

Excavation in the Kathmandu Valley

-Chiara Silvi Antonini
-Giovanni Verardi

The Nepalese-Italian Archaeological Mission began excavations in the city of Kathmandu in 1984 at the sites of Dhumvarahi and Hadigau. The joint excavations were represented by Mr. B.K. Rijal from HMG, Department of Archaeology, Nepal.

For numerous different reasons emerging from the thorough exploration of the city area and the valley carried out in previous years, and which will be dealt with in greater detail in the following, the choice fell upon these two particular sites.

Dhumvarahi is situated to the northwest of the city, on the right bank of the Rudramati (Dhobi Khola). The site must have been a very important centre during the Licchavi period. A passage of the *Gopalaraja-vamsavali* mentions one of the worthy deeds performed by Bhumigupta as being the consecration of an image of "Dharanivaraha Visnu". This image has been identified¹ as the one still preserved in a small temple at Dhumvarahi, now enveloped by the huge roots of a pipal and still actively used for worship. The identification was based on the fact that the Dhumvarahi image is the most important image of Varaha Avatara found so far in the Valley and on its date, which the stylistic features indicate as the

6th or 7th century A. D.² A Licchavi inscription has also been found in the vicinity, at the site of Tunal-devi.³ Lastly, along the road skirting the mound where the excavations are situated, about twenty years ago Dr. N. R. Banerjee had dug a trial trench in a large dump, the remains, of which can still be seen, and from which a large quantity of precious pottery has been removed.⁴

The river, the dump and the ancient sacred area are the three factors on which the assumption of the existence of a settlement has originally been based.

After locating the highest point in the area, it was deemed advisable to begin the work immediately, as it was urgent to carry out the archaeological survey before this was made impossible by the rapidly expanding construction work going on in the area.

At Dhumvarahi a trench was dug and subdivided into 12 5x5 m squares, covering a total field area of 47x56 metres.

The site occupies square W in the overall grid of the area, which has been divided into 50 m. sided squares. Squares marked WCd,

WCc, WHa, WGa, Wgd, Wfa, Wfb, WMa, Wmb and WRa (Drawing A) have been excavated.

In squares Wcd and WCc a small mound was visible. Some debris and bricks could be seen on its surface (Pl I, fig. 1), which was covered with trees and reeds. The trench runs through the middle and was cut so as to show the stratigraphic sequence on the south wall of Wcd and WCc (Drawing B). It was thus possible to study the cave-in of the overlying structure, only a few remaining bricks of which have been found still laid in a regular pattern (Pl. I, fig. 2), and also to recover a large quantity of potsherds.

In the other squares, below the humus layer, marked (S), layer (1) was formed by whitish and compact clay. Large, roughly rectangular ditches had been dug and then filled with dark soil, i. e. soil containing organic matter mixed with large quantities of fictile material (sherds and figurines). Furthermore, in squares Wfa, Wfb, WMa and WRa, several storage jars had been buried, and circular and square pits have been found (Pl. I, fig 3 and 4). The pattern of the jars and pits was not constant. The latter had their walls and bottom lined with bricks (Pl. II, fig. 6) and were empty, except for Pit 16 in Wfa, which contained dark and carefully purified clay. Also jar 11, in the same square, had been used to contain clay, while the others, which had presumably been used to hold the water required for working the clay, contained pottery and brick fragments (some of which had been preserved intact) (Pl. II, fig. 7). These were the remains of the collapse of the overlying structures. All that remains of these structures appears to be part of a cave-in and crumbling wall in square Wfa. The only stru-

cture of layer (1) preserved consists of a double row of bricks in sequence in square Wfb (Pl. II, fig. 5)

It is thus possible to conclude that the archaeological layer denoted as (1) affords evidence of the presence of a group of potters dating back to fairly recent times who had been attracted to Dhumvarahi by the excellent quality of its clay. This settlement, together with the farming carried on by the inhabitants of the site, up to only a few years ago a rural district of the city, was responsible for disturbing the layer. Originally this layer must have preserved evidence, however slight, of an ancient settlement, i. e. the one to which, at least partly, the high quality ceramic finds found in the filling of the pits presumably refer. The soil used for this purpose was presumably taken from the area itself and preserves the remains of the material culture of the settlement, the masonry buildings of which have been lost. As we have seen, the only evidence of the preceding situation is what remains of a wall in trench Wfb.

This hypothesis seems to be confirmed by stratigraphic situation. In squares WCc and Wmb, the trench was dug down to a depth of 2.90 m. It thus became clear that to layer (1) followed a geologically interesting but archaeologically sterile sequence, with alternating sandy and clayey levels, the composition of which is probably closely related to the behaviour of the river next to it (Drawing C).

Ancient bricks were probably reutilized until recent times. What was probably the worship platform of a recent building, the remains of which are visible in the small mound in Wda and Wdb, is made of ancient bricks measuring 34x24x8 and 21x21x9 cm., which have been preserved (Pl. I, fig. 2)

The objects worthy of mention found at Dhumvarahi include:

-a headless, legless male terracotta figurine (Inv. No. DHV 2) wearing a tunic with a double-folded neck, a belt and a cloth passing between the legs. The figurine is made of highly purified clay and is of fine workmanship.

-a terracotta spout (Inv. No. DHV 14) bearing traces of red paint in the form of *mokara*.

-a second *makara* (Inv. No. DHV 6) with gaping jaws and decorated with plant motifs made of black terracotta with traces of black slip (Pl. II, fig. 3). The spouts have definite features in common with objects from the Licchavi period.⁵

-a fragment of terracotta decorations representing a *kinnara* with swollen belly and raised arms (Inv. No. DHV 5).

-the image of a divinity wearing a cloak ending in a point in front and decorated with huge earrings and with the hair piled high on the head (Inv. No. DHV 1).

The animal figurines are particularly numerous. Some of them have been fashioned as a single piece. Mostly, however, they consist of two halves joined together when the clay was still wet. In some specimens the legs were modelled separately and then applied before baking.

Also some dabbers have been found. These objects are still in use today, but are also similar to those found in the excavations carried out in the Ganges valley⁶. Also found were a few Pasupati coins, which are traditionally attributed to Licchavi period.

