

## TECHNICAL SECTION

### ON EXCAVATING A HOUSE THAT WAS NEVER BUILT !

By B. B. LAL

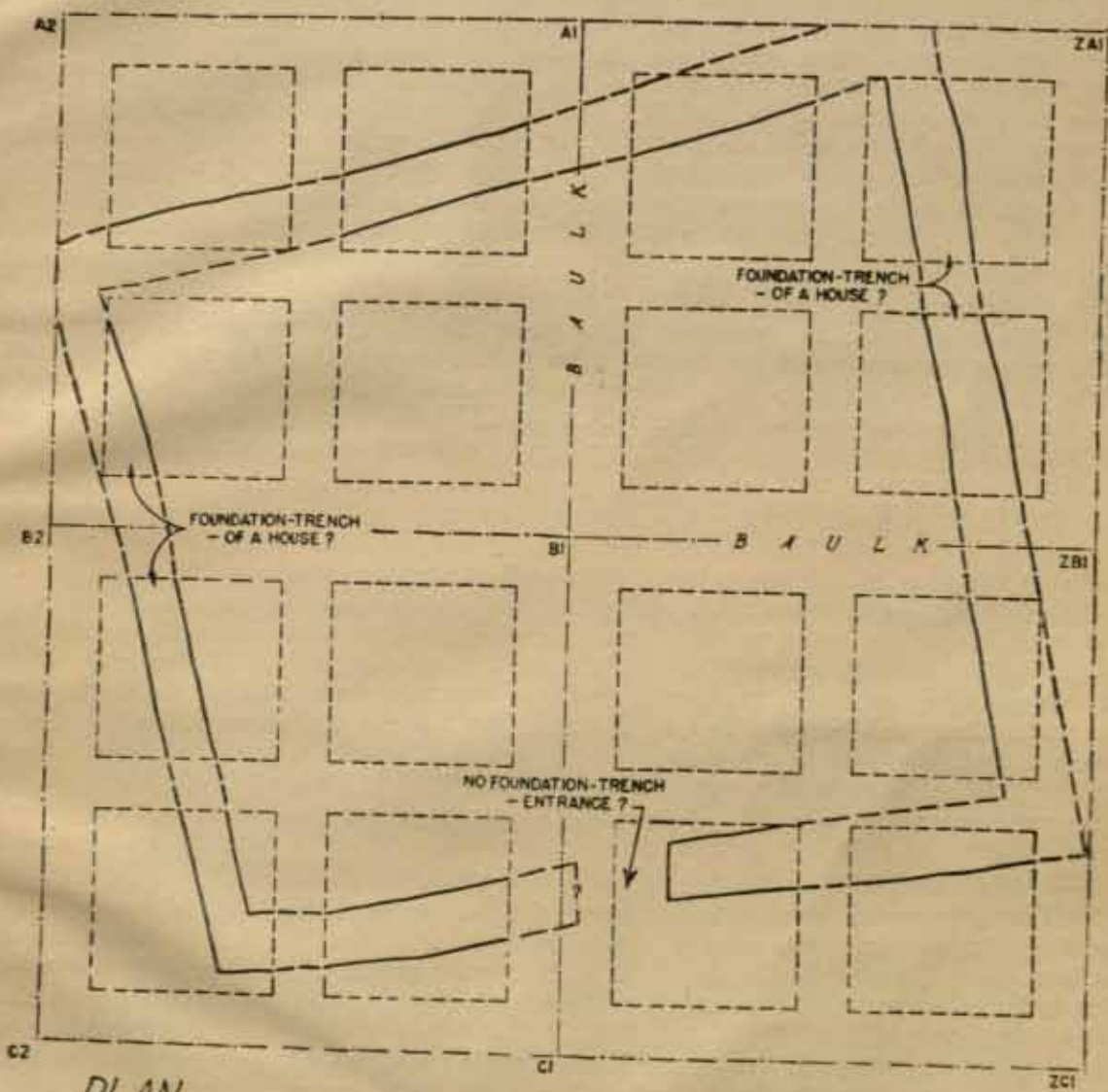
**T**O EXCAVATE A HOUSE THAT ONCE EXISTED IS A THING COMMON ENOUGH IN archaeological operations, for the excavator often comes across the remains of walls which give a fairly good idea of the house-plan. Sometimes, even when the actual walls are not available—having been robbed away for the sake of the material of which they had been constructed—the excavator is able to make out the former existence of such walls from the ‘robbers’ trenches’; and by following up these trenches he is able to plot the ‘ghost’ of the once-existing house. But to excavate a house that had been planned but was never built is indeed a new experience, at least to the present writer.

