

## Short Remarks on the Caves at Tabo in Spiti

—Christoph Cüppers

The town and monastery of Tabo are located in a valley of the Spiti River, which flows along the edge of the plateau on which the town and its few fields are situated. Right next to the road that crosses the valley along the northern side of the plateau, and opposite the town, rises a northerly exposed cliff containing caves. These caves all lie at the same height, and can easily be reached from the road over a gradually ascending path.

Everyone who has visited this region and left behind an account mentions these caves, and this is not surprising in view of the fact that they are clearly visible from all sides of the valley, and have in some cases been provided with structures in front of them one associates with houses. Probably the first mention of the caves comes from Francke: "On the hill side, almost like cave dwellings, are the winter houses of the lamas."<sup>1</sup>

Giuseppe Tucci, who visited the monastery and the village of Tabo for three days (18-21 July) in the year 1933, mentions these caves in his report

only in passing: "The winter seat of the monks, with their small cells dug into the rock which overhangs to the North of Tabo plateau, has been abandoned (plate IIa); the hermitages have been deserted and are beginning to crumble."<sup>2</sup>

A photo of the north-facing cliff is reproduced in the part of his book containing illustrations (plate IIa). This photo shows, in the middle, three frontal structures connected with caves. It must have been taken either from the monastery or from the road below. As there are no other remarks and photos relating to the caves in Tucci's publication, the possibility cannot be entirely ruled out that Tucci did not undertake to traverse the short path up to the caves and decaying structures.<sup>3</sup>

Romi Khosla visited the region at the beginning of the 1970s and provides in his report a description of the caves of Tabo that goes beyond Tucci's report:

The mountains on either side rise up steeply

and the monastery is built on a flat piece of land that has been defined by a large bend in the river. The footpath, which remains north of the river, makes its way into Tabo village and beyond, passing well the rocky cliffs and the ancient caves that are attached to the monastery. These caves are totally dark from inside and have been neglected for many years although their walls still have the ancient paintings which were done by the Indian craftsmen who decorated the temples of the *Chos-khor*. Unfortunately these paintings are in a terrible state and, without considerable renovation, it is not possible to discern very much on the rocky walls.<sup>4</sup>

The above-mentioned caves of Tabo are far from being the only system of caves in this region. If one follows the course of the Spiti River west towards Kaza, along the way one can see similar systems located above the road or on the other side of the river. Some of these have eroded so much that only remains of the back wall or a small opening filled with debris is visible. These caves are not located in direct proximity to modern settlements but in isolated spots above the road.

If we return once more to Tucci's photograph and compare it with plate (1) of the caves, taken in July 1994, it is immediately apparent that, of the three dwellings standing in Tucci's time, only the one on the right still exists. The steady process of decay affecting the site has in the meantime been halted by the Indian government, which gave it Protected Cultural Heritage status.

From plate (1) it can also be seen that the number of caves is far larger than what is visible on the plate in Tucci (1988). A system of approximately six caves (pls. 2 and 3) extends to the right

of the house, and a number of smaller complexes, some filled with debris, to the left of it (pls. 4,5,6, 7). Plate 7 shows the last caves in this series, all of them already in a state of heavy erosion.

Handa appears to have been the first person to investigate the caves above Tabo more closely. Handa writes of "natural caves", but they are clearly artificial ones, that is, created by human hand. In his report, Handa mentions that several potsherds were found.

All the above-mentioned authors agree that the caves served as dwellings, principally as winter quarters for the monks of Tabo. They do not ask the question who excavated the caves and how old they might be.

During my highly cursory inspection of these caves in August 1994 upon joining a research project on Western Tibet of the University of Vienna and the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, I noted close similarities between them and the caves investigated in southern Mustang. Both represent man-made caves connected with one another and built up, in some cases, into more than one level. In Tabo, as in Mustang, traces could be found of old hearths, niches, seats and grain storage areas. Of the wall paintings mentioned by Khosla, however, I found no trace. The walls of the caves I visited were not coated with clay - which would have been necessary for the application of paint, as demonstrated by the examples from Mustang. Khosla's observation presumably refers to the "building-like" caves, which are the most easily accessible. The walls in all the caves I visited lacked clay coatings, and some of them were heavily sooted.

The spontaneous impression of similarity between the Tabo caves and those in northern and

southern Mustang naturally raises the question whether the caves of Tabo and the other caves along the Spiti River represent old settlement sites<sup>5</sup> that were only later used by Buddhist hermits and monks as dwellings. In order to answer this question with greater certainty, it would be desirable to carry out an archaeological investigation of these and other caves along the Spiti River with the same care as could be shown by the research team of the Nepal-German Project on High Mountain Archaeology for the caves of Mustang.

