

THE TEMPLES IN AŠŠUR. AN OVERVIEW OF THE SACRAL ARCHITECTURE OF THE „HOLY CITY”¹

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ABSTRACT

The temples in Aššur make a very important part of the Assyrian architectonic tradition. Numerous as they are (with many subsequent phases, rebuilding and alterations), they allow for a „longue durée” study, from the mid-IIIrd millennium B.C. to the late VIIth century B.C. A variety of schemes employed, especially in layout of the „core” of the sanctuary and the main „cultic tract”, speak for a relatively unconstrained and creative treatment of plans, during the reign of Šamši-Adad I (XIX/XVIIIth century) and in the XIII-XIth centuries B.C. In the 1st millennium B.C., in the Neo-Assyrian period, the sacral architecture in Aššur seems to be of rather secondary, derivative character, following solutions first applied in new capitals of Assyria – Kalhu and Dur-Šarrukin. However, the precursors for these new concepts are still to be looked for in Aššur.

KEYWORDS

temples, cella, „long room”, „broad room”, „bent axis”, architectonic tradition.

The temples founded by the kings of Assyria in the „Holy City” of Aššur constitute an exceptional corpus of buildings, when considered in comparison with other examples of Assyrian sacral architecture, preserved and unearthed on other sites. First of all, they make almost 2/3 (precisely – 56%) of all the Assyrian temples that have been uncovered till now², and they present an astonishing variety of architectural concepts (as reflected in ground plans), not to be found on any site in whole Mesopotamia. Not less important is also the fact that the temples in Aššur offer a sequence of a really *longue durée*, starting about mid-IIIrd millennium B.C. (the oldest Ištar temple, H-phase) and lasting till almost the end of the VIIth century B.C. (the Nabu-Tašmetu temple erected by Sin-šar-iškun ca. 620 B.C.). A short overview of these

¹ Also the temples erected by Tukulti-Ninurta I in Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta shall be considered here. The very close location – the site is within the range of vision from Aššur – and its specific role, as a new capital, meant probably rather to supplement than to replace Aššur – seem to justify the incorporation of its temples to the below presented corpus. On the other hand, the *éakītu*, the „House of the New Year Festival” built by Sennacherib, has been excluded, as it was not the temple *sensu stricto*, i.e. a dwelling or abode of a deity.

² For this comparative overview only buildings with more or less „readable” plans were taken into account. The above stated percentage comes from the confrontation of the here illustrated temples in Aššur (11) and Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta (2), plus the so-called „archaic” (or „elder”) temples of Ištar (phases D-H, 5 in all), and the Aššur temple of Shalmaneser I (XIIIth century B.C.; its plan is practically „contained” in the latest phase, built by Sennacherib) – these sum up to 19, to be set against the 15 buildings from outside Aššur (4 in Kalhu, 8 in Dur-Šarrukin – and 6 of those form a closed complex rather than separate buildings, 1 in Guzana/Tell Ḥalaf, 1 in Ḥadatu/Arslan Tash, and 1 in Me-Turnat/Tell Ḥaddad). This count can be only slightly altered if from the Aššur-corpus we exclude –following J. Bär’s stratigraphic re-examination – the problematic Shalmaneser’s III Ištar temple and connect the G and F phases into one (Bär 2003, C.II, 73-75; Bär 2003a, 158-159).

remains shall be presented here, in an evolutionary perspective³, with an attempt to recognize some general trends and phenomena in the local tradition, as well as possible influence of this tradition on the Assyrian sacral architecture as the whole.

Excavated by Walter Andrae and his team in the years 1903-1914, they were minutely and carefully documented. A series of publications, at first preliminary, mainly in the *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft*, followed, then in extensive volumes of the *Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der DOG* (Andrae 1909, 1922, 1935, v. Haller 1955; a popularizing account of the excavations' results was also given by Andrae in 1938). Both the publications and the archives of the excavations' documentation were the basis for further research, either incorporating the Aššur remains into a broader spectrum of Mesopotamian architecture (e.g. Martiny 1932; Heinrich 1982), or discussing detailed questions of particular buildings (e.g. Börker-Klähn 1980; Galter 1984; Miglus 1990; Husley 2000). Geometry and metrology were also analyzed (Stępniewski 1988; Miglus 1990). The extensiveness and quality of the documentation allowed for a „second series” of basic reference publications in recent years (Eickhoff 1985; Miglus 1996; Bär 2003 – see also Bär 2003a). The temples of the city of Aššur, due to cuneiform archives found in their remains or elsewhere, could also be studied as cultic, economic and administrative institutions, and their architectural layout could be – to some extent – „filled up” with a variety of such activities (e.g. van Driel 1969; Menzel 1981), as also some problems of ritual spatial interrelations of the temples (Pongratz-Leisten 1994). A detailed review of the contents of the said temple archives has been presented by O. Pedersén (1985, 1986).

