

“THE ‘SECOND EBLA’. A VIEW ON THE EB IVB CITY”

Rita Dolce
Università di Palermo

In a recent study of the topographical features and the urban layout of the city of Ebla following its destruction by the Akkadians¹ we have drawn on the archaeological documentation and the very little data that exists to attempt to sketch out a preliminary image of the city in that crucial phase of the historical and cultural development of northern Syria, EB IVB, which, until only a few years ago, had not been shown, or even assumed to be so crucial².

Some of the many questions raised by the ongoing investigations, to which it is difficult to offer any definitive answers at the present time, have at least been clarified by the findings of the excavations conducted over the past ten years in the Lower Town of this large Syrian centre (fig. 1), to which I shall be referring here as the starting-point from which to draw a number of further considerations: the Late Early Syrian Ebla was radically destroyed by the Akkadians which held up the development of the town and for a time, and certainly led to a considerable reduction in its size, but it was never completely abandoned. The partial reorganization of some of the public structures on the Acropolis and the probable building of the official residence of the sovereign³ in the EBIVB/Mardikh IIB period suggest that the city recovered and a system of institutionalized royal power was established. The extension of the EB IVB settlement in the Lower Town⁴, particularly on the northern and western sides⁵, grew up around the monumental Royal Palace (the Archaic Palace) (fig. 2), the seat of the throne and manifest official power⁶, which was founded and already in use by EB IVB and was the forerunner and, to a certain extent, the “model” of the royal-official buildings that followed in the same area and without interruption from EB IVB to MB II⁷.

¹ Dolce 2000 b.

² The following of the excavations at Ebla during the last ten years nearly called the attention of the archaeologist to a wide range of data, referring to the urban settlement subsequent to the Akkadian intervention but still pertaining to the EB IVB. For preliminary observations and interpretations see Matthiae 1994; Ead. 1995: pp. 654-674; Ead. 1993: pp. 615-620, 634-637; Ead. 1998: pp. 574-584. For some preliminary remarks on EB IVB city see Dolce 1995.

³ Matthiae 1977: pp.109-110 ; Dolce 1988: p.106 ; Dolce 1995.

⁴ As has been pointed out by the recent excavations and soundings (T,P areas): cf. Matthiae 1993: pp.615-620, 633-637, figg.12-13; Ead 1995 :p.654 and ff.; Marchetti, Nigro 1997 :pp.1-3, fig.2.

⁵ I refer to the data till now known: cf. Dolce 2000 b; Matthiae 1995: pp.678-681, note 48. Nevertheless it's noteworthy that we cannot exclude a wider and more homogeneous growing of EB IVB settlement along the east and south sides of the site too, as already suggested by recent evidences: Matthiae 1998 : p. 566.

⁶ Matthiae 1995: pp.654, 659-668.

⁷ As the “Palazzo Intermedio” and the Northern Palace, which shows the official-royal core corresponding to the main building of EB IVB relating to the trapezoidal layout and size of the throne-room: Matthiae 1995: p.662; Ead.1998: p.566; nevertheless we point out that the room L.4038 of Northern Palace shows close correspondences with the room L.3038 of Western Palace too, built in the Old-Syrian Period: Matthiae 1990: p.220, note 50.

Matthiae 1995: pp.659-661, 674-677. The entrance opened on the western front is sure in the Northern Palace (Matthiae 1989:p.173) and very likely in the “Palazzo Arcaico” (Dolce 1995: p.11;

Other evidence that may be drawn from the data gathered during the excavations both in the Lower Town and along the northern and western slopes of the ramparts⁸ indicate that post-palatial Ebla was very extensive, as do the references to the city found in the texts from Gudea and the III dynasty of Ur and, in the titulature of its sovereigns who are known and probable⁹ about its presence in the international context. But we still cannot say how, and to what extent, Late Early-Syrian Ebla (which we may now rightly consider to be the “second Ebla”) played a major role in the framework of the leading regional and supra-regional leaderships in the latter quarter of the third millennium BC, and the degree of dependency on a leader state in Syria that enabled Ebla to establish political, diplomatic and economic relations with the states of Mesopotamia.

