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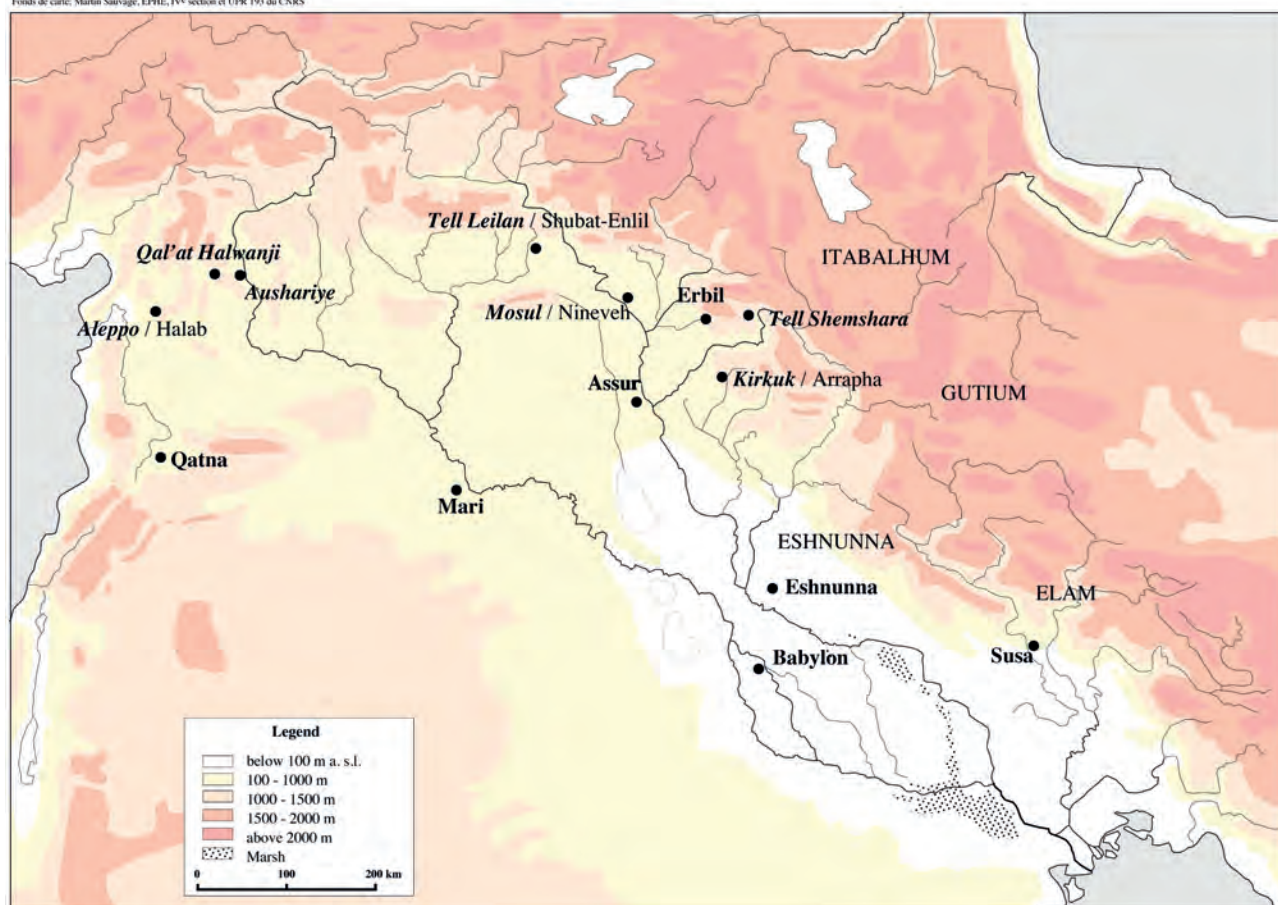


Figure 1. Map of ancient Iraq/Syria with sites mentioned in the text.
Tell Shemshara is found in the upper right.

Dokan.

