

Building between the Two Rivers

An introduction to the building archaeology
of ancient Mesopotamia

Stefano Anastasio

with an Appendix by Piero Gilento



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Contents

List of Figures.....	iii
Preface	ix
Building archaeology: goals and methods	1
Building archaeology.....	1
The building survey and stratigraphy	2
Direct and indirect sources	3
The Mesopotamian context.....	10
Land use and water management	10
Urbanisation and city planning.....	11
Ancient cartography, topography and surveying.....	13
Commissioners, designers and builders.....	16
Ancient building crafts and technology.....	20
Building materials.....	25
Building materials: general characteristics	25
Earth architecture.....	26
Stone	34
Mortar.....	38
Bitumen.....	40
Wood and reeds.....	41
Metals	44
Claddings and decorations	45
Architectural elements	59
Load-bearing structural systems: general features.....	59
Walls.....	59
Arches, vaults and domes	67
Pillars and columns	72
Openings.....	76
Staircases.....	79
Domestic and urban structures for water management	81
Pavements, ceilings and roofs.....	85
Building types.....	90
Form and function: some interpretation issues.....	90
Ziggurats and temples.....	93
Palaces	97
Fortifications	103
Houses, storage- and workplaces	106
Roads, streets, bridges.....	113
Infrastructures for the water management	114
Gardens and orchards	118

Portable shelters	120
Funerary buildings	121
Conclusions	123
Appendix: the methods of building archaeology.....	124
by Piero Gilento	
What is and what does 'building archaeology' deal with?	124
Architectural stratigraphy	125
What is a Stratigraphic Building Unit (SBU)?	127
What stratigraphic relationships exist between the SBUs?.....	128
Typology and chronotypology in building archaeology	129
How to work.....	134
Web resources	144
Thematic bibliography.....	145
The Mesopotamian context	146
Building materials	147
Architectural elements	149
Building types.....	150
Bibliographic references.....	153
Chronological table.....	190
Glossary and analytical index	191
Illustration credits	203

List of Figures

Figure 1: Map of ancient Mesopotamia [<modern name> or <ancient name (modern name)>].	x
Figure 2: Construction façade on a cylinder seal. Mesopotamia (unknown provenance), second half of the 4th millennium BC. Bituminous limestone, height 4.5 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, n. 1983.314.	5
Figure 3a: Reed hut on the so-called ‘Uruk trough’. Uruk, second half of the 4th millennium BC. Limestone, length 96.5 cm. The British Museum, n. 120000.	
3b: Contemporary reed hut in the Tigris-Euphrates Delta.	6
Figure 4: Temple façade on a vessel from Tutub, first half of the 3rd millennium BC. Steatite, height 6.5 cm. Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, n. A12415.	6
Figure 5: City wall with crenellated towers carved on the Balawat Gates. Imgur Enlil, 9th century BC. Bronze. The British Museum, n. 124657.	7
Figure 6: Cult vessel in the form of a tower. Syria (unknown provenance), c. 19th century BC. Ceramic, height 31.4 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, n. 68.155.	8
Figure 8a-b: Changes in the state of the monuments due to destruction and restoration processes: the Ur ziggurat in a photograph taken in 1936 (a), and after the restoration works carried out in the 1980s (b).	9
Figure 7: The excavation of a gate flanked by <i>lamassu</i> statues at Dur-Sharrukin, in a calotype taken in 1853 by G. Tranchard.	9
Figure 9: Clay tablet illustrating the map of an irrigation system to the west of the Euphrates, with indications of length, width and depths of the canals. Mesopotamia, c. 17th century BC. Clay, 9.5 × 12 cm. The Schøyen Collection, n. MS 3196.	11
Figure 10: Shadappum. Plan of the Old-Babylonian settlement, c. 19th century BC.	12
Figure 11: The so-called ‘Nuzi Map’. Nuzi, second half of the 3rd millennium BC. Clay, 7.6 × 6.5 cm. Semitic Museum, Cambridge MA, n. 4172.	14
Figure 12: Clay tablet with the map of the city of Nippur. Nippur, mid 2nd millennium BC. Clay, 21.5 × 17 cm.	14
Figure 13: The so-called ‘Nippur cubit’. Nippur, mid 2nd millennium BC. Copper alloy, length 110.35 cm. Istanbul Archaeological Museum.	15
Figure 14: Clay tablet with an exercise of geometry. Shadappum, c. 19th century BC. Clay, height. c. 10 cm. Baghdad Museum, n. 55357.	16
Figure 15: Clay tablet with agronomic measurements. Girsu, c. 18th century BC.	16
Figure 16: Gudea statue B, the so-called ‘Architecte au plan’. To the right a detail of the plan of a temple. Girsu, 22nd century BC. Diorite, height 93 cm. Louvre Museum, object n. AO2.	17
Figure 17: Perforated stone slab with a relief of King Ur-Nanshe. The central perforation was probably intended to peg the slab to a wall. Lagash, 26th century BC. Limestone, height 39 cm. Louvre Museum, n. AO 2344.	18
Figure 18: Fragment of the so-called ‘Ur-Nammu stele’. Ur, 22nd-21st century BC. Limestone, height 97 cm. Penn Museum, n. B16676.14.	19
Figure 19a: A ziggurat (or part of one) on a cuneiform tablet. Probably from Babylon, c. 6th century BC. Clay, 6.35 × 5.08 cm. The British Museum, n. 38217; 19b: A temple on a cuneiform tablet. Mesopotamia (unknown provenance), first half of the 2nd millennium BC. Clay, 11.4 × 8.12 cm. The British Museum, n. 132254.	20
Figure 20: Two house-plans on a clay tablet. Eshnunna, 24th-22nd century BC. Clay, length c. 10 cm. Tell Asmar excavation n. AS 33:649.	20
Figure 21: Simple machines: a) lever; b) inclined plane; c) wedge; d) wheel; 5) screw.	21
Figure 22: Transporting a <i>lamassu</i> on a sledge, represented on an Assyrian relief: workers bring saws, hatchets, picks and shovels. Nineveh, 7th century BC. The British Museum, n. 124823.	22
Figure 23: Chariot with solid wheels, represented on the so-called ‘Standard of Ur’. Ur, mid 3rd millennium BC. Inlaid in shell, red limestone, lapis lazuli, bitumen; total length 50.4 cm.	23

