

UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA DE MADRID

Proceedings of the 5th International Congress  
on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East



**Universidad Autónoma de Madrid**

**Proceedings of the 5th International  
Congress on the Archaeology of  
the Ancient Near East**

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La artesanía y el arte en el Oriente Antiguo

**4. *Reports on the Results from the Latest Archaeological Seasons***

Informes sobre los resultados de las recientes campañas de excavación

# Index - Índice

## VOL. I

Á. Gabilondo Pujol, <i>Prólogo</i> .....	17
P. Matthiae, <i>Opening Speech</i> .....	21
J. M <sup>a</sup> Córdoba, M. Molist, M <sup>a</sup> C. Pérez, I. Rubio, S. Martínez, <i>Bienvenida</i> .....	25

### Opening Lectures to Main Themes - Apertura de las sesiones temáticas

N. Chevalier, <i>Considérations sur l'histoire de l'archéologie, ses origines et son développement actuel</i> .....	31
S. Mazzoni, <i>Arts, crafts and the state: A dialectic process</i> .....	37

### Papers and posters - Comunicaciones y pósters

M. Abdulkarim, O. Olesti-Vila, <i>Territoire et paysage dans la province romaine de la Syrie. La centuriatio d'Emesa (Homs)</i> .....	55
G. Affani, <i>Astragalus bone in Ancient Near East: Ritual depositions in Iron Age in Tell Afis</i> .....	77
A. Ahrens, <i>Egyptian and Egyptianizing stone vessels from the royal tomb and palace at Tell Mišrife/Qatna (Syria): Imports and local imitations</i> .....	93
B. Ajorloo, <i>The neolithization process in Azerbaijan: An introduction to review</i> .....	107
C. Alvaro, C. Lemorini, G. Palumbi, P. Piccione, <i>From the analysis of the archaeological context to the life of a community. «Ethnographic» remarks on the Arslantepe VIB2 village</i> .....	127
Sh. N. Amirov, <i>Towards understanding religious character of Tell Hazna 1 oval</i> .....	137
Á. Armendáriz, L. Teira, M. Al-Maqdissi, M. Haïdar-Boustani, J. J. Ibáñez, J. González Urquijo, <i>The megalithic necropolises in the Homs Gap (Syria). A preliminary approach</i> .....	151
A. Arroyo, <i>Akpınar</i> .....	163

L. Astruc, O. Daune-Le Brun, A. L. Brun, F. Hourani, <i>Un atelier de fabrication de récipients en pierre à Khirokitia (Néolithique pré-céramique récent, VIIe millénaire av. JC, Chypre).....</i>	175
G. Baccelli, F. Manuelli, <i>Middle Bronze Khabur Ware from Tell Barri/ Kabat ....</i>	187
B. Bader, <i>Avaris and Memphis in the Second Intermediate Period in Egypt (ca. 1770-1770-1550/40 BC).....</i>	207
F. Baffi, <i>Who locked the door? Fortification walls and city gates in Middle Bronze Age inner Syria: Ebla and Tell Tuqan.....</i>	225
L. Barda, <i>El aporte de los mapas y descripciones antiguas en el ensayo de reconstrucción de sitios arqueológicos, periferias y rutas (con uso del SIG).....</i>	245
C. D. Bardeschi, <i>A propos des installations dans la cour du Temple Ovale de Khafajah....</i>	253
C. Bellino, A. Vallorani, <i>The Stele of Tell Ashara. The Neo-Syrian perspective.....</i>	273
D. Ben-Shlomo, <i>Iconographic representations from Early Iron Age Philistia and their ethnic implications.....</i>	285
A. I. Beneyto Lozano, <i>Manifestaciones artísticas desde Oriente Próximo a Al-Andalus</i>	305
L. Bombardieri, C. Forasassi, <i>The pottery from LA II-III levels of Late-Assyrian to Post-Assyrian period in Tell Barri/ Kabat.....</i>	323
B. Brown, <i>The Kilamuwa Relief: Ethnicity, class and power in Iron Age North Syria.....</i>	339
A. Brustolon, E. Rova, <i>The Late Chalcolithic settlement in the Leilan region of Northeastern Syria: A preliminary assessment.....</i>	357
S. M. Cecchini, G. Affanni, A. Di Michele, <i>Tell Afis. The walled acropolis (Middle Bronze Age to Iron Age I). A work in progress.....</i>	383
B. Cerasetti, V. A. Girelli, G. Luglio, B. Rondelli, M. Zanfini, <i>From monument to town and country: Integrated techniques of surveying at Tilmen Höyük in South-East Turkey.....</i>	393
N. Chevalier, <i>Fouiller un palais assyrien au XIXe siècle: Victor Place à Khorsabad.....</i>	403
L. Chiochetti, <i>Post-Assyrian pottery from the Italian excavations at Fort Shalmaneser, 1987-1990.....</i>	417
X. Clop García, <i>Estrategias de gestión de las materias primas de origen mineral en Tell Halula: primera aproximación.....</i>	441
A. Colantoni, A. Gottarelli, <i>A formalized approach to pottery typology: The case of some typical shapes from the Late Bronze Age in Northern Syria.....</i>	455
A. M. Conti, C. Persiani, <i>Arslantepe. The building sequence of the EB3 settlement.....</i>	465
C. Coppini, <i>Mitannian pottery from Tell Barri.....</i>	477
J. M <sup>a</sup> Córdoba, <i>Informe preliminar sobre las últimas campañas en al Madam (2003-2006)....</i>	493
F. Cruciani, <i>The attributes of Ishtar in Old Syrian glyptic and the Mesopotamian literary tradition.....</i>	509
A. Daems, <i>Alternative ways for reading some female figurines from Late Prehistoric Mesopotamia and Iran.....</i>	519



A. D'Agostino, <i>Between Mitanni and Middle-Assyrians: Changes and links in ceramic culture at Tell Barri and in Syrian Jazīrah during the end of the 2nd millennium BC</i> .....	525
A. D'Agostino, S. Valenti, N. Laneri, <i>Archaeological works at Hirbemerdon Tepe (Turkey). A preliminary report on the first three seasons</i> .....	549
M. B. D'Anna, R. Laurito, A. Ricci, <i>Walking on the Malatya Plain (Turkey): Preliminary remarks on Chalcolithic pottery and occupation. 2003-2005 Archaeological Survey Project</i> .....	567
I. de Aloe, <i>A preliminary report on the 1995 Tell Leilan survey: The pottery from the Hellenistic to the Sasanian Period</i> .....	575
F. Dedeoglu, <i>Cultural transformation and settlement system of Southwestern Anatolia from Neolithic to LBA: A case study from Denizili/Çivril Plain</i> .....	587
K. De Langhe, <i>Early Christianity in Iraq and the Gulf: A view from the architectural remains</i> .....	603
T. De Schacht, W. Gheyle, R. Gossens, A. De Wulf, <i>Archaeological research and CORONA: On the use, misuse and full potential of historical remote sensing data</i> .....	611
C. del Cerro, <i>Life and society of the inhabitants of al Madam (UAE). Interdisciplinary study of an Iron Age village and its environment</i> .....	619
G. M. Di Nocera, <i>Settlements, population and landscape on the Upper Euphrates between V and II millennium BC. Results of the Archaeological Survey Project 2003-2005 in the Malatya Plain</i> .....	633
S. Di Paolo, <i>Dalle straordinarie avventure di Lady Hester Stanhope alla «Crociata» archeologica di Butler: la politica «religiosa» dei viaggi delle esplorazioni scientifiche nella regione di Damasco tra XIX e XX secolo</i> .....	647
R. Dolce, <i>Considerations on the archaeological evidence from the Early Dynastic Temple of Inanna at Nippur</i> .....	661
R. H. Dornemann, <i>Status report on the Early Bronze Age IV Temple in Area E at Tell Qarqur in the Orontes Valley, Syria</i> .....	679
A. Egea Vivancos, <i>Artesanos de lo rupestre en el alto Éufrates sirio durante la época romana</i> ..	711
A. Egea Vivancos, <i>Viajeros y primeras expediciones arqueológicas en Siria. Su contribución al redescubrimiento de Hierapolis y su entorno</i> .....	731
B. Einwag, <i>Fortified citadels in the Early Bronze Age? New evidence from Tall Bazî (Syria)</i> .....	741
M. Erdalkiran, <i>The Halaf Ceramics in Şirnak area, Turkey</i> .....	755
F. Escribano Martín, <i>Babilonia y los españoles en el siglo XIX</i> .....	767
M. Feizkhah, <i>Pottery of Garrangu style in Azerbaijan (Iran)</i> .....	775
E. Felluca, <i>Ceramic evidences from Bampur: A key site to reconstruct the cultural development in the Bampur Valley (Iran) during the third millennium BC</i> .....	797
E. Felluca, <i>S. Moghazza Under-floor burials in a Middle Bronze Age domestic quarter at Tell Mardikh – Ebla, Syria</i> .....	809

