

UBAID HOUSES AND TEMPLES*

BY:
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Remains of the 'Ubaid culture have been encountered on a large number of sites in Mesopotamia but until recently few substantial buildings had been uncovered. The extensive excavations undertaken as part of the Himrin Dam Salvage Project have increased enormously our knowledge of 'Ubaid architecture and in this article I will review what has been discovered about the architecture of the 'Ubaid culture. Inevitably the evidence is almost entirely confined to ground plans with little information about the elevations, roofing systems, methods of lighting, etc.; and so here I will be largely concerned with the comparison of ground plans. It seems reasonable to assume that buildings with similar ground plans had similar forms and in the absence of any evidence to the contrary that they were used for similar purposes. Even in simple villages there will be a great variety of different building types and these will vary according to the function of the building, the size, shape and position of the available building plot, on the wealth and status of the owner, as well as on the idiosyncracies of the owner and the builder.

'UBAID ARCHITECTURE OUTSIDE THE HIMRIN BASIN

First let us look at what was known about 'Ubaid architecture before the Himrin Project started, dealing only with those buildings of which sufficient has been discovered for us to reconstruct the complete plan with some certainty. Then we can consider the results of the Himrin excavations and see how they alter and amplify the previous picture.

The most exciting and important excavation of the 'Ubaid culture is that of the Directorate-General of Antiquities at Eridu. The architectural results of these brilliantly conceived and executed excavations were promptly published in preliminary form in *Sumer* (Lloyd and Safar 1947 and 1948) and the final report is now available (Safar, Mustafa, and Lloyd 1982). In the Temple Sounding, levels XVI to VI contained a sequence of buildings identified by the excavators as temples. Here there is a clear development from the simple oneroomed shrine of level XVI to the elaborate carefully planned temples of level VII (Fig. 1*) and level VI: this development still stands on its own and has not been duplicated on any other site, but there is no reason to doubt its validity and it may indeed be typical. The later 'Ubaid temples from levels XI to VI all have similar plans. They all appear to be tripartite with a long central room entered through the long side with rows of rooms on either side.

In the Hut Sounding at Eridu, at Ur, at al-'Ubaid itself, and at Hajji Mohammed only very fragmentary architectural remains have so far been discovered. At Tell el-'Oueili the French Archaeological Delegation has found part of a Late 'Ubaid building interpreted as part of a tripartite domestic building (Forest 1983, p. 73, and Pls. 2-6 on pp. 72-76) (Fig. 2) above what may be a foundation consisting of a grid of small square rooms.

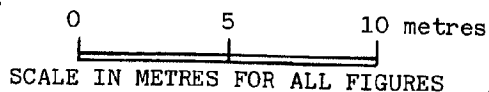
The plans of two 'Ubaid temples at Uruk (Figs. 3 and 4) have been reconstructed by Professor Jürgen Schmidt (Schmidt

* A version of this paper was originally read at the Third International Symposium on Babylon Ashur and Haditha in Baghdad 11-16 November 1981. I would like to thank the organisers of the Symposium for their kindness and hospitality.

I am grateful to Jane Killick, Robert Killick, Janet Leatherby, Peter Morgan, Nicholas Postgate, Susan Roaf, Victoria Southwell and Canon Osborne Olivetti for assistance. They have supplied many of the ideas

presented here and helped in the preparation of the figures.

* The figures are all drawn to the same scale and reproduced at a scale of 1:225. All have north at the top though it is often uncertain whether this is true or magnetic north. Hatched areas on the plans are restored and conjectural walls.



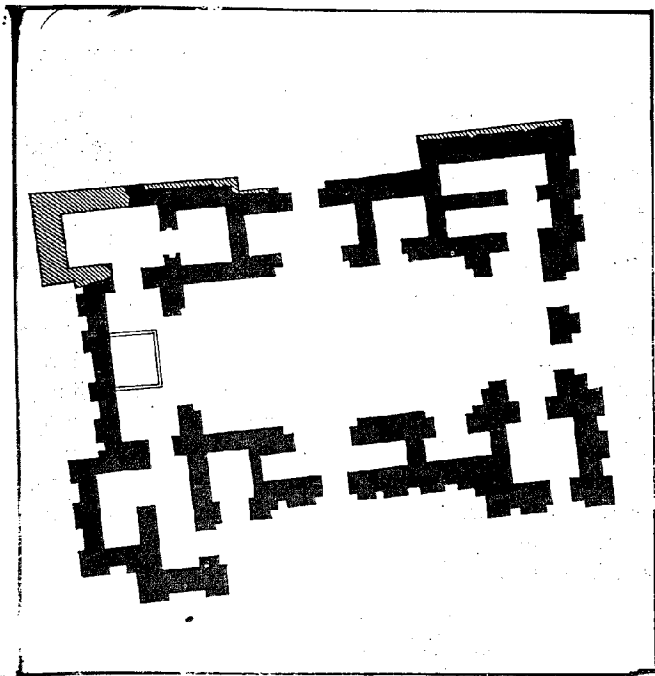


Fig. 1. Plan of Temple VII at Eridu (after Lloyd and Safar 1947, Fig. 3 between pp. 234 and 235 in the Arabic section). For the scale and orientation of the figures see note on previous page.

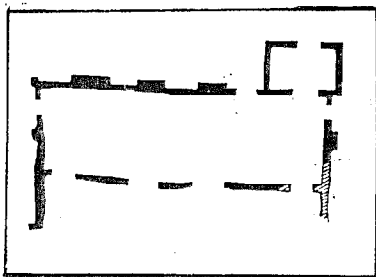


Fig. 2. Plan of building at Tell el-'Oueili (after Forest 1983, p. 78).

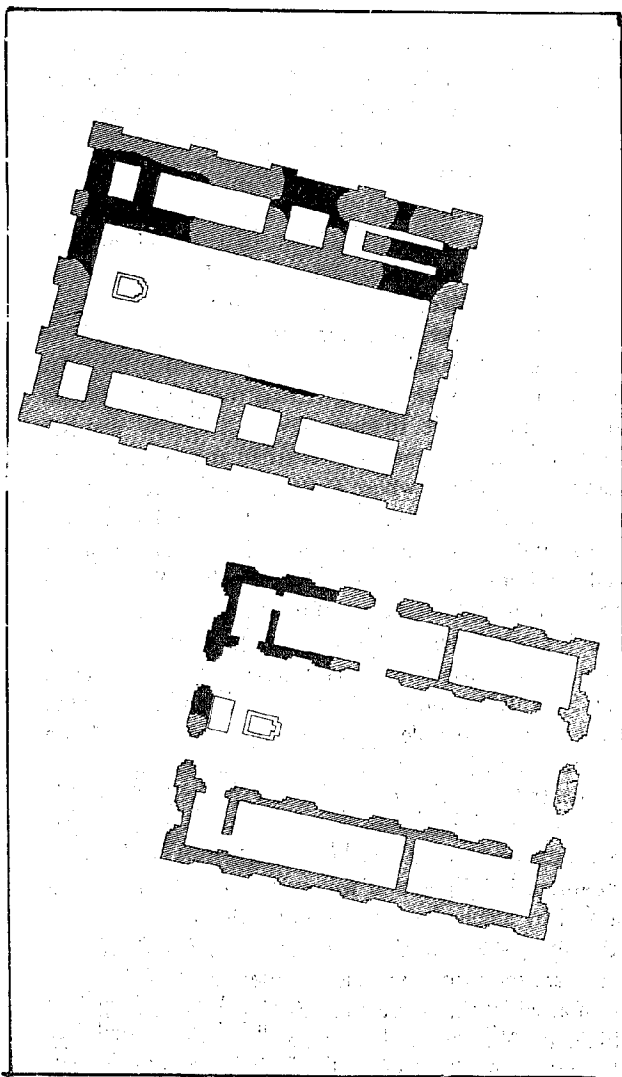


Fig. 3. Plan of Temple II at Uruk (after Schmidt 1974, p. 174).

