

**Preliminary Report on the Results  
of the 2008 Excavation Season at Tel Kabri**

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Tel Kabri, located in the western Galilee region of modern Israel, was the center of a Canaanite polity during the Middle Bronze Age. Excavations conducted by Aharon Kempinski and Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier from 1986-1993 revealed the remains of a palace dating to the Middle Bronze period (ca. 2000-1550 BCE). Within the building (Fig. 1), dated specifically to the MB II period, were discovered an Aegean-style floor and Aegean-style wall paintings. Kabri is one of only four sites in the Eastern Mediterranean to have such Bronze Age Aegean-style paintings and may well be the earliest.

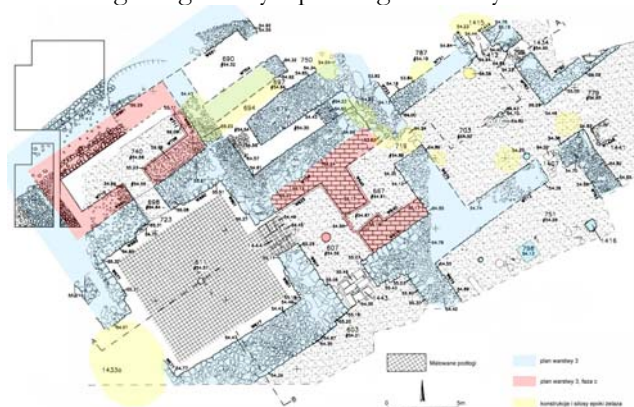


Fig. 1. The Middle Bronze Age Palace in Area D-West at Tel Kabri: plan showing MB II remains with Ceremonial Hall 611 at the bottom left

A geophysical survey in 2003 and our exploratory excavation season in 2005, conducted by the then newly-formed Kabri Archaeological Project (KAP), enabled us to establish that the MB II palace is nearly twice as large as previously thought, probably 3000-4000 sq. m. rather than 2000 sq. m. in area. In 2005, we also uncovered remains of an underlying MB I structure, a possible “proto-palace,” which seemed to be a massive construction, built at a slightly different orientation to the later MB II palace. We decided to spend the 2006 season, and also the 2007 season, conducting a regional archaeological survey of MB I and MB II settlements throughout the western Galilee prior to beginning full-scale excavations at the site, since we are fully aware that at Tel Kabri we may have a unique opportunity to study the diachronic development of Canaanite political power in the region as well as the development of cultural contacts with the Aegean and Cyprus.

The 2008 season at Kabri was therefore the first season of excavation conducted following the regional studies in 2006 and 2007 and the original 2005 exploratory excavation season. It was undertaken with a grant from the Institute for Aegean Prehistory (INSTAP), which has also generously supplied previous funding for our efforts at Tel Kabri; additional funding for the 2008 season was also provided by the University of California at Santa Cruz and The George Washington University. The excavation was co-directed by Assaf Yasur-Landau of the University of California at Santa Cruz and Eric H. Cline of The George Washington University in Washington, D.C.. Team personnel included Nurith Goshen of the University of Pennsylvania, Alexandra Ratzlaff of Boston University, Helena Tomas of the University of Zagreb (Croatia), Laura D’Alessandro of the University of Chicago, Assaf Nativ of Tel Aviv University, Gilad Jaffee of the Israel Antiquities Authority, and twelve local workmen headed by Mr. Fathi Khalailah.

The excavation season itself lasted from July 6<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>, 2008. During that period, numerous visitors stopped by the site, including Manfred Bietak, Professor at the University of Vienna; Shuka Dorfmann, Head of the Israel Antiquities Authority; Michel Artzy, Professor at the University of Haifa; Yaacov Kahanov, Head of the Recanati Institute for Maritime Studies at the University of Haifa; Ezra

Marcus, Researcher at the University of Haifa; and Rafi Frankel, one of the pioneers of archaeology in the western Galilee of Israel.

