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Five Seasons of Excavations (1997-2001) in Field I at Tell Beydar (Syria)¹

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Abstract. Since 1997 the Ca' Foscari University of Venice has been taking part, as one of the official partners, in the Syro-European archaeological expedition at Tell Beydar (Northeastern Syria). A new excavation area, Field I, was opened by the Italian team on the north-eastern slope of the 3rd millennium Upper City, just inside the Inner-City Wall. After five seasons of excavation, the presence of one of the city gates has been confirmed, and the topographical layout of the area is sufficiently clear. The opening in the fortification wall was protected by two huge, massive brick structures projecting on its internal side. Through this passage, a narrow street led from the Outer City toward the mound's central plateau. This street was flanked on both sides by large complex buildings, possibly official in character, and by small open spaces occupied by graves and dumping areas.

Keywords. Tell Beydar, Jezirah, 3rd millennium BC, Upper City, fortifications, architecture, graves.

PROGRESSION AND MAIN RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATION

Since 1997 the Ca' Foscari University of Venice has been taking part, as one of the official partners, in the Syro-European archaeological expedition at Tell Beydar (Northeastern Syria).² A new excavation area, Field I

¹ The present article was originally intended for the proceedings of an ICAANE conference which for unfortunate circumstances were not published. Given its content and scope, it is presented here with practically no changes. As a summary report (the final report is presently in preparation), most of the data it contains are illustrated here for the first time.

² At the time when these campaigns took place, the expedition was directed by M. Lebeau (European Centre for Upper Mesopotamian Studies) and Antoine Suleiman (Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées de Syrie), who passed away in 2012. Ca' Foscari University was represented by prof. Lucio Milano. Other official partners of

(Fig. 1), was opened by the Italian team on the north-eastern slope of the 3rd millennium Upper City, just inside the Inner-City Wall. Here, the presence of a deep gully approximately on the line of one of the major gaps in the Outer Wall suggested the presence of one of the ancient accesses to the Upper City.

After five seasons of excavation, the presence of one of the city gates has been confirmed, and the topographical layout of the area is now sufficiently clear. It can be summarised as follows: the opening in the fortification wall was protected by two massive brick structures projecting on its internal side. Through this passage, a narrow street led from the Outer City toward the mound's central plateau. This street was flanked on both sides by large complex buildings, possibly official in character, and by small open spaces occupied by graves and dumping areas.

During the first campaign (1997) a 20 m long, east-west oriented step-trench was opened in the upper part of the slope in order to define the stratigraphic sequence of the area inside the Inner-City Gate (Milano, Rova 2001). The step-trench was continued in the 1998 season both in the eastern and, from here, in a northern direction, towards the bottom of the gully (Milano, Rova 2003a), where the sherd-paved street leading toward the Outer City was discovered (Fig. 2).

In the following years (see Milano, Rova, 2003b), work continued in two different areas:

1. on the upper part of the slope (Western Sector), the original step-trench area was deepened and expanded to the north, in order to obtain a wider horizontal exposure.
2. towards the bottom of the gully (Eastern Sector), the course of the street was followed in a northern direction until the limit of the Inner-City Gate and beyond. At the same time, the gate structure and the buildings flanking the street on both sides were investigated (Fig. 3).

With the exception of some Hellenistic pits, the occupation of the area is confined to the 3rd millennium BC. Excavated layers date between the Early Jezirah (henceforth EJ) II/IIIa and the EJ IIIb period.³ They belong to a slightly earlier phase than the official buildings ("palace", "temples") and the domestic quarter discovered on the Inner-City plateau by the other teams working at the site. Virgin soil has not yet been reached, but various elements suggest that the area was occupied since the beginning of the 3rd millennium (among these, the recovery from the lowest part of the slope of a few out-of-place pottery sherds which may date from the EJ 0/I periods).⁴ The dates obtained from a number of ¹⁴C samples from different parts of the field cluster between 2600 and 2400 BC cal. (Lebeau, Milano 2003), in general agreement with those proposed on the basis of the pottery sequence.

The Western Sector

In the Western Sector, the uppermost occupation (Phase 1, dating back to the later EJ IIIb period) was probably domestic in character, and consisted in parts of different rooms and open-air areas equipped with a variety of different installations (tannurs, white-plastered basins).

