
Chapter 17

The aftermath of the Assyrian empire as seen from the 'Red House Operation' in Tell Sheikh Hamad (ancient Dur-Katlimmu)

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From the late tenth to the late seventh century, Assyria had risen to the largest, most sophisticated and complex power system ever created in the Ancient Near East (Radner 2015, Postgate 1992; Cancik-Kirschbaum 2003). However, between the years 614 and 608 BC, that is, in a period of only seven years, this Neo-Assyrian empire vanished from the historical map. Reasons for this sudden breakdown are searched both inside and outside the system, such as overstretching of its territory with a preprogrammed downfall (Lamprichs 1995), or military activities of Babylonians and Medes, which led to the devastation of Assyrian power centres such as Assur, Kalhu, Nineveh, and finally Harran in the years 614, 612, and 608 BC (Reade 2003; Curtis 2003). After this, Assyria ceased to exist as an autonomous political unit (Nissen 2012, 122–31).

The few Babylonian, Israelite-Jewish, and classical text sources which refer to the fall of the Neo-Assyrian empire deliver only a rather blurred picture if one takes into account their sometimes very specific and individual perspective as well as their distance from Assyria in terms of both time and space (Zawadzki 1988; MacGinnis 1988; Machinist 1997; Heller 2010, 140–56; Rollinger 2011). Information coming directly from Assyrian texts peters out and sources from neighbouring regions are sparse. Because of this gap with regard to available philological material, the search for other archeological evidence is a must in order to gain deeper and more detailed insights into these historical events.

New data on the late Neo-Assyrian and post-imperial periods in northern Mesopotamia can be found at the excavation site Tell Sheikh Hamad, 200 km west of Assur. The Red House operation is located in the Lower Town II (Fig. 17.1). The stratigraphical sequence can shed some light on the Dark Age between the fall of the Neo-Assyrian empire at the end of the seventh century BC and the onset of Parthian times in the first century BC (Kühne 1993,

2002; 2006–2008; 2011, 2013; Postgate 1993; Radner 2002; Kreppner 2006; 2008a; 2008b). The analysis of the Red House's stratigraphical sequence has just been finished (Kreppner & Schmid 2013; Kreppner 2012). The basis of this analysis were approximately 5000 earth deposits as well as 2500 man-made installations such as walls, floors, fire places, basins, wells, drainage systems with canalization etc., which were excavated between 1992 and 2010. The Red House was completely excavated; it encompasses an ensemble of rooms and yards covering an area of 5200 m². The excavation site also includes other neighbouring roofless areas as well as buildings in the South and East, adding up to a total area of some 7100 m² (Fig. 17.2).

This article places the focus on the settlement development during the main occupational phase of the Red House and the period of re-use. It will discuss the various aspects of settlement activities at this location in the Lower Town II of Dur-Katlimmu on the Habur River after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian empire.

The excavation's archeological findings can be subdivided on a time line into the following phases (Fig. 17.3): the Red House was founded on the remains of Neo-Assyrian residences and can therefore be determined to be younger than these (Kühne 1993; Pucci 2008). The period from construction to destruction during which the building was in full use according to its original design has been called the 'main occupation period' (Fig. 17.4). As the floors in two rooms were renewed three times before destruction, the main occupation period has been partitioned into four sub-phases. In many rooms rubble caused by fire marks the end of the main occupational phase.

The kind of settlement following this period clearly differs from the building's former use, as many rooms no longer were inhabited and dilapidated. In the ruins of the Red House only several single rooms or ensembles of rooms were used in various areas after destruction. As the building's use was totally



Fig. 17.1. Aerial view of Tell Sheikh Hamad from north in 1997 (Gerster & Wartke 2003: 76, with addenda).



