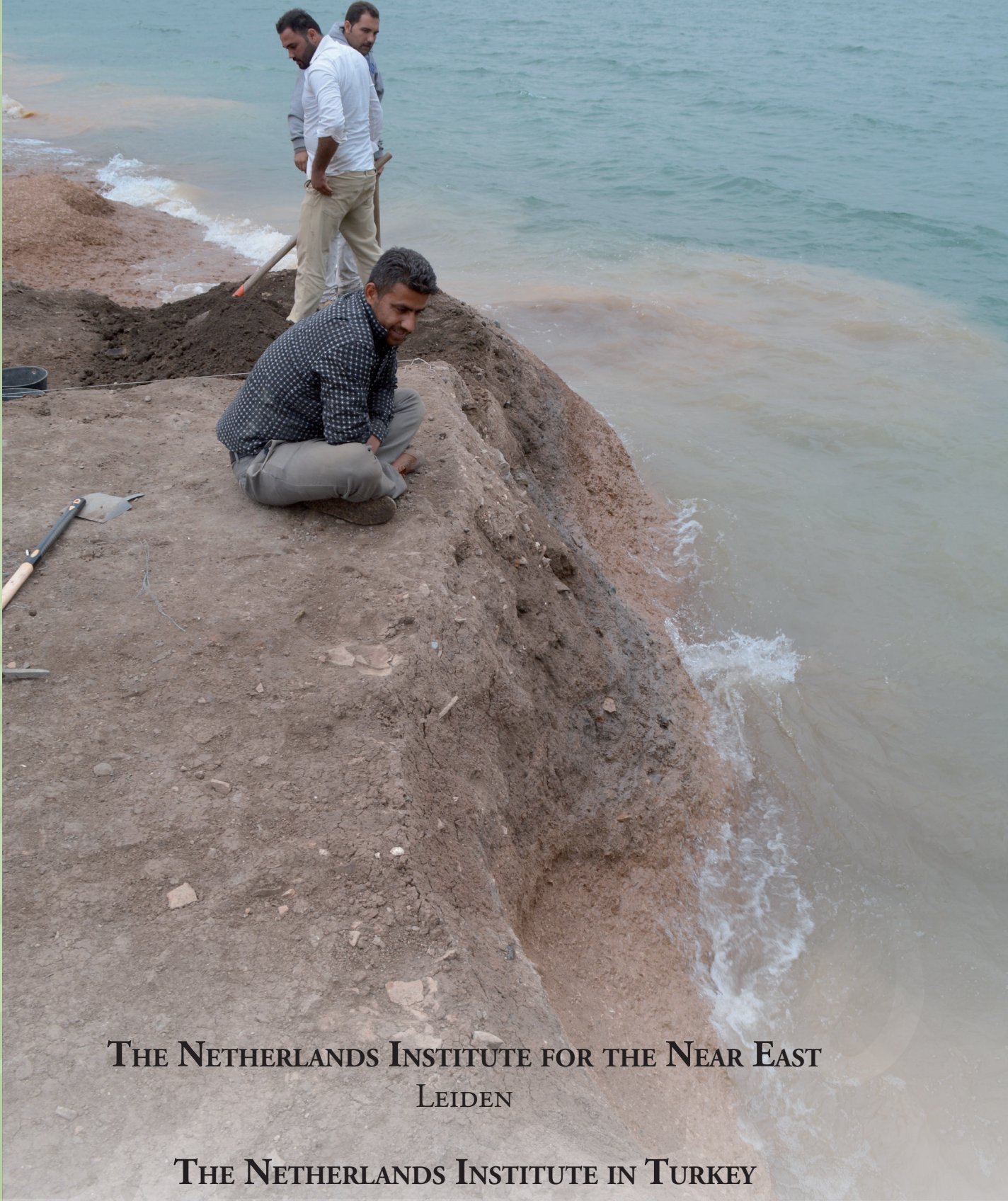




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THE NETHERLANDS INSTITUTE FOR THE NEAR EAST
LEIDEN

THE NETHERLANDS INSTITUTE IN TURKEY
ISTANBUL



The Netherlands Institute for the Near East

Witte Singel 25
2311 BG Leiden

P.O.Box 9515
2300 RA Leiden

www.nino-leiden.nl



The Netherlands Institute in Turkey

İstiklal Caddesi 181, Merkez Han
Beyoğlu, İstanbul

P.K. 132, Beyoğlu 34433
İstanbul, Turkey

www.nit-istanbul.org

Front cover:

Salvage at the edge of Lake Dokan, at the
site of Arban. *NINO Archaeological
Project on the Rania Plain*, see pp. 2-13.