## Notes

1. Francke (1910), p. 38.
2. Tucci (1988), p. 37.
3. Handa (1994), p. 128, shares the view that neither Tucci nor Francke visited the caves: "It was probably because of the unwieldy look of these caves that Francke and Tucci did not hazard the risk of ascending them." It should be repeated that access to these caves is over an easily traversable footpath, and in no way compares in degree of difficulty to access to similar cave systems in southern or northern Mustang.
4. Khosla (1979), p. 37.
5. The dating of the cave systems in the valley of Muktināth undertaken by A. Simons, W. Schön and S.S. Shrestha was to 800 B.C. Cf. Simons (1994), p. 54.

## References

- Francke, A.H. (1926) *Anitquities of Indian Tibet*, vol. II. Calcutta.
- Handa, O.C. (1994) *Tabo Monastery and Buddhism in the Trans-Himalaya (Thousand Years of the Existence of the Tabo Chos-Khor)*. New Delhi.
- Khosla, R. (1979) *Buddhist Monasteries in the Western Himalaya*. Kathmandu.
- Simons, A., Werner Schön und Sukra Sagar Shrestha (1994) *Preliminary Report on the 1992 Campaign of the Team of the Institute of Prehistory, University of Cologne*. In: *Ancient Nepal*, no. 134, pp. 51-75. Kathmandu.