In 1961, while excavating at Sardargarh, District Ganganagar, Rajasthan, the writer came across in one of the trenches (north-eastern quadrant of Square ZA 1 in fig. 1) an approximately  $\frac{1}{2}$ -m. wide and  $\frac{1}{4}$ -m. deep ‘channel’, cut into earlier occupational layers and itself containing alternating bands of sand and silt and occasional potsherds. The ‘channel’ having been traced across the quadrant—a length of about 2 m.—the north-western quadrant of the Square was taken up for investigation. There also the ‘channel’ was traced, having the same contents and following the same alignment. The total length thus became a little over 4 m. At this stage some of the colleagues present at the site surmised that the ‘channel’ might be a drain; but the absence in the ‘channel’ of sillage-material (usually met with in drains) and the near-verticality combined with a sort of sharpness of its walls (unusual to walls of unlined drains) made the writer doubt the possibility of the ‘channel’ having functioned as a drain.

The obvious course then was to extend the operation to the remaining quadrants of the same (ZA 1) Square and to other adjacent Squares, as necessary. While the south-eastern quadrant of the Square did not yield any evidence, the south-western quadrant threw some interesting light on the problem. It revealed another ‘channel’, of the same width and depth as the former but aligned altogether differently—at more or less a right angle to the former. The supporters of the ‘drain’ theory were at first taken aback, but they soon tried to regain their stand by arguing that the newly-discovered channel might be another drain joining the former. However, as the contents and the condition of the side-walls in this case also were the same as in the previous one, the writer’s initial objection to the drain-theory still stood there. If anything, the objection became all the stronger, for rarely does one see a *kuchcha* (i.e. cut into the soil and not lined with brick or stone) drain turning or joining another sharply at a right angle. On the other hand, this very feature, namely the meeting at a right angle of the two ‘channels’, made the writer think that the channels might, instead, represent two adjacent arms of the foundation-trench of a house.

The matter was pursued further, into Square A 1. Here the ‘cross-channel’ was further traced, which increased its overall length to nearly 8 m. However, more

# SARDARGARH (RAJASTHAN) 1961



PLAN



FIG. 1



important than the foregoing was the discovery of still another 'cross-channel', again at more or less a right angle to the one just described. Such a behaviour of the 'channels' redoubled the writer's conviction in his working hypothesis, according to which the 'cross-channels' would represent the various arms of the foundation-trench of a house.

Pursuing this new alignment into Square B 1, the writer got not only another 4 m. of the last-mentioned 'cross-channel' but also yet another 'cross-channel'. In the latter case, however, there were two significant features. In the first place, unlike in other Squares where the supposed 'crossings' had fallen under the baulks and could not be duly ascertained, in Square B 1 it was clearly determined that there was no 'crossing' as such, but just a turn (fig. 1; pl. XLV B), which clearly set at naught the possibility of a 'criss-cross' arrangement of drains. (On pl. XLV B may be seen not only the sharp outlines of the turn, but also the sand-and-silt deposits of the 'channel', which stand in marked contrast to the earlier occupational deposits containing even a pot *in situ*.) Secondly, the direction of this turn virtually closed in the 'channels', which, again, made the drain-theory still less plausible.

