



# UR REGION ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT

REPORT 2016

# Ur Region Archaeology Project

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### *With special thanks to:*

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Bill and Sue Rees

Front cover: Drone photograph of Tell Khaiber

## Directors' Report 2016

There is positive news this year regarding archaeology in Iraq. In the north, the extent of damage to monuments is still not clear, but there are several things to celebrate. Initiatives for research into Iraq's ancient heritage are on the increase: the British government's Department for Media, Culture and Sport announced in June a new fund for the protection of cultural heritage in the Middle East, and this should bring welcome expertise and participation into the field.

Since we began our project in 2012, we have been busy demonstrating that southern Iraq, especially Thi Qar, is a safe place to work. Our colleagues from La Sapienza University in Rome continue their exploration of Abu Tbeirah as ever, but this year Stony Brook University, New York, made a welcome return to the Ur region too. Furthermore, the ancient city complex of Lagash is being explored again, partly by a French team (part of a British Museum project) at Girsu, and by another La Sapienza team at Nigin. Our Iraqi colleagues from the Nasiriyah office of the State Board for

Antiquities and Heritage suddenly have several international teams to look after, and have met this challenge with their customary patience and courtesy.

Tell Khaiber's Babylonian Public Building continues to yield up its secrets, and always has surprises for us. Starting to plan the largest part of it, the northern wing, we found it was not at all as we had expected. And under the administration block in the southern wing, there was a whole series of unexplained vaults. We have shared and discussed this strange phenomenon with colleagues, and still have no definitive explanation for it.

The cuneiform texts recovered are of course the most significant discovery, and now they have secured a date for the settlement (c.1,500 BC). As we find more and more, nearly 200 pieces now, we begin to flesh out the way people lived and were governed in the area, something we knew almost nothing about until now. Exploration was expanded into the courtyard, the main reception

room and the kitchen, while in the northern wing mapping went so well that by next year we should have the plan of the entire building, which will give researchers much food for thought for a long time to come.

Our team of professional archaeologists and specialists were joined as usual by Iraqi colleagues, and this year by our first volunteer. It was a pleasure to welcome the British Ambassador, Mr Frank Baker, as one of our visitors, also Mr Mike Douglas, of SKA International Group, whose staff smooth out some of our logistical challenges.

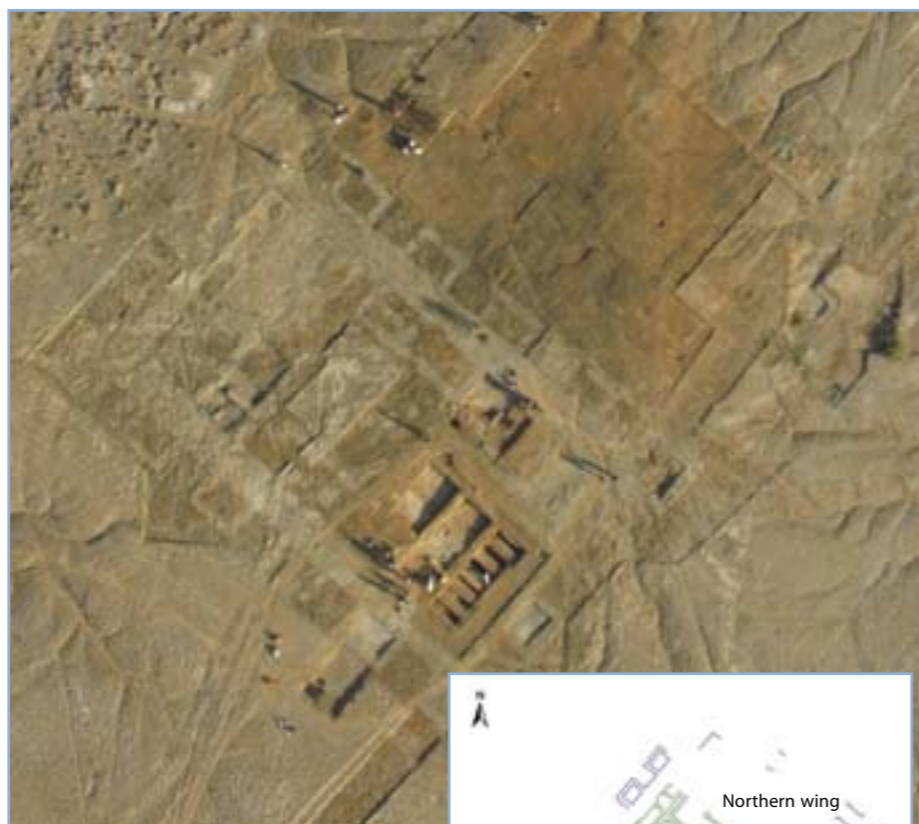
In September the directors were guests at the opening of the Basrah Museum, and participated in the accompanying workshop organised by the British Institute for the Study of Iraq. All this followed hard on the announcement that the ancient southern Iraqi cities of Ur, Eridu and Uruk had been inscribed on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites, together with the Marshes, adding another very welcome positive development for Iraq's cultural heritage.