Fig. 17.2. Aerial view of the Red House operation in 1999.

changed and in no way comparable to its former use, this period has been called the re-use period. By linking the various floors in the rooms ten phases could be distinguished in the re-use period (phases 5–14) before the ruins of the Red House were finally left to decay. Unfortunately no definite and exact date exists for the building's construction, as no document recording the foundation is available. However, for the discussion of such a date texts found in the Red House carrying information about individuals and dates are important (Radner 2002). It is evident that the oldest texts found were included in younger archives but had been written long before the building's construction. Radner 2002, Text No. 116, found in the Red House, was written in the year 828 BC, texts Nos. 119 and 124 originate in the late eighth century BC and Texts Nos. 113, 121, and 127 refer to dates in the early seventh century BC. The individuals of these texts appear only in these single texts. Texts Nos. 107 to 112, from the time under the reign of Ashurbanipal, show the chariot fighter Rahimi-il as possessing a central role. The most important personality, however, to whom the main part of the texts found in the Red House – Nos. 41 to 106 – can be ascribed, is Šulmu-šarri, a confidant and contem-

porary of King Ashurbanipal (Radner 2002, 41). He appears in 56 cuneiform texts and numerous Aramaic documents, mainly triangular docketts. He is referred to as creditor of loans as well as having acquired various possessions. He bought slaves and estates around Dur-Katlimmu in great numbers and he also owned a whole village. Texts document his activities during the entire reign of Ashurbanipal. From Text No. 32 it can be concluded that Šulmu-šarri had died and his sons Šamaš-ahhe-iddina and Nabu-ili continued the family businesses. Thus, Šulmu-šarri, with his high economic potential as well as his high social status as recorded by the large number of purchases and the title *ša-qurbūti*, appears to be the appropriate candidate for the person responsible for ordering and financing such a huge and sophisticated project as the Red House. For this reason, it seems very likely that the building has been constructed during the reign of Ashurbanipal in the 630s BC, possibly after Šulmu-šarri had been honoured with the title *ša-qurbūti*. As an exact date for the start of the building's construction could not be found, the arrow in the time line indicates that this event might have happened somewhat earlier or later. An additional son is documented in Text

