

A Re-appraisal of the Identification of the Ziggurat on Assurbanipal's Relief in Nineveh*

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The Assyrian royal reports are among the major sources of geographical history of western Iran and partially deal with the Elam region and its historical happenings. Among the Assyria kings, Assurbanipal's accounts of his military campaigns furnish the largest dataset on the events of the Neo-Elamite period. The 19th-century excavations at Assurbanipal's palace in Nineveh recovered a stone relief depicting a five-story ziggurat. In the reports of his military campaigns, Assurbanipal speaks of the ziggurat of Susa and its demolition and transferring of its bronze horns to Assyria. Yet, despite the extensive excavations at the archaeological site of Susa, no evidence of a related structure or such an incident have so far been reported. The present paper explores the form of this ziggurat and evaluates its original location drawing on the historical evidence and archaeological data, and at the same time reviews the existing positions on its location. Our results suggest that the ziggurat on the relief at Assurbanipal's palace in Nineveh presumably represents the ziggurat of Choga Zanbil.

Keywords: Nineveh, stone relief, ziggurat, Assurbanipal, Choga Zanbil

Introduction

With the rise of the Assyrian state in the late second millennium B.C. and expansion of its power in the first millennium B.C. in the vicinity of the large and small polities of western Iran, West Asia entered a new phase of cultural, political, military, economic, etc. developments. The early first millennium B.C. coincided with the increased Assyrian power; consequently, the Assyrian kings launched frequent campaigns against western Iran so as to bring the region under control and obtain natural resources as well as accommodate the needs of their growing empire (Rigg, 1942; Gerardi, 1987; Lanfranchi, 2003). They have prepared meticulous reports of their campaigns for their temples and documented the relevant occurrences on stone reliefs at their palaces, which are some of the major sources of information on historical geography and historical events of western Iran from the early to late first millennium B.C. In the light of these reports, we are able to reconstruct ethnic composition, settlement planning, fortifications, lifestyle, and even clothing of the inhabitants of western Iran. These reports include those of Assurbanipal's campaign against Elam, during which his army razes

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Elamite temples and farmlands (Brinkman, 1991, p. 59) and ends the Elamite Empire through moving its population to Assyria. Among these looted temples, reference is made to a ziggurat with Assurbanipal boasting that he destroyed the ziggurat of Susa and smashed its bronze horns (Luckenbill, 1926, p. 309; Streck, 1916, p. 53). Review of the report of these triumphs and analysis of the structure of the ziggurat on the relief under discussion as well as evaluation of the archaeological and textual evidence deriving from Elamite regions in particular the Elamite Susa bring into light new information about this relief and raise doubts over the location of this ziggurat in Susa.

“Ziggurat Relief” at Assurbanipal’s Palace

Today, the ancient mounds of Koyuncik and Nabi Yunis on the Tigris in Mosul comprise ruins of the palaces of the ancient city of Nineveh, which once was the capital of the Neo-Assyrian kings (Layard, 1849; Thompson, 1934, p. 95). The palaces in Nineveh were excavated by Hormuzd Rassam, the Assyrian-British archaeologist, who recovered large numbers of stone reliefs (Layard, 1849).

Tepe Koyuncik represents ruins of two palaces, of which the northern belongs to Sennacherib and the southern to Assurbanipal (Moortgat, 1387/2008, p. 293). The North palace in Nineveh consists of several rooms, halls, and passageways that were built in the reign of Assurbanipal. The walls and doorways of these rooms were covered with adjoining stone reliefs which were for the most part transferred to the British Museum after the close of the 19th-century excavations. These reliefs depict in a particularly naturalistic fashion the Assyrian king’s military actions and conquests of cities and triumphs. The northern part of the palace shows a high concentration of reliefs in the halls and side rooms, including Rooms I, F, G, and H. These reliefs include the ones with the scenes of Assurbanipal’s assault on Elam. Assurbanipal has documented this assault on the reliefs of both the North and South palaces (Reade, 1964). On the eastern wall of Room I, Blocks 9 and 10 (Figure 1) portray a multi-staged ziggurat flanked by a smaller structure on the right. The ziggurat lies between two rivers, and is fringed by trees that resemble palm.

