

AN EARLY IRON AGE AND URARTIAN FORTRESS IN THE VAN REGION: ALILER

by OKTAY BELLİ

Aliler Castle lies 52 km north of Van, approximately 11 km southeast of Van Lake* (Fig. 1). The closest settlement to the castle is Tutumlu Mezraa in the village of Karaağaç. The castle stands at 1830 m a.s.l. and is cited as 'Kale' in 1/25.000 maps (Fig. 2), although the local people call it 'Aliler'¹. It was built on an andesite rocky hill, and the southern and southeastern parts are surrounded with large andesite rocks. The southeastern part of the castle was eroded by the stream which flows down from the high hills to the south and into Van Lake.

The castle is rectangular in plan, measuring 66 × 25 m, and oriented along an east-west axis (Fig. 3-4). A wall of large blocks was raised at the southern part, which slopes steep and was not naturally well-defended. It can be seen that the andesite bedrock was partially smoothed and some of it even incorporated into the wall. The same custom is also observed at Yukarı Kaletepe², dating to the Early Iron Age, south of Van Lake. The wall is about 30 m long, but only 2-3 rows of stone course still stand today (Fig. 5). Its highest point measures about 2 m. The dressed blocks, which have fallen towards the southern slope, suggests that the original height of the wall must have been at least 3-3.5 m.

The southwestern section of the wall consists of 2 rows of stone courses, built onto the bedrock. The third row was placed 60 cm towards the inner side of the wall (Fig. 6). Such architectural features dating to the Early Iron Age are not seen in Urartian fortresses. It is understood that such features ceased to be employed as new building techniques had been developed in the Middle Iron Age. For example each stone course which used to be placed 8-12 cm towards the inner side of the wall, instead, had been placed 3-7 cm towards the inner side of the wall in the early times of the Urartian Kingdom, dating to the last quarter of 9th century B.C.³.

The basalt stones used in constructing the walls was obtained from local

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¹ O. Belli and E. Konyar, *Early Iron Age Fortresses and Necropolises in East Anatolia*, Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları, İstanbul 2003, 113.

² O. Belli, "Research on Early Iron Age Fortresses and Necropoles in Eastern Anatolia"; in: A. Çilingiroğlu and R. Matthews, eds. *Anatolian Iron Ages V, Proceedings of the Fifth Anatolian Iron Ages Colloquium held at Van, 6-10 August 2001*, *Anatolian Studies* 54, 5, fig. 31.

³ O. Belli, *The Anzaf Fortresses and the Gods of Urartu*, Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları, İstanbul 1999, 11.

