

MUZEUL JUDEȚEAN BUZĂU

MOUSAIOS

XIX

**Evangelos Kroustalis
Aris Tsaravopoulos**

**Excavation of a hilltop sanctuary
on the acropolis of Antikythera**
preliminary report

Offprint

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BUZĂU COUNTY MUSEUM

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XIX

International Colloquium

Residential Centres

(dava,emporium,oppidum,hillfort,polis)

and Cult Places in the Second Iron Age of Europe

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**Edited by
Valeriu Sîrbu and Sebastian Matei**

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EXCAVATION OF A HILLTOP SANCTUARY ON THE ACROPOLIS OF ANTIKYTHERA: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

Evangelos S. KROUSTALIS, Aris TSARAVOPOULOS

Keywords: oracle, divination dice, purification baths, niches, cisterns, Apollo.

Abstract: This paper presents the material remains of a sanctuary that were partially excavated at the upper levels of the Antikythera citadel in 2012-2014. The shrine displays several irregular features. It incorporates a water cistern, linked to a fissure, which is formed along the rocky ridge. This fissure had been artificially widened in order to be converted to a staircase leading onto the top of the citadel. At this point, at the edge of the cliff, a platform was carved into the rock. Immediately below this platform, on the vertical face of the cliff, at least 16 votive niches are carved. Not far from the cistern excavation revealed the remains of a bathroom equipped with a built bathtub and a similar foot-washbasin. An important portable object along with observations related to the structure of the shrine lead us to its identification with an oracle¹.

Introduction

At the northern side of Antikythera lies the rocky peninsula of Kastro. Running from NNW to SSE it totals *ca.* 800m in length, while a ridge stretching along the peninsula divides the terrain into an eastern and a western slope. The Hellenistic settlement of the island was built on the steeper, terraced, western slope (Fig. 1). A well-preserved fortification wall surrounds the whole settlement, enclosing an irregular area of *ca.* 70000m². Built in a combination of isodomic and polygonal masonry, the wall is strengthened by at least 24 quadrilateral towers and bastions, positioned at more or less regular intervals. Hitherto, we have recognized three gates. On the higher part of the slope an inner, near rectangular, precinct encompasses the citadel of the settlement (Fig. 2). Measuring *ca.* 120m by 30m, and with an area of 4,500m², the citadel runs parallel to the ridge and is delimited to the east by the outer wall of the settlement. It was accessed from the west through a monumental gate and from the east through a second gate on the outer fortification wall.

The hilltop sanctuary

At the highest level of the citadel, parallel to the rocky ridge, stretches an oblong terrace *ca.* 36m in length, with a maximum preserved width of *ca.* 9m (Fig. 3-C). This terrace is delimited to the north by a rocky oblong crest, which forms the top of

¹ We would like to warmly thank David M. Smith for reading this paper and correcting its English.

the ridge (Fig. 3-A). During the summers of 2012-2014, survey and excavation was carried out in this area, which brought to light the remains of a sanctuary² (Fig. 2-4). As the investigation is still under way, the present report can only be considered of preliminary character.

It is the presence of numerous carved niches on the steep western cliff of the rocky summit – which rises almost vertically to a height of almost *ca.*10m – which attests to the sacred character of the site (Fig. 3-1, 5). A total of 16 large niches have been recognized thus far, measuring roughly *ca.* 0.5m in height by *ca.* 0.55m in width (with variation) and arranged in three horizontal rows. Most of them have roofs, while cylindrical holes cut into the floors of several would have served to firmly stabilize offerings (Fig. 6). The necessity of this feature is evident, given the stormy winds that often blow in the area. Apart from the niches a number of simpler steps and cuttings on the cliff were probably intended to receive offerings. Under the cliff stretches a trapezoidal terrace measuring *ca.*12.2m (N-S) by *ca.*10.5m (Fig. 3-B, 7). At the centre of the terrace we opened a trench, measuring 4m (N-S) by 6m (E-W), in which foundations belonging to the corner of a building were revealed. These foundations are partly built of unworked stones, with the remainder taking the form of a rock-cut ditch. The character and the date of this structure remain uncertain. The presence of those niches described above indicates that people would congregate at the area of the terrace facing to the east, namely towards the cliff and the top of the summit. It is on this last spot that the core of the shrine was situated. This conclusion is supported by further evidence.