Plate 1 The northern slope of Tabo



Plate 2 The caves above Tabo village, eastern direction

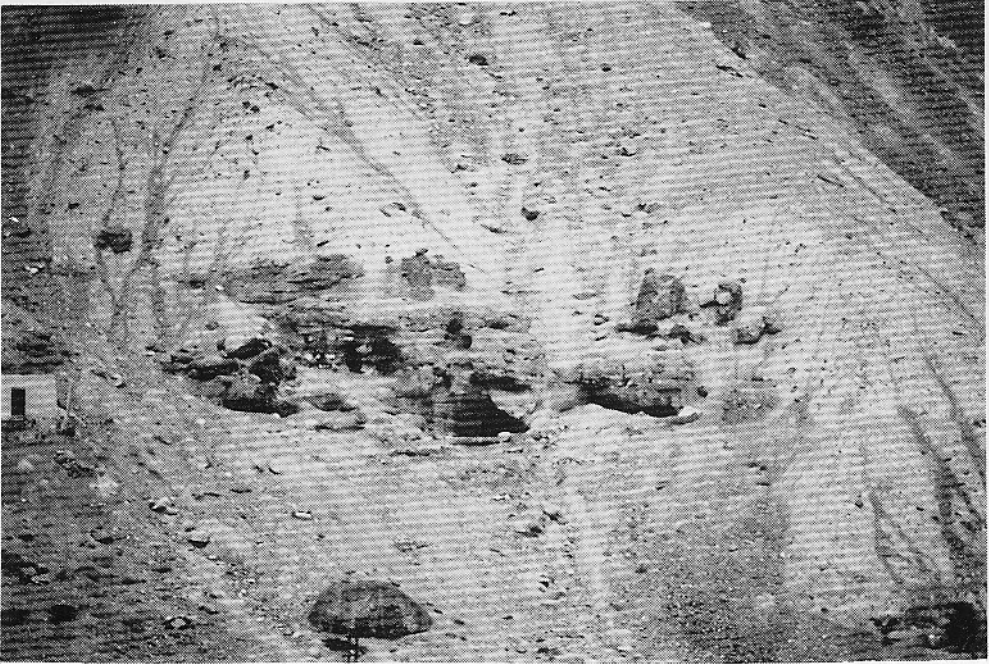


Plate 3 The caves above Tabo village, eastern direction



Plate 4 The caves above Tabo village, western direction