Fig. 4. Plan of Temple I at Uruk (after Schmidt 1974, p. 177).

1974). Only small parts of these buildings have been excavated but their similarity to the Eridu temples and to later temples at Uruk makes the reconstructions convincing. These buildings like the Eridu temples appear to be tripartite with a long rectangular central room flanked on either side by rows of smaller rooms.

From central Iraq we have no complete plans of 'Ubaid buildings. The investigations at Ras al - Amiya (Stronach 1961) and at Tell 'Uqair (Lloyd and Safar 1943, Adams 1972, p. 199) gave evidence for close packed domestic housing but individual building plans cannot be identified. Similarly further north at Nuzi and Kudish Saghir (Starr 1937-9), and at Tell Hassuria (Lloyd and Safar 1945) no architecture was recorded in the 'Ubaid' levels. At Arpachiyah the few walls that were planned do not yield recognisable building plans (Mallowan and Rose 1935).

So far then despite the number of sites that have produced samples of 'Ubaid pottery only Eridu has given us plans of complete buildings and these were all temples. None of the sites has told us much about the nature of 'Ubaid domestic architecture except that there were constructions of reed and mud-plaster, of tauf, and of mudbrick, and that the buildings normally had rectangular rooms. But at the next two sites to be considered, Tepe Gawra and Tell el - Thalathat there is abundant evidence for a distinctive type of domestic dwelling, the tripartite house, which may be defined as a building with a long central room with rows of rooms on each of the long sides, using the term tripartite house in a more restricted sense than Heinrich (1973) used the term *Mittelsaalhaus*.

The excavators of Gawra and Thalathat in their publications

have rather arbitrarily classified some of these as temples and others as private houses. As I hope to demonstrate there are no convincing reasons to think that any of these buildings were temples (except for Gawra level XIII) and it is probable that they were all private houses.

The plans published from the 'Ubaid levels at Tepe Gawra are for the most part difficult to understand. In a number of cases the excavators seem to have assigned walls to the wrong phase, have not distinguished secondary constructions, and sometimes appear not to have observed or recorded walls. Nevertheless one particular house type is clearly visible in several levels. This is a tripartite building with a long central room with rows of smaller rooms on each side. In levels XVIII, XV, XIV, and XII obvious examples of this type were recorded and in most other levels there were buildings whose plans could be reconstructed according to this scheme; and apart from the round structures in level XVII and the temples of level XIII there are no other recognisable building types in the 'Ubaid levels at Tepe Gawra other than irregular agglomerations of rectangular rooms.

Let us look more closely at those buildings which definitely fall into the class of tripartite houses. The earliest is in level XVIII (Fig. 5), which incorrectly (as I hope to demonstrate) the report takes to be a temple: 'the religious character of the edifice is established by a rectangular podium slightly to the rear of the central chamber, or sanctum' (Tobler 1950, p. 44). The report goes on to compare the plan of the level XVIII building with the undoubted temples of levels XIII and XI - A. 'Such fundamental architectural features as long axes, central sancta flanked by smaller rooms on both sides, and entrances through the short sides are shared by all these buildings. . . . These details are too numerous and too identical to have been 'the result of accident; they must represent a definite tradition' (Tobler 1950, p. 44). But in fact none of these features are necessarily indicative of a religious function, for as we will see below they are all also found in private houses except for the entrance in the short side and this itself was not found in the level XVIII building at Gawra, where no doorways were identified.

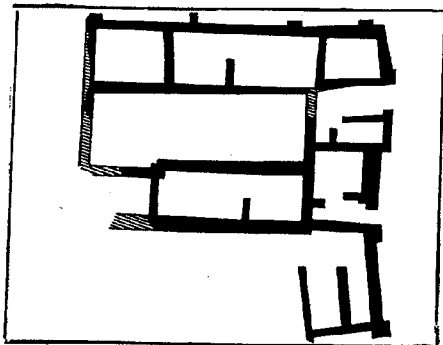


Fig. 5. Plan of House in level XVIII at Tepe Gawra (after Tobler 1950, pl. XIX).

In level XV two buildings with similar tripartite plans were discovered: one of these in squares 4G and 5G had been truncated at its eastern end by a thick later wall but enough survived to show that as on examples which we will see later the central room was cruciform rather than rectangular with arms on the north and south (Fig. 6). The second tripartite building in squares 4K and 5K is more completely preserved and like the first had a cruciform central room (Fig. 7). Two other features which we will encounter again and which seem characteristic of 'Ubaid architecture are found in these buildings: one is the way the external wall steps in and out wherever it is met by an internal cross-wall, and the other is the unit of two narrow rectangular rooms side by side which must have been the staircase up to the roof. Tobler (1950, p.37) referred to the central rooms as courts but there can be no doubt that they were in fact roofed over. He also states that both these buildings were private houses and there are no reasons for us to disagree.

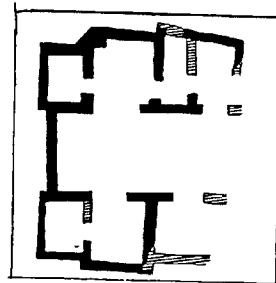


Fig. 6. Plan of House in level XV at Tepe Gawra. The eastern end of the building was probably destroyed by a later wall. (after Tobler 1950, pl. XV)

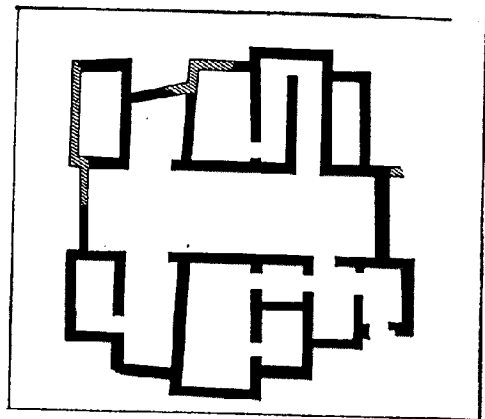


Fig. 7. Plan of House in level XV at Tepe Gawra (after Tobler 1950, pl. XV).

