



# UR REGION ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT

REPORT 2015

# Ur Region Archaeology Project

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H.E. Adil Sharshab  
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Qais Rashid  
Belinda Lewis  
Najwa Al-Habeeb  
Professor Kais Kubba  
Dr Licia Romano  
Amir Doshi  
Salah Hadi  
Cynthia Bates  
Michael Christy

# Directors Report 2015

The archaeological heritage of Iraq has received much publicity this year, for very regrettable reasons. The destruction of iconic artefacts in the north, both in the Mosul Museum and at ancient capitals such as Nimrud and Hatra, is heart-breaking. Even more lamentable to archaeologists is the loss by looting or vandalism of unexcavated sites whose secrets will never now be recoverable. Several initiatives are now underway in response and, while we get involved as appropriate, our own focus remains the Ur region where we can add value to developing excavation and research.

The situation in southern Iraq remains stable and our team was able to complete another session of fieldwork at Tell Khaiber between January and March. The focus was the major Babylonian public building that dominates the ancient settlement, unique in its design, divided into two distinct parts. We are pleased to report that we have recovered

the plan of the entire southern part, now quite clearly the administration wing. Further finds of cuneiform tablets this year have brought us closer to understanding its purpose, and finally provided us with a date. This community was active in the years around 1500 BC, during the time of the Sealand Dynasty, people of unknown origin who gained control of southern Iraq during the political collapse that followed the fall of Babylon. Very little is known about how people lived and fared during this uncertain time, so discoveries at Tell Khaiber are making a significant contribution to history.

Our headquarters and work facilities were again at Ur, courtesy of the State Board for Antiquities and Heritage, whose collaboration and assistance we warmly acknowledge. The addition of a 40x 12 ft portakabin for use as a laboratory, processing unit and photographic studio, greatly enhanced our efficiency, and the generous

loan of a large off-road vehicle by our colleagues at La Sapienza University, Rome solved a major logistical challenge. As usual the team comprised professional and academic staff from the UK (and one from Italy), working with Iraqi archaeologists and other helpers drawn from the local area.

Our links with Thi Qar University and with cultural life in Nasiriyah continue to grow, and the directors also interacted with colleagues from Basrah, Baghdad and Diwanayah, exchanging views and expertise, and making the first steps towards more formal input to higher education in archaeology in Iraq. The team was able to visit the ancient Sumerian city of Lagash, and also, for the first time for most of them, Babylon itself. Finally, the Minister for Tourism and Antiquities requested and opened a temporary exhibition of the finds from Tell Khaiber in the newly re-opened Iraq Museum, which was an especially proud moment for us.



# Scribes and Farmers

About fifty additional cuneiform tablets were retrieved from the archive room this year. Even the fragments can be very informative. Two-thirds of the tablets found concern the administration of personnel, so we now know the names and professions of people who lived at and around Tell Khaiber three and a half thousand years ago. Some records are tiny little notes, mostly dropped around the central recycling bin, bearing ephemeral pieces of information. One, for example, lists quantities of grain assigned to two men, Sin-ma-ilu, and Mayašu the scribe. The latter also appears on at least three other documents.

A typical record has a clearly demarcated heading at the top, which uses standard administrative terminology. It may be dated to the day and the month, though not always the year, and is ruled vertically into columns. These separate the quantitative information, amounts of grain from one to ten litres, from the qualitative, the name of each man receiving or

delivering them. Some men are identified by their professions, others by their patronyms, or father's names.

Most of the 50–60 men documented so far are only engaged part-time in this grain production and have separate primary professions and identities. These include leatherworkers and reedworkers, carpenters and cooks, washermen and oil-pressers, even a herald, and a group who stand apart: the professional farmers.