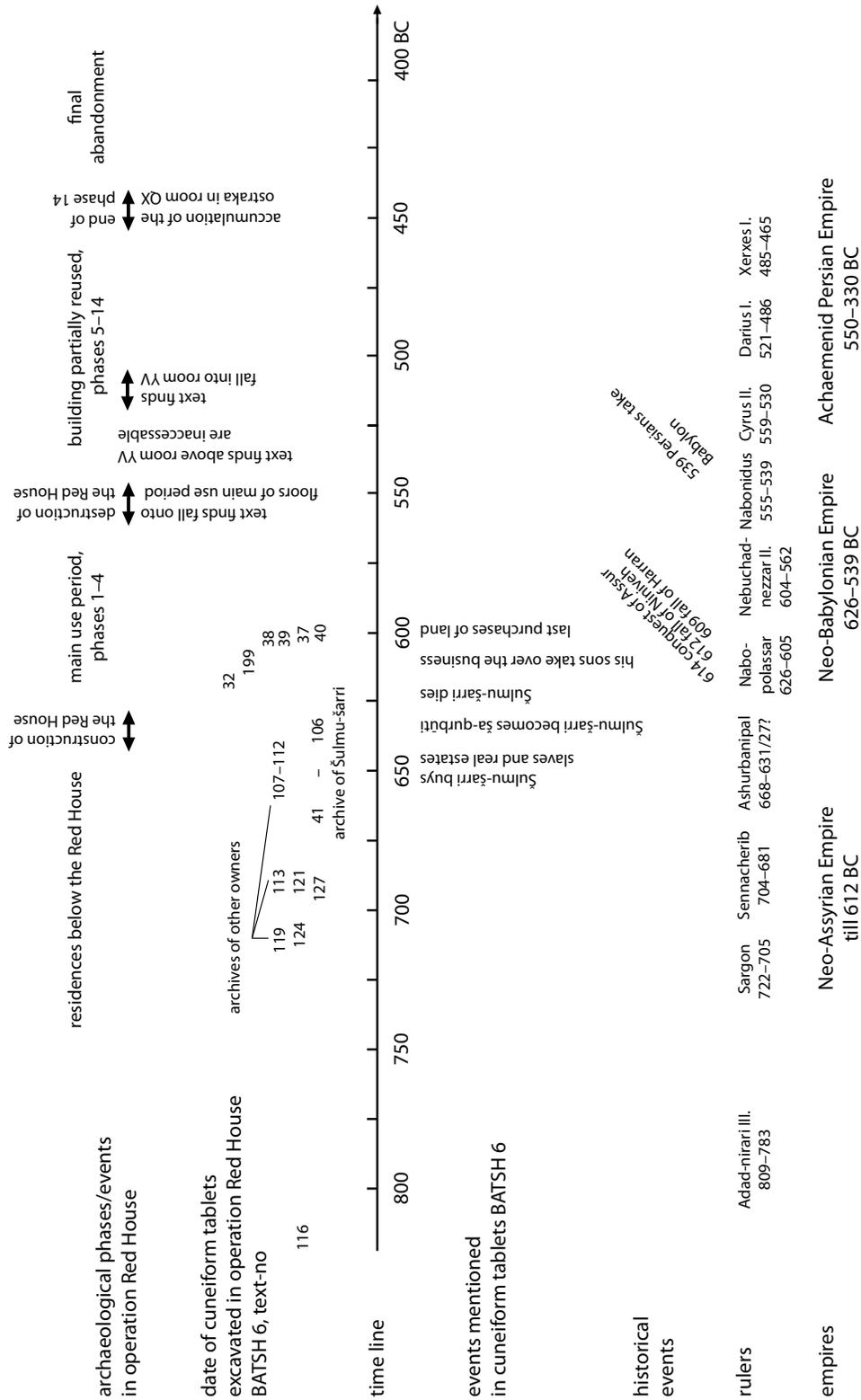


Fig. 17.3. Time line showing the archaeological phases in the Red House operation, dates of excavated cuneiform tablets, and historical events.



