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THE ITALIAN-KURDISH EXCAVATIONS AT GIR-E GOMEL IN THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE 2017 AND 2018 FIELD SEASONS¹

ABSTRACT

The article presents the preliminary results of the Italian-Kurdish excavation project carried out by the University of Udine and the Directorate of Antiquities of Duhok at the site of Gir-e Gomel (Kurdistan Region of Iraq). From at least the mid-third millennium BC onwards, Gomel was the central site of the entire Navkur Plain, a very fertile and well-watered region on the route linking Arbail and the Greater Zab Valley with the Upper Tigris region to the north of Nineveh. The Eastern Tigris plains between the modern city of Duhok and the Greater Zab have never been the object of a target-oriented archaeological excavation aimed at establishing a stratigraphic reference sequence for this still under-explored archaeological landscape and investigating diachronically the development of the region's material culture. With this purpose – and the aim of exploring the character and function of this important site on a local and regional scale, investigating the role it played in the region's cultural and socio-economic processes – Gir-e Gomel has become the subject of extensive archaeological excavations as from 2017 and 2018. The main results of the first excavation seasons are discussed in the following article.

KEYWORDS

Gir-e Gomel; Iraqi Kurdistan; Chalcolithic; Bronze and Iron Age; Classical and Islamic periods.

1. Introduction and project goals

The Transtigradian plains located between the modern city of Duhok and the Greater Zab have never been the object of a target-oriented archaeological excavation designed to establish a stratigraphic reference sequence for this still under-explored archaeological landscape and investigate diachronically the development of the region's material culture (Fig. 1). The region comprised between the Tigris Valley, the Zagros foothills dominating the modern city of Duhok, and the Navkur Plain, crossed by the Gomel and Al-Khazir rivers, was investigated from 2012 to 2018 by the University of Udine. The exploration of this region covering almost 3,000 sq. km was carried out in the framework of a multidisciplinary landscape archaeology project with the goal of investigating the formation and transformation of the cultural and natu-

ral landscape of one of the hitherto most uncharted regions of Upper Mesopotamia.² The project is based on a twofold strategy: on one hand, the analysis of settlement and land use through extensive and intensive survey and the geoarchaeological study of the region's environment and climate and their evolution as a result of anthropogenic impact and climatic fluctuations and, on the other, the excavation of a reference archaeological site with a long and continuous settlement sequence. The evidence gathered during the survey indicates that the prominent site of Gir-e Gomel would be an appropriate choice for archaeological investigation.

The excavation of Gir-e Gomel, located in the heart of the Navkur Plain, 4 km west as the crow flies of the modern town of Kelekchi, in the northern region of Iraqi Kurdistan, is an Italian-Kurdish cooperation undertaking entitled “The Kurdish-Italian Gir-e Gomel Archaeological Project” (KIGAP). The project, which is co-directed by Daniele Morandi Bonacossi of Udine University and Hasan Ahmad Qasim of the Duhok Directorate of Antiquities, fills the gap that exists in our knowledge of the region's archaeological landscape and material culture. The site, which today's Kurdish inhabitants of the village call Tell Jomel and in 20th century cartography is recorded as Tell Gomel or Tell Jomel,³ was first

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² MORANDI BONACOSSI 2012-2013, IDEM 2016, IDEM 2018a-b; MORANDI BONACOSSI, IAMONI 2015; GAVAGNIN, IAMONI, PALERMO 2016; IAMONI 2016; PALERMO 2016; COPPINI 2018.

³ See for example the “Operationskarte” published in 1917 by the kartographischen Abteilung der Königlichen Preußischen Landesaufnahme (Mosul Sheet: Tell Gomel), the map of Mesopotamia published in 1919 by the Great Britain War Office (Survey Party M.E.F. Baghdad, TC Anglo-Indian series of Mesopotamia, Dohuk Sheet 137 O/SW: Tell Jomel), the map published in June 1942 by the U.S. Army Map Service (Sheet J-38 T: Tell Jomel), and the GDP Survey Map published in 2009 by the Kurdish Regional Government where the site is recorded as Tal Jumar (Shekhan Sheet 38n.). In his *Mu'jam al-buldān* (Dictionary of Countries), 1977, vol. II, 189, written between 1224 and 1228, the Arab geographer Yakut al-Hamawi (1179-1229) refers to the site as Jawmal.

