, in the High Mound, by the presence of a large architectural complex.

*The Architectural Complex of the Middle Bronze Age*

Starting from the first work of archaeological reconnaissance at the site of Hirbemerdon Tepe in 2003 (Laneri 2005), it has been clear that the main phase of occupation of this small-sized site was the first half of the second millennium B.C. that is the Middle Bronze Age (Fig. 2 and 3). This is especially evident from the pottery assemblage that characterizes the site as well as numerous other settlements of the region, the so-called Red Brown Wash Ware (Laneri *et al.* 2008).

With these premises in mind, our main scientific efforts have been dedicated to investigating the large architectural structure that appeared in the images of the geomagnetic survey done on the High Mound in 2004 (Laneri 2006).

<sup>3</sup> A detailed analysis of the Iron Age period at Hirbemerdon Tepe is currently under process and will be published at the end of 2009.

The archaeological work has confirmed the premises and a series of radiocarbon dates have further demonstrated that this architectural complex chronologically ranges between ca. 2064 and 1416 B.C. (Laneri *et al.* 2006). The architectural complex can be possibly divided into three main sectors (Fig. 2): one central sector dedicated to more public/ceremonial activities; another area, separated from the central one by a long alley, that is marked by the presence of long narrow buildings built in an agglutinated manner and that show clear signs of working activities, such as mortars, pestles, grinding stones and hydraulic facilities found *in situ*; and finally, a third sector located in the southwest corner with an unclear function.

In particular, the archaeological work of last summer concentrated on investigating the southeastern part of the public/ceremonial sector (Fig. 3). This section of the architectural complex is composed of at least two large outdoor spaces, in one of which the archaeologists have discovered numerous unique objects whose function was ceremonial. Moreover, most of these objects, such as highly decorated ceramic vessels, human and animal clay figurines, and clay votive plaques (Fig. 4), were recovered nearby a stone basin located along the southwestern edge of the *piazza*.

Next to the *piazza* lays a monumental building that has only one entrance from the main alley and is based on an antechamber and a series of rooms. Among these rooms, a long room appears as the most important one. It is directly accessible from the antechamber through a door that is in axis with the main door serving the whole building and is marked by a stone altar and two perpendicular drains located behind it (Fig. 3). This room was monumental as is demonstrated by its size, the thickness of the outer walls and the large flagstones paving it. Moreover, a foundation deposit, consisting of a piglet inserted in a fine cup of the Red Brown Wash Ware assemblage, was found in the northeastern corner of this room and further emphasizes its importance. During the excavation of 2008, our main goal has been to bring to light the room lying directly east of the long-room, that is room 52. This room has its entrance from a vestibule located next to the antechamber and was sealed

In terms of pottery assemblage, most of the pottery categories found within the architectural complex have clear parallels with repertoires from contemporaneous Middle Bronze Age sites of the upper Tigris river valley in which the ubiquitous presence of the Red Brown Wash Ware appears

sized stones and fragmented storage jars.

and broken vessels were found, whereas the other one was filled with mid- the architectural complex. Moreover, in one of these rooms numerous whole should have been of primary importance in creating the urban landscape of were accessible from the *piazza* and the monumentality of the whole facade between the floors of the uppermost building and the *piazza's* floor. The rooms at a lower level. Four meters of difference in elevations are recognizable casemate manner in order to connect this higher building to the *piazza* located next to a mud-brick substruction and a series of small rooms constructed in a an extraordinary retaining construction consisting of a wide stone wall built To further emphasize its monumentality, the western side was built on top of almost total lack of working tools suggests a public purpose for this sector. location and monumentality both in plan and architecture together with an the function and the distinctive features of this building. However, its central Due to its poor state of preservation, it is very difficult to reconstruct both consists of a series of outdoor and indoor rooms and wide external walls. Because of later pits and of the slope, this building is poorly preserved and times to connect the previously described building to the uppermost one. together the whole sector. Thus, another outdoor space was created in ancient terracing system and, as a consequence, outdoor spaces were used to chain Due to a steep slope in the virgin soil, the public area was built using a

main *piazza*.

ceremonial objects were probably disposed of and purposely broken in the of a 'cleaning' of these ceremonial spaces prior to their abandonment. The broken objects were found in this room confirming our preliminary hypotheses a squared bench of stone foundation and mud-brick superstructure. A few by the collapse of the roof. Along the western wall the archaeologists found

as a marker for the first half of the second millennium B.C. whereas the painted ware (that we named Pseudo-Khabur Ware) forms a clear link with northeastern Syria (Laneri *et al.* 2008).