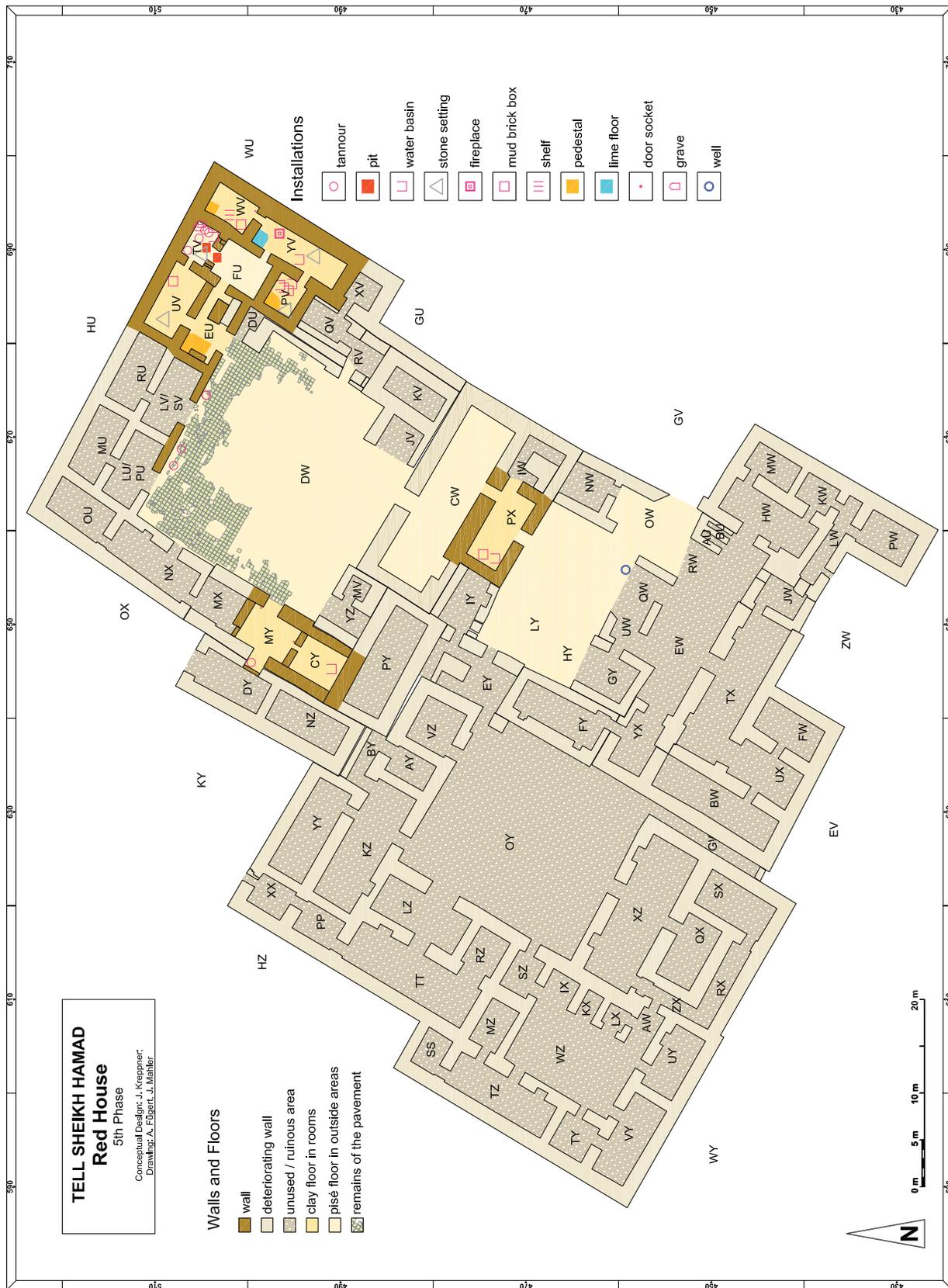


Fig. 17.5. Plan of the Red House: re-use period, phase 5.

No. 199, a document which therefore shows that the family still had influence even after the year 612 BC. The stratigraphical context of documents Nos. 37 to 40, which document the purchases of land, on a floor of the main occupation period in Room XX prove that the 5200 m² residence of the Red House was in full scale use even after the Neo-Assyrian empire's fall. These documents refer to dates of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II and were definitely stored in the building before its destruction by fire. The Assyrian élite obviously survived the empire's fall (Kühne 1993; Radner 2002, 61–9; Rohde 2013, 345; Kreppner & Schmid 2013, 355–61).

The main occupation period

Detailed analysis of the building revealed that construction activities followed a general plan. At the start of the main use period 82 rooms were inhabited, arranged around five courtyards. The number of rooms later increased to 85, caused by some variations in the building (Fig. 17.4).

Destruction and re-use period

After a period of full use, the Red House was destroyed by violence. This is well documented by the many variations in the formation processes of the deposits in individual rooms. Reception rooms with access from the courtyards were particularly and intentionally hit by devastation by fire (Kreppner 2006, 18–21; Kreppner & Schmid 2013, 74–9). Debris caused by fire was found on the floors which – together with adjoining walls – were characterized by signs of strong heat. Earth deposits indicating the end of the main period of use appear to be of great importance for the categorization of these small finds, because they embedded the remaining elements of the inventory.

It is unknown in which year the destruction occurred and by whom it was ordered. No large-scale military campaigns with armies moving along the Habur have been recorded in the Babylonian chronicles (Röllig 1993). It could well be that local events caused the burning down of the Red House. After the destruction the majority of texts that had been stored in the building's upper floor during the main period of use, in a room above Room YV, was no longer accessible (Rohde 2013). At some later stage, when the ceiling fell in in the process of the building's collapse these stored texts fell onto this room's earth deposit. The clay tablets and docketts were excavated within the mud brick debris, clearly positioned above the youngest floor of Room YV.

No human victims of the catastrophe were found inside the destroyed building. Therefore it appears that the former inhabitants had fled and came back and moved into the ruins under totally different socio-economic living conditions. From now on they lived in poverty. The reoccupation began soon after the destruction (phase 5, Fig. 17.5) as former main use period floors in several rooms in the Northern wing were used anew after the destruction. However, the number of rooms used shrank abruptly during this fifth phase (the first phase of the re-use period): only eight rooms in three groups of the Northern wing were in use. The former main entrance was blocked by mud bricks put in the passage MY-DY; from now on this part of the building had its main access from GV, OW, LY in the southeast.

On Figs. 17.5–7 inhabited rooms are identified by dark walls, used floors with dark orange. Unroofed areas outside are shown in light orange. Grey denotes rooms which were not in use in this period and began to fill with mud brick collapse. Installations such as tannur ovens for baking bread, fire places, basins, shelves etc. are indicated in the map by corresponding symbols. Drinking water was available because the well in Yard LY was still functioning.