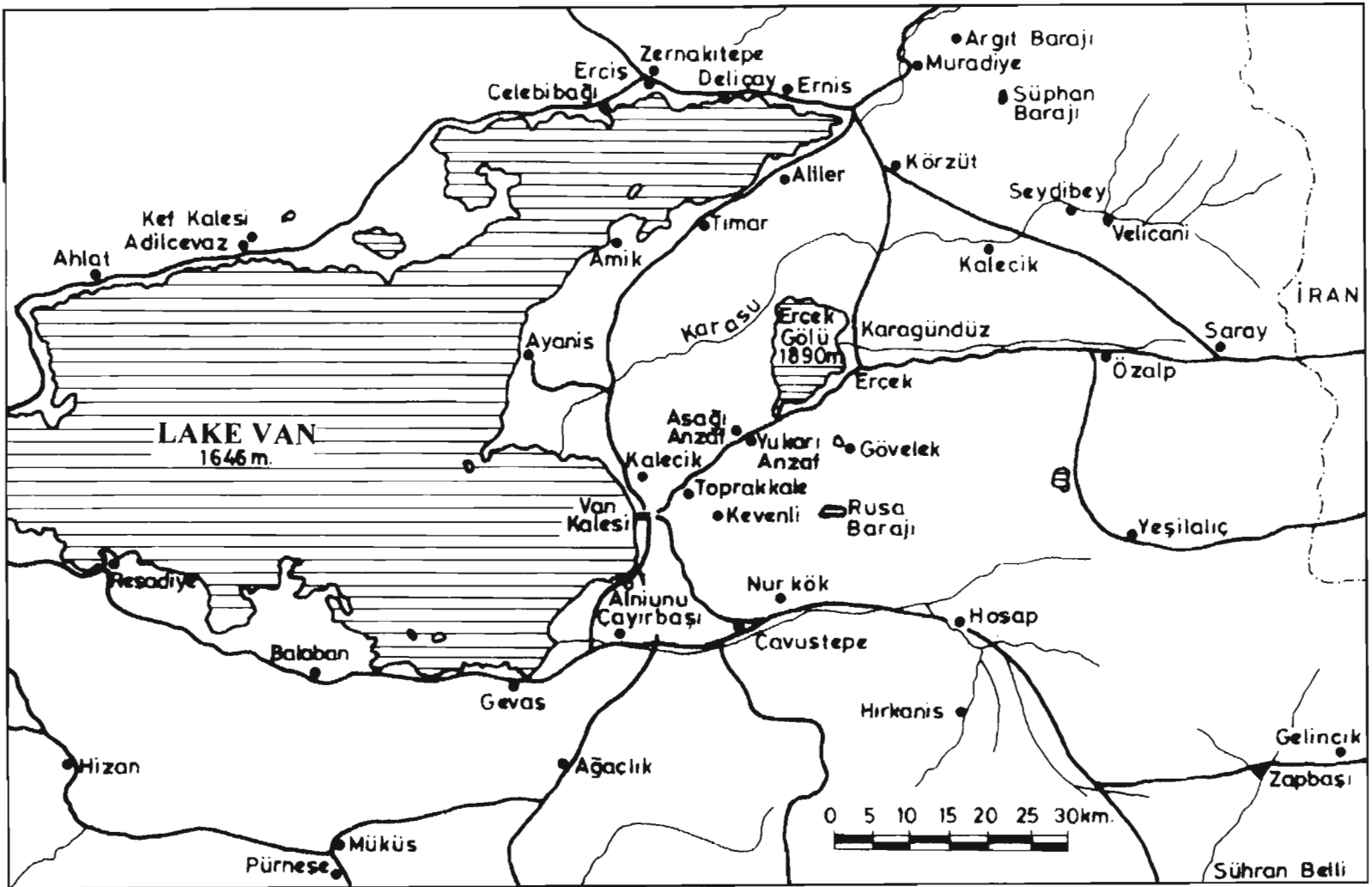


Fig. 1 – The location of the Aliler fortress.