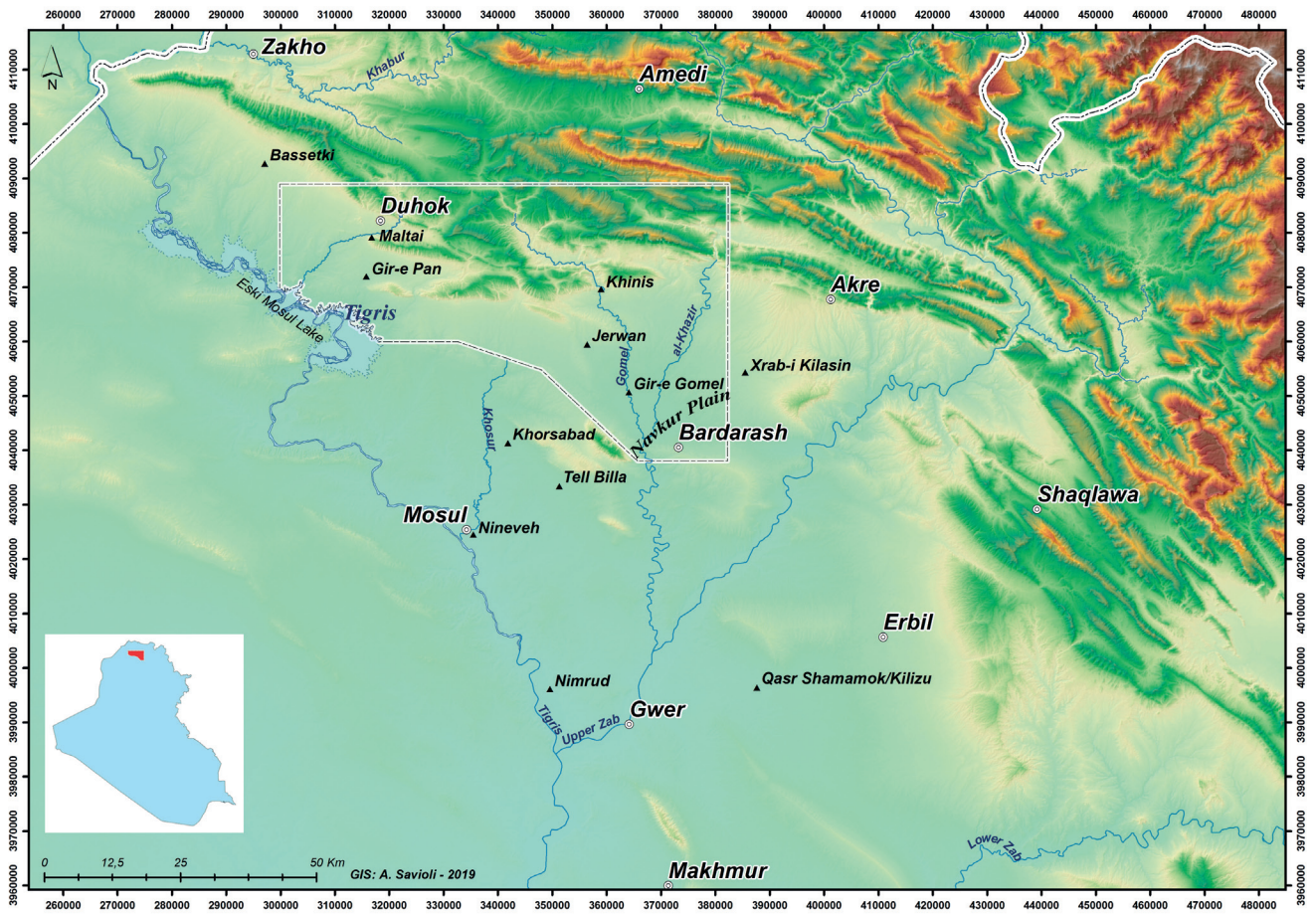


Fig. 1 - Location of Gir-e Gomel and the Udine University survey area in the northern Region of Iraqi Kurdistan.

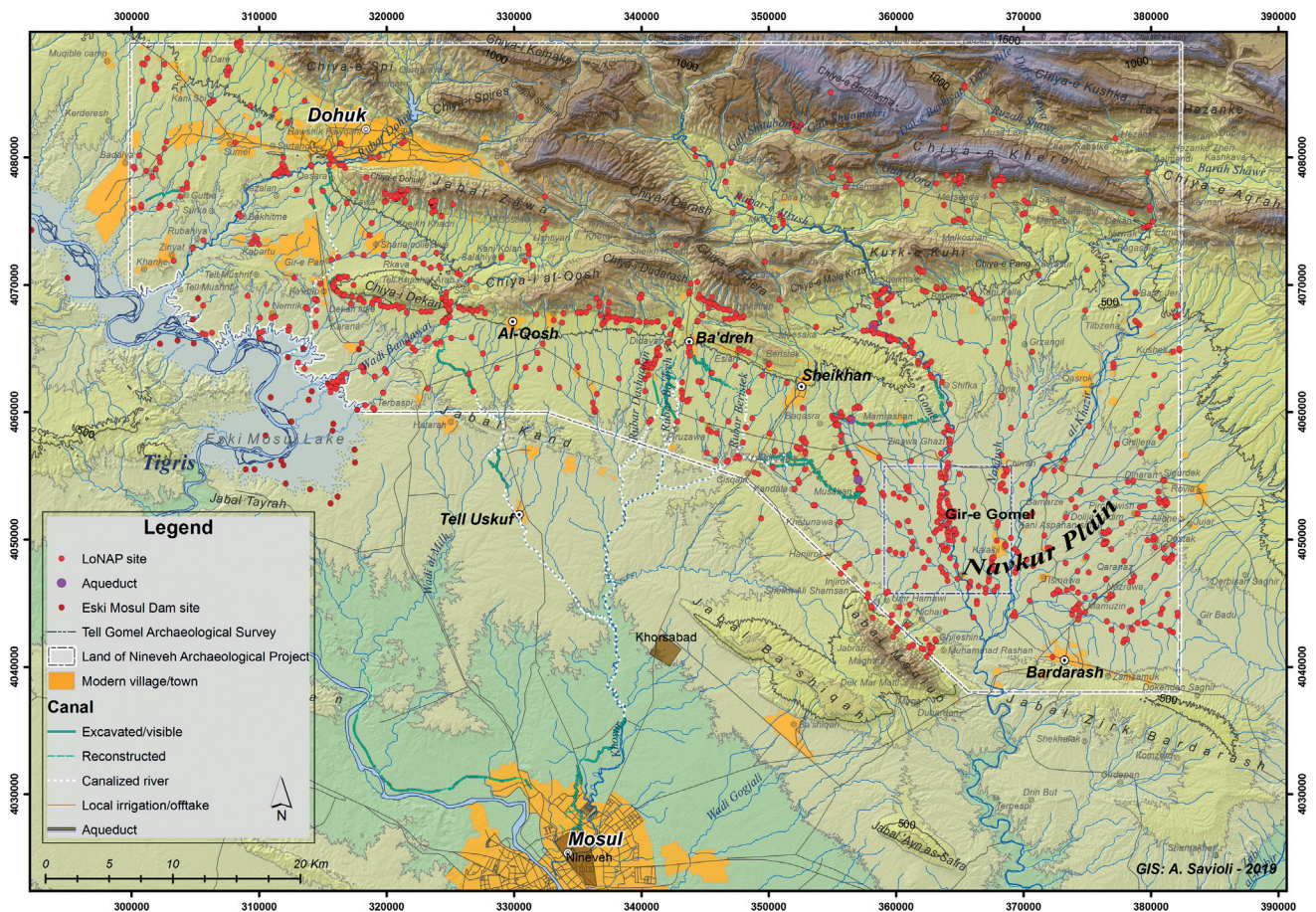


Fig. 2 - Preliminary distribution of archaeological sites discovered in the 2012-2018 survey seasons.

archaeologically investigated in 2012 during the extensive survey conducted in the region by the University of Udine. A small trial trench was dug along the site's south-western edge in 2012 and 2013 in order to get a first insight into the mound's stratigraphy.⁴ This first trench was then enlarged as from 2017 to become Operation 1 (see below). In 2016, an intensive survey programme was carried out at Gir-e Gomel with the aim of investigating more in depth its overall occupation history.⁵ Extensive excavation started in 2017 in Operation 1 and was extended to Operations 2 and 3 in 2018.

The main goals of the Gir-e Gomel excavation consist of establishing a stratigraphic reference sequence at the site and well-stratified and relatively and absolutely dated seriations of ceramics and other archaeological artefacts. The accomplishment of these objectives will make available the first reference series of material culture in the region and enable comparisons to be made with neighbouring areas, thus shedding light on cross-cultural relationships and exchange patterns in Upper Mesopotamia. At the same time, the excavation in Gomel will explore the character and function of this important site through the millennia on a local and regional scale, investigating the role it played in the production dynamics and socio-economic processes in the region.

2. The environmental setting of Gir-e Gomel

The site of Gomel, which entered the scientific literature thanks to the work of the first scholars who studied the region from the early 18th century onwards,⁶ lies in the middle of the Navkur Plain ("mud plain" in *Badîni*/Kurmanji), a 30 kilometre wide roughly triangular plain in the eastern part of our survey area delimited to the north and east by the first Zagros foothills, to the south by the low hill range of the Jebel Zirkh Bardarash, and to the west by the Jebel Maqloub (Figs. 1-2).