Under it, there were the remains of more substantial architecture, probably belonging to a building of some importance (Fig. 4). This showed a considerable continuity throughout the late EJ IIIa/earlier EJ IIIb period (Phases 3 and 4 –with sub-phases 4a-d). The building was founded on a large platform of massive mudbricks, which was re-built at least once (between sub-phases 4d and 4c) after cutting the building's walls almost to ground level.

The north-western corner of the excavated area (Fig. 5) was occupied by an open area (courtyard?), delimited on the south by a large mud-brick wall covered with a thick gypsum plaster, which also covered a bench running along the northern face of the wall. To the south-east of this, at the base of a large Hellenistic pit, the remains of

the project were the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, represented by prof. Karel Van Lerberghe, and the Université Libre de Bruxelles, represented by prof. Philippe Talon. For general information on the Beydar excavations, see Ismail *et al.* (eds) 1996; Lebeau, Suleiman (eds) 1997, 2003.

³ For the EJ periodisation in general, see Lebeau *et al.* 2000; for Tell Beydar in particular, Lebeau, Rova 2003.

⁴ Among these, a few examples of pointed bases and notably a fragment bearing a painted decoration strongly reminiscent of the so-called "terminal Uruk style" (Lebeau *et al.* 2000, Lebeau, Rova 2003).

a stone-paved canalisation were preserved, running under the floor level. The canalisation was first built during sub-phase 4d, cutting into the earlier platform, and was rebuilt twice, with a slightly different course, during sub-phases 4c and 4b.

A doorway, flanked on its northern side by a buttress showing an elaborate system of multiple white-plastered recesses, gave access from the courtyard to a room located to the east. This room measured 3.70 x 2.40 m; it was completely rebuilt, between sub-phases 4d and 4c, and remained in use, after that, until the end of Phase 4. It showed a well-preserved sequence of eleven different floor levels and was equipped with various installations. A white-plastered bench along the northern wall was present throughout the room's history, while other installations – e.g. a stepped threshold in the doorway, a low brick platform in the south-eastern corner; a fireplace in the centre and/or along the northern wall, and a small grain-filled jar - varied in number and location according to the different floor levels. From the room, in addition to objects pertaining to normal domestic activities, especially food preparation (grinding stones, carbonised grains, pottery fragments), come a group of approximately 50 clay sealing fragments and a clay tablet bearing possible numerical marks. Some of the sealings show complex miniature designs on two registers, probably dating early EJ IIIb.

During the earliest sub-phase (4d), the area to the east of this room was a sherd- and pebble-paved, street-like open space, equipped with different open-air installations (fireplaces, benches, small basins). Subsequently it was covered by a system of retaining walls and filling layers leaning against the eastern wall of the room. This massive structure, extending over an area of several square meters and involving a considerable amount of work, would not make sense if only aimed at retaining the room's wall. We therefore suppose that it protected the outer boundary of a larger building, of which the area represented the southern periphery. This hypothesis is supported by the size of the underlying brick platform (at least 5 x 8 m), by the high quality of some architectural features (plastered bench, stone canalisation, buttressed entrance to the room) and by the presence of administrative material (sealings etc.).⁵

Remains belonging to an earlier occupation phase were uncovered in the easternmost part of the original step-trench. They consisted of small units (probably partially open-air or covered with light material) bounded by low thin walls, equipped with a series of complex installations (multiple white-plastered basins and receptacles).⁶ These were probably used in a set of connected activities (we may suggest grinding cereals and possibly mixing the resulting flour with some liquids) on a scale that, again, seems to exceed normal domestic needs.

The Eastern Sector

In the Eastern Sector of the excavation, the system of access to the Upper City through the North-Eastern Inner-City Gate located on this side of the mound was investigated. The whole area had been severely damaged both by rain erosion, which caused a thick slope-wash layer to accumulate in its lowest part, and by the action of the *wadi*. This at first followed the ancient course of the street, but then deviated from it, to cut its way through the ancient gate structure. In spite of the large size of the uncovered structures, it is clear that this gate did not represent the main access to the Upper City, but only a side-access. It is also clear that, in determining its layout, concerns for defense and strict control of the traffic prevailed over display.

