“The preservation of the fortress as we see it today is impressive, yet it is little more than a faint representation of what the stronghold must have really looked like in antiquity.”

Peter Akkermans (in press).

This chapter will provide the reader with a very general introduction to the stratigraphy and the architecture of the Late Bronze Age levels at Tell Sabi Abyad. Awaiting the final publication of the excavations at the site (Akkermans in prep.), the information in this chapter and the accompanying plans (figs. III.2-6) may function as a guideline when levels, buildings or square numbers are mentioned in the following chapters. Moreover, this chapter will include a general overview of the areas from which pottery has been processed for this study. In the site plans of each level these areas are indicated with a pink background colour. A detailed list of processed lots is available in Appendix A, but will mainly interest those working with the original excavation files. Likewise, throughout this volume, original square-locus-lot information has occasionally been added in footnotes for future reference. The stratigraphy and architecture of the areas where pottery production took place (workshops, kilns) will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter V. In the absence of a published stratigraphy and architecture report, this chapter is partly based on the information from internal records of the excavation administration (Sabi Abyad files).

III.1 Summary description of the stratigraphy

The site of Sabi Abyad is approximately 5 hectares in size. Although the top of the mound is almost six metres above the modern fields and extends to around 4.5 meters below the plains, the majority of these archaeological deposits dates from prehistoric periods (Akkermans 1996, Akkermans et al. 2006). The remains dated to the Late Bronze Age are concentrated on the central-western part of the mound, more or less within the 325 m contour line, and are approximately 1 hectare in size (fig. III.1). On all sides, the Late Bronze Age remains have eroded out of the slope, suggesting that the originally occupied area may have been larger than the area preserved now. Five building levels are dated to the Late Bronze Age (levels 7-3), numbered from the top down. The upper two levels (level 1 and 2) most probably date from much later periods, possibly Hellenistic and Islamic, based on the pottery found in these levels. They will be dealt with in a separate publication (Duistermaat and De Jong in prep.). The Late Bronze Age levels will be briefly presented here in order of building sequence.

Level 7

The earliest Late Bronze Age remains on the site probably date from the late 14th or first half of the 13th century BC, the Mitanni period (see Chapter IV). Directly on top of the eroded prehistoric layers a square, towerlike building (dimtu) was erected (fig. III.2). Deposits dated to level 7 have also been found to the east of the tower in square N9. The level 7 remains have all been reached only within the confines of later rooms and spaces.

Before building the level 7 tower, the builders partly levelled the ancient prehistoric mound, either by cutting away the prehistoric occupation layers or by depositing extra soil. However, these levelling activities were of a limited nature (Akkermans et al. 1993: 9). The various rooms of the building had nice lime-plaster floors, sometimes with a pebble layer underneath. Simple loam floors and mud-brick floors were used as well. Several floors were renewed over the course of time, occasionally resulting in more than 23 different floor layers. A thin deposit of finds and light brown soil and ashes may be related to the last occupation phase of the building. Later, a fire raged through parts of the building and probably marked the end of its occupation. This destruction left a thick (up to 13 However, in future only the reports published by Akkermans (in prep.) should be used for reference.}
31 cm) layer of burnt material including a lot of pottery on the lime-plaster floors in some of the rooms. After the destruction, the building must have stood empty for some time. Mud-brick debris and other rubble, about 25 cm thick, filled up the rooms. This fill is not completely preserved due to levelling activities in level 6, when the tower was renovated (Sabi Abyad files). As yet, no sublevels have been distinguished within the level 7 deposits, while at least three different strata are present (the material from these strata is lumped together for this study). The pottery processed for this study came mainly from rooms 1, 2, 5 and 6, while only very small amounts of sherds were recovered from the other rooms (cf. fig. III.2, highlighted in pink). All ceramic material comes from the latest phase of use and the destruction and abandonment phase. In square N9 a loose brown-grey fill of about 50 cm thick on top of a loam floor was found, just outside the later fortress wall (not on fig. III.2). The nature of the occupation in this area of the site is not well known.

