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**PODIA WITH STUCCO DECORATION FROM THE TEMPLE OF FIRE AT MELE HAIRAM
IN SOUTHERN TURKMENISTAN
(PL. 77-79)**

Polish archaeologists have been carrying out archaeological excavations at the site of Mele Hairam in the Sarakhs oasis in southern Turkmenistan since 1997¹. Their work has resulted in the discovery of an excellently preserved Sassanian temple of fire (Fig. 1).

Five rooms of the temple have been uncovered to date. Their walls were preserved up to the height of almost 4.5 m in the main room of the temple, where remains of a fire altar in the shape of an hourglass have been found. A wide passage, which probably had once been covered with an arch resting on moulded impostes, linked the altar room to a small room paved in the center with three rows of five baked bricks each. A rectangular platform with traces of ashes on top has been exposed against the northern wall of the room. A narrow passage in the middle of the altar room's northern wall opened onto an even smaller rectangular room, where an oven which had held the sacred embers was located. Behind the oven, in the eastern wall, a blocked doorway was discovered; it had led into a long and narrow corridor, furnished with a clay bench along its southern wall. The main, vaulted entrance to the temple complex was located in the eastern wall of the altar room, leading through the back wall of the entrance room, which was probably an *aywan*. The walls of this room stood 4 m high at the moment of discovery. Inside the room three clay podia covered in stucco decoration were exposed². East of the podia, a low clay bench, 0.4 m wide, stretched along the *aywan* walls. On the axis of the entrance a step had been marked in the bench surface. Its erection might have been necessitated by the lowering of the floor level in the *aywan*.

The most impressive of the podia stood perpendicular to the longer axis of the *aywan*, ca. 1.3 m away from the entrance to the main room of the temple. The two remaining podia started ca. 0.2 m from the edges of

the first one and stretched parallel to the longer walls of the room. Initially, the podia had been completely visible, yet in the second phase of usage of the room their lower parts were covered by a clay floor, which concealed the bottom row of the stucco decoration on the side podia, as well as the plain socle, ca. 0.24 m high, of the central podium.

The decoration of the podia is relatively well preserved, enabling the missing ornaments in the damaged areas to be reconstructed. On the central podium, which is cracked along its axis, numerous fractures have been observed, as well as sizable gaps in the relief decoration of its eastern face. The lateral podia, the southern one being the better preserved, displayed traces of damage, mostly peeling plaster with the relief decoration as a result of damp. The northern podium is preserved incompletely with only the western part measuring 2.5 m remaining.

The podia were probably destroyed in antiquity, when the roofing of the *aywan* collapsed. This took place when the temple was no longer in use³, presumably after the priests had left the temple subsequent to the Arab conquest and the introduction of a new religion, Islam, in Central Asia.

The central podium is a rectangular prism, 3.08 m long and ca. 0.6 m wide (its width must remain an estimate because of the severe damage to its western face) and 0.88 m high. It most probably bore relief decoration on its two longer faces. While the western face has yet to be exposed, the presence of such decoration on this surface should also be expected, considering the evidence of the decorated western faces of the lateral podia⁴.

The eastern face of this podium is decorated with a relief consisting of three adjacent, similar palmette compositions (Fig. 2)⁵. The central point of each composition is a figure-of-eight knot motif, which is the axis of symmetry for each of them. Each knot is formed by a band

¹ The Polish archaeological mission in Turkmenistan has been working in the Sarakhs oasis since 1995. Initially, work concentrated on Old Serakhs, the largest *tepe* in the oasis. It was not until after a survey in 1997 that the site of Mele Hairam was chosen to become the object of archaeological research directed by Dr Barbara Kaim.

² B. KAIM, *Zarathushtrian Temple of Fire; Excavations in Turkmenistan*, Warsaw 2001.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

⁴ The discovery of a fragment of stucco decoration near the northwestern corner of the central podium can be regarded as additional confirmation of this hypothesis.

