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THE ASSYRIAN GOVERNOR'S PALACE OF GŪZĀNA

Mirko Novák (Bern)[1] *(Plates XXIX–XXX)*

Among the architectural structures excavated by Max Freiherr von Oppenheim and his team in Tell Halaf during two campaigns in 1911–1913 and 1929 was the so-called 'Nordost-Palast' ('Northeastern Palace'). This building, situated at the north-eastern corner of the citadel mound, was considered to be the dwelling palace of Kapara, the Aramaean ruler who was responsible for major building activities in ancient Gūzāna like the Hilani palace with its rich pictorial decorations. The reasons for this interpretation were the allegedly missing representational functions in the Northeastern palace and the proposed identity of the stratigraphical situation in both palaces.

However, doubts on this interpretation arose quite quickly after the final publication of the architecture of Tell Halaf. The similarities of the layout of the Northeastern Palace with Late Assyrian palatial architecture were too obvious to be coincidental. Hence, at least the later phase of the building was considered to be Late Assyrian in date by most of the more recent authors dealing with Tell Halaf.

Thus, one of the major goals of the renewed Syrian-German mission working in Tell Halaf was to get further information on the chronology, function and structure of the building. In the following, I will give a short overview of the preliminary results of this now interrupted excavation project.

Location

Tell Halaf is located in Upper Mesopotamia, close to the spring of the main branch of the Khabur river (Pl. I). Water supply was guaranteed by a large number of karstic springs, which gave the name Ra's al-Ain 'Head of the Spring' to its vicinity. Thus, the site lies in a fertile area with plenty of water supply for both irrigation and rainfall agriculture. Moreover, it is situated at one of the main trade routes in the Near East connecting Assyria proper with Upper Mesopotamia, the Northern Levant and the Mediterranean shore: in Assyrian sources this route was named *ḫarrān šarri* 'King's Road'. Tell Halaf and close-by Tell Fekheriye, the Mittanian capital Waššukanni near the modern town of Ra's al-Ain, form a twin city together, characterised by several periodical shifts in occupation. Both are situated immediately at the Baghdad-Railroad, which nowadays defines the Syrian-Turkish border.

Tell Halaf consists of a c. 5 ha large citadel mound and a c. 60 ha large Lower Town adjacent to its south and nowadays almost completely overbuilt by modern houses.

[1] I thank David Kertai very much for the invitation to participate in the workshop and the publication of the papers. I am also indebted to him for improving the English manuscript.

Max von Oppenheim's Excavations in the Northeastern Palace

Tell Halaf was explored in 1899, 1911–1913 and 1929 by Max Freiherr von Oppenheim.[2] His excavations uncovered large parts of the fortified Iron Age citadel mound and some areas of the vast Lower Town, among them a temple of the Assyrian period and the so-called 'cultic room' of the Aramaean period.

The most famous buildings on top of the citadel mound were the 'Western Palace', built in the so-called Hilani style, and the adjacent 'Scorpion's Gate', both richly decorated with statues and reliefs and dated to the reign of a certain Kapara, an Aramaean ruler of the town (Fig. 1). Tombs were discovered both in the north-western and the southern part of the citadel, the latter buried under a huge mud brick terrace.

The vast building excavated in the northeast of the citadel was interpreted as the dwelling palace of the same Kapara (Pl. XXIXa). Nevertheless, no inscription supported this designation or dating. It was built on an outcrop of the natural limestone terrace immediately above a strong natural spring, which formed the main drinking water supply for the inhabitants of the citadel. This spring was accessible from the central part of the citadel through the so-called Spring's Gate, while the inhabitants of the Northeastern Palace could reach a well above the spring through an entrance of the building, the so-called Well's Gate.

The foundation of the Northeastern Palace consisted of an artificial massive mudbrick platform, which partly covered the earlier citadel's fortification wall.

The former excavators recognized two building phases with a pavement of baked bricks in the first phase and another one made of limestone slabs in the second phase (Pl. XXIXb). The later floor level was built about half a meter above the previous one. Both phases were also distinguishable by a considerable change of the architectural layout although the earlier phase remained mostly unexplored. Some gateways were marked by huge limestone thresholds or stone curtain holders (Pl. XXXa), both similar to items known from Assyrian palaces like *e.g.* Khorsabad.

As the excavators have considered, the building originally seemed to consist of only one large courtyard with three adjacent wings of living rooms to its west, north and east, and an entrance at its southern side. The northern wing was presumably not connected with the courtyard, but formed an independent suite accessible only from the outside through the Well's Gate. During the second phase, the building was enlarged with the help of a second courtyard to the south. This southern part of the palace has not been investigated so far.