In the following phase (phase 6) the number of rooms which were inhabited increased to more than 20, organized in 13 groups. Fireplaces were created by using fragments of baked bricks coming from the former pavement in the yard. Obviously the inhabitants could not afford new bricks. During the 7th phase (Fig. 17.6), individuals were buried according to Assyrian tradition under the floors in rooms in the building's North East. The style of burial, in earth graves with only few objects as grave goods, evidences the poor living conditions of the inhabitants. During the 8th phase rooms in the North East of the Building were given up, and during the ninth phase the rooms in the North and East wing were left for decay, so that by the 10th phase only four rooms in the West remained in use. In phases 11, 12 and 13 only two rooms remained occupied, in phase 14 (Fig. 17.7) only one, Room QX, after which the ruined remains of the Red House were finally given up for good.

In the earth deposits of this last phase 14 pottery was found in Room QX the ware and form of which indicate that it was produced after the Assyrian tradition (Kreppner 2006, 107 taf. 117–19, Röllig 2014, 233–34). Two sherds had Aramaic inscriptions written in ink. They mention the names Šamaš-zera-ibni and Nabu-ibni which are well documented in younger Akkadian texts but are otherwise unattested in the Aramaic onomasticon. These ostraca may have served to mark goods, and the form of signs on both ostraca