Plate 5 The caves above Tabo village, western direction

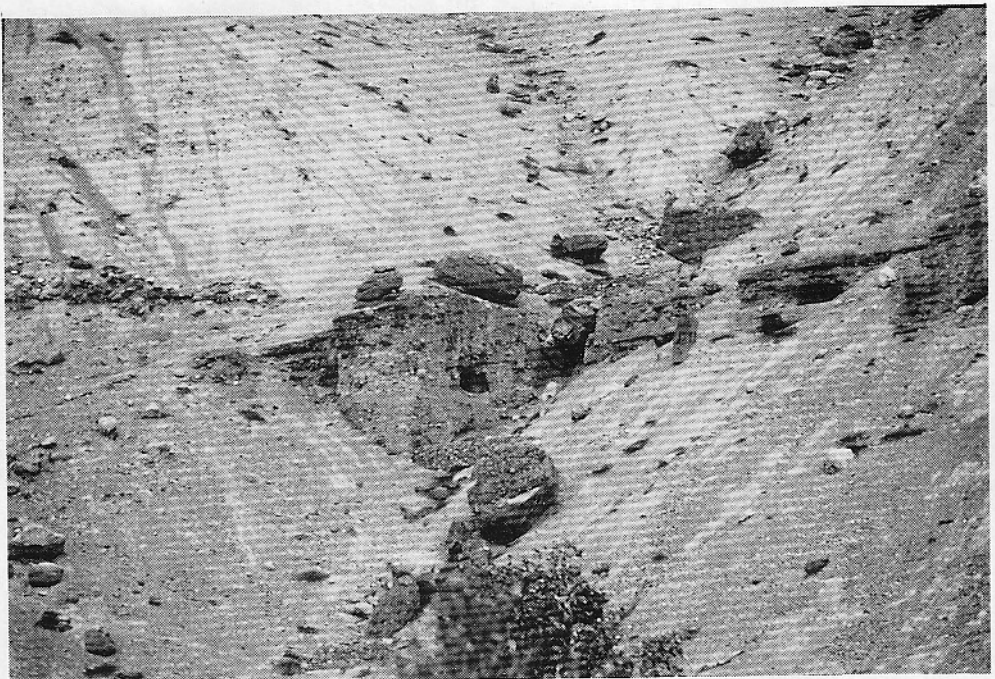


Plate 6 The caves above Tabo village, western direction

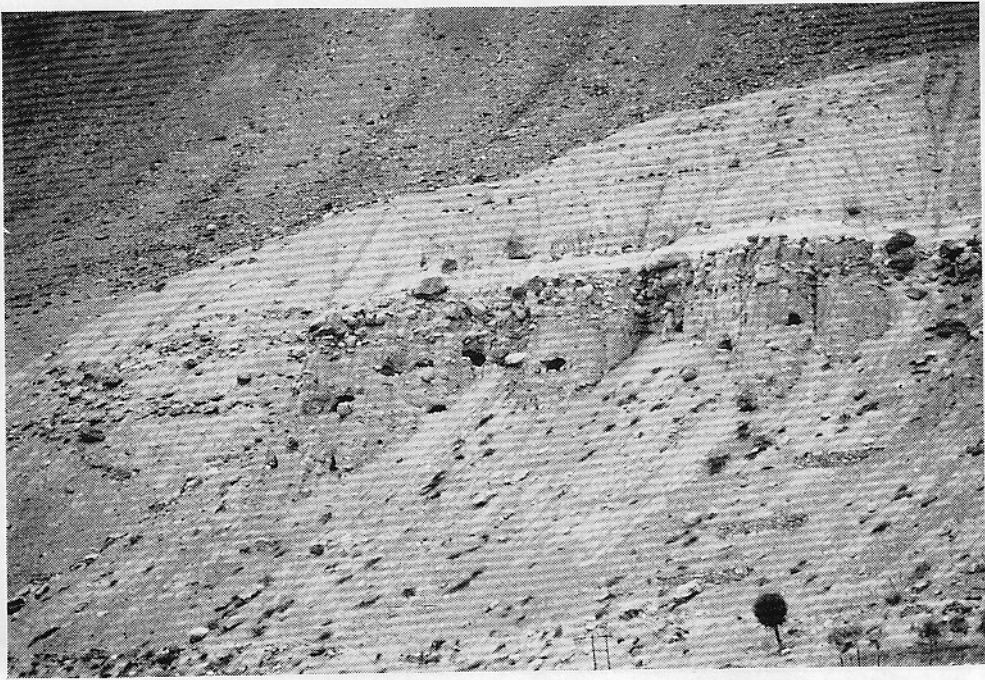
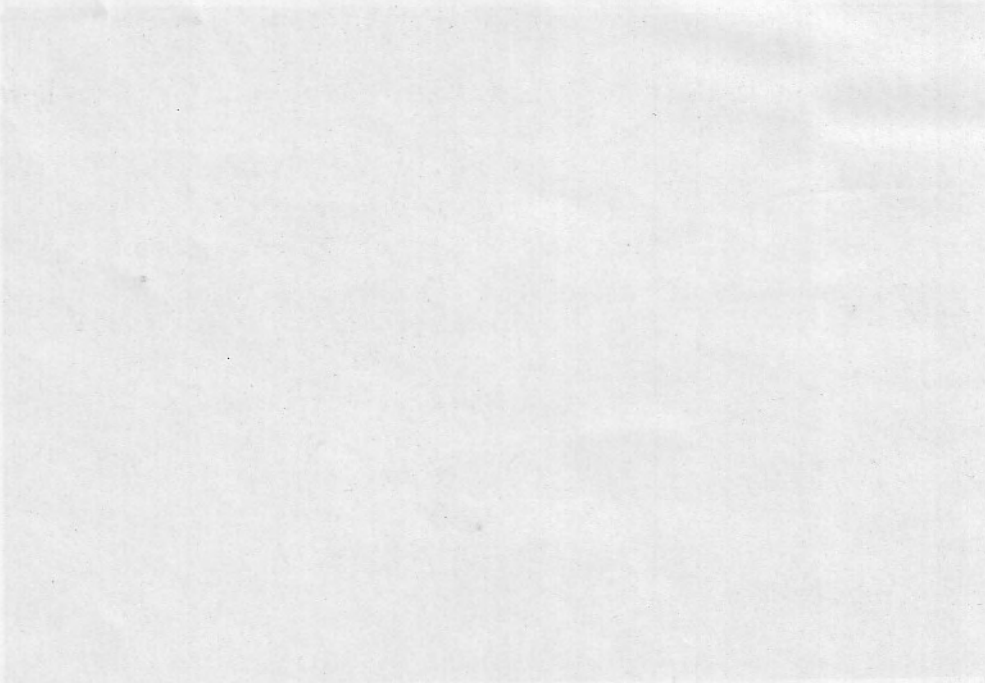