As the issues of typological connections of the oldest temples in the City – these of Ištar and Aššur – to the Mesopotamian architecture, with attempts to state basic elements of a local, indigenous tradition, have already been adequately studied (Bär 2003, 2003a; Miglus 1990, 2001; Novák 2001), they shall not be reconsidered here. We may thus start the overview with the two most important concepts of the Mesopotamian sacral architecture – namely the „bent axis” model and the „broad room” model, as already introduced into the Aššur tradition. New concepts, in the subsequent buildings, shall be thus looked for, or a re-modelling of the already existing schemes.

On the attached figures (1-12) schematic plans of the buildings are being presented, all in the common scale and orientation, so not only they layouts but also dimensions could easily be compared. All have been redrawn, on the basis of plans published by W. Andrae, A. von Haller and T. Eickhoff, with the exception of the temple excavated by R. Dittmann on Tell „O” in Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta (the published drawings have been only re-scaled), and small circles in the cellas mark the possible location of cultic representations of the gods, be it statues or reliefs. In the case of the Sin-Šamaš temple the „S” indicates staircases giving access to the roof, terrace or the upper storey. The archaic Ištar temples have not been illustrated, as they represent a consequent realization of the same „broad room” model, with only minor variations, and it can be found in the later buildings (Figs. 3, 8 and 10 [see also note 3]).

On the basis of thus prepared material following general remarks can be formulated. There are two phenomena of a long duration – the Aššur complex and the temples of Ištar. In the first case, a monumental sacral compound (no temple built in

³ This evolutionary approach should of course be treated as a metaphoric, agreed upon archaeological way of thinking about and presenting a sequence of objects through time; the temples did not evolve or develop by themselves, they were invented and planned by skillful and creative master-builders, and their plans reflected both abilities of those builders and the whole set of conditions they worked in – the tradition, technical means, building material limitations etc. etc., and even possible influence of the royal investors not to be excluded. But as far as our access to the respective data is fairly limited, an external inspection of the most substantial effects of this ancient master craft – plans of the temples – seems to be a reasonable procedure.

Assyria surpassed its dimensions!) existed for almost 1200 years, and although frequently renovated, decorated and re-decorated, since its foundation by Šamši-Adad I (Fig. 1) it underwent only twice more substantial rebuilding – a new courtyard with adjacent rooms was added by Shalmaneser I, and in the times of Sennacherib yet another courtyard was added, with the rooms surrounding it forming the so-called *Ostanbau* (Fig. 12). While the exact form of this last operation, its purpose and consequences (the possible re-orientation of the cella as the „long room”) have been debated upon (Börker-Klähn 1980; Galter 1984; for this rebuilding being inspired by the shape of the Esagila in Babylon see also George 1999; Huxley 2000), it remains undeniable that the main layout of the complex remained the same, and – which may be surprising – this largest and most important sanctuary of Assyria was never – as a whole – imitated, or inspired buildings of similar layout. J. Reade has recently proposed a reconstruction of the Ištar temple in Nineveh built by Šamši-Adad I (Phase 7), in fact copying the plan of that of Aššur (Reade 2005, Figs. 12, right, and 13). Although the proposition is carefully argued and the coincidences are striking (same orientation, dimensions, time of building), the extent of the reconstruction, when confronted with the remains preserved (ibid., Fig. 6, 7 and 12, left) makes it plausible, but far hypothetical.

The second case is the very long sequence of the Ištar temples. Here however not one and the same building expressed the attachment to a specific architectural arrangement of cultic space, but a series of such, located in the area of one *insula*, only once – with the temple erected by Aššur-reša-iši – „moved” into the neighboring one⁴. Although the orientation of subsequent buildings was changing (probably to fit them into the already existing scheme of streets and private houses), dimensions and shape of the courtyard and adjacent rooms differed, an antecella could precede the main cultic room, and even another sanctuary could be adjoined (as in the complex built by Tukulti-Ninurta I, Fig. 3) it always followed the „bent axis” model and was, importance of the cult of Ištar kept in mind, of strikingly humble dimensions. It seems that the „bent axis” scheme was somehow connected with the cult of Ištar – two other temples dedicated to her, discovered in Kalḫu, were built accordingly (Reade 2002, Fig. 2), but the layout was by no means reserved exclusively for her: besides the temple of Aššur, it was used in at least four other sanctuaries⁵. If Andrae’s reconstruction of the only partly preserved rooms in the northern corner of the Nabu-Tašmetu temple in Aššur, and his interpretation of its function as the cella of Ištar, was correct, also here we could deal with the same model⁶, and even – quite symbolically – with its last realization in Assyria. And it must remain an open question if it was due to overwhelming influence of the City’s tradition that the scheme was so often adopted in the sanctuaries outside of Aššur.