The street was exposed for about 41 m, from the point in which it climbed up the mound's slope and was progressively reduced to a narrow path, to a point located outside of the Inner-City Wall. In its southern part, the street was relatively wide (ca 160 cm) and followed a straight line, gently sloping toward the north; it was flanked by lines of flat-topped stones, which may have served as sidewalks (Fig. 6). Its central part had been repeated-

⁵ The hypothesis was confirmed in the course of the 2002 excavation season, when further rooms of the same building, which now extends for more than 20 m in a north-south direction, were exposed in the area located north of the original step-trench. Notably, a fragment of a cuneiform tablet bearing an administrative text was also recovered in the area.

⁶ Similar installations have been discovered at other 3rd millennium sites in the Khabur region (Tell Melebiya, Tell Abu Hafur, Tell Bderi, Tell Brak) and, west of it, at Tell Chuera. For discussion and literature, see Milano, Rova 2001: 70.

ly plastered with layers of pottery sherds. Further north, it seemed to follow a more tortuous way, narrowing between the two sides of the massive gate structure. It then rose to give access to a small raised space, which had stone-based walls, a stone threshold and a sherd-paved floor. The small size of the latter (only 180 x 100 cm) and the presence of a heavy door, suggested by a large *in situ* door-socket, point to a strict control over people and goods passing through the North-Eastern Gate. The space led to an irregular stairway, or ramp, made of large flat basalt stones interspersed with compact mud and pottery sherds (Fig. 7), which descended toward the Outer City. In the EJ IIIa period, the stone stairway was 340 cm long, and covered a difference in height of ca 120 cm. Beyond the gate's limit, the street continued northward, resuming the shape of a gently sloping, rectilinear sherd-paved path.⁷

On both sides of the street, the Inner-City Gate complex was a massive structure which extended for several meters in both directions. The top of the structure appeared eroded. It was certainly standing for a long time and was probably repeatedly modified and repaired. Its base has not been reached; it pre-dates all the street pavings excavated so far. A *terminus ante quem* for its erection is represented by the later layers and structures leaning against it, which date between the EJ II and the beginning of the EJ IIIa period.

The gate structure was remarkably asymmetrical: the limits of the eastern wall were shifted about 4 m to the north in comparison with those of the western wall. The latter extended for 15 m in a north-south direction, along the street, and for at least 7 m from west to east. The eastern face was articulated by a series of irregular buttresses. The northern face was also rather irregular and was joined on the north by a system of glacis-like superimposed sloping layers of compacted clay and debris, retained by a series of smaller mud-brick walls.

Subsequently, the northernmost wall was used as the southern limit of a building flanking the continuation of the street in the Outer City area (Fig. 8). One room of this building was completely excavated; it was accessed from the north through a narrow corridor, while a second door opened to the west, into what appears to have been an open space outside the Inner fortification wall. The room had a fine, light-plastered floor surface, which also covered a low bench running along its northern and eastern walls. On its eastern wall, along the street, there were two niches, in which small, window-like openings were probably located. A pit containing early EJ IIIb pottery sherds, which cuts one wall of the room, provides a sure *terminus ante quem* for its abandonment, while its building is to be dated in the EJ IIIa period. The presence in this phase of rooms joining the external side of the Inner-City Wall confirms the suggestion that this had already lost its original defensive function. This interpretation was previously advanced to explain a similar situation encountered in Field H on the Outer City Wall (Bluard 1997: 183).

The limits of the opposite side of the Inner-City Gate wall were less clear, since the area had been heavily disturbed by the *wadi*; it is clear, however, that it extended for more than 15 m in length and 6 m in width. Both walls were built with a mixed technique which alternated sections of true mudbrick with sections filled with cob and miscellaneous debris filling layers. In the lower part of the wall, large, very fine, sandy bricks of greyish-yellowish colour were used. These were covered by layers of crumbly, reddish bricks, which probably represent a later phase in the life of the Inner-City Gate structure.