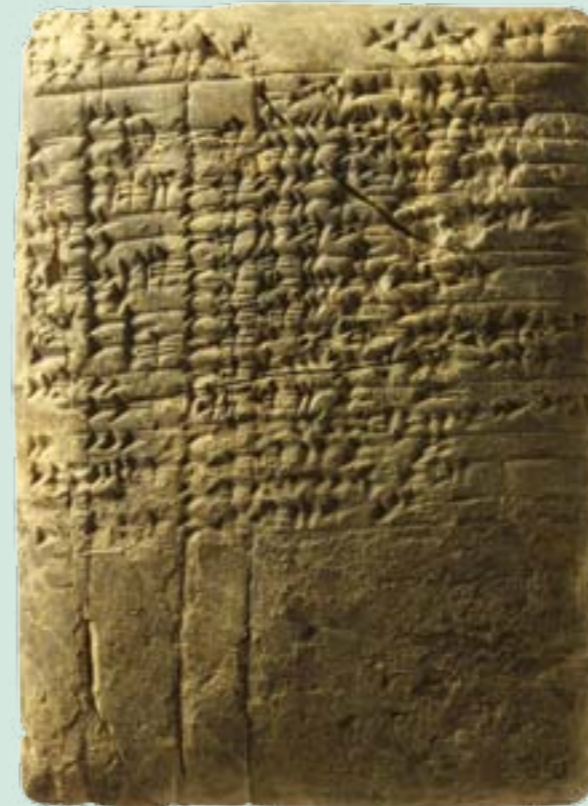
There are no clues about any administrative hierarchy, so it must have been self-evident to all concerned who is in charge. But who was he answerable to? The headings on seven tablets tell us that they record deliveries 'to the palace'. So this was the ultimate authority.

What is particularly exciting about the palace is the dynasty that it represents. After about 1500 BC, years were numbered by regnal year of the King (e.g. 'the xth year of King y'), but

before that they were named after the ruling king plus an important military or political event from the year before (such as 'The year Hammurabi built a new temple in Babylon'). We have three year names on our tablets so far, and one is complete: it lists our farmers receiving grain, and the date is the accession year of Aya-dara-galama, the eighth king of the Sealand Dynasty, who ruled in about 1500 BC.

This dynasty ruled southern Iraq from about 1720 BC, and seems to have adopted a Babylonian cultural identity. The Sealander are still rather mysterious. We do not know yet where their capital was, but it was quite likely the location of the palace that required Mayašu and friends to provide all that grain, and someone was making sure that each contribution was very carefully checked and recorded.

1. Tablet 3064.51 listing grain shipments. Ht. 10 cm.
2. The tablet recycling bin.
3. Tablet 3064.67, dated to the first year of King Aya-dara-galama. L. 9.8 cm.



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# The Sealand Dynasty Building

A major achievement at Tell Khaiber this year was to recover the entire plan of the southern wing of the public building. Supplemented by the excavation of several of the rooms, this has made major progress towards understanding the building's date and function.

The southern wing is now shown to be a self-contained block with a deliberately restricted entrance, reached only by walking right through the larger, northern part. Access was obviously strictly controlled. What went on inside?

The overall plan of this area is unique, but we can recognize some of its elements from standard Babylonian architecture. The entrance leads straight into an antechamber, which leads to the courtyard beyond. Next to the antechamber is another small room (Area 617), which may have housed the staircase to the roof or to an upper storey. On the far side of the courtyard is the audience room (Area 314), with double entrances and a small private space at one end. The

suite of rooms at the west end of the block mostly remains to be excavated, but may represent the domestic wing. The rooms east of the courtyard, however, have already yielded up their purpose: cuneiform tablets have been found in three of them, and Area 300 was used both for storing records and for making new ones. Here we are clearly in the heart of the administration.

Near one end of Area 300 was a circular clay bin where redundant clay tablets were thrown to be recycled. Doors into adjacent rooms have been identified but not yet one that would lead out into the courtyard, which is probably where the scribes sat.

Really striking is the arrangement of external towers around the outside of the building. It is not clear if these were primarily defensive, but their combination with the 3 metre-thick perimeter wall suggests they were at least designed to intimidate. One excavated this year, Area 304, had a plastered floor, and in the western corner a small area