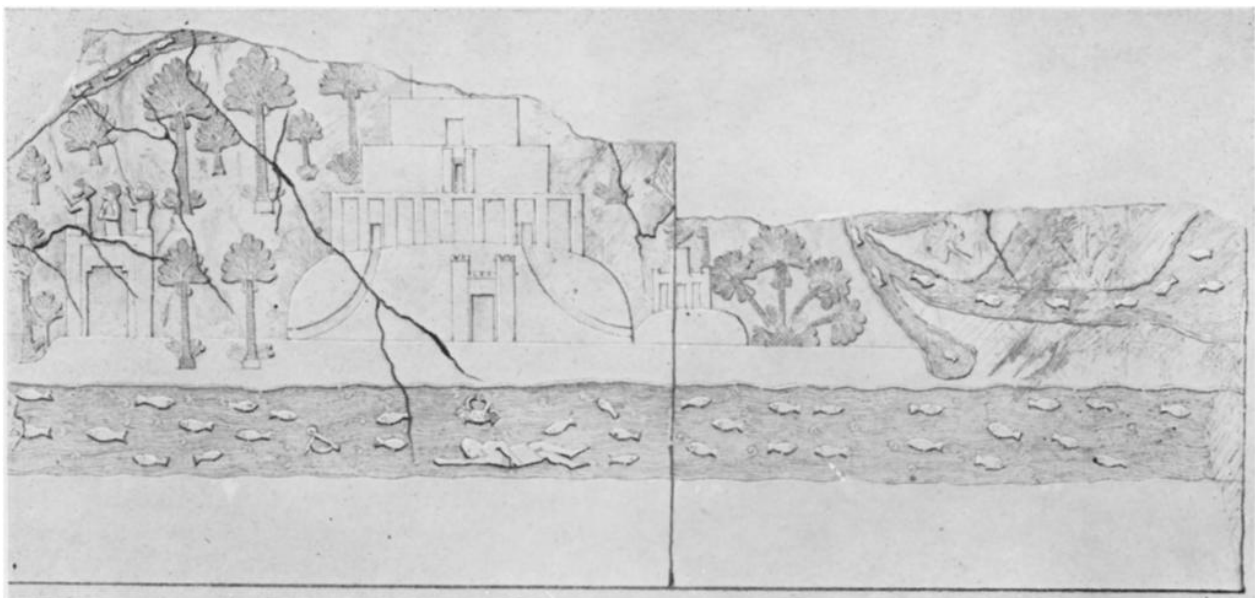


Figure 1. Lower part of the stone relief at Assurbanipal’s palace (Reade, 1964, pl. Iva).

The existing drawing of this ziggurat displays a monumental, five-story building with two cattle heads with large, elongated horns in the façade of the entrance to the topmost temple. It is a pity that main part of this relief (see Figure 2) was sunk in the Tigris on its way to the British Museum (Reade, 1964, p. 2). However, the whole relief was drawn earlier by William Butcher (Reade, 1993, p. 48).