## VOL. II

S. Festuccia, M. Rossi, <i>Recent excavations on the Ebla Acropolis (Syria)</i> .....	17
S. Festuccia, M. Rossi <i>Latest phases of Tell Mardikh - Ebla: Area PSouth Lower Town</i> .....	31
J.-D. Forest and R. Vallet, <i>Uruk architecture from abroad: Some thoughts about Hassek Höyük</i> .....	39
M. Fortin, L.-M. Loisiert, J. Pouliot, <i>La géomatique au service des fouilles archéologiques: l'exemple de Tell 'Acharneh, en Syrie</i> .....	55
G. Gernez, <i>A new study of metal weapons from Byblos: Preliminary work</i> .....	73
K. T. Gibbs, <i>Pierced clay disks and Late Neolithic textile production</i> .....	89
J. Gil Fuensanta, P. Charvát, E. A. Crivelli, <i>The dawn of a city. Surtepe Höyük excavations Birecik Dam area, Eastern Turkey</i> .....	97
A. Gómez Bach, <i>Las producciones cerámicas del Halaf Final en Siria: Tell Halula (valle del Éufrates) y Tell Chagar Bazar (valle del Khabur)</i> .....	113
E. Grootveld, <i>What weeds can tell us Archaeobotanical research in the Jordan Valley</i> ...	123
E. Guralnick, <i>Khorsabad sculptured fragments</i> .....	127
H. Hameeuw, K. Vansteenhuyse, G. Jans, J. Bretschneider, K. Van Lerberghe, <i>Living with the dead. Tell Tweini: Middle Bronze Age tombs in an urban context</i> ...	143
R. Hempelmann, <i>Kharab Sayyar: The foundation of the Early Bronze Age settlement</i> .....	153
F. Hole, <i>Ritual and the collapse of Susa, ca 4000 BC</i> .....	165
D. Homès-Fredericq <i>The Belgian excavations at al-Labun (biblical Moab region), Jordan. Past and future</i> .....	179
J. J. Ibáñez et al., <i>Archaeological survey in the Homs Gap (Syria): Campaigns of 2004 and 2005</i> .....	187
A. Invernizzi, <i>El testimonio de Ambrogio Bembo y Joseph Guillaume Grelot sobre los restos arqueológicos iraníes</i> .....	205
K. Jakubiak, <i>Pelusium, still Egyptian or maybe Oriental town in the Western Sinai. Results of the last excavations on the Roman city</i> .....	221
S. A. Jasim, E. Abbas, <i>The excavations of a Post-Hellenistic tomb at Dibba, UAE</i> ....	237
Z. A. Kafafi, <i>A Late Bronze Age jewelry mound from Tell Dayr 'Alla, Jordan</i> .....	255
E. Kaptijn, <i>Settling the steppe. Iron Age irrigation around Tell Deir 'Alla, Jordan Valley</i> ....	265
C. Kepinski, <i>New data from Grai Resh and Tell Khosbi (South-Sinjar, Iraq) collected in 2001 and 2002</i> .....	285
A. Klein-Franke, <i>The site in Jabal Qarn Wu'l near Hiziaz in the region of Sanhan (Yemen)</i> .....	297
G. Kozbe, <i>A new archaeological survey project in the South Eastern Anatolia: Report of the Cizre and Silopi region</i> .....	323
P. Kurzawski, <i>Assyrian outpost at Tell Sabi Abyad: Architecture, organisation of space and social structure of the Late Bronze settlement</i> .....	341

R. Laurito, C. Lemorini, E. Cristiani, <i>Seal impressions on cretulae at Arslantepe: Improving the methodological and interpretative references</i> .....	351
A. R. Lisella, <i>Clay figurines from Tell Ta'aneke</i> .....	361
M. Lönnqvist, Kathleen M. Kenyon 1906-1978. <i>A hundred years after her birth. The formative years of a female archaeologist: From socio-politics to the stratigraphical method and the radiocarbon revolution in archaeology</i> .....	379
K. O. Lorentz, <i>Crafting the Head: The human body as art?</i> .....	415
C. Lorre, <i>Jacques de Morgan et la question de l'origine de la métallurgie dans le Caucase</i> ....	433
S. Lundström, <i>From six to seven Royal Tombs. The documentation of the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft excavation at Assur (1903-1914) – Possibilities and limits of its reexamination</i> .....	445
N. Marchetti, <i>A preliminary report on the 2005 and 2006 excavations at Tilmen Höyük</i> .....	465
O. Marder, I. Milevski, R. Rabinovich, O. Ackermann, R. Shahack-Gross, P. Fine, <i>The Lower Paleolithic site of Revadin Quarry, Israel</i> .....	481
R. Martín Galán, <i>An example of the survival of ancient Mesopotamian architectural traditions in Northern Jazireh during the Hellenistic period</i> .....	491
A. C. Martins, <i>Oriental antiquities and international conflicts. A Portuguese episode during the 1st World War</i> .....	515
K. Matsumura, <i>Hellenistic human and animal sacrifices in Central Anatolia: Examples from Kaman-Kalehöyük</i> .....	523
P. Matthiae, <i>The Temple of the Rock of Early Bronze IV A-B at Ebla: Structure, chronology, continuity</i> .....	547
M. G. Micale, <i>The course of the images. Remarks on the architectural reconstructions in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: The case of the Ziqqurrat</i> .....	571
L. Milano, Elena Rova, <i>New discoveries of the Ca'Foscari University – Venice Team at Tell Beydar (Syria)</i> .....	587
I. Milevski, Y. Baumgarten, <i>Between Lachish and Tel Erani: Horvat Ptora, a new Late Prehistoric site in the Southern Levant</i> .....	609
O. Muñoz, S. Cleuziou, <i>La tombe 1 de Ra's al-Jinz RJ-1: une approche de la complexité des pratiques funéraires dans la péninsule d'Oman à l'Âge du Bronze ancien</i> .....	627
L. Nigro, <i>Tell es-Sultan/Jericho from village to town: A reassessment of the Early Bronze Age I settlement and necropolis</i> .....	645
L. Nigro, <i>Preliminary report of the first season of excavation of Rome «La Sapienza» University at Khirbet al-Batranay (Upper Wadi az-Zarqa, Jordan)</i> .....	663
A. T. Ökse, <i>Preliminary results of the salvage excavations at Salat Tepe in the Upper Tigris region</i> .....	683
V. Orsi, <i>Between continuity and transformation: The late 3rd Millennium BC ceramic sequence from Tell Barri (Syria)</i> .....	699
A. Otto, <i>Organization of Late Bronze Age cities in the Upper Syrian Euphrates Valley</i> .....	715
M. Özbaşaran, <i>Musular: The special activity site in Central Anatolia, Turkey</i> .....	733
F. Pedde, <i>The Assur-Project. An old excavation newly analysed</i> .....	743

