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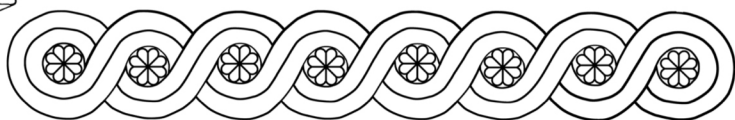
Volume 2

Field Reports

Islamic archaeology



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Foreword to the Section “Field Reports”

Nicolò Marchetti, Francesca Cavaliere, Claudia D’Orazio, Gabriele Giacosa
and Eleonora Mariani

Field reports generally represent the largest relative share of papers at the ICAANE. Reassessments of old excavations fall in this category as well. In Bologna, 95 papers were presented in four parallel sessions and 49 of them are published here. They have been simply arranged according to the alphabetic order of first authors (with the exception of course of the keynote paper, opening this section). They attest to a diversity of agencies, methods, perspectives and urgencies which represent a singular asset of our field.

While new digital architectures of knowledge are about to deeply transform the ways of our scientific dissemination, these reports do supply in the meanwhile loads of new information on near eastern sites, as well as on neighbouring areas, which are all too often insufficiently considered in our discussions.

Field Reports

Abu Tbeirah: Preliminary Report on the 2018-2019 Excavations

Licia Romano and Franco D'Agostino¹

Abstract

We present here the results of the 8th and 9th excavation campaigns at Abu Tbeirah, Iraq. Beyond the description of the archaeological evidence brought to light during the last seasons in Area 6, a particular focus was devoted to geoarchaeological research and the city environment. The research methodology and the preliminary results of the ongoing study of the canal system inside and outside the settlement is presented as well.

Introduction

The last excavations campaigns at Abu Tbeirah were focused on geoarchaeological research and on the excavation of area 6, where remains from the end of the third/beginning of the second millennium BC were discovered (Fig. 1). In this report, the geoarchaeological research is presented first and then the discoveries in Area 6. For an overview of the site and excavations, see Romano and D'Agostino 2019.

Our work in Iraq is possible only thanks to our colleagues of the Iraqi SBAH. We are all really grateful for their precious and fundamental help. Abu Tbeirah research is funded by Sapienza University of Rome, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, and Fondazione Franco Bardelli.

Geoarchaeological Research at Abu Tbeirah

The geoarchaeological research at Abu Tbeirah is based on the joint work carried out by Jaafar Jotheri, Salvatore Milli, and Luca Forti. The discovery of the harbor in the NW part of the site opened a wide range of questions. First, there was the urge to verify on the ground the geological setting of the site and the presence of canals crossing the city. The study of satellite imagery (Fig. 1) revealed the presence of two internal canals connected to the port and a series of winding watercourses distributed in a kind of radial pattern around the *tell*.

Our research on the field, not yet completed due to the pandemic emergency, involves the realization of the following:

- deep boreholes (up to *ca.* 20 m of depth) realized through a drilling machine;
- shallow boreholes (up to 6 m of depth) excavated with a hand auger;
- trenches realized by hand in the canals inside the city and using a mechanical shovel for the channels around the settlement.

The investigations are yielding us a quite clear image of the environmental evolution in the settlement's area. A complete sampling of the cores and trenches was carried out to perform laboratory analyses that are giving us information about the sedimentary environment.

¹ Sapienza University of Rome, Department of Oriental Studies.

For example, recovered ostracod assemblages are typical of a shallow water environment with variable salinity. In particular, the ostracods recovered from borehole A seem to indicate an oligohaline freshwater environment, rich in vegetation, with spring water inputs and events of higher salinities, possibly connected with both sea level variations or increased aridity (Forti *et al.* in press).

These data, joined to the highlighted stratigraphy, seem to indicate a sequence of floodplains and marshes. In particular, Borehole A stratigraphy shows the presence of marine deposits around 5.3-6.30 m of depth. The presence of a marshy environment around the site is thus confirmed, and the data have a potential impact on the study at high resolution of the evolution of the ancient shoreline (Forti *et al.* in press).