Another aspect of the temples built in Aššur is a remarkable variety of plans, especially in the period of XVIth-XIIth century B.C. While the „Aššur-Ištar-tradition” seems to be well established in the subsequent realizations, considerable liberty and a „quest for spatial solutions” may be observed in other sanctuaries. In the XVIth century the Sin-Šamaš temple was built, a „Doppeltempel” with two cellas arranged symmetrically one in front of the other (Fig. 2), and although crucial fragments of its

⁴ For the Ištar temples set in the context of streets and dwelling-houses see Miglus 1996, Taf. 8a-9b; a new proposal for the reconstruction of the Aššur-reša-iši temple’s plan is also given there, Plan 122.

⁵ Once in Imgur-Bel/Balawat, in a small side-cella of the Mamu-temple, in Guzana/Tell Ḥalaf, in a side-cella of the „Town Temple”, and twice in Dur-Šarrukīn – in the Ea and Sibitti temples (for the relevant plans see e.g. Heinrich 1982).

⁶ The plan of the temple illustrated here (Fig. 11) follows the plan of actual remains by J. Jordan (1908, Abb. 8); for Andrae’s reconstruction see e.g. 1977, Abb. 213. For a different interpretation of this part of the building – Postgate 1974.

layout can be identified as having prototypes or analogies in many other constructions in Mesopotamia as a whole, and particularly in Aššur itself (Miglus 1990; 2001), the final arrangement and the profoundly articulated, decorative façade, speak for inventiveness and creativity of its builders. They were also manifested in the Anu-Adad temple, built in XII/XIth century (Fig. 6), where two cellas, arranged parallel, were accompanied by ziggurats. As a whole, this realization lacks the elegance and compactness of the Sin-Šamaš complex (the courtyard and adjoining rooms look as if artificially added), but can also be treated as an adequate illustration for the „experimental” phase in local building tradition. It should also be stressed that in both temples the „long room” model of the cella, with a broad antecella, has been introduced for the first time in Aššur. Even if not a local invention and only an adaptation of the elsewhere made up model⁷, it seems that, once having occurred in Aššur, it dominates in the Assyrian temples from now on. It should also be noted that the said temples were quite differently treated by later rulers – the Sin-Šamaš sanctuary was erected with a completely altered arrangement of the now parallel cellas (their location and orientation changed, Fig. 8), while the Anu-Adad temple enjoyed quite a deferential treatment, with only minor reduction of the dimensions and a shifting of one cella (Fig. 9).

The Anu-Adad complex appears to be a part of yet another „group” – namely the temples with adjoining (not free standing) ziggurats, together with the new Aššur temple in Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta (Fig. 4). For the first, as the possible predecessor the temple of Dagan in Mari could be pointed at (Margueron 1985, 496, Fig. 10), and for the second – another foundation of the already so frequently mentioned Šamši-Adad I – the temple in Tell al-Rimah (Oates 1967, Pl. XXX)⁸. And the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta would seem quite conventional – but only in regard to the temple planning – had not yet another temple been found in Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta (Dittmann 1990; Bastert/Dittmann 1995; here Figs. 5a, b). Its plan goes beyond any scheme hitherto recalled; although the cella conforms to the „long room” layout, the arrangement of the adjoining rooms and especially the sophisticated communication tract, resulting from the „bi-axiality” of the building⁹, make it unique and somehow enigmatic.

The last to mention is the Nabu-Tašmetu temple (Fig. 11), and it is the only sacral building in Aššur owing so much to the predecessors – those of the Kalḫu and Dur-Šarrukin temples dedicated to the same god and goddess. In all three cases two parallel cellas, surrounded by a combination of rooms and corridors, with two courtyards preceding the inner sanctuary, constitute basic attributes of the scheme. In all, a third part of the compound existed: with a pair of supplementary cellas and a throne-room in Kalḫu, of probably the same functions, but not so evident in the plan – in Dur-Šarrukin, and worst preserved – in Aššur. If J.N. Postgate’s hypothesis, locating there, in all these temples, a *éakītu*, (Postgate 1974) is correct, the secondary character of the temple in Aššur becomes the more evident.

This short account of the history of the City’s temples may be summed up as follows: two periods of dynamic, creative and inspirational planning can be pointed out – in the first half of the second millennium B.C., mainly during the reign of Šamši-Adad I, and in the XIII-XIth centuries B.C. Most of the „primary” foundations of the so differing temples took place in these times. In the first millennium B.C., in the times of expansion, prosperity and ambitious town-planning projects, when considerable means

⁷ The only older example comes from Tell Leilan – a temple built by Šamši-Adad I; Weiss 1990, 538, Fig. 3 and 4.