The new season of excavation was primarily designed to complete our preliminary excavations begun in 2005, prior to beginning a new series of full-scale excavations during the years 2009-2012, when we hope to be operating using grants from NSF, NEH, and National Geographic. Since Kempinski and Niemeier's excavations focused mainly on horizontal exposure of the core of the palace, dealing mainly with its latest phase of the MB II period, we planned to return to the core of the palace for our 2008 season and to investigate the vertical, diachronical aspects, aiming to reach the remains of the earlier phases of the palace and more of the MB II "proto-palace" whose existence was hypothesized by Kempinski. We therefore excavated in areas around the center of the palace, i.e. near Ceremonial Hall 611, with its frescoed floor and fragments of Aegean-style wall fresco. This investigation was aimed at retrieving critical data concerning the chronology of the various phases of the palace, as well as the history of the connections between the Kabri polity, Cyprus and the Aegean.

In brief, we are able to report that the 2008 season of excavations at Tel Kabri met with a great deal of success. We were able to retrieve data from the entire history of the MB palace and "proto-palace" at the site, from a pre-palatial period through to final destruction. We also found approximately 45 fragments of wall plaster, at least some of which appear to be painted, and additional evidence for red paint on one of the plaster floors in the palace.



Fig. 2a-c. Two principal areas of excavation in Area D-West at Tel Kabri, located east (top) and northwest (below) of Ceremonial Hall 611

### **Excavation Results**

Our excavations during the 2008 season were concentrated in D-West, an area located at the eastern edge of the MB II palace, just to the northwest of the large Ceremonial Hall 611 exposed during Kempinski and Niemeier's earlier excavations. In order to gain insights into the stratigraphical sequence of the palace, we opened up two principal excavation areas, located to the east and northwest of Ceremonial Hall 611, within Area D-West (Fig. 2a-c).

#### *Western portion of D-West*

The western part of D-West included Room 740, the room directly to the north of 611, as well as its long and narrow Threshold 698, in whose entrance the fragments of miniature fresco were recovered by the previous excavation team. A second focus of excavations in this area was to the north of Room

740, immediately on the other side of the massive, four-meter-thick Wall 673. The aim of the excavations in both these areas was to open a stratigraphical window into the earlier palace, both within Room 740 and on the other side of Wall 673, perhaps an outdoor area. A third, smaller, section was opened in the region of western entrance to Hall 611, aiming to find the depth of the foundations of Wall 677.

In the area of Room 740 itself, we discovered that the uppermost floor in this room, which was also the latest floor of the MB II palace, had up to 25 centimeters of makeup below it (Fig. 3a-b). It may have been cut by Walls 710, 709, and 673, all of which had been constructed as additions to already-existing walls (705, 660, and 20103) during the massive renovation project within the palace which predated its destruction at the end of the MB II period. As a result of this renovation project, it appears that during its final phase Room 740 was but a shadow of its former self, being now extremely narrow and long as a result of having lost almost half of its area during the widening of the above walls. The edges of the plaster floor were never fully mended, while the walls themselves were covered with a thin layer of mudplaster.



Fig. 3a-b. Room 740 with uppermost floor (left) and with makeup under floor 740 and Floors 2029 and 2087 below (right)

The underlying floor, designated as L. 2029 and dating to the preceding period of the palace, belonged to a much larger room. This floor is extremely thick, up to 40 centimeters in depth when the stone makeup below is included. Traces of red pigment found on the floor by our conservator, Laura D'Alessandro of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, may indicate that it, just like the contemporary penultimate floor of Hall 611, was painted red. The threshold leading between these two areas featured a monolithic stone very different from the rubble and plaster threshold (698) of the final period; this stone is visible in Fig. 3b above, towards the top of the photograph.



Fig. 4a-b. Pit 2071 in Floor 2029 (left) and Cyproit Red on Red sherds (right)

During the renovation period of the palace, and just before the laying of the uppermost (third) floor of Room 740, a large circular pit (L. 2071) was cut into Floor 2029, near the center of the room (Fig. 4a). Within this pit were sherds of Cyproit Red on Red ware (Fig. 4b). Furthermore, a large amount of pottery belonging to restorable vessels, mostly storage jars, was apparently thrown into this pit before it

was sealed by the makeup for the later plaster floor 740. It is possible that these were the remains of pithoi and other storage jars that stood at the center of the room, just like the situation in Room 703 of the later palace. These vessels are expected to give a *terminus post quem* to the penultimate phase of the palace and to the event during which Threshold 698 was formed using the fragments of painted wall fresco as filling. Initial observation suggests that the assemblage belongs well within the MB II period, thus giving a preliminary date for the deposition of the wall fresco fragments. In order to allow future testing of our hypotheses, we excavated only half of this all-important threshold and the room behind it (i.e. Room 740).

