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SOME REMARKS ON THE SO-CALLED "STEINGEBÄUDE" IN ARCHAIC URUK-WARKA (1).

The staff of the "Deutsches Archäologisches Institut" in Baghdad under the direction of Professor Jürgen Schmidt discovered in Uruk an unique underground cult structure, the so-called "Steingebäude". It is situated at the feet of the north-west scarp of the An's Ziggurrat and it originates probably from the early Uruk-IV period. Professor J. Schmidt presented its detailed description with plans and photos in the XXVI-XXX volumes of the U.V.B. (2).

In spite of a good preservation of "Steingebäude" and a big discussion about its unusual form, its destination and use remain unclear. I would like to present my own hypothesis about it, but first, I will remind the most important archaeological and historical data connected with this object.

"Steingebäude" is situated close to the An's Ziggurrat (3). We are not sure which cult dominated in this place in the archaic period, but according to the later localisation and Sumerian's traditionalism we can assume the existence of the cult of the god An, and probably the Heaven in general, as gods cosmic zone from which they could descend to the earth.

"Steingebäude" is unique - it represents a cult structure, but in no case a common temple. It is placed in a deep pit dug into the 'Ubaid tal formed of ancient 'Ubaid settlement ruins. There are three independent circles of walls around a central room with some kind of a flat "pedestal" in the middle (4). The passage to this room is made difficult to approach, two corridors with the opposite situated entrances form a kind of

the labyrinth. The second wall made of the big gypsum blocks was built a little earlier than the other ones erected of limestones. This fact indicates that the fundamental plan did not assume the three-walls construction. The upper surface of the walls is elaborated with the huge lime-plaster, thus, a stable roof above the central room was never designed. The archaeologists did not found any decoration and equipment neither in the central room nor in the corridors.

Taking into consideration all these evidences I am inclined to admit that the walls of "Steingebäude" represent only a simple protective fence around the pedestal being the real cult place.

The so-called "pedestal" in reality is not a pedestal, but an appointed place covered with stones and a lime-mortar coating. Its construction is very important for considering the "Steingebäude"'s problem, so I would like to present some details of this construction.

Examining the central place construction from its base, that is in the same succession it was built, the following layers can be observed (5) :

- the substratum - an 'Ubaid mud brick wall inside the prehistoric tal in which "Steingebäude" was plunged,
- the flat layer of single limestones joint together with mortar, which forms the nivelation platform under the whole "Steingebäude" (6),
- the moldy remains and impressions of reed mat,
- the flat layer of polygonaly dressed white limestones joint together with some kind of bitumen,
- the thick lime-mortar coating, and finally :
- the thin coating of the lime-paste, on which we can see the impressions of stones used to fill up "Steingebäude". This lime-paste was laid immediately before "Steingebäude"'s final filling up, most probably - I think - to fasten the first stones and to protect in this way the central place against the possible future damage.

The most unexpected und significant in the central place construction is the mat placed on the nivelation platform. The

fact that the mat was placed on the bottom of the central place is for me very significant, because mats were used in general for covering all kinds of openings or relevant places on the floor. Thus, I think that in reality, this so-called pedestal was not a base of something, but, on the contrary, it was a cover of some important place on the earth.

Now I would like to pass to the literary documents, later than "Steingebäude" but preserving - no doubt - many traditions and échos of much older events. Professor Samuel Noach Kramer in his book "The Sumerians" (7) wrote : "According to the poem "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Nether World" which characterizes the nether world as the "great dwelling", there was an opening of some sort in Erech that led down to the nether world ... There was also a gate in Erech in front of which one could sit down and through which a mortal - at least if he was a hero like Enkidu - might descend to the nether world... Enki... had Utu open the a b l a l [-the vent-] of the nether world and Enkidu reascended to the earth... A highly revealing myth... is "Inanna's Descent to the Nether World". According to this poem the nether world is a place to which one descends and from which one ascends presumably through an opening or a gate situated in Erech... In general the nether world was believed to be the huge cosmic space below the earth corresponding roughly to heaven, the huge cosmic space above the earth... There also seem to have been special openings and gates in Erech, as well as - no doubt - in all the important city centers".

The passage to the nether world is named in the myths : g a n z e r written with signs IGI.KUR or IGI.KUR.ZA ; this passage is defined as : k a -, é -, or é - g a l - g a n z e r and is described as : i g i - k u r - r a, that means : "the eye of Kur". Thus, this g a n z e r was recognized as a big gate, a house or a palace.