Inside the limits of the Inner-City Gate complex, the street was flanked on both sides by a series of rooms and small open spaces. On the eastern side, two different buildings separated by a small open space were partially exposed. Almost nothing is known of the northern building: only part of a room was excavated, which was accessed from the side opposite the street. North of it, there was a 5 by 3,50 m open space, which functioned as a small burial ground. It contained three rectangular built graves, which are probably contemporary with the southern building, since they all follow its general orientation and one of them leans toward its external wall. The building was accessed from the street, at its southern corner, through a series of irregular stone steps. It consisted of several rooms, including a small courtyard of irregular shape. Traces of at least two different phases, involving some reshaping of the building's walls, were preserved, which could be correlated to two different pavings of the street.

⁷ The 2002 excavation season showed that this, however, was not its original layout: during a previous phase, which can now be firmly dated in the EJ II period, the stone stairway actually continued, under the EJ IIIa sherd paving, until the northern limit of the excavated area and beyond.

The layout of the area to the west of the street is more complex and underwent significant changes in the course of time. Originally, there must have been a small open space beyond the limit of the gate wall, opposite to the one discussed above, and roughly symmetrical with it. The area was, however, completely covered by a massive stone collapse, which was not removed during excavation. Within the collapse, two north-south alignments and a shorter east-west alignment of larger stones were visible. These may represent the remains of a stone structure which was leaned in a later phase against the Inner-City Gate wall, in order to extend it along the street and straighten its profile.

Further south, a large continuous wall, probably contemporary with the gate structure, flanked the street. Beyond this wall, there seems to have been at first a building of some importance, with massive walls made of the same large, yellowish-greyish bricks which were used for the gate walls. This was later abandoned, and multiple ash and debris layers accumulated in the rooms. The area then served as a burial ground for children (6 graves were excavated). Still later, a number of narrower walls were built over the remains of the earlier building, leaning toward the southern limit of the Inner-City Wall. These marked a series of rooms whose function – despite the recovery of a series of floors and of some activity areas (ash lenses, etc.) – remains dubious, since they were abandoned rather quickly, while new graves were sunk into the area.

Further south, there was a large open area, which was progressively covered with multiple layers of ashes and other debris, into which mudbrick graves were sunk (Fig. 9). At different times, mud-brick walls were founded on the ash layers, probably with the only aim of retaining them, since they defined no real rooms, and were filled and covered by successive ash layers. Later still, the dumping area was reduced in size, and a series of small rooms with plastered walls and real floors with some *in situ* material were built on its eastern and southern sides.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, the 1997-2001 excavations in Field I at Tell Beydar have contributed to the understanding of the general topography of the settlement, by providing new data on the layout of the North-Eastern Inner-City Gate and surrounding areas. The excavated layers belong for the most part to the EJ IIIa/early EJ IIIb period, a previously poorly known phase in the life of the city. It is rather certain, however, that the topographic layout of the area was not significantly different in the later EJ IIIb phase, contemporary with the official complex and the other private and public buildings unearthed on the Upper City plateau (Lebeau, Suleiman (eds) 1997, 2003).

Synchronically, the most interesting feature is the presence in this area of a highly protected secondary access to the central plateau. This type of access can be compared with the main access to the official complex located on the southern, opposite side of the mound (see Lebeau, paper presented at the 2002 ICAANE in Paris) whose impressive stone-paved stairway obviously shows quite different concerns for monumentality and significant display.

The area inside the North-Eastern Inner-City Gate was characterised by a series of complex buildings on both sides of a narrow street. The area was not occupied by simple domestic units, but rather by larger, more complex structures, possibly of official character, which included open-air areas in which “industrial” activities took place, and where administrative tasks were also performed. The concentration of graves in the area parallels similar finds made during the earlier campaigns in different sectors of both the Outer and the Inner-City Wall (Lebeau, Suleiman (eds) 1997, 2003). This confirms the urban walls as a favorite neighborhood for burial grounds, and shows that the choice was not limited to the external side of the wall.

The Field I excavations have provided fresh data about the Beydar Inner-City Wall, previously only investigated in the neighbouring Field G (Suleiman 2003). The most important discoveries here are the exceptional width and the complex building technique of this wall, which represents a significant contribution to the study of the poorly known fortification systems of EJ III Upper Mesopotamian cities.