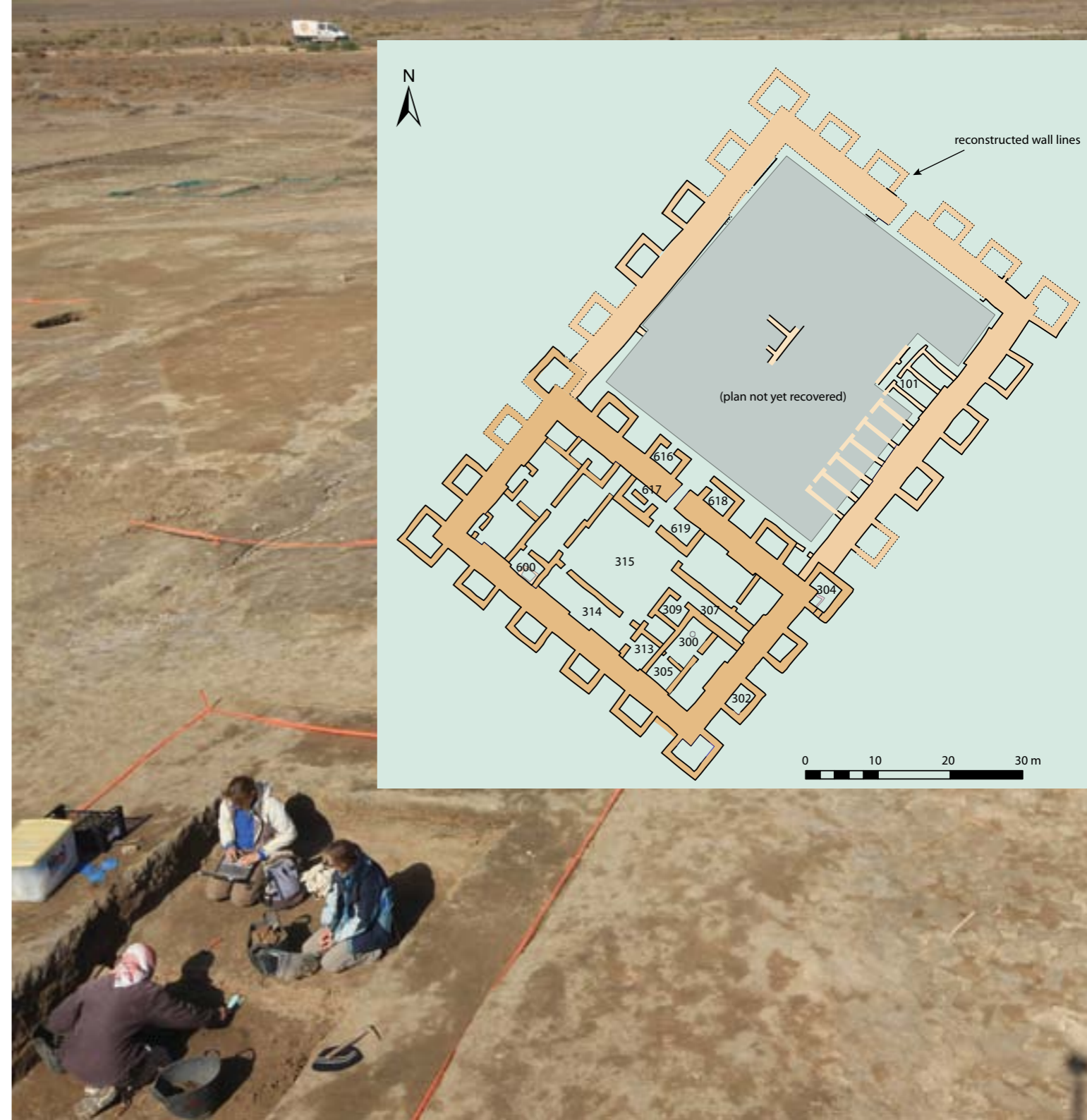
enclosed by a thin partition wall, perhaps a storage bin. So clearly the space within the tower was being used, though how it was accessed we are not yet sure.

The larger, northern unit will be further explored in 2016. We already know that it contains at least one row of long, narrow, identical rooms, which look very like storage magazines. However, we excavated one of these (Area 101) completely this year, and this interpretation is not supported by the finds, which included cooking installations. Archaeology is full of surprises. Now we must think of other possibilities, such as barracks, slave quarters or workrooms.

The space immediately around the building was devoid of any other structures, perhaps for reasons of defence and to display to best advantage the impressive façade.