⁵ The conservation and restoration of the plaster antependium was performed by Ms Małgorzata Sołtys, conservator from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.

dotted with a row of convex beads. In the lateral compositions the bands end with demi-palmette sprays bordered with plain listels that are 4 cm wide. In the central composition the band ends with four long curved tripartite leaves (Fig. 3). In the lateral compositions elongated tripartite leaves, set horizontally complement the figure-of-eight knot motif, while in the central composition undulating, horizontal demi-palmette leaves accompany it. From the top and the bottom, the central composition is delimited by palmette motifs forming a "swallow's tail". The other compositions are similarly adorned with smaller, tripartite bands and cinquefoil demi-palmettes.

In the left bottom corner of the eastern face of the podium, three lotus flowers are carved. They may be part of a lotus frieze which was to border the bottom of the composition. The fact that the lotus frieze was never finished may be related to the raising of the floor level in the room, which resulted in covering the bottom part of the podium with a layer of clay and in concealing from view the lower part of the decoration on the lateral podia. Yet the pretreatment of this fragment of decoration – the sketchy engraving of the lotus flowers – reveals the technique used in decorating the podium.

The lateral podia (the northern one: 0.77 m high, 0.96 m wide and only 2.5 m long, its eastern end destroyed; the southern one: 0.77 m high, 0.96 m wide and 4.71 m long) carry stucco decoration of two rows of square metopes filled with rosette-palmettes separated with plain bands, ca. 3-4 cm wide. The metopes on the southern podium measure 26-27 cm x 26-27 cm, while those on the northern one 28-30 cm x 28-30 cm (Figs. 4, 5).

Trefoil palmettes set in a cross fill the metopes in the upper register of the podium by the northern wall. Lotus flowers with outermost petals forming two demi-palmettes occupy the spaces between the arms of the cross. The metopes in the lower register are decorated with rosettes composed of four hearts, each of them filled with a cinquefoil palmette. Smaller, tripartite elements carved in the corners complement the ornament. The whole composition is crowned with a 10 cm wide horizontal frieze of demi-palmettes.

The other podium is ornamented in similar fashion. On the southern podium the metopes in the upper row are similar to the ones in the lower register of the northern podium, while those in the bottom row correspond to the ornament of the upper register of the northern podium. The rhythm of the metopes on the southern podium is disturbed by the occurrence in the bottom row of motifs typical for the decoration of the upper register, perhaps due to some repairs of later date.

The decoration was executed in the carved stucco technique (German: *Antragtechnik*)⁶, by modeling damp stucco with a trowel and other sharp tools. A core of beaten clay was coated with thin layers of plaster (3-4 cm thick in this case), the surface of the last layer being smoothened to facilitate the drawing or engraving of the ornament outlines. The elements that were meant to be rendered in high relief were left, while plaster was removed from the spaces between them. The pretreated elements were then carefully smoothened. Features characteristic of this technique are precision in the execution and soft modeling of details.

The carved stucco technique was already known in the Parthian period. The spreading of stucco as architectural decoration throughout Iran and Central Asia can be connected with the building activities of the Arsacid dynasty⁷. N.C. Debevoise postulates that stucco wall decoration appeared simultaneously with the introduction of a new architectural development, the *aywan*, in the Parthian Period, initially in Mesopotamia and later in northeastern Iran⁸. The Iranian tradition of stucco wall decoration originated, *inter alia*, in Achaemenid palaces, where simple geometrical patterns were used to ornament the doorways and niche frames. The doorways in the 3rd century AD palace of Ardashir I at Qal'a-ye Dukhtar in Firuzabad had a similar decoration. Ardashir I, who founded the Sassanian Dynasty, regarded himself as an heir of the Achaemenid kings⁹. In the Sassanian period the stucco wall decoration most often appeared in the form of square metopes such as those found in houses at Umm az-Za'atir¹⁰ or Ma'arid¹¹ and in palaces at Ctesiphon¹², Bisshapur, Kish and Hājiābād¹³, and others. Ornaments carved in plaster could resist varied weather conditions better than the carpets that had been hung on walls hitherto.