**Level 6**

After a hiatus of unknown duration, in which the level 7 tower deteriorated and gradually filled up with debris, the site saw major renovations and new building programmes with the arrival of the Middle Assyrian inhabitants. It is probably at this moment that extensive levelling of the prehistoric mound took place, including the construction of terraces to create a more or less horizontal building space for a planned settlement (fig. III.3, Akkermans in press; Akkermans and Wiggermann in press). Possibly some ruins of earlier level 7 buildings around the tower were cleared away at this point. A dry moat was dug in a roughly rectangular shape around an area of approximately 80 x 80 m, within which the settlement was planned. The moat was apparently only used at the outset of the building programme, and during the course of level 6 it gradually filled up with garbage and debris. Inside this space the thick outer wall of the fortress proper was built in this level, measuring approximately 60 x 60 m. The preliminary stratigraphy report (Sabi Abyad files) distinguishes numerous strata grouped into 5 different sublevels for level 6 (6E – 6A, 6E being the earliest one). The number of strata and sublevels illustrates the organic and flexible nature of the settlement in level 6, with constant rebuilding and alterations of the architecture. All through the settlement a continuous alternation of use, abandonment, renovation, removing or adding of walls, floors and features seems to have occurred. Inside rooms this led to a succession of floor levels and debris on floors. The areas outside the buildings, mainly used as courtyards, also witnessed an accumulation of garbage and waste, resulting in the gradual elevation of the walking surfaces. At the end of level 6, many buildings seem to have been abandoned or severely neglected, leading to their gradual decay. The dates from cuneiform texts suggest that level 6 may have had a duration of around 30 years (Akkermans and Wiggermann in press; see also Chapter IV). It seems that most of the described pottery diagnostics come from the earliest phase of level 6 occupation. Not all diagnostics have been attributed to a sublevel yet. In this study the pottery from secure level 6 contexts was grouped together irrespectively of the sublevel. The pottery ascribed to level 6 comes from different contexts, including fill on floors (possibly in situ deposits), room fill and debris, fill from outer areas, etc. (fig. III.3, highlighted in pink). The efforts during pottery processing have focussed on pottery from floors and room fills. No pottery from the fill of the moat has been included in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>sublevel</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No sublevel assigned yet</td>
<td>1112</td>
<td>48.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6B/6C mixed</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6C</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6D</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6D/6E mixed</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6E</td>
<td>773</td>
<td>33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2295</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III.1: Diagnostic sherds in sublevels of level 6.
**Level 5**

At the start of level 5 an extensive programme of renovation and rebuilding was carried out. Although the basic lay-out of the settlement stayed the same, there were numerous changes as well (fig. III.4). Apart from the major renovations and changes in the architecture described below, the settlement seemed to be focussed more on the area inside the fortress walls. The previously densely occupied area between the former dry moat and the wall was now almost completely cleared of any standing architecture. This area was still used for ovens, kilns and pits, and only a few buildings were situated in the north and east outside the walls. Again, over the course of level 5 numerous changes and renovations were carried out in individual buildings. The end of the level 5 occupation was more dramatic than that of level 6. In level 5 the central tower, the residence and buildings in their vicinity show traces of a violent fire, resulting in collapse and destruction. Other buildings were left to their fate and collapsed as well (Akkermans and Wiggermann in press). The dates from cuneiform texts suggest that the occupation in level 5 may have lasted for ca. 15 years (Akkermans and Wiggermann in press, see also Chapter IV). The preliminary stratigraphy (Sabi Abyad files) divides level 5 into three sublevels, and diagnostic sherds were available for this study from two sublevels: 5B and 5C (5C being the earliest sublevel). It appears that most described diagnostics can be attributed to the end of level 5 (sublevel 5B). In this study, however, all material from undisturbed level 5 contexts was grouped together. Level 5 yielded the most completely preserved contexts regarding architecture, textual evidence and small finds including pottery. The numerous in situ floor contexts, caused by the partly violent destruction of the buildings, illustrate the enormous potential of the site for spatial analysis. This is especially so since the function of the settlement (a dunnû) is also illustrated in textual sources (cf. Akkermans in press). It is for this reason that initially all efforts during the pottery processing focussed on the description of undisturbed floor contexts from level 5. Less effort was spent on processing material from pits, street fills, garbage dumps and mixed contexts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sublevel</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No sublevel assigned yet</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5B</td>
<td>5358</td>
<td>70.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5B/5C</td>
<td>1299</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5C</td>
<td>787</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7614</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III.2: Diagnostic sherds in sublevels of level 5.