The two phases were synchronized with the two levels attested both in the Hilani area and the southern citadel's gate (Naumann in Langenegger, Müller & Naumann 1950: 376–380). Thus the overall stratigraphy of the citadel mound of Gūzāna seemed to be clear and uncomplicated – a clarity that of course generally does not occur at all! However, since the areas of the Western and the Northeastern Palaces are not connected by excavations, there is still a lack of stratigraphical arguments for a comparative chronology.[3]

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[2] The results of the excavations were published in Schmidt 1943, Langenegger, Müller & Naumann 1950; Moortgart 1955; Hrouda 1962; Cholidis & Martin 2010. A reappraisal of the former excavations is given by Orthmann 2002. The textual findings were published by Friedrich *et al.* 1940.

[3] On the attempt of reconstructing the comparative stratigraphy *cf.* Pucci 2008. The problems are demonstrated by Novák 2010.

The only building on the citadel considered Assyrian in date was the so-called 'Assyrian House', excavated about 100 m south of the Northeastern Palace. Nearby, in the debris of small houses, a number of tablets was discovered, belonging to the archive of a certain Mannu-kī-(māt)-Aššur, governor of Gūzāna. The same Mannu-kī-(māt)-Aššur is attested as *limmu* (eponym) of the year 793 BC, giving thus an approximate date of the archive. Due to this find, the 'Assyrian House' was interpreted as the residence of the Assyrian governor, situated within a largely ruined citadel (Langenegger, Müller & Naumann 1950: 206).