Also Hadigau lies on the right bank of the river, about 2 k.m. away from Dhumvarahi. The reasons leading up to the choice of this

site are as follows:

1) Scientific literature points to Hadigau as being one of the most important Licchavi period sites;

2) Inscriptions in Licchavi Script (Gupta Character Script)⁷ and stone sculptures dating back to the Licchavi and pre-Licchavi periods have been found in this area;

3) A large quantity of pottery, much of which is certainly ancient, has been found on the slope running down from the last houses in the village to the river; in the natural section visible on the river banks potsherds are visible down to a depth of about two metres;

4) The unbuilt up area is quite large. It is situated between two temples, that of Saraswati in the village and Satya Narayana closer to the river. The present buildings are of recent construction, but as the cult images show and according to the evidence of tradition, they were erected on the spot where, in ancient times, miracles had suggested the advisability of erecting a shrine.

In the field immediately adjacent to the compound of the temple of Satya Narayana an extensive trench has been dug over 7 5x5 m. squares denoted as ATb, APc, AUd, AVc, AQB, AVa, AQC, plus half of AVd (Drawing D and Fl. III, fig. 9). The stratigraphic situation is extremely complex. Taking account of the fact that the numbering of the layers is incomplete and provisional, it can be summed up schematically as follows:

—Surface (S). Brick fragments and potsherds are visible, but only in very small quantities. It corresponds to the humus layer that has been disturbed on many occasions during farmwork.

--First layer. In ATb, APc and AUd remains of rooms have been unearthed of which a few small wall portions have been preserved (2 or 3 rows of kiln-fired bricks) and respective floors. The small pinkish bricks are all broken and no reliable measurements can yet be given. It is possible that these bricks originally belonged to the second layer structures and had been reutilized. The second layer is documented throughout the excavated area, where it appears as an extensive collapse (Pl. III, fig. 10). In AVd the bricks are mixed with large quantities of tiles, only occasionally found elsewhere. This is the result of the total or partial collapse of a number of rooms that had been built in several stages and only more extensive excavation work will allow full light to be shed on it. One of these rooms in APc (Pl. III, fig. 11) still has the floor. Its western and northern walls have collapsed completely.

The remains of two successive settlements are thus documented. The first and most recent of these is built on the ruins of an earlier and larger settlement which has yielded a large amount of ceramic and fictile material.

In AUd, AVa and AVd, the excavation was taken down to a level in which evidence of three floors was found. The earliest of these consists of rectangular bricks (ca. 26x16 cm). The second consists of triangular tiles (side length of 22 cm), laid with alternate edges so as to form parallel horizontal strips (Pl. IV, fig. 12). The third, and most recent, of broken bricks that cannot easily be measured, is particularly noticeable in AVd (Pl. IV, fig. 13).

These could well be outside floors as is suggested by the arrangement at right angle of the triangular tile floor in AVd. It still remains to be clarified what relationship exists between these floors (and each of them separa-

tely) and the second layer structures. With reference to the rectangular and triangular brick floor there is definitely a wall running E-W for a distance of about 10 m and made of 24/26x16x4.50 cm bricks. A trial trench dug in AVa has revealed the foundation of the wall itself, showing the fill (clay, a few brickbats, ashes, potsherds and two bull figurines) in which the first of the three floors was built at this point. (Drawing E)

Another wall was unearthed forming a right angle (Pl. V, fig. 14). It is made of bricks measuring 28x29x19/20x5 cm. It has been exposed in AQc and AQB over a length of about 10 m. and reaches a depth of 1.70m. A depth sondage dug in AQB revealed what seems to be its foundation pit and a three course row of bricks at the bottom. The section obtained through the sondage can be read as follows:

- clay
- clay mixed with debris from the rubble
- floor of pressed sherds ascribable to layer two (coccio pesto)
- layer of clay and sand
- comparatively coherent material from the collapsed structures; it has yielded also ceramic and fictile material together with brickbats
- clay layer
- sand and river pebbles.

The sections of AQc and AQB have been drawn in detail in Drawings F and G. A second trial trench dug in AQc (thus also situated south of the wall) displays basically similar stratigraphic features, although the foundation pit is less clearly visible (Drawing H).

The earliest structures of the site have been barely reached in AUd, where the bad

state of repair of the floors described above allowed an immediate test to be made. The heads of two walls running EW and SW were unearthed. It was on these walls and on the filled in spaces delimited by them that the floors described above were gradually built. The objective of the next excavation campaign will be to investigate this earlier layer.

At the present state of the work, no conclusions can be drawn and it is too early to deal even with dating problems. The stratigraphic data are still too incomplete and, although significant, the excavation finds are still not sufficient for a reliable date to be suggested.

The majority of the objects made of terracotta, stone and other materials come from the second layer, and thus coming from among the collapsed structures, it cannot be ascribed with certainty to any particular building. Furthermore, a number of ancient objects have been used improperly until much more recent times. One typical example is that of the polished stone axe (Inv. No. HSN 17) found among the collapsed bricks in AVa, near the floor. This finely crafted axe is of the type used in protohistorical times, and other specimens have occasionally been found in the Kathmandu Valley. Even today these objects are popularly considered vajra-stone. Obviously the protohistorical axe cannot be used to date the wall or the floor near which it was found.

The material found in the rubble of layer two includes several plaques and terracotta figurines, an example of which is the head of Bhairava shown here (Inv. No. HSN 8) and a plaque with Ganesa on it (Inv. No. HSN 5) (Pl. V, figs. 15 and 16). Stylistic comparison with known items will

provide us with useful indications concerning this type of material. In this sense it would be possible to use also several fragments of grey stones, i. e. a piece in which a Garuda in anjalimudra can be recognized (Inv. no. HSN 1) (Pl. VI, fig. 17), a fragment of a tunic (Inv. No. HSN 2) and that of the lower limb of a figure. Unfortunately only a portion of the tunic forming an oval-shaped curve along the basin and the geometric decoration—three parallel horizontal lines—of the material has been preserved (Pl. VI, fig. 18). Also worthy of mention is the presence of a bird-shaped rattle (Inv. No. HSN 14) recalling those found in the Ganges Valley excavations, e. g. at Rajghat⁹ and Mathura¹⁰. Similar bird-shaped figurines were used also as toys, although in this case the holes were arranged so as to house a wheel axle¹¹.

It is worth repeating that this material was not found *in situ*, but among the rubble, mostly consisting of large quantities of common pottery and bricks from the collapsed walls, and can be ascribed with certainty to the large settlement mentioned above.