**Level 4**

After the destruction of the level 5 settlement in a fire, the central buildings in the fortress (the tower, residence and adjacent buildings) filled with massive amounts of mud-brick debris and rubble. The ruins were left to their fate in level 4, allowing for more accumulation of debris and garbage. The parts of the ruins that were still standing were used for the construction of bread ovens, the disposal of garbage and the burial of the dead. However, in the north and north-western part of the settlement some buildings were renovated or reconstructed (fig. III.5). Before this could be done, the ruins of the level 5 buildings in this area were levelled (Akkermans and Wiggermann in press). The preliminary stratigraphy (Sabi Abyad files) divides level 4 into four sublevels, all of which have yielded diagnostic sherds for analysis: 4A – 4D (4D being the earliest sublevel). It appears that most diagnostics are attributed to one of the later sublevels in level 4: 4B. Sherds from both level 4 and level 3 come from rooms as well as from outside areas, pits and garbage dumps.
Chapter III: The Archaeological Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sublevel</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No sublevel assigned yet</td>
<td>881</td>
<td>43.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4A/4B or 4A/4B/4C mixed</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4B</td>
<td>467</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4B/4C or 4B/4C/4D mixed</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4C</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4D</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III.3: Diagnostic sherds in sublevels of level 4.

Level 3

Occupation in level 3 retained the general character of the settlement in level 4 (fig. III.6). Open areas were still used for a variety of outdoor activities, resulting in the accumulation of garbage and debris. Small ovens and bins were built there. Older ruins collapsed and filled with rubble as well. New floors were laid in the houses in the north and north-west. In the yards smaller irregular structures were built, containing hearths and storage bins (Akkermans and Wiggermann in press). The preliminary stratigraphy (Sabi Abyad files) divides level 3 into two sublevels, 3A and 3B. Most diagnostics come from the later of the two: 3A.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sublevel</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No sublevel assigned yet</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3A</td>
<td>648</td>
<td>83.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3A/3B</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3B</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III.4: Diagnostic sherds in sublevels of level 3.

III.2 Summary description of the architecture

This study is not the place to discuss in detail all the architecture and features excavated in the various levels. However, for a general understanding of the site and the context of the pottery, a summary overview is presented here.

Level 7

The level 7 remains mainly consist of a square tower-like building. Since level 7 remains were found only within the confines of later walls, the level 7 building itself was never fully uncovered. Several wall faces were hidden behind or within later renovation walls, while other walls had been cut away. Consequently, the ground plan of the building is largely reconstructed on the basis of the analysis of the renovation activities that took place in level 6. The level 7 tower consisted of 8 rooms and a stairwell to a second storey. The northernmost and middle row of rooms had hard lime-plaster floors. Room 6 was divided into two separate areas, with a toilet in the northernmost half. The southern row of rooms had either mud-brick floors (the western half of room 7, and room 9) or simple loam floors. Rooms 1, 2, 4 and 5 had hearths or fireplaces. The southern wall of room 4 had a row of 13 small rectangular niches built into the wall. It has been suggested (Akkermans et al. 1993: 9, 13; Akkermans and Wiggermann in press) that these niches could have been used for the storage of cuneiform tablets. Since the area around the building and the character of the upper floor are not known, it is difficult to

---

14 The plan presented in fig. III.2 is based on the reports in the excavation files and unpublished stratigraphical reports (Sabi Abyad files). The plan published in Akkermans et al. (1993) for this phase is incomplete.
draw conclusions with regard to the function and character of the building. It may have been a mansion or *dimtu* (cf. Koliński 2001: 60-63).