*Opposite:* The public building, with our archaeologists at work in the corner tower room, Area 304.

*Overleaf:* The perimeter wall and tower rooms show up clearly after rain.









# Tools and Toys

The cuneiform archive is slowly revealing the social landscape of Tell Khaiber — the names and professions of the local people involved in the everyday affairs of the settlement. But how are the everyday objects we find adding to this picture?

Careful examination of the bits and pieces left behind in and around the public building show corroborating evidence for the occupations mentioned in the text. Reed-cutters must have needed boats and cutting tools: we find pieces of bitumen caulking, notched flint blades from composite sickles, and model boats made of clay. Simple net-sinkers, made by trimming potsherds and drilling holes in them, are very common, and presumably used by the fishermen. We do not yet have definite fish-hooks, but small fish, typical of the marshland that once surrounded Khaiber, are more easily caught in nets.

Stone tools are also quite common, perhaps surprisingly so, as good stone does not occur

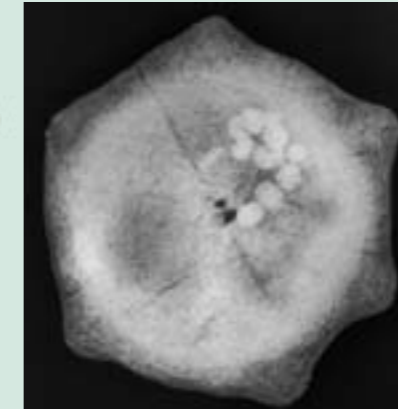
naturally in southern Iraq. Yet we have pounders, querns, rubbers, smoothers, multi-purpose implements, and even vessels, made of stone that must have been imported. The farmers, or their downstream colleagues in milling and malting, would have used the querns to process all that grain, and presumably the leather-workers and oil-pressers made use of some of the other tools to ply their trades.

The most abundant natural resource of southern Iraq is mud, and over millennia people have used it, baked or unbaked, for building, decoration, tools, ornaments and just about anything else you can think of. Humble products made of clay testify to details of the private lives of ordinary citizens. Pocket-sized mould-made plaques depicting goddesses, worshippers or other religious symbols are common in Babylonia. These were mass-produced, as is illustrated by a pair cast from the same mould, but found in different parts of the building.

The majority of the artefacts we recovered so far reinforce a picture of a working environment: tools, weapons, pieces of harness and fishing equipment. There is little evidence so far for traditional women's occupations, but then we have still to excavate any domestic quarters inside the building.

Nevertheless, there are clues to the existence of family life as well as the practice of trades and professions. One of the corner towers contained a collection of crude clay figurines, of sheep, horses and chariots, shaped by small hands. And, showing in X-ray the tiny pellets that make the sound, is a clay rattle that no doubt soothed a Babylonian baby three and a half millennia ago.

1. Baked clay rattle and X-ray photograph, 8.7x9.1 cm.
2. Mould-made clay plaques of a goddess 9cm high.
3. Unbaked clay figurine 7.9cm high.
4. Hand-sized rubbing and pounding tools made of imported stone.



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# Community

A vital purpose of the Ur Region Archaeological Project is to share what we discover with the local community: with archaeologists, teachers, students, members of the public—in fact with anyone who is interested. Visitors of all kinds find their way out to Tell Khaiber, or drop in to the dig house at Ur to see us working on the finds. These include people living or working nearby, international diplomats and dignitaries, and tourists to the area. It may sound surprising, but tourists do come, to see the wonderful nearby marshes and the fabulous site of Ur itself.

At the end of each excavation season the newly found artefacts are taken to Baghdad and formally deposited in the Iraq Museum, along with a copy of the relevant documentation. In 2015 the hand-over was made an occasion for a temporary exhibition of the best pieces found so far at Tell Khaiber, opened by the Minister for Tourism and Antiquities. We also took the opportunity to buy tickets and tour the newly

re-opened permanent galleries, not as special guests this time, but side-by-side with local schoolchildren and other visitors. It felt like an historic moment.

Alongside the re-opening of museums, the development of universities teaching archaeology, ancient history and languages is important for Iraq's participation in international scholarship and research. We continue to engage with the universities within reach of Nasiriyah, and plan to expand our support for their activities.