Mean annual rainfall in the Navkur Plain rises from south to north from 400 to 600 millimetres per year (500-550 mm in the Gir-e Gomel area), dropping in dry years to 300 mm in the southern part (Gir-e Gomel about 350 mm) and 500 millimetres in the north.⁷ Today the entire plain is located well to the north of the "zone of uncertainty", i.e. the belt of marginal cultivation characterised by an increasing frequency of crop failure,⁸ and is part of the stable dry-farming zone of Upper Mesopotamia (Wilkinson's Zone 1b).⁹ Here, at between 350 and 600 mm and not less than 300 mm in two out of every three years, rainfall is reliable and cereals can be predictably and extensively cultivated using a rain-fed system even in years with lower rainfall figures. Gir-e Gomel and the Navkur Plain enjoy not only adequate rainfall but also from an extreme abundance of surface and ground water. The plain is crossed by the River Al-Khazir,

a major tributary of the Greater Zab, and the minor Nardush and Gomel rivers that join the Al-Khazir at the southern end of Navkur. Numerous *wadis* and ephemeral streams feed the main watercourses. The plain is thus potentially much richer in soil moisture than any other region to the north of the Greater Zab's confluence with the Tigris and offers ideal conditions for highly productive agriculture.¹⁰ Ground water is also extremely abundant and many springs, supplied by the aquifers located in the Zagros foothills, contribute to making Navkur an intensively cultivated area, sustained also by irrigation from wells. Today, cereals (mainly wheat, but to a lesser extent also rice and barley) and vegetables are grown there.

In the Navkur Plain, the presence of abundant water is combined with fertile soils. The region is characterised by deep and productive agricultural soils, mainly "Brown Soils (Deep Phase)" developed on alluvial sediments, which occur at average depths varying between 2 and 4 m and are non-saline.¹¹ In the presence of the high rainfall characterising the Gomel area and the entire Navkur Plain, these soils can produce high yields. These overall very favourable conditions for extensive and intensive agriculture account for the fact that the greatest density of the 1081 archaeological sites hitherto identified in the region by the Udine University's survey project, of which 608 can be classified as habitation sites,¹² is situated in this plain (Fig. 2).

3. The site: topography and occupation history

The ancient settlement of Gir-e Gomel is located on the eastern bank of the River Gomel approximately in the centre of the Navkur Plain. The town was located at a strategic crossing point¹³ on the route con-

⁴ Excavation work was conducted by Marco Iamoni, assisted in 2013 by Francesca Simi.

⁵ This project was conducted by Francesca Simi in her PhD research programme (Simi in press).

⁶ BACHMANN 1927, Taf. I; JACOBSEN, LLOYD 1935, 32; STEIN 1942, 163-164; FIEY 1965, 230.

⁷ BURINGH 1960; WIRTH 1962, Abb. 9-10; GUEST 1966, figs. 5-6; TAVO maps AIV.4-5.

⁸ WILKINSON, HRTZ 2013, 14-18, fig. 2.1.

⁹ WILKINSON 2004, 42-43.

¹⁰ MORANDI BONACOSI 2018a, 84-87, figs. 5-6.

¹¹ MORANDI BONACOSI 2018a, fig. 3; BURINGH 1960, 78 and folding chart.

¹² The 473 sites which did not yield archaeological material include many different non-settlement features, such as aqueducts, primary and secondary canal sections, weirs, stone water-mills and other productive installations, rock-reliefs, rock-graves, cairn fields and isolated cairns, karst springs etc.

¹³ YAQUT AL-HAMAWI 1977, 189, referring generally to earlier historians, mentions the existence in the area of a Qantarat Jawmal, thus indicating that at Gomel there was a bridge crossing the river that at the time he wrote was no longer present (HONIGMANN 1954, 97; FIEY 1965, 230).

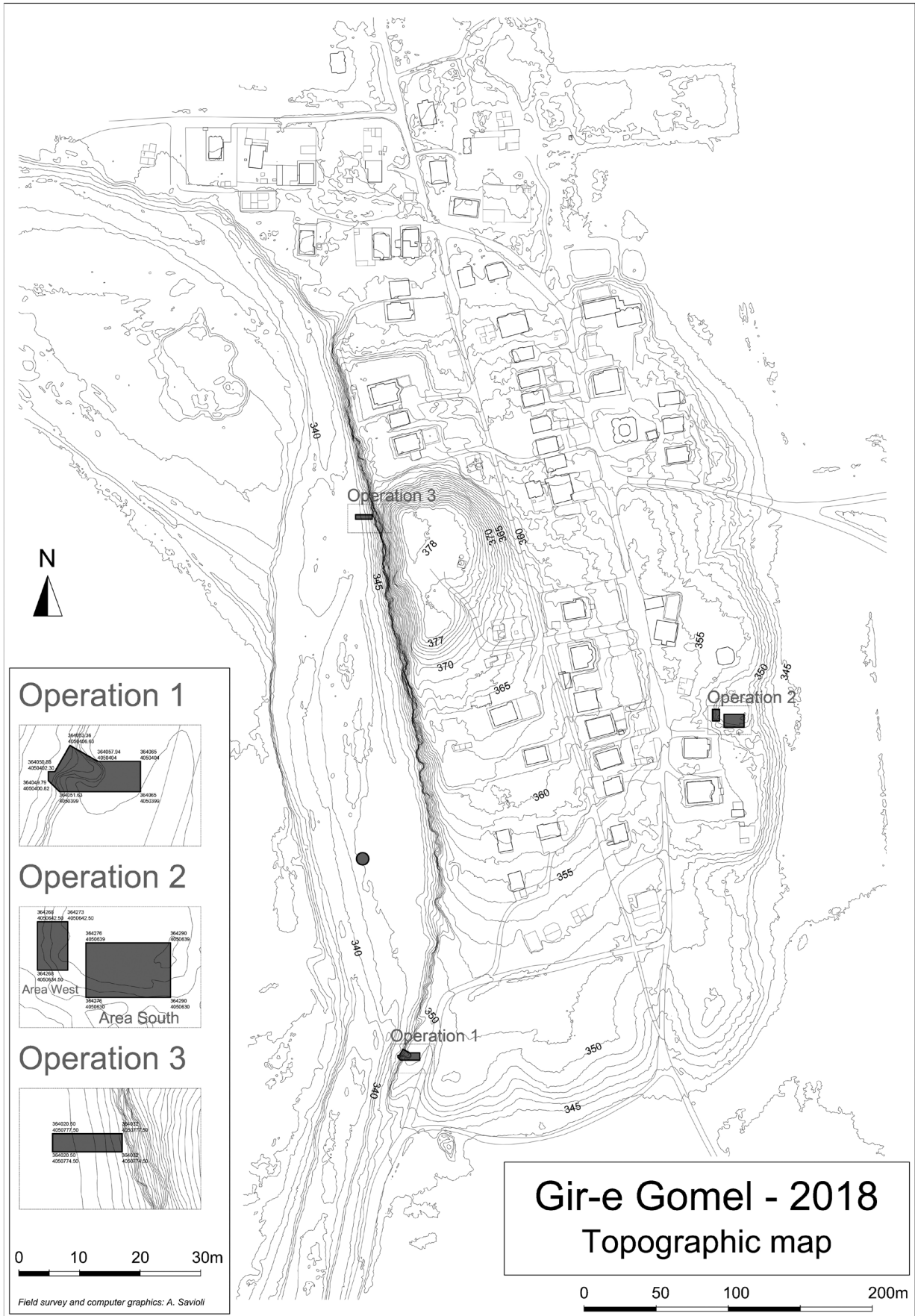


Fig. 3 - Topographic map of Gir-e Gomel.