**Level 6**

The settlement in level 6 was the first Middle Assyrian occupation. It also was the largest. Within the rectangular area bordered by the dry moat a rather systematic building plan had been carried out (fig. III.3). A thick mud-brick defensive wall enclosing an area of approximately 60 x 60 m formed the main fortress area. The main entrance to this area was located in the north, while the crossing over the moat was located in the north-west (Akkermans and Wiggermann in press). Buttresses and doorposts formed a solid construction for the wooden door that could be closed with a horizontal wooden beam. From the main gateway a broad corridor led to the inner areas of the fortress. A door to the right led into a large square courtyard that was paved with baked bricks, which in its turn gave access to the “residence” described below. A door to the left led to the entrance of the tower and to the area between the tower and the fortress wall.

In level 6 the ruins of the level 7 tower were thoroughly renovated: many walls were cut away, others were strengthened with extra walls set against them. The outer wall of the tower was also reinforced (Sabi Abyad files). Consequently, the level 6 tower is larger and has thicker walls (up to 2 m) than its level 7 predecessor, and perhaps also the functions of the building and its rooms had changed. The tower still had a second storey, as is proven by the spiral stairwell in the north-east (Akkermans in press).

West of the tower was the second major building inside the fortress enclosure: the “residence” or “palace”. This large square building was built immediately against the western wall of the tower. It had a very regular plan around a longitudinal central hall measuring 15 x 4 m. On either side of this central space, doors led to a row of smaller rooms with a similar lay-out both on the west and east side. To the north, and perpendicular to the orientation of the central hall, a rectangular private courtyard measuring 15 x 5 m was located, partly paved with baked bricks (Akkermans and Wiggermann in press). The smaller rooms at the southern end were bathrooms and toilets with baked brick floors, suggesting that the two wings were residential apartments (Akkermans in press). The western wing, showing some decoration on the walls and having an extra means of access to the courtyard, seems to be more public than the eastern apartment.

In the area between the fortress wall and the main buildings (tower and residence), large rectangular rooms or barracks had originally been built aligning the fortress wall. A building in the north-eastern corner had a large staircase with an estimated height of approximately 5 metres, proving that these buildings had upper storeys as well. The area between the rectangular buildings and the tower and residence seems to have been left empty originally, probably serving as courtyards. However, over time this area was more and more built up with smaller rooms and structures. Walls were generally thin here and many of these spaces were probably not roofed (Akkermans and Wiggermann in press).

Outside the fortress area, but within the area surrounded by the dry moat, a number of workshops and houses was built. There is evidence for bead-making or stone-cutting workshops (in the north west) as well as for pottery workshops and kilns (in the east). The pottery workshops will be discussed in detail in Chapter V. The buildings to the north of the fortress seem to have been normal houses. Sometimes they were built outside the moat as well, suggesting that the total settlement area may have been substantially larger than the area enclosed by the moat.

**Level 5**

At the start of level 5, the neglected and partly collapsed buildings of level 6 were for a large part levelled. Many were rebuilt in the same place, although the internal divisions often changed (fig. III.4). The outer defensive wall was partly levelled and rebuilt as well. The long staircase in the
northeastern corner had fallen into disrepair and was not used as a stairwell again. Instead, it was
turned into a lavatory belonging to a series of rooms built here (see below). Now a new staircase was
built against the eastern fortress wall. The northern outer wall was moved some distance further to the
north, expanding the inside fortress area. The main entrance to the fortress was moved to a spot in the
north-west of this new northern wall, turning the former main entrance into a normal internal
doorway. The new main entrance was again flanked by buttresses. Upon entering the fortress, a
rectangular courtyard led to a small bathroom and toilet. From the entry court one could enter the
main square courtyard in the north-west, which became the crossroads of all traffic in the fortress. All
doors leading from the courtyard could be closed by wooden doors.

A small building consisting of a few small rooms and a bathroom and toilet was located to the
west of the main courtyard. A large number of cuneiform tablets were found in this building,
identifying it as the office of the *abarakku* Tammitte. Sealing and fragmentary tablets in the yard
indicate that the opening of sealed goods took place in front of Tammitte’s office.