Figure 24: Chariot with spoked wheels carved on the ‘Balawat Gates’. Imgur Enlil, 9th century BC. Bronze. The British Museum, n. 124657.	23
Figure 25: The helical screw profile in a pottery stand from Haradum. First half of the 2nd millennium BC.	24
Figure 26a-c: The effects of cut (a), compression (b) and tension (c) on stone.....	25
Figure 27: Earth architecture methods: <i>pisé</i> . Construction of a <i>pisé</i> wall at Alfândão, Portugal.....	27
Figure 28: Earth architecture methods: adobe. A wooden form is placed over adobe mixture in making bricks, Chamisal, New Mexico, 1940.....	27
Figure 29: Earth architecture methods: wattle-and-daub. Structure in the Indian Mission Village of Bac, House No. 4, Tucson, Pima County, AZ, c. 1933.....	27
Figure 30: Earth architecture methods: cob. An external wall from a building in Macerata (Italy) reveals the presence of cob bricks covered by straw.	28
Figure 31: Example of a masonry bond with plano-convex bricks.	32
Figure 32a: Moulded bricks used for column bases, partially restored, with cuneiform inscriptions dedicated to Gudea. Girsu, 22nd century BC. Clay, base length 180 cm. Louvre Museum, n. AO388; 32b: Detail of the mud-brick decoration of the Innin Temple. Uruk, 15th century BC. Fired bricks, height of the whole panel 205 cm. Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum, n. VA 10983.	33
Figure 33: Examples of marks on mud-bricks excavated at Bismaya, late 3rd millennium BC.	34
Figure 34: Mud-brick with cuneiform inscription. Southern Mesopotamia (exact provenance unknown), late 3rd millennium BC. Clay, 33 × 16 × 8 cm. National Archaeological Museum of Florence, n. 94051.....	34
Figure 35: Examples of stone finishes, hand-worked with traditional tools in Northern Italy (province of Varese): chisel (a); punch (b); point (c); bush hammer (d); pick (e); toothed chisel (f).....	37
Figure 36: The main bitumen deposits in Mesopotamia.....	40
Figure 37: Bitumen used as a mortar in the bricklaying of a building in Ur.....	41
Figure 38: The transport of wooden trunks in an Assyrian relief from Dur-Sharrukin, 8th century BC. Gypsum alabaster, total height 2.40 m. Louvre Museum n. AO 19890.	43
Figure 39: Woodcutters at work, represented on an Assyrian relief. Nineveh, 7th century BC.	43
Figure 40: Detail of the so-called ‘Investiture of Zimri-Lim’ painting, from the Zimri-Lim palace at Mari, 18th century BC. Tempera on plaster, total size 1.75 × 2.50 cm. Louvre Museum, n. AO19826.....	47
Figure 42: Striding lion on a glazed panel from Babylon, ca. 604–562 B.C. Ceramic, glaze, height 97 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, n. 31.13.1.....	48
Figure 41: Mud-brick with a glazed <i>guilloche</i> design. Kalhu, 9th century BC. Glazed clay, 10.2 × 18.8 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, n. 57.27.24a-b.....	48
Figure 43: Detail of a glazed-brick panel (a), and its exploded view (b), from the Throne Room of Nabuchdnezar II in Babylon, 6th century BC.....	49
Figure 44: Relief panel from the Northwest Palace at Kalhu, 9th century BC. Gypsum alabaster, height 236 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, n. 32.143.8.	50
Figure 45: Human-headed winged lion (<i>lamassu</i>) from Kalhu, 9th century BC. Gypsum alabaster, height 311 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, n. 32.143.2.	50
Figure 46: Buttresses and recesses in a mud-brick wall of the so-called <i>dublalmakh</i> , Ur, 14th century BC.	51
Figure 47: Fragment of a relief representing a building façade with buttresses and recesses topped with a sort of frieze, possibly made with terracotta bottles. Uruk, late 4th millennium BC. Limestone, height 10.8 cm.....	53
Figure 48: Columns decorated with clay-cones at Uruk, reconstructed at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. Uruk, late 4th millennium BC.....	54
Figure 49: Clay cones from southern Mesopotamia, late 4th millennium BC. Penn Museum, n. B2715-2.54	
Figure 50: Wall flower, from al-Ubaid, mid 3rd millennium BC. Clay, stone and bitumen, length 15 cm. Penn Museum, n. B15888.	55
Figure 52: Miniature corbel in the shape of a hand. Kalhu, 9th century BC. Glazed clay, length 22.2 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, n. 54.117.30.....	56
Figure 51: Reproduction of an Assyrian knob-plate. Ashur, 9th century BC.....	56
Figure 53: <i>Sikkatu</i> -nail from Kilizu, 10th-7th century BC. Clay, length 18.5 cm. National Archaeological Museum of Florence, object n. 203023.....	57
Figure 54: Various Assyrian wall cones and nails, between the 2nd and 1st millennium BC.	57