C. Persiani, <i>Chemical analysis and time/space distribution of EB2-3 pottery at Arslantepe (Malatya, Turkey)</i> .....	753
L. P. Petit, <i>Late Iron Age levels at Tell Damieh: New excavations results from the Jordan Valley</i> .....	777
L. Peyronel, <i>Making images of humans and animals. The clay figurines from the Royal Palace G at Tell Mardikh-Ebla, Syria (EB IVA, c. 2400-2300 BC)</i> .....	787
P. Piccione, <i>Walking in the Malatya Plain (Turkey): The first Half of the III millennium BC (EBA I and II). Some preliminary remarks on the results of the 2003-2005 Archaeological Survey Project</i> .....	807

### VOL. III

F. Pinnock, <i>Artistic genres in Early Syrian Syria. Image and ideology of power in a great pre-classical urban civilisation in its formative phases</i> .....	17
A. Polcaro, <i>EB I settlements and environment in the Wadi az-ẓarqa Dolmens and ideology of death</i> .....	31
M. Pucci, <i>The Neoassyrian residences of Tell Shekh Hamad, Syria</i> .....	49
P. Puppo, <i>La Tabula «Chigi»: un riflesso delle conquiste romane in Oriente</i> .....	65
S. Riehl, <i>Agricultural decision-making in the Bronze Age Near East: The development of archaeobotanical crop plant assemblages in relation to climate change</i> .....	71
A. Rochman-Halperin, <i>Technical aspects of carving Iron Age decorative cosmetic palettes in the Southern Levant</i> .....	93
M. Rossi, <i>Tell Deinit-Syria MEDA Project n. 15 (2002-2004). Restoration training programs</i> .....	103
M. Sala, <i>Khirbet Kerak Ware from Tell es-Sultan/ancient Jericho: A reassessment in the light of the finds of the Italian-Palestinian Expedition (1997-2000)</i> .....	111
S. G. Schmid, A. Amour, A. Barmasse, S. Duchesne, C. Huguenot, L. Wadeson, <i>New insights into Nabataean funerary practices</i> .....	135
S. Silvonen, P. Kouki, M. Lavento, A. Mukkala, H. Ynnilä, <i>Distribution of Nabataean-Roman sites around Jabal Harûn: Analysis of factors causing site patterning</i> .....	161
G. Spreafico, <i>The Southern Temple of Tell el-Husn/Beth-Shean: The sacred architecture of Iron Age Palestine reconsidered</i> .....	181
M. T. Starzmann, <i>Use of space in Shuruppak: Households on display</i> .....	203
T. Steimer-Herbet, H. Criaud, <i>Funerary monuments of agro-pastoral populations on the Leja (Southern Syria)</i> .....	221
G. Stiehler-Alegría, <i>Kassitische Siegel aus stratifizierten Grabungen</i> .....	235
I. M. Swinnen, <i>The Early Bronze I pottery from al-Labun in Central Jordan: Seal impressions and potter's marks</i> .....	245
H. Tekin, <i>The Late Neolithic pottery tradition of Southeastern Anatolia and its vicinity</i> .....	257
H. Tekin, <i>Hakemi Use: A newly established site dating to the Hassuna / Samarra period in Southeastern Anatolia</i> .....	271

D. Thomas, <i>The ebb and flow of empires – Afghanistan and neighbouring lands in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries</i> .....	285
Y. Tonoike, <i>Beyond style: Petrographic analysis of Dalma ceramics in two regions of Iran</i> .....	301
B. Uysal, <i>The technical features of the Ninevite 5 Ware in Southeastern Anatolia</i> .....	313
C. Valdés Pererio, <i>Qara Qūzāq and Tell Hamís (Syrian Euphrates valley): Updating and comparing Bronze Age ceramic and archaeological data</i> .....	323
S. Valentini, <i>Ritual activities in the «rural shirines» at Tell Barri, in the Khabur region, during the Ninevite 5 period</i> .....	345
K. Vansteenhuyse, M. al-Maqdissi, P. Degryse, K. Van Lerberghe, <i>Late Helladic ceramics at Tell Tweini and in the kingdom of Ugarit</i> .....	359
F. Venturi, <i>The Sea People in the Levant: A North Syrian perspective</i> .....	365
V. Verardi, <i>The different stages of the Acropolis from the Amorite period at Tell Mohammed Diyab</i> .....	383
V. Vezzoli, <i>Islamic Period settlement in Tell Leilan Region (Northern Jazīra): The material evidence from the 1995 Survey</i> .....	393
O. Vicente i Campos, <i>La aplicación de las nuevas tecnologías de la información y la comunicación en el yacimiento arqueológico de Tell Halula</i> .....	405
N. Vismara, <i>Lo sviluppo delle metodologie della scienza numismatica e la scoperta di una nuova area di produzione monetale: il caso dell'identificazione della emissioni della Lycia in epoca arcaica</i> .....	417
T. Watkins, <i>Natural environment versus cultural environment: The implications of creating a built environment</i> .....	427
N. Yalman, <i>An alternative interpretation on the relationship between the settlement layout and social organization in Çatalhöyük Neolithic site: A ethnological research in Central Anatolia</i> .....	439
E. Yanai, <i>Ein Assavir, Tel Magal and the peripheral settlement in the Northern Sharon from the Neolithic period until the end of the Early Bronze Age III</i> .....	449
E. Yanai, <i>Cemetery of the Intermediate Bronze Age at Bet Dagan</i> .....	459
E. Yanai, <i>The trade with Cypriot Grey Lustrous Wheel Made Ware between Cyprus, North Syrian Lebanese coast and Israel</i> .....	483

## Workshops - Talleres de debate

### Workshop I

#### Houses for the Living and a Place for the Dead

N. Balkan, M. Molist and D. Stordeur  
(eds.)

<i>Introduction: House for the living and place for the dead. In memory of Jacques Cauvin</i> .....	505
P. C. Edwards, <i>The symbolic dimensions of material culture at Wadi Hammeh 27</i> .....	507

F. R. Valla, F. Bocquentin, <i>Les maisons, les vivants, les morts: le cas de Mallaba (Eynan), Israël</i> .....	521
E. Guerrero, M. Molist, J. Anfruns, <i>Houses for the living and for the dead? The case of Tell Halula (Syria)</i> .....	547
D. Stordeur, R. Khawam, <i>Une place pour les morts dans les maisons de Tell Aswad (Syrie). (Horizon PPNB ancien et PPNB moyen)</i> .....	561
I. Kuijt, <i>What mean these bones? Considering scale and Neolithic mortuary variability</i> .....	591
B. S. Düring, <i>Sub-floor burials at Çatalhöyük: Exploring relations between the dead, houses, and the living</i> .....	603
P. M. M. G. Akkermans, <i>Burying the dead in Late Neolithic Syria</i> .....	621
T. Watkins, <i>Ordering time and space: Creating a cultural world</i> .....	647

### **Workshop III**

#### **The Origins of the Halaf and the Rise of Styles**

O Nieuwenhuys, P. Akkermans, W. Cruells and M. Molist  
(eds.)