The main access to the top of the summit was from the south, through the northern end of the upper terrace. At this point begins a north-south oriented fissure, measuring *ca.* 6m by *ca.*1-1.4m (Fig. 3-4, 8). This natural formation was artificially widened, and its walls smoothed, to allow its adaptation as a monumental staircase leading to the top of the summit. Steps were fixed to a series of cuttings made along the walls of this corridor (Fig. 9). The presence of a cutting *ca.*1.7m long on the top of the staircase, visible on the western wall, proves the existence of a platform at this point. This platform is flanked by two rocky projections, whose inner surfaces are smoothed and slightly sloping. They resemble the jambs of a gate (Fig. 3-3, 8). The platform, and its frame, signified the transition to the top of this rocky outcrop. The NW corner of the platform is linked to a narrow stair, *ca.* 5.7m in length and *ca.* 1m high, comprising nine rock-cut steps. The stair leads to the top of a rocky projection, at the edge of the western cliff (Fig. 3-2, 10). The surface of this projection is leveled and has an irregular rhomboid shape measuring *ca.* 2.2m (S-W) by *ca.* 0.7m (E-W). This is the highest point of the hill, visible from any point of the settlement and beyond it (Fig. 11). Just below it, to the west, spreads the vertical cliff with the 16 niches and the

² The investigation took place under the direction of A. Tsaravopoulos. Work was done by volunteers, mainly students of archaeology, under the supervision of the archaeologists S. Moschouris (S sector) and E. Kroustalis (N sector).

trapezoidal terrace. This is obviously the very heart of the sanctuary and the spot, presumably, where processions would culminate. The very narrow surface of this platform, and its position by the cliff, preclude any practical use (for instance, as an observation point). In addition to this formation, the remainder of the surface on the top of the summit has also been artificially leveled, to form an oblong terrace of *ca.* 18m by *ca.* 8.5m.

The partial cleaning of accumulated soil from the staircase corridor revealed a cluster of thick limestone slabs (Fig. 12). With a thickness of *ca.* 0.17m, these slabs probably constitute structural elements (steps?) of the staircase. However, the length of these stones in most cases remains unknown, and we need more evidence to clarify their character. On the other hand these blocks are too thin to have been used as building material in the fortification wall, which runs a short distance to the east.

The upper terrace

The partial excavation of the oblong terrace to the south of the rocky summit has brought to light the remains of a series of quadrilateral rooms and other structures (Fig. 3-C, 4). These remains lay immediately beneath the surface of the thin layer of soil that covers the terrace. All these structures have their eastern sides cut on the rock and the rest of their walls built of partly-worked and unworked stones.

At the northern end of the terrace came to light remains of a cuneiform cistern, a rainwater collector measuring *ca.* 5.65m by *ca.* 1.2m (N side) to *ca.* 2.8m (S side) (Fig. 3-5, 13). The inner surface of its walls is covered with mortar. It is remarkable that the northern side of the cistern coincides with the base of the staircase that leads to the top of the summit, although the precise way in which the two structures were connected to each other remains uncertain. At this point, on the eastern side of the rock, four small carved cavities are visible (Fig. 9). They continue partly beneath the first steps of the staircase and partly above the plastered walls of the cistern. These features are to be interpreted either as holes intended to receive wooden beams or as votive niches. To date, while we have brought to light the walls of the cistern – with the exception of the northern side, where no clear edge has been traced – we have not yet excavated its interior.

Several meters to the south of the cistern were excavated the remains of a bathroom. It is equipped with a built bathtub and what appears to be a foot-washbasin (Fig. 3-8, 14). Both structures consist of a stone-built substructure and a plastered surface. The presence of two distinct layers of plaster corresponds with successive structural phases: the initial construction phase and a later repair. The earlier layer is of better quality, more solid, with smoother surface and a pinkish tint. The wall of the bathtub is adorned with an engraved dolphin (Fig. 15). Water was drained through a hole on the plastered floor to the west of the bathtub. From there it was carried out of the room through an angular terracotta pipe, which is partially preserved. Contrary to the bathtub, the washbasin has no drainage hole. A bench is

positioned along one of its narrow sides, while a cavity in the floor at the opposite end would function to collect dirt and water. Like the bathtub and the washbasin, several layers of plaster were laid on the floor of the bathroom; its walls were also plastered. Beyond those structures noted, little has survived of the room itself. Its southern, western and northern walls, which would have been entirely stone-built, were robbed to their foundations following the abandonment of the building; some of this material was probably reused in a recent building that lies a short distance to the north (Fig. 3-6).