Below Floor 2029, a third plaster floor level was uncovered. This floor, designated as L. 2087, is a much thinner plaster floor than either Floors 2029 or 740 above it and was built without a stone makeup below. Probably because of the lack of this supporting makeup, it sloped heavily from the edges towards the middle of the room (Fig. 3b, 5), probably indicating that an unintentional sinking of the floor level had occurred at some point during its use. A posthole, probably supporting the roof and found filled with charcoal, was located in the middle of the room. We expect that the C<sup>14</sup> samples retrieved from this posthole, as well as the associated pottery, may give a date for this early phase of the palace.



Fig. 5. Stratigraphy and sloping Floor 2087 seen in corner of Room 740

Below Floor 2087, a dark grey deposit (L. 2099) was discovered. This may have belonged either to the earliest phase of activity in the palace or to pre-palatial deposits.

In the area to the north of Room 740, immediately on the other side of the massive, four-meter-thick Wall 673, we first excavated a substantial mudbrick and plaster collapse belonging to the final destruction of the MB II palace (L. 2027 and 2033). Since this collapse appeared to be separated into two parts, upper and lower, by a line of plaster (Fig. 6a), it is possible that it belonged to both the second and first floors. Embedded within this collapse, we found at least 45 fragments of high-quality wall plaster, some of which appear to have been painted (Fig. 6b). One of the fragments also seems to have a string impression on its surface, consistent with Minoan fresco-painting techniques. Since this collapse clearly continues to the north and east, beyond the limits of the 2008 excavation area, we are optimistic that we shall recover more painted wall plaster fragments in the next season, when we expand out into this area.



Fig. 6a-b. North baulk with collapse (left) and wall plaster fragments (right)

Directly below this level of collapse, a thick layer of occupational debris (L. 2047) in the form of a massive quantity of flat-lying pottery sherds stacked one on top of another and forming a stratum

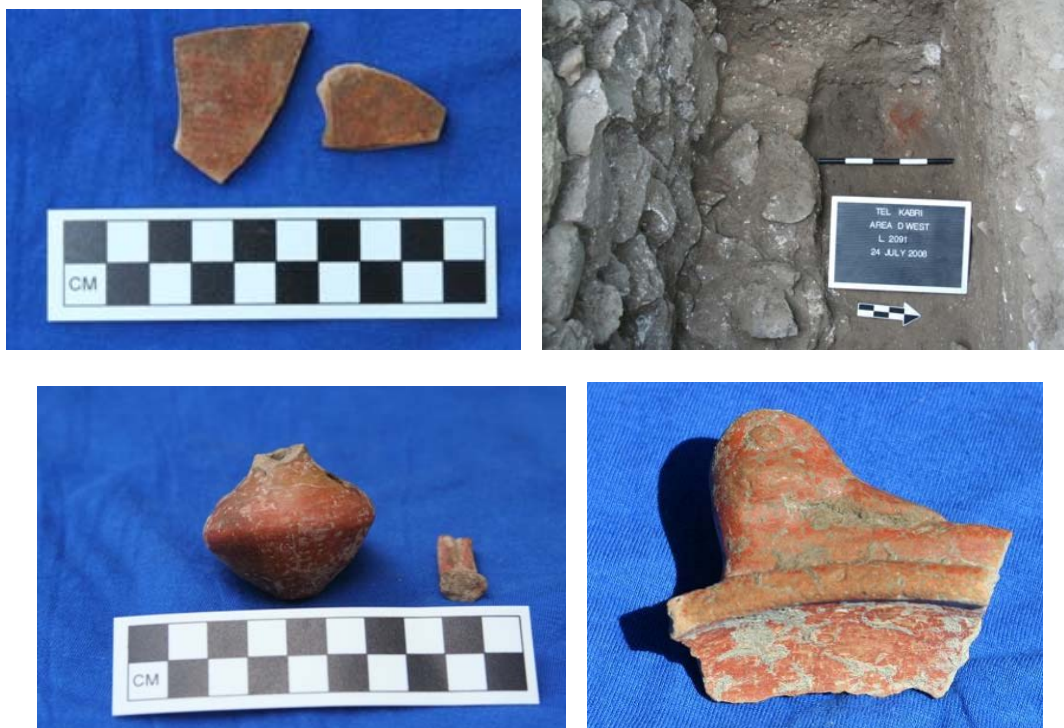
approximately 30 cm in depth was discovered (Fig. 7a). The pottery, which had been apparently crushed by the collapse, consisted mainly of storage jars datable to the MB II period. Within this pottery, several fragments of imported wares were found, including a neck fragment from a Cypriot White Painted jug and two possible Aegean imports (Figs. 7a-b).