<i>Introduction: A workshop on the origins of the Halaf and the rise of styles</i> .....	663
W. Cruells, <i>The Proto-Halaf: Origins, definition, regional framework and chronology</i> .....	671
O. Nieuwenhuys, <i>Feasting in the Steppe – Late Neolithic ceramic change and the rise of the Halaf</i> .....	691
R. Bernbeck, <i>Taming time and timing the tamed</i> .....	709
M. Le Mière, M. Picon, <i>A contribution to the discussion on the origins of the Halaf culture from chemical analyses of pottery</i> .....	729
B. Robert, A. Lasalle, R. Chapoulie, <i>New insights into the ceramic technology of the Proto-Halaf («Transitional») period by using physico-chemical methods</i> .....	735
H. Tekin, <i>Late Neolithic ceramic traditions in Southeastern Anatolia: New insights from Hakemi Use</i> .....	753
M. Verhoeven, <i>Neolithic ritual in transition</i> .....	769

### **Programme - Programa**

# Pelusium, still Egyptian or maybe Oriental town in the Western Sinai. Results of the last excavations on the Roman city

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## Abstract

Since 2003 Polish expedition has conducted research in a Greek-Roman town Pelusium in Western Sinai. Those excavations resulted with unearthing a Roman theater and fragments of Late Antiquity dwelling architecture located north from the theater. Analyze of the discovered material seems to prove that Pelusium had many relation and contacts with the Levantine coast, what underlines that the town was attended as the first Egyptian or last Middle Eastern city on the *via maris* older the Horus Rad running along the seashore from Egypt to Levantine.

**Keywords:** Pelusium, theatre, mosaic, dwelling architecture, geophysical researches.

Since 2003 the Polish Egyptian expedition has been excavating at Tell Farama, where ruins of the ancient city of Pelusium are located.<sup>1</sup> The site is situated in north western Sinai, approximately 40 km east of Qantara and the Suez Canal. The city was located on the ancient Horus Road or Via Maris, the most important route connecting Egypt and the Middle East.

At the beginning of our investigations we focused on the seriously damaged ruins of a Roman theatre.<sup>2</sup> The excavated structure was 67 metres long and at least 78 metres wide (fig. 1). However, the width of the *cavea* should be enlarged by about 6 meters on either side. The theatre from Tell Farama was constructed mainly of red brick, although other materials were also used. The substructure of the whole *cavea*, for instance, was built with mud bricks. Because that part of the theatre was badly preserved it was impossible to estimate if the *cavea* construction was originally divided on *imma cavea* and *summa cavea*. That structure was then covered with red bricks and possibly with slender marble flagstones. On the surface, traces of mud brick superstructures were still visible. Fragments of one circular inner wall of the *cavea* built of red bricks was also preserved *in situ*. These elements are located in the western part of the *cavea*.

A number of protruding elements similar to buttresses along were also visible along the façade of the *cavea*. In total, traces of seventeen such elements were recognizable in that part of the theatre. The seriously damaged elements

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<sup>1</sup> M. Gawlikowski, *Tell Farama, Preliminary Report on a Season of Polish-Egyptian Excavations*, PAM 15, 2004, 67-72.

<sup>2</sup> A. Al-Taba'i, M. Abdal-Maqsoud, P. Grossmann, *The Great Theater of Pelusium*, in *Hommages à Fayza Haikal*, edited by N. Grimal, A. Kamel, C. May-Sheikholeslami, IFAO Bibilothèque d'étude 138, 2003, 271-283.; K. Jakubiak, *Tell Farama (Pelusium), Preliminary Report on Second Season of Polish-Egyptian Excavations*, PAM 15 (Reports 2004), 2005, 61-68.

were part of the arcade, which formed the façade decoration of the *cavea*. These elements were constructed symmetrically, but one of them was built on the main axis of the theatre and divided the *cavea* in two. Such a solution indicates that here no central entrance to the theatre was intended. Possibly this irregularity was the result of construction reasons. One explanation may be associated with the natural landscape of Pelusium. The ground in this part of the city was very marshy and the *cavea* may have been divided to give the structure extra stability and prevent it from subsiding.

Alternatively, it is possible that two stairways led from both sides of the arcade to entrances in the upper galley. If this was the case, it may explain the denser construction on both sides of the *cavea* underneath which may have been necessary to support such elements.

The whole *cavea*, was divided into five sectors called *cunei*, where *scalaria* were located. This layout eased access for spectators. The traces of those entrances are still visible in the mud brick sections, which remain from earlier excavations conducted inside the *orchestra*. One entrance to the auditorium was located in the centre of the theatre's main axis. The four remaining entrances were located symmetrically, two either side of the main entrance.

Almost the whole scenic structure of the theatre was unearthened except for the rear part behind the stage, which originally formed a *postscaenium* or porticoes. The original masonry of the stage probably remained largely hidden prior to excavation and as a consequence survived. Those structures located upon it however were robbed, providing as they did a cheap source of red brick, limestone and maybe even marble.

Both *parodoi* located along the stage were unearthened during the excavations. Because the stage was constructed in the northern part of the theatre, the entrances opened into the building from the east and west. This layout along the four cardinal points ensured the best sunlight. Furthermore, the portico crowning the *cavea* would have provided a pleasant source of shade for the spectators.

The *Parodoi* of the theatre were 3 metres wide and ran approximately 25 metres from the entrance to the edge of the *orchestra*. Because of heavy destruction it was difficult to precisely estimate the original length of the *parodos*.

It was also difficult to estimate the original size of the *orchestra*. A general idea of the original spatial organisation was only possible due to the survival of several partly destroyed shell-limestone flagstones, preserved *in situ*. Beside the flagstones, fragments of marble were visible on the orchestra surface. It seems probable that marble was used to mark the limits of the *orchestra* and to accentuate the main axis of the theatre and *orchestra*. In the central part of the *orchestra* a few fragments of marble flagstones survived on the pavement *in situ*, which seems to support this suggestion. It should be added that the area of the *orchestra* was repaired several times in antiquity. These renovations were made not with stone but with red bricks, suggesting that the renovations were carried out with the minimum of cost. Patches of red bricks were visible in many areas once excavation was complete, clearly showing where such reparations had taken place.

An underground corridor was located on the main axis of the stage. It had suffered serious damage however making it impossible to estimate its precise



shape and dimensions. The corridor originally joined the proscenium structure and a transversal corridor built underground on the rear side of the stage building. Above these subterranean constructions a *scaena* was built. It was possible to identify the shape of the stage thanks to observations made during earlier investigations. The upper parts of the stage were constructed of red bricks. Possibly such decorative elements were finished with plaster or even marble fixed to the façade.

The gate to the stage i.e. *valva regia* was the main feature and dominated the shape of the (*scenae frons*) stage building. This element of the decoration was set in the shallow and flat apse. Inside of it were traces of four columns, two on each side of the gate. The *valva regia* was located on the central axis and the wings either side were symmetrically designed.

Only small differences were observed between the two wings during our investigations.

On both sides of the *scaena* were constructed two lateral wings, *versurae*, projecting from the façade in the *parodos* direction.

The *valva regia*, like the other gates leading to the stage *pulpitum* and *proscenium* was arch vaulted. This was common in constructions of this type. This element in the centre of the theatre was often characteristic of other such buildings. Some parallels can be seen in the so-called Large Theatre from Pompeii,<sup>3</sup> Bosra,<sup>4</sup> and Scythopolis (Beth Shean).<sup>5</sup> In Cesarea the central exedra was bigger than in Pelusium, nevertheless the idea was similar.<sup>6</sup> Even in the theatre buildings known from Philadelphia (Amman) and Petra flat apses were constructed, giving easy access to a portico in the case of Amman,<sup>7</sup> or the street in the case of Petra<sup>8</sup>.