# The Public Building

## The Northern Wing

The settlement at Tell Khaiber was dominated by the vast Public Building, a combination of fortified administrative centre, centralised grain store, and tax office. Soon after it was built, the size was tripled by adding a new wing to the north. One thousand square metres of this north wing were mapped in 2016 and the results were surprising. Unlike the regular and orderly southern wing, the plan of the northern one is quite chaotic, with small units of two or three rooms, arranged rather awkwardly into the available space, although respecting the long corridor from the main entrance through to the southern wing. There were lots of rebuilds and additions, seen for instance in the rooms either side of the access between the two wings. There were also many ovens and other cooking installations. The place must have been quite untidy.

But this contrast is deceptive. The northern wing sits on the highest part of the site and the

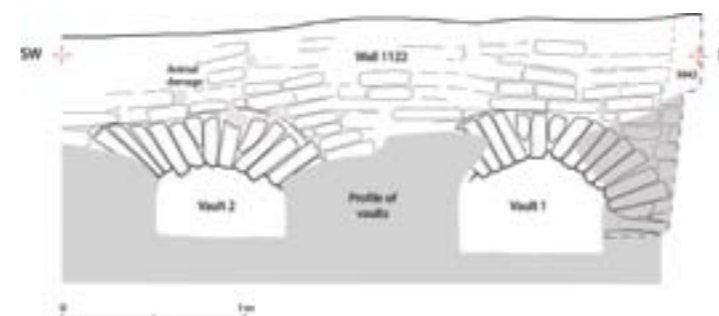


The regularity of the southern part of the building shows clearly in the photo.

plan obtained from surface-scraping represents only the very latest extant phase, one that has by and large disappeared to the south. Almost certainly the function of the building had



Plan of the Public Building.



The courtyard wall was built with arched openings to allow the vaults to continue underneath.



Articulating all the bricks and excavating the voids was a time-consuming task for our team.



Plan and drone photo (SE at top) of the six sub-floor vaults in the Public Building.

changed by this time; it had lost its administrative functions and been adapted to domestic use. Perhaps a period of insecurity caused local families to re-locate hastily to inside the heavy perimeter walls, or perhaps they were simply making use of the redundant space.

## Subterranean Vaults

In the southern wing this year we encountered another surprise: a row of six parallel vaults below the floors in the offices where the tablets were located. The voids were about 80cm wide, just right for graves, we thought. But their length told a different

story, and there were no bodies. They ran from the eastern external wall all the way into the central courtyard, a distance of 12 metres, and we have yet to find where they stop. It seems that the area destined to become offices was originally one large rectangular space, with vaults

# Life under the Kings of the Sealand

underneath. Later, it was levelled by cutting off their tops, filling them with earth, and laying new floors on top. New walls were then built to divide the space up into small rooms.

Even though the construction history of this part of the southern wing is understood, the function of the vaults remains a mystery. They seem poorly designed for storage: the brickwork takes up far more room than the vaulted spaces, which are barely wide enough to crawl through, even if there was some means of access, which so far there is not. Our provisional suggestion is that they were part of a sub-floor ventilation system for grain storage. Keeping stored grain dry is a major problem, and the solid, well-plastered brick vaults would also have obstructed rodents and other pests.