The pottery fragments include one very interesting specimen (Inv. No. HSN 3) (Pl. VI, fig. 19). This consists of a vase fragment found at the base of the rubble near the floor in AVa, which bears an impressed medallion divided into two parts. On the upper part is a *puṇakalasa* while the lower portion bears 4 characters paleographically determinable as late-Licchavi.

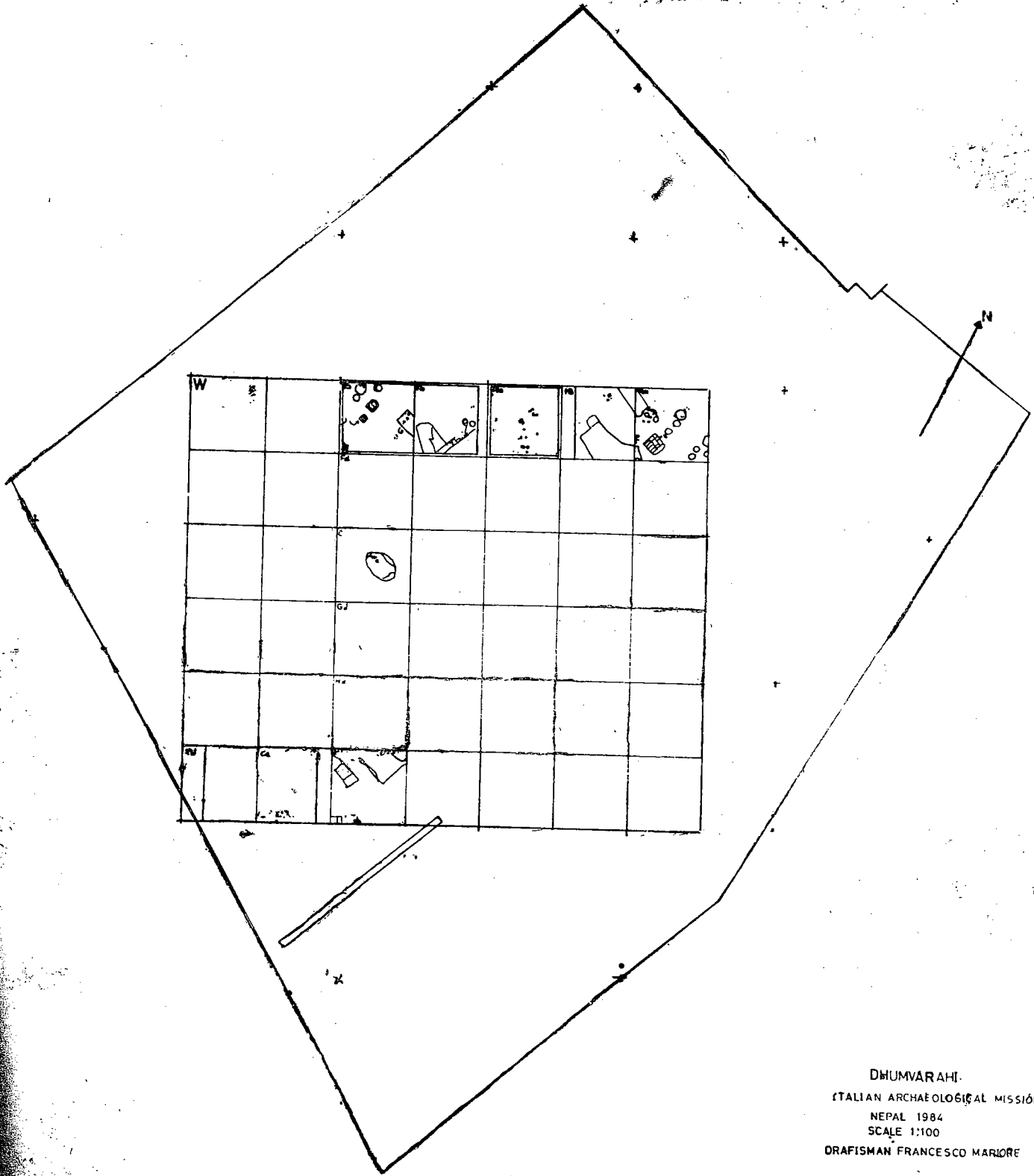
Of special interest is Inv. No. HSN 10 (Pl. VI, fig. 20), found among the brickbats forming the lower collapse documented in the trial trench in AQB. It consists of a terracotta fragment of architectural decoration depicting a standing female figure, unfortunately headless and with the lower part of the legs missing.

The wide hips and the *tribhanga* pose suggest possible comparisons with ancient Indian models, which continued to be followed for many centuries. The type of clay used (yellowish in colour and containing large amounts of mica) support the hypothesis that it was produced locally.

Excavation campaigns carried out in future years will provide fresh data with which to reconstruct the cultural and religious life carried on in the site and allow it to be dated.

Notes

1. M. Shepherd Slusser-G. Vajracharya: *Some Nepalese Stone Sculptures: A Reappraisal within their cultural and historical context*, *Artibus Asiae*, vol. XXXV, 1/2, 1973, pp. 79-138 and pp. 131-132 in particular.
2. The piece referred to by Slusser and Vajracharya belongs to the 6th cent. (op. cit. p. 132), while P. Pal (*Vaisnava Iconology in Nepal: A Study in Art and Religion*, Calcutta 1970; and ID: *The Arts of Nepal*, I, Leiden 1974) and L. S. Bangdel: *The early Sculptures of Nepal*, Kathmandu 1981, Pl. 36, propose the 7th century.
3. See R. Gnoli: *Nepalese Inscriptions in Gupta Characters*, Roma 1956, Inscription n. 5, p. 8.
4. No report has been published on this excavation.
5. DHV 6 recalls the *dantamayamakaramukha-mahapranala* of the Sarnath Museum (cf. V. S. Agrawala: *The Deeds of Harsha*, Varanasi, 1969, p. 20).
6. See the illustrated example from Rajghat in A. K. Narain and P. Singh: *Excavations at Rajghat*, Part III, Varanasi, 1977, pl. XV B.
7. R. Gnoli: op. cit., iscr. no. XI, p. 14; no. XXXV, p. XXXVI, p. 50
8. L. S. Bangdel, op. cit. Pls. 1-3, 11-12, 15-16, 47, 59, 76, 97, 117, 119-121, 127, 145.
9. Cf. A. R. Narain and P. Singh, op. cit., p. 68 and Pl. XVII B.
10. Cf. *Indian Archaeology*, 1973, Pl. XLV
11. Cf. A. S. Altekar and V. Mishra: *Report on Kumrahar Excavations 1951-55*, Patna, 1955, pp. 122-23 and Pl. LVII.