Excavation at the area between the cuneiform cistern and the bathroom has brought to light the remains of a square room with a lavishly plastered floor and walls (Fig. 3-7). Its investigation is, as yet, incomplete and its character has yet to be determined. To the south of the bathroom, few structural remains have come to light. Most important among them is a stone-built bench (Fig. 3-9). The remains of several pyres and large quantities of high-quality pottery were found at the same area. These finds, associated with the preparation and consumption of food, may represent the remains of sacrifices.

Interpretation

A six-sided clay dice discovered in the corridor of the staircase represents a key find for the interpretation of the above remains (Fig. 16). One would tend to believe that an object of this kind found only a few paces from the walls of the city should be interpreted as a toy, a possession of men of the garrison. This is not the case. This dice has an irregular pressed shape, with two sides markedly wider than the others, and two narrower sides. This feature brings it closer in shape to an *astragalos*. On the widest (opposite) faces are impressed the numbers five and six, on the narrowest, the numbers one and two. Using such a dice for gaming would make no sense, since every opponent would tend to get favorable outcomes. Consequently, it seems more likely that this is a divination dice. It would be used as a means to manifest divine will against questions raised by believers. Given its weighting, "the god" (as manifest through the dice) would tend to deliver positive answers (for dice-divination and *astragalomancy*, see Graf 2005, p. 60-62; Hopfner 1924). If this interpretation is correct, then we may equally interpret the shrine as an oracle. Several other features of the site would seem to support the identification.

The sanctuary of Antikythera shares several elements with other ancient oracles. All of those oracles whose structure is known through excavation are divided into several spaces. Each of these spaces is loaded with varying degrees of sanctity gradually, elevated as one moves from the periphery to the core of the sanctuary. Access to these successive spaces is progressively restricted to fewer and fewer individuals, who occupy elevated positions in the sacerdotal hierarchy. At one end of this spectrum lie the external courts of an oracle, which are open to most worshippers; at the other end lies the *adyton*, which is usually accessible by seer only. Passage from

one sector to the next is marked by symbolic, or both real and symbolic, checkpoints. Typical arrangements of this kind are to be seen in the oracles of Apollo in Delphi, Didyma and Claros (for these sanctuaries, see Parke 1985; Parke and Wormell 1956; and Johnston 2008, p. 38-60, 76-95, 105-107, with a more extensive bibliography). The sanctuary of Antikythera is structured in a similar manner. Its outermost space is the western trapezoid terrace, which not only lies at a lower level than the upper terrace with the bathing facilities but is also separated from it by a substantial retaining wall. We have, moreover, already noted the presence of several transitional stages, as one moves from the base of the staircase to the platform of the top (cistern, broad stair, platform flanked by "jambs", narrow stair, platform).

Apart from these general analogies, it is at the oracle of Didyma that we find the closest similarities with the sanctuary of Antikythera (for the Hellenistic temple of Didyma, see Fontenrose 1988; Knackfuss 1941, p. 46-120; Parke 1986; Voigtländer 1975). By this we do not mean that these two establishments are similar in every aspect; the oracle of Didyma is, after all, a massive temple, while Antikythera represents an open-air sanctuary. The Temple of Didyma displays several architectural peculiarities. Instead of a roofed *cella* it has a quadrangular court surrounded by a high enclosure, at the western of which a *naiskos* forms the *adyton*. At the eastern side of the court, a monumental staircase leads via three doors to a large quadrangular room with two giant columns. At the eastern side of this room opens a huge door, which, despite its appearance, does not permit access to the *pronaos* – as would be the normal pattern – or *vice-versa*: the threshold of this door lies 1.495m above the floor of the *pronaos*, forming an elevated platform. According to the prevailing view, from this point the *prophetesses* would announce the answers of Apollo to worshippers standing below them in the *pronaos* (see, for example, Fontenrose 1988, p. 79-80; Parke 1986). This pattern is very similar to that visible at the shrine of Antikythera, where a staircase leads to a platform rising above the western terrace. Consequently, we have to question whether a ritual similar to that of Didyma might also be reconstructed for Antikythera.