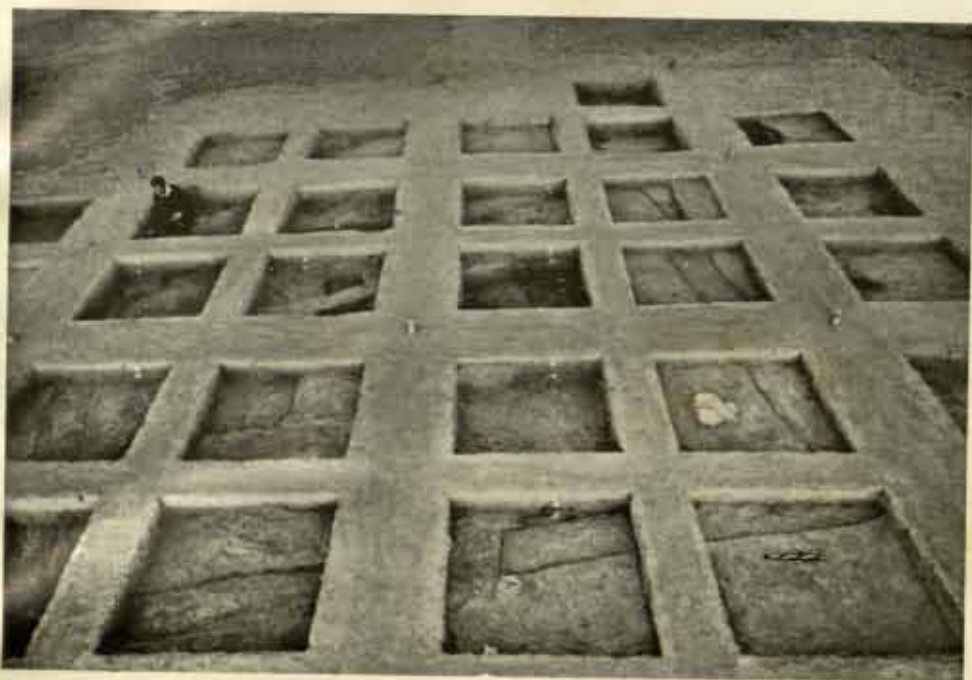
The extension of the operations into Square ZB 1 brought to light not merely the fourth corner (though under the baulks in fig. 1 and on pl. XLV A, yet easily inferable on the analogy of the south-eastern corner in Square B 1), but also a 'square' end of the 'channel' (cf. fig. 1, and pls. XLV A and XLVI B). Giving a closer view of this end, pl. XLVI B also shows how, by chance, a pot, occurring in the preceding occupational deposits, just escaped destruction.

The plan, as finally retrieved, left little doubt that the 'channels' were not drains, laid out in a criss-cross fashion, but the arms of a foundation-trench. The four arms produced the plan of a house having an overall dimension of about  $8\frac{1}{2} \times 7\frac{1}{2}$  m.<sup>1</sup> The thickness of the walls, as conditioned by the width of the foundation-trench, could not have been more than half a metre. The house had an entrance on the eastern side, the exact width of which, however, could not be determined as one of the ends of the foundation-trench fell under the baulk. All the same, there could be little doubt that there was, under the baulk between Squares B 1 and ZB 1, the end of the arm of the foundation-trench proceeding from south-east to north-west in Square B 1. For, there was no continuity of this arm of the trench in Square ZB 1. (It had originally been planned to resume the work at the site during the following season when all the baulks were to be removed and the complete outline of the foundation-trench recovered, but owing to certain inevitable reasons the work was not continued.)