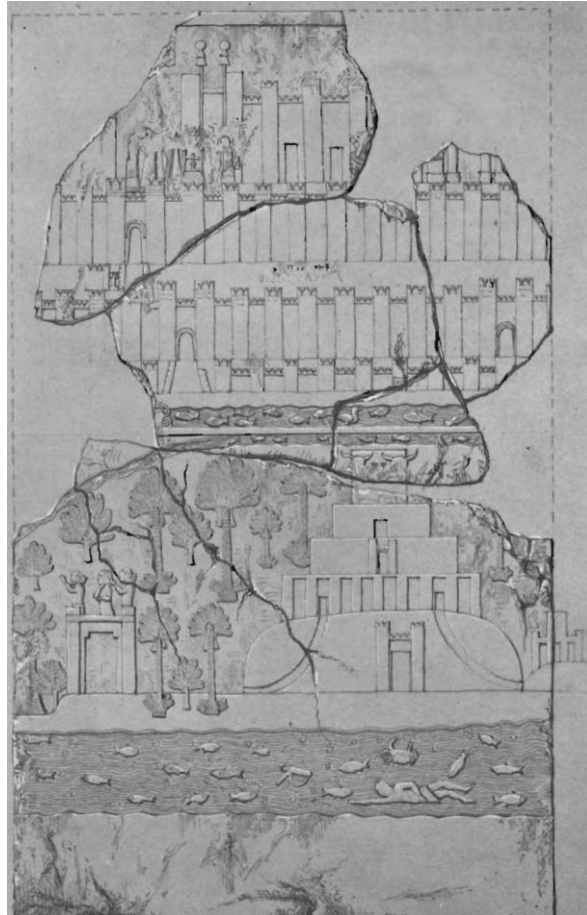


Figure 2. Ziggurat and citadel (Albenda, 1980, p. 3, fig. 2).

In the Butcher's drawing of the relief in situ, the ziggurat is amid a palm grove, against which flows a wide river. A smaller river, probably a tributary, turns behind the palm grove to proceed towards the wider river in front of the grove. The ziggurat and the surrounding palm grove are confined between these two rivers. As said, the ziggurat has five stories. Its entrance lies at the center as a crenellated gate, which probably is the only entrance to the whole complex. The façade of the second story is decorated with recessions and protrusions while the two upper stories feature a simple façade. In front of the ziggurat, the larger river extends throughout the scene, and body of a man, a quiver, several fishes, and a crab are depicted in it. On the left of the ziggurat is seen a doorway, above which two male and one female figures (Reade, 1964, p. 6) are depicted in profile view, raising their hands in supplication.

However, the most interesting part of the relief concerns the fifth story of the ziggurat. This story is depicted as a square with plain, undecorated sides. Over both sides of the entrance, two big animal heads,

probably bull heads, with long, up-curved horns embellish the temple (Albenda, 1980, p. 2)¹.

Discussion

It is certain that ziggurat construction in the Elamite cultural world marked a continuation of and was inspired by Mesopotamian traditions, and began in the 14th century B.C. in the reign of Untash-Gal (for the history of his reign, see Van Dijk, 1986). Untash-Gal himself has referred to ziggurat construction in several texts particularly those from the Choga Zanbil temple (Steve, 1375/1996, pp. 24, 77). In particular, in an inscription recovered in Susa, he puts that,

I, Untash-Napirisha, son of Humban-numena, king of Anzan and of Susa, desirous (that) my life (be) continually one of prosperity, ... with this intention I built a temple of baked bricks, a high-temple of glazed bricks; I gave it to Inshushinak-of-*siyan-kuk*. I raised a ziggurat. May the work which I created, as an offering, be agreeable to Inshushinak! (Potts, 2004, p. 209, Table 7-7, IRS:71)

Accordingly, Untash-Gal has so far been regarded as the first Elamite king to build a ziggurat and the Choga Zanbil ziggurat lying 33 km southeast of Susa (Ghirshman, 1373/1994, p. 17) as the earliest and biggest known Elamite ziggurat.

The ziggurat represented on the relief from Assurbanipal's palace provides further evidence as to ziggurat construction in Elam. Though Assurbanipal himself talks of the ziggurat of Susa and its demolition in his reports (Luckenbill, 1926, p. 309), the exact location of this structure is widely deemed disputed. Dombart identifies this representation with a ziggurat in Susa (Dombart, 1929) while J. Reade deems identification of its exact location impossible, though stressing that it refers to a ziggurat within the boundaries of Elam (Reade, 1964, p. 7). W. Hinz believes that the representation belongs to the ziggurat of Susa (Hinz, 1386/2007, p. 33), a position also held by Y. Madjidzadeh (Madjidzadeh, 1371/1992, p. 54). Yet, referring to the various discussions surrounding the subject, D. Potts sees Dombart's hypothesis more probable based on the available evidence (Potts, 1990, p. 37).

