

SEARCHING FOR THE KINGDOM OF MUSASIR

Near Eastern archaeologists generate compelling headlines and grab attention searching for lost kingdoms, temples, and palaces, but most everyone knows that modern archaeology encompasses far more than the pursuit of great discoveries. Archaeologists strive to reconstruct past cultures and study cultural evolution and human-environment interactions over time. Nevertheless, I confess that our new archaeological project in Iraqi Kurdistan provides the best of both worlds—the thrill of discovery coupled with the satisfaction of conducting long-term anthropological research. We established the Rowanduz Archaeological Program (RAP) in 2012 with the goal of producing a detailed understanding of the ancient cultures of the remote northeast corner of Iraq’s Erbil Province—the area of the modern towns of Rowanduz, Soran, and Sidekan—from the first agricultural settlers to the early modern period. We are also searching for a lost Iron Age kingdom that many scholars believe flourished here in the later 2nd and early 1st millennia BC before meeting a tragic end at the hands of the Assyrians.

The author stands at the entrance to a stone-built tomb at Ghabrestan-i Topzawa, which has been dated to the late Achaemenid period.



ANCIENT MUSASIR

While RAP studies all time periods, the Late Bronze Age (1600–1200 BC) and early Iron Age (1200–330 BC) represent our main focus. This research interest grew out of my analysis and publication of aspects of the Penn Museum excavations at Hasanlu Tepe (1956–1977) in northwestern Iran. This famous early Iron Age site lies in the valley system just across the border from the RAP region, and the two areas exhibit similar cultural horizons. Many scholars believe that this archaeological culture in Iraqi Kurdistan formed the core of a kingdom called *Musasir* in contemporary Assyrian texts (see page 30). Hasanlu's socio-political affiliations and ethno-linguistic composition remain unclear, and it constituted a separate kingdom. The great foes of the Assyrians, the formidable Urartians of eastern Turkey and the Caucasus, referred to Musasir as *Ardini*. Particularly important in this region were the mountain passes linking the highlands of northwestern Iran to the Assyrian plain, and both Assyria and Urartu sought to control them. The scenic Rowanduz Gorge is by far the most famous of these passes with incredible vistas, caves, and waterfalls.

The most compelling evidence that the RAP study area was Musasir comes from two stone stelae erected by Urartian kings at the high

mountain pass of Kel-i Shin and near the modern village and stream bearing the name Topzawa. The stelae presumably lay along an ancient route linking Urartu to Assyria via Musasir and both inscriptions are concerned with the kingdom of Musasir and its ruler, king Urzana. Despite its neighbors' political designs, Musasir maintained relative independence as a buffer state between Urartu and Assyria. In part, the region's natural fortifications deterred invasion, but Musasir probably relied on divine protection as well. Musasir was home to the main temple of the god Haldi. The temple served as a transregional cult center, bestowing status and wealth on the little kingdom. Nevertheless, tragedy would eventually strike at the very heart of the realm.

SARGON'S EIGHTH CAMPAIGN

In 714 BC, the Neo-Assyrian king Sargon II conquered Musasir and sacked the Haldi temple at the end of his famous eighth campaign. The prevalent interpretation of Sargon's route into Musasir maintains his army surprised the mountain



Political conditions long prevented archaeologists from working in this rugged mountainous frontier zone where the borders of Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey, and Iran converge. Until recently, the Iraq-Jarmo Project of Robert Braidwood of the University of Chicago (1948–55) and the famous excavations by Ralph and Rose Solecki at the prehistoric sites at Shanidar (1951–60) were the only excavations in the area. *Map by Marshall Schurtz.*