Plate 7 The caves above Tabo village, western direction



APPENDIX 1

LIX

LI

XLI

XXXI

C

XXI

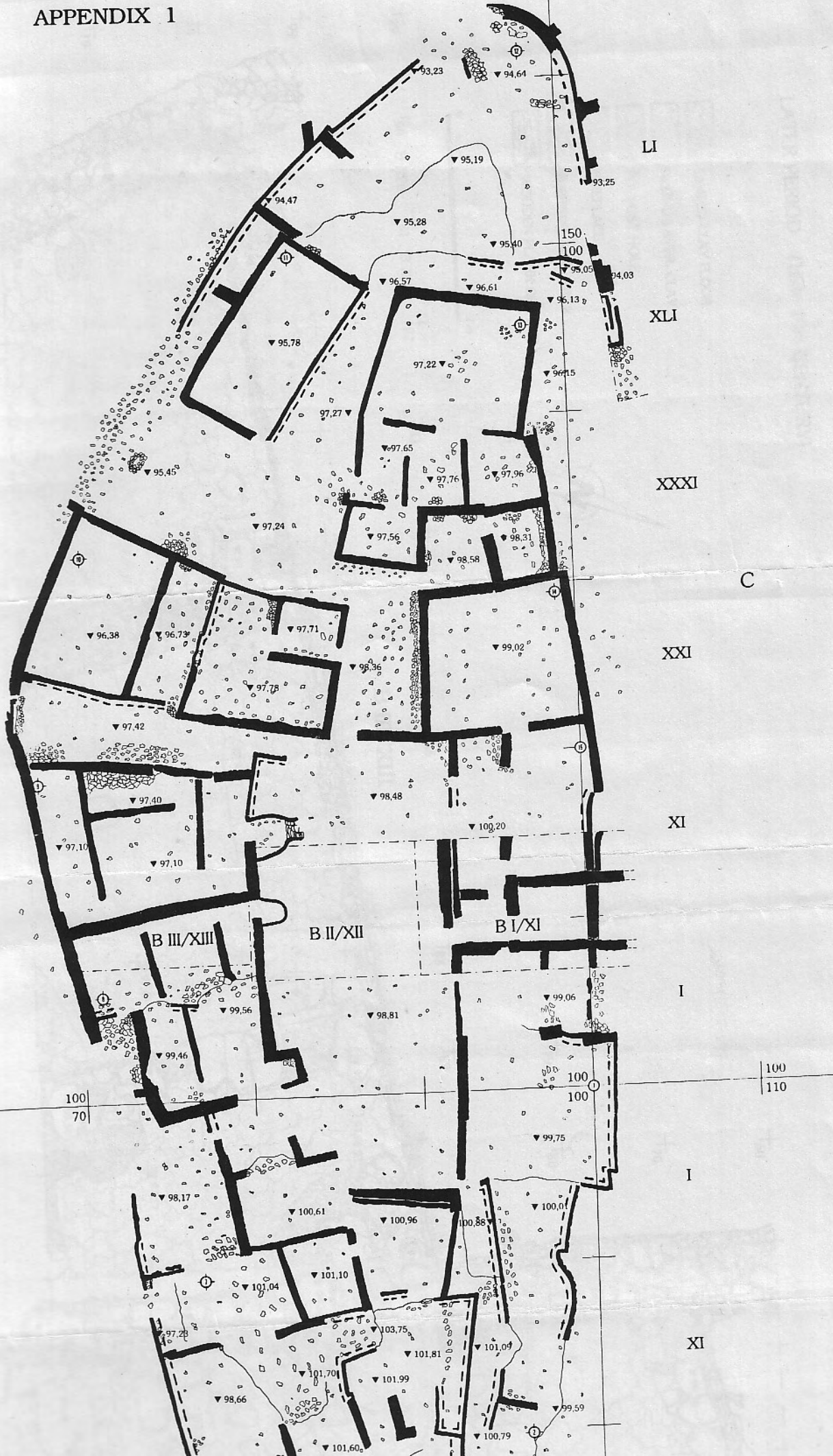
XI

I

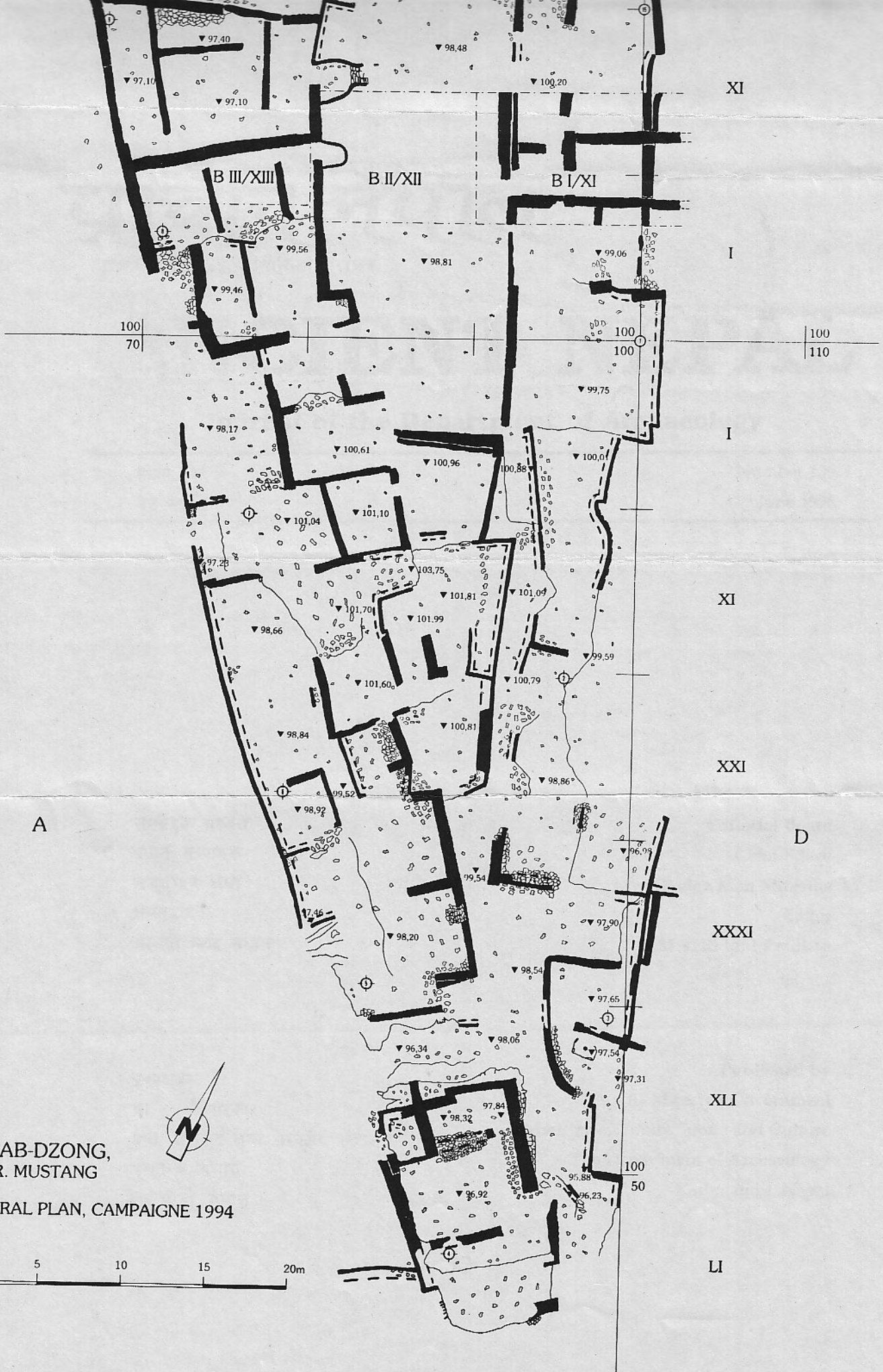
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XI