In level XIV the stone rubble foundations of what is essentially a tripartite building were discovered (Fig. 8). No doors or mud-brick superstructure were recovered and it is possible that not all the foundations would have been covered by mud-brick walls. The plan is more elaborate than those of level XV and perhaps like some of the examples from the

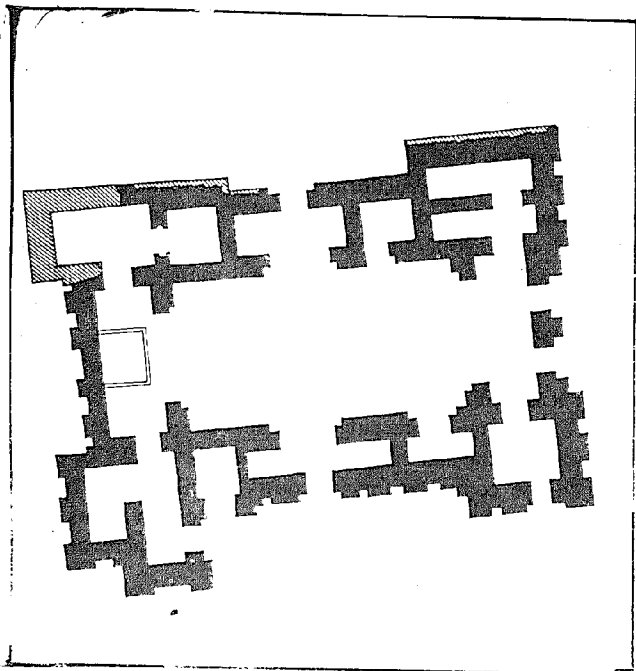


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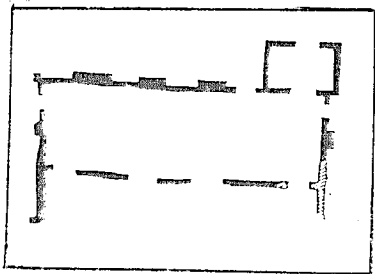


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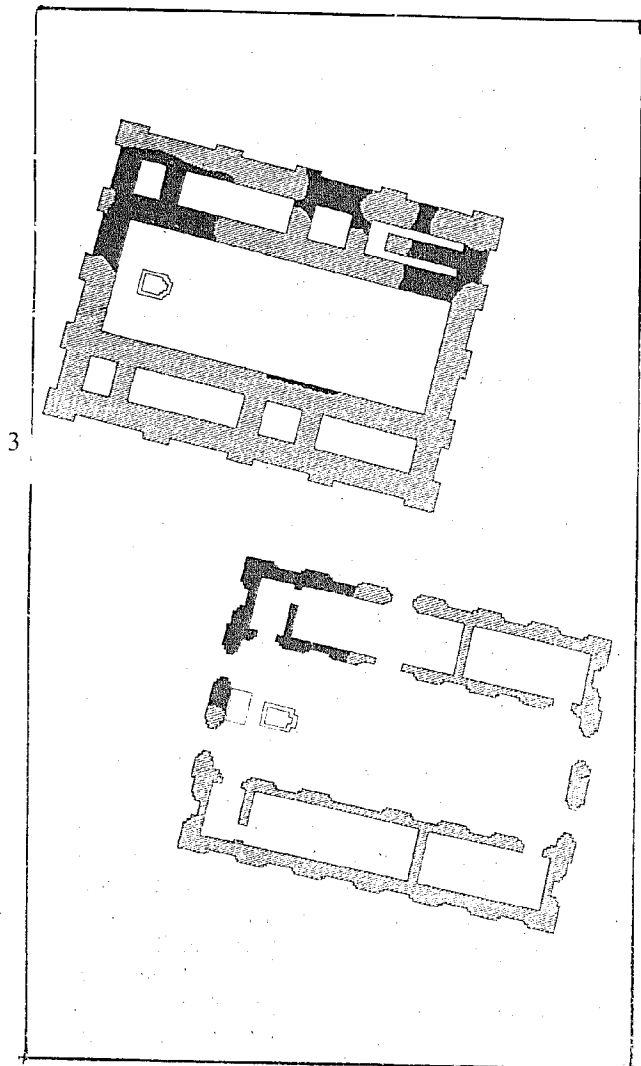


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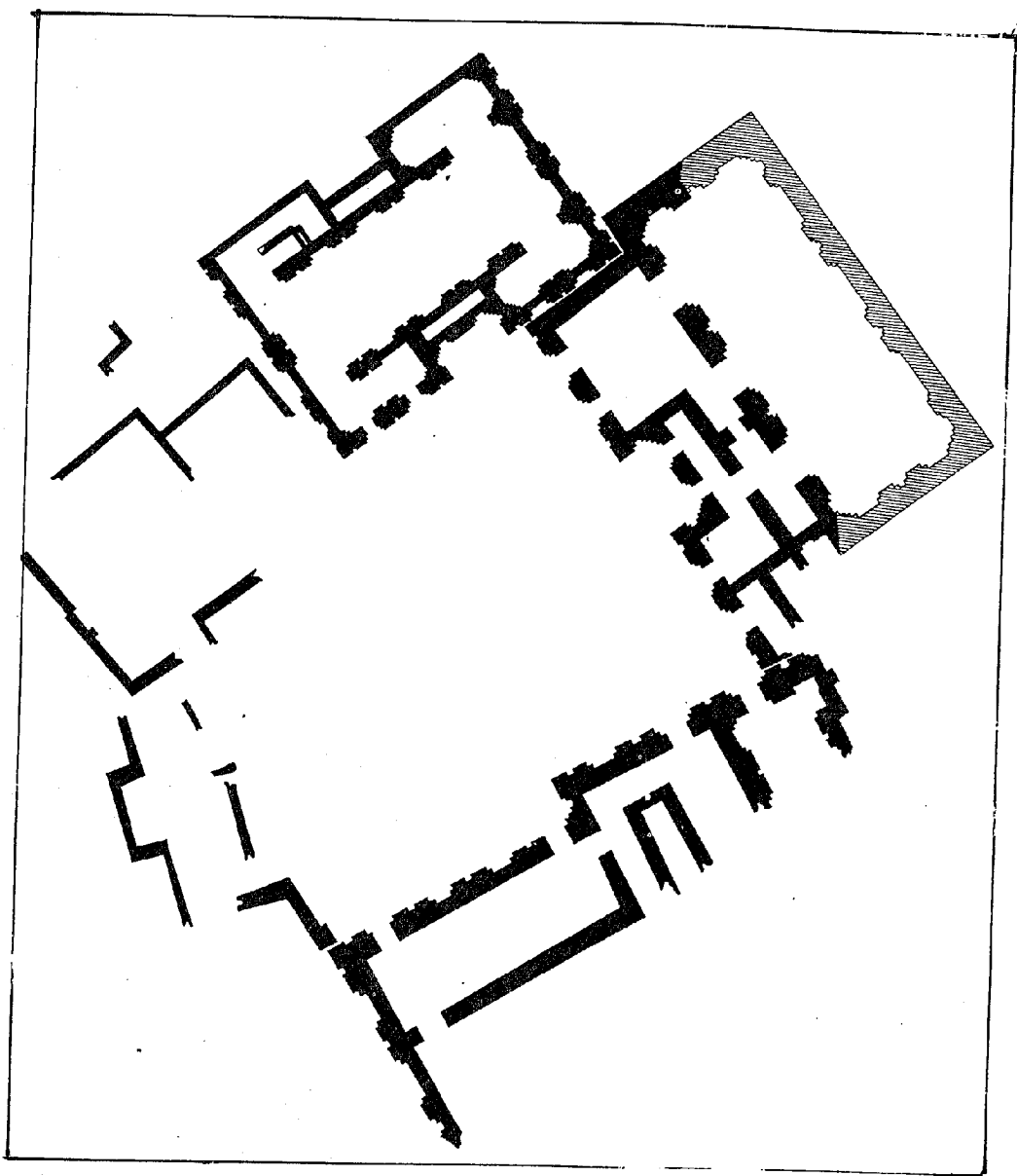


