



Fig. 1. The Shemshara Hills from northwest. In center of photo the high summit of Main Hill behind North Hill, and to the left the large Camp Hill (photo J. Eidem).

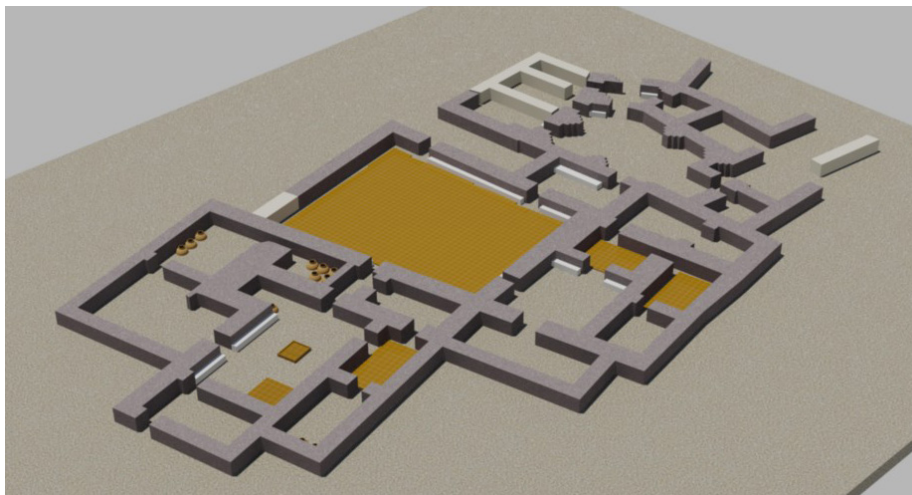


Fig. 2. 3D reconstruction of the Level V palace at Tell Shemshara (view from southeast). The surviving portions re-investigated by NINO 2012-14 (much of the central courtyard, and smaller sections of each wing) provide location and base for approximate, but not to-scale accurate, reconstruction of wholly eroded or yet unexplored rooms and spaces visible in the Iraqi photo record (plan by M. Uildriks).

The NINO Archaeological Project on the Rania Plain 2013-2014

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Introduction

After the first exploratory season on the Rania Plain in 2012 (see *Annual Report NINO & NIT 2012*, 2-11) the work was accelerated in 2013-14, with three field seasons and a smaller visit in October 2014. In early 2015 the new NINO website (see www.nino-leiden.nl) was launched, which includes sections with summary information and picture galleries of our work, some of which will also be briefly summarised in this article.

While Syria for a fifth year is ravaged by a vicious civil war and with much of Northern Iraq in the grips of the perverse barbarity of ISIS, legal archaeological exploration in Greater Mesopotamia has come to an almost complete halt. One notable exception is the still vibrant activity conducted in the safe Kurdish Region of Iraq, by numerous Iraqi and foreign teams, and in close cooperation with the local directorates of Antiquities. NINO is grateful for the continued support of its work by the relevant authorities in Erbil and Sulaymania, and to the many individuals, Iraqi and European, who contributed to the results reported here. The fieldwork is since 2012 sponsored principally by NWO and NINO.

The Hills of Shemshara

The ancient settlements at Shemshara are spread over several natural hills. Main Hill is where the Danes excavated in 1957, followed by Iraqi colleagues 1958-59. Just west of this is the large "Camp Hill" (so-called because the Danish expedition pitched its tents here), and just north

of Main Hill is an elongated hill, which we have dubbed North Hill. These three hills form a roughly triangular system, located in the angle where the small Wadi Boskin joins the Lower Zab. They all had some occupation in the Neolithic Hassuna period, and in the Bronze Age (late 3rd-early 2nd mill. BC). A further hill, west of Wadi Boskin, Bardastee, seems basically unrelated. In spring 2013 we conducted test excavations here, and found that Bardastee was only occupied in the very early third Millennium BC, and a fairly rare settlement of the so-called Ninevite 5 period. During the same season we discovered a very eroded site of the first millennium BC on a hill northwest of Bardastee. Otherwise, however, the Shemshara hills seem fairly isolated, and whatever smaller, rural settlements may have existed nearby, are not today easily identified on the ground.