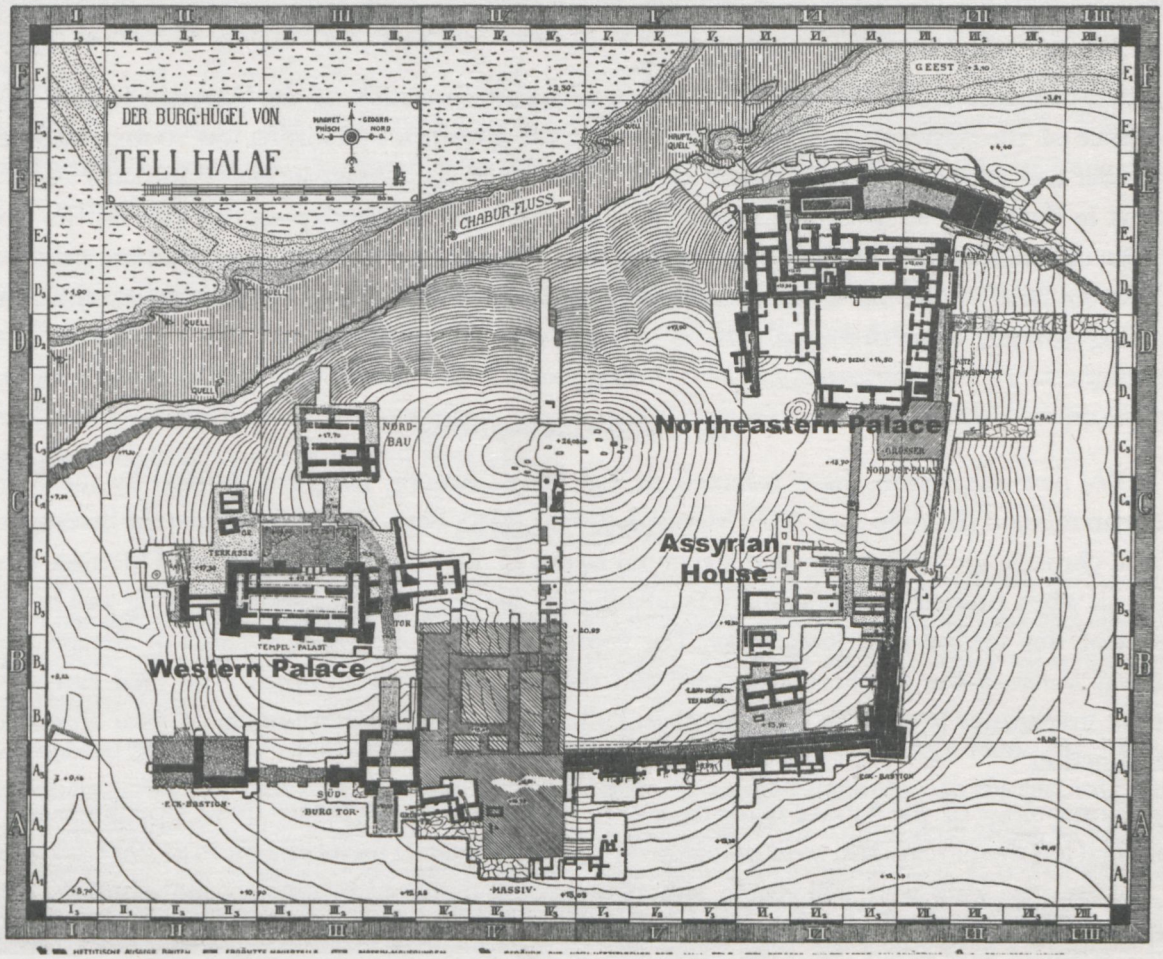

Fig. 1. Plan of the Citadel of Gūzāna showing the remains of the "Northeastern Palace" and the "Assyrian House" (taken from Langenegger *et al.* 1950).

Doubts on the Interpretations

In the decades following the final publication the knowledge of Late Assyrian palatial architecture and its appearance in the provinces has grown rapidly. Hence some authors have drawn attention to some formal and structural similarities between the Northeastern Palace and Late Assyrian palatial architecture, mainly after its enlargement to a multi-court entity in its second phase (*cf.* Orthmann 2002: 40–44). Late Assyrian elements such as the mudbrick platform, covering the former fortification wall, or the thresholds and curtain holders supported this idea. W. Orthmann even suspected that there was an entrance between the courtyard and the large room to its north, which had just not been realized by the excavators (Fig. 2). If so, both units would form a reception suite, typical for Late Assyrian palatial architecture (Turner 1970a).

Furthermore, findings such as some pieces of basalt statues[4] and bronze statuettes[5] and most of the other objects published by B. Hrouda all date to the Assyrian period, showing a lack of inventories from the Aramaean period.

Nonetheless, W. Orthmann proposed dating the earlier level to the Kapara period, while only dating the later phase to the time of Assyrian dominion. The reason was that the similarities to Late Assyrian architecture were only visible during the later phase, if one considers the stratigraphical reconstruction by Oppenheim and his team correct: the original layout was thus reduced to just one central courtyard and that there was no entrance from the courtyard to the unit at its north. Obviously, an unquestionable reconstruction of the layout and chronology of the building was not at all possible without more reliable data.[6]

Another problem left by the old excavations was the interpretation of the 'Assyrian House' as the residence of the Assyrian governor. The office of the governor of Gūzāna was so important, that its holder had the right to be the *limmu* in the 16th year of each Assyrian king (Dornauer 2010: 67; Novák in Baghdo *et al.* 2009: 97). Hence he belonged to the 20 most powerful men of the whole empire, superseded only by the central officers and a few governors of more important provinces! (*cf.* Mattila 2000). Thus he seems to have been too powerful to live in such a modest and simple building with just seven (!) rooms.

Renewed Excavations[7]

In 2006, new excavations have resumed in Tell Halaf. Among the goals defined by the Syrian-German mission (Baghdo *et al.* 2009; Martin & Novák 2010; Baghdo *et al.* 2012) was the investigation of the chronology, stratigraphy and structural layout of the Northeastern Palace. One task was to find out when precisely the building was enlarged by the addition of a southern wing and how the layout of this second wing looked like. The second goal was to explore the area of the presumed gateway between the northern courtyard and the large room to its north. The final aim was to expose inventories from both building phases allowing a better understanding of their chronology and function.

The morphology of the surface made clear even before any new activities that Oppenheim and his team had left their excavation areas uncovered when they finished their expedition in 1929. Structures of the exposed walls were still visible, although strongly damaged by erosion and removals. It was therefore quite easy to locate the wall between the courtyard and the presumed throne-room to its north. A trench was opened at the calculated point of a 'buttress' recognized by Oppenheim in the central part of the wall. The level of the later phase was quickly reached. The stratigraphy of Oppenheim was reconfirmed insofar as a mudbrick terrace was explored, which functioned as the basement of the whole building. The original floor made of baked bricks and the later floor made of stone slabs were still preserved (Novák & Abdel Ghafour in Baghdo *et al.* 2009: 42–46).

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[4] Cholidis & Martin 2010: pl. 80, no. 42 was found in the debris of the Northeastern Palace.

[5] A possible find spot of the bronze statuette, published by Moortgat-Correns 1989, was the Northeastern Palace as well.

[6] The wide range of possible chronological, architectural and cultural interpretations can be seen in the comparison of the controversial reconstructions proposed by Orthmann 2002 and Pucci 2008.