In terms of paleobotanical analysis carried out at the site by Matte Held, the assemblage of crops is quite typical for the Middle Bronze Age in this region as well as at other northern Syrian and southeastern Anatolian sites (Laneri *et al.* 2008). However, the presence of grapes and other remains of *Vitis Vinifera* within some of the rooms of the 'architectural complex' appears of great importance for a better understanding of the socioeconomic landscape of the region during the Middle Bronze Age.

For the faunal remains, the analysis has been initiated by Remi Berthon who has included in his study both the Middle and Late Bronze Age levels (Laneri *et al.* 2008). The first data show a subsistence based on domestic animals. According to Berthon, cattle were of great importance in the food supply at the site during these archaeological phases. The high number of pigs and caprines bones also suggests that both had an important role in the economy of the site. While pigs were a good meat supplier, sheep and goat could have been used also for secondary products as indicated by the relative high number of old individuals. Hunting was also an important factor at Hirbmerdon Tepe during the second millennium B.C. as has been demonstrated by the presence of antler and deer bones.

#### *The Step Trench AB-AC*

Another important step towards a better understanding of the chronological sequence at Hirbmerdon Tepe is the excavation of a long step trench of about 3 meters wide and 50 meters long that will further investigate the northern sector of the High Mound (Fig. 1). As a preliminary step in this direction, last summer we decided to investigate the area north of the architectural complex (the AB section). In so doing, we have been able to define a few disturbed floors directly underneath the complex's architecture. In particular, Locus 12



The survey region can be roughly divided into two geomorphological areas: a western zone of cultivated Tigris terraces and low hills (Dog'an 2005, Kuzucuoğlu 2002), and an eastern zone of dry eroded uplands that are unsuitable for agriculture. Because of its agricultural potential the terraces

millennium or more.

traces of pastoral nomadic groups that have settled in the region over the last patterns of MBA settlement contemporary with Hırbemerdon, and also the use and modification beyond the sites. We are particularly interested in the human occupation of the region and to identify various forms of human land (Fig. 5). Our goals are to document traces of sedentary and non-sedentary June 2008. Our survey region is a 48 km<sup>2</sup> area on the right bank of the Tigris The Hırbemerdon Tepe Survey (HMTS) conducted its second season in

#### *Hırbemerdon Tepe Regional Survey*

In addition to these data, fragments of the first half of the third millennium B.C. pottery assemblages (e.g., Fine Ware and Metallic Ware) and a few fragments of Chaff-Faced Ware of the Chalcolithic period were found directly above the natural bedrock. These sherds are probably part of a washing of earlier archaeological contexts not recognizable by the excavation, but they further confirm a possible occupation at the site during these periods.

between the late third and early second millennia B.C.. Thus, these data confirm a cultural continuity at this site scattered and badly disturbed phase of architecture belonging to the late third emerging from this section of the Step Trench AB-AC is the presence of a together with earlier types of Red Brown Wash Ware. The element that is brought to light in layers directly underneath Middle Bronze Age levels and survey. Moreover, in the Outer Town Dark Rimmed Orange Bows were found out of context during the excavation and that are typical of a late third millennium B.C. horizon. Other samples of Dark Rimmed Orange Bows have brought to our attention a high density of Dark Rimmed Orange Bows

are where most sedentary settlement is found. The eastern uplands have very limited pockets of cultivatable soil and have been used primarily as pasture.

In the 2007 season, most of our efforts were in the western cultivated terraces. The largest sites (*tepes*) were defined by the edges of mounding and collected in sub-areas. These sites were only a small portion of the total archaeological landscape, however. Elsewhere, fieldwalkers made transects at 25 m. intervals across harvested agricultural fields. Artifacts were marked with color coded flags (red for lithics, blue for ceramics) and collected. The positions of the flags were then recorded via a GPS-enabled mobile computer. Sites were defined by interpolating the density of surface scatters in a GIS framework. The eastern uplands, which were subjected to a brief reconnaissance that was guided by high resolution Ikonos satellite imagery in 2007, were the primary focus of survey in the 2008 season. A range of sedentary sites, campsites, and various landscape features were identified (discussed below). In total, we recovered 92 places that were termed "sites," although they vary from multi-hectare mounded *tepes* to light scatters of Paleolithic tools. The general classes of site types are described below.