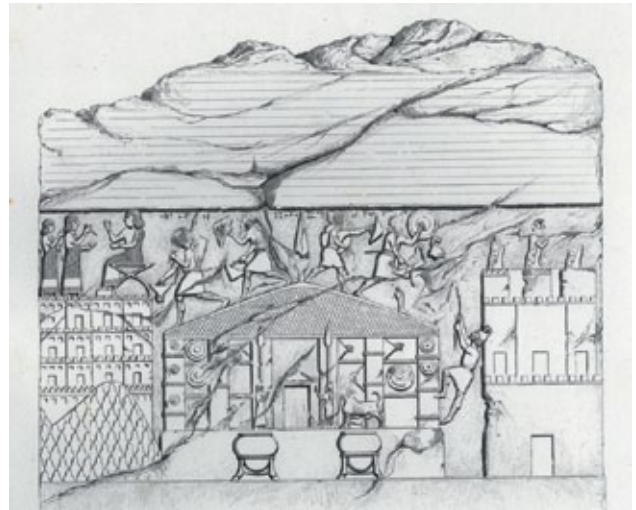


LEFT: Excavations at Gund-i Topzawa revealed well-preserved masonry buildings of the early Iron Age terraced into the hillside—similar to ancient Assyrian depictions of Musasir. The buildings were destroyed while still in use.

BELOW: Relief of the sack of the city of Musasir by Sargon's troops. Khorsabad, Palace of Sargon, Room XIII, slab 4. Botta, *Monument de Ninive* 2 pl. 141.

stronghold by entering from the east via the Kel-i Shin pass, descending down into the Topzawa valley to Sidekan, and sacking large numbers of settlements and the temple and palace. Sargon commemorated this achievement in pictures and text on stone bas-reliefs found in his palace at Khorsabad, and in an incredible cuneiform text that enumerates the astounding wealth his soldiers looted from the temple and kingdom. The Assyrians forcibly resettled large numbers of Musasir's inhabitants elsewhere and incorporated the region into their empire. Since we started RAP, the most common question we are asked is: "Have you found Musasir yet?" We have not definitively proven the RAP research area comprised Musasir, but after two seasons of fieldwork we have certainly unearthed compelling circumstantial evidence that we are on the right track.

While the area has provided few indigenous written records shedding light on the Bronze Age (3000–1200 BC) and early Iron Age (1200–330 BC), what little cuneiform exists from ancient Assyria and Urartu strongly suggests this area formed the core of Musasir or some other early Iron Age buffer state. Scholars have debated this identification since German researcher C.F. Lehmann-Haupt first advanced the theory in the early 20th century,



but archaeologists have seldom had the chance to test his hypothesis through fieldwork. In the early 1970s, a German team led by Rainer Michael Boehmer conducted a few days of important preliminary research, revealing early Iron Age occupation centered on modern Sidekan. Boehmer even found stone column bases in the little hamlet of Mudjesir hinting an early Iron Age temple lay beneath its agricultural fields and orchards. After two seasons, RAP has added greatly to our picture of ancient settlement in the region.

Excavations revealed a sequence of fortifications at the site.



Cuneiform tablet with an account of Sargon's campaign against Urartu and destruction of Musasir in 714 BC. AO 5372 (Louvre Museum). *Naissance de l'écriture* p. 199 no. 133.

SARGON'S MARCH: A NEW TRANSLATION

BY GRANT FRAME, ASSOCIATE CURATOR, BABYLONIAN SECTION

In the eighth year of his reign (714 BC), the king of Assyria, Sargon II (721–705 BC), led a campaign into the Zagros mountains in order to aid his vassal Ullusunu, the ruler of Mannea. He then turned north, invading the powerful kingdom of Urartu, whose ruler Rusâ (or Ursâ) had been giving trouble to Mannea. The exact route of Sargon's march is much debated, but he may well have gone all the way around Lake Urmiah. On the way back to Assyria, a lunar eclipse that occurred on October 24 was interpreted to mean that he should attack Musasir, an important religious center of the god Haldi. While most of his army continued on its way home, Sargon and 1,000 soldiers advanced on Musasir.

"I let the terrifying (war) cry of my troops resound [again]st that city (Musasir) like (the thunder of) the storm god...Its people, (even) old men (and) old women, climbed up onto the roofs of their houses, crying bitterly[...]. In order to save their live(s), they crawled around on all

fours...Because King Urzana, their ruler, had not respected the command of the god Ashur, but had (instead) thrown off the yoke of my overlordship and despised his position as a vassal to me, I planned to take the people of that city into captivity and I ordered the removal of the god Haldi,

RAP 2013–2014

The RAP research region contains diverse environmental zones ranging from precipitous gorges to high mountains and lush mountain valleys. We conduct research in all these areas to develop a complete profile of ancient lifeways. Today's residents practice highly productive farming in the valleys—fruit trees and grapes are a regional specialty—and herd cattle, sheep, and goats in the highlands. Our botanical and zoological studies conducted by zooarchaeologist Dr. Tina Greenfield (University of Cambridge/University of Manitoba) and archaeobotanists Dr. Alexia Smith and Lucas Proctor (University of Connecticut) tentatively show similar patterns in antiquity as well as the hunting of diverse wild game up to the early modern era.