## The Kitchen

Evidence for later use of the southern wing of the building was also found this year: Area 316, a large room adjacent to



Ovens and kitchen debris scattered on the floor of the kitchen.

the entrance into the southern wing, became a temporary cooking area. In among the decaying walls were remnants of fireplaces and ovens, with large quantities of bone, burnt chaff and other organic material. Insubstantial partition walls served as windbreaks for fires. Rubbish had accumulated then been scooped out again to make more space, while surfaces were trampled and soon covered by more debris. By this time the once-grand building had seen better days.



Pierced stone hemisphere with carved rosette design, from under the kitchen floor. The style suggests it was made several hundred years earlier. Diam. 8 cm.

It is easy to visualise the scribes and accountants of Tell Khaiber sitting out in the courtyard of the southern wing, poking away with their styluses at damp clay tablets, hurrying to finish before the sun dried them. The collection of documents found in the administration block continues to grow, and now numbers almost 200 pieces. Of course not all are still legible, although the painstaking skill of our excavators, conservator and epigraphist sometimes makes the transformation of encrusted fragments into recognizable texts seem almost miraculous.

This year there were more of the expected 'tabular accounts', which document incoming grain, amounts delivered and balances owed—rarely in arrears in those studied so far, as the entries are almost all noted as 'correct'. Then there are short internal memoranda, written on tiny tablets just a few centimetres long, and numerical lists, with entries like this: '20+ litres: Iddin-Ninurta, priest; x litres: Mayašu, scribe; 40 litres:

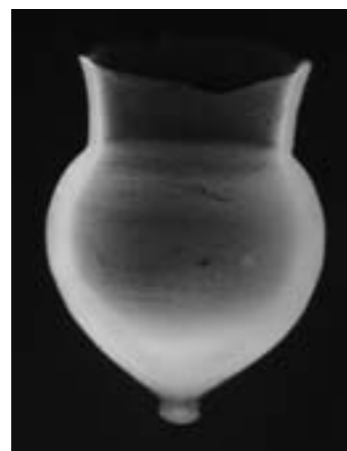
Cuneiform tablet with a message relating to a court case. The result was not what the writer had hoped for (4.5 cm long).



Qištum, herald; ...20 litres: Abi-la-ili, cook, 60 litres: Ahi-illikam, carpenter'. These provide us with information on the trades and professions practised in and around Tell Khaiber. There are a few letters. One is from a certain Ahi-illikam to the scribe Atanah-ili, apparently complaining about his conduct of a court case. Another, to the same addressee, but from an unidentified sender, reports that 'the mayor has returned from town and seized the grain; there is none left'. Atanah-ili also features as the authoriser of many payment orders, small tablets issued to payees who probably brought

them into the Public Building to claim the amounts of grain or silver written on them. It must have been a bustling place.

Pottery is very useful to archaeologists. Broken pieces are ubiquitous in and around ancient settlements in Iraq, and because styles and techniques changed through the ages, they can often help to date sites, or levels within them. Nobody has excavated a Sealand period settlement in Iraq before, so Tell Khaiber, with its dated documents, is very important for establishing just what pottery of this time looks like.



A pottery drinking cup. The X-Ray shows the manufacturing techniques. 13 cm high.

Potters in Iraq learned to use the fast-wheel centuries before the vessels we find were made, so we were intrigued to find that they were not uniformly wheel-thrown. Close examination using microscope and X-ray shows that even small pots were made by a combination of techniques: so a cup might have the base hand-shaped, the body coil-built but shaped on the wheel, the rim actually thrown, then the body pared down by hand. This rather suggests a production line of some kind, rather than the workshop of a single artisan.

Pottery also has much to tell us about everyday life, including economic conditions.

Our documents mention many professions, but so far no potters, and while there are kiln areas and pottery wasters at Tell Khaiber, these are not contemporary with the Public Building—in fact are many centuries older, from an earlier occupation of the area. So the Sealand administrators must have been ordering in crockery from producers elsewhere, and in fact two of the cuneiform tablets may refer to shipments of vessels, in 30 kg loads.