Figs. 7a-b. Locus 2047 with flat-lying pottery (left) and a possible Aegean import (right)

This occupational debris did not rest upon a plaster floor, but rather on an apparent beaten earth surface. This in turn may indicate that the area north of Wall 673 may not have been roofed and may have belonged to a courtyard. At the moment we believe that this area may have been an internal courtyard, rather than lying completely outside the palace, primarily because of the massive mudbrick collapse which covered the area.

Below this occupational debris, we found a thick deposit of what appears to be a deliberate fill containing primarily middle and late MB I pottery (L. 2077), including several sherds of Cypriot Red on Black ware (Fig. 8a). Underlying this in turn, and below the massive stone foundations of Wall 673, the top of a smaller wall (Wall 2093) as well as a tabun (bread oven) were found in L. 2091 (Fig 8b). These probably belong to a domestic structure which predates the construction of the palace. A miniature red burnished juglet and an unusual red burnished bowl handle in the form of a duck were found near the top of this stratum (Fig. 8c-d). These two objects, as well as other indicative pottery such as red burnished carinated bowls, all date to the middle phase of MB I. We therefore suggest that Wall 673 of the palace was constructed sometime after that date.



Figs. 8a-d. Cypriot Red on Black ware sherds (top left); Wall 2093 and tabun (top right); miniature red burnished juglet (bottom left); bowl handle in the form of a duck (bottom right)

Within this same general area of the palace, but to the south of the above, another probe examined the western entrance to Ceremonial Hall 611, mainly the lower courses of Wall 677. Although we were able to establish that the foundations of Wall 677 were constructed of large stones arranged in at least five courses below the floor level of Ceremonial Hall 611, we were unable to further examine the MB stratigraphy in this area because of a very large Iron Age pit which had removed the relevant deposits.

*Eastern portion of D-West*

Turning now to the eastern part of D-West, we initiated excavations in this area in an effort to investigate the earlier phases of the palace east of Ceremonial Hall 611. Here we descended underneath Room 703, dating to the latest phase of the palace, for the floor of this room had already been cut by Kempinski. We also investigated the area north of Room 703, designated by Kempinski as Room 787, which had not been fully excavated by the previous team, in part because of numerous Iron Age pits that had cut its floor and robbed out some of its walls.



Fig. 9a-b. Wall 733 in Area D-West

The area is dominated by Wall 733 (Fig. 9a-b), originally discovered by Kempinski, which, when we cleaned its top, turned out to be sealed below Wall 767 of the latest phase of the palace. Wall 733 thus belonged to an earlier phase of the palace. It is a massive wall, ca. two and half meters wide, with an external row of coarsely-drafted boulders up to two meters in length on either face and a rubble fill of large stones between them. Its construction technique bears much resemblance to that of the outer wall of the MB rampart surrounding the tell, which can be seen in Area T exposed by Kempinski (Kempinski, Scheftelowitz, and Oren 2002: fig. 4.25).

Two cross-walls, Wall 731 and 2032, abutted Wall 733 from the east, creating three small rooms. The deposits within these rooms provided a firm pottery sequence for the palace, from its initial foundation late in the MB I period until its final destruction in the MB II period.



Fig. 10a-b. Possible Middle Minoan III Polychrome ware (left); fragment of a spout from a Cypriot Red on Red spouted bowl (right)

In the southern room, we first excavated the makeup for MB II Floor 703 as L. 2028. A related locus, L. 2024, yielded a sherd of possible Middle Minoan III Polychrome ware (Fig 10a). Below these loci lay an ash layer (L. 2040) which apparently belonged to domestic activity in the early phase of the palace. Below it, a beaten earth floor with a thin lens of plaster flecks (L. 2046/2052) was apparently the earliest floor to be connected with the walls of the palace. An initial reading of the pottery suggests a date

late in the MB I period for the floor and its use; included among the pottery in L. 2046 is a fragment of a spout from a Cypriot Red on Red spouted bowl (Fig. 10b).