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Annual Report NINO and NIT 2015

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Fig. 1. Modern toy doll embedded in lake deposition (west slope of Tell Shemshara Main Hill, Oct. 2015).



Fig. 2. Map of the Rania Plain with Lake Dokan at low level, showing the location of sites mentioned in the text.

Dams and Damage

Heritage loss and second phase salvage on the Rania Plain (Kurdish Region of Iraq)

Jesper Eidem

In autumn 2015 the NINO Archaeological Project on the Rania Plain conducted a sixth season of fieldwork in Iraq. This concluded the first phase of our project and we are now busy preparing more comprehensive reports on the results as well as the next phase. The work in Iraq 2015 included some additional investigations at Tell Shemshara, and further survey within the Flood Risk zone of Lake Dokan. In this short article we focus on the latter effort, which will be a main component of the next phase of the project.

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.

Introduction

Some years ago a distinguished Turkish archaeologist commented on the deplorable fact that only a few of the many dam constructions in Turkey were accompanied by systematic heritage survey and salvage work, and continued: “However, even though Cultural Heritage work has been minimal, there has been a tremendous amount of new data recovered from these few projects on the culture history of the project regions. Thus, one cannot avoid wondering what has been lost.”

This statement neatly sums up a huge problem. Since the 1950’ies many scores of dams have been constructed throughout the Middle East, where the predominant heritage sites are mounds composed

of earth-built ruins, prone to severe damage if permanently flooded. When applied salvage work in dam zones have indeed often produced important new evidence. The concentration of investigations in small areas, and excavation of modest sites, which would not otherwise have attracted attention, have provided many new insights and also some surprises! On the other hand it has remained unknown what effects prolonged flooding actually causes to sites, whether investigated or not, and this brings us to the question posed by our Turkish colleague: what *has* been lost?

As one of the earliest dam zones where heritage work was performed prior to inundation the Dokan Dam Area provides vivid illustrations of the potential loss to heritage in the longer term. Water level in the artificial Dokan Lake, formed in 1959, varies yearly and seasonally up to 25 m or more, creating a wide “Risk Zone” in its perimeter, where sites are exposed to long periods of flooding, but also intermittently accessible. The NINO project, realising the enormous damage done to Tell Shemshara (see below), has therefore decided to investigate other sites in the area, with some immediate concrete goals and a more general agenda. Primarily the work will supplement meagre data on the settlement history of the Rania Plain from the old pre-1959 work, and “second Phase” salvage excavation at selected sites may retrieve important evidence now fast disappearing. In a wider perspective the results will serve as a first assessment of how flooding affects Middle Eastern heritage sites, and hopefully inspire and guide better planning and protection in future dam schemes.



Fig. 3. View from Basmusian towards Darband-i Ramkan; in foreground examples of baked brick "walls" (October 2015).



Fig. 4. Basmusian (October 2015).

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To demonstrate these aspects we offer here a small “tour” of some of the relevant sites, starting with the probably main ancient site of the Rania Plain, Basmusian, which was reachable by boat in 2015, and proceed to a site not formerly recognised as such, also by boat. The tour will then “land” and briefly consider another important site of the plain, also only recently identified, and finally end at one of the hills of the Shemshara site itself, a hill which archaeologically today appears virtually a “shop with empty shelves”.

Basmusian

The high mound of Basmusian towers over the Rania Plain, although much less so than before 1959. Only completely submerged when the Dokan Lake is at its highest Basmusian is now mostly an island, and still visible from many angles on the plain, located more or less at its centre. With an original extent of some 9 ha and with a long sequence of occupation it may reasonably be regarded as a main and key site of the plain. Iraqi excavations 1956-58 recorded 16 successive levels, from a Medieval level on top down to Neolithic levels.