Figure 55: A votive clay cone with cuneiform inscription. Lagash, 24th century BC. Clay, length 21.7 cm. National Archaeological Museum of Florence, n. 93768.	57
Figure 56: Relief panel representing the lion-headed eagle Imdugud gripping two ibexes or deer, from the Temple of Ninhursag at al-Ubaid, mid 3rd millennium BC. Lead, copper alloy, bitumen, length 259 cm. The British Museum, n. 114308.	58
Figure 57: Foundation peg in the form of a lion, probably from Urkesh, 22nd century BC. Copper alloy, 11.7 × 7.9 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, n. 48.180.	58
Figure 58a-d. Above: the pressure exerted on the trilithon (a) and the arch system (b). Below: examples of arch-like systems i.e. the corbel arch (c) and the jack arch (d).	60
Figure 59: Wall components: foundation (a), footings (b), masonry wall (c).	61
Figure 60: Brick surfaces (a) and an example of masonry bond (b).	62
Figure 61a-d: Some examples of brick- and stone-masonry bonds (not to scale). 61a: herringbone masonry of plano-convex mud-bricks from Tutub, 3rd millennium BC; 61b: stretcher bond brick masonry from Ur, 2nd millennium BC; 61c: rubble stone masonry in a wall foundation from Karkemish, early 1st millennium BC; 61d: ashlar stone masonry at Dur-Sharrukin, 1st millennium BC.	62
Figure 62: Drainage holes in the ziggurat at Borsippa, 6th century BC, from two photographs taken by J.A. Spranger in 1936.	63
Figure 63: Layers of reeds used for the construction of the ziggurat at Uruk, late 3rd millennium BC. ...	64
Figure 64: The main steps for shaping a rusticated stone.	66
Figure 65a-b: Rusticated masonry in the aqueduct of Jerwan, 7th century BC.	67
Figure 66: The components of an arch: extrados (a); key-stone (b); intrados (c); impost (d); spring-line (e); rise (f).	68
Figure 67a-b: Examples of arches: round arch, Guzana, 1st millennium BC (a); segmental arch, Ashur, 1st millennium BC (b); camber arch, Karana, 2nd millennium BC (c).	69
Figure 68: The <i>Porte du diable</i> , Girsu, 3rd millennium BC.	70
Figure 70: Vault of the gateway into Nabuchdnezar's palace, Babylon, 6th century BC.	71
Figure 69: Barrel vault (a) and pitched vault (b).	71
Figure 71: Stone T-pillar from da Nevalı Çori, 9th millennium BC. Limestone, height c. 230 cm.	72
Figure 72: Mosaic column made of drums, from the Temple of Ninhursag at al-Ubaid, mid 3rd millennium BC. Core of palm wood, shale (black), mother-of-pearl, limestone (pink), copper, bitumen, height 115 cm. The British Museum, n. 116760.	73
Figure 73: Moulded columns with spiral profile in the northern façade of the temple at Shubat-Enlil, 18th century BC.	74
Figure 74: Stone column base from Residence K at Dur-Sharrukin, 8th century BC. Basalt, max diam. c. 25 cm. Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, n. A17558.	75
Figure 76: Columns shaped as human figures from Guzana, reconstructed at the entrance of the Archaeological Museum of Aleppo, (a) and graphic section of the first and second passages of the palace (b), 9th century BC.	75
Figure 75: Openwork furniture plaque with a 'woman at the window'. Kalhu, 8th century BC. Ivory, height 7.19 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, n. 59.107.18.	75
Figure 77: A backed clay grille, probably used for a window, from Eshnunna, 3rd millennium BC. Clay, 55 × 47 cm. Excavation n. As 32. 1186.	76
Figure 78: A window at Eshnunna, 3rd millennium BC: front (a), section (b).	76
Figure 79: Incised cosmetic box fragments with representation of a vaulted city gate. Kalhu, 9th-8th century BC. Ivory, height 4.8 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, n. 54.117.11a,b.	78
Figure 80: Reconstruction of the Balawat Gates at the British Museum. Imgur-Enlil, 9th century BC. The British Museum, n. 124681.	78
Figure 81: Door socket. Nippur, late 3rd millennium BC. Diorite, max. length c. 45 cm. Penn Museum, n. B8751.	79
Figure 82: Remains of the western stone stairs to the terrace of the Nin-hursag temple at al-Ubaid, on a photograph taken by J.A. Spranger in 1936, late 3rd millennium BC.	80
Figure 83: Mud-brick staircase, built over an arched structure in the 'TA House' at Nippur, 3rd millennium BC.	80
Figure 84: The <i>Double escalier</i> , Girsu, late 3rd millennium BC.	81
Figure 85: The top of a fired brick well shaft, more than 30 m deep, Ashur, c. 11th century BC.	82