Fig. 10. Plan of Temples in level XIII at Tepe Gawra (after Tobler 1950, pl. XI).

Note that the main room of the Central Temple (north - east) should probably be reconstructed as extending further to the south - east (Tobler 1950, p. 32).

the Uruk period ; but the two published, pots from this building and the descriptions of the others fit more easily into an 'Ubaid assemblage than an Uruk one. Again these buildings clearly belong with those of Gawra to the class of tripartite private houses.

This completes our review of what was known about 'Ubaid buildings before the Himrin Project ; for although 'Ubaid pottery has been found further west in Syria and in southern Turkey and to the east in western Iran none of the 'Ubaid levels

excavated have yielded significant information about architecture. An exception might have been the excavations of M.E.L.Mallowan at Tell Mefesh on the Balikh River in Syria: there he found 'a range of four small rooms with a square ground plan and internal measurements of about 2.5 x 2.5 m. They were flanked by an oblong storeroom or court which ran the full length of the four rooms and was slightly wider than the room which it adjoined' (Mallowan 1946, p. 126). Unfortunately the excavation was abandoned after five days of digging and no

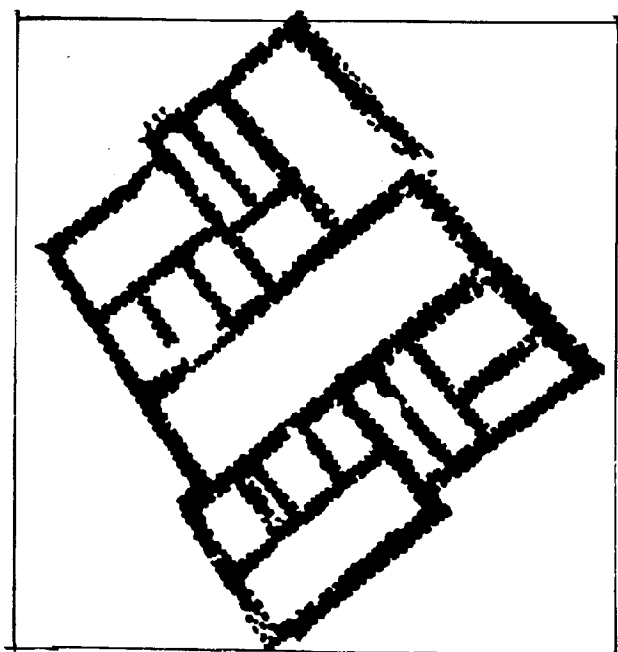


Fig. 8. Plan of stone foundations of House in level XIV at Tepe Gawra (after Tobler 1950, pl. XIV).

Himrin this building included more than one reception room. Once again Tobler (1950 p.36) suggested that this was a secular not a religious building.

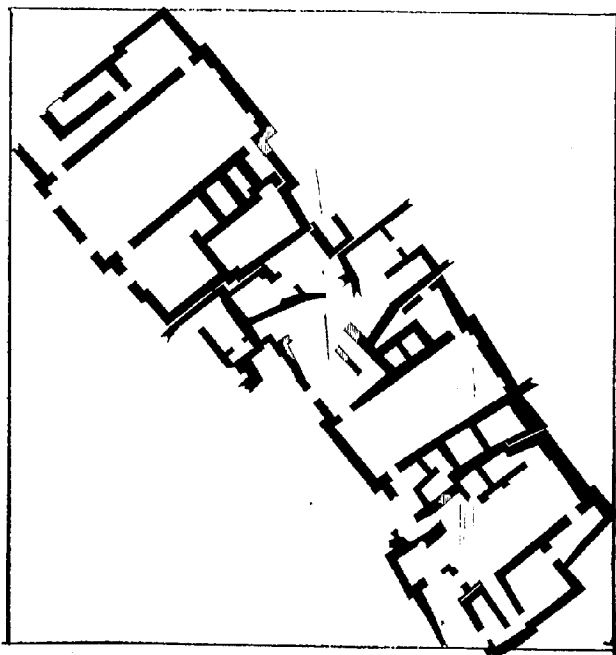


Fig. 9. Plan of Houses in level XII at Tepe Gawra (after Tobler 1950, pl. VIII).

In level XII there are a number of examples of tripartite houses, but the congested nature of the occupation makes it difficult to be certain where the limits of the houses with their central rooms in squares 4/5J, 4K, and 6K actually lie (Fig. 9). The plan and extent of the building on the north-west containing the White Room (so-called because of the white plaster on its walls) is clearer, though the south-east side seems to have been rebuilt at some time during the long life of this building. As Tobler has remarked, this was a secular building though the quality of the architecture leads one to believe that it belonged to a person of stature in the community. Tobler has commented on 'the profusion of household objects found scattered on its floors. Included among these were numerous pottery vessels, seal impressions, and spindle whorls, as well as celts, obsidian implements, and a single stone vessel, all of which had been buried under a thick layer of ashes and charred refuse (Tobler 1950, p. 28). An interesting feature of two of these central rooms is the presence of two niches in the northeast wall. This feature is also found in uruk houses as for example at Gral Resh (Lloyd 1940, p. 14). Furthermore the White Room has its entrances in the short wall unlike other 'Ubaid houses which were entered indirectly from the outside through an antechamber the entrance of which was normally in the long wall of the central room near one of the corners. Porada on the basis of seal impressions and unpublished sherds in Philadelphia has suggested that Gawra level XII should be assigned to the Early Uruk period despite the abundance of 'Ubaid style painted pottery published in the report as coming from this level (Porada 1965, pp. 145 - 146). Whichever period one should assign this level to, the doubt serves to show the lack of a sharp break between the 'Ubaid period and the Uruk period.