Either side of the main gate in the main façade of the *scenae frons*, two other lateral doorways were located. These elements formed an important part of the *hospitalia* construction. Both of these entrances were located in shallow niches decorated with columns. Traces of where these columns were located are still visible among the remnants of the stage building. These two side entrances in addition to the *valva regia* led to the backstage rooms which were located directly behind the stage decorations. In the theatre of Pelusium two such rooms were built on each wing of the stage building. What is peculiar however is that the staircase which led to the upper storey of the building was located in the eastern wing. In the easternmost part of the building, the broad stairs were formed by narrowing the walls in the back part of the construction. Thanks to this, it was possible to connect the subterranean corridors with the level of the stage decoration (*scenae frons*), and further up to the uppermost part of decorations.

<sup>3</sup> M. Bimber, *A History of the Greek and Roman Theater*, Princeton 1971, 170-174.

<sup>4</sup> A. Segal, *Theaters in Roman Palestine and Provincia Arabia*, Leiden 1995, 53-55.; E. Frézouls, *Les édifices des spectacles en Syrie*, in : J. M. Dentzer, W. Orthmann (eds.), *Archeologie et Histoire de la Syrie II, La Syrie de l'époque achéménide à l'avènement de l'Islam*, Saarbrücken 1989, 397-399. ; H. Finsen, *Le levé du théâtre romain à Bosra*, *Analecta Romana Inst. Danici, Suppl.*, Copenhagen 1972.

<sup>5</sup> A. Segal, *Theaters in Roman Palestine and Provincia Arabia*, Leiden 1995, 56-60.

<sup>6</sup> A. Segal, *Theaters in Roman Palestine and Provincia Arabia*, Leiden 1995, 64-69.

<sup>7</sup> A. Segal, *Theaters in Roman Palestine and Provincia Arabia*, Leiden 1995, 82-85.

<sup>8</sup> A. Segal, *Theaters in Roman Palestine and Provincia Arabia*, Leiden 1995, 91-93.

In front of the *scaenae frons* was located a *pulpitum* construction. This structure was at a lower level than the stage building (fig. 2). In spite of the position of the *pulpitum*, it covered and joined the whole area between both protruding elements i.e. *versurae*. The *pulpitum* was partly constructed of red bricks, which were used to define the stage limits. The space between this red brick wall and the main body of the theatre was covered with wooden planks. These were evidenced by gaps for wooden beams and numerous bronze and iron nails which were found during excavations. At the beginning of excavations the function of the red brick square structure, which was also observed in excavation trenches, was enigmatic. It now seems clear however that these elements were used to support the wooden planks belonging to the *pulpitum* construction.

The final question concerns when the theatre should be dated to. Artefacts found during excavations came from mixed and unclear contexts. Consequently it was impossible to date the structure using artefact or pottery analysis. Thus it was necessary to make a more detailed comparative study with similar constructions from neighbouring areas.

The most similar construction to Pelusium's theatre is the theatre from Philipopolis, which can be dated to the reign of Philip the Arab.<sup>9</sup> Of course, it is difficult to find two constructions that are the same. The theatre from Philipopolis is smaller, however it follows a similar plan and thus provides the closest analogy with the theatre building from Pelusium. The question now arises, was the theatre from Pelusium erected at the same time as that constructed in Philipopolis. If the assumption is correct, that the date of the theatre can be based on such parallels, a date around the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. may be suggested for the theatre's erection, the same as for Philipopolis. Since no clear sequence of findings were unearthed during excavations precise dating as discussed is extremely difficult. Nevertheless, a construction date between the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. seems seductive.

In the area associated with the theatre building two trenches were opened. The first one was located near the eastern entrance to the theatre (fig. 3). This relatively small trench brought to light some interesting features. A sequence of several flagstone pavements was unearthed just in front of the entrance. The most important result was the discovery of the badly damaged ruins of a monumental building directly east of the theatre. These ruins were connected with a sewage canal, which was destroyed and blocked during the construction of the theatre. This suggests that the sewage system belonged to a phase prior to the theatre's construction. A stamp seal was found in the ruins of the monumental building dating to the Hellenistic period. Consequently it can be assumed that both constructions date to the late 3<sup>rd</sup> or early 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. As mentioned, three layers of limestone flagstones were laid on these structures. These pavements probably belonged to the damaged remains of a street running in a south-north direction.

It was not only in the eastern part of the theatre that earlier structures were uncovered however. In the western *parados*, the ruins of what was probably a

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<sup>9</sup> E. Frézouls, *Les édifices des spectacles en Syrie*, in: J. M. Dentzer, W. Orthmann (eds.), *Archeologie et Histoire de la Syrie II, La Syrie de l'époque achéménide à l'avènement de l'Islam*, Saarbrücken 1989, 394-396.; A. Segal, *Theaters in Roman Palestine and Provincia Arabia*, Leiden 1995, 39-41.

dwelling structure was unearthed. This dated to the late Hellenistic or early Roman period. (FIG. 4) It is difficult to be more precise since the pottery found here belonged both the Hellenistic and early Roman periods.

Along the northern façade of the theatre another trench was opened. Here again, remains of a sewage system were detected. This sewage canal was probably associated with part of a street running east-west. Alternatively, it may have served to transport water away from the theatre roof. According to our field observations it is probable that a portico was erected along the northern façade of the theatre. The portico pavement covering the sewage canal was built of shell stone. Many small fragments of badly preserved flagstones made of shell stone were visible in that area of the theatre.

Having finished work in the theatre during last year's season, another area was chosen for excavation. This area was located approximately 150 metres north of the theatre. The intention here was to investigate the character and organisation of urban planning in this part of Pelusium. In the beginning it seemed possible that structures dating to the Early Roman Empire would be uncovered, however the results were completely different from what we expected. Only very badly destroyed fragments of urban architecture were found. The superstructures had almost entirely disappeared. A similar situation was observed during excavation of the theatre. The question therefore arises, what happened during Late Antiquity that necessitated the robbing of such a huge quantity of material? The most likely explanation can be associated with the Persian invasion conducted by Chosrow II. Under this threat the citizens of Pelusium may well have been desperately trying to prepare the city's defences. An essential part of this was the construction of a large fortress, located several hundred metres west of the excavated area. All abandoned dwellings and public buildings were probably plundered for cheap building material at this time. It cannot be excluded that in addition to the theatre, dwelling structures from sector 1 and the remains of other buildings discovered in sector 2 were almost completely devastated.

Whatever the case, the dwelling structures of sector 1, excavated during the summer of 2005, showed very bad preservation. Several small shops or inns were probably located in the southern part of this construction. Some findings indicate that the excavated structure may have originally been quite rich. Traces of painted decoration as well a piece of marble wall decoration seem to support this suggestion. After the abandonment of the dwelling area, several ovens (tannurs) were constructed within the ruins. The total deterioration of the architectural remains was observed during the last phase, as mentioned above.

Findings from this sector dated mainly to the Late Roman period, although some objects, especially pottery sherds were earlier, even Late Hellenistic. It should be added that some of the material belonged to Cypriot sigillata type pottery. Gaza type amphorae could also be distinguished. Furthermore, more than one thousand three hundred bronze and copper coins were found, although unfortunately most of them were illegible. Only a few of them were preserved in relatively good condition. It was these that made it possible to suggest a date for the functioning of the complex in the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D (fig. 5).