The similarities with Didyma do not stop at this point. According to Iamblichus (Myst. 3.11) the divinatory rituals comprised purification, during which the *prophetess* sank either her feet or the hem of her skirt in water. An analogous situation is evident at Delphi, where Pythia used to bathe in the spring of Castalia (see Sh. E. Ph. 221, 224; cf. Parke and Wormell 1956, p. 27-28). It is remarkable that at Antikythera we have discovered a pairing of bathtub and foot-washbasin, which may correspond to differentiated purificatory rituals. In addition to those cases noted above, water played an important role in every oracle, either as a means of purification or as a provocative of divinatory trance. For this reason every oracle was built over, or immediately next to, a natural spring. Indeed, if any unfortunate turn of fate caused the spring to dry, the priesthood could invent devices to convey the illusion of springing water. The case of Delphi is the most famous. Perhaps it would

be too much to expect the presence of a spring on the hilltop of Antikythera. At this spot the spring was substituted by the rain-water cistern. But the presence of stalagmitic material on the walls of the staircase corridor may have evoked the illusion of a spring.

In one further commonality, it is noteworthy that both the sanctuary of Antikythera and the Delphic oracle were built over geological faults (see de Boer *et al.* 2001; Hale *et al.* 2003).

Although the strongest evidence for the identification of the sanctuary of Antikythera with an oracle is provided by the irregular dice, the remaining elements analyzed above are closely associated with trance divination and, therefore, presuppose the presence of a seer on the site. This is not surprising, since at the same oracle several divinatory methods may coexist. For instance, although the oracle of Delphi is renowned for the oracles conveyed by Pythia, there is evidence that at the same site cleromancy (lot-divination) and probably several other forms of divination were practiced in parallel (see Amandry 1950, p. 19-65; Johnston 2008, p. 44-56; Parke 1967a, p. 72-89). The oracle at Dodona involved – though not all at the same time – groups of seers called *Selloi* (male) and subsequently *Peleiae* (female) and procedures such as interpretation of sounds and movements made by the sacred oak tree, the waters of the sacred spring and doves, as well as cleromancy (see Johnston 2008, 60-71; Parke 1967b).

We cannot define with certainty the name of the deity to which the sanctuary of Antikythera was dedicated, though Apollo appears to be the most likely candidate. This conclusion is indicated not only by the fact that Apollo is the most prominent divinatory figure in the Greek religion, or by the fact that the closest parallels for the shrine of Antikythera are found among the oracles of Apollo, but also by the presence of the engraved dolphin on the walls of the bathtub. The dolphin, after all, is associated with Apollo, who may be called *Delphinios* (see, for example, Jessen 1901; Mikalson 2005, p. 101). Moreover, the presence of this symbol on the coinage of Phalasarna clearly indicates that Apollo was one of the major deities of this city (for bibliographical references on Phalasarnian coins with depictions of dolphins, see Kozatsas *et al.* this volume).

A less likely candidate is Zeus. The position of the sanctuary on the top of the ridge and its connection with the cuneiform cistern, *viz.* the tank where rain-water was collected, offer the strongest elements in support of this association³. However, his identification at Antikythera is made problematic by the fact that, in contrast to the greatest part of Crete, where Zeus is regarded as the most prominent god, he is certainly underrepresented in the west of the island (Sporn 2002, p. 319, 323).

³ Zeus is worshipped on Crete among others with the properties of *Hypatos* / *Hypsistos* (Supreme) and *Ombrios* / *Hyetios* (of the rain) / *Vrondaios* (of the thunder), although most of the relative evidence dates from the Roman times (see Sporn 2002, p. 57, 126, 241).

This hilltop sanctuary, along with the temple of Apollo in the harbor published in this volume, form two major sacred poles in the settlement of Antikythera. Their investigation has started to shed some light on the rituals and the mentality of those people who inhabited this wild place.