[7] The new Syro-German project is co-directed by Abdel Mesih Baghdo (Damascus/Hassake), Lutz Martin (Berlin) and the present author. The prehistoric levels are investigated by Jörg Becker (Halle). I thank the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums and all the authorities of the Syrian Arab Republic for their helpful support and all colleagues involved in the project for their ambitious work, which made this overview possible.

The elevation of the latter was approximately 0.5 m above the first one. As it turned out, a gateway indeed existed, at least during the later phase. The threshold consisted of baked bricks, which were discovered broken in pieces. The door was about 2.5 m broad and flanked by two square buttresses at both sides. Obviously the door was blocked in a later phase. That is the reason why it had not been recognized by Oppenheim. In the earlier phase the situation is still unclear since the wall was different in breadth and is still covered by its broader successor. Nevertheless, a remarkable installation was discovered below the later doorway, a rectangular basin built up with baked bricks and protected by marble slabs on its outside. Bitumen mortar was placed between the bricks as well as between the bricks and the stones. Thus the installation was suitable for water related activities, although its precise function is not clear (Novák & Abdel Ghafour in Baghdo *et al.* 2009: 43, figs. 4–2).

Anyhow, the results of this small trench opened the possibility that the building really followed Assyrian building patterns. The solution to the question of dating the palace had to be looked for in the southern wing.

Here, a larger area was opened just north of several test trenches of Oppenheim, in which a large mudbrick terrace was investigated (Pl. XXXb). They were situated just a few meters north of a deep erosion channel, which had cut away the northern part of the 'Assyrian House', thus providing the chance for a kind of step trench with the perspective of a quick overview on the stratigraphy. Indeed, this goal was reached successfully. A number of rooms was explored in this area, providing insights into both its chronology and function.

Stratigraphy

The architectural remains in the area under investigation rest on a massive mudbrick terrace. Its bottom has not yet been identified, but its attested height is more than 3.5 m. Its surface was covered with a pebble layer on which the earliest floor was situated. The walls are well preserved to a height of more than 2 m.

In the central part of the opened trenches, a courtyard was explored (Pl. XXXc). Here, the original pavement consisted of baked bricks (labelled Phase C8 in the local stratigraphy). In the second phase (Phase C7) the courtyard was made smaller by the insertion of small compounds along its western and eastern sides. The later floor lay approximately 0.5 m above the original floor. It is characterized by a paved road, which is running diagonally through the courtyard from the Northwest to the Southeast. The pavement is made of flat limestone and basalt slabs, the basalt used exclusively for the outer row. Below this road a channel is attested. The rest of the courtyard floor consisted of pebbles. Finally, in a third phase of the building (Phase C6), a final new pebble floor was constructed immediately above the second phase floor.

The situation inside the courtyard is repeated within all the other rooms excavated in this area so far: There are three phases with a major change in architectural layout between the first and the second floor. Thus, the stratigraphy is identical to the one in the 'Northeastern Palace' as recognized by Oppenheim and his team: The basement formed by a free standing, high and massive mudbrick terrace, the original building phase immediately on its top with a courtyard floor made of baked bricks. A second building phase is attested approximately half a meter higher with significant changes in layout and the use of stone slabs as floor pavement.

The final phase preserves the ground plan of the second phase and is characterized by simple pebble floors. This makes it quite probable that both areas, correlated so strongly by the same architectural characteristics and stratigraphy, belong to one and the same building.

Fortunately, on top of almost each excavated floor large room inventories were discovered, providing evidence for the chronology of the building.

Chronology

The material, which was discovered in all three phases of the building, was undoubtedly Late Assyrian in style and dating (Becker & Novák in Baghdo *et al.* 2012: 227–231). The vast number of complete ceramic vessels and sherds belong to the highly standardized Late Assyrian corpus, showing the well-known range of types and wares. As the fabrics indicate, most of the pottery was locally produced, thus indicating a complete adaptation of Assyrian traditions in Gūzāna (Sievertsen in Baghdo *et al.* 2012: 142–149).

Contrary to the situation in the palace area, there are a number of find spots in Tell Halaf in which non-Assyrian Iron Age pottery was discovered. In the earliest levels below the 'Western Palace' and at the northern slope some sherds of Early Iron Age Anatolian 'Groovy Pottery' were found, later replaced by wheel-made local pottery in the Aramaean layers. In the later phases, Assyrian pottery production completely replaced the local Aramaean traditions (Sievertsen in Baghdo *et al.* 2012).