Especially significant is one information offered by the myth of "Inanna and Enki", about the name of one stopping place of the Inanna's bark in Uruk ; this name is : é - g a n z e r b a - d u - "the house ganzer was built" and it proves that the construction of the g a n z e r - passage to the nether world was an important and real event in Uruk, preserved in the Sumerian

memory during centuries. Moreover, "Descent into the nether world" and "Ascent from the nether world" are the names of two divine forces m e. This fact stresses the important role of the idea of the passage to the nether world in Sumerian religion and rituals.

Meditating upon "Steingebäude"'s construction I suddenly associated its form with the literary descriptions and with the Professor Kramer's suggestion about the existence of some sort of opening or gate in Uruk which led down to Kur. When we assume that "Steingebäude" includes this "eye of Kur" - nearly all uniqueness and curiosities of its form and construction become clear :

- localisation at the feet of the Ziggurrat, on the route leading from the heaven to the earth and further - to the nether world,
- construction of the central place (especially its covering with a mat) representing the symbolic entrance to Kur,
- successive fencing of the central place with the walls,
- special construction of the walls which enabled to walk on their crown and to look down on the central place, and finally :
- the careful filling up ; the entrance to Kur used by deities belonged to the nether world and had to be placed underground but carefully secured.

The hypothesis presented by Professor J. Schmidt - although with reservation - that "Steingebäude" is a monumental tomb, may be a symbolic cenotaph of a god (8) or some sort of house of the deads (9), seem to me to be insufficiently supported neither by archaeological nor by historical evidences.

My idea is, of course, only a pure hypothesis, which however - I hope - may be useful for the discussion about the interpretation of "Steingebäude".

Notes

(1) This article was presented at the XXVII Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale in Paris, the 3th of July, 1980.

(2) Vorläufiger Bericht über die von dem Deutschen Archäologischen Institut aus Mitteln der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft unternommenen Ausgrabungen in Uruk-Warka : vol. XXVI/XXVII, Berlin, 1972, p. 18 ff.; vol. XXVIII, Berlin, 1978, p. 24 ff. ; vol. XXIX/XXX, Berlin, 1979, p. 13 ff.

(3) See Fig. 1 and UVB XXVI/XXVII Taf. 73.

(4) See Fig. 2 and UVB XXVI/XXVII Taf. 65, 66.

(5) See UVB XXVI/XXVII, p. 28 and Taf. 4-6 and 64.

(6) Excluding the second wall of gypsum blocks which was errected earlier, directly on the substratum ; about this first stadium of building work,see UVB XXIX/XXX, p. 15.

(7) S.N. KRAMER, *The Sumerians*, Chicago, 1963, Chapter IV.

(8) See UVB XXVI/XXVII, p. 27-28.

(9) See UVB XXVIII, p. 26.

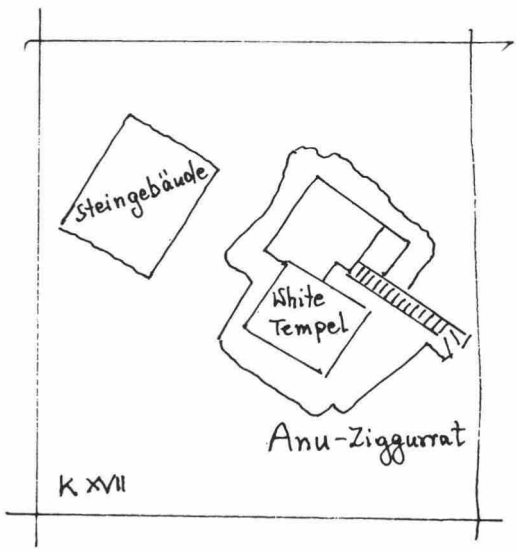

Fig. 1

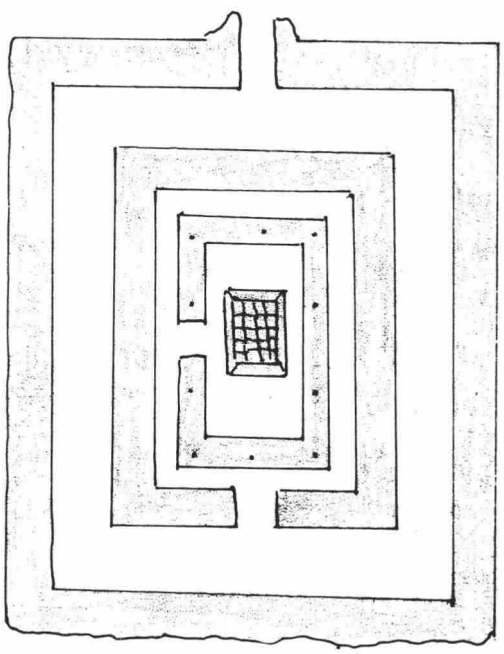

Fig. 2
Schematic plan of Steingebäude