*Tepes.* The HMTS region has three mounded sites. Hirbemerdon Tepe (Site 1) and Kavuşak Tepe (Site 4) were already identified by Algaze during his survey of the Batman-Bismil region (Algaze 1989, Algaze et al. 1991). Other mounded sites exist to the south (Güzel Köy, Site 34) and southwest (Ahmetli Tepe, beyond the survey limits). Mounded sites in the Upper Tigris region are small compared to those found in the broad alluvial plains in adjacent areas of northern Mesopotamia, mostly under 5 hectares. All of the mounded sites in the HMTS region had MBA occupation.

*Unmounded Ceramic Scatters.* The cultivated fields in the HMTS region are characterized by an almost continuous scatter of small artifacts at a low density, a phenomenon known throughout the Near East and Mediterranean (Wilkinson 1982, Bintliff and Snodgrass 1988). Transect walking in the area immediately around Hirbemerdon Tepe revealed elevated concentrations of artifacts that represent sites (Fig. 6). Two of them (Sites 19 and 22) were

surface survey alone. They may mark the burials of pastoral nomads, or they might represent some other form of symbolic or ritual activity. Because they have little associated material culture, they are difficult to date without excavation.

*Campsites.* The Upper Tigris region has been the location of winter pasture grounds (*kışlak*) since at least the 15th century, when tribes of the Akkoyunlu confederacy controlled the area (Woods 1999). In more recent times, transhumant Kurdish tribes have migrated between the Taurus mountains in the summer and descended into the Tigris valley and foothills during the winter months (Cribb 1991:196-207, based on the work of Beşikçi, Hütteroth 1959). In the 2008 field season, several campsites in the eastern uplands were visited and planned (reported in detail in Ur and Hammer 2009). Site 18 is a 20th century camp consisting of stone built rectangular animal enclosures and cleared spaces where tents were erected (Fig. 9). Further down the wadi, an older and more disturbed campsite (Site 26) is probably far older, but had little surface artifacts in association. The archaeology of pastoral nomads has been understudied in the Near East, and the eastern uplands offer important new empirical evidence for them.

*Cisterns and Other Water Catchment Features.* Near the campsites in the eastern uplands were found several features for capturing and storing runoff rainfall. These features would have been critical for providing drinking water for people and animals in this otherwise dry zone. Southeast of the Site 18 campsite, a cistern (*sarnıç*) was cut into the side of a wadi (Site 24). It was fed by two small channels carved into a large area of exposed bedrock. Rainfall would have flowed across the bedrock, into the channels, and then into the tank of the cistern, which could have held 9 m<sup>3</sup> of water. Another method of water capture was found at Site 28, where a circular stone structure was built in the base of a wadi. Water flowing down the wadi would have been redirected and held in the structure. This feature was probably intended for watering animals. These water catchment features demonstrate the modifications and adaptations of human groups to the otherwise inhospitable

eastern uplands, and show that the landscapes of pastoral nomads can be found by archaeological survey in this region.