The lack of any textual documentation at Ebla belonging to the period examined here, and at present for the next age too, (namely, the Ebla of Ishtar¹⁰ in the floruit of Old Syrian culture and the grandiose urban project which encompassed most of the Lower Town¹¹, makes the investigation even more difficult. Furthermore, in my opinion, the investigation can be pursued essentially on two planes: inside the city, as more data emerges from the excavations at the “second Ebla”, and outside the city, but connected to the largest centres of contemporary Syria, relating first and foremost to the history and the development of Mari from the Akkadian age to the Amorite domination, evidenced from the wide range of documentation from its palatine archives and from the old and new evidence revealed by archaeological excavations on that site¹².

The vision we are given of Mari is that of a city governed from the times of Akkadian supremacy by local rulers, who followed one another in a stable dynastic system¹³, and set up a wide-ranging town planning and architectural project in the city in the course of the last century of the third millennium BC, when the third Ur dynasty reigned in Mesopotamia and in various forms extended territorial control over the northern centres, which included Mari¹⁴.

If the considerations made in this regard by J. Margueron are correct, the real rebirth of post-Akkadian Mari occurred before the beginning of the second millennium

Matthiae 1998: p.566, nota18): these data confirm the supremacy of the western side of the city from EB IV to MB I-II. See at this regard also Dolce 2000b.

⁸ It's about some remains of floors dating back to EB IVB discovered on the western borders of the Northern Palace; a sounding to the east of the eastern front of P2 Temple itself has brought to light a large number of EB IVB sherds: Matthiae 1995: pp.673-674; Matthiae 1993: p.633 note 46.

Traces of a huge structure of urban wall of EBIVB Ebla were brought to light on the top of the northern ramparts while unearthing the fortified amorite complex to the north (AA); finally, during the 97 and 98 excavations traces of mud bricks very likely of the same type usually employed in the EB IVB appeared on the top of the western rampart near to the south-western side of the northern fortifications (area V); they could belong to an analogous wall-system: cf. Dolce 2000b, note 32, in press.

⁹ In the first place we dealing with the Ebla mention in the votive inscription on the Gudea's statue B and with the many quotations of the city in the epigraphical sources of Ur III dynasty, particularly of Shu-Sin and Amar-Sin (Amar-Suena); in the second place, with the quotations of Ebla in the texts coming from Drehem contemporary to both sovereigns: Edzard 1967: pp.30-38, p.33, V 53-58 particularly; Owen 1992: pp.117-120; Ead. 1984: pp.266-267, 275; Finally with the recent dossier suggested by Tonietti 1997 about some data already known regarding to the eblaite royal titles during the late Early-Syrian Period.

¹⁰ But an old-babylonian letter coming from the royal Acropolis area (TM.76.G.412): Kupper 1980: pp.49-51; a fragment of a lexical text coming from the ruins of the northern A fortification; lastly, a tablet discovered inside a jar in its primary context, the Z residence in the Lower Town.

¹¹ Cf. Matthiae 1993; Ead. 1995; Ead. 1997.

¹² Durand 1985; Margueron 1996.

¹³ Some suggestions about the relations between Akkad and Mari and about the Akkad supremacy at different degrees over the syrian leaders-centres during the late Early-Syrian Period have been advanced by myself: Dolce 2000a; p.105 and ff.; regarding Mari cf. Durand 1985 and Margueron 1996: pp.96-97.

¹⁴ Margueron 1996: p.95 and ff.

BC¹⁵ and partly before the rebirth of Ebla itself, which was documented in the Mardikh IIB2/EB IVB period. If confirmed, these circumstances support the opinion previously advanced¹⁶ that Akkadian intervention from the 'ideal border' of Mari as far as the Khabur Valley, must not be considered to have been homogenous either in the forms it took or the objectives it pursued. The undoubted prestige and the cultural tradition that marked out Mari as early as the middle of the third millennium BC, as it did the city of Nagar¹⁷ even earlier, during the life of the "Ebla degli Archivi" as well, are the bases for assuming a longstanding well-entrenched cultural leadership that was to guarantee the survival and the maintenance of its position during the Akkadian interference, unlike what happened in other rapidly, albeit temporarily, rising kingdoms up to the age of Sargon, such as Ebla¹⁸. However – and this is the novelty that has emerged that is relevant to the dynamics of the regional states of Upper Mesopotamia and Syria between the third and second millennia BC – the urban history of Ebla did not suddenly stop and stand still for a long period. It was dealt a serious blow and appeared to have been totally destroyed, unlike the treatment meted out to the cities and kingdoms with which it had previously been in contact. The reasons for the tenacious recovery which followed are unknown, as already indicated, but we may infer from the evidence available that these reasons are partly based on very closely linked considerations that were necessary for the recovery to take place: even though the fame and the power of "Ebla degli Archivi" far outstripped the Akkadian age and survived with the "Ebla di Ishtar" in the historical memory of the cultures of preclassical Ancient Near East¹⁹, the mention of the destruction of Ebla in the inscriptions of Naram-Sin indicates at least that the city was well-known at that time – namely at the end of the XXIII century – but was not yet in a period of renewed energy²⁰.