From a diachronic point of view, the Field I excavations have recovered important information on the earliest history of the 3rd millennium *Kranzhügel*. It seems clear by now that the widespread EJ IIIb occupation of the

upper mound was preceded by an uninterrupted EJ IIIa sequence of layers and, earlier still, by an unexpectedly substantial occupation dating back at least to the EJ II period. In particular, the early date of the Beydar fortification has been confirmed, together with its partial loss of function already by the EJ IIIa period. The remarkable changes in the topographic setting of the area and in the general function of some of the buildings through time mark the transition from the early history of urbanisation at Tell Beydar to its full flourishing at the beginning of EJ IIIb.

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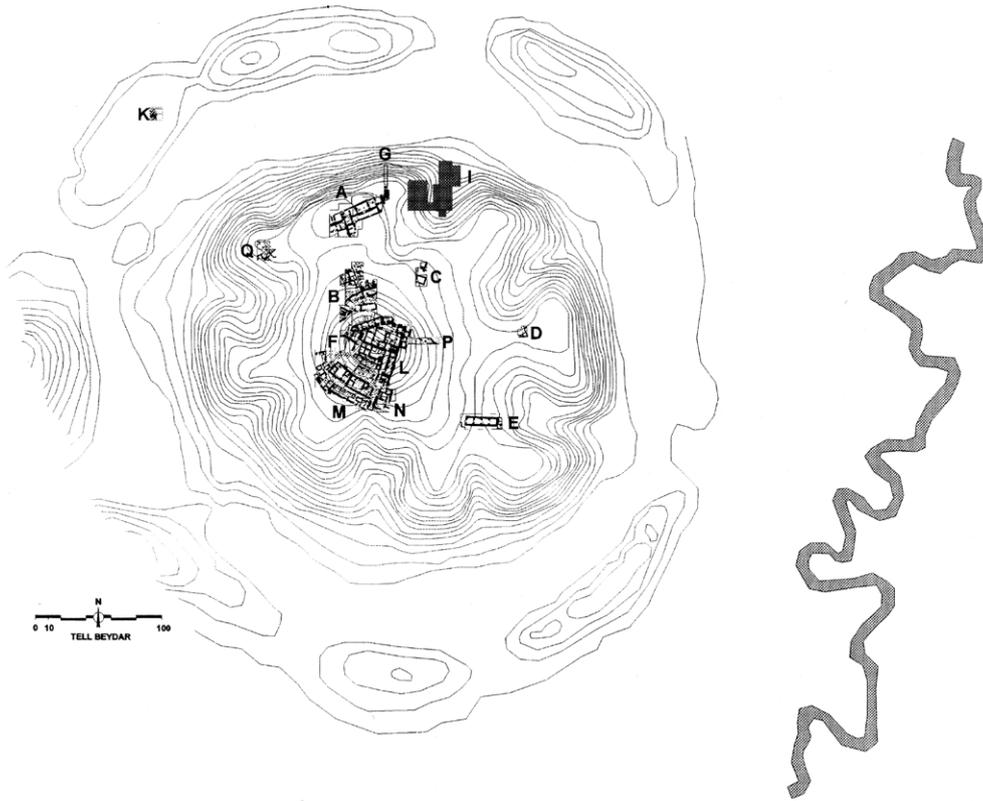


Fig. 1: Topographical map of Tell Beydar with location of excavation areas (2001).