### *Conclusions*

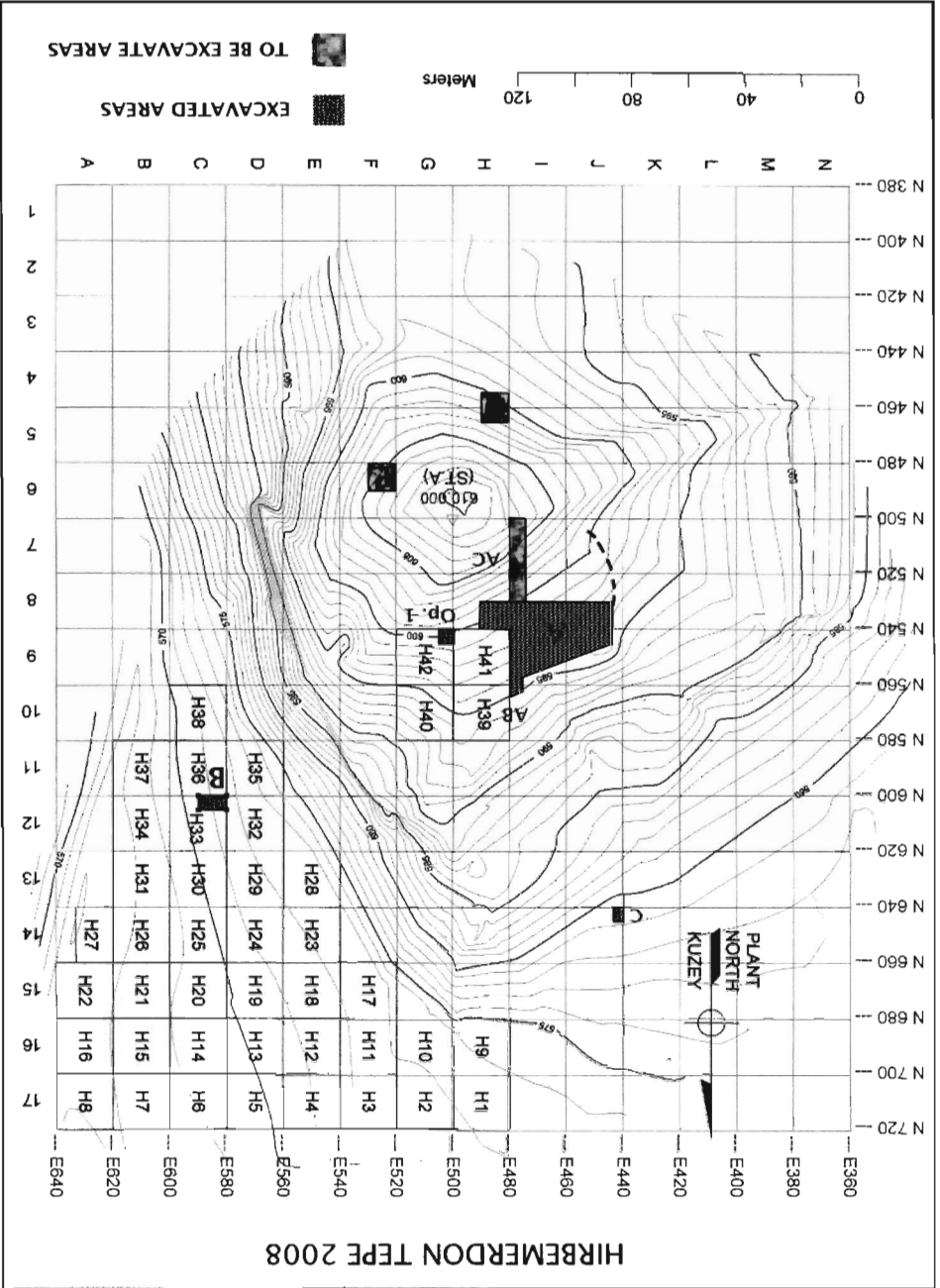
The archaeological work enacted in 2008 at Hirbemerdon Tepe and its surrounding region has further demonstrated the importance of the site in the political landscape of the upper Tigris region during the Middle Bronze Age. In addition to this element, Step Trench AB-AC will allow us to determine a more coherent chronology for the occupation of the High Mound. Due to its strategic location at the frontier between cultivable lands and uplands suitable for pastoralism and hunting, the Hirbemerdon Tepe Regional Survey will allow us to further investigate a fundamental topic for archaeological studies, relating to the relationship between pastoralist and agricultural communities during both ancient and more recent times.

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Fig. 1: Map of Hirberdon Tepe



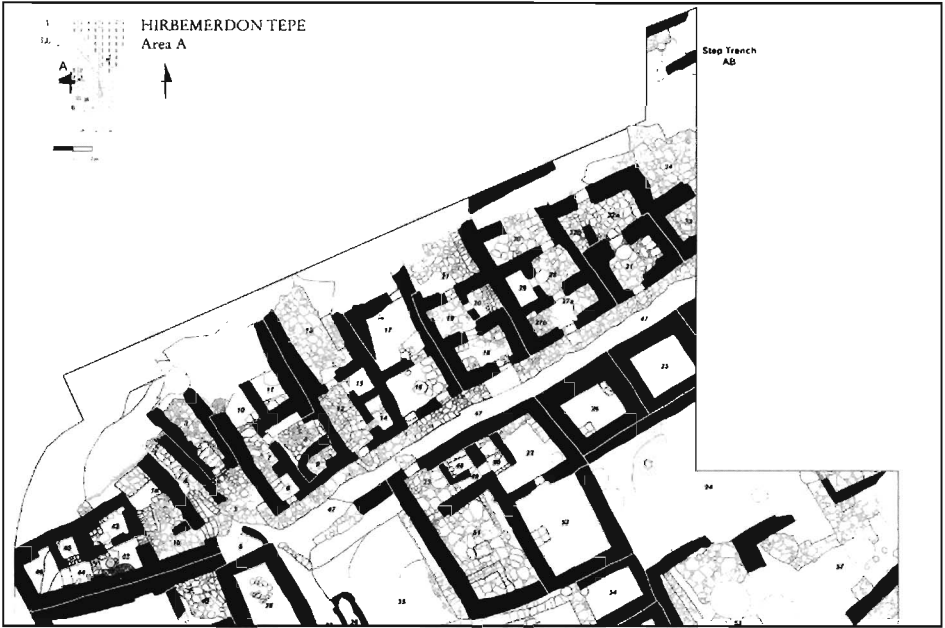


Fig. 2: The architectural complex of the Middle Bronze Age



Fig. 3: View of the ceremonial/public sector of the Middle Bronze Age architectural complex

Fig. 5: The Hirbermdon Tepe Survey region.