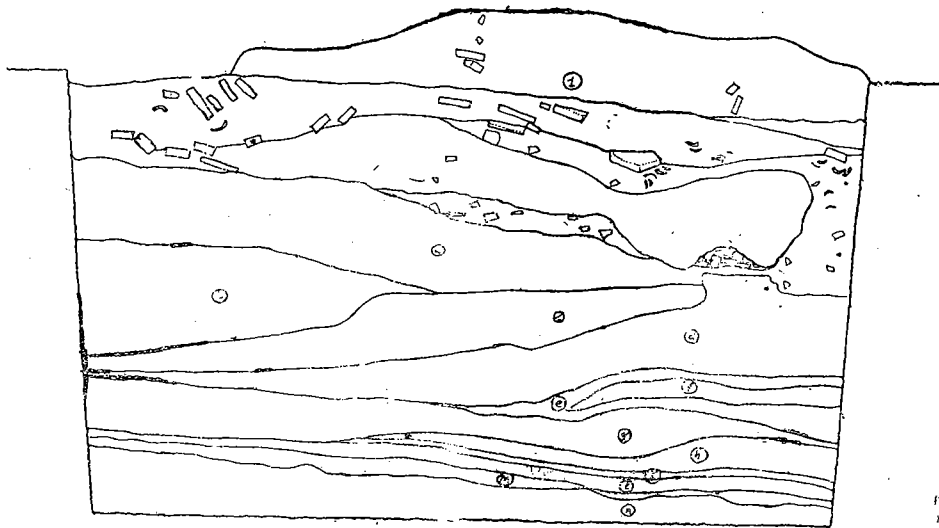
DHUMVARAHI.
ITALIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION
NEPAL 1984
SCALE 1:100
DRAFISMAN FRANCESCO MARIÒRE

DRAWING A

Dhumvarahi. General plan of excavation.

~ DHUMVĀRĀHĪ ~
 ITALIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION
 NEPAL 1984

SECTION IN Wcd-WLc



- 1 - ARCHAEOLOGICAL LAYER
- a - CLAYEY SOIL
- b - SANDY SOIL
- c - SAND MIXED WITH EARTH
- d - CLAY
- e - LIGHT COLOR SAND
- f - DARK COLOR SAND
- g - GREY SAND
- h - LIGHT COLOR SAND
- i - CLAY
- l - LIGHT COLOR SAND
- m - CLAY
- n - LIGHT COLOR SAND

SCALE 1:20
 MARCO FRANCESCO

DRAWING B

Dhumvarahī. Section from Trench ACd and Wcc



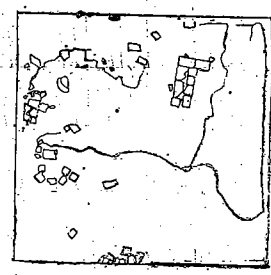
1A7c



1A6c

1A6b

1A6a

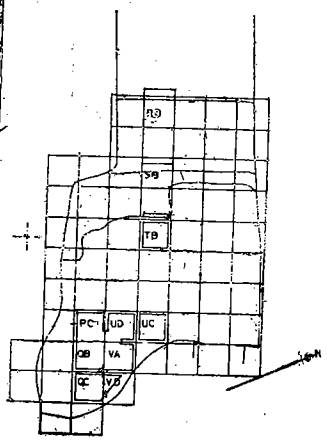


1A6b



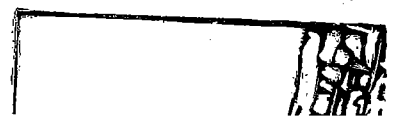
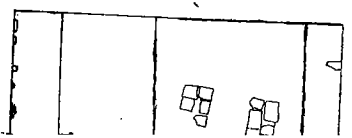
1A6c