An archaeological salvage project in Iraq, 1956-60

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In autumn 2012 NINO will initiate new archaeological fieldwork in Northern Iraq, in a first instance returning to the Rania Plain and the site of Tell Shemshara, briefly excavated by Danish and Iraqi archaeologists more than 50 years ago. We hope to describe this work in our next Annual Report. Here we provide an introduction to the area and the project.

A salvage first

In 1950 the Iraqi government decided to build a hydro-electric dam at Dokan, at the south end of the Rania Plain. The dam would create a large artificial lake in the plain, and this would flood some 40 ancient sites. As the construction of the dam was in progress in the mid-1950s Iraqi archaeologists were sent from Baghdad to make a list of the sites which would be flooded and to start salvage excavations in the most important of them.

The first excavation began in 1956, and during the next years some 10 ancient sites were examined by a group of young and enthusiastic Iraqi archaeologists. As a salvage operation the Dokan project was the first of its kind. Many ancient sites in Iraq and other countries in the Middle East had of course already been excavated by local or foreign archaeologists, but usually these sites had been carefully chosen because they were believed to have special importance and would provide exceptional evidence. The fairly small sites in a

remote area like the Rania Plain were not among them. Only the threat of flooding made their investigation an urgent task. Many other salvage projects necessitated by dams or other construction work have followed, both in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and other countries, but it is worth remembering the Dokan project as a

pioneering effort. Without it much information would have been lost, and the excavations here showed that also small sites in a remote area could provide important historical information.

In 1956, the same year excavations began in the Dokan project, a Danish professor, Jørgen Læssøe, was in Iraq and was asked if Denmark would like to help the salvage effort. He affirmed, of course, and after his return to Denmark he began to organize a Danish team to excavate in the Rania Plain. As field director he

chose Harald Ingholt, a Danish archaeologist who had extensive experience from excavations in Syria, and was then professor at Yale University. In May 1957 the Danish team arrived in the Rania Plain and decided to excavate the site of Tell Shemshara. They did not really know what to expect, but the site was situated in an important location close to the main mountain pass through the Zagros mountains between Iraq and Iran (see cover illustration), so they had high hopes when they started the excavation.

Digging in Iraq

The main mound of Tell Shemshara was ca. 330 m long and ca. 60 m wide. The north end was more than 10 metres higher than the rest, and the Danes decided to open a large excavation area on the high northern part.

The actual digging was done by local workmen guided by master foremen from the village of Sharqat in central Iraq. The men in this village had formed a tradition as master workers in archaeological excavations, and were employed at sites all over Iraq. They were of course paid more than the local workers.

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Life on the Rania Plain

The Danes had hardly put up their tents near the main mound of Shemshara when they were hit by very heavy rain and thunder. Many days strong wind made work in the excavation difficult and sometimes impossible, and throughout the summer there were more heavy rains.

Wolves could be heard near the camp at night, and an armed guard had to be hired. During June and July temperatures reached 55 °C at the middle of the day, and the team was also much disturbed by sandflies (small, mosquito-like insects).



Figure 2. Tell Shemshara during excavation in summer 1957.
View from north towards the high summit.

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During the summer the Danes dug down in the high part of the mound and uncovered no less than sixteen successive occupation levels. The lowest and earliest levels could be dated to the Neolithic, the so-called Hassuna period – some 8000 years ago. Above these levels were remains of occupation which could be dated to the second millennium BC, but without any clear ruins of buildings. Finally the latest occupation found just under the modern surface was from the 14th century of our own era – so only some 500 years old.

In the middle of July the Danes decided also to make a small excavation on the lower part of the site. They first found the same medieval occupation as on the high part of the site, but then dug into the much older level from the second millennium BC. Here they found a few rooms of a building full of ashes, clearly burnt down in antiquity. In one room, which had a tiled floor, they found, just a few days before the end of the season, an archive of some 150 clay tablets inscribed with texts in cuneiform writing.

Læssøe, an expert in ancient languages, had to make a catalogue of these tablets in a very short time before the camp was packed. He discovered that several of the tablets were letters sent by the famous Assyrian king

Shamshi-Adad – to a man named Kuwari. Actually most of the letters were sent to this Kuwari, who could then be identified as the owner of the archive. Over the next few years Læssøe was able to study and decipher all these letters and it became clear how lucky the Danish Expedition had been to find this archive.