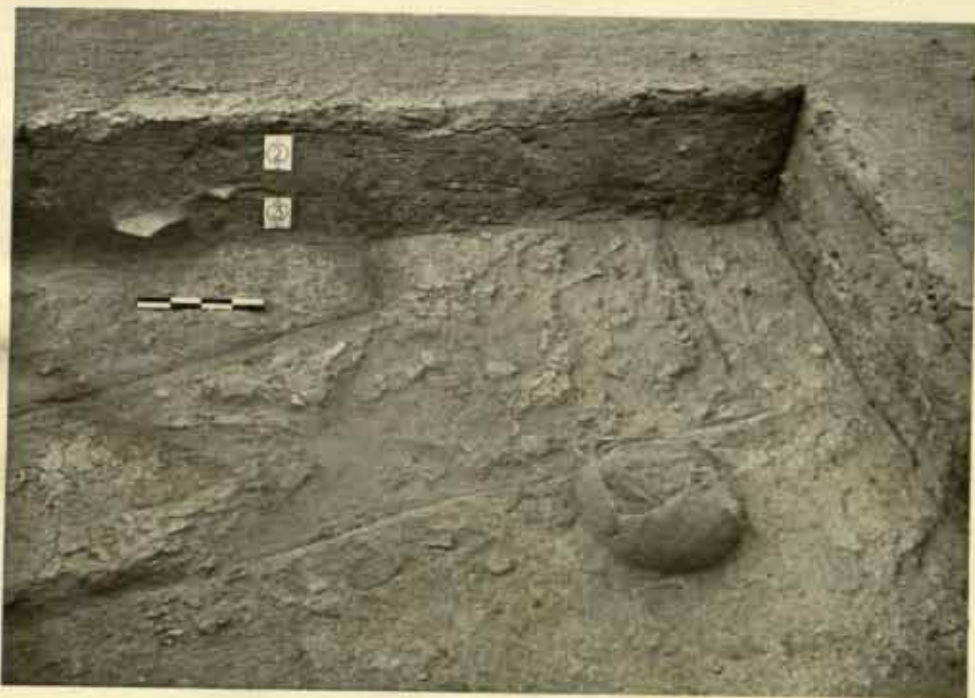
The excavation threw valuable light also on the probable date of the proposed building of the house. A look at pl. XLVI A would show that the foundation-trench was cut into layer 3 and sealed by layer 2. The former contained the Painted Grey Ware (first-half of the first millennium B.C.), and the latter Kushan pottery (early centuries A.D.). The latter pottery was also recovered from the foundation-trench. The obvious inference, therefore, would be that it was in the Kushan period that somebody wanted to build the house. The foundation-trench was dug, leaving out the space for the entrance on the east. However, as chance would have it, the house was never constructed. In the exposed foundation-trench, therefore, accumulated layers of silt and sand in wet and hot weathers. (There is too much of sand about in the area, and observations show that such

<sup>1</sup> The dimension seems to be too big for a single room. One thus expected to find within this area further foundation-trenches, for walls of individual rooms. The scheme of building the house itself was perhaps soon abandoned, and as such the other trenches were never dug.





A. *Sardargarh*: general view of the plan of the foundation-trench. In the foreground may be seen the end of the right arm of the foundation-trench, indicating an entrance. See p. 208



B. *Sardargarh*: close-up of the turn of the foundation-trench, looking west (cf. south-eastern quadrant of square B 1 in fig. 1). In the foundation-trench may be seen bands of sand and silt. Scale: each division 5 cm. See p. 208



B. Sardargarh: close-up of the square end of the foundation-trench (cf. pl. XLVA and south-eastern quadrant of Square ZB I in fig. 1). Scale: each division 5 cm. See p. 208



A. Sardargarh: close-up of a section across the foundation trench. At the bottom may be seen Kushan pottery, and above it bands of sand and silt. Scale: each division 5 cm. See p. 208

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a shallow trench—about  $\frac{1}{3}$ -m. deep—can easily get filled up in a couple of years at the most.) The rains must have brought into the trench a few of the Kushan sherds that had been lying about on the adjoining surface.

So here are the plan and date of a house that was never built!