Since the RAP research region is virtually unexplored, developing a regional chronology must be an immediate objective. To that end, RAP conducts excavations at the high mound of Gird-i Dasht located

at the center of the Soran Plain. This multi-period mound represents the remains of several millennia of continuous occupation from at least 2000 BC to the early modern era. Kyra Kaercher (Penn Museum) and Melissa Sharp (University of Cambridge) are developing a ceramic chronology based on the Gird-i Dasht results combined with other RAP excavations and material from archaeological surveys conducted by Marshall Schurtz (University of Pennsylvania). Excavations on the high mound in 2013 and 2014, supervised by Dr. William Hafford (Penn Museum), Dr. John MacGinnis (University of Cambridge), and assisted by Anashya Srinivasan and Danny Breegi (Boston University) revealed a long sequence of successive fortifications consistent with the interpretation that the site served as a fortress controlling the plain and access to one of the main outlets to the Rowanduz Gorge. This site function continued up to the Ottoman period (19th century AD). Excavations on the

(the god) on whom the land Urtu relied (for protection). Triumphantly, I had (Urzana) sit in front of his city gate as I led away into captivity his wife, his sons, his daughters, his people, (and) the members of his paternal family. I reckoned (them) together with 6,110 people, 12 *kūdanu*-mules, 380 donkeys, 525 oxen, (and) 1,235 sheep (and) goats, and brought (them all) inside the wall(s) of my camp..."

"I took (all these things) as booty, as well as many, countless (other) valuables of his, (and) this does not take into account the objects of gold, silver, tin, iron, bronze, ivory, ebony,

boxwood, and every other kind of wood that the troops of the gods Ashur (and) Marduk took in countless numbers as booty from the city, palace, and temple. I loaded the property of the palace of Urzana and of the god Haldi, together with his (Urzana's) many valuables that I had taken as booty from the city Musasir, on (the backs of) the massed troops of my extensive army and I had (them) convey (it) to Assyria. I considered the people of the district of the city Musasir to be among the people of Assyria and I imposed on them (the performance of) labor duty (and) corvée duty as if they were Assyrians."

"Rusâ heard (of this) and threw himself on the ground. He ripped his garments and bared his arms. He tore off his headdress, pulled out his hair, and beat his breast (literally: heart) with both (fists). He lay flat (on the ground), face down. His mood became angry and his temper burned (hot). Woeful lamentations were on his lips. I caused cries of mourning to be uttered throughout the entire land Urtu and established wailing in the land Na'iri for all future time."

(Selections from lines 343–349 and 405–414 of Sargon's Eighth Campaign text)

EDITOR'S NOTE: All the official inscriptions of Sargon II will be edited in a volume being prepared by Grant Frame. This will be the 5th volume of inscriptions to be published by the Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period, a research project directed by Dr. Frame that has received support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the University of Pennsylvania.

RAP conducted excavations at the mound of Gird-i Dasht.



low mound supervised by Dr. Richard Zettler and Katherine Burge (University of Pennsylvania) revealed some of the earliest periods of occupation at the site attested by painted and plain Khabur Ware ceramics of the Middle Bronze Age (2000–1600 BC). In 2014, a geomagnetic survey crew from Ludwig-Maximilians Universität headed by Dr. Jorg Fassbinder mapped large sections of the low mound, revealing the full extent of occupation and many interesting rectilinear anomalies that probably represent the outlines of buildings and streets.