Before leaving the site of Tepe Gawra some mention must be made of the extraordinary architectural complex of level XIII (Fig. 10). After the sparse remains of level XIV, level XIII represents a totally new departure (Tobler 1950, p. 30). Thus although there is clear continuity in the character of the village settlement from level XIX to level XIV and on to level XII, level XIII is quite different and there is every reason to look for the origins of the temples of level XIII elsewhere than in the earlier levels at Gawra itself. The only obvious parallels now known are the 'Ubaid temples excavated in the south at Eridu and Uruk. The lack of architectural continuity is striking and unusual in a country where religious buildings tend to be built and rebuilt in the same place for century after century.

To return to our chronicle of 'Ubaid architecture let us look at the remains from Tell 2 at Telul el-Thalathat (Egami 1959). Here once again we find two examples of tripartite houses: one in L/M IX/X was identified as a private house (Fig. 11), and the other in Q/R IX/X as a temple because there was a small podium at one end of the central room (Fig. 12). The excavators also record that the sherds on the floor of this room belonged to

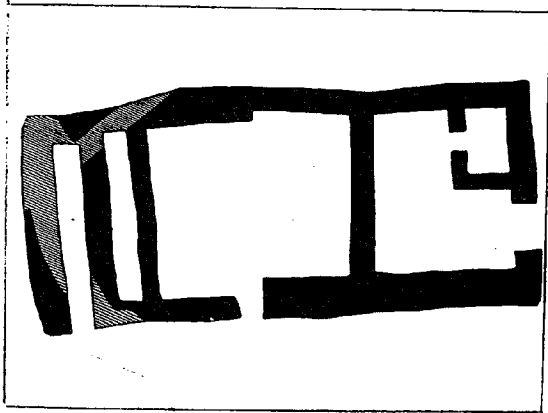


Fig. 15. Plan of Building at Tell Songor B.
(after Matsumoto 1981, Fig. 43).

earliest, level III, dated to the Samarra' / 'Ubaid interface, the so-called Choga Mami Transitional, approximately 'Ubaid I or early 'Ubaid 2 in the traditional terminology. The later two levels, levels I and II, are really two phases of the same building level and both belong to the 'Ubaid 3 period. In level III two buildings were almost completely excavated (Fig. 16). The Plan of one of these is not easily understood but it includes the same network of small square rooms found at Songor B and Tell Oueili. The other is clearly an early version of a tripartite house. The central room with the two ranges of flanking rooms is clear. It is interesting to note that on two walls are small buttresses which are characteristic of the Samarran tradition while a third wall steps in and out which as we have already noted is a feature of 'Ubaid architecture.

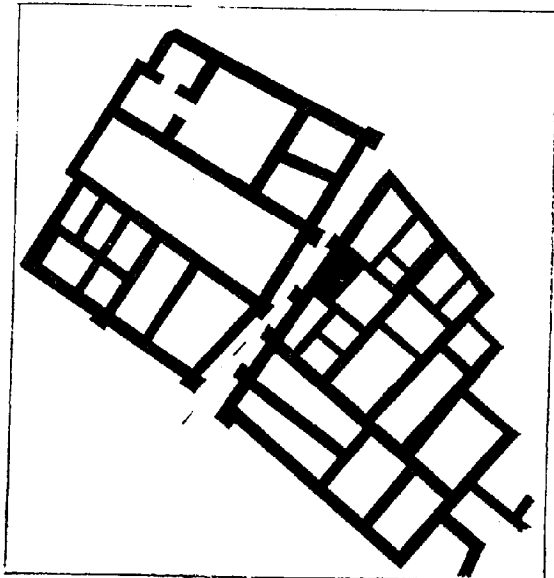


Fig. 16. Plan of Houses in level III at Tell Abadeh.
(after Jasim 1984, Fig. 3).

Since level I at Abadeh is essentially a rebuild of level II, we need only consider the level II buildings here. At least eight tripartite houses have been uncovered. The plans are quite complex and most of them contain three cruciform rooms completely interlocked together so that the arms of the central cruciform room fit into the sides of the flanking cruciform rooms. This is most clearly seen in the houses in squares L/9/10 (Fig. 17) and in squares I/J 9/10 (Fig. 18) where the southern cruciform room has been divided into two by a later wall, of a foundation which was never intended to rise above the floor and which has been drawn on the plan as if it were a wall. Note also the staircase rooms and the stepping in and out of the walls. In one case the central room appears to have been rectangular not cruciform, in two the side rooms are rectangular not cruciform, and in two others the side rooms are rectangular or ill-defined.

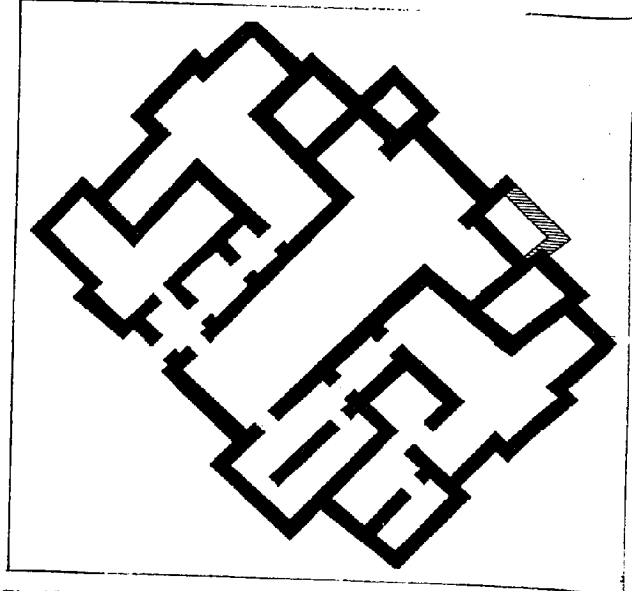


Fig. 17. Plan of House in level II at Tell Abadeh (after Jasim 1979, Fig. 2).

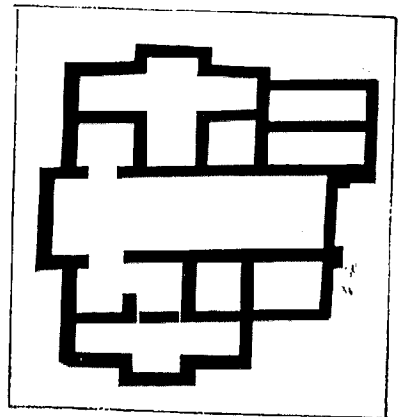


Fig. 18. Plan of House in level II at Tell Abadeh (after Jasim 1979, Fig. 2).

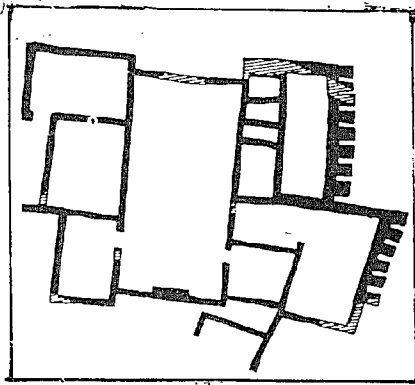


Fig. 11. Plan of House at Tell 2, Telul el - Thalathat (after Egami 1959, Fig. 25 on pp. 88 - 89).