The winding watercourses forming a radial pattern around the site are common to different settlements in southern Iraq, and were interpreted by Jotheri *et al.* 2019 as relict communication waterways, a kind of south Sumerian version of the hollow-ways in Northern Mesopotamia. In 2019 a trench was realized in order to verify this hypothesis on the ground. The location of the trench on the field was decided with Jaafar Jotheri on the basis of satellite imagery. The work was followed by our geologist, Luca Forti, an Agatha Christie fan, who named the trench "Malloway", a name we have been very happy to keep. The section shows a stratigraphy that can be considered the product of sedimentation in a floodplain environment with the presence of a small and sinuous channel. Twenty-seven samples from the trench were collected for analysis. Unfortunately, due to the political situation in Iraq at the end of 2019, they are still waiting in the Nasiriyah Museum.

As said before, the geoarchaeological research at Abu Tbeirah in these years also involved the excavation of two trenches aimed at verifying the presence of the internal canals visible from the satellite imagery.

The 2018 winter season was characterized by strong rainfall that completely filled the harbor basin, giving us a glimpse of how the harbor appeared in antiquity. The internal canals of the site were the only place in which it was possible to operate without damaging the *tell* surface, thanks to the perfect drainage of their sand sediment.

The main canal (Fig. 2) dividing the site from north-west to south-east was probably a natural channel, artificially modified. The section revealed a sequence of modern activities over the third millennium BC stratigraphy.

Immediately under the topsoil (Unit A), a modern human-made seasonal canal (Unit D) was highlighted.

The canal cut a silty-clay layer, rich in vegetation (Unit B). The ostracod assemblage collected here points to a slow freshwater environment. This layer filled an ancient anthropic cut covered with clay (Unit C). The cut partially removed the layer of an earlier river (Unit E), characterized by an accumulation of yellowish sand, indicating a good water regime. The provenance of the sand samples is intermediate between Euphrates and Tigris sediment and within the range of composition of the Mesopotamian floodplain sand (Forti *et al.* in press).

It is plausible to hypothesize that a reduction of the water flowing in the main canal (Unit E) led Abu Tbeirah inhabitants to artificially reconstruct a second bed with the clay (Unit C), realizing a smaller canal to collect water in a more efficient way.

The ground surface of the port's rampart is connected with the marshy/vegetation layer. Unit B seems thus coeval to the use of the artificial basin and at least to the last phase of

the rampart. On the basis of pottery, this structure is dated at least to the second half of the third millennium BC.

The trench realized in the secondary canal, immediately eastward of the port, revealed a similar situation: the stratigraphy testifies the presence of a rich vegetation filling a canal artificially realized with a clay bed, cutting the yellowish sand left by the passing of a bigger and earlier water course.

On the bottom of the earlier canal, several pottery sherds were collected, dating plausibly to the second half of the third millennium BC. The reduction of the secondary canal is marked by the presence over it of a richly organic layer that constitutes a good *terminus ante quem non* for its realization.

Our team is now studying all the stratigraphic sequences highlighted by the trenches and the boreholes, creating a correlation panel that will hopefully allow us to describe in detail the geological evolution of the river crossing Abu Tbeirah.

However, some preliminary considerations can be presented. The reduction of the sediment deposition and the consequent swamp formation can possibly be connected to the climatic variations related to the 4.2 ka event. Interestingly, the strategies implemented by the inhabitants of Abu Tbeirah are still practiced today in the Iraqi Marshlands to cope with a period of drought. In recent years, despite the winter rains, the level of swamps and waterways was significantly reduced. The inhabitants created small canals to optimize the accumulation of the little water available and to allow navigation and buffalo breeding.

In analyzing the causes of the end of Abu Tbeirah settlement, however, additional factors must also be considered, which may have played an important role at a local level. In particular, the possibility that a natural or artificial deviation or other anthropic interventions carried out upstream may have deprived the site of its main watercourse and generated a devastating effect locally in an ecosystem as sensitive as that of the marshes. However, these interventions could also have been an attempt to cope with the generalized shortage of water.

Area 6 (Fig. 3)

Last Occupational Phases

Important evidence of the last occupational phases of the site was revealed by 2017 excavations in Area 6. Like the rest of the site, this area did not show a huge pottery dispersion on its surface, a situation possibly worsened by the presence of huge rainfall gullies. Here, the cleaning of one of the military trenches realized in the area brought to light the mudbrick and brick foundation of a building dated at least to the Amar-Suena reign, as demonstrated by the discovery of two inscribed half bricks and associated Ur III pottery. In 2019 the excavation area was enlarged south of the military pit. Immediately under the surface, several modern activities were highlighted, including some modern graves.