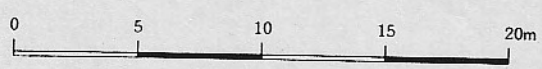
B







GARAB-DZONG,  
 DISTR. MUSTANG  
 GENERAL PLAN, CAMPAIGNE 1994





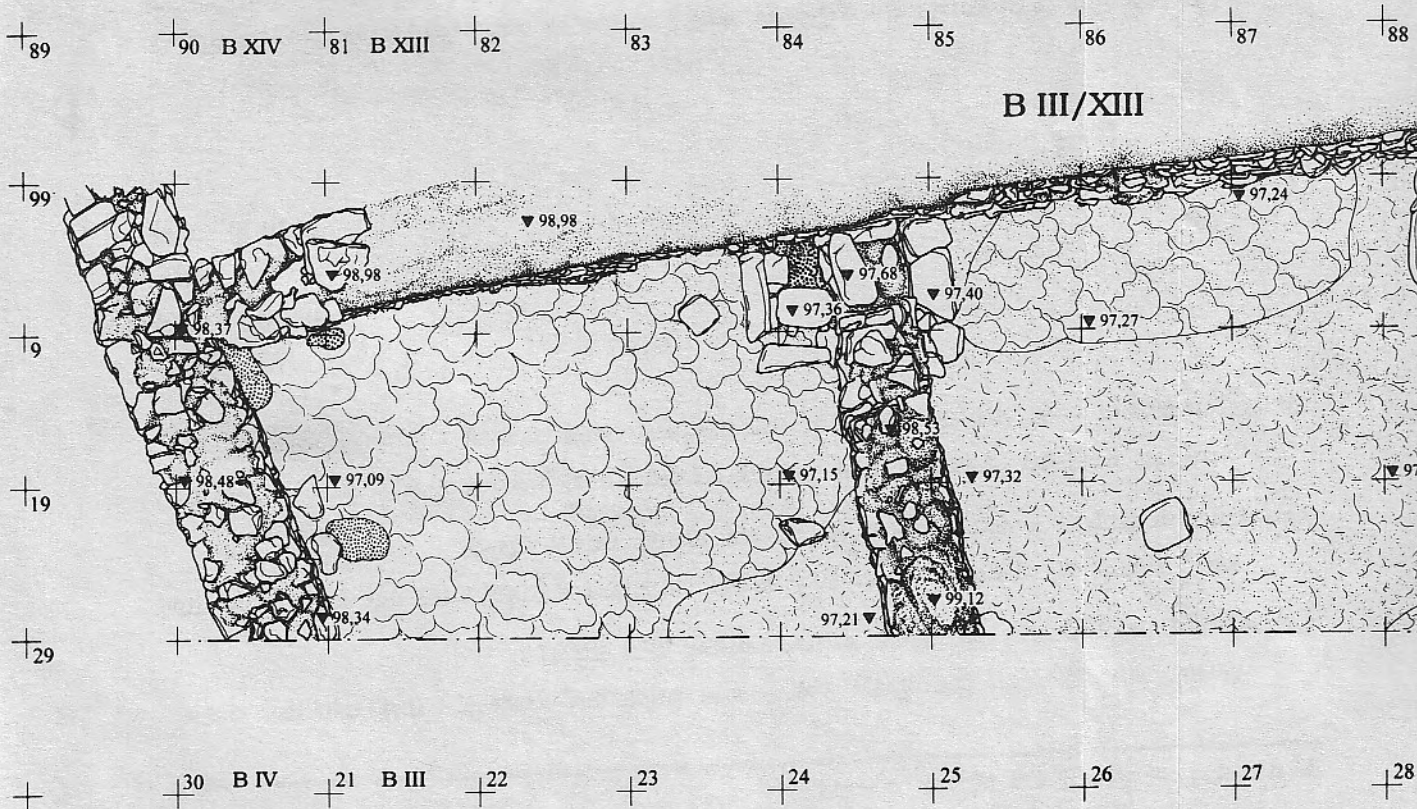
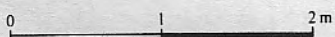
# APPENDIX 2