⁶ J. KRÖGER, *Sasanidischer Stuckdekor*, Mainz am Rhein 1982, p. 209

⁷ *Ibidem.*, p. 210, 258

⁸ N.C. DEBEVOISE, *The origin of decorative stucco*, AJA 45, 1941, p. 45, followed by J. KRÖGER, *op. cit.*, p. 210

⁹ D. HUFF, *Qal'a – ye Dukhtar bei Firuzabad*, AMI 4, 1971, p. 139-141, fig. 4

¹⁰ J. KRÖGER, *op. cit.*, p. 50-80

¹¹ *Ibidem.*, p. 80-128

¹² *Ibidem.*, p. 13-40

¹³ The room decorated with stucco has been interpreted as a hall serving the cult of goddess Anahita – M. AZARNOUSH, *The Sassanian Manor House at Hājiābād, Iran*, Firenze 1994, p. 81-88

The Mele Hairam podia are unique not only for their original stucco relief decoration but also because of their place of discovery – inside an *aywan*, the walls of which were not covered with stucco but simply decorated with murals. Unfortunately, it is impossible to reconstruct the designs, since the murals were damaged already in antiquity when the walls were covered with white plaster, in compliance with the rules of Zoroastrian religion. Isolated small fragments of the decoration which have been recovered point to a similarity with patterns known from Sassanian textiles and carpets¹⁴. Sassanian textiles were usually adorned with medallions framing images of realistic or fantastic figures. Floral elements, such as rosettes and lotus flowers, sprouted between the medallions bordered with beaded bands¹⁵.

The absence of similar stucco-decorated podia in Central Asia, Iran and Mesopotamia makes it difficult to define their function. Placing the central podium across the *aywan*, some 1.3 m away from the entrance to the temple, may suggest that it was meant to be a kind of a barrier stopping the faithful, who seem to have been allowed access to the *aywan*, from entering the altar room. The narrowness (0.2 m) of the gap between the transverse central podium and the western ends of the lateral podia also obstructed the passage. It seems that brick “barriers” in the doorways of Temple B at Takht-e Suleiman in northern Iran may have served a similar purpose of protecting the main room, where the altar of fire was located¹⁶.

The transverse podium from Mele Hairam could have also been used as an offering table by the priests during some unknown rituals¹⁷. A pedestal unearthed in the northern part of Temple B at Takht-e Suleiman, which was up to eight courses of bricks high, could have been of analogous function. The pedestal, standing between two smaller, yet higher, corner pedestals separated the altar from the rest of the northern part of the room¹⁸.

The podia with their lavish stucco ornaments had also a decorative function, indicating through the depicted patterns an association with the rich ornamentation of carpets and textiles.

Lack of coins and pottery sherds in the occupation level to which the podia belonged makes it impossible to establish precisely their time of construction. Only an analysis of the ornamental motifs of the stucco-decorated podia offers grounds for a tentative dating.

The motif of the figure-of-eight knot, which appears in the center of the compositions on the central podium, has also been noted among the stucco ornaments in the palace at Kish²⁰ and on the columns of a temple at Dargaz²¹ in northern Iran.

The motif of the eight-like-knot from the palace at Kish, where it has been reconstructed for the most part, is largely simplified. It is made up of a plain band, the endings of which change into elongated palm leaves. On the columns from the Dargaz temple the figure-of-eight knots are interlocked, and the band which forms the knot is divided with four longitudinal incisions. Both the palace at Kish and the temple at Dargaz have been dated to the 5th century, which may suggest the same date for the construction of the podium from the temple of fire at Mele Hairam.