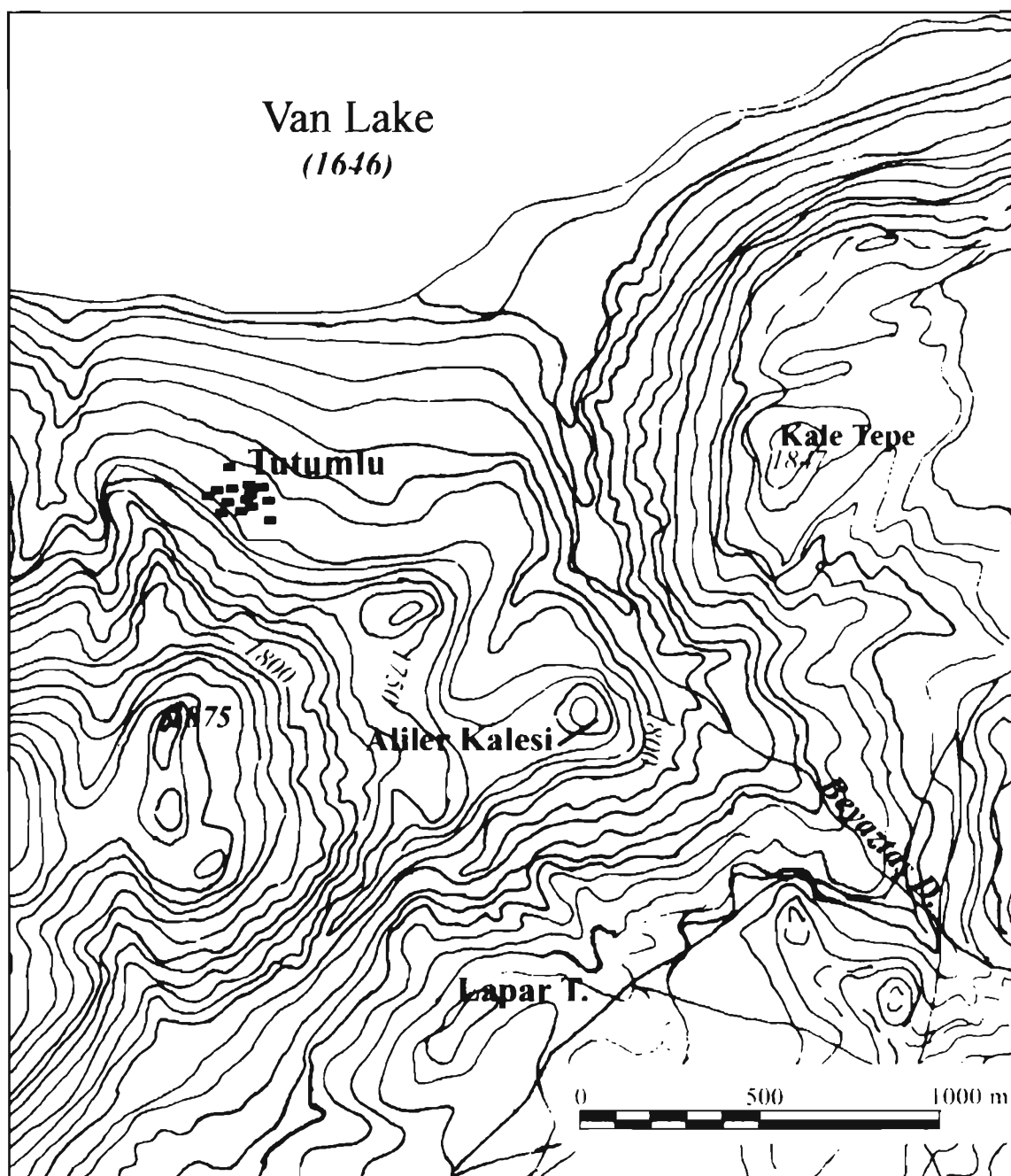


Fig. 2 – Topography of the Aliler fortress and its vicinity.

