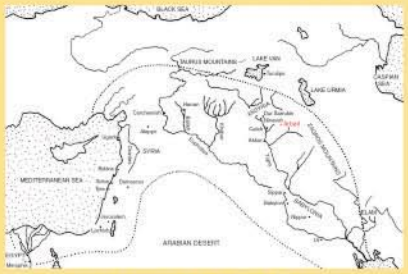
# Archaeology of Arbil citadel: historic context and settlement background

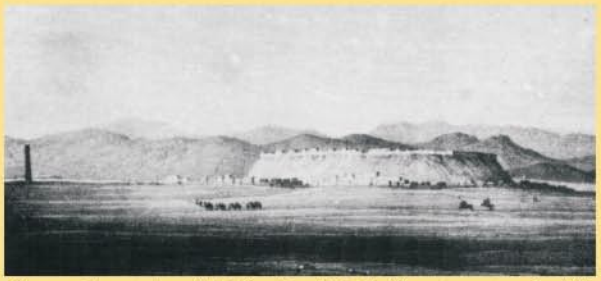
The citadel (qal´a) at Arbil belongs to the most important archaeological monuments of northern Mesopotamia, and is also a symbol of Iraqi Kurdistan. The fortified complex lies on a clayey, 25–32 m high tell which settlement apparently reaches back as far as the Neolithic, but clearly to the Chalcolithic Ubaid and Uruk cultures (c.5000–3200 BC). Therefore, area of the Arbil citadel show not-interrupted continuity of the human settlement longer than six millenniums, which is unique case all over the world.



Arbil on the map of Assyrian Empire

King Shulgi

King Ashurbanipal



The southwest view of Arbil, with al-Mudhaffar minaret on the left, the earliest known view of the town (engraved by W. Walton, 1820).

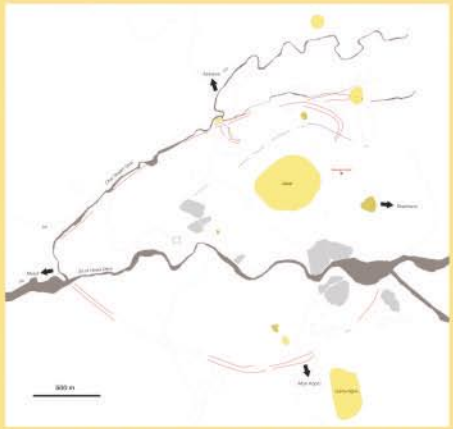
The first records in which Arbil (Urbilum) figures relate to Shulgi, king of the Third Dynasty of Ur (c. 2095–2048 BC). The city apparently reached the apex of its importance during the Assyrian Empire period (11th–7th centuries BC), when as Arba ilu it was, along with Nineveh and Ashur, a religious metropolis, centre of the cult of Ishtar and a royal residence known to have been used by king Ashurbanipal (669–627 BC). After the destruction of Assyria, the city came by turns under the control of the Medes, the Persians and latterly the Greeks – after the famous Battle of Gaugamela in 331 BC.

During the Parthian period (126 BC–226 AD) Arbil became the administrative centre and one of the earliest and most important centres of Christianity around the Tigris. The new religion found a refuge in the large Jewish community here as early as around the year 100. In 410 the local bishopric was raised to an archbishopric.

Within the framework of the Sassanid Empire, the administration of the province of Nódh-Ardashirakan was concentrated in Arbil, along with that of the neighbouring province of Garmekan; at the same time, the existence is claimed here of a great Zoroastrian fire temple.

In 642 northern Mesopotamia was conquered by the Muslims, and the function of regional centre shifted to Mosul. In the first half of the 12th century, Arbil became the seat of the Kurdish Begteginid family, later subordinated to the Egyptian Ayyubids, to whom it was related. The period of prosperity was interrupted by Mongol siege and capture of the town (1258). After 1534 Arbil became gradually a marginal locality at the eastern periphery of the Ottoman Empire. Only at the end of the 19th century did the city begin to grow again, and after the Second World War this urban and demographic development exploded. In recent decades, as a consequent of directive interventions, the social structure of the citadel's occupants has fundamentally changed, and its basic maintenance was neglected. Today the area contains a dense agglomeration of heavily damaged houses.

The research in 2009 confirmed earlier hypothesis that the citadel mount is only an iceberg´s top, only a part - albeit the most important - of much more complex city of admirable dimensions. The area of the fortified Assyrian town in the plain can be estimated to 3km-square. Several residential and production quarters from many historical periods may be supposed in the background of the tell, but their traces have been destroyed nearly completely by modern building activity.



Topography of the ancient and medieval Arbil (yellow = settlement mounds, red = fortification remains, blue = medieval town wall (?), grey = alluvium, hatched = graveyards)

Mound of the north town wall, probably of the Assyrian origin. The mound is sectioned by the road to Ainkawa. A detailed view on the vertical aerial photograph taken by Royal Air Force in 1953.