Fig. 4 - UAV oblique view of Gir-e Gomel from the south (September 2018).

necting the Erbil/Arbela Plain with the Greater Zab Valley, the Navkur and Duhok plains and the Tigris Valley. Over the millennia, the river has modelled the shape of the site, which consists of a small mound measuring 155 x 86 m with a surface area of 1.4 ha that, with its height of 38 m, today towers over the riverbed¹⁴ and a large surrounding lower town to the north, east and south (Figs. 3-4). The high mound slopes gently to the south, more steeply to the east and north, while its western side was eroded by the River Gomel, the course of which undermined the mound's margin determining the formation of an imposing, nearly vertical section. The latter gives an impressive insight into the upper town's stratigraphic sequence (Figs. 4 and 50). Mud-brick walls on massive stone foundations and baked brick paving belonging to different settlement phases can be clearly recognised in the section.

Today the lower town overlooks the surrounding landscape from an average height of 10-15 m and covers a surface area of approximately 30 ha. A U2 aerial photograph, taken on January 29th 1960 (Fig. 5), shows the presence of anthrosols around the eastern Gomel lower town.¹⁵ The anthrosols extend into

the surrounding plain further eastward than the edge of the lower town, indicating that the site was larger than suggested by its present-day morphology. The intensive survey carried out by Francesca Simi in 2016 has provided the necessary field confirmation of this interpretation of the U2 image.¹⁶ Especially in its central and western parts, Gomel's lower town is now occupied by the scattered houses and gardens of the modern village. The construction of these buildings, which have been erected in the last two decades,¹⁷ required the levelling of the ground in the lower town, thus damaging the latest archaeological deposits. The steep eastern slopes of the lower town and a deep erosion gully located in the area of Operation 2 (see

¹⁴ The top of the mound is 33 m above the adjacent plain.

¹⁵ On anthrosols and the interpretation of their signature on remotely sensed imagery, see MENZE, UR 2012.

¹⁶ SIMI in press.


¹⁷ The above-mentioned U2 aerial photograph of Gomel shows only a cluster of abandoned collapsed dwellings in the northern lower town immediately to the north of the high mound, the remains of a small pre-1960s village.



Fig. 5 - U2 mission 1554 (29 January 1960) aerial photograph. Courtesy of Jason Ur, Harvard University.

below) might suggest the existence of a fortification system protecting the ancient settlement, and a city gate. These features are particularly visible in the U2 image. The original topography of the northern lower town can no longer be reconstructed since this part of the site has undergone levelling and terracing operations to create flat surfaces on which the houses of the modern village could be constructed. The southern edges of the lower town slope quite gently down to the surrounding plain.

As for the original form and size of the ancient site, fluvial erosion has removed part of the high mound and the western lower town. The contour lines in the topographic map of Gir-e Gomel, the U2 aerial photograph and the oblique image of the site emphasise the persistence at the foot of its western section of a semi-circular portion of the ancient site with a surface area of 4 ha where the archaeological deposit has been partly removed by the river (Figs. 3-5). What remains of this eroded part of the site are the lowest archaeological deposits, partially removed by water erosion and now covered by thick gravel

deposits laid down by the river. This interpretation of the topographic and archaeological evidence is supported by the discovery made in 2013 of three poorly preserved baked-brick walls of a building located in what is today the Gomel riverbed in the southern part of the eroded site slice, about 140 m to the north/north-west of Operation 1 (Fig. 3,  dot). The building, part of which is still buried under the river gravel, was associated with Middle Bronze Age pottery.

The available evidence shows that the ancient site of Gomel must have reached an overall surface area of about 35 ha, which was entirely occupied during the mid-late 3rd millennium and the Middle Bronze Age (see below), thus undoubtedly serving as the central place of the Navkur Plain during these periods. At other periods during its occupation history, the site may have been significantly smaller. Gomel's size thus equalled the 34 ha of the mid-late 3rd millennium site of Xrab-i Kilaşin discovered about 20 km to the west of the Greater Zab and 22 km to the east of our site by the Upper Greater Zab Archaeological

Gir-e Gomel periodization	Operation	Relative chronology	Absolute chronology
1	1-3	Recent/modern	1922-today
2	1	Late Islamic	c. 1500-1922 AD
3	So far not attested in the excavation	Middle Islamic	c. 1000-1500 AD
4	1	Early Islamic	636- c. 1000 AD
5	So far not attested in the excavation	Sasanian	224-636 AD
6	1-2	Parthian	c. 100 BC-224 AD
7	1	Hellenistic	331-c. 100 BC
8	1	Post-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, Achaemenid	612-331 BC
9	1-2	Neo-Assyrian, Iron Age	c. 900-612 BC
10	1	Middle Assyrian, later Late Bronze Age	c. 1300-1100 BC
11	1	Mitanni, earlier Late Bronze Age	c. 1550-1300 BC
12	1-3	Middle Bronze Age	c. 2000-1550 BC
13	1, 3	Mid-late Early Bronze Age, EJZ 2-5	c. 2750-2000 BC
14	So far not attested in the excavation	Earlier Early Bronze Age, Early Ninevite 5, EJZ 0-1	c. 3100-2750 BC
15	3	Late Chalcolithic 3-5	c. 3850-3100 BC
16	3	Late Chalcolithic 1-2	c. 4500-3850 BC

Tab. 1 - Archaeological periods recorded in Gir-e Gomel during the excavation.

Reconnaissance.¹⁸ Gir-e Gomel and Xrab-i Kilaşin were thus the most extensive sites in the region to the west of the Greater Zab and east of the Tigris before Bassetki, a 50 ha mid-late 3rd millennium and Middle Bronze Age site in the Selevani Plain north-west of the city of Duhok.¹⁹

The result of the extensive and intensive surveys carried out in Gir-e Gomel show that the site was continuously occupied without significant interruptions from the beginning of the Late Chalcolithic²⁰ to the Middle and Late Islamic period.²¹ As mentioned above, the site's at least seven millennia long history is also witnessed by the remarkable height of the upper town, which rises almost 40 m from the level of the River Gomel. The first two excavation seasons at the site have made it possible to establish a stratigraphic sequence covering the Late Chalcolithic 1-5, the time span from the later Early Bronze Age (mid-late 3rd millennium) to the Iron Age, and the Hellenistic, Parthian, Early and Late Islamic periods. Hitherto not recorded in the excavation – even though attested at Gomel by the extensive and intensive surveys – are the earlier Ninevite 5, Sasanian and Middle Islamic periods (Tab. 1).

With its notable size that makes it the largest site in the Navkur Plain, its essentially continuous occupation for at least almost seven millennia, and its

strategic position on the left bank of the river nearly at the centre of the fertile and well-watered plain and on the main south-east-north-west route connecting

¹⁸ KOLIŃSKI 2018, 17-18 and https://www.academia.edu/5709687/UGZAR_The_site_catalogue_2013_part_2_Sectors_D1-F5, site 074. According to Rafał Koliński, the size of Xrab-i Kilaşin shrank to approximately 14 ha during the following Middle Bronze Age, thus marking a change in the function of the settlement that became a rural centre of local importance (Rafał Koliński, personal communication, March 05, 2019).