Figure 86: Stone duct at Hadatu, joined with mortar, coated with bitumen and covered with bricks, early 1st millennium BC.	83
Figure 87: 3rd-millennium BC drain pipes at Girsu.	83
Figure 89: Brick drainage canal in the ziggurat at Eridu, late 3rd millennium BC.	84
Figure 88: Knee and T-clay joins found in the excavation of the Temple of Bel at Nippur, 3rd millennium BC.	84
Figure 90: Toilet coated with bitumen in a private house at Eshnunna, 3rd millennium BC.	85
Figure 91: Artificial pools in front of the temple at Ashur, first half of the 1st millennium BC.	86
Figure 92: Pebble mosaic pavement at Til Barsip, 9th-8th century BC.	87
Figure 93: Roof and ceiling of a house at Tutub, 3rd millennium BC.	88
Figure 94: Two possible reconstructions of a 2nd-millennium BC house at Ur.	89
Figure 95: 'Temple C' of level IVA2 at Uruk, late 4th millennium BC.	91
Figure 96: The T-plan building at Tell Madhur, 4th millennium BC.	92
Figure 97: The 'White Temple' on its ziggurat at Uruk, late 4th millennium BC.	94
Figure 98: The 'Temple Oval' of Tutub, first half of the 3rd millennium BC.	94
Figure 99: The remains of the foundation ditch of the ziggurat at Babylon, in a photograph taken by J.A. Spranger in 1936.	96
Figure 100: The Ur ziggurat in a photograph taken by J.A. Spranger in 1936 (a). On the left (b): detail of the holes on the south-western face of the ziggurat.	96
Figure 101: Main types of Mesopotamian temple plans. T-shaped temple, Uruk, 4th millennium BC (a); bent-axis temple, Sin Temple level VII at Tutub, 3rd millennium BC (b); in <i>antis/megaron</i> -type temple, Tell Khuera, 3rd millennium BC (c); broad-room temple, Ninmah Temple at Ur, 1st millennium BC (d); long-room temple, Sin-Shamash Temple at Ashur, 2nd millennium BC (e).	98
Figure 102: The Palace A at Kish, 3rd millennium BC.	99
Figure 103: Zimri-Lim's Palace at Mari, early 2nd millennium BC.	100
Figure 104: Sargon II's Palace at Dur Sharrukin, 8th century BC, according to the reconstruction made by V. Place.	101
Figure 105: The throne room of Sargon II's Palace at Dur Sharrukin, 8th century BC.	101
Figure 106: The <i>bit-hilani</i> at the entrance to the Palace at Kapara, 9th century BC.	102
Figure 107: The remains of Nabuchdnezar's Palace at Babylon, late 7th-early 6th century BC, in a photograph taken by J.A. Spranger in 1936.	102
Figure 108: Tell es-Sawan during the Samarra period, late 7th millennium BC.	104
Figure 109: The enceintes of Babylonia, 6th century BC: a) Euphrates; b) outer enceinte; c) inner enceinte.	106
Figure 110: Building with different plans at Jerf el-Ahmar, 10th-9th millennium BC.	107
Figure 111: The transition from the round (a) to the orthogonal (b) plan at Nemrik, 10th-9th millennium BC.	108
Figure 112: A <i>tholos</i> at Tell Arpachya, 6th millennium BC.	108
Figure 113: The round building at Tell Razuk, 3rd millennium BC.	109
Figure 114: Plan and reconstruction of a private house at Ur, early 2nd millennium BC.	110
Figure 115: A granary at Choga Mami, early 6th millennium BC.	110
Figure 116: Reconstruction of kilns found within the 'Temple Oval' at Tutub, 3rd millennium BC.	112
Figure 117: Section of the Processional Way at Babylon, 6th century BC.	114
Figure 118: A bridge represented on the Balawat Gates. Imgur Enlil, 9th century BC. Bronze. The British Museum, n. 124681.	114
Figure 119: The standing remains of the aqueduct at Jerwan, 7th century BC.	116
Figure 120: Ideal section of a <i>qanat</i>	117
Figure 121: Sennacherib's 'hanging garden' represented in an Assyrian relief. Ashurbanipal's Palace at Nineveh, 7th century BC. Gypsum alabaster, eight 208 cm. The British Museum, n. 124939.a. ..	119
Figure 122: The area of green planting excavated in the <i>Bit Akitu</i> at Ashur, 7th century BC.	119
Figure 123: Detail of a <i>baghdir</i> (left) and a tent (right), as represented on an Assyrian relief, 7th century BC.	120
Figure 124: Different kinds of coverings used in the underground buildings of the Royal Cemetery at Ur, mid 3rd millennium BC.	122