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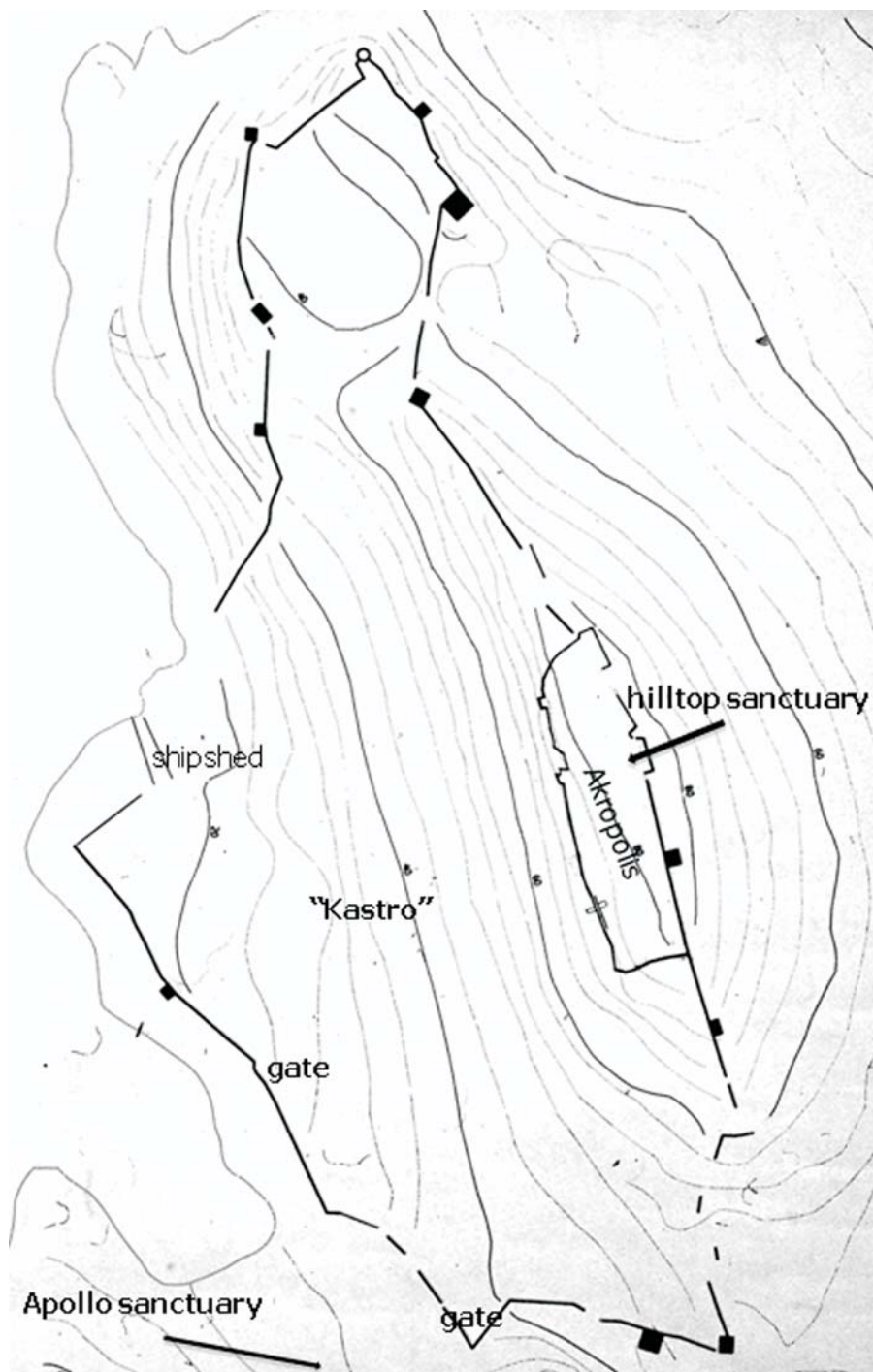