⁸ This temple existed and was in use as late as the XIIIth century B.C. (Oates 1966, 76-77, Fig XXVIII); thus an adaptation to the Assyrian tradition seems more probable in this case, while the Mari example lacks such a direct link.

⁹ One axis is to be set along the cella, through its center, the other, perpendicular to the first, runs across the façade.

were also directed toward building, renovation and decoration of the temples in the whole Empire, no single original plan – with the exception of the Sin-Šamaš temple founded by Aššurnasirpal (Fig. 8) – would be made up in Aššur. While the new capitals benefited greatly from the architectural traditions rooted in the City – both for the singular buildings and for the general plans of the cities (Novák 2005) – the City itself did not generate any new concepts or trends.

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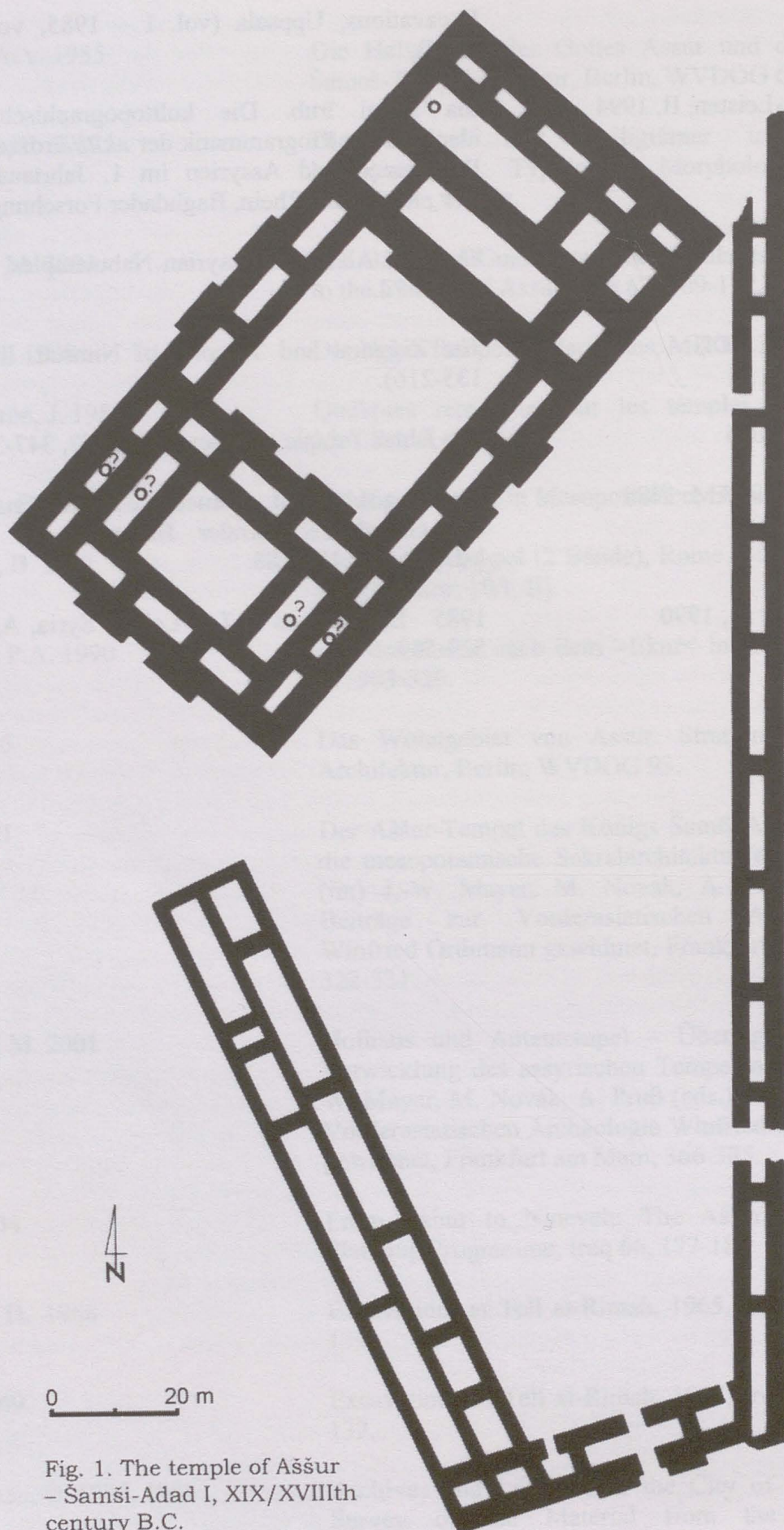


Fig. 1. The temple of Aššur
– Šamši-Adad I, XIX/XVIIIth
century B.C.