However, contrary to what some scholars think (Unger, 1938, p. 353), there is no doubt that this is an Elamite ziggurat. In the representation of this ziggurat on the relief from Assurbanipal's palace, the entrance to the topmost story is adorned with big horns (Figure 4). We know that the tradition of "horned temples", as evidenced by a sealing from Susa (Figure 3) that depicts a temple with three horns on both sides, dates to the fourth millennium B.C., and Shilhak-Inshushinak in the late second millennium B.C. (1200-1100 B.C.) speaks of molding metal horns for an altar (Potts, 2004, p. 284). Comparison of the ziggurat of Choga Zanbil with the structure represented in the Assyrian palace substantiates its Elamite nature, in that the entrances to the five stories are all aligned with each other and the upper stories were accessed through an internal stairway, in the same way as the Choga Zanbil ziggurat and different from what is seen in the Mesopotamian ziggurats (Mallowan, 1970, p. 267). Potts similarly considers the horned temples as being specific to Elam, emphasizing the origination of the tradition in Susa (Potts, 1990, p. 38).

¹ The practice of adorning temples with horn-like forms in Elam is attested on a sealing from Susa II period (Potts, 2004, p. 71, fig. 3.2) (Figure 3). Also, the tradition of decorating buildings and forts with horns is seen in most buildings reported from West Iran in Assyrian sources (Potts, 1990).



Figure 3. A sealing from Susa depicting a horned building (Potts, 2004, p. 71, fig. 3.2).