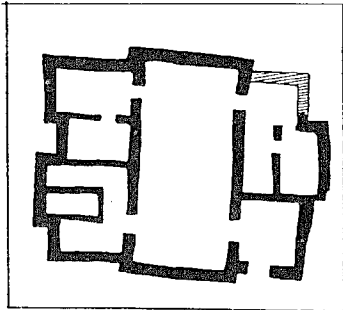


Fig. 12. Plan of House at Tell 2, Telul el - Thalathat (after Egami 1959, Fig. 47 on pp. 140 - 141).

plan was published; but the description could refer to a tripartite house.

'UBAID ARCHITECTURE IN THE HIMRIN

Let us now examine the new evidence from the excavations in the Himrin Dam Salvage Project.

Early 'Ubaid structures were found by the Japanese Archaeological Expedition at Tell Songor B and Tell Songor C (Matsumoto 1979 and 1981). The architecture at Tell Songor C, which was associated with Hajji Mohammed style pottery, consists of the fragmentary remains of a building which had a large number of rather small rooms (Fig. 13). It does not appear to have been based on a tripartite plan.

At Tell Songor B four levels were discovered (Matsumoto 1979, and 1981, pp. 182 - 187). The earliest, level I, had no buildings. Level II which was associated with mixed 'Ubaid and Late Halaf pottery contained a grid of small square rooms about 1 m by 1 m which are reminiscent of the 'Ubaid building at Tell Ouelli, for a building with a very distinctive plan: it had a central cross-shaped room with entrances through square antechambers on three sides and with stepped triangular rooms filling in the corners of the north and west (Fig. 14). There was evidence that this building extended further to the northeast and southwest. A second building with very large rooms also belonged to this level (Fig. 15). The excavators have suggested

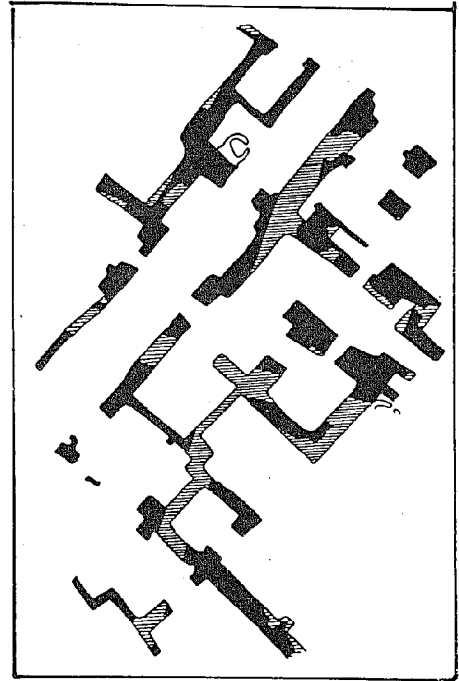


Fig. 13. Plan of Building at Tell Songor C. (after Matsumoto 1981, Fig. 53).

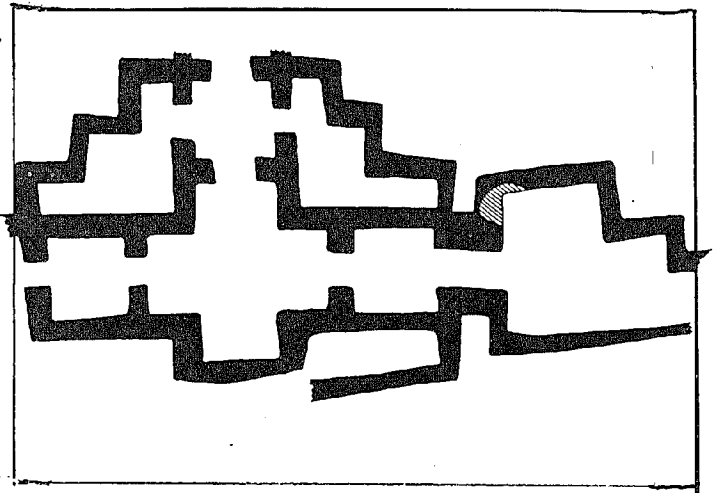


Fig. 14. Plan of Building at Tell Songor B. (after Matsumoto 1981, Fig. 43).

that both these buildings, which had gypsum floors and contained no household equipment or fittings, were for public rather than domestic use. In level III the large building remained in use and was modified. Only fragments of rooms were found in level IV.

Even more important results come from the excavations of the State Organization for Antiquities and Heritage at Tell Abadeh directed by Sabah Abboud Jasim (Jasim 1979, 1981, 1984). Here three architectural levels were identified: the

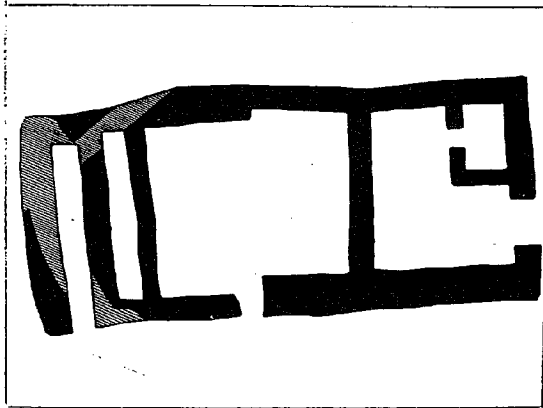


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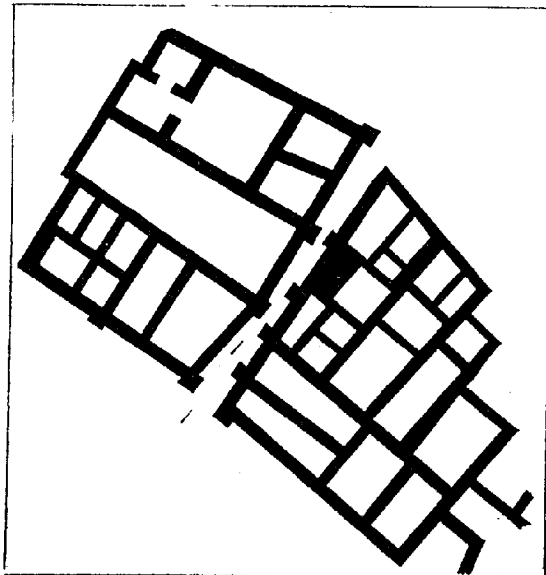


Fig. 16. Plan of Houses in level III at Tell Abadeh. (after Jasim 1984, Fig. 3).