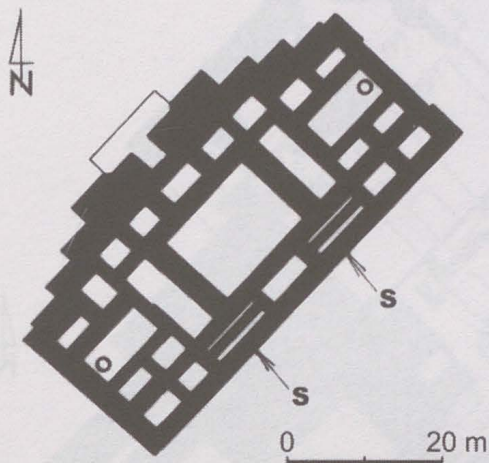


Fig. 2. The Sin-Šamaš temple
– Aššur-nirari I, XVIth century B.C.

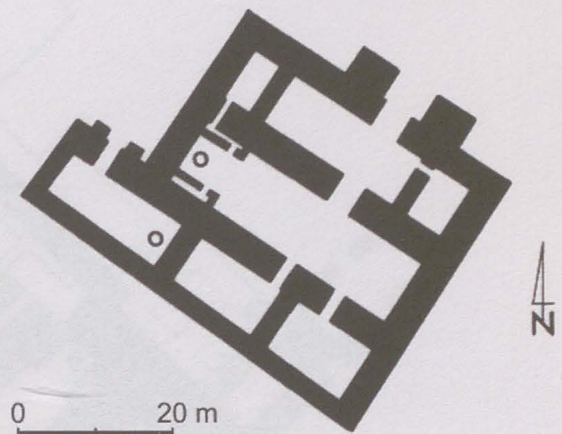


Fig. 3. The Ištar-Šulmanitu temple
– Tukulti-Ninurta I, XIIIth century B.C.

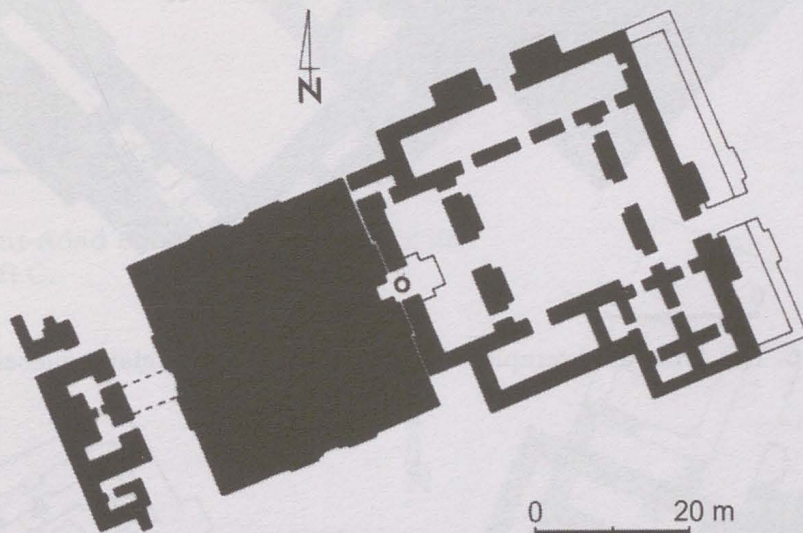


Fig. 4. The Aššur temple in Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta – Tukulti-Ninurta I, XIIIth century B.C.

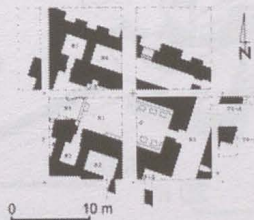


Fig. 5a. The temple on Tell "O" in Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta – Tukulti-Ninurta I, XIIIth century B.C. (Dittmann 1990, Abb. 8).

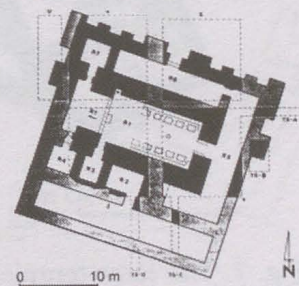


Fig. 5b. The temple on Tell "O" in Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta – Tukulti-Ninurta I, XIIIth century B.C. (reconstructed plan: Bastert/Dittmann 1995, Abb. 3)