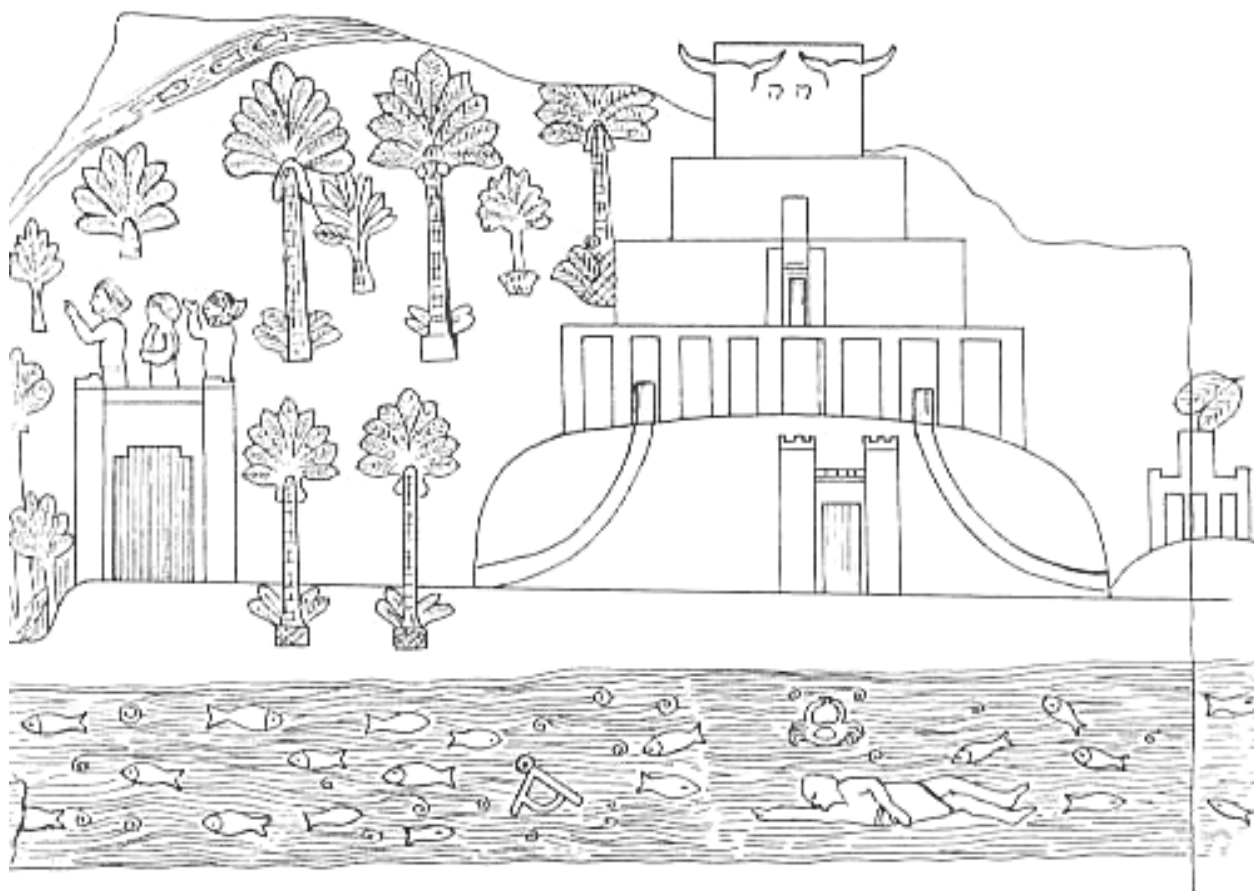


Figure 4. Reconstructed drawing of the relief at Assurbanipal's palace with the representation of an Elamite ziggurat (Hinz, 1388/2009, p. 143, pl. 33).

The only evidence of ziggurat architecture from Susa is Untash-Gal's inscription that refers to raising a ziggurat for the god Inshushinak (Potts, 2004, p. 209, Table 7-7, IRS:71). However, this inscription was most probably transferred from Choga Zanbil to Susa by Shutruk-Nahhunte, because he alludes to this in an inscription: "I removed the statues which Untash-Napirisha had placed in the *siyan-kuk* when Inshushinak, my god, demanded it of me, and at Susa dedicated them to Inshushinak, my god" (Potts, 2004, p. 220). Alternatively, Untash-Gal's report of ziggurat construction might have been addressed to the god Inshushinak in Susa reporting that he had put up a ziggurat for him in *Siyan-Kuk*. At any rate, if Untash-Gal did build a ziggurat in Susa, today several inscriptions dealing with construction of a ziggurat by him, similar to what is seen in thousands of inscriptions recovered in Choga Zanbil, must have been persevered there.

Since the Middle Elamite kings recorded most of their actions concerning construction and restoration of temples and other structures, the culmination of these actions was perhaps reached after Untash-Gal in the Shutrukid period, especially in the ages of Shutruk-Nahhunte (Malbran-Labat, 1995; Steve, 1968; 1987) and Shilhak-Inshushinak (Potts, 2004, p. 238, Tables 7.10). This period witnessed construction of several new and restoration of most of earlier temples (Potts, 2004, pp. 205-247). Therefore, despite the presence of hundreds of inscriptions about works and activities of the Elamite kings subsequent to Untash-Gal, even in not a single inscription mention is made of construction of temples as large as ziggurat, and over half of the inscriptions report restoration of multiple temples (Potts, 2004, pp. 205-247).