Economic development can often run fast ahead of archaeology. In 2013, the Soran Department of Antiquities was alerted to the disturbance of a large number of archaeological sites—mostly cemeteries—caused by the widening of a road linking modern Sidekan to the Kel-i Shin Pass/Iranian border. In 2013, we conducted a survey along the long road cut and rescue excavations of a stone-built tomb of the late Achaemenid period at the site of Ghabrestan-i Topzawa. The tomb contained burials from two periods with over 20 individuals interred with ceramics, jewelry, and food offerings. Osteoarchaeologist Kathleen Downey (The Ohio State University) is studying the human remains from the tomb as well as other burials excavated by RAP.

Our survey of the road cut produced tantalizing evidence of several burned early Iron Age settlements near the original findspot of the Urartian Topzawa Stela that mentions Musasir. Radiocarbon dates from one of the largest burned sites, dubbed Gund-i Topzawa, indicate a construction date in the early 1st millennium BC. The pottery from this site suggests it was intentionally destroyed in the Iron III period, a date consistent with Sargon's conquest of Musasir. In 2014, we excavated Gund-i Topzawa and Jorg Fassbinder's team conducted geomagnetic surveys at early Iron Age sites in the surrounding area first documented by Rainer Michael Boehmer in the early 1970s.

MUSASIR LOCATED?

Our excavations at Gund-i Topzawa revealed multiple stages of well-preserved masonry buildings terraced into a hillside overlooking the Topzawa Valley and River below. These excavations were supervised by Darren Ashby (University of Pennsylvania), Dr. Conrad Christian Piller (Ludwig-Maximilians Universität), and Dr. John MacGinnis (University of Cambridge) with the expert assistance of Hardy Maaß (Ludwig-Maximilians Universität), Daniel Patterson (University of Pennsylvania), and our capable



In addition to RAP's research objectives, our program is also charged with conducting rescue excavations and site assessments with the Soran Department of Antiquities, headed by Abdulwahhab Suleiman. Allison Cuneo (Boston University) works closely with the Soran Directorate in her ongoing study of cultural heritage management practices and policy in Iraqi Kurdistan. The rapid pace of development in Kurdistan, driven by oil exploration and tourism, jeopardizes many

archaeological sites. In 2013, RAP conducted emergency excavations and site assessments at a number of locations. We completed one of the more interesting rescue projects at the Islamic site of Qalat Lokhan near modern Rowanduz. Here we completed test excavations and the mapping of a masonry structure that local history associates with Mir Mohammad, the last ruler of an independent Kurdish state, the Sorani Emirate, that thrived here from AD 1530 to 1835 before being

absorbed into the Ottoman Empire. Other rescue excavations and site assessments were completed at the early 6th millennium BC Halaf farming village of Banahilk where house construction in a suburb of Soran threatens the archaeological remains. RAP also documented the archaeological deposits of a burned village of the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods in modern Sidekan disturbed by the construction of a new bank building for the town.

LEFT TO RIGHT: A masonry structure is surveyed at the Islamic site of Qalat Lokhan. One of several rescue excavations conducted at Banahilk. Archaeological remains can be seen just above the trench. The archaeological remains of an ancient burned village (notice the black layer on the cut) were exposed during the construction of a new building.

government representative, Dlshad Mustapha. Our 2014 excavations focused on the lowest terrace of this building complex where we uncovered the well-preserved remains of kitchens and storage areas. The terraced architectural methods resemble depictions of Musasirian architecture on Sargon's Khorsabad palace relief (see page 29). The excavated buildings were destroyed by fire while still in use based on the numbers of *in situ* ceramic vessels and other artifacts found. Our surveys show other sites along the Topzawa River were similarly destroyed at this time, compelling circumstantial evidence of Sargon's campaign.

Jorg Fassbinder's geomagnetic survey team likewise produced tantalizing results. At the hilltop early Iron Age fortress of Qalat Mudjesir, their mapping produced detailed

plans of the underlying buildings. Even more exciting, in the village of Mudjesir the surveys produced signs of a monumental structure in the area where Boehmer and other archaeologists—key among them Kurdish archaeologists Dlshad Zamua and Abdulwahhab Suleiman—have tentatively located the Haldi temple based on scatters of early Iron Age pottery and stone column bases. Have we located the position of the Haldi temple? Only future excavation seasons will produce conclusive results, but we seem close to pinpointing the elusive kingdom of Musasir. ●

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