In the Sassanian period the convex, globular elements, called beads or pearls²², that adorn the figure-of-eight knot, became a common motif. Such beads can be found on the frames of tondi occupied by an inscription in Pahlavi which may be read as “Iran” from Umm az-Za’atir²³ or Damgan²⁴, as well as on the border of an image of the mythical bird Simorg from Chal Tarkhan²⁵. Fragments of tondi with analogous decoration are also known from Takht-e Suleiman²⁶ and Nizamabad²⁷, as well as from reliefs from Taq-i Bustan²⁸, where they appear as appliqués on garments. According to R. Ghirshman the motif of beads is common to both Sassanian and early

¹⁴ The designs typical of the fabrics of this period are known mainly from the reliefs in Taq-i Bustan, cf. S. FUKAI, K. HORIUCHI, *Taq-i Bustan IV, Text*, Tokyo 1984.

¹⁵ R. GHIRSHMAN, *Iran Partians and Sassanians*, London 1962, p. 226-237, fig. 271-290.

¹⁶ R. NAUMANN, *Takht-i Suleiman und Zendan-i Suleiman*, AA 80, no. 4, 1965, p. 630.

¹⁷ B. KAIM, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁸ R. NAUMANN, *op. cit.*, p. 630. The pedestal is connected with the second phase of the temple and with the brick “barriers” or blockages in the northern, eastern and western entrances. Therefore, it appears impossible to interpret the pedestal as a kind of a “curtain”. The pedestal was placed in the northern part of the temple whereas the main entrance opened unto the south. It is rather the blockages, not the pedestal, that

was meant as a screen. The latter one provided an extra surface which could have been used during religious ceremonies.

¹⁹ R. GHIRSHMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 226-237.

²⁰ J. BALTRUŠAITIS, *Sassanian Stucco, A. Ornamental*, in: A.U. Pope (ed.), *A Survey of Persian Art*, vol. I, London – New York 1938, fig. 178.

²¹ I am indebted to Dr B. Kaim for this personal communication.

²² J. KRÖGER, *op. cit.*, p. 230-231.

²³ *Ibidem*, pl. 14, 3.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pl. 88, 3.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pl. 94, 3.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pl. 60, 1.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pl. 74, 2.

²⁸ S. FUKAI, K. HORIUCHI, *op. cit.*, p. 127, fig. 59, 37, 38, 47.

Islamic art. It can be found in the stucco ornaments at Bishapur, Ctesiphon and Takht-e Suleiman and is also present in all three styles of Samarra²⁹. A band decorated with beads, visible on a fragment of plaster wall decoration from the palace at Ctesiphon, had been treated exactly like the one depicted on the central podium in the temple at Mele Hairam. The band loops to make triangular and round frames filled with floral ornaments³⁰.

The decoration of the temple at Dargaz provides us also with an example of a twig with demi-palmettes bordered with plain listels³¹. An identical motif appears in the central composition of the podium from Mele Hairam. This pattern, consisting of three demi-palmettes forming a "swallow's tail" motif, encloses the figure-of-eight knot from the bottom and from the top. In the stucco decoration of the Dargaz building this motif appears on frames bordering figural representations. The appearance of demi-palmettes forming a "swallow's tail" on the Mele Hairam podium and on the walls of the temple at Dargaz implies that both decorations could have been completed at approximately the same time.

The earliest example of the demi-palmette motif bent to form the letter "S", similar to the one visible in the middle composition on the transverse podium in the Mele Hairam temple, appears on friezes from the palace of Shapur I at Bishapur³², which has been dated to the middle of the 3rd century.

A commonly used motif in the Sassanian period was a frieze of lotus flowers, like the one that had been sketched on the transverse podium. A lotus frieze appears on fragments of stucco decoration found at Kish³³, Umm az-Za'atir and Bishapur³⁴. The motif of a single lotus flower is one of the ornaments on garments of people depicted on the reliefs from Taq-i Bistan³⁵.