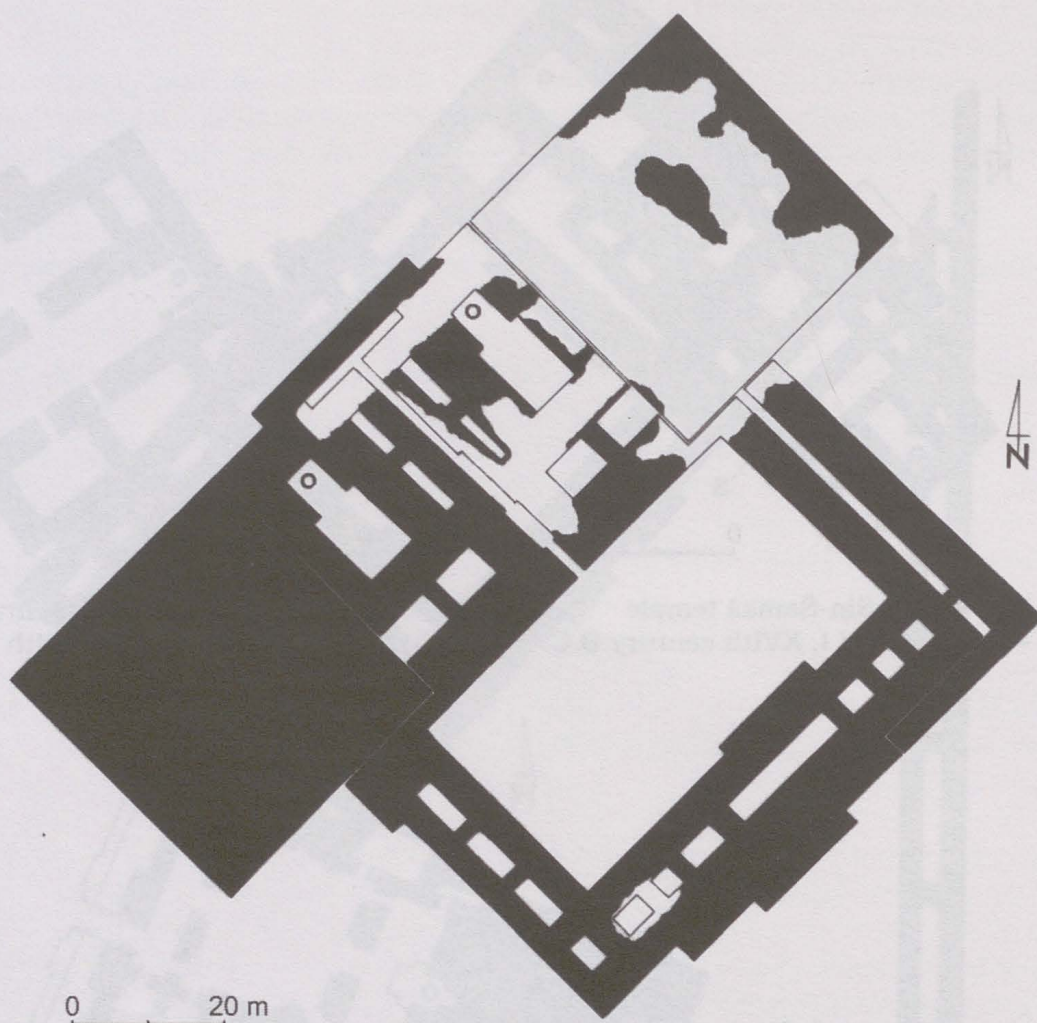


Fig. 6. The Anu-Adad temple – Aššur-reša-iši I and Tiglath-pileser I, XII/XIth century B.C.

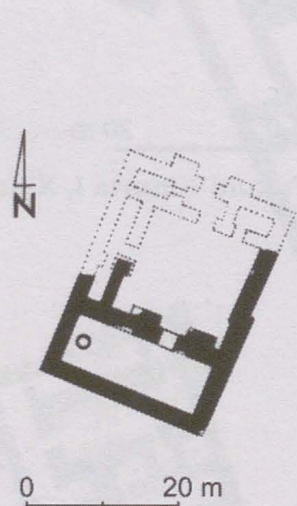


Fig. 7. The Ištar temple
– Aššur-reša-iši I,
XIIIth century B.C.

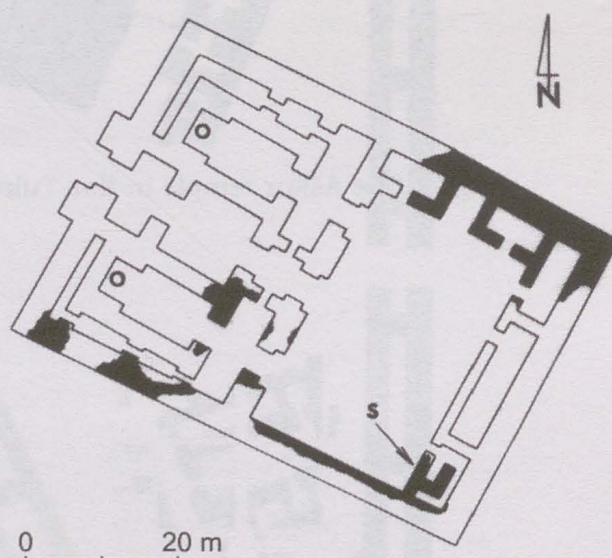


Fig. 8. The Sin-Šamaš temple – Aššurnāṣirpal II,
IXth century B.C.