The site has clearly suffered immensely from the passing water of the lake. The high summit has retained the squarish shape it had pre-flood, partially perhaps a shadow of early second millennium BC temple platforms. The old report describes Temple 1 (Level III), with shallow foundations and built on top of the older Temple 2 (Level IV), founded on a “stepped mud-brick platform”, 6-12 courses high. The report also mentions a sounding which revealed an even older temple. During our visit we

noted what seem “walls” of baked bricks eroding out of the high summit (Fig. 3). It seems possible that these “walls” were the protective shells for another temple platform (of *terra pisé* or mudbrick), and perhaps that of a “Temple 3”. We hope to return and plan these and other features in a future season. The series of temples at Basmusian is of some interest to us, since at Shemshara the 1957 excavation found what the field director, H. Ingholt, referred to as a “cultural installation” on the high summit of the Main Hill, associated with a massive construction of bricks, and used through three successive phases of the early second millennium BC. Although the Shemshara structures were less clear, and now are almost gone, it is tempting to see them as a parallel to the Basmusian temples.

Elsewhere on Basmusian walls, foundations, baked bricks or features, ovens etc. are eroding out of the slopes in bewildering proportions. Our rather short visit was used to set up mapping points for UAV photography, and do a random collection of surface sherds. The photo here (Fig. 4) shows clearly how thousands upon thousands of ceramic sherds have washed out of the site, and since been re-deposited by the lake in thick braids on its lower parts. Thus normal systematic surface sampling is rather futile on this site, and the small selection of sherds we collected indeed represents many periods.

Of particular interest to our project are the rather many painted sherds of the early Ninevite 5 period, dated to the very beginning of the third millennium BC. Just to the west of the Shemshara Hills is the mound of Bardastee, where we in 2013 excavated levels of the same date, and which



Fig. 5. UAV photo of Baiz Agha (October 2015).



Fig. 6. Selection of Middle Assyrian (late second millennium BC) sherds from Baiz Agha.

Dams and Damage

was only occupied in that period. On Shemshara itself we have found a few similar sherds, and the same material is found on a number of sites in the Rania and Pishdar Plains, the easternmost examples identified so far. This terminal-to-post Uruk horizon is of great interest for wider historical perspectives on the region: its trajectories following the Late Uruk period, and the apparent paucity of later third millennium occupation. On present evidence the early Ninevite 5 period seems to be followed by a long period of very limited settled occupation in this border-region.

Basmusian is a fascinating mound, steadily eroding, and in spite of the obvious logistic challenges working there we hope to conduct some further investigations in the near future. Some other aspects of the site will be discussed in our next *Annual Report*.

Baiz Agha

Proceeding south we reach another island, the site of Baiz Agha. It is marked only as a village on the Iraqi survey map from 1956, but clearly this village was located on an ancient site. The ruins of the old village are now long washed away, and the 2015 photos (UAV photo Fig. 5) instead show the rather massive stone foundations of much older ruins, principally a large structure with a central courtyard and surrounding rooms. The photos also show traces of mud brick walls below the stone foundations, and thus from an even older level, and again of a fairly substantial structure. The sherds collected (randomly) during the rather short visit provide some tentative clues to the history of the

site. A fairly large segment of the sherds represents the clearest Middle Assyrian ceramic profile we have yet seen on the Rania Plain (Fig. 6). It is surely of interest to note that the local antiquities' inspector has heard rumours of tablets ("at least ten – some in envelopes") found by casual visitors at the site of Baiz Agha. Possibly these tablets derived from a Middle Assyrian level. In spite of the logistic challenges clearly also this site deserves further scientific attention.

Araban

The site of Araban was already visited and documented (mapping, UAV photos, geophysical prospection, systematic random sampling) in autumn 2014. It is located on the east bank of the Zab/Lake Dokan, and appears as a very low-contour extended area with scatters of surface sherds, mostly of Late Uruk and Early Ninevite 5 date. A small sondage in 2014 revealed only very shallow remains of stone foundations, and the site seems almost exclusively to have survived sub-surface, represented by numerous, mostly circular trash pits and fireplaces along its west edge, close to the water of Lake Dokan. Already in 2014 it was clear that the site extended actually into the water and that many of the pits were being washed out. Large fragments of ceramic vessels, bones, and shells were visible, half buried in the extant pit-surfaces.