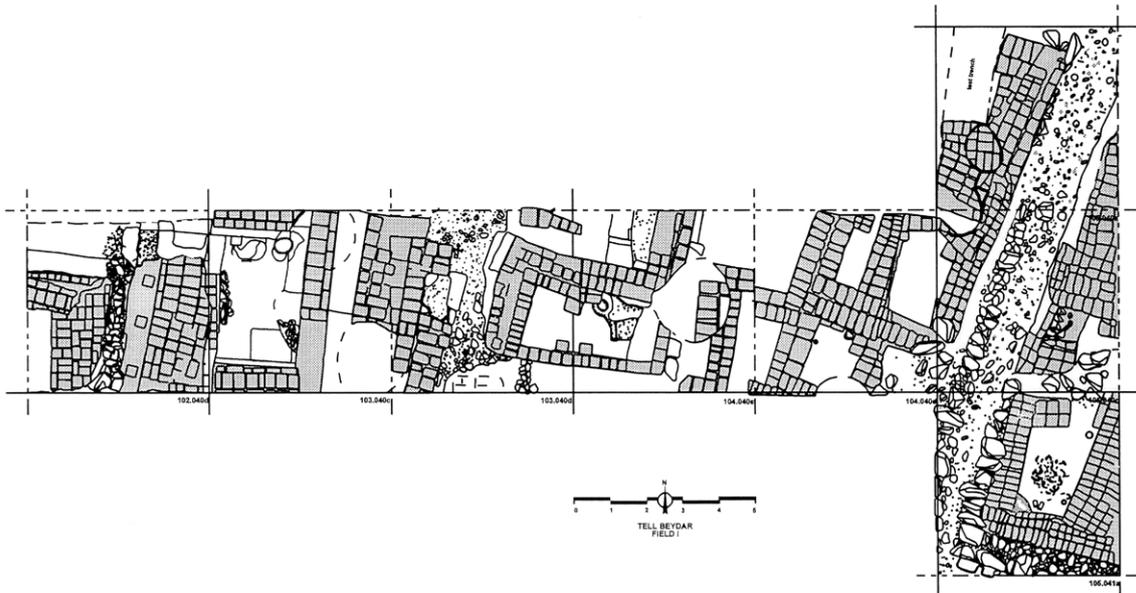


Fig. 2: Field I: 1997-1998 step trench.



Fig. 3: Eastern Sector, general plan (2001).

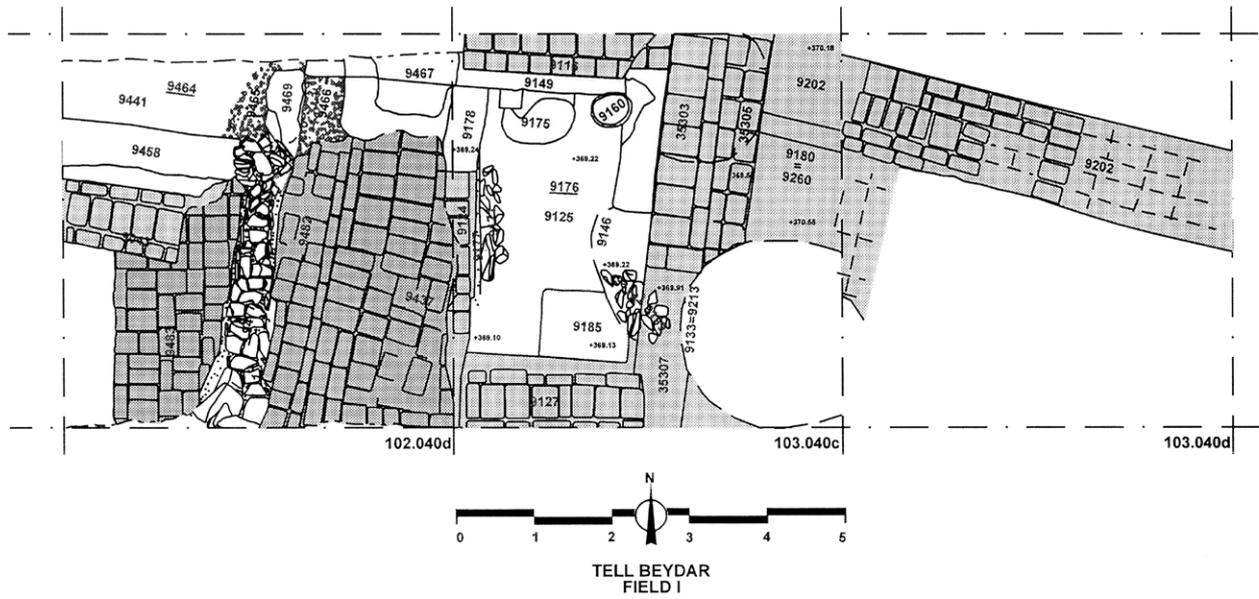


Fig. 4: Western Sector, plan of sub-phase 4c.



Fig. 5: Western Sector, courtyard with plastered wall and bench, stone canalisation.



Fig. 6: Eastern Sector, southern portion of the street.



Fig. 7: Eastern Sector, the stone ramp and the Inner-City Gate access.



Fig. 8: Eastern Sector, building flanking the street outside the Inner-City Wall.



Fig. 9: Eastern Sector, Grave 35079.