A saddle quern made of rough local stone, 30 cm long, and a handstone of igneous rock, 15 cm long.



A tiny cup 4.7 cm high, and a group of perforated clay pellets.

Drinking cups were the most common pots encountered at Tell Khaiber up to now. As the Public Building was fortified, and we have found weapons, it is easy to imagine a garrison of soldiers doing plenty of drinking. Beer was a universal beverage in the Babylonian world, made in a vat called a 'kakallu', with a hole in the base to filter the liquid. We have found fragments of these, as well as large storage vats for other foodstuffs.

This year, however, we opened up a kitchen area, and started to find a greater variety of pots. These

included cooking vessels, easily recognizable from their globular shape and their temper of large grits mixed into the clay, to stop them from cracking with the heat. There were fewer drinking cups here, and more open bowls suitable for serving up food, also many lids, a carefully made and burnished small bottle, perhaps for storing an expensive spice, and a little cup like a dice-shaker, associated with a heap of pierced



Akram tackles a large storage jar sunk into the ground.

clay pellets. Perhaps some form of game was being played while dinner cooked.

The world beyond Tell Khaiber is represented too. Everywhere in the Public Building we find fragments of querns, and sometimes whole ones. This

is not surprising, given the emphasis on the growing and processing of grain, and the usual stone is a form of limestone available not far away, often containing shells. Pieces of flint, used to make notched blades for composite sickles are likewise locally available. But the handstones used with the grinders are often of hard igneous rock, which can only be found in the distant mountains, and which must be trade items. Other imported items are copper for tools and weapons, semi-precious stones, and a few exotic shells from the Indian Ocean. However, these are not common, and on the whole the people of Tell Khaiber took most of what they needed from the land around them.



Imports from the Indian Ocean. A large cowrie (2.6 cm long) and a conus ebraeus shell (2.6 cm long).

# Community

We love to welcome visitors, but not everyone with an interest in our work is able to make it to Tell Khaiber in person, so we reach out in as many ways as possible. For specialists we have given talks and seminars at universities in UK and Germany, and at the biennial International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, which took place in Vienna in April. This year we engaged for the first time with the very young, at a rural primary school in England, where the students had been learning about early Islam.

During fieldwork we are extremely busy, and travelling within Iraq requires the assistance of the Security Police, who in turn have many calls on their time. Nevertheless, we do manage to visit local universities, and other archaeological sites, as well as participating in cultural events.

A repeated pleasure is the hospitality of Nature Iraq's Marshes office, and 2016 was a very special year, as the long,

Pottery specialist Daniel Calderbank from the University of Manchester among friends and colleagues at the College of Fine Art in Nasiriyah.

hard effort to gain inscription on the UNESCO world heritage list for the Marshes (with Ur, Eridu and Uruk) finally came to fruition. The landscape and architecture of the Marshes really help us to understand the way the Babylonian world must have looked and functioned.

A day spent exploring the Eridu basin area was a reminder that there are still so very many ancient settlements in the Ur region awaiting proper investigation and documentation, some having suffered during less settled times from illicit digging. Our Iraqi colleagues work tirelessly to prevent recurrence of this destruction.



Archaeology and heritage concerns are part of the wider world of culture, and in return for the welcome and support we receive from Nasiriyah's thriving community of writers, artists and thinkers, we share our broader interests too. Professor Eleanor Robson spoke to a lively audience on modern English literature, and Daniel Calderbank, who is studying the ancient pottery from Tell Khaiber, engaged with aspiring and practising potters at the local College of Art. These people are every bit as important to us as academic and professional practitioners.

# Ur Region Archaeology Project

## Team

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- Professor Stuart Campbell, Project Co-director
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- Ms Giulia Barella, Conservator
- Mr Daniel Calderbank, Pottery specialist
- Ms Bronwen Campbell, Archaeologist
- Mr Adrian Murphy, Photographer & Finds Manager
- Professor Eleanor Robson, Epigraphist
- Dr Mary Shepperson, Archaeologist
- Ms Fay Slater, Archaeologist
- Mr Matthew Williams, Archaeologist
- Ms Marta Wojtowicz, Finds Assistant



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