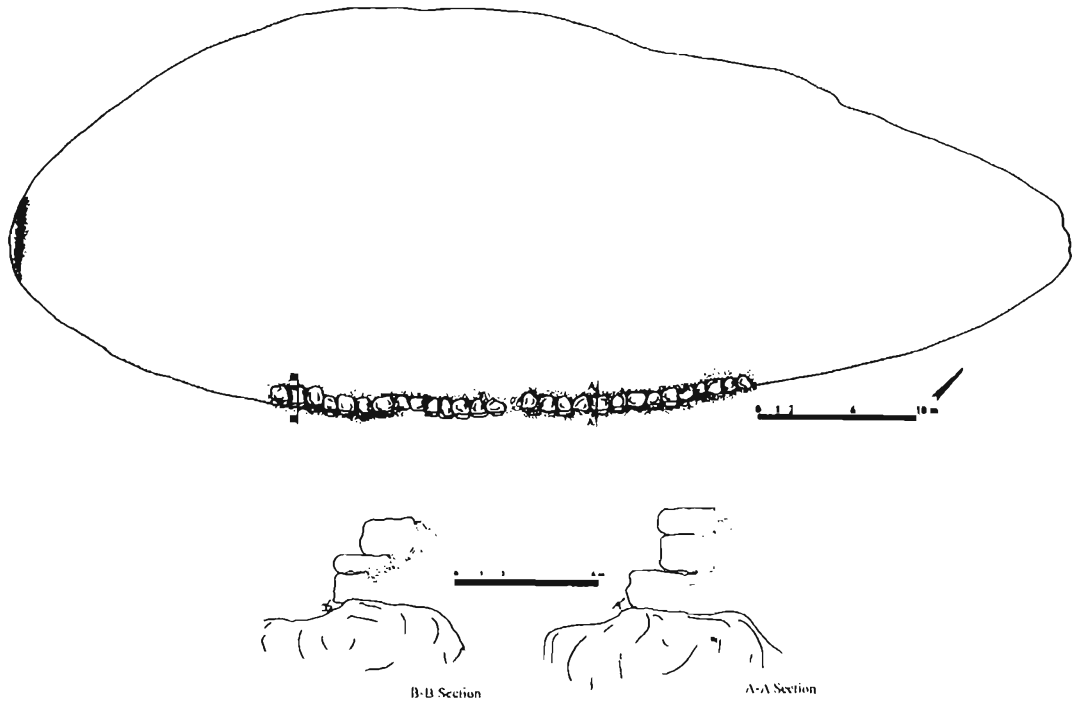


Fig. 3 – Plan and section of the Aliler fortress.



Fig. 4 A general view of the hill and of the Aliler fortress from the west.



Fig. 5 – Aliler fortress - Remains of the southern fortification walls.



Fig. 6 Detail of the fortification walls.

sources, the richest basalt sources in Van. Square and rectangular stones were used in the walls⁴, with the outer faces and the joints of the blocks being carefully worked. Iron tools are thought to have been used to shape the basalt. The most interesting feature of Aliler Castle is its walls, which include none of the curtains or bastions common in Urartian fortification walls. The castle was strengthened by erecting walls on the weak and low stretches of the rocky hill. Building walls on the weak sides of castles is a common feature in Eastern Anatolia and Nakhichevan from the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age onwards. The fortresses of Çalhankale⁵ and Nebi (Vayhır-Gavur Kale) in the Republic of Nakhichevan dating to the Late Bronze Age and Oğlankale⁶ Castle dating to the Early Iron Age, and the castles of Yoğunhasan⁷, Keçikıran, Yürek, Papaz, Yukarı Kaletpe, Panz, Meydan Tepe, Bohanis and Karataş in Eastern Anatolia Region all show such features⁸.

It is understood that Aliler Castle is located in a strategic position, which was home to a typical regional dynasty in the Early Iron Age. The site is surrounded by fertile pastures and mountain meadows watered by rich freshwater springs. New structures were raised in Urartian Period, and a large, rectangular building was built on the western hillside (Fig. 7).

Since the extensive remains of the civilian settlement near the building are mostly below the surface, their plans cannot easily be delineated. The building itself however, measuring 50 × 54 m. and covering an area of 2700 m², apparently has a square plan (Fig. 8). The southern wall is preserved to a height of 60-70 cm. with two rows and a thickness of 2 m., while the remaining walls are 30-40 cm. with single rows and 3 m. thick (Fig. 9). As the walls are quite thick, buttresses were built. The surfaces of these large andesite blocks were roughly worked and the blocks transported to the site from the rich andesite quarries nearby.

The building consists of seven large halls or rooms. The largest one in the northwest corner is square in plan and measures 22 × 24 m., covering an area of 558 m². To the south of this room are two adjacent rooms measuring 10 × 21 m., with an area of 210 m², which are separated by a 1 m. thick internal wall. To the east there lies a rectangular room, 12 × 36 m., covering an area of 432 m². Another room, square in plan, lies to the south of this one, measuring 10 × 12 m., and covers an area of 120 m², while to the east is a second hall, rectangular in plan, measuring 7 × 36 m. over an area of 252 m². Adjacent to this hall is the smallest room of the complex, measuring only 7 × 11 m.