South gate of the citadel, 1918

Northern slope of the tell in 1932

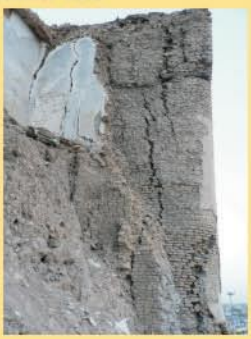
Citadel on aerial view, 1947

Slum building of the citadel in September 2006

## Future:

Conservation of the monumental area - static security of the perimeter frontage, as well as the inner building, reconstruction of the engeneering networks and communications, renovation of natural central functions of the citadel and its integration in tourism

All the reconstructions must be done with respect to archaeological values of the site, which authenticity should be conserved for future in maximal degree.
All archaeological data gathered during the reconstruction will be the primary source of knowledge of the qalat historical evolution.



Destruction of the perimeter building, 2006

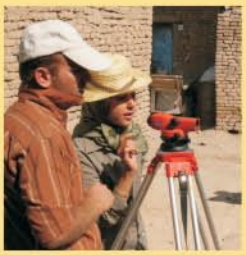
# Archaeology of Arbil citadel: methods

Archaeological research in densely settled environment needs different approaches than these are used on "traditional" archaeological sites. Moreover, the citadel area has not been the subject of any archaeological investigation. The primary emphasis is therefore on gathering standard documentation on the citadel and gaining basic archaeological data, mainly with the help of non-destructive methods (surface finds collecting, geophysical and architectural survey).

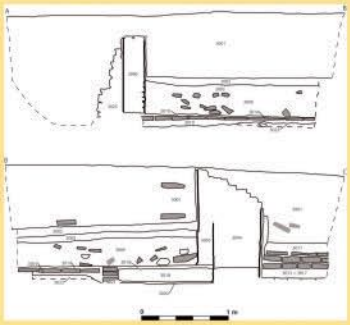
a) b)

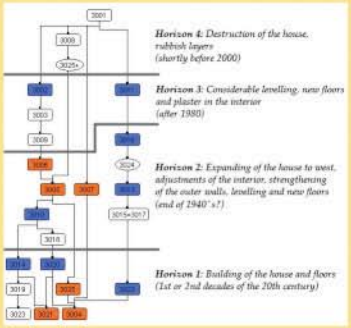
a) Our current knowledge of archaeology of the citadel tell is mainly based on the results of the surface finds collecting on the western slope of the tell.
b) Realisation of the geophysical survey in densely inhabited area with heavy traffic and many other disturbing influences was extremely difficult task.


A new plan of the citadel (2008) with location of the archaeological sections (green) and transect of the surface finds collection.

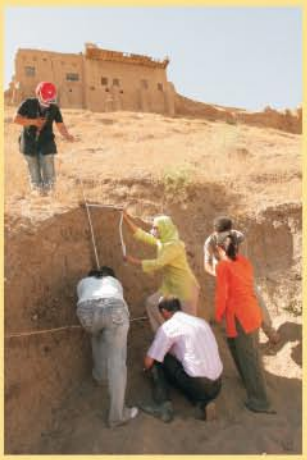


In this preliminary stage of research, the excavation was rather of a complementary and didactic character. Due of time shortage the trench not allowed reach earlier than horizons of the 20th century. Despite of this, standard methods of modern archaeological recording were used.

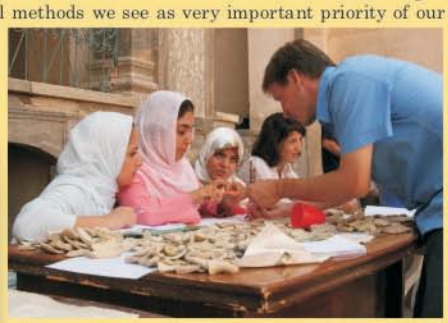





Current state of the complex information system for citadel architecture: interactive database of houses and virtual 3D model (© Veronika Králová and Karel Pavelka, Czech Technical University of Prague; Karel Nováček, University of West Bohemia Plzen). The database is fully operational and ready to use.



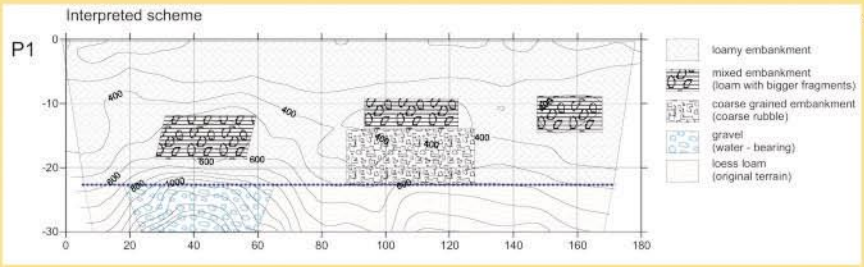
The research programme was expanded to include a teaching component for archaeology students from Salahaddin University and staff of the General Directorate of Antiquities in Arbil. This training was designed as a series of seminars on the methodology of field archaeology, the conservation of archaeological artefacts, the basics of heritage management and museology, combined with participation in the excavations in the area of the Arbil citadel. A total of 20 students and staff from the institutions named completed the course, which was for the majority of them their first contact with archaeological fieldwork conducted in the standard manner. Training of students in archaeological methods we see as very important priority of our project.