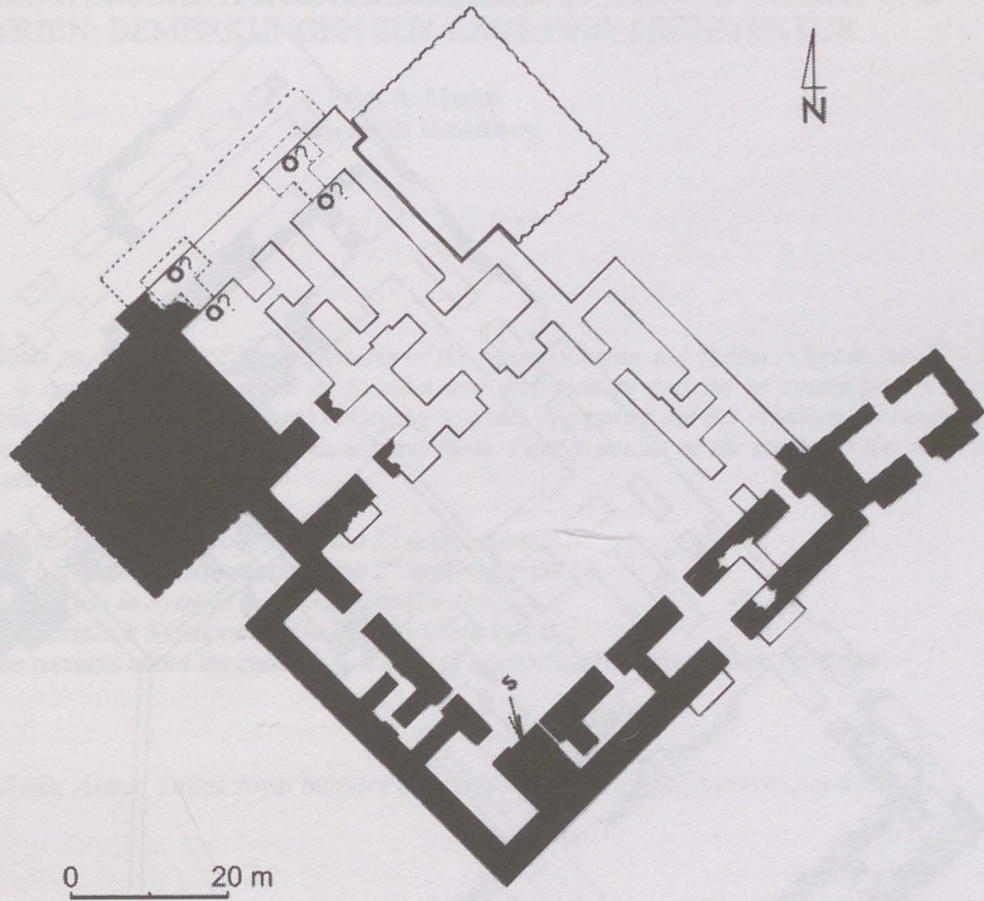


Fig. 9. The Anu-Adad temple – Shalmaneser III, IXth century B.C.

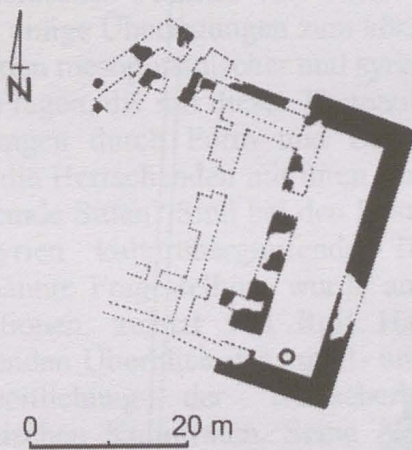


Fig. 10. The Ištar temple – Shalmaneser III, IXth century B.C.