The decoration of the lateral podia in the entrance room of the temple has analogies in the ornamentation of the aywan walls at Kish, Umm az-Za'atir and

Ma'arid. The wall decoration of the Sassanian house at Ma'arid IV consists of two rows of metopes filled with a composition of demi-palmettes and pomegranate fruits complemented with a demi-palmette frieze, which is similar to the one depicted on the upper frieze of the lateral podia from the temple at Mele Hairam³⁶. Fragments of a demi-palmette frieze bordered from the top and the bottom by a Greek meander have been found at Umm az-Za'atir³⁷. Other examples of this motif come from Ctesiphon³⁸, Kish³⁹ and from the decoration of an archivolte at Nizamabad⁴⁰. Quite often the palmettes and demi-palmettes form a cross, with a circular hole, or an imitation thereof, in the center. A cross is formed by the trefoil palmettes in the metopes of the upper register on the northern podium from the Mele Hairam temple. A similar pattern can be found in the metopes in Building I at Kish. There it is enriched with roundels filled with rosettes and with other floral elements⁴¹.

At Mele Hairam the motif of the cross formed by palmettes is complemented with floral elements, namely lotus flowers with outward petals transformed into demi-palmettes, which are placed in the corners of the metopes. Similar elements shaped as demi-palmettes fill the corners of plaster panels, inter alia at Ma'arid IV⁴² and Damgan⁴³.

The metopes of the lower register are decorated with four hearts encircling cinquefoil palmettes. Single elements of this pattern appear in the stucco ornaments at Ma'arid IV⁴⁴ and in Kish⁴⁵, as well as on rock reliefs at Taq-i Bistan⁴⁶.

The similarities of motifs common to the decoration of Sassanian structures in Mesopotamia, northeastern Iran and the temple at Mele Hairam point to the beginning of the 5th century at the earliest as the date of the construction of the podia. Above all the parallels between the ornamental motifs from the Mele Hairam temple and those from the nearby temple at Dargaz imply a common date for the execution of the reliefs.

²⁹ R. GHIRSHMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 161

³⁰ *Idem*, *Bichâpour II, Les mosaïques sassanides*, 1966, p.161, fig. 58

³¹ M. RAHBAR, *Trente Cinq Mètres de Stucs d'Époque Sassanide*, in: *Dossiers d'Archéologie* no. 227, 1997, p. 4

³² J. KRÖGER, *op. cit.*, p. 195, pl. 90, 2

³³ J. BALTRUŠAITIS, *op. cit.*, p. 622

³⁴ J. KRÖGER, *op. cit.*, p. 70, fig. 34 b, pl. 24, 2 c-g

³⁵ S. FUKAI, K. HORIUCHI, *op. cit.*, p. 125, fig. 57, 1-3

³⁶ J. KRÖGER, *op. cit.*, p. 97-99, fig. 54, pl. 38, 5

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 66-67, fig. 31, pl. 20, 7, 8

³⁸ R. GHIRSHMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 151, fig. 42

³⁹ J. BALTRUŠAITIS, *op. cit.*, p. 612-613, fig. 194 b

⁴⁰ J. KRÖGER, *op. cit.*, p. 149-150, pl. 62, 1, 2

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 191-192, fig.121; J. BALTRUŠAITIS, *op. cit.*, p. 610-611, fig. 189