¹⁹ PFÄLZNER *et alii* 2017, 14. A smaller area of the site was also settled during the following Late Bronze and Iron Age.

²⁰ The discovery of an Ubaid period white stone stamp seal found on the site's surface in 1933-1934 and now in the Oriental Institute Museum of Chicago (A12466; FRANKFORT 1935, 29-31, fig. 31) suggests that Gomel was already occupied during the Northern Ubaid/Early Chalcolithic period. The recovery of a so far very limited amount of unstratified ceramic material possibly dating to this and the Halaf periods in Operations 1 and 3 may suggest the existence under the later occupation levels of a Late Neolithic and Early Chalcolithic prehistoric site.

²¹ The Late Islamic period, i.e. the Ottoman period, is attested too at Gomel. However, the density of the diagnostic pottery and its distribution on the site's surface suggest the existence of a very small hamlet in the northern part of the site, which was possibly settled only during the very late Ottoman period or even after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. A sub-recent cemetery was brought to light in Operation 1 (see below). However, the still limited understanding of the Ottoman period pottery may influence our conclusions.

the Erbil Plain with the Tigris Valley, Gir-e Gomel was the most important site in the area and commanded the entire Navkur Plain, in particular in the periods of its maximum extension during the mid-late 3rd millennium BC and the Middle Bronze Age. The UGZAR Project located the site of Xrab-i Kilaşin about 22 km to the east of Gir-e Gomel, in the environs of the modern town and the archaeological site of Rovia.²² With its 34 ha surface area the site equals the extension of Gomel. However, its peripheral location on the eastern margin of the Navkur Plain and non-continuous occupation – starting only in the mid-late 3rd millennium, when the site reached its maximum extension, and continuing in the Middle Bronze Age (though with a significant reduction of its original size), the Middle Assyrian period and then in the Islamic era – suggest that Xrab-i Kilaşin was not the central site of the fertile Navkur Plain.

4. Written sources on Gomel and its region

The history of the Navkur Plain is scarcely illuminated by ancient written evidence. The Old Babylonian texts from the Mari and Shemshara archives of the time of Samsi-Addu mention in the region to the east and west of the Upper Iraqi Tigris a poorly known Amorite tribe, the Ya'ilanum, ruled by a king called Mar-Addu whose neutrality Samsi-Addu tried unsuccessfully to negotiate.²³ This tribe lived in the lands of Nurrugum and Qabra and was defeated and eradicated through deportations by Ishme-Dagan immediately before the joint conquest of Qabra and Urbil (Erbil) by Dadusha, king of Eshnunna, and Samsi-Addu in 1781 BC.²⁴ According to the cuneiform sources, sites such as Talmush (probably Ger-e-pan), Ninet/Nineveh, Shibanum=Shibanibe/Tell Billa, and Kilizum/Qasr Shemamok belonged to the local kingdom of Nurrugum.²⁵ During the reign of Samsi-Addu, the Navkur Plain and the entire region explored by the University of Udine were certainly part of Nurrugum. The capital city of the Land of Nurrugum, which according to Eidem and Ziegler spanned both banks of the Tigris to the north of Ekallatum, had the same name and must have been located to the east of the Tigris, as an unpublished Mari letter suggests.²⁶ The city of Nurrugum resisted the siege by Samsi-Addu's army for almost a year (while Nineveh fell after a few weeks) and was thus certainly well fortified.²⁷ After the conquest of the capital city in 1780, the Land of Nurrugum was incorporated into the kingdom of Upper Mesopotamia and many of its inhabitants were enlisted in Samsi-Addu's army. After this period, the Ya'ilanum tribe that lived in the region disappears from the cuneiform sources.²⁸ Slightly later, during the 17th-early 16th century BC, the otherwise unknown Pizigarra, of probable Hurrian descent – either the ruler of Nineveh, or coming from

this city – is mentioned in a fragmentary context of the preamble to the “The Song of Release”, a literary composition written in Hurrian with Hittite translation discovered during the excavations in Hattusha that mentions the destruction of Ebla.²⁹ This textual evidence suggests that the region studied by the University of Udine had passed under the control of an emerging Hurrian polity.

A similar scenario, characterised by conquest by Samsi-Addu's army followed by the emergence of a local Hurrian political entity, can now also be outlined for Bassetki during the Old Babylonian/Middle Bronze Age period. This site, located slightly to the west of our study region (see above), is now providing important fresh evidence for the Late Bronze Age in particular, due to the discovery during the 2017 excavation campaign of 92 Middle Assyrian texts stored in a jar on the floor of a building destroyed by fire.³⁰ Thanks to the discovery of this Middle Assyrian archive, the site can be identified as the Assyrian city of Mardama, which was the administrative seat of a currently unknown mid-13th century BC Middle Assyrian governorate. The city is already mentioned under the name of Mardaman in an Akkadian period inscription of Naram-Sin, who celebrates its destruction, and again by sources from the Third Dynasty of Ur. The city was then conquered by Samsi-Addu in 1786³¹ and later became an independent kingdom under a Hurrian ruler called Tish-ulme,³² before being destroyed by the Turukkaeans. The Middle Assyrian archive from Bassetki will hopefully also shed new light on the historical geography of the region to the east of Mardama during the Late Bronze Age.

As for the 1st millennium cuneiform sources, not very much is known for the Navkur Plain. According to Radner, from the 8th century onwards the plain perhaps belonged to three different Neo-Assyrian

²² See footnote 18.

²³ ZIEGLER 2011, 149.

²⁴ CHARPIN, ZIEGLER 2003, 90-101; EIDEM, LAESSØE 2001, 23; ZIEGLER 2004, 24 and 2011, 149-150; VIDAL 2013.

²⁵ CHARPIN, ZIEGLER 2003, 77; ZIEGLER 2004, 2011 and Nele Ziegler, personal communication (February 26, 2014).

²⁶ CHARPIN, ZIEGLER 2003, 97-99; EIDEM 1985, 101 and no. 84; ZIEGLER 2004, 21.

²⁷ As for the possible identification of Nurrugum with Gir-e Gomel, see the discussion in the conclusions to this article (Section 9).

²⁸ VIDAL 2013.

²⁹ DE MARTINO 2012; NEU 1996; WILHELM 2001.

³⁰ PFÄLZNER *et alii* 2017 and <https://uni-tuebingen.de/en/newsfullview-landingpage/article/cuneiform-tablets-from-bassetki-reveal-location-of-ancient-royal-city-of-mardaman.html> (2018). To the Middle Assyrian tablets, a few other Neo-Assyrian tablet fragments can be added.

³¹ CHARPIN, ZIEGLER 2003, 145.

³² *Ibidem*, 183.