The foundation trench of Wall 733 cuts a deliberate fill (L. 2064) made up of small to medium stones, large sherds of pottery, and very compact dark soil (Fig. 11). This may have been the constructional fill upon which the palace was built. Below this fill, light grey ashy deposits (L. 2062 and, underneath this, L. 2072) contain MB I pottery. These may belong to activities which took place before the construction of the palace.



Fig. 11. Foundation trench for Wall 733 (with main deposits in baulk section to east)

The central room, bordered on the south by Wall 731 and on the north by Wall 2032, contained a deposit of dark brown soil and stones (L. 2026), possibly the makeup for the MB II floor which is now missing. We should note that the deposits here are in much worse shape than elsewhere in the area, since the room was heavily disturbed by Iron Age pits in both north and south. Below L. 2026, another beaten earth floor with a thin lens of plaster flecks (L. 2042) was uncovered. Underneath this thin plaster floor, which probably correlates to Floor 2046/2052 in the southern room, a dark compact soil with many stones and sherds was excavated as L. 2044 and L. 2054. We believe that this is the constructional fill for the building of the earliest phase of the palace, equivalent to L. 2064 in the southern room. Walls 731, 2032, and 733 were built on top of an ashy layer (L. 2058 and L. 2060), probably belonging to activities carried out before the building of the palace.



Fig. 12a-b. Tomb 2070/2076 (left); Drain 2048 with long/narrow space to west (right)

Tomb 2070/2076 was dug into this ashy layer and was partially disturbed by the constructional fills of the palace. It contained the remains of an individual aged 20-30, of unknown gender, who may have originally been deposited in a flexed position (Fig. 12a). It is possible that this tomb, like many of the tombs found elsewhere at Kabri, was constructed below the floor of a house, i.e. that it is an

intramural burial, for it is sealed by a thin layer of plaster. It is therefore also possible that the walls of the palace in this area were built on top of private domestic structures, similar to the situation found by Kempinski in his Areas B and C.

It is conceivable that this central room was never used as a residential space within the palace, since Drain 2048, built through Wall 733, flowed into this room from the area of the long and narrow space (interpreted by Kempinski as a possible staircase) lying to the west (Fig. 12b). The drain itself did not have capstones, but did have a stone floor. In its latest phase, the drain was blocked up at its western end by at least two restorable storage jars dating either from the late MB I or the early MB II period. Finds from inside the drain included numerous food remains such as crab pinchers and bones of cows, sheep, and goats. As for the long and narrow space lying to the west of the drain and the central room, we excavated the easternmost part, hoping to find more data concerning its use. It became apparent that under the plaster floor of the latest palace in this room, there was a deliberate fill which continued all the way down until the level of the drain. At the bottom of this fill, flat-lying pottery indicated the existence of a surface (L. 2078) which corresponds to an earlier phase of the palace. However, it remains to be seen, in the next excavation season, whether additional floors exist below this surface.

In the northern room, little was found because of the limited excavation area left between Wall 2032 and the northern baulk. It is our intention to return and dig the remaining parts of these rooms in the next excavation.

### *Conclusions*

In conclusion, a tentative reconstruction of the occupational history of the palace may be proposed as follows. Prior to the construction of the palace, the area was very likely occupied by domestic structures, complete with intramural burials, datable to the middle part of the MB I period. Contacts with Cyprus were already taking place in this early phase, as indicated by sherds of Cypriot Red on Black pottery. These contacts with Cyprus then continued throughout the history of the palace. The massive foundations of Wall 733 indicate that the earliest palace was of an astonishingly-solid construction, reminiscent of the MB fortifications for the entire tell. The date given by Kempinski for the construction of these fortifications is MB I late, so it is conceivable that Wall 733 and the outer fortification wall for the entire site were constructed at approximately the same time. We shall address this question of possible contemporaneity and its relationship to the rise of rulership at Tel Kabri in our next excavation season.