All other objects discovered in the early and middle phases of the palace are also Late Assyrian in style, *e.g.,* the cylinder seals and seal impressions, terracotta figurines and metal tools, fibulae and pendants.[8] In the second phase some fragments of cuneiform tablets were found, dating to the late 8th or early 7th century BC. The whole range of objects is very similar to those found in some of the elite houses explored in the southern part of the citadel and in the lower town. The inventories from the third and latest phase of the building find their closest parallels to what is known as 'post-Assyrian' from several sites like *e.g.* the 'Red House' in Dūr-Katlimmu (Sievertsen in Baghdo *et al.* 2012: 146–149). Late-Babylonian cuneiform tablets found by Oppenheim in the central part of the citadel indicate that Gūzāna was still inhabited after the collapse of the Assyrian Empire in 612/608 BC (Becker & Novák in Baghdo *et al.* 2012: 230). There are signs of a violent destruction of the palace during the 6th century BC.

Since the stratigraphy is identical to the one found in the northern part it is more than likely that both parts belong to one and the same building and that the palace was from its beginning onwards structured as a multiple court unity, extending alongside the whole eastern part of the citadel.

The foundation of the palace must date to a time during or slightly after the change of pottery production style. If we consider the historical sources to get a more precise dating one is reminded of the Tell Fekheriye statue, discovered in the early 1980s in the ancient town of (W)Aššukanni/Sikani, about 2.5 km east of Tell Halaf (Abu Assaf, Bordreuil & Millard 1982). It is the depiction of a certain Hadda-yiš'i (Assyrian Adad-iti), inscribed with an Aramaean-Assyrian bilingual text. Hadda-yiš'i claims to be 'governor' (Assyrian version) and 'king' (Aramaic version) of Gūzāna. An identification of his father Šamaš-nuri with the Assyrian eponym of the year 866 BC (*cf.* Dornauer 2010) would indicate that Gūzāna was already completely incorporated into the Assyrian provincial system during the reign of Shalmaneser III, the period to which the statue should thus date. Šamaš-nuri was probably already governor of Gūzāna during the reign of Ashurnasirpal

[8] *Cf.* several contributions in Baghdo *et al.* 2009 and 2012.

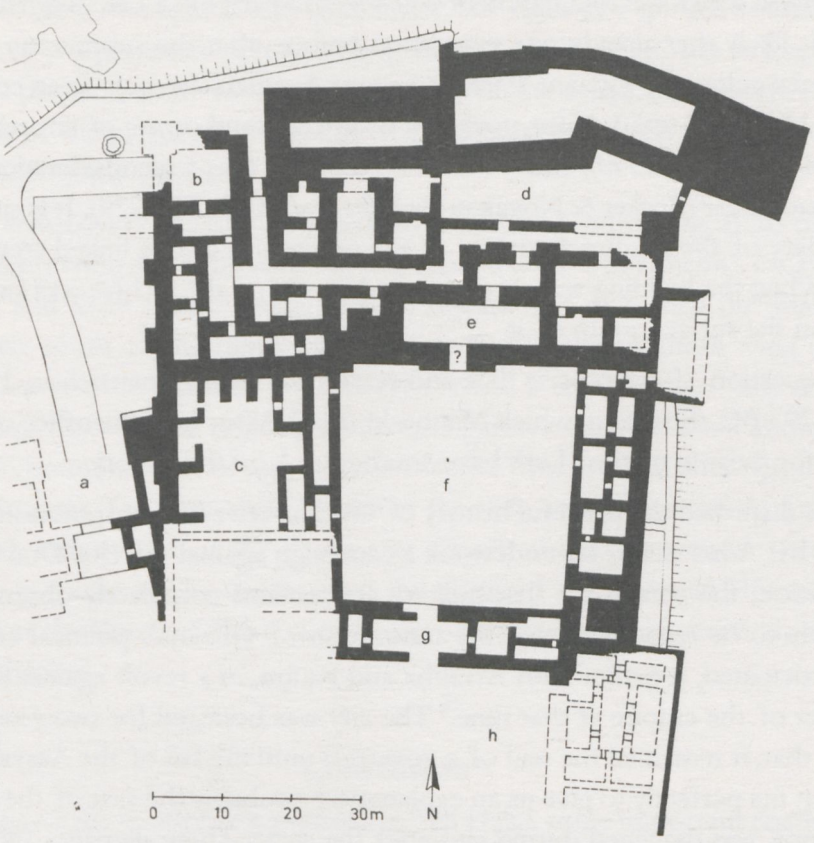

Fig. 2. Plan of the northern part of the Northeastern Palace including a reconstructed doorway between the courtyard and the 'throne room' (taken with courtesy from Orthmann 2002).