Fig. 6 - Examples of sub-recent graves (Phases 1-2): stone cist (from the east), baked-brick cist (from the east) and simple pit burial (from the west).

provinces: from west to east Barkhalzu, Shimu and Shibkhinish.³³ As admitted by Radner herself, however, this reconstruction is very tentative and is not based on firm documentary evidence. The only site in the Navkur Plain for which identification with an ancient toponym has been proposed to date is Gir-e Gomel. Reade³⁴ and Fales and Del Fabbro³⁵ have tentatively identified it as the ancient Assyrian town of ^{URU}*Gam-ma-ga-ra*, mentioned in the Inscription B of Sennacherib at Jerwan.³⁶ The archaeological evidence does not contradict such a proposal, since at Gomel Neo-Assyrian levels have been identified in Operations 1 and 2 (see below). If Gir-e Gomel can be identified with Gammagara, whose name involves a metathesis possibly as an erroneous outcome so that Gammagara should stand for *Gangamara,³⁷ a toponomastic formation with internal duplication, then the equivalence with the Greek toponym of Gaugamela already proposed by Reade³⁸ would not give rise to particular difficulties.³⁹

9th century Syriac sources mention the site of Gomel as Gogemal, a clear distortion of the name of Gaugamela.⁴⁰ The *Chronography of Bar Hebraeus* (1226-1286) refers to the “town of Gomel” as one of the biggest centres of the diocese of Marga, spanning the region between the Upper Greater Zab Valley, the foothill region of ‘Aqra and the Atrush Valley and the Navkur Plain to the River Gomel.⁴¹ Gomel was the seat of two Monophysite bishops of Marga in the ~~seventh and ninth~~ centuries.⁴² This documentary evidence indicates that in the Byzantine/Early Islamic period the site of Gomel held a central socio-economic and religious position in the Marga diocese and was an important crossing point of the River Gomel on the Erbil-Tigris route.⁴³

Medieval Arabic sources, with the exception of Yaqut al-Hamawi⁴⁴ mentioned above, do not refer to the site of Gomel,⁴⁵ and neither do the 16th century Ottoman *defsters* pertaining to the regions of Mosul and Duhok.⁴⁶ The silence of the Arabic and Ottoman period sources with regard to the site suggests that during the Late Islamic period Gomel did not play an important role as an economic and religious centre or

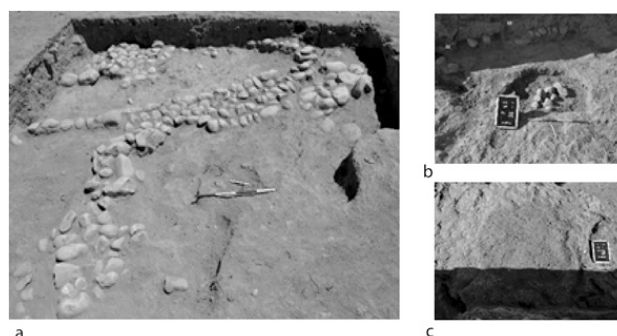


Fig. 7 - Early Islamic occupation (Phase 3), with walls 224, 232, 233, and floor 234 (a) and two of the pits (b, c).

as a strategic river crossing point, as it did during the Byzantine/Early Islamic and Middle Islamic periods, but rather was one among many rural villages and hamlets of the productive Navkur Plain.

5. Operation 1

Introduction

Operation 1 is located along the south-western edge of Gir-e Gomel’s southern lower town, in the area where the site was eroded by the River Gomel (Figs. 3-4). Excavations here were carried out in 2012, 2013, 2017 and 2018. In the first two years, a step trench was opened with the aim of investigating the archaeological sequence in this part of the site. The area was selected after a careful examination of the eroded section of Gomel’s south-western lower town. In this part of the mound, the river erosion and illicit digging had exposed baked-brick structures in a section through an extensive occupation sequence from the sub-recent period to the 3rd millennium BC. In 2017, excavations were resumed and extended through the opening of a new square (5 by 5 m) to the east of the 2012-2013 step trench. The overall

³³ RADNER 2006, Karte 1.

³⁴ READE 1978, 169. See also READE, ANDERSON 2013, 75-76.

³⁵ FALES, DEL FABBRO 2014, 80-81.

³⁶ GRAYSON, NOVOTNY 2014, no. 226: line 4.

³⁷ FALES, DEL FABBRO 2014, 80, footnote 61.

³⁸ READE 1978, 169.

³⁹ FALES, DEL FABBRO 2014, 80, footnote 61 for details.

⁴⁰ Gogemal is mentioned in the “Book of Governors” written by Thomas of Marga, bishop of the diocese of Marga in about the mid-9th century (HONIGMANN 1954, 97; FIEY 1965, 230).

⁴¹ FIEY 1965, 225-303 and map p. 224.

⁴² BUDGE 1932. See also FIEY 1965, 230-231.

⁴³ See footnote 13.

⁴⁴ See footnote 3.

⁴⁵ Miroslav Melčák, personal communication (February 11, 2019).

⁴⁶ Onur Usta, personal communication (February 12, 2019).

Early Islamic Pottery from stratigraphic unit 318.

N.	SU	PHASE	WARE	DESCRIPTION
1	318.35	3	w6	Pale-yellow ware, with medium occurrence fine inclusions
2	318.37	3	w5	Pink ware, reddish-yellow ceramic body, with abundant fine inclusions; pale-yellow sur
3	318.68	3	w14	Cooking ware, reddish-grey hard fire ware, with abundant inclusions, presence of quartz
4	318.33	3	w7	Eggshell ware, pale-yellow, well levigated body
5	318.30	3	w7	Eggshell ware, pale-yellow, well levigated body
6	318.31	3	w7	Eggshell ware, pale-yellow, well levigated body
7	318.32	3	w7	Eggshell ware, pale-yellow, well levigated body
8	318.27	3	w7	Eggshell ware, pale-yellow, well levigated body
9	318.28	3	w4	Gritty ware, light-grey/pale yellow ceramic body with abundant fine inclusions

area excavated in Operation 1 amounts to about 85 sq. m. Twenty-six different occupation phases have been identified so far in this part of the site, which was used as a burial ground in the sub-recent period, the Neo-Assyrian period, and in the Middle and Early Bronze Age, while it was an inhabited area during the Late Bronze Age, and the Post-Assyrian, Parthian and Hellenistic periods.

Sub-recent occupation (Phases 1-2)

The first two phases of occupation are dated to very recent times (probably the 20th century AD) and are represented by 21 graves of a cemetery located immediately below the topsoil. Three types of burials have been recorded (Fig. 6): one baked-brick cist grave and seven stone cist graves (or with stone covers), while the remaining burials are simple pit graves. Sixty percent of the bones analysed belong to adults/juveniles, while 40% pertain to young individuals (from newborns to adolescents). The burials were mainly oriented west-east, but in some cases east-west orientation is found. All the skeletons faced south and lay directly on the grave bottom, mostly lying on one side or on the back, with slightly bent or outstretched legs. No grave goods were recovered from the burials.

Early Islamic occupation (Phase 3)

The third occupation phase, dating to the Early Islamic period (7th-10th century AD), is represented by an external trodden floor abutting three walls (224, 232 and 233) and some waste pits (256, 268 and 318). The walls were built with large cobblestones of different sizes (20-40 cm) taken from the nearby river, laid in courses and bound with brown or grey mud; they are probably the foundations of mud-brick walls that were not preserved. The above-mentioned

graves heavily damaged this level. The ceramic material found in several large rubbish pits (diameter: 2-2.5 m; depth 1-1.5 m; Fig. 7) particularly interesting. The pottery assemblages from the bell-shaped disposal pits, which might originally have been used as storage pits, are homogeneous and of great interest for understanding the material culture of the poorly known earliest phase of the Islamic period in the Gir-e Gomel region.