Furthermore, unlike its perennial rival, Mari, Ebla has not left any traces of the active presence of the Akkadians, but only traces of their destruction. The years of the Akkadian supremacy must therefore be considered as "a pause" in the life of the city. And this pause was followed by, and partly overlapped, the period of the recommencement of building and urban planning in the Lower Town, the impressive work on establishing and reorganizing part of the royal Acropolis of EB IVA²¹. These activities were necessary as a prelude to the rebirth of the "second Ebla" and the first stages, furthermore, of its reconstruction. In chronological terms, then, the most likely estimate that we can make at the present time of the period that elapsed between the destruction by the Akkadians and the construction of the Late Early Syrian city is around two centuries. This initial phase of

¹⁵ Margueron 1996: pp.99-103.

¹⁶ Dolce 2000 a: pp.106-109.

¹⁷ Tell Brak, the ancient Nagar, is one of the main regional centres in the Khabur area and properly of Subartu in the III mill.B.Chr.; this site shows a clear pre-eminence relating to the cultural trend in the Fourth and Third Mill.B.Chr. in the Upper Mesopotamia. See Oates, 1993; Oates 1989; *Iid.* 1993, 1994 (archaeological reports on Iraq 55, 56); *Iid.* 1995.

¹⁸ Dolce 2000a, *passim*.

¹⁹ It is enough to recall that the main eblaite goddess, identified with Ishtar during the Old-Syrian Period, is still mentioned in a neo-assyrian ritual (very likely written in the Middle-Assyrian Period) as the protagonist of a cult-ceremony: cf. Frankena 1954:pp. 8,12,92, n.77; van Driel 1969: p. 63.

²⁰ Unless we would consider that Ebla had a sudden and short renewal after the destruction by Sargon and therefore infer a further destruction by his nephew, Naram-Sin: that hypothesis has of course no foundation.

²¹ Regarding the Lower Town see: Matthiae 1977: p.107; Dolce 1988: p.113; Matthiae 1991: p.320; Ead.1995a: p.165; Ead.1995b: pp.674-676; Ead. 1993: pp.615 and ff., 633-637; Marchetti, Nigro 1997: pp.1-3.

For the Acropolis see again Matthiae 1977: pp.107-109; Ead. 1976: p.201, fig. 6; Matthiae 1989: p.128.

Late Early Syrian Ebla runs parallel to the so-called “age of the shakkanakku” at Mari, which was recently more accurately defined²², during which Mari was still, and once more, very important in the political history of Syria, but not sufficiently strong to put Ebla down. This may have encouraged the continuation and the completion of the birth of the “second Ebla” under the leadership of sovereigns of whom a great deal of recently redefined evidence²³ provides their names and probably also their titles²⁴. The governors of Late Early Syrian Ebla may have worked at the dependency of a larger kingdom in the region for which Armanu and subsequently Urshu have been suggested²⁵. The archaeological evidence unearthed so far has provided proof, fortunately quite consistent proof, that the Late Early Syrian city was not radically destroyed²⁶, and also evidence of the substantial continued occupation and function of the area set aside as the official seat of royal power from EB IVB to MB I-II²⁷.

The disappearance of Late Early Syrian Ebla was therefore not primarily a highly traumatic event and perhaps took place at a time when the city (and its governors) were trying to complete the urban plan and the political project for the rebirth of the city, as is suggested by the fact that certain sectors of the Archaic Palace were not completed²⁸. It was perhaps for this reason, too, that the new invaders did not unleash their destructive fury on it.