Figure 125: Umm al-Surab (Jordan), Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus: from the whole Architectural Complex (AC), to the single Stratigraphic Building Units (SBU).	126
Figure 126: Umm al-Jimal (Jordan), the West Church. Example of relations of ‘anteriority’ and ‘posteriority’.	128
Figure 127: Umm al-Jimal (Jordan), the West Church. Example of relation of ‘contemporaneity’ (<i>binds with</i>).	129
Figure 128: Umm al-Jimal (Jordan), the Architectural Complex of the so-called ‘Barracks’. Above: stratigraphic reading of the eastern front; below: orthophoto with the outline of the main masonry techniques of each phase.	130
Figure 129: Chronotypical table of masonry techniques and openings of the ‘Barracks’ at Umm al-Jimal (Jordan).	132
Figure 130: Drawing of the church and monastery of Saint George at Samah al-Sarhan (Jordan), made at the beginning of the survey. The drawing already contains the main information for the architectural survey: measurements, stratigraphic relations, notes on details... (drawing by Roberto Parenti, 2011).	135
Figure 131: Samah al-Sarhan (Jordan), internal front of the presbyterial zone of the church and monastery of Saint George: a) orthophoto from a terrestrial digital photogrammetry; b) ‘stone-by-stone’ drawing carried out on the orthophoto; c) elaboration, with indication of the building periods.	137
Figure 132: Umm al-Surab (Jordan), the Architectural Complex (AC) of the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus: a) 3D wire-frame model drawn on the point-cloud; b) obtained from terrestrial digital photogrammetry (after Parenti 2012: 190, fig. 3).....	138
Figure 133: Umm al-Surab (Jordan). Combined analysis of the external fronts and plan of an Architectural Complex (orthophoto elaborated by Gourguen Davtian, 2019).	139
Figure 134: Umm al-Surab (Jordan). Architectural Complex 24. Registration card of the main features of the masonry technique.	140
Figure 135: Umm al-Surab (Jordan). Chronological interpretation of the façade of the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus.	142
Figure 136: Umm al-Surab (Jordan). Façade of the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus: a) photograph taken by Renato Bartoccini in the 1930s with the inscribed lintel still in situ; b) photograph taken by François Villeneuve in 1979: The lintel is still in situ; c) orthophoto taken in 2009: The lintel is missing and a large part of the wall has been significantly refurbished in 2006.	143

Preface

Near Eastern archaeology is extremely rich in studies on architecture. This volume aims to make a further contribution, focusing on the architectural evidences from Mesopotamia, dating from the early Neolithic to the Achaemenian period, i.e. between the 10th millennium BC and the 4th century BC.

In particular, this essay concerns the so-called ‘building archaeology’, that is the discipline dealing with the registration and analysis of all the building materials and techniques involved in the assembly and erection of constructions.