The excavated evidence is far too fragmentary to ascertain the nature of the area's occupation. However, the uncovered features suggest that in the Early Islamic period this part of the site was used for domestic and storage activities.

The pottery from the Early Islamic dumps (C. Tonghini)

It is well known that the material culture of northern Iraq in the long Islamic period is still poorly understood and that a well-established reference chronology for the ceramic finds is not available yet. However, it must also be said that the situation is gradually changing thanks to the most recent field-work seasons.⁴⁷ The excavation of a site such as Gomel, characterised by continuous occupation dur-

⁴⁷ See for example NOVÁČEK *et alii* 2016, 122-159. At the 11th ICAANE held in Munich, April 2018, ceramic assemblages from on-going projects in Iraqi Kurdistan were discussed: M. AHMAD "Islamic Archaeology in Iraqi Kurdistan: Sulaymaniyah region as a case-study"; K. KAERCHER "Chronology and Social Identity in the Middle and Late Islamic Periods in Northeastern Iraq via the Study of Unglazed Earthenwares"; C. TONGHINI, V. VEZZOLI "The Islamic period settlement in Kurdistan/Iraq: results from the Land of Nineveh Archaeological Project".

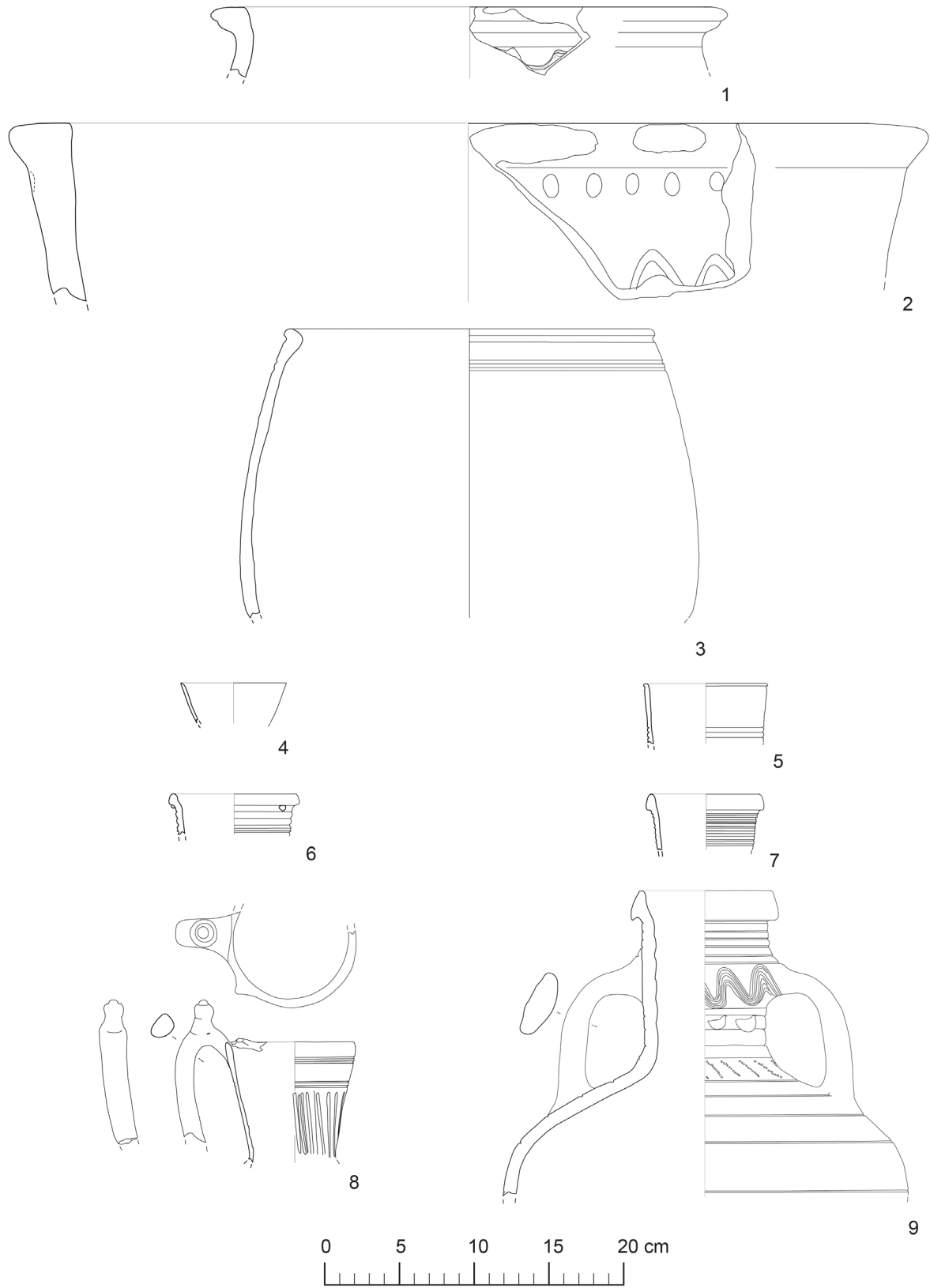


Fig. 8 - Early Islamic Pottery from stratigraphic unit 318.

Early Islamic pottery from stratigraphic units 318 and 227.

N.	SU	PHASE	WARE	DESCRIPTION
1	318.41	3	w7	Eggshell ware, pale-yellow, well levigated body
2	318.42	3	w5	Pink ware, reddish yellow ceramic body, with medium occurrence fine inclusions
3	318.43	3	w6	Pale-yellow ware, with medium occurrence fine inclusions
4	227.37	3	w14	Cooking ware, reddish-grey hard fire ware, with abundant inclusions, presence of quartz
5	227.24-25	3	w3	Abbasid moulded ware: pale-yellow ceramic body, well levigated, rare inclusions, presence of quartz
6	227.35	3	w3	Abbasid moulded ware: pale-yellow ceramic body, well levigated, rare inclusions, presence of quartz
7	227.21	3		Pale yellow, levigated body with glaze, deteriorated