Ancient power play

So what is the story these tablets tell us? To explain this we have to take a broader view at the history of Iraq in the early part of the second millennium BC – at the time when Hammurabi was king of Babylon and Shamshi-Adad was king of Assur.

Shamshi-Adad was a very successful politician and general, and he managed to expand his territory until it included all of northern Mesopotamia. Among the tablets found in Mari (see text box) is a large group of letters sent from Shamshi-Adad to his son. These letters show us

how the kingdom expanded eastwards into areas close to the Rania Plain, but later got a lot of trouble with the people living there.

This is where the small archive from Shemshara enters the story. The letters were all written just before and just after Shamshi-Adad and his sons tried to get control with this area,

Hammurabi and Shamshi-Adad

Much of the information we have for this period comes from a site on the Euphrates in modern Syria – from a city called Mari. Here a French excavation in the 1930s uncovered a large archive of tablets – nearly 20.000, in the ruins of the palace of the city. This archive is an incredible source of information for this period. The archives contain thousands of letters sent to the kings of Mari from other kings, from diplomats, generals, and spies.

Mari was a local Syrian kingdom, but Shamshi-Adad of Assur conquered the city, and placed one of his sons as viceroy in Mari. Shamshi-Adad himself spent most of his time in a new capital he built in what is now northeast Syria, in Shubat-Enlil. In the east part of his large kingdom he placed another son as viceroy. In this way he had reliable people on the two flanks of the kingdom.

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Fig. 3. Tablet from Tell Shemshara. Letter from one of Shamshi-Adad's generals to Kuwari.



Figure 4. Tell Shemshara in 2012 – compare similar view in 1957 (Fig. 2).



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and they show us how a ‘big game’ unfolded during a few months in the years 1781-80 BC. They also show that the ancient name of Shemshara some 4.000 years ago was – Shusharra – which remarkably survived into modern times.

The man at Shemshara, Kuwari, was placed there as governor by a kingdom in the mountains of Iran, Itabalthum. This kingdom was at war with another kingdom in the mountains, Gutium.

At the same time Shamshi-Adad was conducting a big military campaign in the area around modern Erbil, and approaching the Rania Plain. A friend of Kuwari wrote to him:

I have read the letter you sent me (and where you wrote): “Nipram came back from Shamshi-Adad and said: “What Shamshi-Adad told me is very good news; he has conquered the city of Arraphum (= Kirkuk), and is moving towards Qabra (= Erbil), and he has sent his son with 60.000 troops to besiege Nurrugum (= Mosul).” This is what you wrote in the letter you sent to me. Pay close attention to this news. Hopefully Shamshi-Adad will not conquer the whole country, and we shall not have to worry.

So an envoy had reported to Kuwari that Shamshi-Adad was busy conquering the main cities on the plain west of the Rania Plain, and hopefully he was so busy that he would not be able to do more and also move further east.

But then another friend of Kuwari wrote to him that the army of Gutium had made a raid into the core of the kingdom. At this point Shemshara was in a very dangerous situation: who would reach it first – the army of Gutium,

or the army of Shamshi-Adad? It seems the local population in the Rania Plain preferred to be protected by Shamshi-Adad against Gutium, and Kuwari followed them. So instead of being the western outpost of the mountain kingdom Shemshara now became the eastern outpost of Shamshi-Adad’s kingdom. And instead of receiving letters from his friends in the east Kuwari now got letters from Shamshi-Adad and his generals.

Was Kuwari a traitor? Or did he have no choice in order to save Shemshara and the Rania Plain from the army of Gutium? This is difficult to judge, but we can see that Shamshi-Adad did not manage to control Shemshara for more than a few months. Perhaps because of the news that he wanted a coalition with the king of Gutium, as described in another letter:

You wrote to me about the servant of Shamshi-Adad who brought presents of silver, gold and silver bars to the king of Gutium. ... Shamshi-Adad wrote as follows to the king of Gutium: “You and I should make an agreement ... I will give you my daughter, and as dowry for my daughter I will give you the country of Shemshara.”