The area appears particularly disturbed by the presence of two rainfall gullies. Beyond the modern activities and the cuts left by the erosion, four ancient graves were discovered, and a possibly fifth one, looted in antiquity (Pit US 1609+1610). These graves revealed for the first time an occupation of the site, now almost completely lost, dated plausibly to the beginning of the second millennium BC.

Up to now, it is impossible to hypothesize if we are dealing with sub-pavement or cemetery burials. Up to now, it is impossible to hypothesize if we are dealing with sub-pavement

or cemetery burials. Therefore, the only interesting stratigraphic relationship highlighted is related to one grave cutting the brick and mudbrick foundations of the underlying structure.

In two of these graves (Grave 212 and Grave 214), the skeletons were inside a kind of coffin mainly attributed to the Larsa period: a multiple-ridged “dome”-like cover, directly set over the body (Woolley and Mallowan 1976: 194).

Grave 212 equipment was quite rich. Outside the coffin, it consisted of a small bottle and two jars, one of them closed with a cover in reed mat and bitumen. Inside the coffin, near the skeleton's head, there was a vessel in grey ware, decorated with red painting and incisions filled with white incrustations (Fig. 4). This kind of vessel with small suspension loops is attested from the end of the 20th century in Southern Mesopotamia, Diyala, and Susiana (Armstrong and Gasche 2014: Type 135 C). Comparisons for the other vessels confirm the dating.

Several beads, found near the upper vertebrae of the skeleton, might have originally formed a necklace or, more probably, a dress decoration. In addition, the skeleton was adorned with two bracelets (a copper-alloy one and another one with carnelian, agate, lapis lazuli beads, and small pierced shells), two copper alloy rings, and a shell one recovered from the backfill (Fig. 5).

Among the other later activities in the area, a pit (US 1609+1610), probably a grave looted in antiquity, contained a copper alloy ring and a light green chlorite (?) seal (Fig. 6). The seal is dated, on the basis of comparisons, to the early Old Babylonian period. Two individuals are represented holding their hands while dancing on one foot. The other leg is bent and grasped by the opposite hand. The scene is further enriched by a moon crescent over the couple and a scorpion under it. The dancing duo is framed from one side by the representation of a snake and by a spiral standard, ending on the top with two lion protomes and a rounded mace-head. The two lion-headed staff is usually attributed to Inanna/Ishtar or to Nergal (Romano 2021).

Building E1

The activities cutting the structures dated to Amar-Suena are chronologically consistent with what was highlighted in the 2017 and 2019 campaigns. We decided to dig the fillings of the foundation pit, highlighting their nucleus, and partially excavate also the layer cut by the foundation. This method was chosen in order to better document the presence of inscribed bricks and their position in the structure, while keeping clearly separated the materials from the foundations and the layers cut by them. Up to now, the excavations highlighted at least 14 rooms. In the eastern part of the area, traces of two doors in the southernmost walls of Rooms 11 and 12 were revealed (*ca.* -0.70/-0.80 m; same elevation of the small part of the pavement highlighted inside Room 13). In the northernmost part of the new excavation area (squares GjXIII3-5), immediately under the upper erosion layers, the collapse of the brick structure and some bricks still in place were highlighted. Though there is the possibility that we are dealing with more than one structure, the overall impression is that the foundations belonged to the same building.

If this interpretation is correct, the building was formed by several rows of rooms, a possible corridor, and plausibly the setting of a staircase (Room 7), hinting at the presence of a second floor for the original structure. The absence of a clear subdivision in Room 10 is due to the flowing of water inside a rainfall gully: the presence of melted mud bricks was noted and documented, but the walls are drawn here with dashed lines due to the uncertainty of

their reconstruction. The almost complete absence of pavement gives us no hint toward the identification of the functions of the rooms. Unfortunately, the area north of the walls with the bricks still *in situ* was destroyed by the army. The next campaigns will investigate the area further east and north-east with the hope of finding preserved traces of the activities carried out in the structure.

From the building technique point of view, at least four methods of construction were highlighted by the partial excavation of the foundations.

