

EXCAVATION AT TELL SAKHARIYA IN DHIQAR PROVINCE IN SOUTHERN IRAQ

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From late December 2011 through mid-January 2012, a joint team from the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) and the State University of New York at Stony Brook under the supervision of Dr. Elizabeth Stone and Dr. Paul Zimansky began excavating at the late-third millennium through later-second millennium B.C. site of Tell Sakhariya, located 6 km northeast of the ancient city Ur in southern Iraq. The site of Sakhariya was chosen to find possible answers to questions related to the economic, political, and social relations between rural villages and small towns, and the nearby major urban center at Ur.

The expedition was the first foreign expedition to Iraq (outside of the Kurdistan/northeastern region) since the war of 2003. Following the 1991 war and throughout the thirteen-year economic embargo, the SBAH was isolated for political reasons from undertaking scientific collaboration and communication with international archaeological institutions. One of the goals of the five-week expedition was to reopen the scientific gate of cooperation that had been closed by the former Iraqi regime, and to rebuild cultural bridges between Iraqis and their international colleagues.

A second goal of the expedition was to use modern techniques in archaeology, such as satellite imagery, remote sensing, and

magnetic gradiometry, which had never been used before in excavations in Iraq.

In the first week of our work, the SBAH sent the directors of eight expeditions who had been working in the Marshes Salvage Excavation project to participate in our excavation in order to learn recently developed and modern techniques of excavation. Sharing these techniques with Iraqis was very valuable, as was introducing them to field photography techniques, systematic survey, total station (a device that measures electronically vertical and horizontal degrees and distance), and data collection. There were a series of lectures and demonstrations for them by various members of the international team: classification of ceramics; drawing and recording pottery; field and object photography; understanding Mesopotamian cities using GIS; remote sensing to determine settlement patterns; and new methods of survey and data collection.

The group also participated in the first

season's fieldwork, which consisted of a systematic survey followed by the excavation of several test trenches in order to understand the occupational phases of the site.

The excavation results demonstrated that the site dates back to the mid-second millennium B.C. The team collected animal bones and recovered seeds and plant remains by using a floatation machine in ways that had not previously been used in Iraq.

We spent one Friday visiting the central marshes, north of Chabaish, where we had been invited by engineer Jasim al-Asadi of the Iraq Nature Organization. In addition to seeing the natural wildlife of the marshes, we visited a large, late Mesopotamian archaeological site that is covered partially by water, and which has now become a residential base for fishers, water-buffalo breeders, and other dwellers (see <http://www.natureiraq.org/site/en/node/313>).

For the last two weeks of the expedition, there were two media crews who documented the work and the interactions among the joint team members. One crew was from official Iraqi TV and the other was a team of filmmakers and journalists including Micah Garen and Marie-Helen Carlton. The latter crew documented the excavation and made a documentary called "Digging Out: Archaeology Makes a Comeback in Iraq."

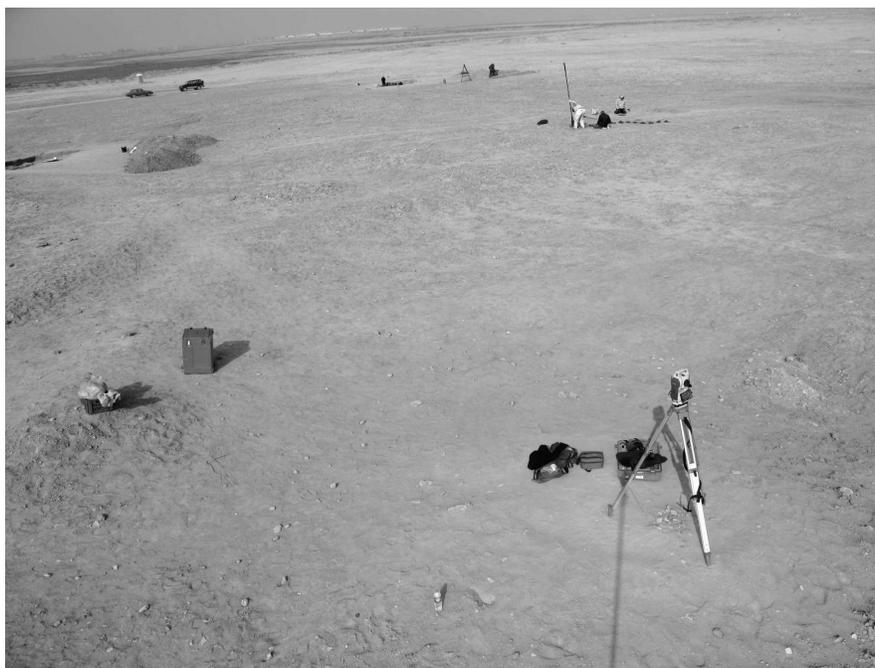


Figure 7.1. Field work at Sakhariya (Photo credit: Paul Zimansky)