1A6a



MADIGAU
ITALIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION
NEPAL 1984
SCALE 1:20
DRAFISMAN FRANCESCO MARIRE

DRAWING D



1A6c

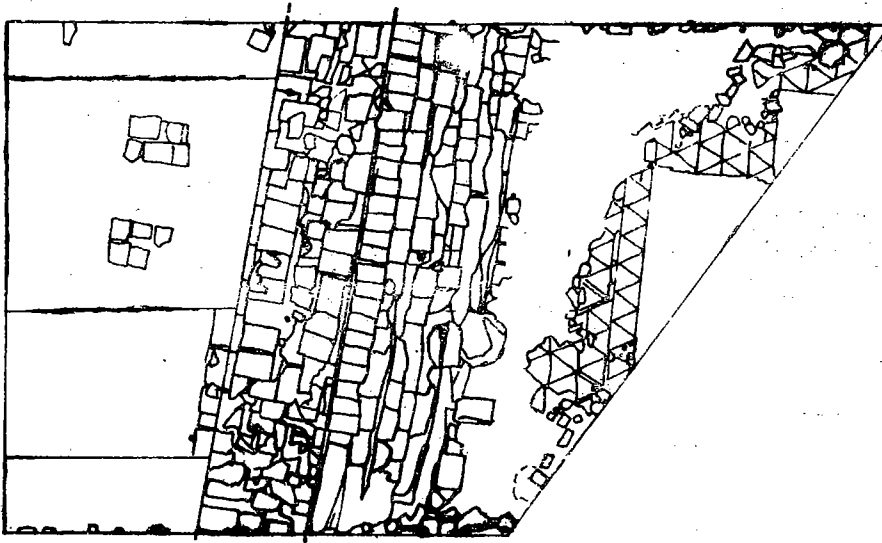


1A0b



1AQc

1AVd



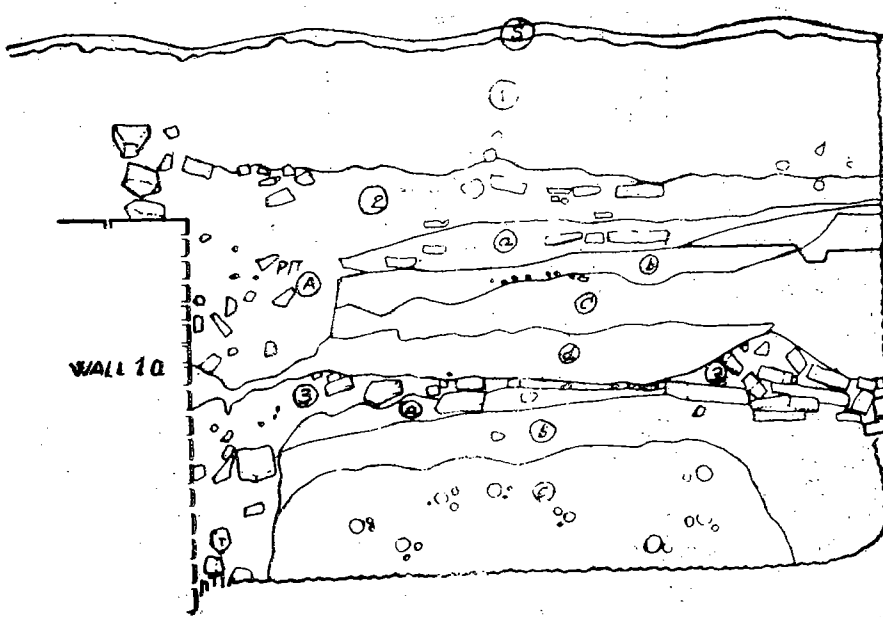
HADIGAU
 ITALIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION
 NEPAL 1984
 SCALE 1:20
 FRANCESCO MARTORE

DRAWING E

Hadigau. Trial trenches in AQc, A0b, AVd, and AVa

~ HADIGAU ~
 ITALIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION
 NEPAL 1984

SECTION IN AQ6



- 5 - HUMUS
- 3 - CLAY WITH LESS BRICKBATS
- 2 - RUBBLE
- 2a - COMPACT GROUND
- 2b - SANDY SOIL
- 2c - CLAYEY LENS
- 2d - SAND
- 3 - RUBBLE
- 3a - SAND
- 3b - CLAY
- 5c - SAND WITH PEBBLES
- LEVEL OR BURNT TRACKS

SCALE 1/20
 MARTORA FRANCESCO

DRAWING F

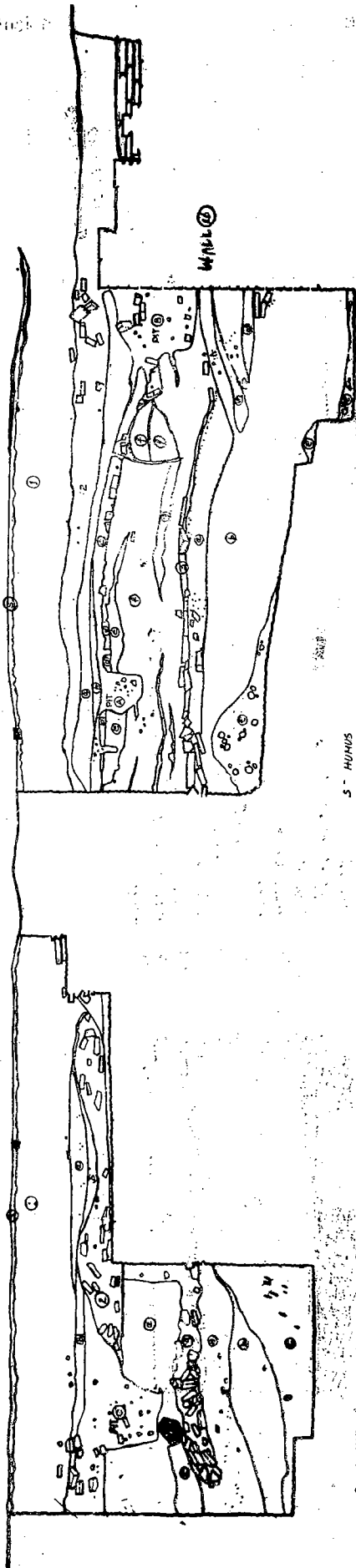
Hadigau. Section in Trench AQ6

NEPAL 1984
-HADJIGAD-
ITALIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION

100 M Scale

A Qb

A Qc



- 5 - HUMUS
- 1 - CLAY
- 2 - RUBBLE
- 10 - SANDY SOIL WITH BRICKFRAGS
- 2b - SAND
- 10 - COLLAPSED GROUND
- 2d - COMPACT CLAY
- 2c - SAND
- 2f - SANDY SOIL WITH CLAY LENS
- 2g - SAND
- 3 - RUBBLE
- 30 - COMPACT CLAY AND BURNT EARTH
- 3b - COMPACT CLAY
- 3c - SAND
- 3d - SAND
- 3e - SAND AND FRAGILES
- 3f - LEVEL OR BURNT TRACKS

- 5 - HUMUS
- 1 - CLAY
- 10 - CLAY AND BURNT EARTH
- 2 - RUBBLE
- 10 - SAND
- 10 - CLAY WITH BRICKFRAGS
- 2c - SAND
- 3 - RUBBLE
- 30 - SAND WITH CLAY AND BURNT EARTH
- 3b - SAND
- 3c - COMPACT CLAY SOIL WITH SANDY LENS
- 3f - LEVEL OR BURNT TRACKS

