

Kurdistan

A NEW DAWN BREAKS FOR NEAR EASTERN ARCHAEOLOGY

The Kurdish Autonomous Region in north-east Iraq is a land of craggy peaks, gushing rivers, and extraordinary archaeology. Yet, for decades, dictatorship and military conflict has kept the area off-limits. Now, as **John MacGinnis** and **Konstantinos Kopanias** reveal, archaeological investigation is set to flourish in an area that is largely *terra incognita*.

Excavations of the 19th and 20th centuries explored the great cities of ancient Assyria and Babylonia through most of Iraq, but Iraqi Kurdistan remained largely overlooked. Then decades of dictatorship and wars closed the region to the outside world. Now, however, the situation is reversed: conflict and uncertainty in other parts of Iraq are restricting fieldwork, while in the Kurdish region to the north it is blossoming. Last year, archaeologists representing more than 30 international projects gathered to discuss their work and share their findings. Major programmes are mapping sites, roadways and rock reliefs, canals and watercourses, to produce a systematic and exhaustive map of the region that can be used

both for heritage management and for studying the development of settlement occupation.

Some of the world's earliest societies evolved in this region, from the alluvial plains of the Tigris and its rolling landscape to the foothills of the Zagros and then the high mountains themselves. Regional surveys also have their roots in Mesopotamia: the pioneering work of Robert Adams in the south of the country led to famous titles such as *Heartland of Cities* and *Land Behind Baghdad*. Now a new generation of archaeologists has learnt to exploit the huge possibilities of 'overhead imagery': aerial photographs, including those made by the Royal Air Force during the period of the British Mandate, and declassified US satellite imagery from the Cold War. The images

that are particularly valuable are those that date back some decades and show traces of features that are no longer visible on the ground. These clues are followed up by old-fashioned field-walking and interviews with local inhabitants, research that is turning over a lot of stones.

In the beginning

Starting at the beginning, the Palaeolithic, a team from Cambridge University is returning to Shanidar. Discovered in 1951 by Ralph Solecki, Shanidar, which lies above the Great River Zab, is the best known of many caves in the region that were first inhabited by Neanderthals about 100,000 years ago. Evidence from here has shown that these early hominins both controlled fire and cared for their sick (see CWA 61).



MAIN IMAGE (LEFT) Looking down into a gorge in the Barzan region at the Rukuchuk River, in Iraqi Kurdistan.

BOTTOM RIGHT A rock relief at Darband-i Gawra that dates to the late 3rd millennium BC.

BOTTOM LEFT Shanidar Cave provided refuge to early hominins about 100,000 years ago.

early steps that led to the emergence of sedentary human societies.

Meanwhile, within weeks of beginning their fieldwork in September 2013, the team at the Chalcolithic site of Kani Shaie, in the Bazyan basin close to the Zagros Mountains, uncovered an exceptional corpus of painted pottery. But, importantly, they also found a tablet with a seal impression and a numerical sign. Similar tablets have been found on sites in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran, and are probably a precursor to the invention of writing. This is hugely significant: it was assumed that writing was invented in southern Mesopotamia during the 4th millennium BC, and took off at major southern centres such as Uruk, leaving the north lagging behind for several centuries. Now the finds at Kani Shaie are forcing

us to reassess this process. Moreover, it shows that the people there were in contact with places as far away as south Mesopotamia, suggesting the site was a local centre for the region during a pivotal time of emerging socio-political, economic, and administrative complexity.

The 3rd millennium BC, the Early Bronze Age, is a poorly understood period in Kurdistan. In the south, city-states emerged as independent polities, before being absorbed into the Akkadian and then Ur III empires. French fieldwork at the site of Kunara hopes to unravel whether a similar evolution happened in the north. The results are encouraging: the discovery of at least two monumental structures, made using sophisticated building techniques, suggests that Kunara may have been the capital of just such an independent kingdom.

More states emerged in the geopolitical reconfigurations that followed the collapse of the Ur III empire. One of these, Qabra, flourished in the early 2nd millennium before being destroyed by Shamshi-Adad of Assyria. We know from written sources that Qabra was located east of the Tigris, somewhere between Erbil, the capital of the modern Kurdish Autonomous Region, and the Lesser Zab. Several expeditions are ➤





ABOVE Excavation in action: the Early Neolithic buildings at Bestansur.
ABOVE RIGHT Beads of carnelian, shell, and crab claw from human burials of the Early Neolithic.



IMAGE: Bestansur Archaeological Project

now hunting for this forgotten kingdom – though it appears that a team from Johns Hopkins University may have hit the jackpot at Kurd Qaburstan, a large site surrounded by a city wall, and with ceramics from the right period.