Especially from the 1980s, studies on ancient architecture increasingly concentrated on all the topics related to ‘building construction’, even without neglecting the historic-artistic approach. It has often been emphasised that architectural remains require special attention by archaeologists. In fact, they need a different methodological approach, compared to the dating of ‘movable’ items. In most cases, a construction is the result of the sum of several building interventions realised over a span of time: a frequently quoted example is the Pantheon in Rome, that has an inscription by Marcus Agrippa on its pediment, but it ultimately came to us in the form realised under Hadrian (Giuliani 2008: 25). Such a situation occurs in any archaeological context as a rule, and it can therefore be a hard task for archaeologists to reconstruct the building history of the monument concerned. From this point of view, the registration of building materials and techniques is the proper starting point for archaeological investigation.

The methods for surveying and registering these data, as well as those for undertaking the stratigraphic reading of the various elements of any single building structure, play a key role in building archaeology. It is worth noting that, apart for this common feature, the discipline developed differently, from the 1980s on, depending on the country and the research area (Prehistory, Classical or Medieval archaeology, etc). However, there is now widespread acceptance that stylistic and functional analyses are not enough to duly interpret an architectural monument. Detailed registration of the metric data, material features and construction techniques is required to ensure correct reconstruction of the total building history of structures realised long ago, and coming to us after an eventful life.

In-depth registration and analysis of building materials and techniques require professional skills and experience that cannot be achieved only after a standard university training in archaeology. At the same time, the architect’s training is often insufficient to allow the effective use of technical information for the purpose of archaeological research. Coexistence between archaeologists and architects has not always been easy. However, it is clear that archaeologists cannot do the job of architects, and vice versa: somehow they must collaborate, which first means communicating with each other.

From the archaeologist’s point of view – i.e. that of the current writer – it is necessary to know the basics of classification of building materials, their physical properties, the main techniques of their finishing, as well as the basic principles of statics. Archaeologists should also let architects understand how better to tune the registration of data to ensure a fruitful

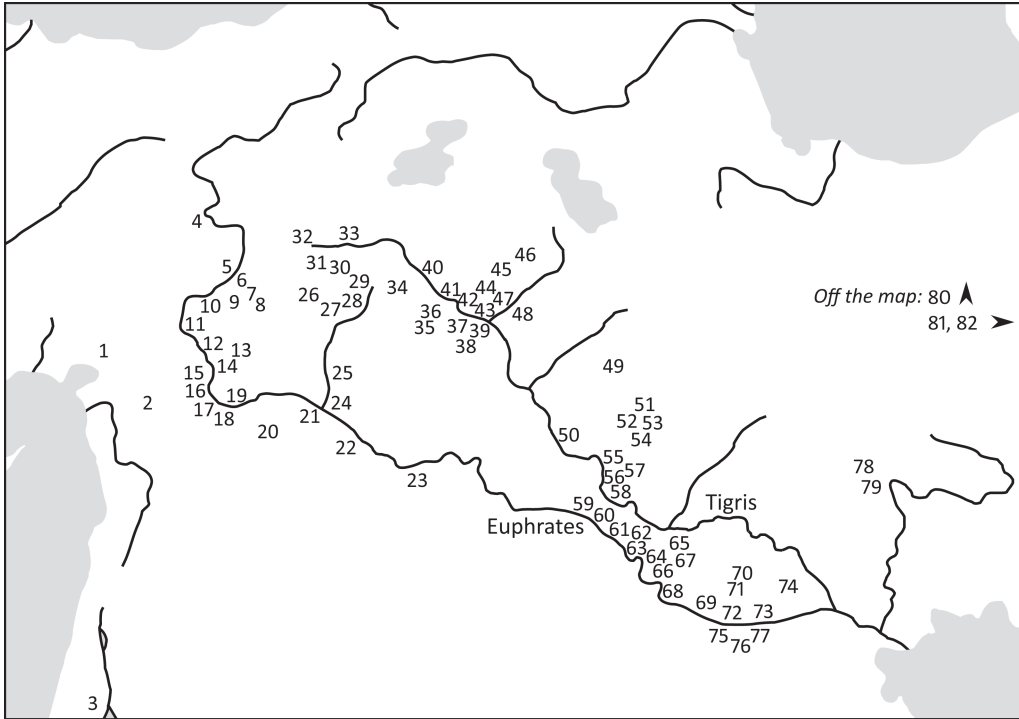


Figure 1: Map of ancient Mesopotamia [*<modern name> or <ancient name (modern name)>*].