## GARAB - DZONG

### 1994 EXCAVATION AREA

#### LATER PERIOD (16th - 19th CENTURY)

-  TAMPED CLAY FLOOR
-  FILLING LAYER, CLAY
-  PIT; POST HOLE
-  FIREPLACE
-  NATURAL SOIL; ROCK
-  WODDEN PLANK OR POST



+50

+41 B XII

+42

+43

+44

+45

+46

+47

+48

### B II/XII

+60

+70

+79

+80

+89

+89

88

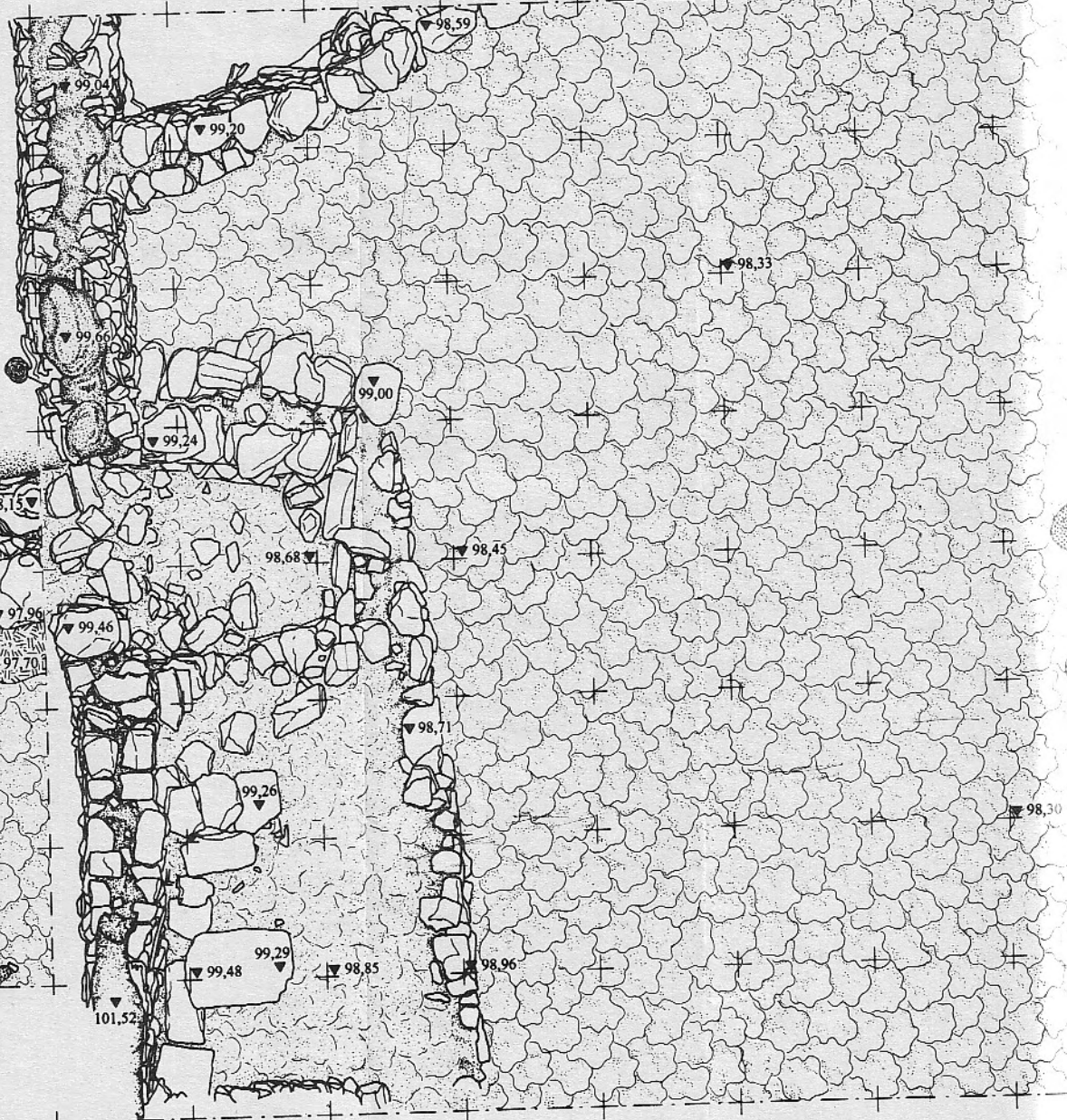
97,40

97,50

97,70 97,60