Secondly, the disappearance was limited in scope to the preexisting structure of the settlement, as specifically evidenced from the close sequence of palatine buildings just mentioned; this was of little interest to the later historiographic tradition because the bilingual Hurrite-Hittite epic poem (which was originally composed in Hurrite in MB I and was probably written in northern Syria and even perhaps at Ebla itself²⁹), makes no mention whatsoever of the destruction of the city. What it does do is to speak about the possibility of destruction if the conditions demanded by the stronger party (in the text) were not met³⁰. If it is the case that this unique text was composed in the area of northern Syria³¹, it would confirm the assumption of the Hurrite presence, which was already known and expanding in the third millennium BC³² in the Khabur area, and which, straddling the third and the second millennia, became a powerful cultural entity with

²² Durand 1985; Margueron 1996. The analysis of both scholars concerning textual data and archaeological evidences respectively do not agree each other in the chronological conclusions: indeed Margueron suggests to fix the beginning of shakkanakku's dynasty at the time of advent of Ur III dynasty or little before (Ead. *ibidem*:p.96 and ff.), while Durand set the dynastic sequence as a continuum from the XXIII century till the beginning of the XX century B.Chr.(Ead. *ibidem*:pp.171-172).

²³ Toniatti 1997; Bonechi 1997.

²⁴ Cf. Dolce 2000b, note 69; it seems that the term “meki-megum” refers to the role and rank of rulers of Ebla rather than to a personal name cf. Neu 1993: pp.349-351; Toniatti 1997; Matthiae-Scandone 1997.

²⁵ Matthiae 1995 a: p.90; Klengel 1992: p.36; at this regard some reservations have been put forward by Owen 1984: p.274, note 5.

²⁶ Matthiae 1994:p.38; Ead. 1993: p.633 and note 46; cf. Dolce 2000b.

²⁷ From the “Palazzo Arcaico” to the “Palazzo Intermedio” till the Northern Palace, which is on a smaller scale than the others regarding to its layout: Matthiae 1994; Ead.1995b: p.659 and ff. pp.674-681; Ead. 1998: p.564 and ff.; Dolce 1995.

²⁸ Matthiae 1998: p.566 note 19.

²⁹ Neu 1993: pp. 329-362; Ead. 1996:189-195; Wilhelm 1992: p.122. For the first edition of the poem see Otten, Rster 1990.

³⁰ Neu 1996: p.192.

³¹ Cf. note 29; Toniatti 1997: pp.233-235.

³² The results of the last ten year of excavations at Tell Mozan/Urkes have already shown surely that the Hurrians carried on a primary cultural and political role among the regional states of Upper Mesopotamia, Khabur/Subartu and Northern Syria since the Third Mill.B.Chr. See at this regard Buccellati, Kelly-Buccellati 1996; Iid.1999; Iid. 2000: pp.12-13 in partic.; Iid.(eds.) 1998.

which Ebla itself must have had to come to terms³³.

In the alternation of political and cultural leadership in the tormented area of Upper Mesopotamia and North Syria, the increasing supremacy of the Hurrite kingdoms, of which so far Urkesh has been shown to be one of the leading capitals³⁴, may have been the cause for a temporary regression and decadence of the “second Ebla”, with certain signs of violence, right at the beginning of the second millennium BC. Speaking purely personally, and with all the caution required because of the considerable number of assumptions underlying it, it may be the case that the second invaders of Ebla were its nearest neighbours and had less authority than those who wiped out the palatine city of EB IVA, and who had such authority that they became legendary.