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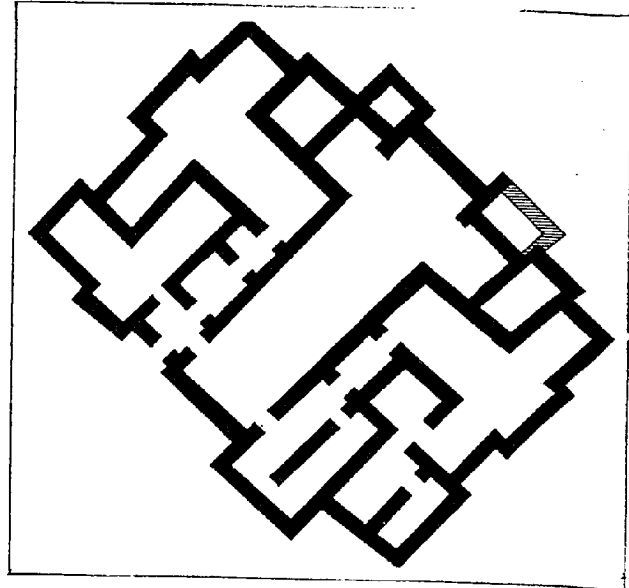


Fig. 17. Plan of House in level II at Tell Abadeh (after Jasim 1979, Fig. 2).

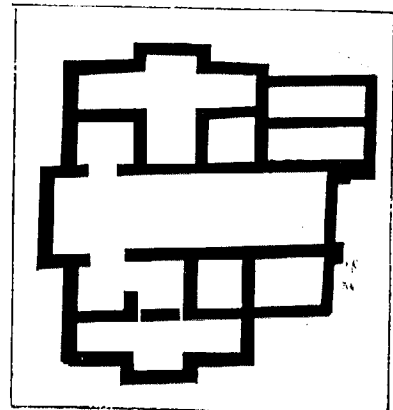


Fig. 18. Plan of House in level II at Tell Abadeh (after Jasim 1979, Fig. 2).

The most important building lay near the centre of the north-east side of the mound (Fig. 19). This building is distinguished in a number of ways: it is the largest of the excavated buildings on the site (c.20 by 12 m), the three central rooms are adjacent and parallel, not interlocking and at right-angles, the outer facade was buttressed with little of the stepping in and out we have seen on other 'Ubaid buildings, and finally the building is protected on the north-east by a thick wall, perhaps as much for protection against floods as against human foes. This building must surely have been the residence of the chief family in the village.

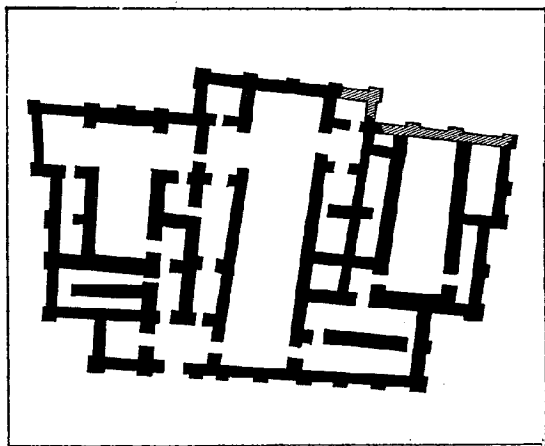


Fig. 19. Plan of House in level II at Tell Abadeh (after Jasim 1979, Fig. 2).

Thus the buildings from Tell Abadeh fall into the general scheme of 'Ubaid architecture though here in a more elaborate form than we have seen before. It is perhaps surprising that this small village with perhaps no more than twenty houses in it should have developed such a complex architectural tradition.

A second site of this period, Tell Rashid, not far from Tell Abadeh and also excavated by Sabah Abboud Jasim (Jasim 1983), included two tripartite buildings in level III (Fig. 20). To

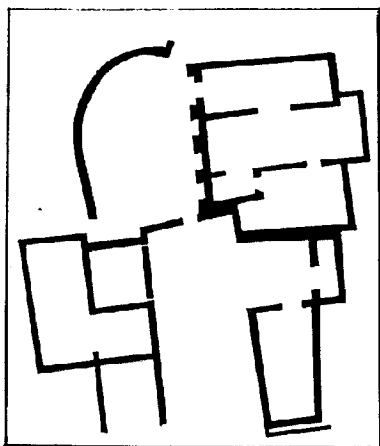


Fig. 20. Plan of Houses at Tell Rashid. (after Jasim 1983).

the north a building consists of a rectangular central room with rooms on either side. Further south the second building is only partly excavated. It has a cruciform central room of which the western arm appears to have been blocked off.

Tell Abadeh is not unique, for the French excavations at Khelt Qasim III (Forest - Foucault 1980) have revealed one building with an almost identical plan built up of three interlocking T-shaped rooms (Fig. 21). A second neighbouring contemporary building at Khelt Qasim III had a different type of tripartite plan with buttresses on its external walls (Fig. 22). The pottery associated with these buildings as well as 'Ubaid wares included some sherds of Late Halaf and of Dalma impressed wares and suggests a date in the 'Ubaid 3 period thus of the same date as the buildings at Tell Abadeh and Tell Rashid.

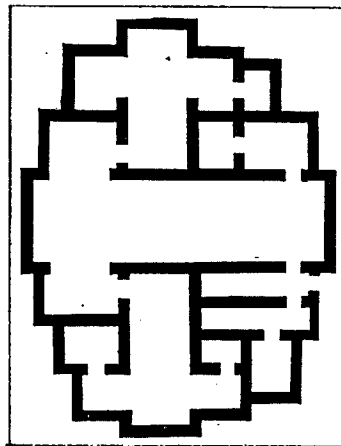


Fig. 21. Plan of House at Khelt Qasim III. (after Forest - Foucault 1980).

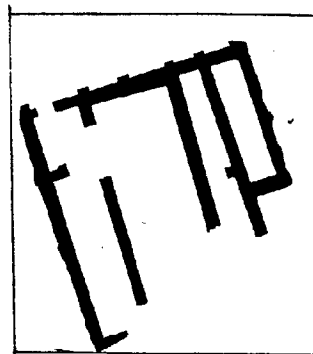


Fig. 22. Plan of House at Khelt Qasim III. (after Forest - Foucault 1980).

On a number of other sites, which were excavated as part of the Himrin Dam Salvage Project, remains of the 'Ubaid period have been found. These sites include Tell Abu Husaini, Tell Ayyash, Tell Bustan, Tell Hatzalun, Tell Hasan, Tului Khubari, Tell Madhhur, Tell Rubeidheh, and Tell al-Sa'adiyeh (for

preliminary accounts see Sumer 35 (1979), Invernizzi 1980, Postgate and Watson 1979, and Postgate and Roaf 1981). of these the only site to produce substantial architectural evidence was Tell Madhbur which was excavated by the British Archaeological Expedition (Killick and Roaf 1979, Roaf 1982, Roaf n.d.). Here several building levels were investigated but it was only in level 2 that the plan of a complete building was recovered (Fig. 23). This building was extremely well preserved: in some places the walls stood more than two metres high and several doors and windows were preserved intact. The plan is one that is by now familiar to us. It has a tripartite structure with a central cruciform room extending the whole width of the house with rows of rooms on either side. This building was destroyed by fire and the pots and domestic equipment were left in situ. Here there was abundant evidence to show that this was a house and not a religious structure and that the central room was roofed. The pottery belonged to the Late 'Ubaid period ('Ubaid 4) and a radiocarbon determination on a sample of grain carbonized in the fire yielded a date of 5,570 55 b.p. which gives a calibrated date of 4,470 80 B.C.