In geographical order: 1: Sam'al (Zincirli); 2: Ebla (Tell Mardikh); 3: Jericho (Tell es-Sultan); 4: Arslantepe; 5: Tille Höyük; 6: Nevalı Çori; 7: Göbekli Tepe; 8: Guzana (Tell Halaf); 9: Tell Aswad; 10: Tell Khuera; 11: Karkemish (Jarablus); 12: Til Barsip (Tell Ahmar); 13: Hadatu (Arslan Taş); 14: Jerf al-Ahmar; 15: Halula; 16: Habuba Kabira; 17: Tell Kannas; 18: Emar; 19: Mureybet; 20: al-Kowm; 21: Tell Buqras; 22: Mari (Tell Hariri); 23: Haradum (Khirbet ed-Dinya); 24: Tell Masaikh; 25: Dur-Katlimmu (Tell Shekh Hamad); 26: Nabada (Tell Beydar); 27: Tell Brak; 28: Kahat (Tell Barri); 29: Shubat-Enlil (Tell Leilan); 30: Urkesh (Tell Mozan); 31: Tushan (Ziyaret Tepe); 32: Çayonü Tepesi; 33: Hallan Çemi; 34: Tell Maghzalya; 35: Karana (Tell ar-Rimah); 36: Tell Taya; 37: Ashur (Qalat Shergat); 38: Umm Dabaghya; 39: Hassuna; 40: Nemrik; 41: Tell Arpachya; 42: Tepe Gawra; 43: Nineveh (Kuyunjik-Nebi Yunus); 44: Kalhu (Nimrud); 45: Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad); 46: Jerwan; 47: Imgur-Enlil (Balawat); 48: Kilizu (Qasr Shamamuk); 49: Nuzi (Yorgan Tepe); 50: Tell es-Sawan; 51: Tell Razuk; 52: Abada; 53: Tell Madhur; 54: Choga Mami; 55: Eshnunna (Tell Asmar); 56: Shadappum (Tell Harmal); 57: Tutub (Khafaja); 58: Neribtum (Ischchali); 59: Dur-Kurigalzu (Aqar Quf); 60: Sippar (Abu Habba); 61: Tell Uqair; 62: Babylon (Babil); 63: Borsippa (Birs Nimrud); 64: Kish (Tell Ingharra); 65: Mashkan ash-Shapir; 66: Abu Salabikh; 67: Nippur (Nuffar); 68: Shuruppak (Fara); 69: Uruk (Warka); 70: Girsu (Tello); 71: Abu Tbirah; 72: Tell el-Oueili; 73: Larsa (Senkereh); 74: Lagash (Tell al-Hiba); 75: al-Ubaid; 76: Eridu (Abu Sharain); 77: Ur (Tell Mukayar); 78: Susa (Shush); 79: Dur-Untash (Choga Zambil); 80: Kamiltepe; 81: Pasargade; 82: Persepolis. *In alphabetical order:* Abada; 52; Abu Salabikh; 66; Abu Tbirah; 71; al-Kowm; 20; al-Ubaid; 75; Arslantepe; 4; Ashur (Qalat Shergat); 37; Babylon (Babil); 62; Borsippa (Birs Nimrud); 63; Çayonü Tepesi; 32; Choga Mami; 54; Dur-Katlimmu (Tell Shekh Hamad); 25; Dur-Kurigalzu (Aqar Quf); 59; Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad); 45; Dur-Untash (Choga Zambil); 79; Ebla (Tell Mardikh); 2; Emar; 18; Eridu (Abu Sharain); 76; Eshnunna (Tell Asmar); 55; Girsu (Tello); 70; Göbekli Tepe; 7; Guzana (Tell Halaf); 8; Habuba Kabira; 16; Hadatu (Arslan Taş); 13; Halula; 15; Hallan Çemi; 33; Haradum (Khirbet ed-Dinya); 23; Hassuna; 39; Imgur-Enlil (Balawat); 47; Jerf al-Ahmar; 14; Jericho (Tell es-Sultan); 3; Jerwan; 46; Kahat (Tell Barri); 28; Kalhu (Nimrud); 44; Kamiltepe; 80; Karana (Tell ar-Rimah); 35; Karkemish (Jarablus); 11; Kilizu (Qasr Shamamuk); 48; Kish (Tell Ingharra); 64; Lagash (Tell al-Hiba); 74; Larsa (Senkereh); 73; Mari (Tell Hariri); 22; Mashkan ash-Shapir; 65; Mureybet; 19; Nabada (Tell Beydar); 26; Nemrik; 40; Neribtum (Ischchali); 58; Nevalı Çori; 6; Nineveh (Kuyunjik-Nebi Yunus); 43; Nippur (Nuffar); 67; Nuzi (Yorgan Tepe); 49; Pasargade; 81; Persepolis; 82; Sam'al (Zincirli); 1; Shadappum (Tell Harmal); 56; Shubat-Enlil (Tell Leilan); 29; Shuruppak (Fara); 68; Sippar (Abu Habba); 60; Susa (Shush); 78; Tell Arpachya; 41; Tell Aswad; 9; Tell Brak; 27; Tell Buqras; 21; Tell el-Oueili; 72; Tell es-Sawan; 50; Tell Kannas; 17; Tell Khuera; 10; Tell Madhur; 53; Tell Maghzalya; 34; Tell Masaikh; 24; Tell Razuk; 51; Tell Taya; 36; Tell Uqair; 61; Tepe Gawra; 42; Til Barsip (Tell Ahmar); 12; Tille Höyük; 5; Tushan (Ziyaret Tepe); 31; Tutub (Khafaja); 57; Umm Dabaghya; 38; Ur (Tell Mukayar); 77; Urkesh (Tell Mozan); 30; Uruk (Warka); 69.