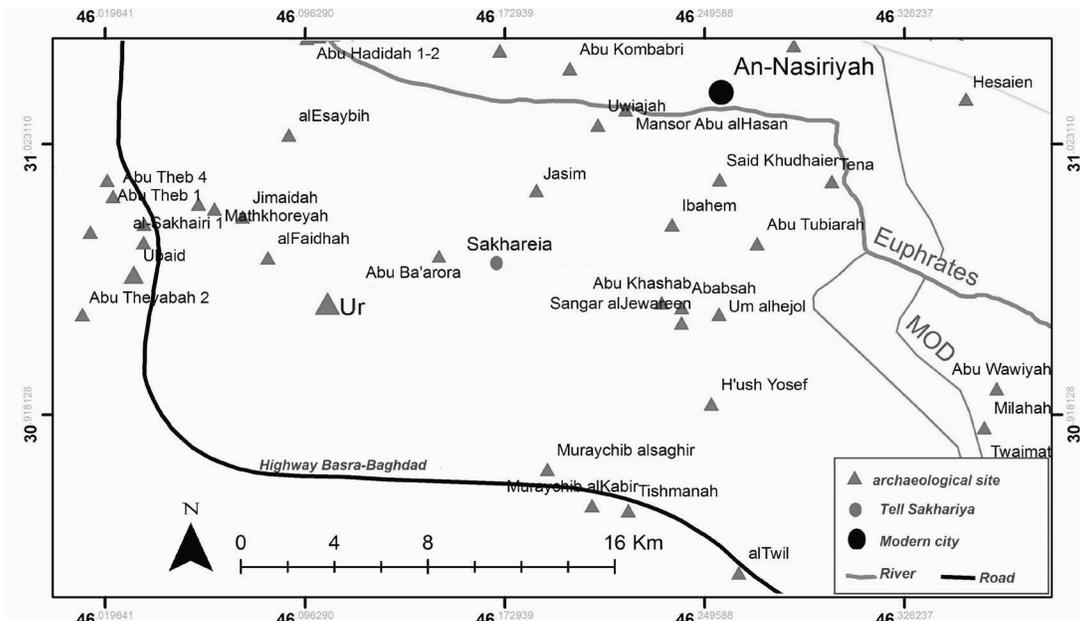


Figure 7.2. Map showing location of Sakhariya (Photo credit: Abdulamir Hamdani)

For more information, please visit http://www.fourcornersmedia.net/Four_Corners_Media/Home.html.

Several days before the end of the season, the Iraqi Writers Union in Dhiqar province held an event at the cultural center in Nasiriya. This event included the opening of a fine arts gallery and the dedication of a statue of the late Taha Baqer, a very famous Iraqi archaeologist. In addition, Dr. Irene Winter of Harvard University, one of the expedition team members, gave a lecture about the relations between art and environment in Sumerian arts.

On the last day of the expedition, we visited additional archaeological sites north of Ur, including Lagash (Tell al-Hiba), Girsu (Tello), Shmit, and Umma (Tell Chokha).

Throughout the expedition, we were supported by the Iraqi government (represented by the National Security Council), which provided visas for the international team; the governorate of Dhiqar, which furnished us with the required logistics; and on top of that, the local people who were really very friendly, hospitable, and — most importantly — accepting of foreigners.

Overall, the coming four years of

the joint Iraqi-American project at Tell Sakhariya will lead to important and significant work that will shed light on the very critical — but not well-documented — period in Mesopotamian history, namely, the end of Old Babylonian period through the early Kassite period. After an analysis of bones and plant remains that have been recovered from the site and extracted by floatation, Dr. Elizabeth Stone will write a more detailed site report. Moreover, this project will be one of the promising steps in the new direction of Iraqi archaeology, from destruction to construction.



Figure 7.3. The whole team with laborers at the site of Sakhariya (Photo credit: Micah Garen and Marie-Helene Carlton [Four Corners Media])



Figure 7.4. The team during a visit to the Central Marshes near Chabaish (Photo credit: Jasim al-Asadi [Iraq Nature Organization])

Tell Sakhariya Project Members

Elizabeth C. Stone, Director
 Paul E. Zimansky, Co-Director
 Saleem Khalaf Unaied, Representative of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage
 Ali Kadim Ghanim, Representative of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage
 Wasan Abdulsahib Isa, Representative of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage
 Abdulamir Hamdani, Team Member
 Irene Winter, Team Member
 John McGinnis, Team Member
 Demetrios Brellas, Team Member
 Stephanie Rost, Team Member



Figure 7.5. The team on the central staircase of the Ziggurat of Ur (Photo credit: Micah Garen and Marie-Helene Carlton [Four Corners Media])



Figure 7.6. Poster of the cultural event and statue of Taha Baqir (Photo credit: Amir D. Jasim [Sindibad Bureau for Media])



Figure 7.7. Conducting a systematic survey of collecting surface assemblages (Photo credit: Stephanie Rost)



Figure 7.8. Mr. Qais Hussein Rasheed, chairman of the SBAH, visiting the site of Sakhariya and listening to the explanation of Dr. Elizabeth Stone, director of the Sakhariya excavation. From left to right: Abbas Fadhel Al-Ubaidi, director of excavation department at SBAH; Saleem Khalaf, director of archaeological investigations at SBAH; Mr. Qais Hussein Rasheed; and Muhsin Ali, deputy director of the Iraqi Museum (Photo credit: Saleem K. Unaied)