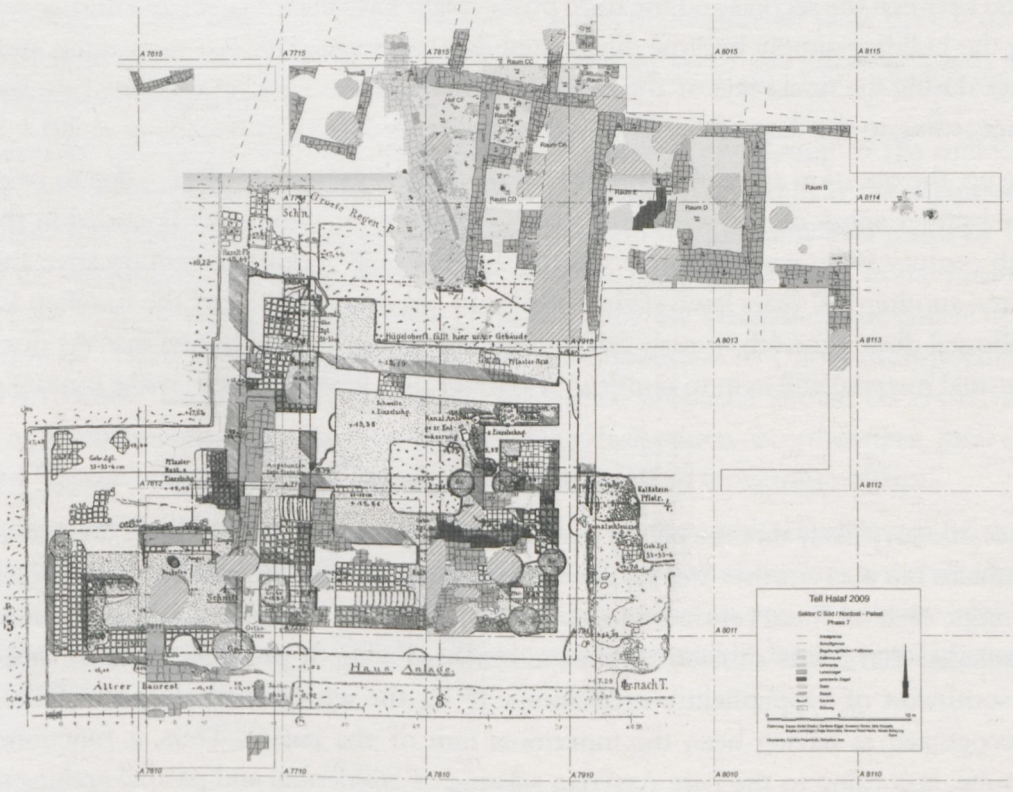

Fig. 3. Plan of the remains of the southern part of the Northeastern Palace during the second building phase (C7) with projection of the plan of the 'Assyrian House' (drawn by Gabriele Elsen-Novák, partly using a plan from Langenegger *et al.* 1955).

II. This is the time at which the foundation of a governor's palace in a Late Assyrian style might have taken place. It is likely that already one generation before, after the submission of Bīt-Baḫiani to Ashur, the material culture of Gūzāna started to adopt Assyrian elements to an considerable extent. The mentioned Mannu-kī-(māt)-Aššur, governor of Gūzāna and owner of an archive discovered by Oppenheim (Friedrich *et al.* 1940), surely inhabited the palace, as a reconsideration of the find spot of the tablets made clear (Becker & Novák in Baghdo *et al.* 2012: 228–229). It is situated close to the southern boundary of the mudbrick terrace of the palace and can be linked stratigraphically to its second phase. When the building was reconstructed, a part of the archive was simply thrown away and deposited on the surface south of it.

This raises the question of the precise date and reason for the reconstruction. It surely happened sometime after 793 BC, the year in which Mannu-kī-(māt)-Aššur held the office of the *limmu*. What was the reason for these activities? Let's have another look on the history.

Only two events disturbed the peaceful history of Gūzāna after its incorporation into the Assyrian Empire. In 808 BC Adad-nerari III undertook a campaign against the city. Due to the lack of any further information, the reason for that military act remains completely obscure. However, this event is too early to be responsible for the renovation of Gūzāna's political centre. In 761–758 BC Gūzāna participated, together with Arrapḫa and Kalḫu, in a revolt against the eunuch Šamši-ilu, the true ruler of the empire at that time.[9] The city was besieged for two years and then finally captured. After that, it remained the seat of a governor until the fall of the Assyrian Empire in 609 BC. So this event fits perfectly to give us an explanation: probably the seat of the chief rebel of the town, its governor, was damaged during and after the siege. These damages might have required the renovation of the palace and gave the opportunity for some major changes (Becker & Novák in Baghdo *et al.* 2012: 227–229).