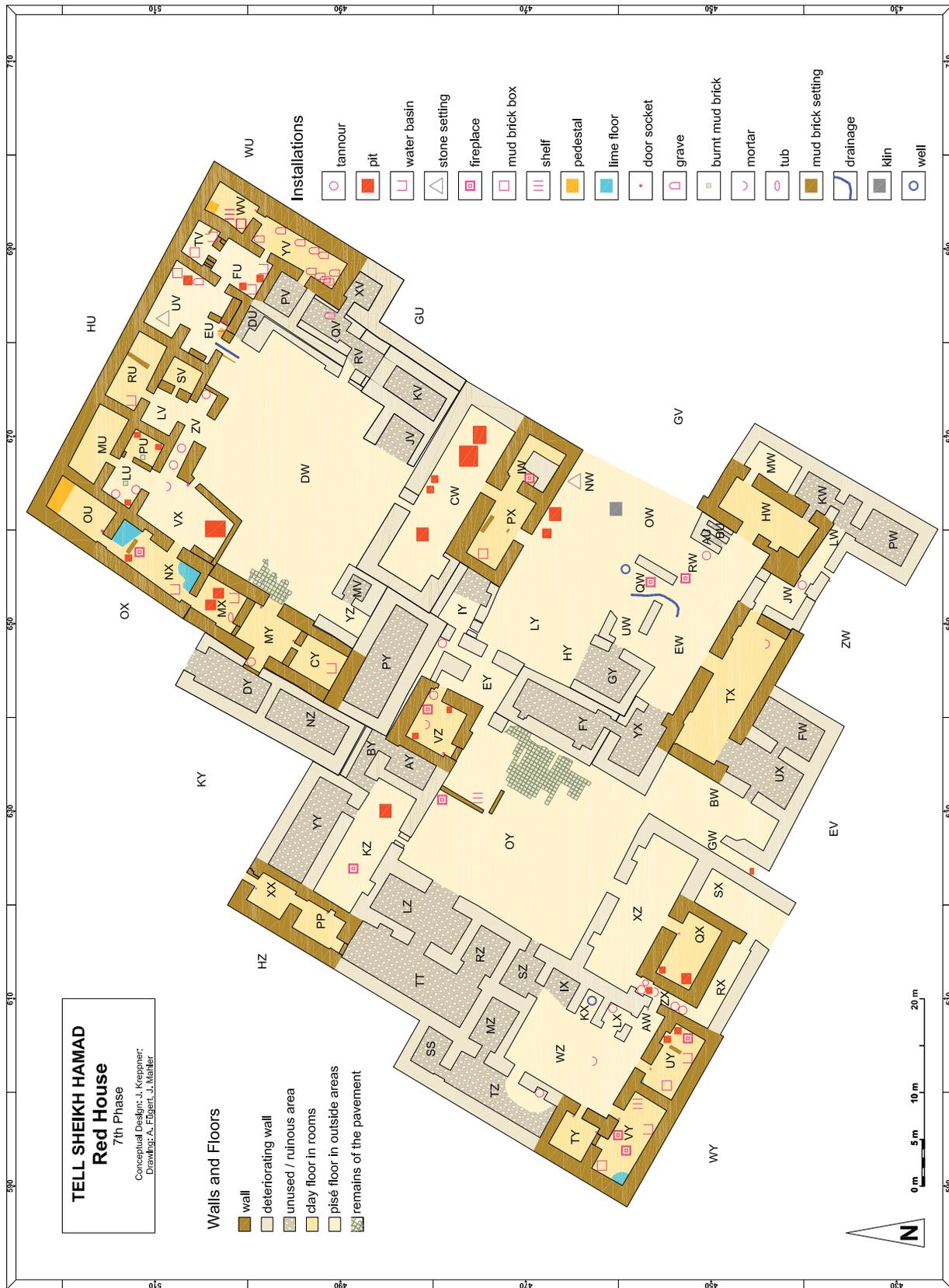


Fig. 17.6. Plan of the Red House: re-use period, phase 7.



Fig. 17.7. Plan of the Red House: re-use period, phase 14.

points to a time of origin, according to Röllig (2003) and Radner (2014, 233–34), either at the end of the sixth or during the fifth century BC, a period in which Mesopotamia was under Achaemenid rule.

After the building was left totally to decay in the 14th phase, the last remains of the walls dilapidated completely and the entire area was covered by sediments.

Conclusion

Systematic analysis with focus on *all* periods in which the building has been used, that is, main use *and* re-use period, has for the first time allowed a differentiated assessment of the settlement development of a large scale area (c. 7100 m²) in the region of northern Mesopotamia during the time periods under Assyrian, Babylonian and Achaemenid rule (Kreppner & Schmid 2013). To date, excavations at comparable sites in Northern Mesopotamia have yielded only limited information about the time after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian empire and the information in textual sources is also sparse. The stratigraphical analyses of the Red House have been able to reconstruct the settlement development during the time when the Red House was in full use, a period during which the change from Assyrian to Babylonian rule took place. Thus, these analyses can be considered to be highly relevant for the history of civilization: they show the continuation of the activities of the Assyrian elite in Dur-Katlimmu even after the takeover by the Babylonians. For example, purchases of land were documented as before with Assyrian cuneiform formula, but dated according to Neo-Babylonian practice. Furthermore, our analyses also allow a look at details of settlement activities after the building's destruction by fire in the Achaemenid period. The absence of large scale reconstructions of old buildings and the absence of the construction of new buildings, as well as the fact that the population lived among ruins, are salient indicators of deteriorating socio-economic living conditions. Moreover, the lack of finds such as clay tablets, dockets or sealings during the Red House's re-use period indicates either a total change of practice (for example, to perishable materials) or perhaps the absence of a functioning system of administration (Fügert 2014). Dead individuals continue to be buried under the floor according to Assyrian tradition, Assyrian type pottery remains in use and goods are marked by ostraca carrying Akkadian names.

A person occupying someone else's house is normally called a 'squatter'. This description has been used for the Nimrud post 612 BC occupations (Oates & Oates 2001, 257–68) and seems inadequate for those persons who lived on in the building after its devastation. I

rather think that the many and various clues which it has been possible to recover from the material of Red House most likely indicate that some of the people who had lived in the building before destruction returned after the fire, restored some of the rooms, and lived on under humble conditions for several generations.

The results presented here from the stratigraphical analyses of the Red House, with their focus on the development of settlement occupation, demonstrate how much information about periods of re-use can be extracted from excavation sites. In order to shed more light onto the Dark Age after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian empire it would be promising to systematically analyse the periods of re-use at comparable excavation sites. In the end both the evidence of both periods, of main use and re-use, is of equivalent weight and of similar importance for the understanding of the history of civilization. It should not be acceptable that in historical research periods of re-use have been more or less neglected. This was the case because, at first glance, nothing of historical relevance appeared to have happened during these times. Contrary to this, I believe that it is absolutely necessary to have detailed knowledge about these periods of re-use in order to be able to correctly classify and interpret subsequent cultural developments.

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