⁴ E. Altınlı, *Explanatory Text of the Geological Map of Turkey*, Maden Tetkik Arama Enstitüsü, Ankara 1964, 64; O. Belli, "Urartian Stone Quarries and Workshops in the Van Region", in: O. Belli, ed. *Istanbul University's Contributions to Archaeology in Turkey (1932-2000)*, İstanbul 2001, 378.

⁵ O. Belli and V. Sevin, *Archaeological Survey in Nakhichevan, 1998*, Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları, İstanbul 1999, 52-57.

⁶ O. Belli, "İstanbul University and Turkey's First International Project in Archaeology: Archaeological Surveys in Nakhichevan", in: O. Belli, ed. *Istanbul University's Contributions to Archaeology in Turkey (1932-2000)*, İstanbul 2001, 414-415.

⁷ O. Belli and A. Ceylan, "A Bronze Age and Urartian Fortress in the Northeast Anatolia: Yoğunhasan", *Turkish Academy of Science Journal of Archaeology* 5, 2002, 119.

⁸ O. Belli and E. Konyar, *Early Iron Age Fortresses and Necropolises in East Anatolia*, Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları, İstanbul 2003, 99 ff.



Fig. 7 – Aliler fortress. General view of the building from the east.

It is clear that the rooms and the halls were placed according to a plan, but their purposes remain unknown. The stone foundations must originally have been more than 1.5 m. high. The rooms are filled with earth, as the mud-brick superstructure of the walls collapsed into the rooms. For this reason, it is impossible to locate the doorways, save for a 2 m. wide example, which connects the rectangular room in the south with the square room to the east.

The building is clearly larger than the Early Iron Age fortress on the hill to the east, and must have been the residence of an Urartian ruler. In order to support the ceiling of such a large complex, columns must have been used. Unfortunately, a find which supported this hypothesis, a basalt column base in the south room, was destroyed by villagers. This was 85 cm. high, with a diameter of 80 cm. at the top and 2 m. at the bottom (Fig. 10-11). The base bears an inscription consisting of two lines and, although it is badly damaged, the intact parts inform us about the builder of the site, namely ^mMe-i-nu-, i.e. the Urartian king Menua (c. 810-786 B.C.).

No other residence with such a great layout is known in the Urartian realm, although smaller examples have been excavated at Ernis – Evditepe, Armavir, Karmir Blur and Bastam. The residence on the western slopes of Ernis – Evditepe⁹ is

⁹ O. Belli and E. Konyar, "The Largest Early Iron Age Necropolis in Eastern Anatolia: Ernis – Evditepe", *Tel Aviv* 30/ 2, 2003, 171.