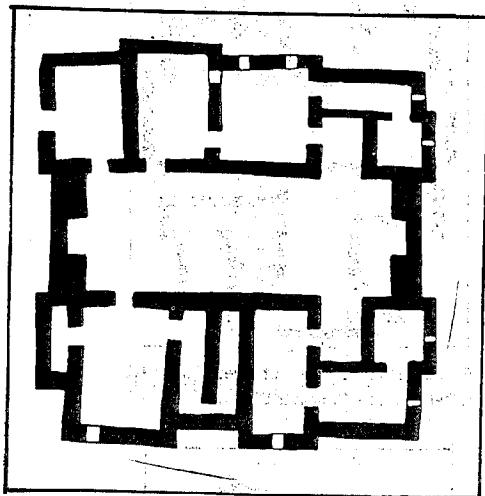


Fig. 23. Plan of House in level II at Tell Madhbur.

CONCLUSIONS

In this brief review of 'Ubaid architecture I have tried to show that 'Ubaid houses were normally built on a tripartite plan consisting of a roofed central room either rectangular or cruciform running the length of the house and rows of smaller rooms on each side. Other common features of 'Ubaid houses are the stepped facades where an internal wall meets the outside wall, and the staircase unit consisting of two narrow parallel rooms.

As can be seen from the plans reproduced in this article all of which are oriented with north approximately at the top of the page, there was no regular orientation of 'Ubaid houses and it is probable that the orientation was more dependent on local topography than on climatic considerations. This may have

been because the central room was 'insulated' from the outside by the flanking rooms. There is a possibility that the central room was taller than the side rooms but this is not necessary as there could equally well have been windows in the end walls.

The tripartite house is not the only architectural type found in 'Ubaid architecture. Apart from the few temples, various other types of building have been recorded in 'Ubaid levels: two 'tholo' of presumably Halaftian inspiration in Gawra level XVII (Tobler 1950, p. 43, and pl. XVIII), the structures at Songor B and Songor C, as well as less well preserved and less clear remains at many sites which cannot easily be classified as tripartite houses. Although the identification of the tripartite domestic house is a fundamental step in our understanding of 'Ubaid architecture, there were clearly many other building forms in use in the 'Ubaid period about which we as yet know almost nothing.

There is no difficulty in distinguishing between 'Ubaid houses and temples even though they shared the feature of having tripartite plans. The 'Ubaid temples have much more elaborate detailing involving complicated decorated buttresses and recesses and more open and symmetrical plans. It is not surprising that both houses and temples should share similar plans for throughout Mesopotamian history the temple was the house of the god and undoubtedly the first temples must have been influenced (as indeed were later temples in the historical period) by secular residences.

The origins of the tripartite house and of the cruciform central room are still unknown, but they may well have been 'Ubaid inventions. Like all archaeological knowledge the picture is biased by the accidents of discovery. We know next to nothing of domestic architecture in the south of Iraq or in Syria, nor do we know anything about secular buildings in the cities as all our evidence comes from villages. Furthermore our knowledge of religious architecture comes from only three sites, two deep in the south of Iraq and the third in the north where the architecture may be intrusive and not local.

Although we know little of the origins and although our knowledge for the 'Ubaid period is still incomplete, it is clear that in both religious and in domestic buildings 'Ubaid architecture formed the basis for the architecture of the following Uruk period. This is shown at Uruk itself, at Qalini Agha (Hijara 1973) (here Fig. 24), at Tepe Gawra (Tobler 1950), at Grai Resh (Lloyd 1940), as well as in the recent excavations as part of the Tabqa Dam Project in Syria at Habuba kabira (Ludwig 1979, Strommenger 1980), at Jebel Aruda (Driel 1979, Driel and Driel - Murray 1979), and at Tell Kannas (Finet 1979), where both private houses and temples follow almost exactly the 'Ubaid prototypes from Iraq. This continuity from the 'Ubaid to the Uruk period is of great importance for the question of the origins of the Sumerians and of Mesopotamian civilization but this problem is beyond the scope of this article.

At Habuba Kabira (Strommenger 1980, p. 38) and at Jebel

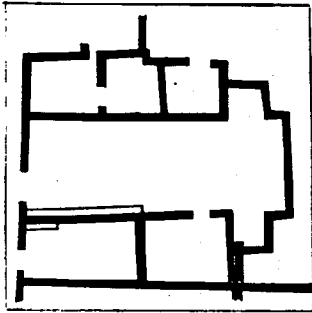


Fig. 24. Plan of House at Qalinj Agha.
(after Hijara 1973,
Fig. 3 between pp. 33 and 34 of the Arabic section).

Aruda (Driel 1979, Driel and Driel – Murray 1979) (here Fig. 25) the tripartite house is combined with open courtyards thus presaging the later development of the courtyard plan for domestic architecture which became the standard house form used in Mesopotamia up to the present day.

As a final observation I would like to stress that if it were not for the rescue projects undertaken in the Near East over the last few years we would still have little information about these important topics. I hope that Mesopotamian archaeologists will not miss the opportunity of investigating and of publishing the many sites now threatened with destruction.

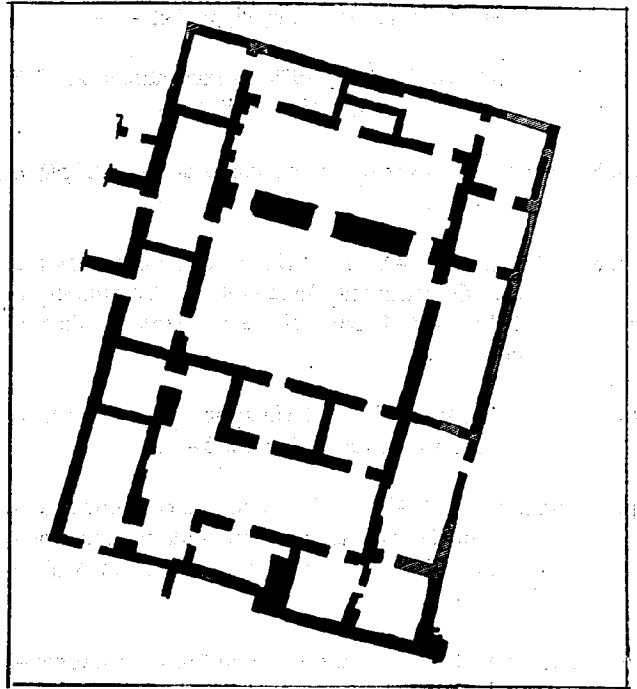


Fig. 25. Plan of part of DD area at Jebel Aruda.
(after Driel 1979, Fig. 4).

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