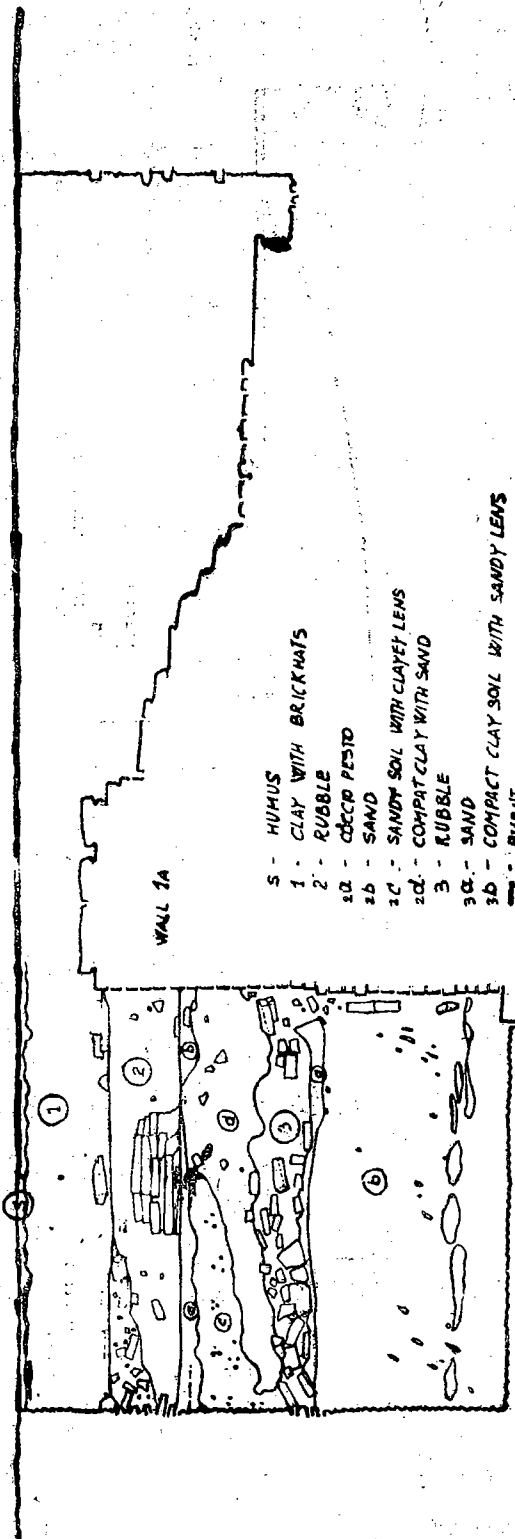
20/1/1980
MONTY PIERCE

DRAWING G

Hadjigau. Section in Trench A Qb

HADIGAU
ITALIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION
NEPAL 1984

SECTION IN A-Q



DRAWING H

Hadigau. Section. in Trench A



Fig. 1-*Dhumvarahi*, Mound in Trench WCd and WCe
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg R 15345/12)



Fig. 2- *Dhumvarahi*. Mound in Trench WCd and WCe, showing
a worship platform
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg L 15362/31)

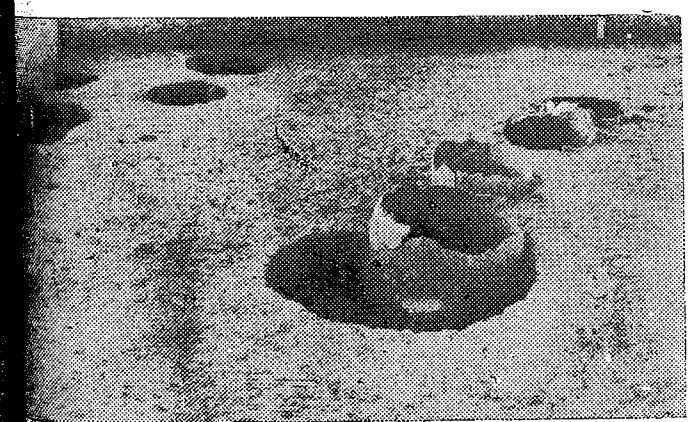


Fig. 3- *Dhumvarahi*. Jars in Trench WRa
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg L 15362/18)

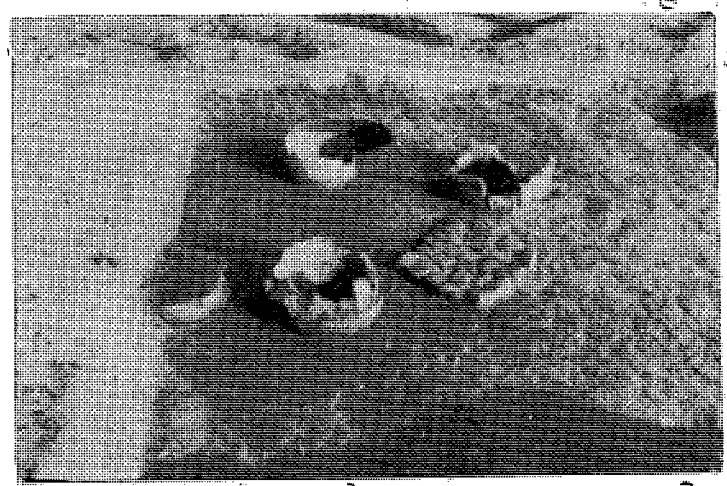


Fig. 4- *Dhumvarahi*. Jars and Pit in Trench WFa
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg L 15492/20)

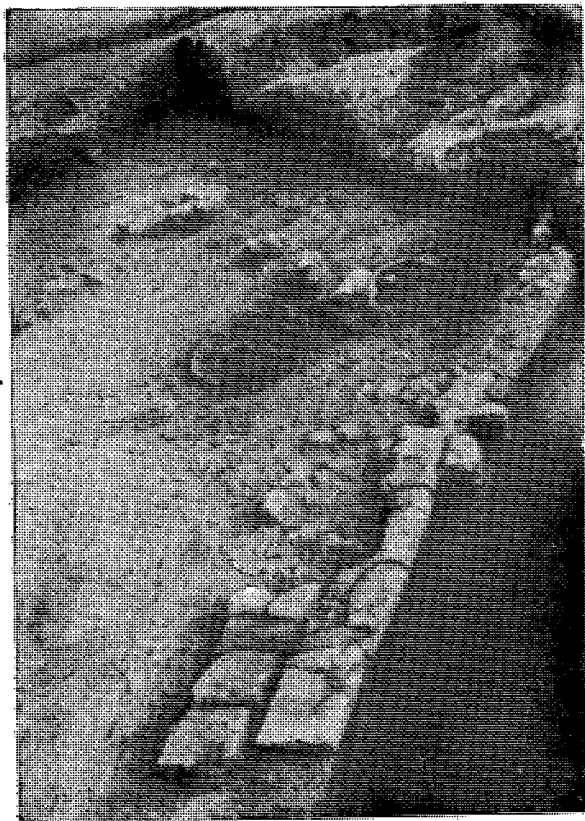


Fig. 5- *Dhumvarahi. Wall and unearthened jars in Trench WFb.*
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg L 15361/7)