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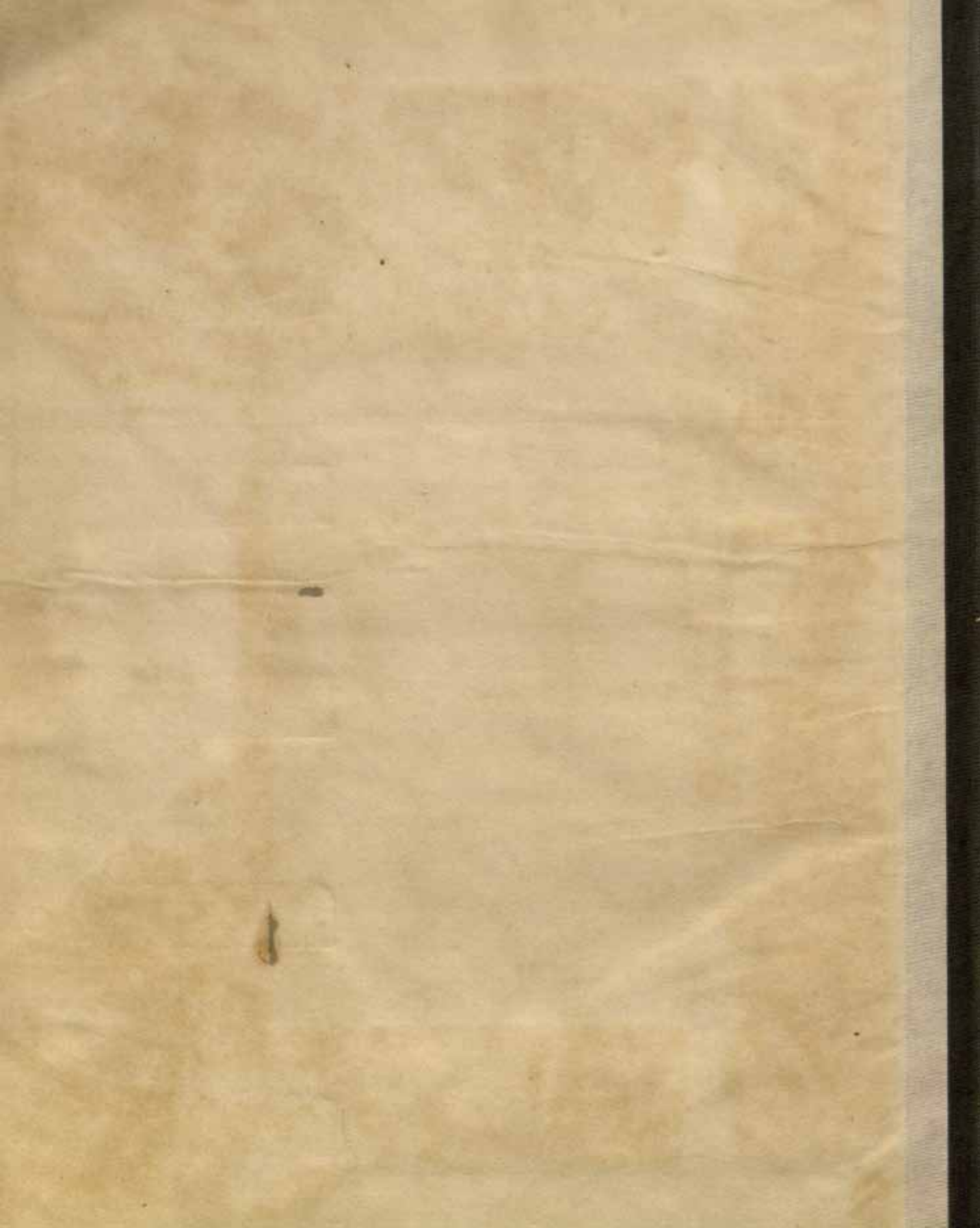
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