- Technique 1: pit with inside mud bricks and bricks nucleus;
- Technique 2: pit with a nucleus of mudbricks, bricks, and mixed material;
- Technique 3: pit with a mudbrick nucleus;
- Technique 4: at least one row of bricks laying over layers of clay and at least another row of mud bricks at the bottom of the foundation pit.

Techniques 1 and 2 are used in the westernmost part of the building, while the eastern part seems to be realized essentially in mudbricks. The concurrent use of different foundation techniques is well attested for the Ur III period at the same Ur (Woolley 1974). These different techniques of foundation might represent proof against the interpretation of the architectural fabric as a unique construction or might also indicate the presence of several construction phases. The few diagnostic fragments recovered in the foundations can be tentatively attributed to the pottery horizon of the end of the Ur III period.

Building E2

The lower phase of the structure was excavated only in the area destroyed by the modern army pit. Two possible occupational phases were highlighted. The first one was only visible in the section: a pavement was preserved, though heavily damaged. Further evidence of this phase comes from the excavations of the later foundations. For example, a *tannur* (US 1628+1629) was found partially destroyed by the foundation of the south-eastern wall of E1 Room 10. Further structures probably belonging to the E2 or, however, to a building earlier than E1 were discovered inside Room 12.

The earlier phase of Building E2, at least in the partially excavated Room 1, was destroyed by fire. Nevertheless, the walls are preserved for more than one meter. A *tannur* was found with its upper part broken and apparently moved from the original position. The bottom of the *tannur* and the corresponding pavement was not reached during the campaign. The pottery from the layers filling Room 1 can be dated to the Ur III period.

Conclusions

The pottery recovered in the stratigraphy of Area 6 indicates a succession from the Ur III to the early old Babylonian period. Our data point toward a reduction of the settlement of Abu Tbeirah to its northern part at the end of the third millennium BC. This reduction might have been linked to the change in the water regime of the canal crossing the city, as seen at the beginning of the presentation.

The presence of Amar-Suena bricks in the foundation of Building E1 might possibly be related to the rebuilding activities of the Ur III king on the western branch of the Euphrates (see H. J. Nissen's remarks in Adams and Nissen 1972: 217). This data can be joined to the evidence from the corona satellite imagery. Here it seems that the main canal crossing Abu Tbeirah was formed by the confluence of two branches, one coming from Ur, the other

possibly from NW, in an area now obliterated by Nasiriyah city. This might be proof of the role played by Abu Tbeirah as a nodal point in the late third millennium BC Southern Mesopotamian fluvial system.

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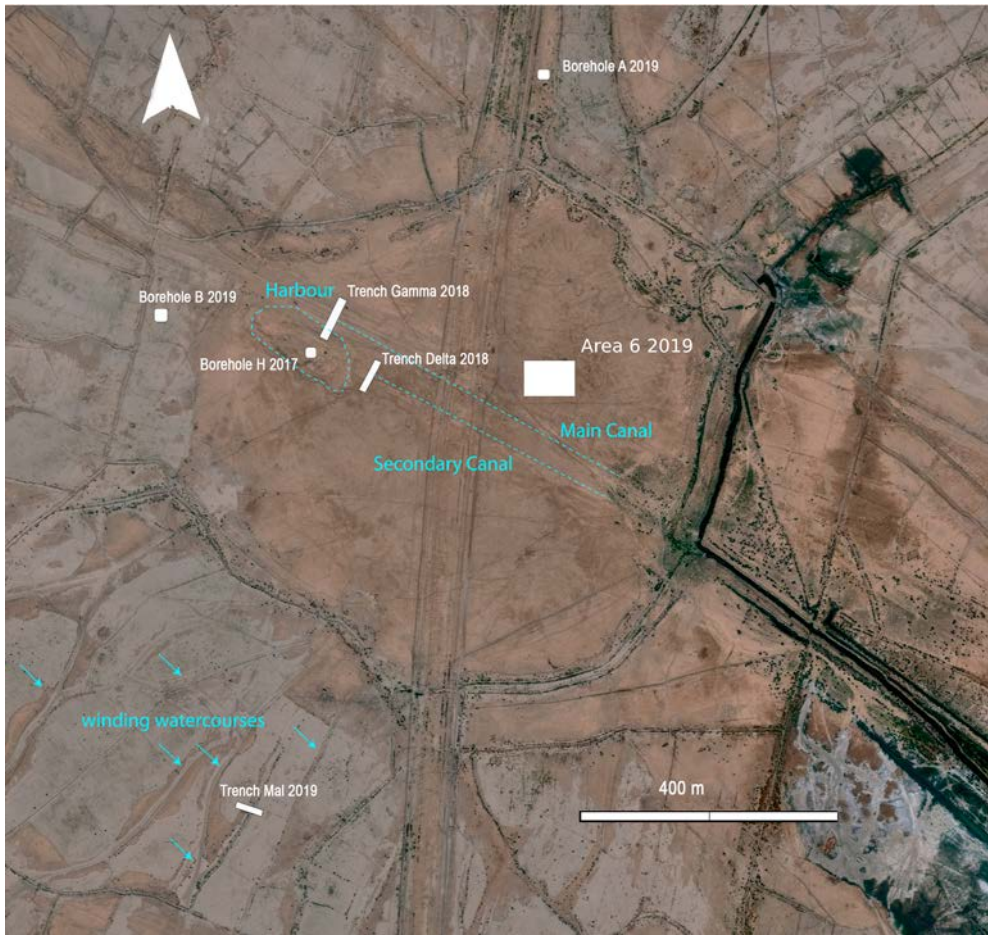