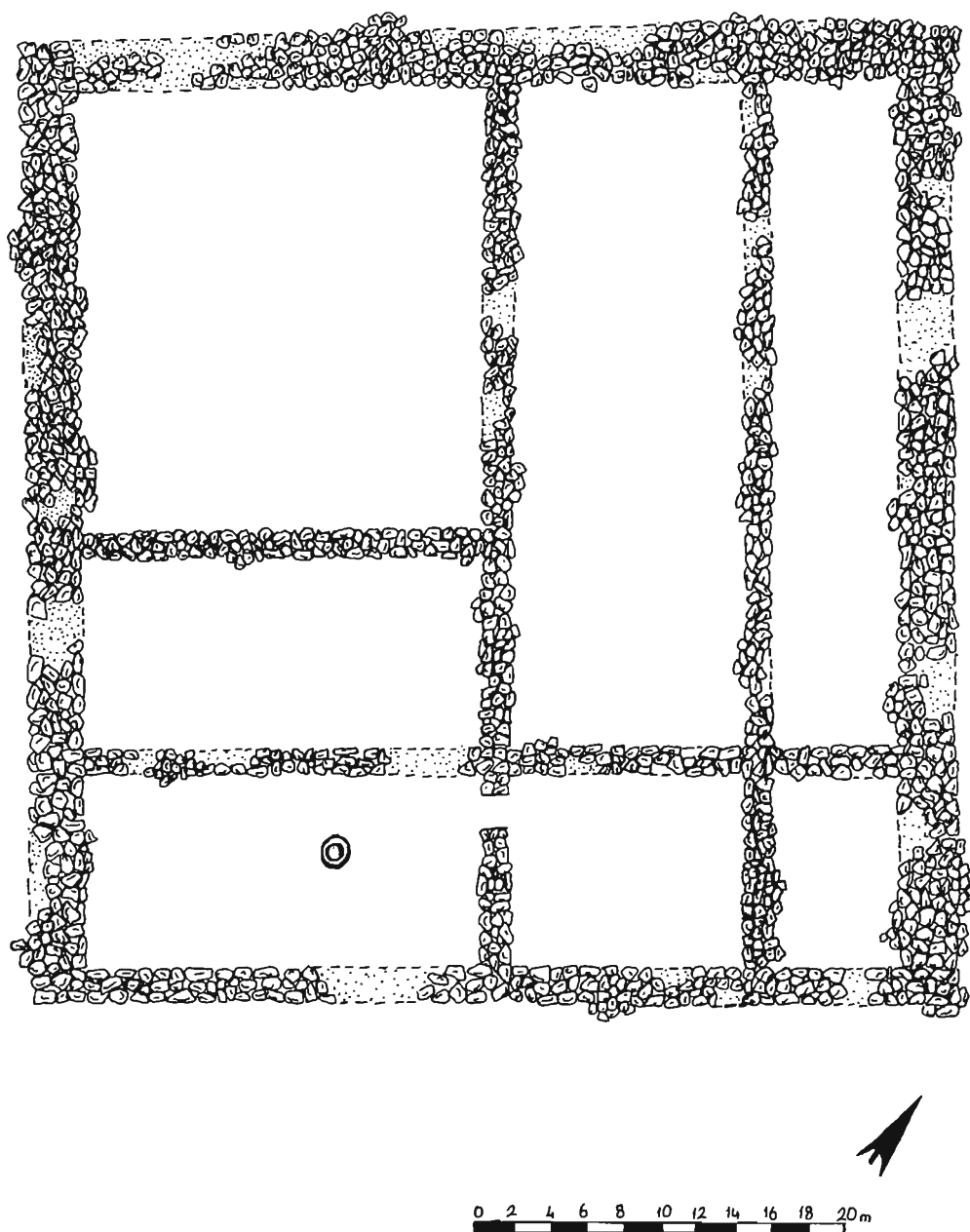


Fig. 8 – Plan of the building.

also thought to have been built in the reign of Menua, while the dwellings at Armavir¹⁰, Karmir – Blur¹¹ and Bastam¹² belong to the 7th cent. B.C. The earliest of

¹⁰ A. A. Martirosyan, *Armeniya v Epokhu Bronzy i Rannego Zheleza*, Erevan 1964, 265 ff.

¹¹ B. B. Piotrovski, *Urartu*, Geneva 1969, 197 ff.

¹² W. Kleiss, "Architektur", *Bastam I*, 1979, 16, fig. 4, 16-17.; W. Kleiss, "Die Architektur", *Bastam II*, 1988, 13, fig. 3, 10.



Fig. 9 – A view of the stone walls of the building from the east.



Fig. 10 – The cuneiform inscription on the damaged basalt column.

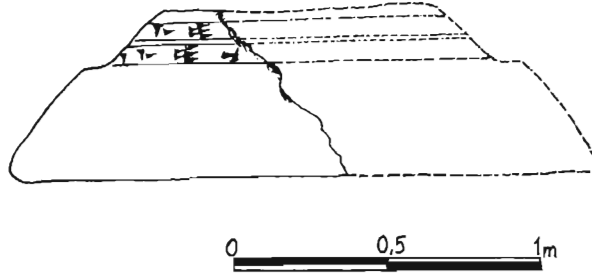


Fig. 11 – The cuneiform inscription from the damaged basalt column.

these is the Aliler residence built in Menua's reign. It would appear that these large residences of the 8th-7th century B.C., were developed from preceding examples in the reign of Menua.

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