Fig. 6- *Dhumvarahi. Pit in Trench WFa*
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg R 15345/4)

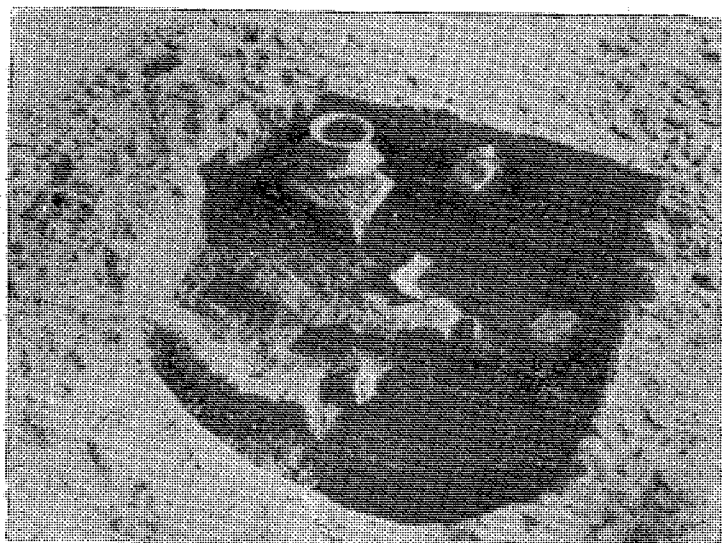


Fig. 7- *Dhumvarahi. Pit in Trench WMb*
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg L 15362/24)

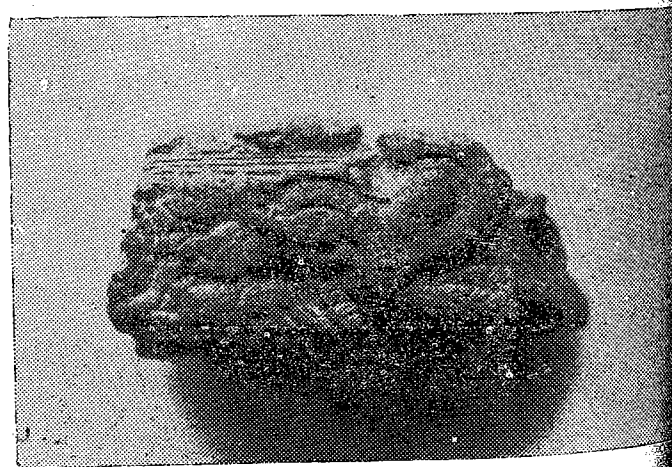


Fig. 8- *Dhumvarahi. Inv. No. DHV 6 from Trench WGa*
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg L. 15488/14)

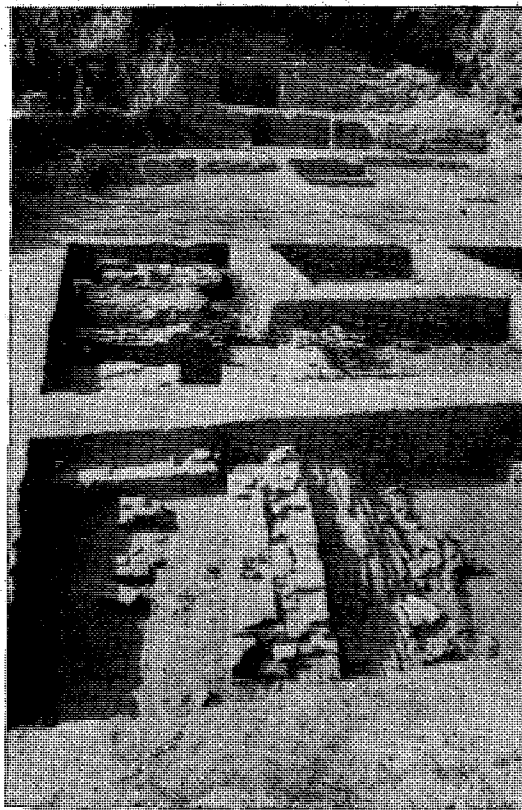


Fig. 9- *Hadigau. General View of excavations in 1984*
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg L 15490/36)

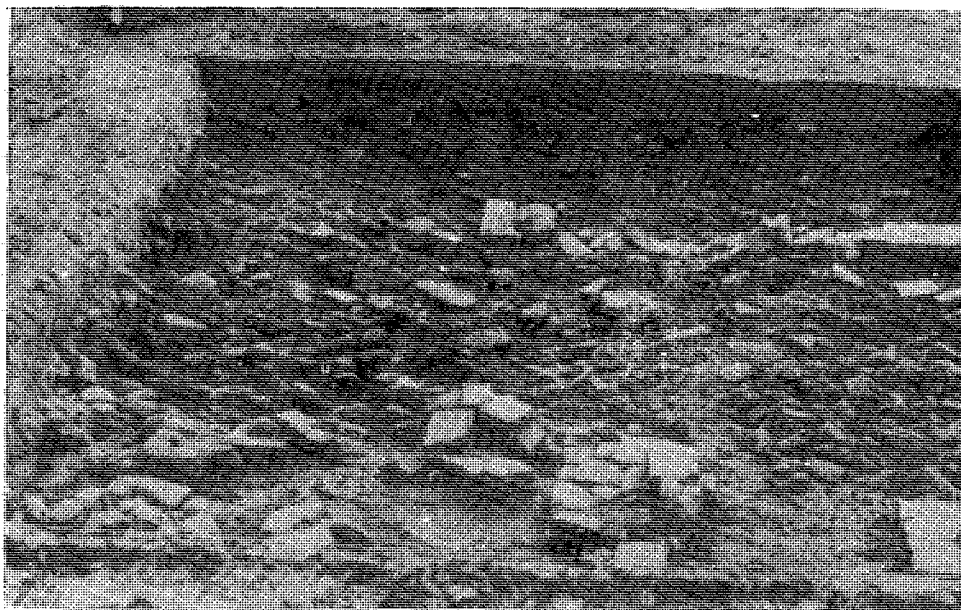


Fig. 10- *Hadigau. Structures of first layer and collapsed structures of*
Second layer trench ATb
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg L 15366/6)



Fig.-11- *Hadigau. View of excavations showing a floor of second layer.*
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg L 15490/37)