They are probably recognizable in those Hurrite kingdoms that were already active in the latter quarter of the third millennium BC and, as in the case of the kingdom Urkesh, they were not destroyed by the Akkadians. The governors of Late Early Syrian Ebla (who probably included the “losing” protagonist against the dictates of the god Teshup in the central episode of the bilingual text, if one accepts the idea that the Hurrite composition dates back to the beginning of the second millennium)³⁵ may have resisted the undoubted emergence of Hurrite power until they came into headlong collision with them, and had to yield to the more powerful side. The episode of the city of Ebla narrated in the bilingual text may reflect the state of weakness of the “second Ebla” and its presumable subjection³⁶ under the threat of its total destruction. This passage, and its interpretation, seem to me to be highly significant when trying to work out an initial proposal for the duration of the Late Early Syrian city on the basis of the archaeological data mentioned above. In the bilingual text, mention is made of the possibility of destruction, but there is no mention of the memory of a destruction that had already occurred. If the Hurrite composition does date back to MB I there is obviously no possibility that the episode relating to the clash between the power of Ebla and the will of the Hurrite god refers to events that preceding the final destruction of the “Ebla di Ishtar”³⁷. The opinion that has been recently expressed³⁸ that the part of the bilingual text dealing with Ebla is taken from a text composed in North Syria and was taken to the Hittite capital Hattusa to become the “epic poem of liberation”, strengthens the assumption that the episode recounted there belongs to a phase in the history of Ebla that preceded its ultimate demise around 1600 BC. The possibility of the total destruction of the “city as the seat of the throne”³⁹ must therefore have induced Ebla to comply with the will of the god, according to the most commonly

³³ This hypothesis has been already suggested by the writer in Dolce 2000a; cf. Toniatti 1997: p.234. Although till now there are not evidences referring to direct relations between late early-syrian Ebla and the hurrians kingdoms (and the first hurrian capital Urkesh), nevertheless either the circumstances regarding the bilingual poem above quoted, either the mention of Urkesh together with Ebla and other syrian cities in a text primary dating to Neo-Sumerian Period (Michalowski 1986: p.141), are noteworthy clues.

³⁴ Buccellati, Kelly-Buccellati 1997; cf. note 32.

³⁵ According to Neu 1993: pp.329-330; Wilhelm 1992. Regarding to the question of Ebla rulers before the amorite renaissance is highly noteworthy that the recent interpretation and the new sequence of inscribed tablets of the bilingual suggested by G. Wilhem point out that Megi was king and succeeded six other kings of the same dynasty; that three of them, quoted by PN in the text, show hurrite names; Wilhem 1997: pp. 277-279, 289-293.

³⁶ Most of the scholars agree with this conclusion, even if the text concerning the epilogue of the Ebla's event is lost.

³⁷ This destruction surely happened, caused by Mursili I (more likely) or by Khattusili I.

³⁸ Neu 1996: pp.189-190; Wilhelm 1992: p.123 points out that the last composition of the poem has been carried out by means of texts coming from several milieux.

³⁹ Ebla is often so called in the bilingual poem: Neu 1996: p.191; Haas, Wegner 1991: p.386.

agreed interpretation of the bilingual text. There was therefore no radical destruction, but certainly a crisis in the urban settlement, and a decline in its importance. But there were no evident breaks in the sequence of occupation as the archaeological documentation of the pre-Amorite period has demonstrated so far⁴⁰.

The event in question, which, as has already been indicated⁴¹, contains a core of historical truth, was changed in the literary epic into an event of great importance, focusing in the tradition of the text on details regarding the topographical layout and the defensive plan of the city, primarily the double town wall, which distinguished Ebla from the beginning of MB I. During later centuries, in the age when Ebla of the Early Syrian Ishtar was at its height, the Hurrite text on the city must have enjoyed wide credence and must have had a great impact on the collective consciousness. The destruction of the “Ebla di Ishtar”, which must have been of epoch-making proportions, by the Hittite sovereigns at the end of the XVII century BC, and of which the city certainly shows evidence, may have been celebrated by the victors, taking on the powerful image of a destruction that had been announced in advance but not yet carried out, contained in the Hurrite text. In this way, and in this spirit, the Hurrite composition regarding Ebla was welcomed and taken over by the Hittite sovereigns and by their chancery in the imperial age⁴².

The “second Ebla” therefore forms part of the extraordinary sequence of the life of the city covering about a thousand years in a time segment and a cultural phase that can be dated to lie between the end of the Akkadian age and the first few decades of the second millennium. It was subjected to a highly renewed urban development plan in comparison with the “Ebla degli Archivi”, which paved the way for the overall re-planning of the city implemented in the next Amorite age. Lastly, on the basis of the circumstances and the objective archaeological evidence of its disappearance, it can be said to have been a very important centre on account of the political and territorial control exercised by the new emerging powers.

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⁴⁰ Cf. Matthiae 1991: p.320; Ead.1995a: p.165; Matthiae 1995b: p.674 and ff.; Matthiae 1998: p.564 and ff.; for preliminary considerations on the Mardikh IIB2 urban settlement see Dolce 2000 b.