97,35 99,50

+28 +29 +30



+31 B II

+32

+33

+34

+35

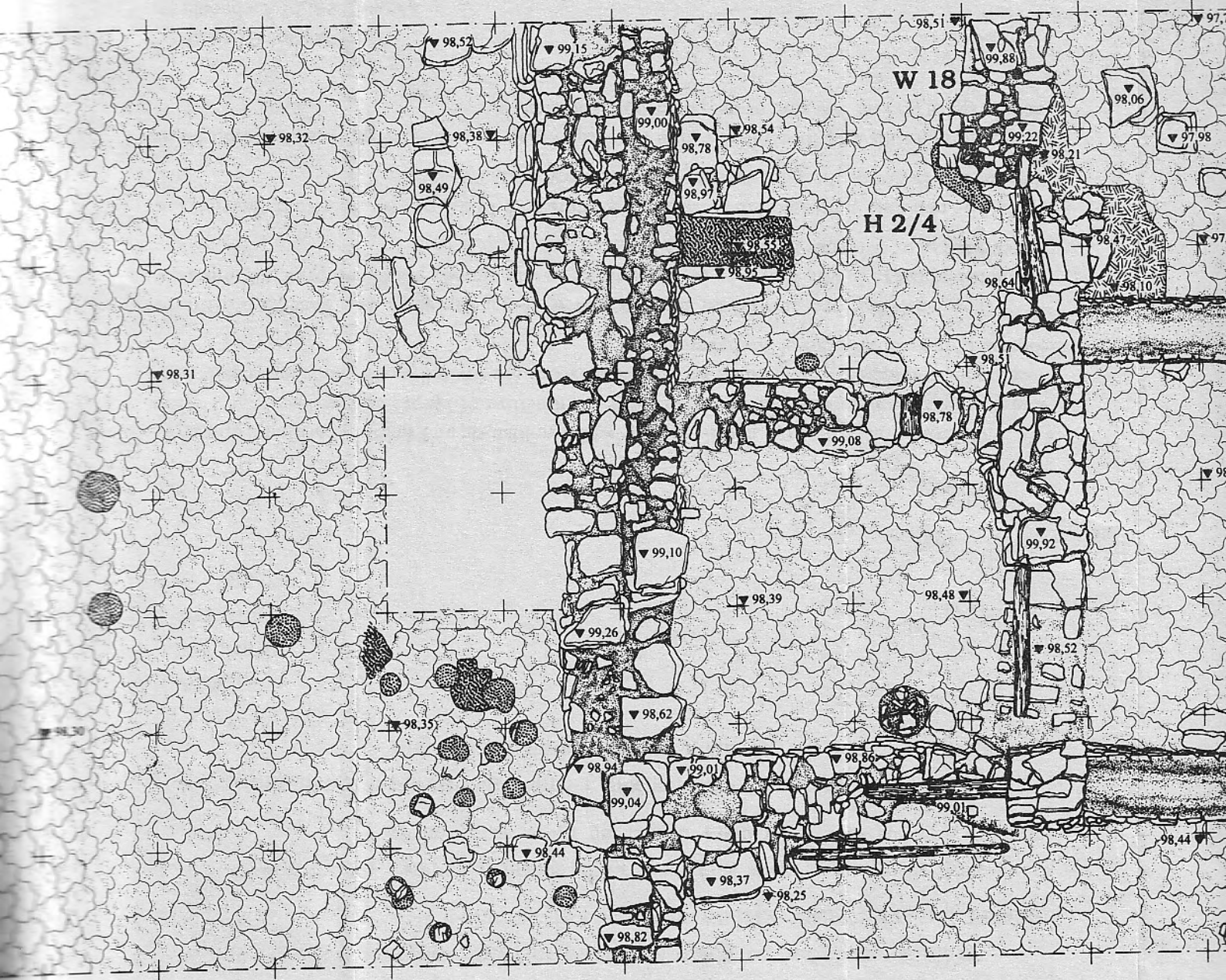
+36

+37

+38

+48 +49 +50 B XII +41 B XI +42 +43 +44 +45 +46 +47 +48

B I/XI

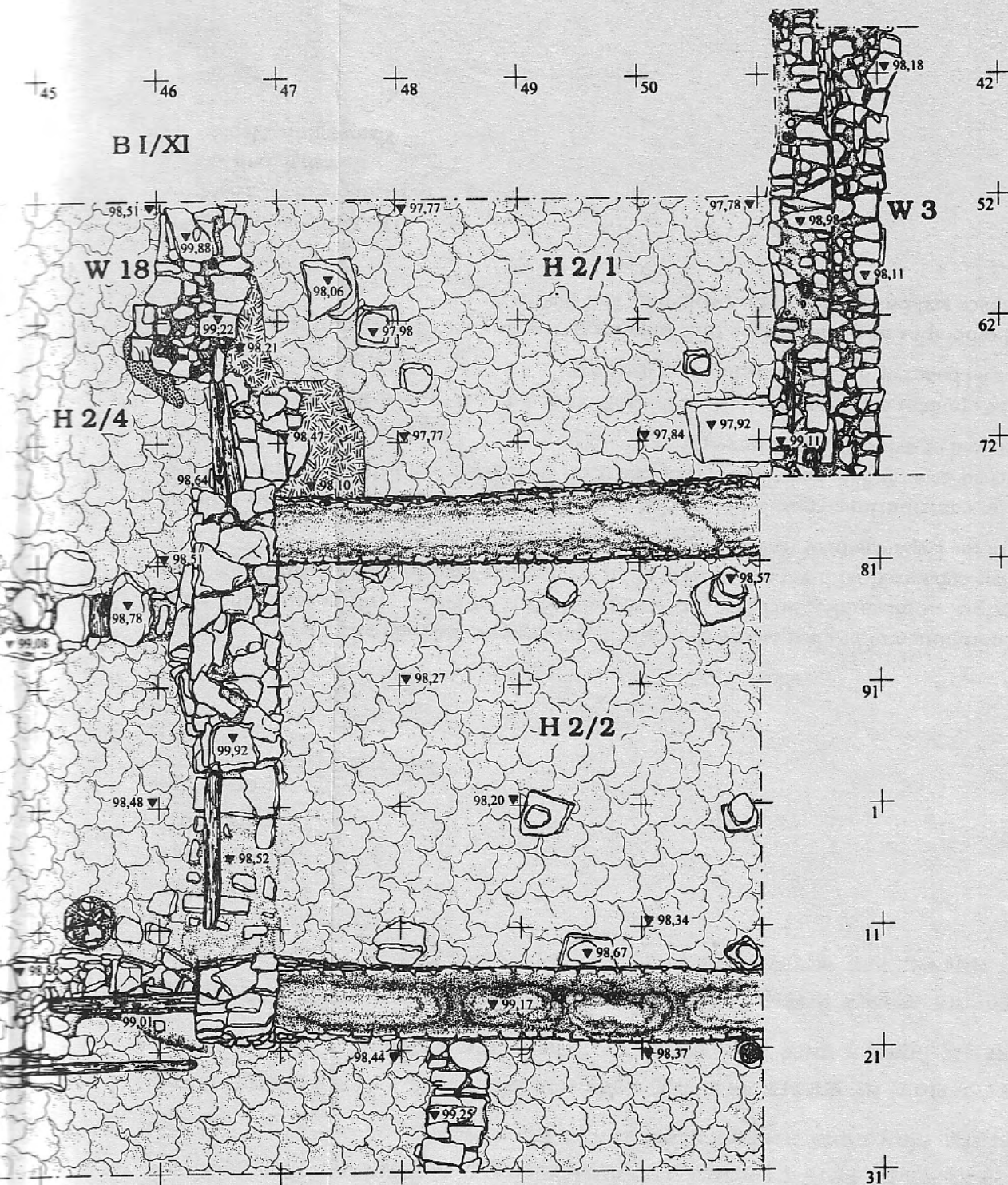


+38 +39 +40 B II +31 B I +32 +33 +34 +35 +36 +37 +38

+40 B XI +31 C XI + 32+

+45 +46 +47 +48 +49 +50 + 42+

B I/XI



+35 +36 +37 +38 +39 +40 B I + C I +