We decided to return to this site in 2015 to salvage some of the eroding pits, and on a first visit discovered that a number of the pits had been disturbed by casual visitors (fishermen, shepherds etc.), evidently curious about the objects protruding

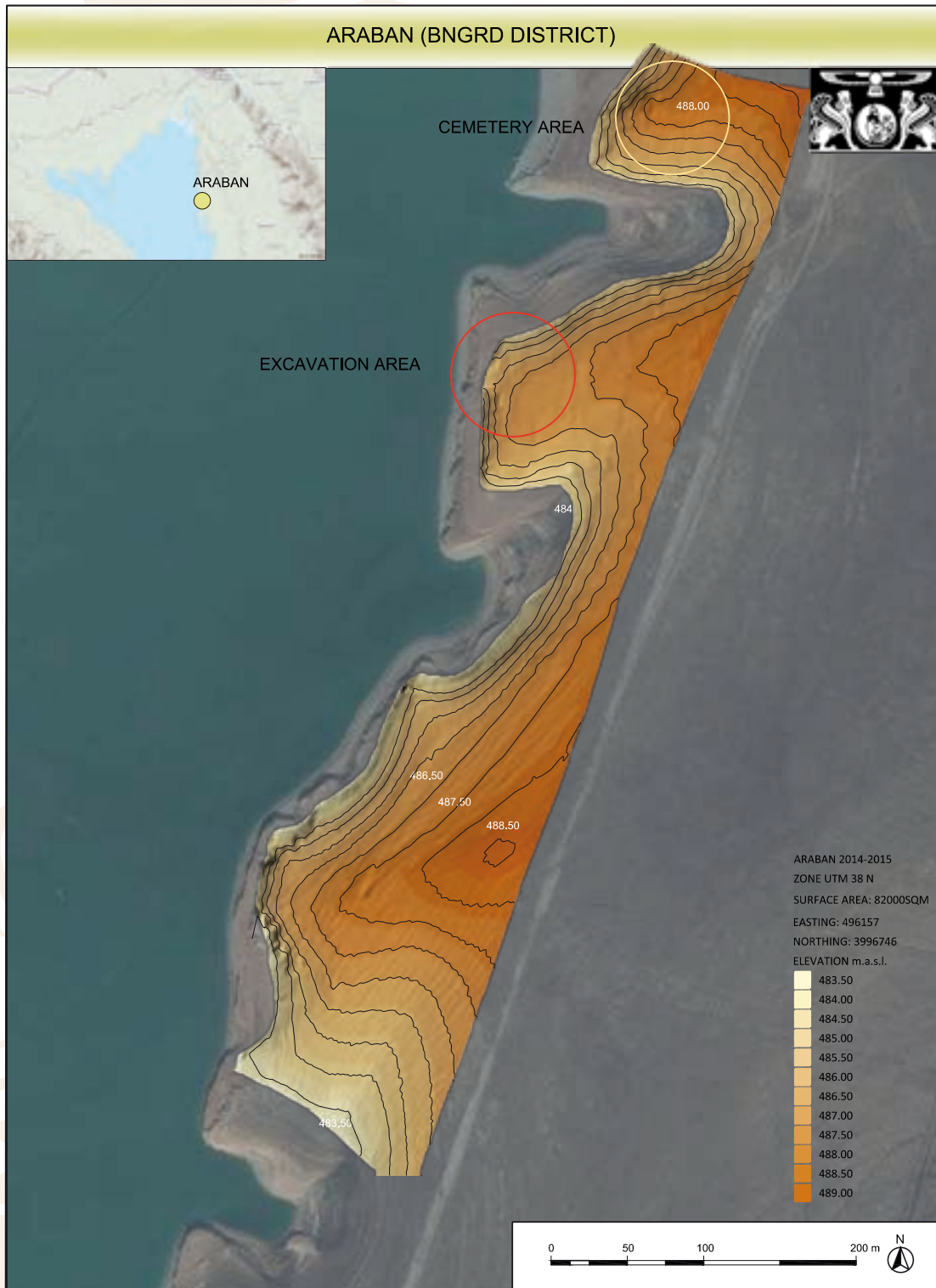


Fig. 7. Map of Araban (2015).