Finding a king

A Middle Assyrian period palace belonging to king Adad-nerari I (1305-1274 BC) was recently found at Qasr Shemamok, and exciting plans are in place to begin further excavations. Meanwhile, excavations at Satu Qalo on the northern bank of the Lesser Zab have given us precious new data about the poorly understood 11th century BC, when the Assyrian state weakened and smaller kingdoms sprung up in the east and west. Archaeologists here have already uncovered a series of glazed bricks with designs depicting sphinxes and horses

with grooms that parallel finds both from Assyria to the west and the Zagros to the east. But, significantly, these bricks also bear inscriptions in cuneiform characters that prove the existence of a local ruling dynasty. One of the kings mentioned, Ba'auri, was known from a stone bowl excavated at the site of Hasanlu in western Iran in the 1960s, but for 50 years this was just an isolated name: now we know who he was. The kingdom did not stay independent for long, however, as Adad-nerari II (911-891 BC) boasts of having brought it back under Assyrian control in 893 BC. The inscriptions from Satu Qalo also prove that the ancient city of Idu, known as a Middle Assyrian provincial capital but thought to have been identical with modern Hit on the Euphrates, in fact lay on the other side of the kingdom, on the edge of the Zagros mountains.

A wealth of evidence

We have well-documented archaeological evidence for the Neo-Assyrian empire that followed. This is when Assyria expanded

once more to establish a dominion stretching from the Mediterranean to Iran, which lasted till its cataclysmic collapse in the final years of the 7th century BC. It is also a time when major hydraulic engineering took off, particularly with the ambitious network of canals constructed by the king Sennacherib (705-681 BC) to deliver water to his capital city at Nineveh, irrigating the rich agricultural land *en route*.

One of the most spectacular of many well-preserved Neo-Assyrian remains is back at Qasr Shemamok, the ancient provincial capital of Kilizu. The site was visited by Layard, who reports that it was littered with baked bricks. This remains the case today, only now we can read them! They record the rebuilding of the walls of the city by Sennacherib. Now Shemamok is the subject of another French archaeological mission, which has uncovered a monumental terrace constructed by the king, most likely as a platform for a palace or temple.

Up in the mountains, the Rowanduz Archaeological Program is embarking on fieldwork centred on establishing an archaeological chronology of the Rowanduz region, with particular emphasis on the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages. Three sites stand out: at Gird-e Dasht, which commands the point at which the Rowanduz Gorge opens up onto a broad plain, the excavations are yielding information on the

FAR LEFT Painted pottery from Kani Shaie.
LEFT This tablet, also from Kani Shaie, with seal impressions and a numerical sign, is forcing a reassessment of when writing was invented.

PHOTO: Kani Shaie Archaeological Project



ABOVE One of the glazed bricks from Satu Qalo that shows similar designs to those found at sites in Assyria to the west and the Zagros to the east.

basic stratigraphic sequence for the region; higher up, at Qalaat Mudjesir, investigations are aimed at establishing whether substantial masonry remains could be connected with the Urartian temple of Musasir, famously sacked by Sargon II in 714 BC; while an Achaemenid tomb excavated at Ghabrestan-i Topzawa is revealing evidence for a period that is otherwise particularly poorly attested.

The overthrow of the Assyrian empire changed the world forever. The immediate post-Assyrian period is poorly understood, not least because of the difficulty in recognising diagnostic ceramics, but the region was evidently divided between the Median and Babylonian victors. Subsequently conquest by Cyrus ensured its absorption into the Achaemenid empire, ushering in a period which was surely prosperous but again hardly documented to date. Following the death of Cyrus the Younger at the battle of Cunaxa in 404 BC, the 10,000 Greek mercenaries whom he had recruited famously marched up along the Tigris on their way to the Black Sea and eventual repatriation. This route took them straight through what is now Kurdistan: the Greek historian Xenophon mentions the 'Kardouchoi', which must surely be



the first historical reference to the Kurds. A little less than a century later, in 331 BC, the Achaemenid Empire itself came to an end when Alexander the Great defeated Darius III at the battle of Guagamela, fought in the plains between Nineveh and Erbil.

Not the end

This is, of course, not the end of the story. The ensuing centuries saw other empires – Seleucid, Parthian, Sassanian – rise and fall, and the advent of Islam left its own mark on the Medieval and Ottoman history of the region. Nor is archaeology the only piece of the jigsaw. An active approach to heritage-management is playing an increasingly important role in restoring and maintaining the region's inventory of historic architecture.

The jewel in the crown is the High Commission for Erbil Citadel Revitalisation



TOP Gird-e Dasht in the Rowanduz region is revealing stratigraphic evidence of Iron Age occupation.

RIGHT An Achaemenid Tomb, and **(INSET)** a bracelet recovered from the grave at Ghabrestan-i Topzawa.



SOURCE Dr John MacGinnis, McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, and Dr Konstantinos Kopanias, National & Kapodistrian University of Athens.