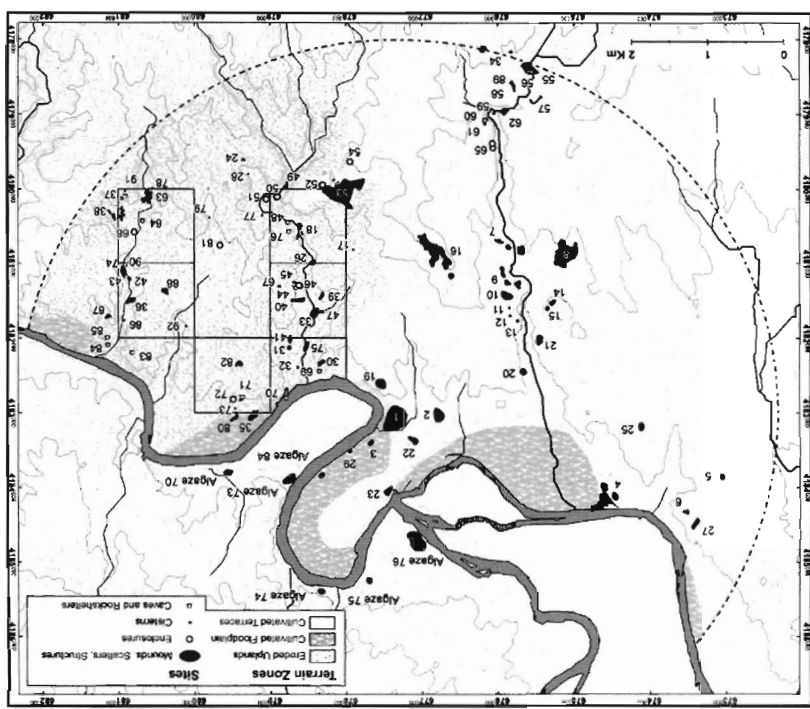


Fig. 4: A partially reconstructed clay votive plaque found in the piazza of the architectural complex.





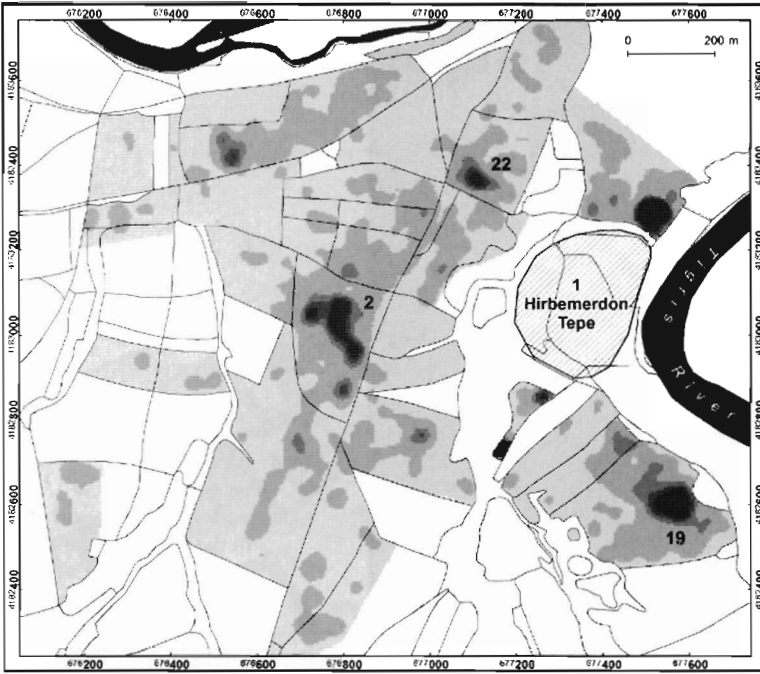


Fig. 6: Surface artifact concentrations in the area around Hirbemerdon Tepe



Fig. 7: Lower Paleolithic hand axes from the Tigris terrace NE of Hirbemerdon Tepe

Fig. 9: The pastoral nomadic campsite at Site 18.



Fig. 8: The cairn field at Site 16