⁴¹ Neu 1996: p.195.

⁴² Neu 1996: p.189 dates the hittite composition to XV century B.Chr.; see also Wilhelm 1992: pp.122-123.

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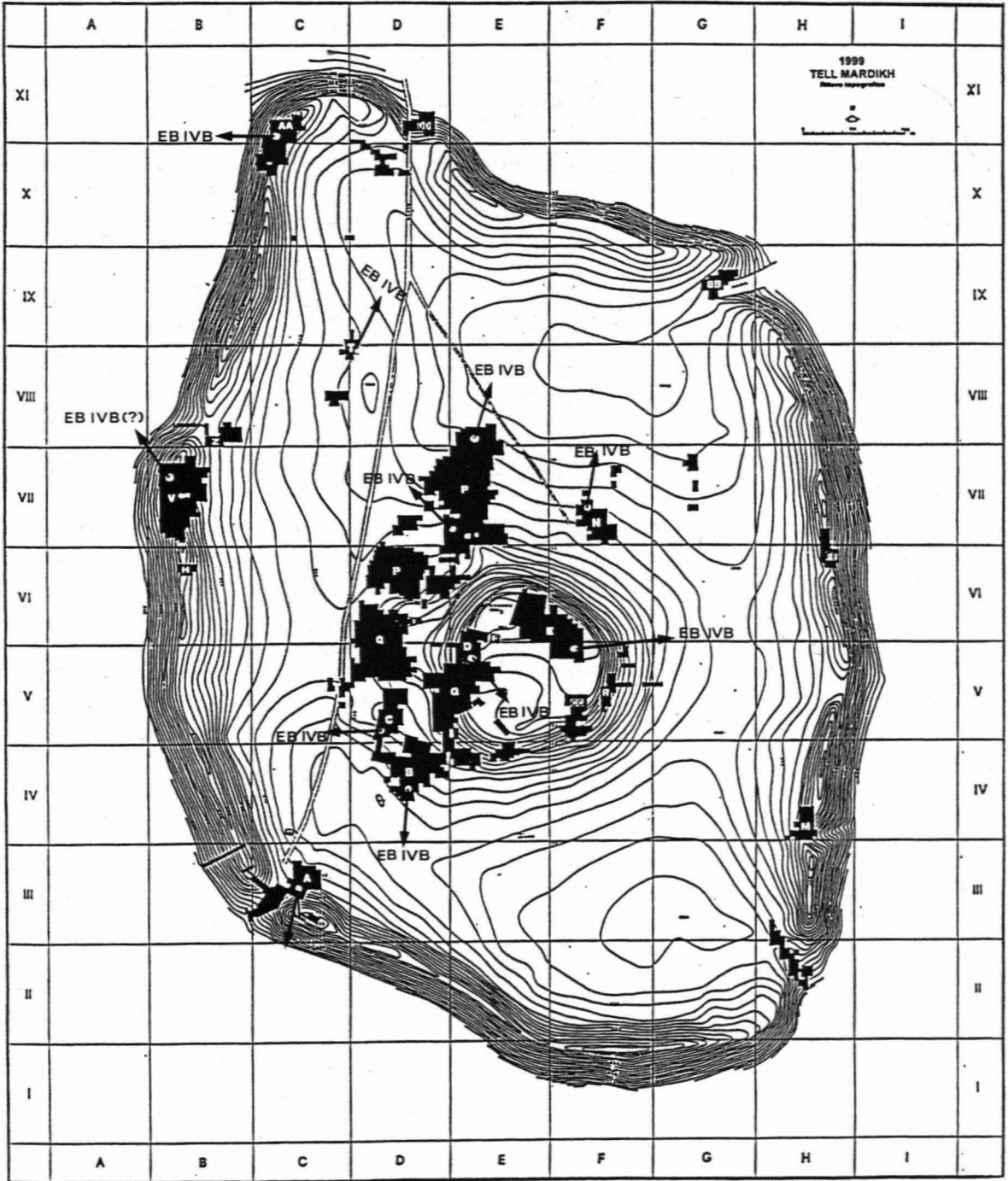


Fig. 1: Tell Mardikh.