In sector 2, located 75 metres east of area 1, the surprising discovery was made at the beginning of excavations of a mosaic floor. The mosaic, which was seriously destroyed, was found just below the surface (fig. 6). The fragments suggest that the

room, in which this decoration was located, was originally quite large. The mosaic probably belonged to the interior of a rich house or a villa, although it is currently too premature to be certain of the kind of structure. So far, only a fragment of heavily destroyed red brick wall has been found along the northern edge of the mosaic. The mosaic floor was only 10-20 cm below the surface and as a result was subject to heavy damage and destruction by water and erosion, which resulted in the severe salinity of the decoration.

The state of preservation meant that we could only estimate the length of the mosaic, at about 10.2 metres. The width varied between 35-40 centimetres and 1.5 metres. South of the heavily damaged mosaic, a red brick floor was found. The surface of this floor was seriously damaged by numerous post-holes and erosion, which also played an important role in the destruction process.

One of the best-preserved areas of the mosaic was the north eastern part of the composition. This featured a representation of a duck in the centre of a panel with a three dimensional triple fillet. Several colours of tesserae were used here including red, green, light green, gray and white. The tesserae was made of stone, faïence, and glass. A rectangular panel containing a grenade tree with two ibises standing either side was another characteristic element of the mosaic floor.

Two other elements also deserve our attention. A three-dimensional pattern of winding and interlocking lines executed from a lateral perspective featured in the mosaic. These patterns, (swastikas) were positioned symmetrically near the eastern and western edges of the mosaic composition. They were laid in a manner that imitated a three-dimensional labyrinth. The northern edge of the mosaic was finished with a broad geometric border. A dominant characteristic in this area of the mosaic was decoration with red squares with a white interior, joined to each other with two crossed lines of bird step motifs.

The precise dating of the mosaic is difficult to estimate. No diagnostic pottery fragments were found nearby to aid us in solving this important question. Based on stylistic factors, the position of the mosaic, and taking into account the objects found in the neighbouring sector, a preliminary date in the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. could be proposed. However, it cannot be excluded that the mosaic dates to a later period, even at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.<sup>10</sup> The closest analogies can be found among Middle Eastern mosaics excavated in Antiochia and Gerasa, once more indicating close contacts with this region. Moreover, coins found under the mosaic floor belonged to the middle of 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. what strongly support suggested dating.

North of the mosaic, heavily destroyed wall fragments were found which belonged to the associated architectural structure. Further excavation of this area will therefore be necessary next season and will hopefully clarify the nature of the building (fig. 7).

South of the mosaic and the aforementioned red brick remains, remnants of stone walls faced with red bricks were uncovered. These structures belonged to a later

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<sup>10</sup> R. and A. Ovadiah, *Hellenistic, Roman and Early Byzantine Mosaic Pavements in Israel*, Roma 1987, 18-20, 40, 107-108.; anyhow, some motives used in the mosaic pavement found in Pelusium seems to belonging to 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and were earlier than those excavated in Israel for instance.

architectural phase, and can possibly be associated with the late 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D architecture and urban planning arrangements. Nevertheless, it is too early to suggest the function of this structure, for now, it can only be said that a later dwelling structure or monumental buildings were built here. If work is continued, this affords us a very good opportunity to begin the study of late urban planning in Pelusium.

Besides excavation, magnetic and resistivity surveying techniques were employed last season to enable a non-destructive investigation of Pelusium's urban planning. These investigations brought to light several interesting features which deserve mentioning (fig. 8).

The first and most important was the shape of the architectural structure, which most probably should be associated with the aforementioned mosaic floor. Other results indicate the remains of two streets, the junction of which is positioned between two test trenches opened up during last season. A small square semi-oval shaped element was found here. The survey results also showed a number of dwelling structures as well as some more enigmatic elements. The latter may perhaps be interpreted as an industrial complex, possibly containing pottery kilns, kitchen ovens and cisterns. These questions will only be answered with the further excavation of this area; however these preliminary results will enable us to direct next season's excavations at Pelusium far more effectively.

To conclude: The theatre excavated in Pelusium by the Polish-Egyptian team was the second such construction found in the city. This is very unusual for an Egyptian city and probably reflects Pelusium's importance. Indeed, there is no other site in Egypt that possesses two theatres, except ancient sources which described theatres in Alexandria, although examples of this can be found in the Middle East at Scythopolis, Gadara, Gerasa, and Petra.

The location of two theatres in one city clearly shows that Pelusium was not a provincial town, and with regards to the question of urban planning it is one of the most important cities on the eastern Mediterranean coast.

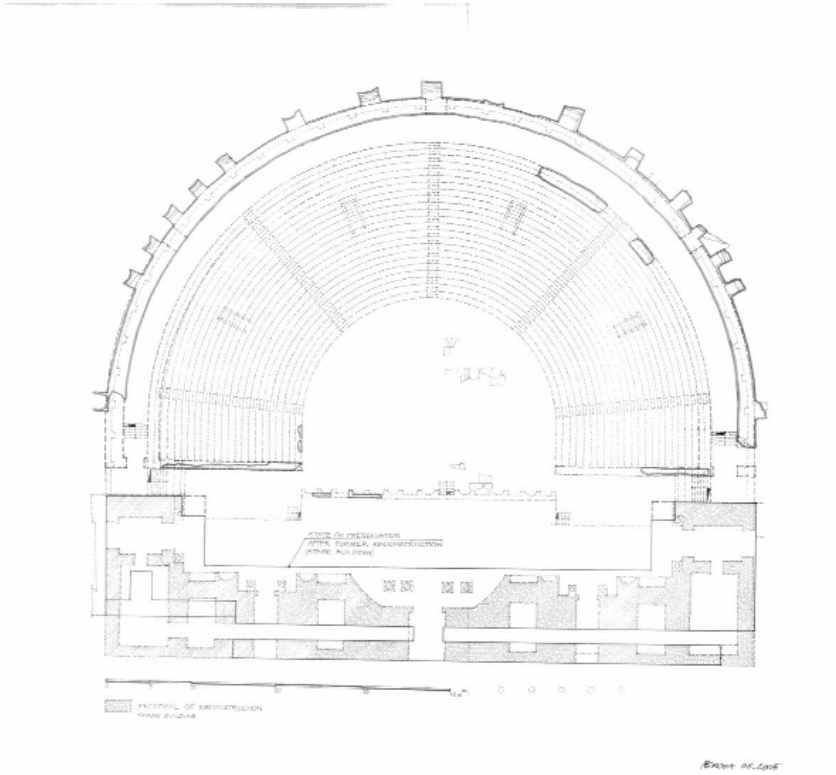
Some findings, particularly ceramic material, clearly indicate that Pelusium had extensive trade contacts and relations with the Middle East and other parts of the eastern Mediterranean. Positioned at the eastern gate of Egypt, it was an important trade city and probably acted as an entrepôt for the supply and distribution of goods. In support of this proposition, many trade items from the Middle East were reshipped to Egypt.

Pelusium probably possessed a very multinational community, who had settled there since the city's origin. The population may well have been dominated by people of Middle Eastern rather than Egyptian origin. The cult of Zeus Casios for instance, which was originally Eastern is a very good argument in support of the proposition that there was a large Oriental community.<sup>11</sup> Moreover the discovered mosaic floor which is common according to its iconography has analogies rather in the Middle East than in Egypt, what also is very important factor.

A final supporting factor is the mosaic floor, which so far only has analogies in the Middle East, but none in Egypt.

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<sup>11</sup> J. Y. Carrez-Maratray, *Péluse et l'angle oriental du delta Egyptien aux époques grecque, romaine et byzantine*, Caire 1999, 216-222, 404-407, 426-428.