The Palace of Kuwari Resurrected

For those studying the history of Northern Mesopotamia in the early second millennium BC the "Palace of Kuwari" at Shemshara has almost mythical status. It was presumably within the walls of this building that Kuwari, the governor of ancient Shusharra, briefly resided as a key figure in both local, regional, and international power plays, exchanging envoys and letters with kings and officials in the Turukkean realm in the Zagros and the mighty Shamshi-Adad in the west. His own archives, or parts of them in any case, were excavated in the building by Danish and Iraqi archaeologists 1957-58. The Danes published a plan of the small section of the palace they explored,

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Fig. 3. Excavation of the central court of the palace, spring 2014 (photo I. Kisjes).



Fig. 4. Entrance to the Level V "temple", re-excavated spring 2014 (photo J. Eidem).



Fig. 5. Terracotta stand from Shemshara (IM.62080; after J.B. Pritchard (ed.), *The Ancient Near East. Supplementary Texts and Pictures*, Princeton 1969, No. 842)

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while the Iraqis only reported to have “uncovered a massive edifice with numerous annexes”, and so for decades available archaeological information on the building remained tantalisingly scant. Results of the recent NINO project on the Rania Plain and the appearance of photos and information from the Iraqi excavations now converge to provide at least a sketch overview of the building, as presented here in Fig. 2.

The western wing of the complex remains fairly unclear and awaits further investigation in coming seasons, but we can now see that the central courtyard, paved with baked bricks (Fig. 3), was flanked by “annexes” north, east, and south. The northern sector features a main entrance and leads to a small court adorned by recessed half-columns. This sector was interpreted as a ‘temple’ by the Iraqi excavators, who mention a ‘cella’ on the west side of the court, but its exact location is unclear. The decorated half-columns would be typical of temple architecture, but in other respects the arrangement is unusual. In 2014 we re-excavated a small part of the entrance room to the ‘temple’ (Fig. 4), and further investigation may help understand this sector better.

East of the central court is the wing which was partly excavated by the old Danish expedition, which here found the famous archive in Room 2 (the small room with paved floor adjacent to the central court). All of this wing is now eroded below floor level, and only shallow limestone foundations remain. Given the location of “Kuwari’s archive” here, and the layout of the suite it seems likely that it was the ‘apartment’ of Kuwari, the lord of the palace.

The large sector south of the central court features several rooms with large storage jars in situ, but also a central court (so according to the Iraqi excavators), with a central podium of baked bricks and a corner platform. On the central podium the Iraqi archaeologists found several, quite impressive stands of terracotta, probably incense burners, shaped like towers carried by animals (see Fig. 5). It seems likely that this space was used for official receptions and meetings. In 2013 we re-excavated the small storage room with many in situ jars just south of the central court, but much of the southern suite is today unfortunately entirely eroded and gone forever.

The reconstruction of the building made possible so far leaves many open questions, and given the heavy erosion which has destroyed much of the complex we can only hope for some partial answers to some of them as we finish this part of the project in coming years. The palace of Kuwari clearly featured elements known from other contemporary sites, but also elements of local flavour. Planning and execution of the complex was carried out when Shemshara was part of a local Zagros kingdom, but still display close connections with Mesopotamian traditions.

Before Kuwari

In our first season at Shemshara in 2012 small operations near the east slope explored levels below the Level V palace. Level VI seemed poorly preserved, Level VII displayed fairly poorly preserved pisé walls and a number of infant burials under the floors, while the burnt Level VIII

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Fig. 6. Araban I: ancient pits visible on surface
(photo I. Kisjes).



Fig. 7. Dugurdkan II. Examples
of prehistoric surface
ceramics (photo J. Eidem).

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was better preserved, and the source of a single cuneiform tablet (from Level VIIIa). In the second season, in autumn 2013, high water of the lake had washed out the east slope and exposed walls and burnt rooms on surface. As expected most of the visible structures belonged to Level VIII, and another tablet was retrieved in Level VIIIb. The results indicate that earlier “administrative” buildings preceded the famous Level V palace, and that at least Level VIII also made perhaps intensive use of written records. An even earlier Level IX was discovered on the lower part of the east slope. Walls of this level are built with characteristic fairly large (ca. 45 x 45 cm), dark red bricks with thick grey mortar, and seem to belong to substantial structures. Remains on the lower east slope include what seems a ‘water gate’.