By the beginning of the first millennium B.C., which marks the inception of the Neo-Elamite period, silence of the Elamite sources becomes more pronounced than any other time in the history of Elam, and probably the cultural realm of Elam was no longer a unified kingdom (Potts, 2004, p. 259). Scattered remains of this period have similarly been reported from Susa and other Elamite districts (Potts, 2004, pp. 259-288). Yet, absence of these data and silence of the Elamite sources do not necessarily imply the decrepitude of Elamite Empire or lack of an independent state in the kingdom. Such a situation can probably be explained by two scenarios of changes in the earlier traditions: Firstly, the tradition of recording activities related with temple construction on the part of the Elamite kings was probably declined; secondly, the tradition of building recurrent temples for the Elamite deities could have been faded out. Thus, what the archaeological record tells us is that putting up monumental temples and boasting about them were no longer practiced by the Elamite kings, and we are no longer faced with repetitive temples constructed for different gods in the Neo-Elamite period.

Though scholars such as Hinz, Potts, Dombart, and Madjidzadeh have related the ziggurat depicted in the Assurbanipal's palace with Susa drawing on the report of Assurbanipal, excavations of French teams since 1897 and other expeditions that have worked in Susa have not as yet recovered remains of a big enough, multi-storied building that can be attributed to a ziggurat such as one represented in the Assurbanipal's palace. The only remains from the Elamite period in Susa include ashy surfaces, fireplace, kiln, and ovens as well as parts of rooms in Layers 3-12 in Ville Royal I (Carter, 1978, p. 197) and ruins of a small, square sanctuary with walls covered in glazed tiles belonging to Shutruk-Nahhunte II on the Acropole mound along with a structure with brick-paved floor and multiple studs (De Miroschedji, 1978); and very limited remains of walls in Ville Royal date to the Neo-Elamite period. Therefore, the archaeological dataset and historical information from Susa shows that traces of construction or presence of such a ziggurat did not exist in the archaeological city of Susa, or the related evidence as yet remains uncovered.

Conclusion

The only evidence of ziggurat construction from Elam is the ziggurat of Choga Zanbil (see Figure 5) in the ancient city of Dur-Untash, founded by the Middle Elamite king Untash-Gal². It contained separate temples for 32 Elamite deities, and the ziggurat of Choga Zanbil served as the focal point of the city (Figure 6). What the excavations have revealed of this structure (Ghirshman, 1373/1994; 1375/1996) suggests that the design and construction of the both ziggurats, i.e., the ziggurat depicted on the Assurbanipal's relief in Nineveh and the ziggurat of Choga Zanbil, follow the same pattern.

Some believe that the city was flourishing only during the Untash-Gal's reign and a short while after him (Potts, 1994, p. 43; Potts, 2004, p. 284). However, in the course of Assurbanipal's fifth campaign against Elam, Ummanaldash, fled from Madaktu to Dur-Untash following the collapse of two frontier cities (Streck, 1916, p. 49; Luckenbill, 1926, p. 307) and took refuge in this city. In his reports, Assurbanipal states that he captured the city. This shows that this scared city had living facilities and was still inhabited during the Neo-Elamite period, with Assurbanipal describing it as the royal city. More interestingly, the moniker Dur-Utash (Dur-Undasi) (Streck, 1916, p. 49; Luckenbill, 1926, p. 307) continued to designate the city from the thirteenth to the seventh century B.C. Also, Ghirshman has excavated at Choga Zanbil bronze, socketed arrowheads specific to the Assyrian army (Ghirshman, 1373/1994, p. 55). Furthermore, the smashed bull guardians at the gates and broken door seals corroborate the presence of the invading Assyrian army and the total devastation of the city by Assurbanipal who put an end to its settlements. Based on the above discussions, the artisans who carved the ziggurat on the relief bearing the conquest scene of an Elamite ziggurat at the Assurbanipal's palace might have been inspired by the ziggurat of Choga Zanbil.

² Indeed, several ziggurats have been reported from Elamite cultural world but none of them has undergone scientific studies to date.