The period between the second and the third phase might have been a slight and unspectacular one. Probably the building simply became dilapidated due to its age. This last renovation should have taken place during the final years of the Assyrian Empire or the early years of the Late Babylonian Empire according to the date of the inventories (Becker & Novák in Baghdo *et al.* 2012: 229).

Summing up, the question about the chronology of the Northeastern Palace – due to its extension one should rather speak of the 'Eastern Palace' – seems to be clear now: Founded in the middle of the 9th century BC it was reconstructed for the first time about one century later and for the second time another 150 years later, slightly before or after the collapse of the Assyrian Empire. It was abandoned during the 6th or early 5th century BC. However, it is hoped that the discovery of further textual material will help to confirm or correct the chronology and make it more precise.

Functional Structure

Since it became very likely that the palace included from its initial phase not only the part excavated by Oppenheim but also another area south of it, the layout can be reconsidered as subdivided into multiple units, each of them centred on a courtyard. The main entrance is not yet localized, but it can be excluded that it was situated within the northern wing. It probably must be looked for in the area southwest of Oppenheim's excavations. If so, the whole northern part of the building can be recognized as having been the innermost unit of the palace. Thus, it functioned as the 'private' suite, according to the Late Assyrian scheme of residential and palatial architecture. This would fit to the low degree of monumentality and the missing of representative wall decorations

[9] On the events and their background *cf.* Fuchs 2008.

there. On the other hand, the spatial arrangement of the recently explored southern rooms also contradict the idea of a representative architecture. Instead, their inventories strongly suggest a use for the storage and preparation of food as well as for weaving activities. The representational and administrative units of the palace are still uncovered and must have been located somewhere north or northwest of the recently excavated areas.

A surprise was the rediscovery and localization of the 'Assyrian House' (Fig. 3). Its position was still visible as a steep depression since the area was not refilled after Oppenheim's excavations. Several parts of the walls and floor of this building were re-explored. It turned out that it is not only situated immediately south of the newly excavated rooms of the southern wing (only separated from them by a deep erosion channel) but actually formed a unit within it. The southern end of the stone-paved road through the recently discovered palace courtyard ends immediately next to where the northern boundary wall of the 'Assyrian House' was located, although it was no longer preserved due to erosion. Thus, the main, or rather the only, access into the 'Assyrian House' was from the courtyard, indicating that the house was actually the southernmost unit of the palace itself (Fig. 4)! This is confirmed by the fact that the floors of the 'Assyrian House' have precisely the same elevation as the floors of the second phase of the palace. Unfortunately, the function of this unit remains obscure.

Conclusion

After five campaigns of the renewed excavations in Tell Halaf some important results were reached concerning the chronology, layout and interpretation of the 'Northeastern Palace'. It can be concluded that the building was founded in the initial phase of Assyrian dominance over Gūzāna as the seat of the governor. It covered almost the whole eastern third of the citadel and was built on top of a high, freestanding mudbrick terrace. A series of interlinked units gave it its internal structure, each of them centred on a courtyard. Thus, the layout of the building strictly followed Assyrian architectural patterns.

Three phases of occupation can be distinguished: The earliest one dating to the middle of the 9th century according to the date of its inventories. The major renovation at the beginning of the second phase was undertaken in the middle of the 8th century, probably as a result of damages caused by the uprising of Gūzāna in 761–758 BC. And the last phase is dated to the final Assyrian decades or the time of the Late-Babylonian Empire. Hence the lifespan of the palace covers the whole period of Assyrian and probably also Babylonian dominion in Upper Mesopotamia. Since the 'Assyrian House' turned out to be part of the palace proper, it should be erased from the literature as an independent architectural feature. The designation 'Northeastern Palace' is best replaced by 'Eastern Palace' or, to be more precise, the 'Assyrian Governor's Palace'.

Further excavations will have to reveal more information on the architectural layout of the palace. Especially, the administrative and representative wings of the palace are still to be identified. The question about the occupation of the terrain during the Aramaean period remains open. It is to be hoped that the political situation in Syria will not cause irreversible damages making these plans obsolete.