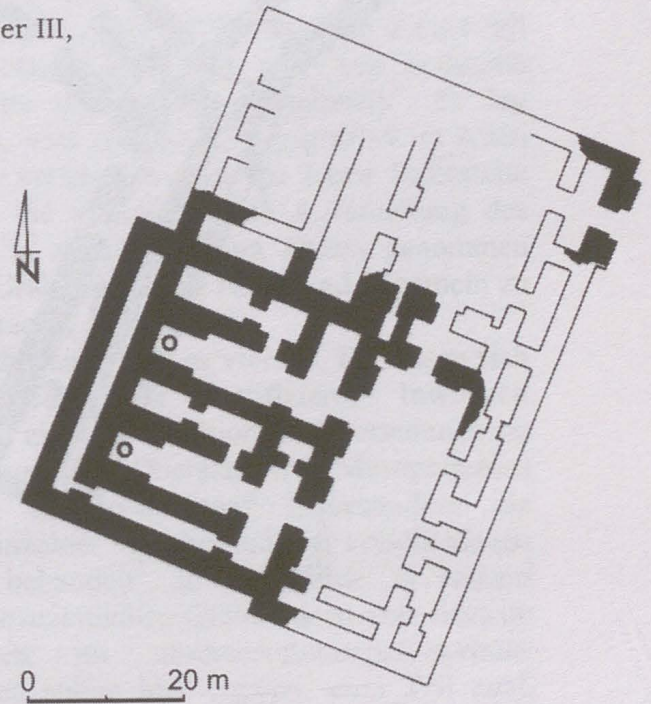


Fig. 11. The Nabu-Tašmetu temple – Sin-šar-iškun, late VIIth century B.C.

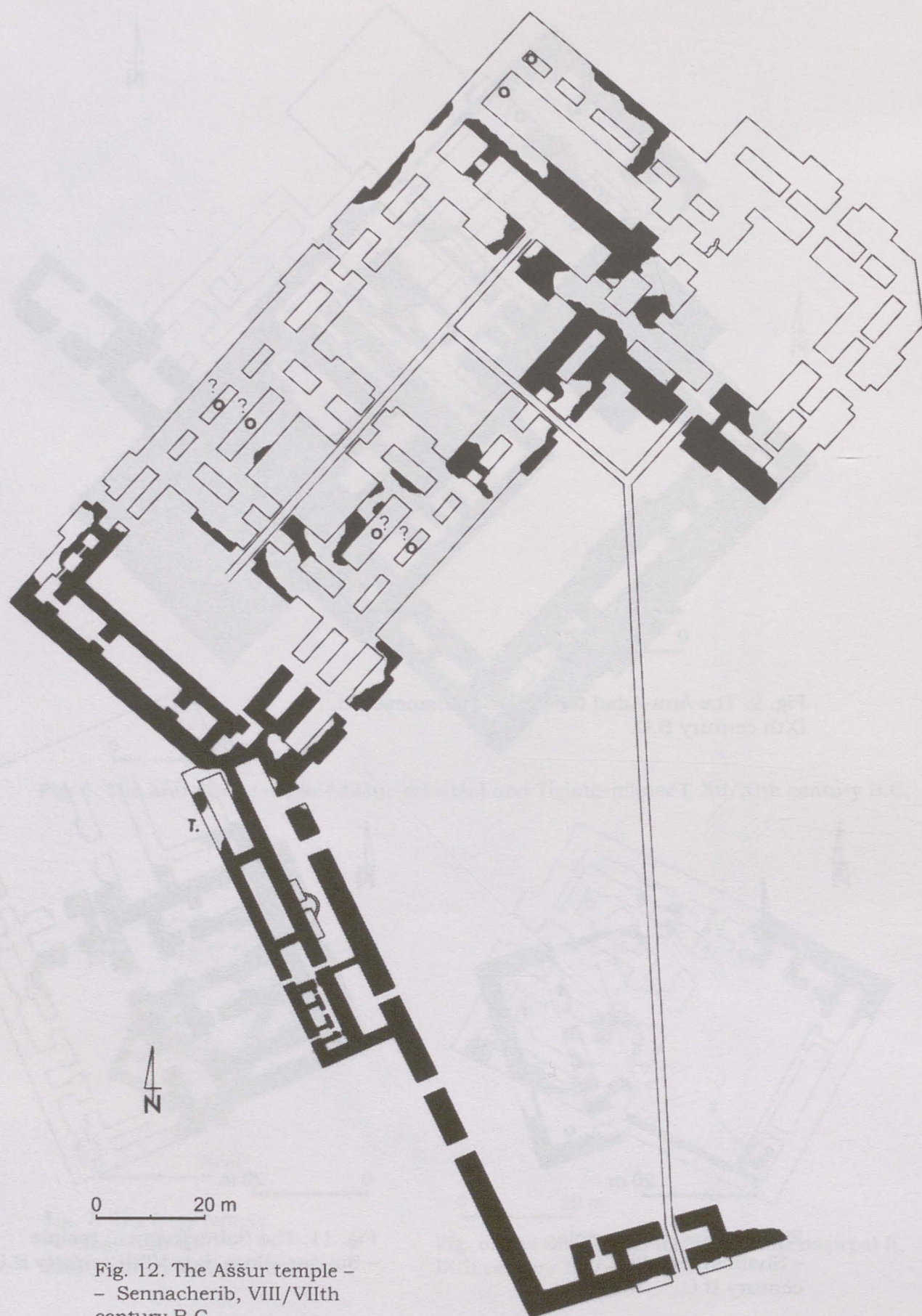


Fig. 12. The Aššur temple –
– Sennacherib, VIII/VIIth
century B.C.