⁴² J. KRÖGER, *op. cit.*, pl. 22, 1, 2

⁴³ *Ibidem*, pl. 88, 4, 5

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 96, fig. 52, pl. 51, 4

⁴⁵ J. BALTRUŠAITIS, *op. cit.*, p. 616-617, fig. 196 a

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 623, fig. 207 c

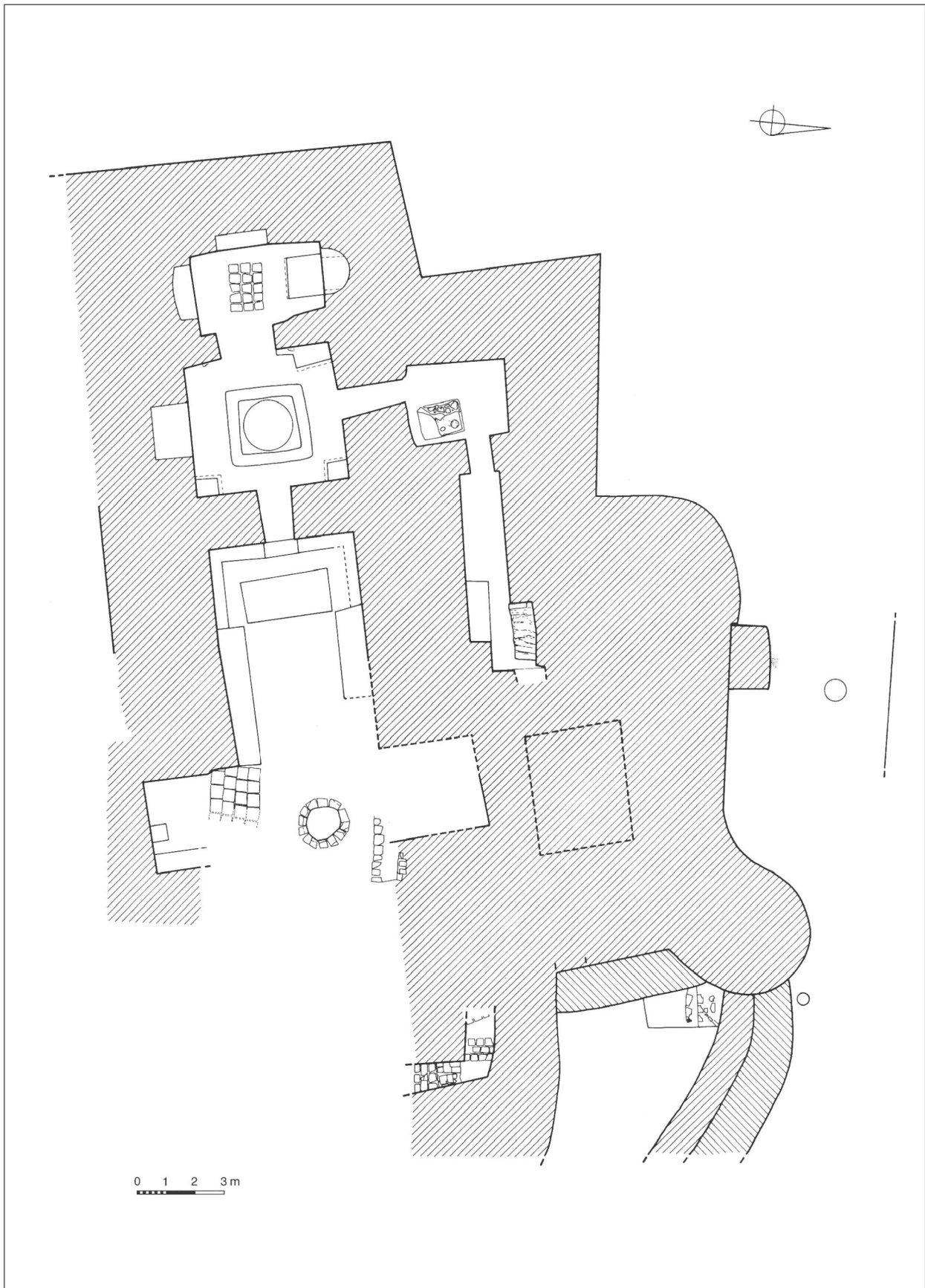


Fig. 1. Plan of the temple of fire at Mele Hairam. Drawing M. Wagner



Fig. 2. Eastern face of the central podium with stucco decoration. Drawing M. Wagner



Fig. 3. Central composition with the figure-of-eight knot motif. Phot. B. Kaim



Fig. 4. Northern podium. Phot. B. Kaim



Fig. 5. Eastern face of the southern podium. Phot. B. Kaim)