Fig. 1 - Plan of the city of Aegilia

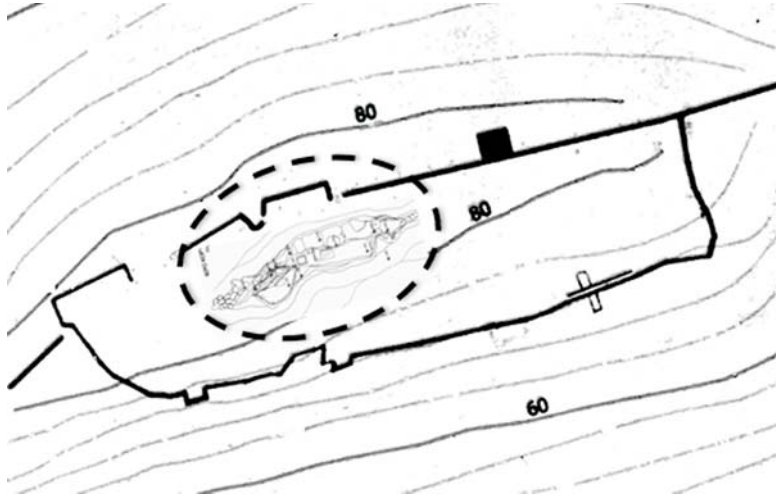


Fig. 2 - Plan of the citadel with the position of the hilltop sanctuary

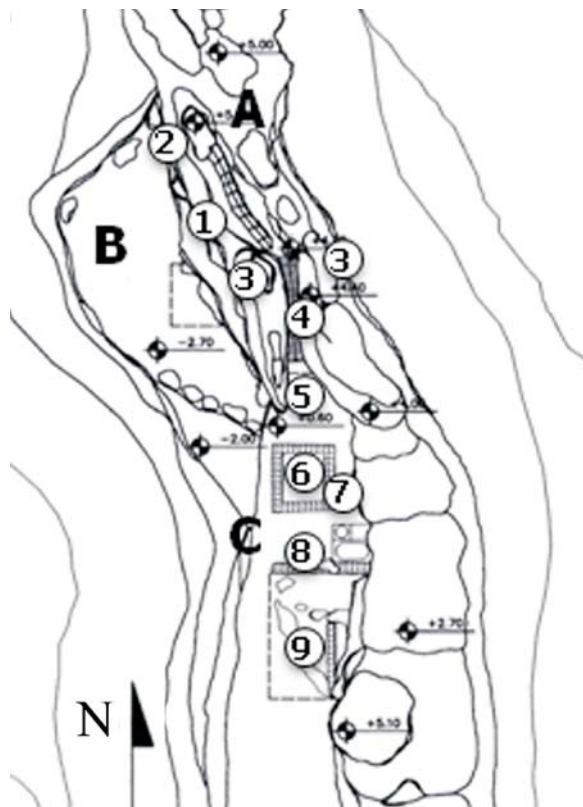


Fig. 3 - Plan of the hilltop sanctuary, showing the position of spaces and structures:
A - The rocky summit; B - The western trapezoidal terrace; C - The upper terrace; 1 - Niches;
2 - The rocky projection of the top; 3 - The "jambs"; 4 - Staircase; 5 - cuneiform cistern;
6 - recent building; 7 - Plastered room; 8 - The bathroom; 9 - Stone-built bench;
(drawn by I. Koutani)



Fig. 4 - The hilltop sanctuary, with the upper terrace at the front, seen from the south



Fig. 5 - The western cliff of the summit, with the carved niches, seen from the west



Fig. 6 - Cylindrical hole cut into the floor of a niche



Fig. 7 - The western trapezoidal terrace, seen from the east and above,
from the top of the rocky summit



Fig. 8 - Fissure along the rocky summit, which was converted to a staircase, seen from the south



Fig. 9 - Cuttings on the eastern wall of the fissure, which supported steps, and, below them, cavities, seen from the southeast



Fig. 10 - Rock-cut steps leading to a projection, on the top of the summit, seen from the south



Fig. 11 - The peninsula of Kastro with the hilltop sanctuary, seen from the north



Fig. 12 - Limestone slabs in the corridor of the staircase, seen from the southeast



Fig. 13 - Remains of a cuneiform cistern to the south of the staircase, seen from the south



Fig. 14 - Bathtub and foot-washbasin, seen from the west



Fig. 15 - Engraved dolphin on the walls
of the bathtub

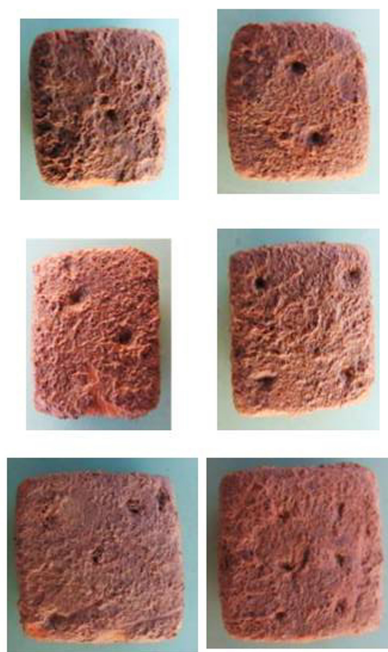


Fig. 16 - Clay divination dice