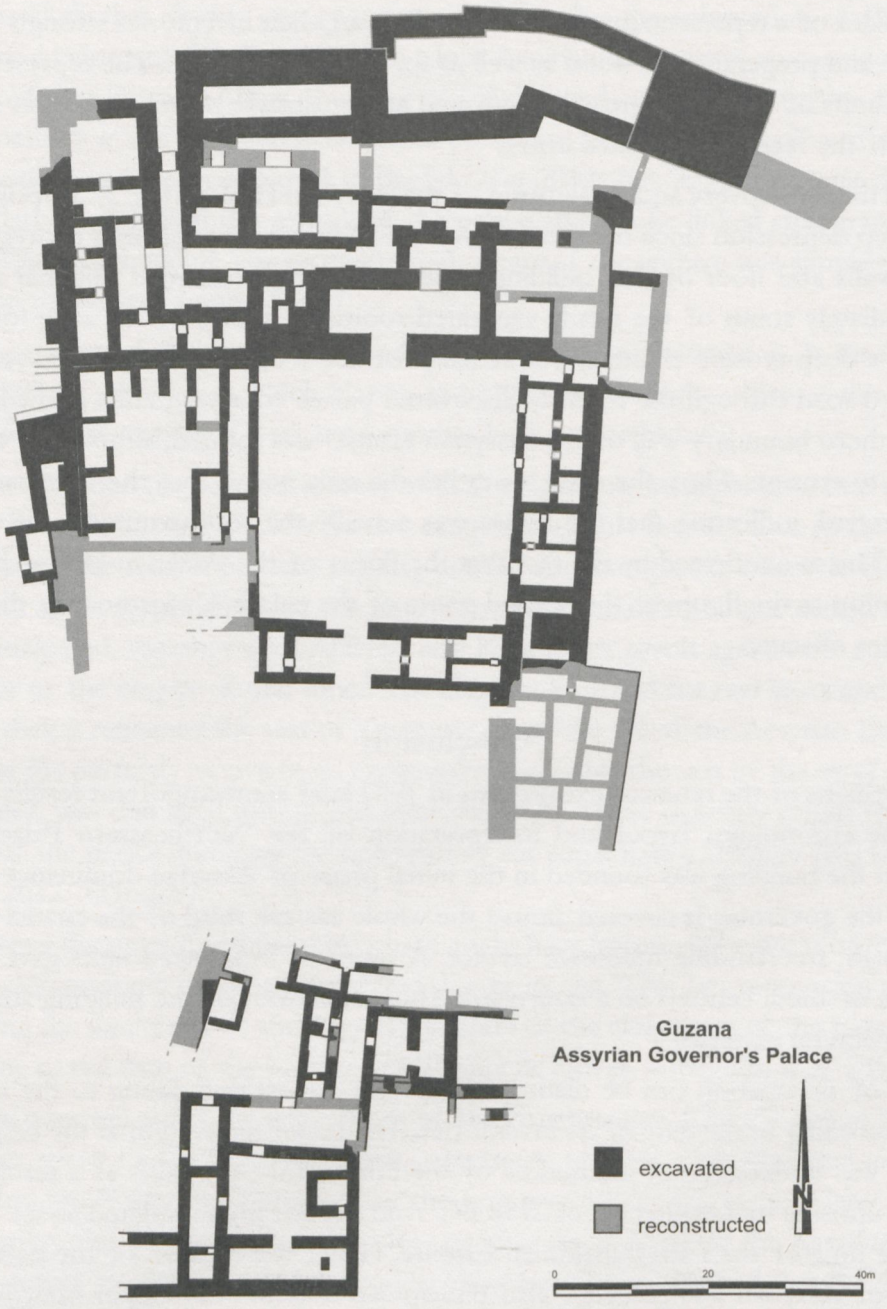

Fig. 4. Plan of the Assyrian Governor's Palace of Guzana according to Oppenheim's and the recent excavations (rendering by Zora Grossen).

a. Overview on the northern part of the Northeastern Palace, photo taken in 1912 (archive of the Max Frei-herr von Oppenheim Stiftung, Köln).

b. Remains of the two succeeding floor levels in the Northeastern Palace, photo taken in 1912 (archive of the Max Freiherr von Oppenheim Stiftung, Köln).

a. Assyrian threshold and curtain holder in the northern part of the Northeastern Palace, photo taken in 1912 (archive of the Max Freiherr von Oppenheim Stiftung, Köln).

b. Overview of the southern part of the Northeastern Palace, photo taken in 2009 (photo by Günther Mirsch).

c. Stratigraphy in the southern part of the Northeastern Palace, photo taken in 2006 (photo by Günther Mirsch).