## Future:

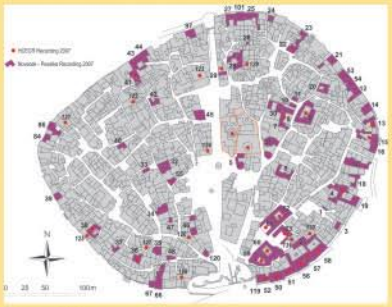
- deepening knowledge of the later phases of the citadel's development by smaller, preventative excavations, required by the advancing reconstruction of buildings and engineering networks
- continuing research into the ancient settlement horizons using non-destructive methods, in particular systematic geophysical prospection
- actuation of an archaeological information system for the citadel (in form of an interactive database)
- survey and documentation of the remains of the historical structures in the citadel
- continuing research of other presumed ancient and medieval parts of the Arbil agglomeration in the hinterland of the tell, which are urgently in danger.

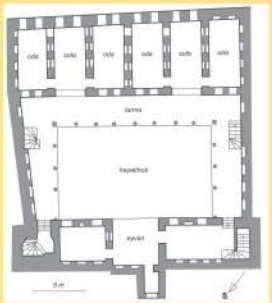
# Archaeology of Arbil citadel: results




## Geophysical survey

Using a combination of three methods – microgravimetry, shallow refraction seismicity, and direct current electrical resistivity profiling – evidence of non-homogenities was found at several locations on the tell at depths of between 9 and 21 meters. This evidence should structurally correspond to the large destruction of stone blocks: it is very probable that this evidence can be linked to the ancient – perhaps Late Assyrian – monumental architecture.





Despite of the drastic house reduction in the citadel in recent decades we were able to identify in November 2007 a group of 72 historically and architecturally valuable houses, albeit heavily damaged. This group is without doubt one of the most valuable complex of the Late Ottoman urban architecture in Iraq with close parallels with Baghdadi houses, and needs the most rigorous protection.

An extensive collection of pottery and other artefacts was obtained by surface collection on the western slope of the citadel, reflecting the majority of the settlement stages from the time of Neolithic cultures to the Late Islamic period. Despite the limited information which can be obtained from unstratified finds, the analysis of pottery does provide the first information available regarding the chronological development, local ceramic traditions as well as some trans-regional contacts.

Fragment of Late Assyrian fine ware, so-called Palace ware beaker

Fragments of chaff-tempered pottery, dated tentatively from late 3th millenium BC to the Late Assyrian period

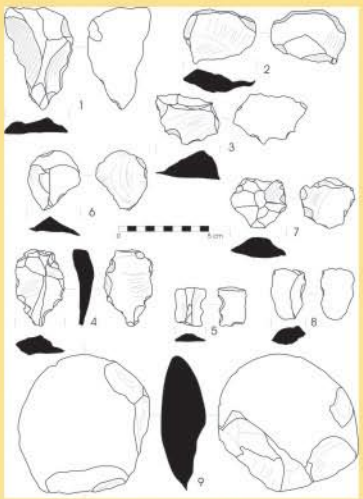
Hellenistic pottery

Hand-made pottery, some with burnished surface, possibly Neolithic or Chalkolithic

Early Islamic finds of the so-called Sāmarrā-horizon of the 9th century AD revealed indicators of contacts between Arbil and southern Iraq in the Early Abbasid period.

Personal stamp of a noble woman. Late Islamic period

Exemple of the slip painted, polychrome glazed earthenwares and stonepastes, Middle to Late Islamic periods. Trichromatic painted pottery offers interesting look at the local ceramic production.



The small but extremely important of the Mousterian stone industry (Middle Palaeolithic, ca. 200 000 – 40 000 BP) has been obtained by the surface find collection in the citadel area. For the time being, this is the earliest evidence for human presence in the Arbil region which probably pre-dates the well-known site at Shanidar. The stone industry occured in secondary position: it probably arrived during the transport or shifting of building materials. In 2009, the in-situ palaeolithic site of the same datation has been revealed in the building pit of the Arbil´s commercial centre, 9 m under the today surface.


Archaeological periodisation of the Northern Mesopotamia (after Wilkinson 2000), periods well represented by Arbil finds are highlighted by dark tone, sparse evidence by light tone.

Future:
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For further information visit the website of the project
http://www.kar.zcu.cz/ovp/projekt.php?id=24