One of the main tasks remaining at Shemshara is to explore and understand these earlier levels better. The two tablets from Level VIII, although not providing much historical information, can be dated to the very early second Millennium, and it seems that the history of Shemshara as a Bronze Age fort protecting the strategic pass at Darband, goes back into the late third millennium BC.

After the Flood: A New Heritage Challenge

Only within the few years we have been active on the Rania Plain we have witnessed substantial fluctuations in the water level of Lake Dokan, and statistics for the last decades show how the water level, seasonally and yearly, may vary up to 25 m or

more... This has created a large “Flood Risk Zone” around the perimeter of the Lake, where heritage sites, including the Shemshara Hills, are periodically inundated, and the movements of the water progressively remove new layers of soil. Together with the co-investigating team from the University of Copenhagen we will survey and register the sites within this zone before they are further destroyed, and we plan targeted test excavations in selected examples.

A team from NINO carried out a pilot survey of Rania Plain sites in October 2014, and focussed specifically on sites close to the extant edges of Lake Dokan. Subsequent to remote sensing sites were plotted and mapped on location with a differential GPS, detailed aerial views were acquired with UAV photography, geo-physical resistivity prospection performed, surface materials (principally ceramic sherds) collected by systematic random sampling, and in one instance a small test trench excavated. The combination of these methods proved highly promising, and will be employed also in future efforts.

A few examples from the pilot survey may serve to demonstrate the various degrees of flood damage according to site position and characteristics (for a map showing location of the sites see section “*NINO Archaeological Project on the Rania Plain (Iraq)*” at www.nino-leiden.nl).

Three of the six sites intensively surveyed, Gird Mamand, Bab-w-Kur South, and Araban, are all basically low-contour, and flooded most of the year, and some years throughout. They are now threatened

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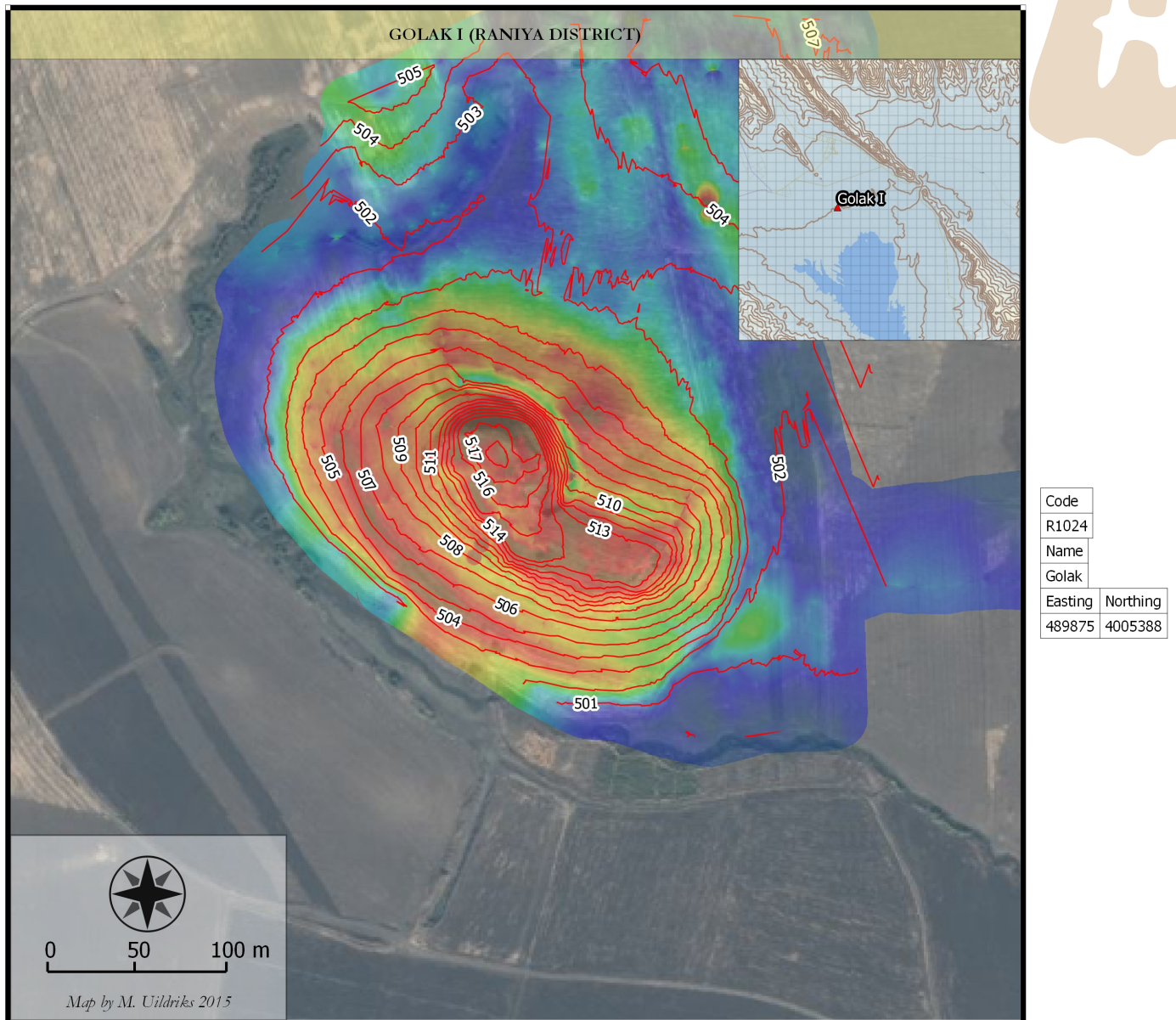