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from them. We also discovered that the site extended much further north along the edge of the Lake. These observations made it even more imperative to extend our investigations, and we therefore devoted a few days to work at Araban. The 'new' portions of the site were mapped, and a small sondage opened in a very large pit in the northern part.

The general situation is shown on the map (Fig. 7): The topography, extended north ca. 100 % in relation to 2014, is superimposed on a Quickbird image from November 2010, when the level of Lake Dokan was ca. 478,5 m (ca. 5 m less than in 2015). The site is represented by exposed pits and fireplaces (the latter predominantly in the southernmost part) close to the lake, and surface



Fig. 8. View from the northern extension of Araban towards the 2015 sampling area.



Fig. 9. Araban: Uruk jar in – and out of the lake!



Fig. 10. Araban: Uruk period sherds from the 2015 sampling.

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sherds extending inland to ca. the line of the old road (which led from Dokan to Qaladze), visible in the map sub-layer as a whitish line (of limestone pebbles). The northernmost promontory, recorded in 2014 as Araban II, also has pits with fourth millennium BC sherds eroding out at the lake edges, but on higher ground a cemetery. Around the graves and scatters of stones from the graves are numerous baked bricks and some sherds of later date, so that this hill also had post-Uruk occupation. The promontory to the south is where the 2015 sampling took place (Fig. 8).

This sampling produced a pure Late Uruk horizon of sherds, many seemingly joining fragments of broken vessels or segments of vessels. Fragments of the famous Late Uruk bevelled-rim bowls, red slipped, and grey ware sherds are frequent (Fig. 10).

Based on the extent of the pits and surface sherds (the latter only a rough guide due to the passing water of the lake!) the area mapped is ca. 8 ha – making Araban one of the largest sites identified on the Rania Plain. It must have been a rather short-lived Late Uruk settlement, with some limited (to the southern part) occupation in the Early Ninevite 5 period. While many sites on the Rania Plain have contemporary occupation, they are much smaller or span a longer fourth millennium horizon. Hence our very tentative suggestion to interpret Araban as a planned ‘colony’ – a *pied-à-terre* to facilitate contacts between Mesopotamia proper, the Rania Plain, and not least areas further east, beyond the pass at Darband. The Araban site thus seems a crucial element in the history of the Rania Plain in the mid-to-late fourth millennium BC.

Shemshara

This site has been a main target for the NINO Project, as described in previous *Annual Reports*, and still merits further, also urgent, investigation. The archaeological site straddles several natural hills, and one in particular is almost lost to the lake. This is North Hill, an elongated and pre-1959 regularly oval mound just north of the Main Hill and its important palace and archives. There is no record of any pre-flood excavation on North Hill, which in retrospect seems a great pity. A sounding on high ground has produced only a very shallow and heavily eroded archaeological layer on the natural soil. Almost certainly the east slope once comprised several terrace-built structures, now washed away by the lake, leaving the large, semi-circular ‘scars’ on the slope (Fig. 11). A few features remain to substantiate this idea.

In early 2013 the water of Lake Dokan rose to surround the Shemshara hills which became islands. In autumn when the water receded we could observe exposed features on most slopes of the hills, which we quickly proceeded to document and salvage. At the north slope of the Main Hill, for instance, erosion had revealed the remains of a thick wall of mudbrick which once surrounded the hill (Fig. 12). Behind it were rooms, one with the remains of a large storage jar embedded below floor level. These rooms, however, were subsequently cut down and covered with a huge terrace of *terra pisé*, which originally would have protruded from the hill, but today is heavily eroded. A small corner of a similar arrangement was found at the very northeastern

Fig. 11. Drone image of Shemshara North Hill (October 2013); embedded jar shown in Fig. 13 marked at northeast corner of hill.



Fig. 13. Exposed remains of embedded storage jar at northeast corner of North Hill (Oct. 2013).

Fig. 12. Lower north slope of Main Hill (view towards west) showing large brick wall (Level IX), founded directly on the natural hill, but “anchored” with a shallow layer of sherds and pebbles.