**Fig. 1: Plan of the theatre (drawn by M. Smoła).**



**Fig. 2:** The construction of *pulpitum*, after excavations  
(photo by K. Jakubiak).

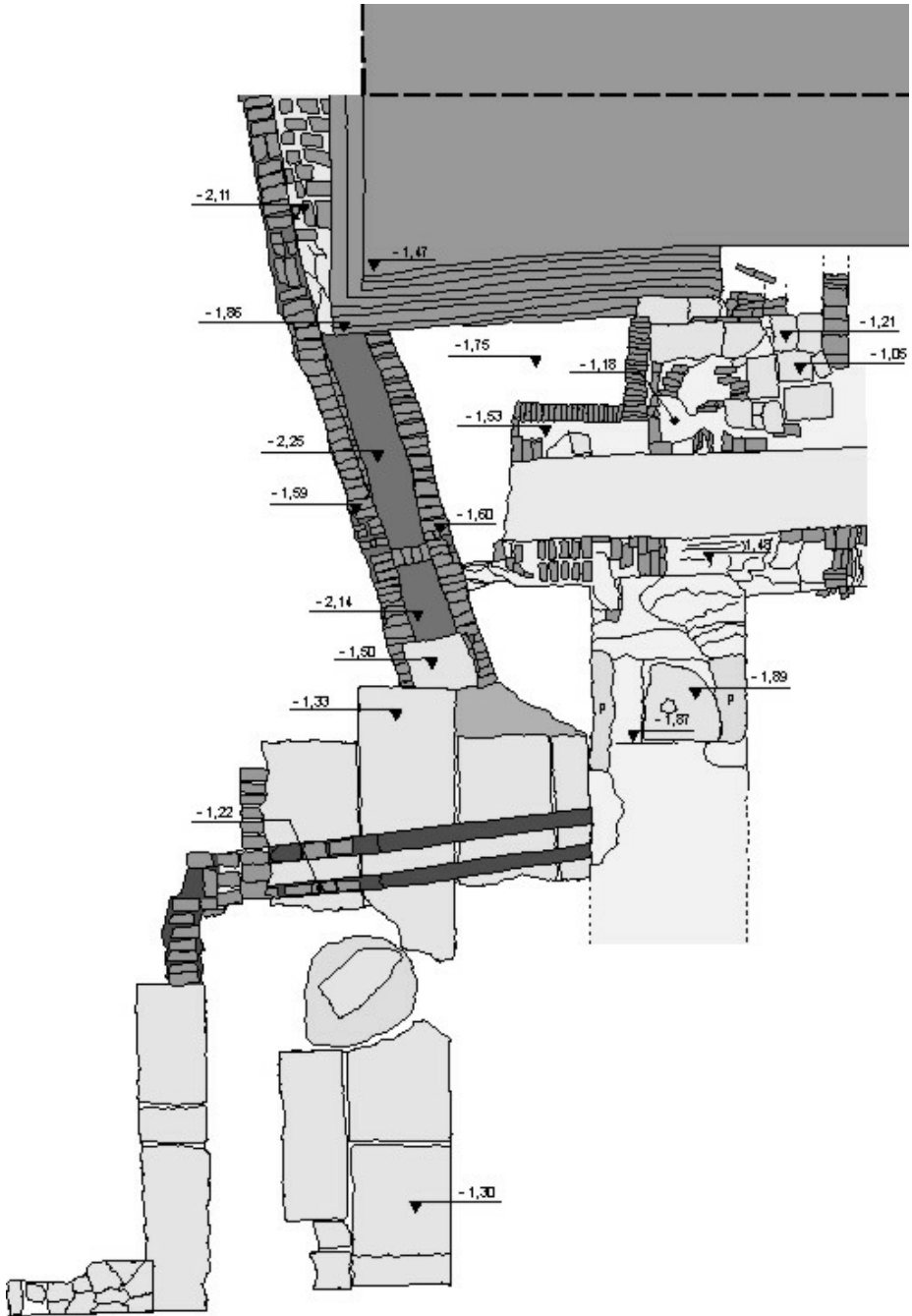
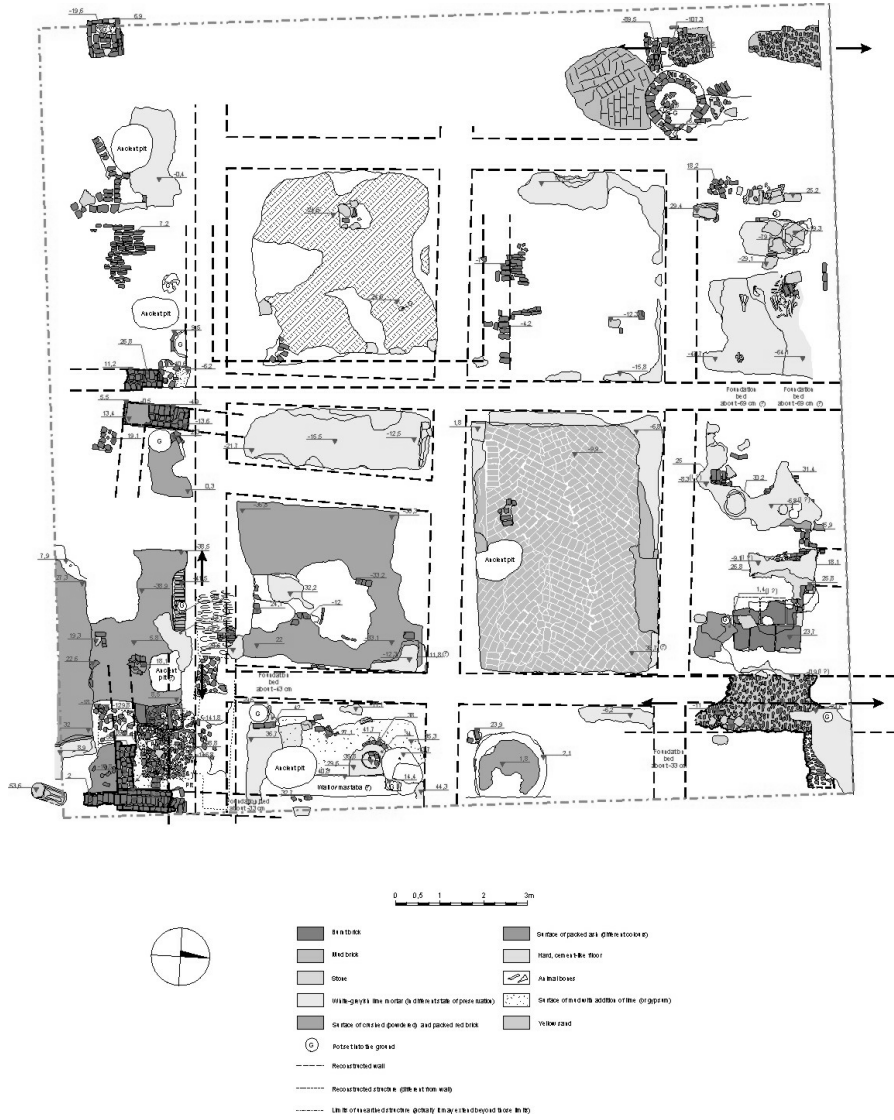


Fig. 3: The trench east from the eastern *parodos*, plan (drawn by K. Jakubiak and S. Maślak).