Fig. 8. The main mound of Gird Golak: superimposed satellite image, topography, and resistivity survey (conducted by J. Orbons). The lower slopes with blue colour show low resistivity and indicate either absence of ancient structures or a heavy cover of wash (topography and composite plan by M. Uildriks).

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by complete obliteration by the movements of the lake, and thus urgent candidates for 'second phase salvage' operations. As an example of this type of site a few particulars of one of them may be noted.

Araban I: resistivity survey as well as surface collections show that only small portions of this site may still hide *in situ* remains. Surface sherds are heavily concentrated on the northern part of the site and otherwise fade out. On the western edge of the north part of the site are numerous circular pits visible on surface, with bones, snail shells, and some near complete ceramic vessels eroding out. On the south-western part of the site are numerous circular fire pits/ovens visible on surface. The surface sherds on the site are predominantly of Uruk and early Ninevite 5 date (late 4th-early 3rd mill. BC). Araban I appears virtually beyond 'salvation', although further investigation is required to certify this. In any case, the numerous pits on the west edge of the site, and possibly some of the ovens on its southern extension, may well be worth a last salvage effort.

The important sites of Dugurdkan I and II, in 1959 target for limited Iraqi excavation, are in an intermediate position, both being high-contour, but also prone to yearly flooding and erosion. The larger and multi-period Dugurdkan I consists of a small, high tell surrounded by an extensive lower town. Eroded foundations of stones, exposed by flood erosion, are visible over the entire site,

and partial rooms and buildings can be traced. The archaeological remains in the lower town seem shallow and close to bedrock. The smaller Dugurdkan II, across a small wadi to the west of the main mound, is almost circular and quite high. Surface sherds reveal occupations from the Neolithic Hassuna-Samarra, Ubaid, Halaf and Late Chalcolithic periods.

Finally Gird Golak, is on fairly high ground ca. 4 km southwest of Shemshara, and has only been touched by Lake Dokan when the water level was exceptionally high, but it has clearly suffered quite some damage, also from intensive cultivation. It is the largest site close to Shemshara, and would seem to supplement the occupational periods represented there. This site is fortunately in a marginal position as far as flood damage is concerned.

As will be clear from these examples many sites in the Dokan Dam area are endangered by progressing erosion, some indeed are literally disappearing. In future years we therefore hope to perform what we call "second phase salvage" at some of the most important and exposed sites. This work has an obvious and urgent priority, and will evidently also serve to demonstrate concretely the potential losses and gains in relation to timely and adequate planning and preparation for heritage salvage in future flood schemes in Middle Eastern contexts.