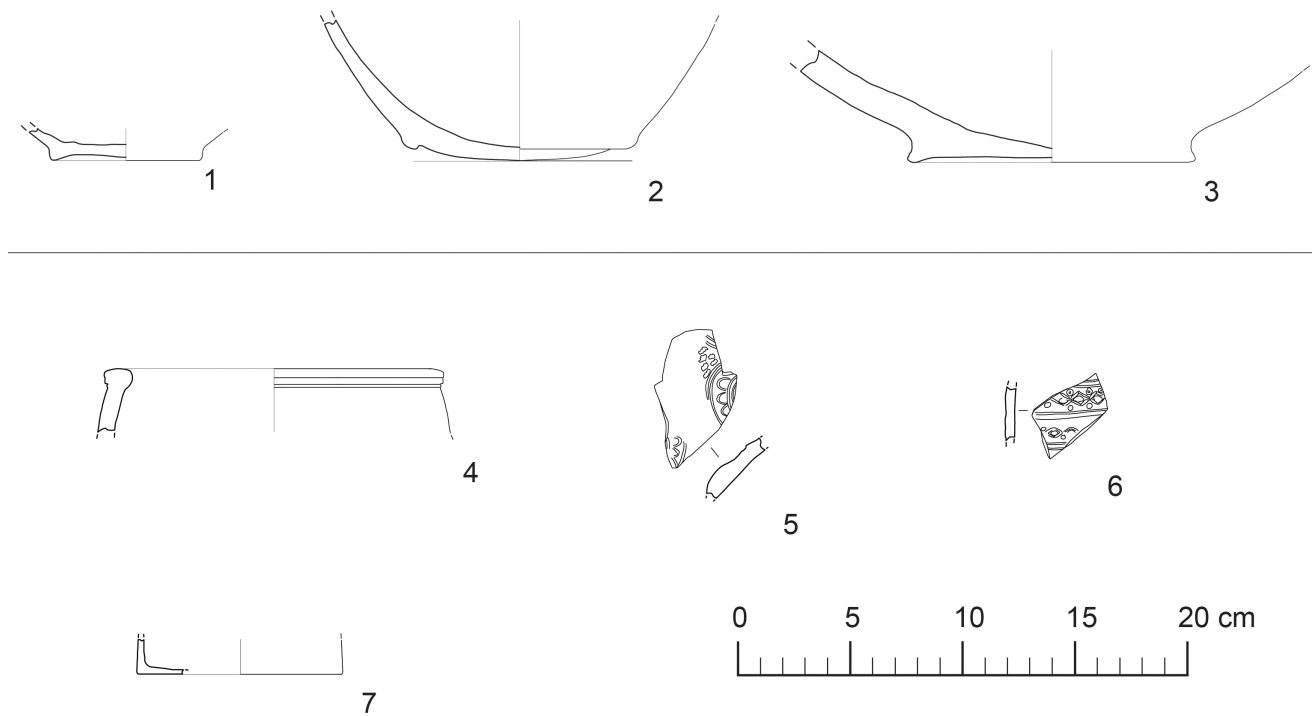


Fig. 9 - Early Islamic pottery from stratigraphic units 318 and 227.

ing the long Islamic period, may provide important evidence in this respect.

In fact, it is especially the pottery finds from the 2017 and 2018 excavations of Gir-e Gomel that made it possible to complete the typological work carried out in the framework of the survey project in relation to the Early Islamic period (7th-10th centuries).⁴⁸ This typology had been originally established on a few well-known, well-dated ceramic types circulating in the region as well as in the neighbouring areas (Syria, Turkey, Iran) and on the pottery from sites characterised by a single-period occupation through a seriation process.⁴⁹

The ceramic finds from a number of dumps at Gir-e Gomel significantly enlarged the assemblage of pottery types that can be ascribed to the Early Islamic period; at the same time, they contribute to a first evaluation of the settlement's character in this period. The dumps are located in an area that, according to the results of an intensive survey, seems to constitute the southern outskirts of the settlement in the Early Islamic period; the finds may thus illustrate the repertoire of a domestic and peripheral context.

The selection of pottery presented here comes from two different dumps, stratigraphic units 227 and 318.

Glazed pottery is rare, and comprises a few samples of the so-called *Yellow Glazed Family*, a distinctive type characterised by a well-levigated fabric and a bright yellow glaze, often associated with black-painted decoration.⁵⁰ The largest group in the assemblage consists of unglazed beige ware, with a number of different varieties. Highly diagnostic types are represented by so-called *Egg-shell Ware*,⁵¹ with a very fine, well-levigated fabric, generally associated with water-juglets (Figs. 8, 4-8 and 9, 1), and by moulded-ware, associated with small closed and open forms (Figs. 9, 5-6 and 10).

The quantity of sand and mineral inclusions can vary considerably within this group. Closed forms of small and medium dimensions generally present a smooth surface and various types of decoration (incised, moulded, applied, and stamped: Figs. 8, 1-2, 9 and 9, 2-3). Larger forms, such as basins and jars, are characterised by a much grittier fabric. A highly diagnostic decoration of the 7th-9th centuries is the so-called *Honeycomb Ware* (finger impressed decoration),⁵² usually associated with jars.

The cooking ware seems to differ from the well-known *Brittle Ware* well attested in the whole region;⁵³ it is characterised by a reddish/brownish gritty fabric, with abundant mineral inclusions; a globular pot with a thickened rim seems to be the most typical form (Figs. 8, 3 and 9, 4).

The repertoire fits within the morphological and decorative horizon of other contemporary and well-known contexts of the Abbasid period in the Mesopotamian region.⁵⁴ The absence of the well-known *Blue-*

Glazed Abbasid Ware can be noted. This absence may bear chronological implications and suggests that the dumps discussed here should be dated toward the later part of the Early Islamic horizon.

The pottery types that are found in the dumps seem to illustrate a peripheral domestic context within an urban environment that must have been well connected to a regional commercial network. The variety of the pottery types and their quality demonstrates easy access to the fine table wares market, and is comparable with that of other urban entities, such as al-Raqqa; the percentages of the various types and especially the paucity of the glazed-ware indicate that this area was somewhat marginal in comparison with the areas of the town presumably frequented by the elites. The continuation of the archaeological exploration of the buried deposits will undoubtedly provide important evidence in relation to the occupation of the site during the long Islamic period and contribute significantly to our understanding of the material culture of this period in the whole area.

Parthian Period (Phases 4-6)

The occupation of Phase 4 is poorly documented through the presence of a fragmentary structure (Building 2), which extended beyond the northern excavation limit. Only one room of this building was brought to light in Operation 1 (Fig. 1).

Underneath one of the mud-brick walls of Building 2, a burial (Grave 31, Phase 5, Fig. 1) was found: the inhumation grave consisted of an ellipsoidal pit at the bottom of which the skeleton of an adult was lying prone.

Although the few walls of Building 2 found in Operation 1 do not indicate its precise function, due to their thickness and construction quality it can be deduced that in the Parthian period the area had a domestic use. The finding of a burial on an external surface belonging to Phase 5 further emphasizes that this region of the site located at its south-western edge was not densely and permanently inhabited.

⁴⁸ Following WHITCOMB 1992, 112-118, the long Islamic period can be divided into three main horizons: Early Islamic Period (7th-10th centuries), Middle Islamic Period (11th-15th centuries), Late Islamic Period (16th-20th centuries).

⁴⁹ TONGHINI, VEZZOLI 2018.

⁵⁰ WATSON 1999, 81-87.

⁵¹ NORTHEGE *et alii* 1988, 86-87; KENNET 2004, 31.

⁵² NORTHEGE, FALKNER 1987, Pl. XXX, and note 62; MIGLUS, STĘPNIOWSKI 1999, taf. 76: i-j.

⁵³ VOKAER 2011.

⁵⁴ Especially MIGLUS 1999; FRANÇOIS, SHADDOUD 2013; ROUSSET 1996.

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