This information must have come as a shock to Kuwari and the people in the Rania Plain. Now they of course had no protection from Gutium, and they rose up in rebellion against Shamshi-Adad and Kuwari. In a letter from Mari – so not from Shemshara – is a report to the son of Shamshi-Adad who was viceroy there:

Concerning the land of Shemshara which you wrote to me about. Ishar-Lim will explain to you that this land is troubled, and that we cannot hold it. The people who live in that land, turned

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hostile and destroyed two towns. I went to help, but they retreated to the mountains.

One of the two towns destroyed was probably Shemshara itself, since the palace there had been burnt. So this is where the story of Shemshara ends. Perhaps Kuwari managed to escape, but we do not know...

There are many more details in this story which cannot be told here. Shamshi-Adad died a few years later, and the large empire he had created was again divided into many small separate kingdoms. But he was only the first of many Assyrian kings. A few centuries later new kings of Assur again began to build an empire and eventually returned to all the places Shamshi-Adad had been, including the Rania Plain, and beyond.

Back to Shemshara

The Danes packed their camp and went home, of course wanting to come back and excavate more of the building where they had found the letters of Kuwari. So next summer they were ready to continue, but that year, 1958, there was a revolution in Iraq. There was a brief period of violence and confusion and the Danes had to cancel their plans. Since the dam at Dokan was almost finished Iraqi archaeologists went to Shemshara and continued the excavation. They exposed a large area around the rooms the Danes had excavated, and in two small rooms elsewhere in the same building they found another archive of cuneiform tablets. This was smaller, about 100 pieces, and the tablets were mainly lists of agricultural products used in the palace of Kuwari.



Figure 5. A satellite image shows the site of Tell Shemshara as it appeared in 2010. The main mound, where the Danish team excavated is marked with two red dots, and north of it are three further mounds which belong to the site.



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The Iraqi archaeologists also excavated on a nearby hill where the Danish expedition had camped the previous year. The Danes had noticed that this hill also belonged to the ancient site, but had not had time to make any excavation there. The Iraqis found ruins of a building from the mid-second millennium BC, but no details of this excavation are known.

What happened later at Shemshara? Apparently the site was abandoned for several millennia until the Medieval period, more precisely to the 14th century AD, when there was a small village on the main mound. In an courtyard between ruins of small houses the Danes found a large amount of arrowheads, showing that the village probably was attacked and destroyed when the Mongol leader Timur Lenk passed this way with his army in the late 14th century, leaving a trail of destruction behind him.

The last archaeologists left the Rania Plain in 1960. When the dam was finished the Dokan Lake was formed, and for many years Shemshara was partly under water, and in any case inaccessible due to difficult political circumstances. The situation has now changed. Conditions in the region are stable, and it seems that in recent years the lake has become smaller, so that Shemshara is dry for much of the year. Since the site was never comprehensively explored we want to make use of this opportunity to do some new investigations there, beginning in late 2012. The main mound, with the palace of Kuwari,

has already been substantially excavated, and has also clearly suffered from the impact of flooding. The fairly large mound to the northwest, on the other hand, and two further mounds north of the main mound (see Fig. 5), have not really been explored, and may hide interesting new evidence. The general history of the whole site needs to be properly investigated – and who knows – perhaps we will also find more traces of Kuwari...

Further reading

An overview of the Dokan project with references to further literature can be found in:

- Eidem, J., 2011: "The Towers of Shemshara", in: G. Barjamovic et al. (eds.), *Akkade is King. A collection of papers by friends and colleagues presented to Aage Westenholz on the occasion of his 70th birthday 15th of May 2009* (PIHANS 118). NINO, Leiden: 79-91.

The archive of Kuwari found by the Danish expedition is published in:

- Eidem, J., and J. Læssøe, 2001: *The Shemshara Archives 1. The Letters* (Historisk-Filosofiske Skrifter, 23). Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, Copenhagen.

A very comprehensive and recent overview of the history of northeastern Iraq and adjacent areas, incorporating the period of the Shemshara archive, is available online:

- Ahmed, K.M., 2012: *The beginnings of ancient Kurdistan (c. 2500-1500 BC): a historical and cultural synthesis* (Doctoral thesis, Leiden University) <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/19095>