archaeological interpretation. A basic knowledge of such architectural skills will also allow archaeologists to avoid a common mistake – the lack of distinction between ‘registration’ and ‘interpretation’. Actually, they are complementary, but separate, steps of the research. Finally, a better understanding of the architectural basics will also enable archaeologists to make informed choices when planning future researches.

Near Eastern archaeology applies the methods of building archaeology, and many architectural remains have been published with a rich and detailed description of their material and technical characteristics. However, compared to other research areas, such as Roman or Medieval archaeology, the research is still strongly oriented to a stylistic and art historical approach. Sometimes technical analysis still struggles to find its space. Moreover, the intrinsic perishability of the architectural heritage of ancient Mesopotamia makes it hard fully to evaluate the information gathered from surveys and excavations carried out in the past, and any analysis is therefore bound by the available documentation. In spite of all this, a huge amount of potentially valuable data exists, both thanks to the architecture still standing, and the dedicated literature and archive documentation.

This volume focuses on ancient Mesopotamia (considered in a broad sense, including bordering, but consistent, regions such as Assyria and inner Syria, immediately west of the Euphrates – Figure 1). Of course, this region can no longer be considered as being of ‘major’ importance (and my thoughts turn to Henri Frankfort’s label ‘peripheral regions’, used for grouping Asia Minor, the Levant and Persia with respect to Mesopotamia – Frankfort 1954). However, the historical framework of Mesopotamia is characterised by a cultural continuity and an amount and quality of available information which justifies, in my opinion, a dedicated essay.

This book, written by an archaeologist, cannot be an exhaustive and detailed handbook on architectural building techniques: its goal is to introduce university students and scholars in Near Eastern archaeology to those building archaeology methods applied within the Mesopotamian context. This should help the reader to understand the principles underlying this discipline, and to realise what knowledge and skills are needed, beyond those specific to archaeologists.

Because of the introductory nature of the book, the contents have been organised in chapters as didactic as possible, trying to cover all the main topics and illustrating them by means of selected examples. The inevitable gap in the choice of examples should be filled in somewhat, in the author’s intention, with the aid of the Thematic Bibliography chapter, in which the reader will find references and reading tips.

The method of ‘stratigraphic reading’ is considered fundamental for any analysis of building archaeology, and therefore a special appendix, authored by Piero Gilento, is dedicated to this topic.

This work is an updated English version of an essay published ten years ago (*Costruire tra i due fiumi*). That particular work was written while undertaking a very fruitful and rewarding building archaeology survey at the site of Umm al-Surab, in Jordan, under the direction of Roberto Parenti. I owe to him my interest and passion for the intriguing job of reconstructing the history of standing walls. Moreover, many colleagues have supported this publication with

tips, comments, and the supply of images for the illustrations. Consequently the best thanks from Piero Gilento and me are due to Susan Allison, Valentina Aversa, Jenina Bas, Brigitte Boissavit-Camus, Guy Bunnens, Amalia Catagnoti, Jennifer Celani, Costanza Coppini, Gina Coulthard, María de los Ángeles Utrero Agudo, Dora D'Auria, Maria Cristina Guidotti, Christine Kepinski, Marc Lebeau, Mario Liverani, Cristina Meneses, Daniele Morandi Bonacossi, Giovanni Pesce, Francesco Rizzi, Francesco Saliola, Eric W. Schnittke, Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin, Enrico Quagliarini, François Villeneuve, Harvey Weiss. Also, my gratitude goes to the team at Archaeopress for the whole editorial support process, including the revision of the English translation.

Finally, this book comes out after the disappearance of my Doktorvater, Prof. Dr Harald Hauptmann, who taught me so many things, despite the little (too little!) time I could spend with him, and I would like to dedicate this work to him.

Firenze, 12 July 2020

Stefano Anastasio