From the main courtyard one could also reach the “residence”, located in the same place as in
level 6. During much of level 5 the building retained its original lay-out and function. However,
towards the end of the period, it seems that the building was no longer used as a residential building.
Instead, there is evidence that points to the use of the building as a threshing floor and as a storage for
bulk amounts of grain. The change of a representative building into a barn is still not fully explained,
but may be related to the dwindling of Assyrian authority in the area.

A third door led from the courtyard into the inner areas of the fortress. In the northern area the
rooms that were added to the north of the former fortress wall, together with new rooms inside, now
formed a large building consisting of a series of interconnected rooms. The building was supplied
with a bathroom and toilet. Near the entrance to the tower a square room had been turned into a large
kitchen, with a series of fireplaces along the wall. These facilities, the size of the building and rooms,
and the find of numerous cuneiform tablets in this area led to the identification of the building as the
housing of the *dunnu* staff. In the kitchen perhaps communal meals for the staff were prepared. This
building had its own access from the outside as well.

The tower was also thoroughly renovated. Again walls had been fortified or changed, room
partitionings had been changed and the outer wall had been reinforced with an extra surrounding wall.
New floors had been laid in the rooms. The texts suggest that the tower may have been used as
housing or as a prison, while the archaeological finds point to the additional function as a storage area.
In front of the tower a vaulted door-less square room may have functioned as a silo for the bulk
storage of grain.

The space between the official buildings and the outer fortress wall, which had been left
comparatively empty in level 6, was now heavily built upon. Older buildings had been renovated and
expanded, or completely levelled, after which the remaining space was filled with new buildings. The
texts indicate that these buildings were mainly workshops and offices of officials and staff. A room in
the north was thus identified as the office of the brewer, while a building to the east of the tower was
identified as the house of the scribe. A pottery workshop was located in this area as well (see Chapter
V). Interestingly, not only the potter’s workshop but also most of the pottery kilns had moved to areas
inside the fortress walls, often making use of spaces that were (momentarily) not in use for other
activities. Several of the buildings to the south of the tower and residence were occupied by the baker,
who was responsible for the production and distribution of all products made from cereals (see for the
whole paragraph Akkermans in press; Akkermans and Wiggermann in press).

**Level 4**

In level 4 the character and the lay-out of the settlement changed radically (fig. III.5). The “official”
buildings including the residence and the tower were left to decay and turned into a field of ruins. The
wall around the settlement was probably still standing, but it is unknown what state it was in. The
former gate in the north was blocked, and access to the area was now probably from the east.
Buildings in the north and north-west that were still considered suitable for living were renovated and
altered. Two, perhaps three, houses of more or less equal size were situated next to each other. Each house had a larger room, some smaller rooms and a bathroom. In the courtyard to the south of the houses, leading up to the field of ruins where the residence used to be, a small room with fireplaces perhaps served as a kitchen (Akkermans and Wiggermann in press). Pottery was still produced in level 4, as is attested by the large pottery kiln to the north of the houses, in front of the blocked former gate (Akkermans and Duistermaat 2001), and a smaller kiln in square K8 (see Chapter V). Also the cuneiform evidence, although meagre, suggests that Sabi Abyad was somehow still part of the Assyrian administration. However, its character and role had probably changed profoundly.

**Level 3**

The buildings of level 4 were still used in level 3 (fig. III.6). They were repeatedly renovated and new floors were constructed. The courtyards were used as before as areas for the construction of bins, ovens and for burials. Also smaller structures with walls only one mud-brick wide were constructed around the houses (Akkermans and Wiggermann in press). The flimsy architecture and the proximity to the surface of the tell did not promote a very good preservation of the remains in this level. The character of the settlement in this period is that of a rural farmstead, and it is not certain whether it still was part of the Middle Assyrian administration at this time. There is no evidence for local pottery production from level 3. Similarly, it is not known until what date the occupation of level 3 continued.
Chapter III: The Archaeological Context