The solid construction of Wall 733, using stones which were much larger than those used in the later phases of the palace, confirms Kempinski's hypothesis that a massive earlier structure lay below the MB II palace. However, rather than calling this earlier structure a "public building," as Kempinski did based upon the humble remains of Stratum IV which he had uncovered in his Area F (Kempinski, Scheftelowitz, and Oren 2002: 55), it may now be possible to suggest that it is in fact a full-fledged palace in its own right. We would suggest that the transition from MB I to MB II at Tel Kabri was not marked by the building of a palace, as Kempinski thought, but rather by modifications to a palace which already existed. In fact, the palace seems to have existed for as much as 250 years, and underwent a series of renovations, including modifications in internal plan, mending of floors, and changes in the functions of rooms, during its lifetime. We can already write the history of single rooms and can date the overall history of the palace from its inception in MB I to its destruction in MB II. However, a general internal phasing of the palace will have to wait until additional excavations have been conducted, further exposing the history of each individual room and area.

Additional insights into the interactions between the rulers of Tel Kabri and the Aegean area have also been obtained as a result of this year's excavations. Our investigation of Room 740 and Threshold 698 (Fig. 13a) strongly supports our hypothesis (Cline and Yasur-Landau 2007) that the fragments of the wall fresco (Fig. 13b) which were reused as packing within the threshold were placed there during a renovation of Room 740, Ceremonial Hall 611, and Threshold 698. The pit which we found cutting through Floor 2029, the penultimate floor in Room 740, yielded pottery which gives a *terminus post quem* of MB II for this renovation activity. The fragments of wall fresco, therefore, are likely to date to a period well before the end of MB II. Indeed, a date within the 17th century BCE may not be out of the question. We had already suggested such a possibility (Cline and Yasur-Landau 2007), but now have a pottery deposit from an excavated context to help support our hypothesis.

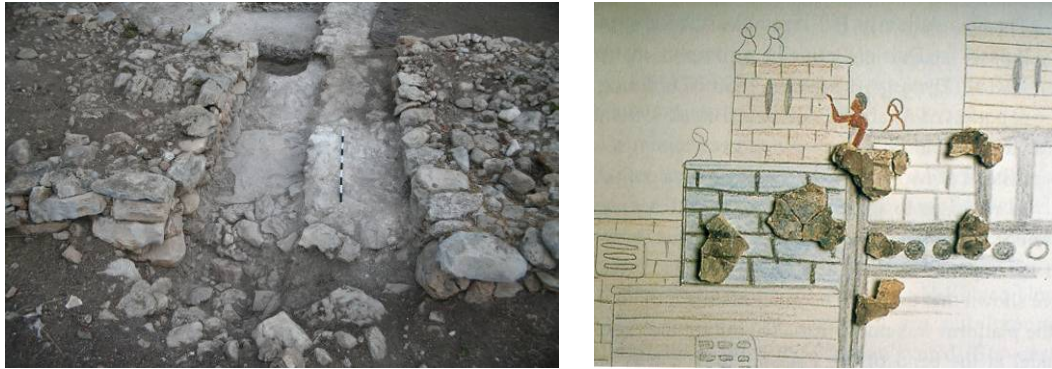


Fig. 13a-b. Threshold 698 (left) and wall fresco fragments (right)

Finally, the possible Aegean sherds originating from both the latest occupational deposits as well as earlier contexts may suggest, if proven to actually originate in the Aegean, that the interactions between the Aegean area and the palatial elite of Tel Kabri included not only the commissioning of Aegean-style art but also the importation of high-quality ceramics and possibly other objects.

### Conservation Plans

In 2008, Dr. Laura D'Alessandro, Head of the Conservation Lab at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and team member of the Kabri Archaeological Project, conducted several studies at the site, including sampling wall and floor plaster and studying the state of preservation of the painted Aegean-style floor in Ceremonial Hall 611 (Fig. 14a). In connection with Mr. Raanan Kislev, Director of the Department of Conservation of the Israel Antiquities Authority, Dr. D'Alessandro and the co-directors of the Kabri Archaeological Project have begun work on a long-range plan to conserve, and possibly present to the public, the walls and floors of the MB II palace, including the Aegean-style painted floor.



Fig. 14a-b. Examination of state of preservation (left); placement of geotextile in Room 740 (right)

Finally, just as in 2005, before ending the 2008 season, we covered most of our excavation areas with a layer of isolating geotextile and then with a layer of earth (Fig. 14b). These measures will protect the floors and other surfaces throughout the next winter. In addition, we have arranged for the entire excavated area to be sprayed for weeds throughout the upcoming year.

### References

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