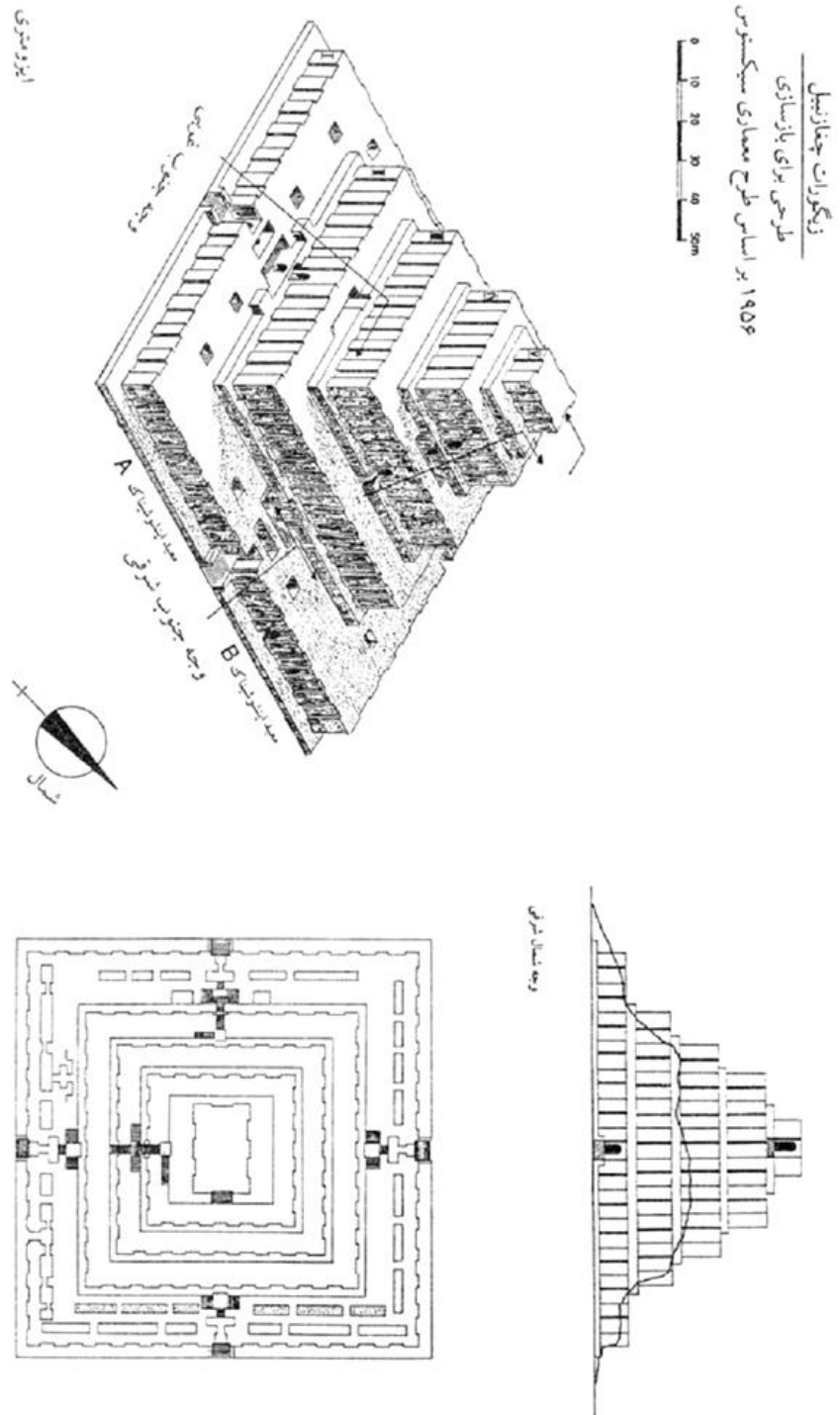


Figure 5. Reconstructed drawing of the ziggurat of Choga Zanbil (Ghirshman, 1373/1994, p. 82, fig. 40).