Fig. 1: Abu Tbeirah. Satellite imagery with the geological trenches and soundings and Area 6

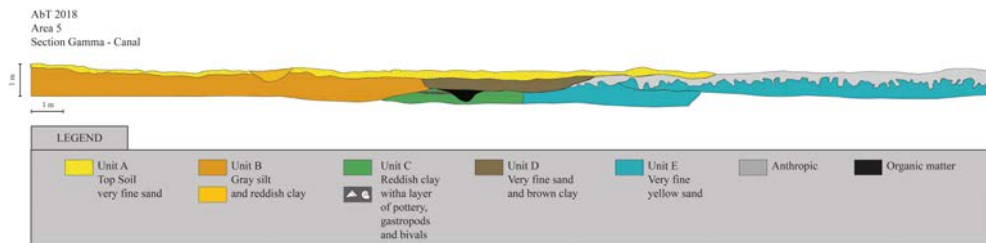


Fig. 2: Abu Tbeirah. Geological stratigraphy highlighted in the main canal crossing the site (Trench Gamma)



Fig. 3: Abu Tbeirah. Area 6, Building E1 and E2 with the indication of the latest activities in the area

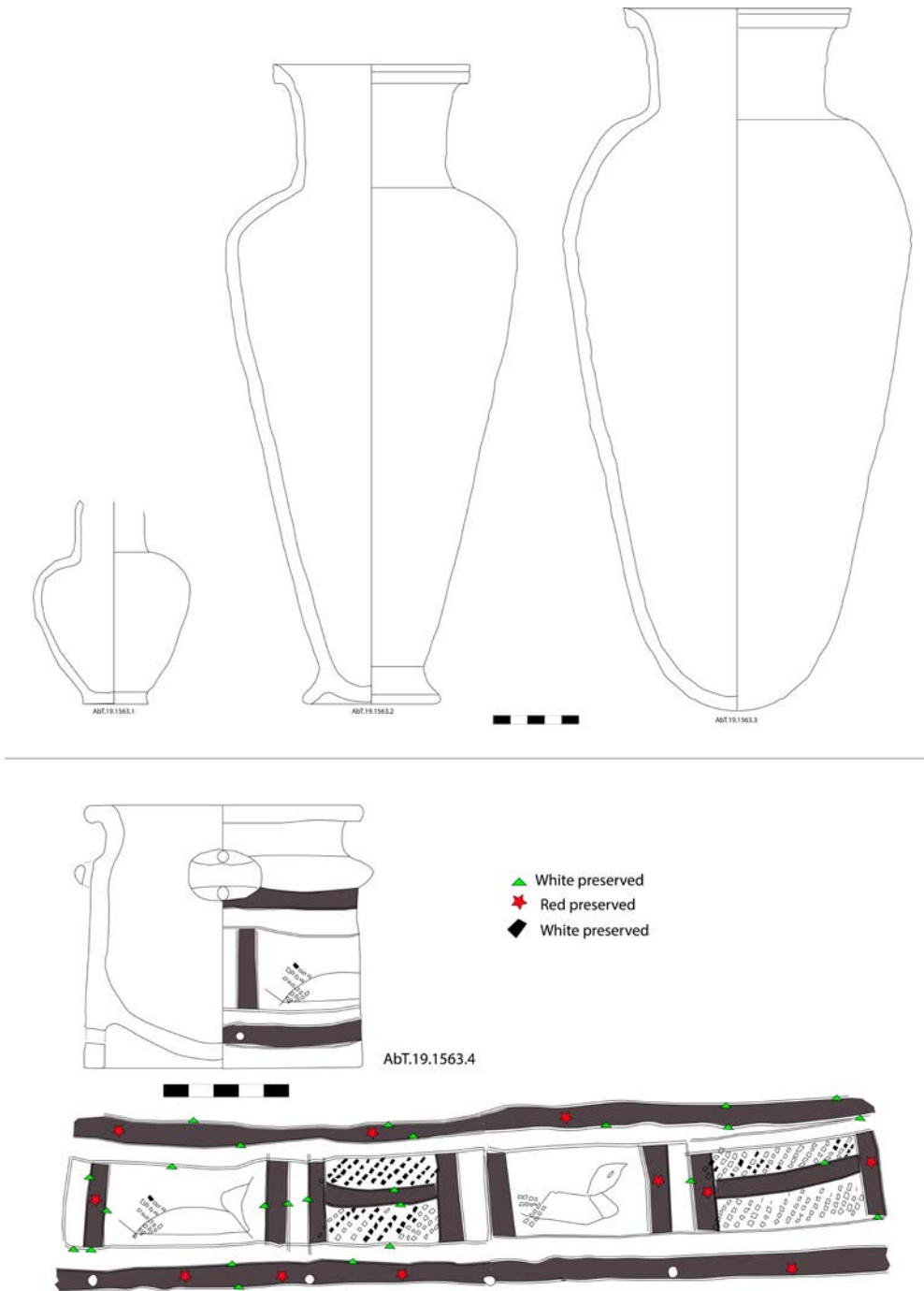


Fig. 4: Abu Tbeirah. Area 6, Grave 212, pottery assemblage



Fig. 5: Abu Tbeirah. Area 6, Grave 212, the jewels adorning the skeleton

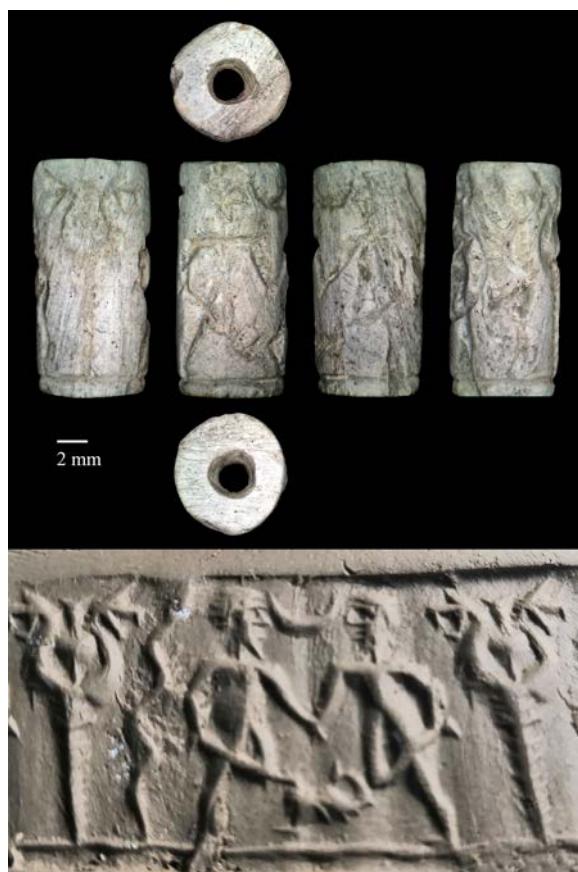


Fig. 6: Abu Tbeirah. Area 6, pit US 1609+1610, Old Babylonian seal