**Fig. 4:** Earlier constructions under the western *parodos*  
(photo by K. Jakubiak).



**Fig. 5: Sector number 1 after excavations in season 2005, plan (drawn by K. Jakubiak and S. Maślak).**



**Fig. 6: Mosaic pavement found in the sector number 2  
(photo by M. Gawlikowski).**

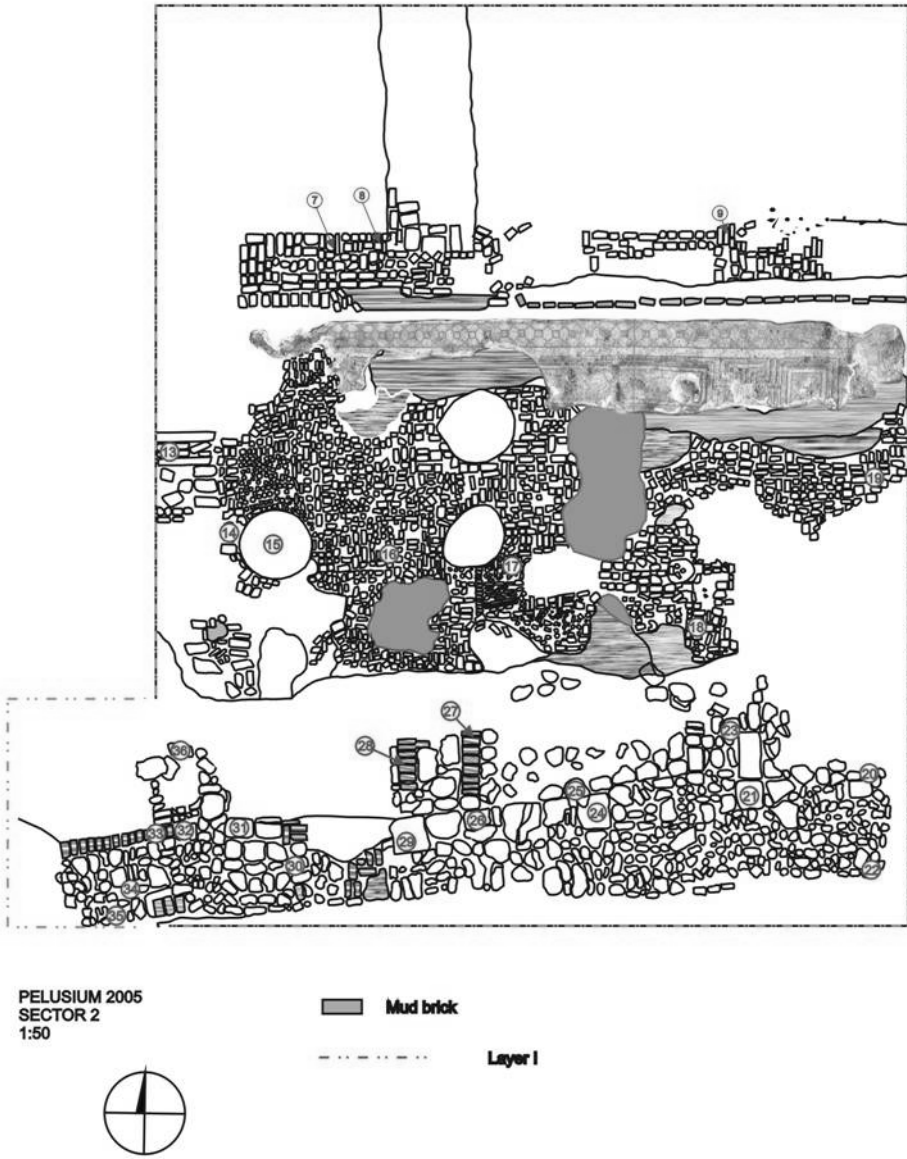
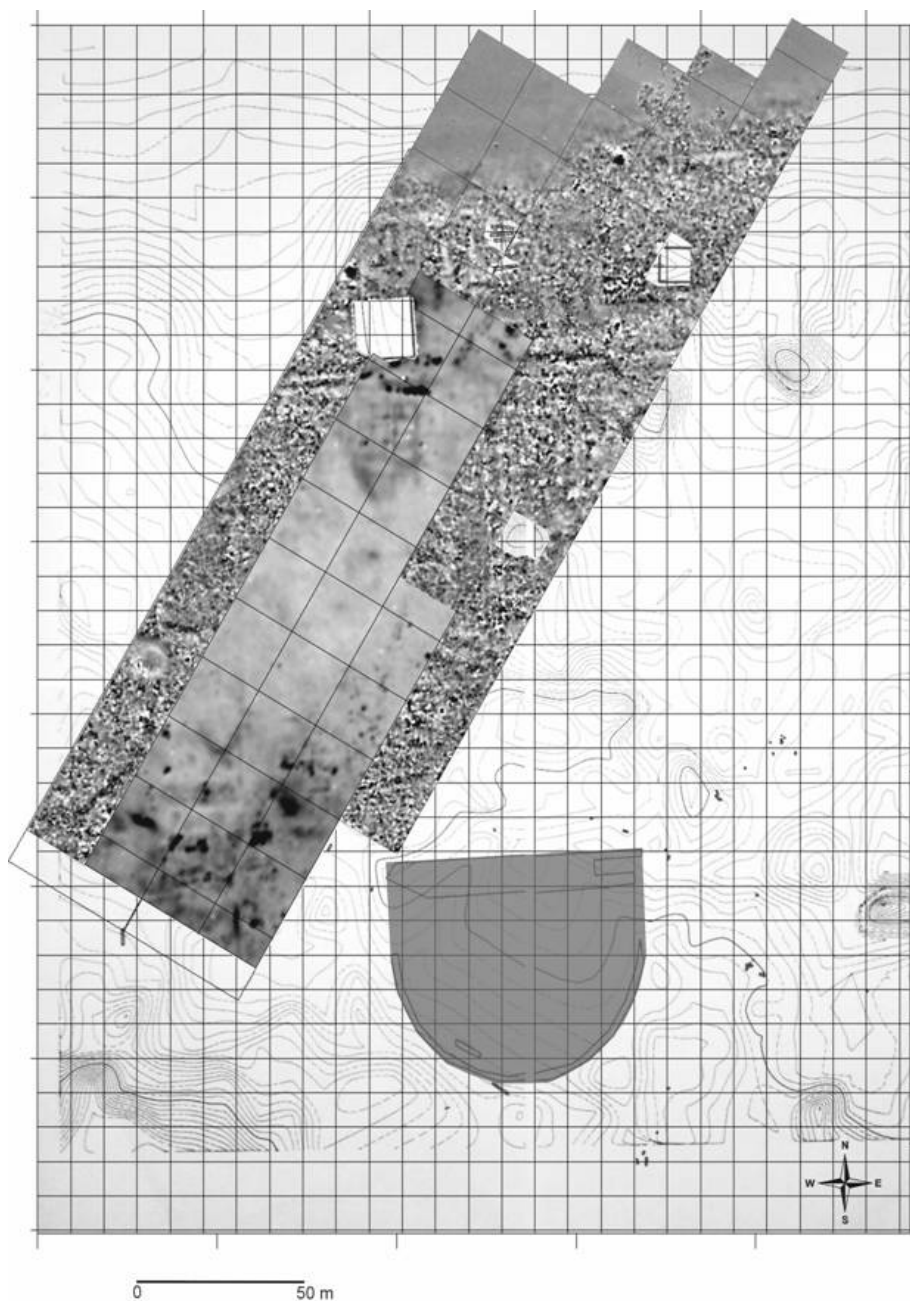


Fig. 7: Plan of the sector number 2 (drawn by K. Jakubiak and O. Wasilewska).



**Fig. 8: Plan of the Polish sector after geophysical researches (drawn by T. Herbich and J. Iwaszczuk).**