The appalling destruction, while we were staying at Ur, of sites and monuments in northern Iraq cast a shadow over this year's activities. We attended events at the University of Qadissiyah and locally to show our support for Iraqi scholars and archaeologists.

The confirmation that our large public building dates to the Sealand Dynasty, along with the exciting find of tablets in their

original context, has generated interest and excitement among the international academic community too. Invitations were accepted to give lectures in Germany at the University of Munich, and in the U.S. at the Universities of Chicago, and Ann Arbor, Michigan.

This year we were joined on the excavations by four colleagues from the State Board for Antiquities and Heritage. We would like to expand in future our training programme for Iraqi professionals at both entry level and mid-career level and will continue to work on identifying funding opportunities for this activity.

1. The Minister for Tourism and Antiquities, Mr Adel Shirshab, opens the Tell Khaiber exhibition at the Iraq Museum.
2. A school trip to the Museum for an enthusiastic group of students.
3. Professor Stuart Campbell with Dr Mohammed Rokan, Dean of the Faculty of Archaeology, University of Qadissiyah, at a conference on the destruction of antiquities in Iraq.
4. Dr Jane Moon, assisted by Mr Amir Doshi, speaks at a protest rally in Nasiriyah.



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# Our Ancient Neighbour

This year, we had the resources to take a look at our nearest neighbour (Tell Khaiber 2), a settlement which we pass every day as we drive along the canal and one that has intrigued us for years. Satellite images clearly show a massive mud-brick building of comparable size to our Sealand dynasty building, but of unknown date, so a key question for us was how the two sites, just over one kilometre apart, relate to one another.

It turns out that the Tell Khaiber 2 building is later, dating to the Kassite period. By the mid-fourteenth century BC, the Kassite kings, based in Babylon, had reconquered the Sealand territories, reunifying the whole of Babylonia. In our local area, this led to the abandonment of our building on Tell Khaiber 1 and to the construction of its equally impressive successor on Tell Khaiber 2.

Built as several interconnecting courtyards, we were only able to examine one small part of this building. Here we found the

perimeter wall, 2.5 m thick, and a parallel inner wall of similar size, with a row of single rooms in between. Its most striking feature was the elaborate outer façade, with its zigzag or dog-tooth decoration of a type previously known only from Neo-Babylonian palaces (8th to 6th centuries BC) at Babylon and at Ur. This one is around half a millennium earlier, firmly associated with the distinctively robust pottery of the Kassite period.

The link between our two sites was further confirmed by the identification of a canal running between them.



Clearly, our local area was of sufficient importance to merit the continued presence of an administrative centre, due perhaps to its strategic position on the canal network.

The low mounds of Tell Khaiber 2 in what is otherwise a very flat landscape were subsequently used over the centuries, and into living memory, as a refuge in times of flood. Traces of transient occupations were revealed by fragments of glass and glazed pottery of more recent times, low humps representing Bedouin graves, and a silver Ottoman coin.



1. Part of the zigzag mud-brick façade of the Kassite building.  
2. A Kassite goblet from TK2. Ht. 17.1 cm.

# Ur Region Archaeology Project

## Team 2015

Dr Jane Moon, Project Co-director  
Professor Stuart Campbell, Project Co-director  
Dr Robert Killick, Project Co-director  
Ali Kadhim Ghanim, Thi Qar Antiquities, SBAH  
Giulia Barella, Conservator  
Daniel Calderbank, Pottery specialist  
Bronwen Campbell, Archaeologist  
Adrian Murphy, Photographer  
Dr Eleanor Robson, Epigraphist  
Dr Mary Shepperson, Archaeologist  
Fay Slater, Archaeologist  
Hussein Sultan, Thi Qar Antiquities, SBAH  
Haider Shnaiwar, Thi Qar Antiquities, SBAH  
Mostafa Fadhil Hasoony, Thi Qar Antiquities, SBAH

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/tellkhaiber>

Web site: <http://www.urarchaeology.org>

Twitter: @EaNasir

Text: Jane Moon, Robert Killick, Eleanor Robson.  
Photography/Illustrations: Adrian Murphy, Robert Killick, Stuart Campbell.





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