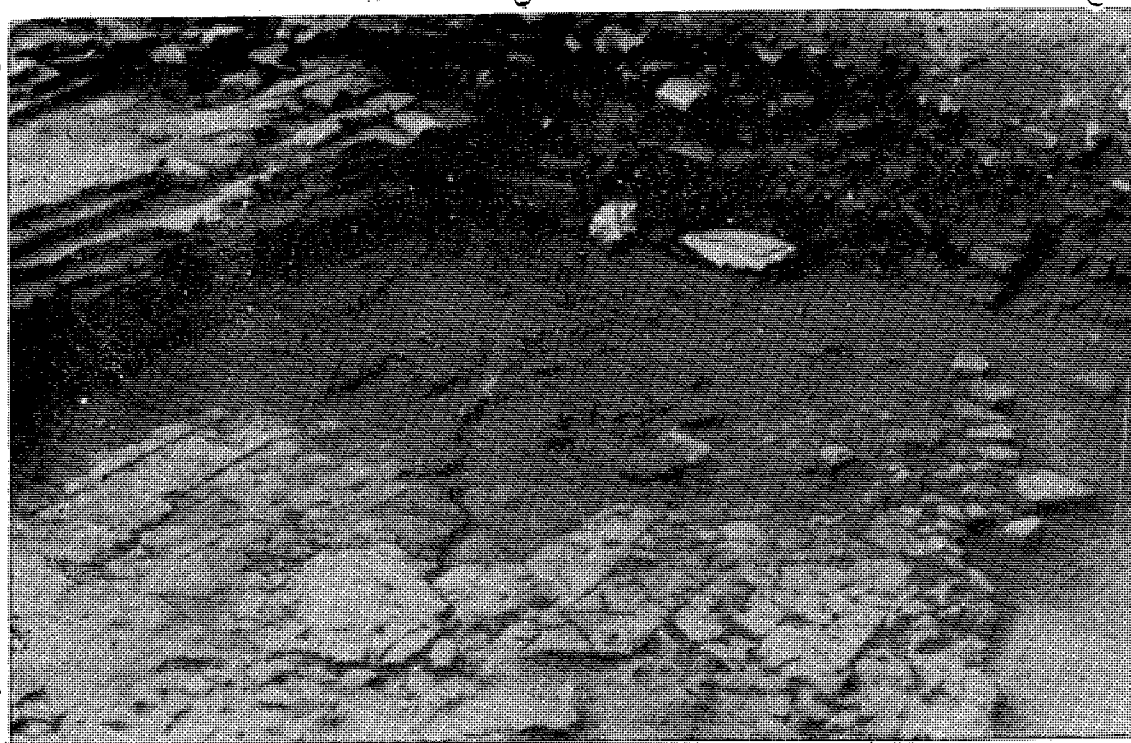


Fig. 12- *Hadigau. Second floor in Trench AVa*
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg L 15366/19)

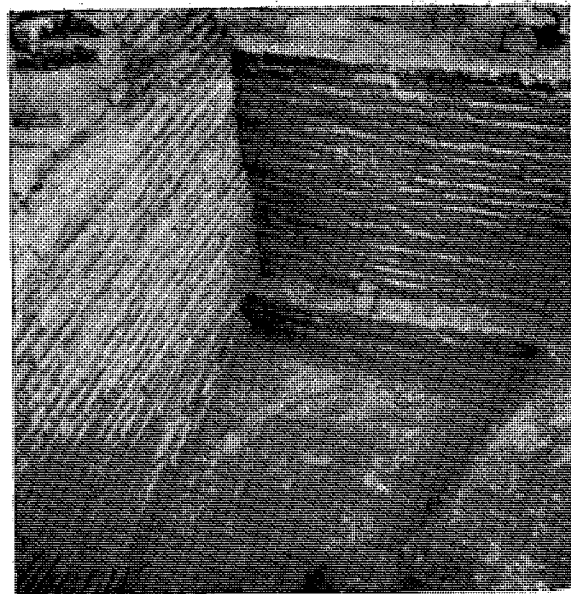
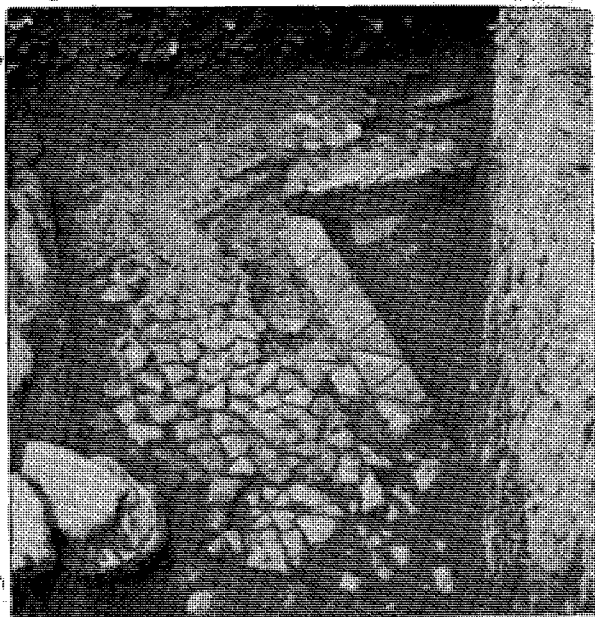


Fig. 13- *Hadigau. Second and third floor in Trench AVd*
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg R 15343/11)

Fig. 14- *Hadigau. Wall in Trench AQb*
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg R 15343/9)



Fig. 15- *Hadigau. Inv. No. HSN 8 from Trench AVa*
showing a head of Bhairava.
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg L 15491/45)

Fig. 16- *Hadigau. Inv. No. HSN 5 from Trench AQb*
showing a terracotta plaque representing Ganesa.
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg L 15491/1)



Fig. 17- Hadigau. Inv. No. HSN 1 from Trench AVc showing Garuda
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg L 15489/10)



Fig. 18- Hadigau. Stone fragment of a figurine from Trench AVa.
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg L 15488/1)



Fig. 19- Hadigau. Inv. No. HSN. 3 from Trench AVa showing a sherd with stamped medallion.
(Photo IsMEO Dep CS Neg L 15489/12)



Fig. 20- Hadigau. Inv. No. HSN 10 from trial pit in Trench AQb showing a terracotta fragment with female image
(Photo IsMEO Dep. CS Neg L 15491/0A)