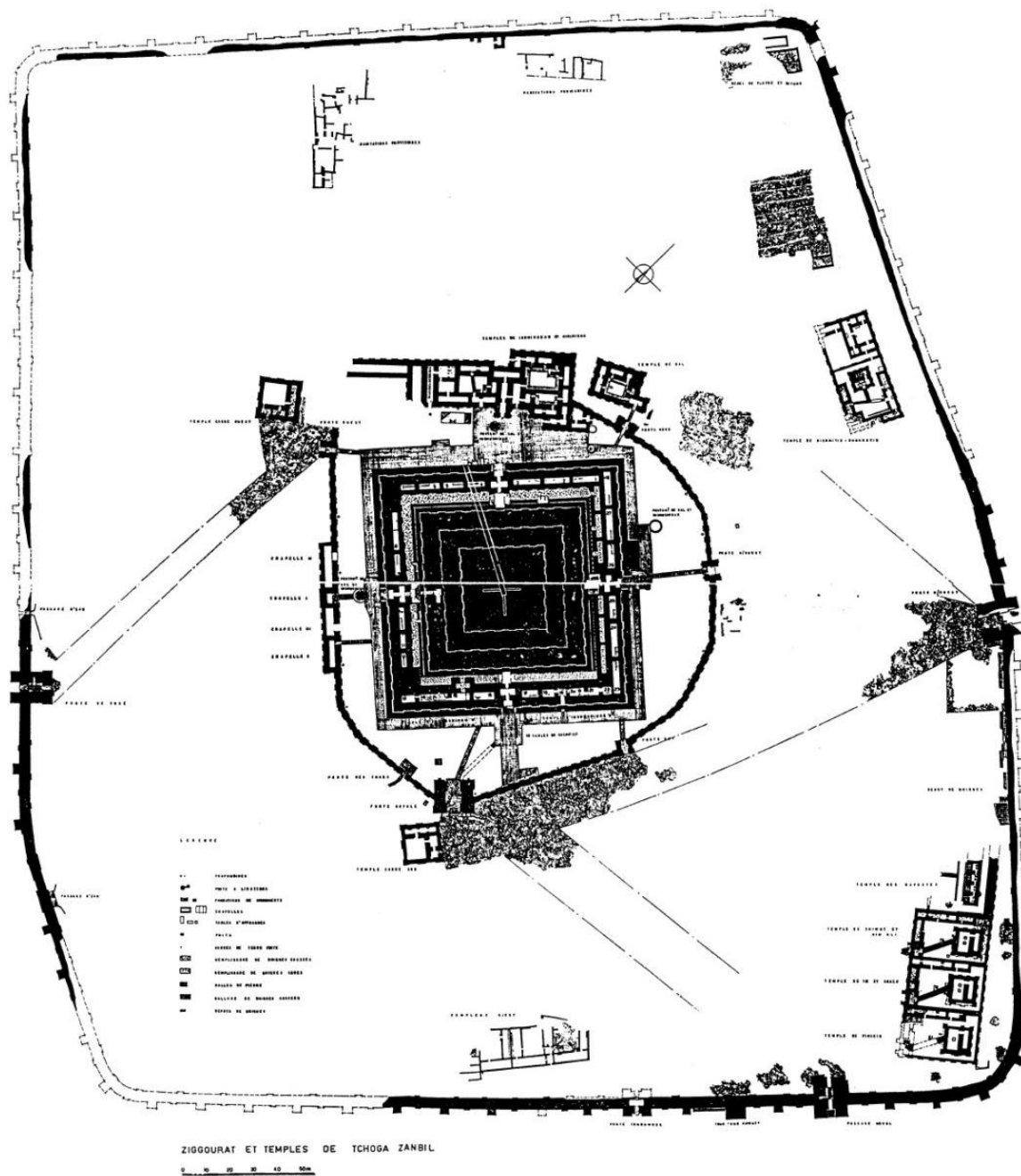


Figure 6. Plan of the ziggurat of Choga Zanbil with its surrounding temples and the inner defensive wall of the Untash-Gal city (Ghirshman, 1963, p. 21).

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