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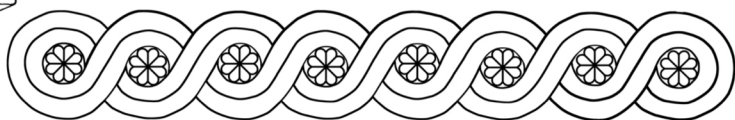
Volume 2

Field Reports

Islamic archaeology



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Foreword to the Section “Field Reports”

Nicolò Marchetti, Francesca Cavaliere, Claudia D’Orazio, Gabriele Giacosa
and Eleonora Mariani

Field reports generally represent the largest relative share of papers at the ICAANE. Reassessments of old excavations fall in this category as well. In Bologna, 95 papers were presented in four parallel sessions and 49 of them are published here. They have been simply arranged according to the alphabetic order of first authors (with the exception of course of the keynote paper, opening this section). They attest to a diversity of agencies, methods, perspectives and urgencies which represent a singular asset of our field.

While new digital architectures of knowledge are about to deeply transform the ways of our scientific dissemination, these reports do supply in the meanwhile loads of new information on near eastern sites, as well as on neighbouring areas, which are all too often insufficiently considered in our discussions.

Field Reports

The Italian Archaeological Expedition in the Erbil Plain (Kurdistan Region of Iraq). A Summary of Four Seasons of Excavations at Helawa (2016-2019)

Luca Peyronel¹

Abstract

This article presents an overview of the evidence obtained at Helawa, one of two sites investigated by the Italian Archaeological Expedition in the Erbil Plain (MAIPE). It is an irregular 22 m high mound lying in a bend of a watercourse, with a steep slope to the south and west, and two sloping extensions to the north and east, covering an area of about 10 ha.

Since 2016, the University of Milan is carrying out excavations at two archaeological sites – Helawa and Aliawa – located in the south-western Erbil floodplain, *c.* 25 km south-west of the modern town of Erbil (Peyronel *et al.* 2019; Peyronel and Vacca 2020a; 2020b).² The investigated sites lie on the meanders of water courses related with the southern branch of the Kordara, one of the main rivers forming the plain's drainage system, which is part of the large hydrographic system of the Upper and Lower Zabs, in the eastern Tigridian region.

After an intensive survey carried out in 2013 and 2015 (Peyronel and Vacca 2015; 2020a: 318-320; Peyronel, Vacca and Zenoni 2016), a more articulated geo-archaeological project began in 2019, mapping the area between the sites to document the evolution of the landscape during the Holocene. In the same year, excavations at Aliawa also started, with the opening of a trench (Operation A) on the lower slope of the mound, to check and refine

1 University of Milan.

2 The MAIPE project is headed by the Author and is directed on the field by Agnese Vacca. The MAIPE team involved in the archaeological excavations at Helawa included the following members: S. Busnelli (archaeologist), A. Del Vecchio (student), N. Donati (archaeologist), L. Forti (geo-archaeologist), E. Ginoli (archaeologist and GIS expert), C. Minniti (bio-archaeologist), D. Moscone (archaeologist, lithic expert), Y. Naime (student), V. Oselini (archaeologist, area supervisor), R. Perego (bio-archaeologist), M. Perri (archaeologist and topographer), A. Pezzotta (student), N. Pizzingrilli (archaeologist), S. Rosso (student), P. Stucchi (archaeologist), M. Terzoli (archaeologist), C. Tomaini (conservator), A. Zerboni (geo-archaeologist). The MAIPE expedition is supported by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the Italian Ministry of University and Research (PRIN program) and the University of Milan. Our sincere gratitude goes to the General Director of Antiquities of the Kurdish Regional Government, Kak Kaifi Mustafa Ali, to the Former General Director of Antiquities, Kak Abubaker Othman Zengin (Mala Awat), and to the Director of Antiquities of the Erbil Governorate, Kak Nader Babakr Mohammed for granting the permit to investigate the Helawa and Aliawa sites and for their support throughout. MAIPE is greatly indebted to the colleagues and the representatives of the General Directorate of Antiquities of the Kurdistan Regional Government, the Erbil Directorate of Antiquities, and the Erbil Civilization Museum, for their assistance during our stay in Erbil. We also sincerely thank the Italian Embassy in Baghdad and the Italian Consulate in Erbil for the constant help and assistance during the period of fieldwork in Iraq. All images here are the copyright of MAIPE.

the settlement sequence elaborated on the base of surface materials (Oselini and Peyronel forthcoming). The site was continuously occupied during the whole Bronze Age, reaching its maximum extension in the Middle Bronze, when it was a 25-ha town, and maintained a 20-ha size during the following Late Bronze Age (Ur *et al.* 2021).

After four seasons of fieldwork at Helawa (2016-2019) a long and uninterrupted sequence of building phases along the slope of the mound, spanning from the 6th to the beginning of the 4th millennium BC (Step Trench B, Operation B1), and an occupation atop the mound and in the eastern lower side, mainly dated to the 16th century BC (Operations A and D), have been brought to light (Fig. 1).

Along the steep southern slope, a 50 m long trench have been excavated, with a series of occupational phases including Late Halaf and Ubaid architectural levels (Helawa II-III) and a long sequence dating from the Late Chalcolithic (hereafter LC) 1 to the transitional LC 2-3 period (Helawa IVA-C), the latter consisting of more than 10 m of superimposed structures with associated deposits. After a long abandonment, which lasted more than two millennia, the site was resettled for a short period, between the end of the Middle Bronze Age and the Late Bronze I (Peyronel *et al.* 2019: 10-14, fig. 11).

The earliest phases of occupation were singled out in the lower part of the trench (squares 8-9) at the end of the 2019 season. Both phases are related to the Late Halaf period (Phases 8-9, c. 5500-5300/5200 BC) and consisted of two architectural levels of domestic structures. In the later one a slightly curvilinear wall delimited a space (L.263) equipped with a cobblestone platform (I.253) of elongated grey and white pebbles, fixed edgeways and horizontally, and a fireplace (Fig. 2). The earlier phase is associated with a floor of beaten earth (L.259), in which a tannur (T.252) and a small circular hearth are set.

Pottery materials retrieved in the filling layers mainly consist of monochrome or bi-chrome painted and non-painted fine wares and can be related to the Late Halaf period. The most attested shapes are deep bowls with sinuous profiles, deep bowls with curved walls decorated with hoop and band motifs, cups with straight walls which find close comparisons in the Hamrin (Tell Hassan), at Yarim Tepe II, and Arpachiyah (TT 7-6). Decorations are varied and include checkerboard designs, net and chain motifs, bands and V-shaped patterns which recur in Halaf assemblages both in the Erbil Plain and in the surrounding regions from the Eski Mosul to the Hamrin.

The one-year interruption of fieldwork in 2020 due to the pandemic prevented to ascertain the thickness of the Halaf occupation at Helawa and eventually to reach an earlier settlement phase, whose presence is indicated at the site by a handful of Hassuna and Samarra pottery sherds collected from the surface (Peyronel and Vacca 2015: fig. 9; Peyronel, Vacca and Zenoni 2016: 313, fig. 5).

The Ubaid period (Helawa III) is documented in squares B5-7 directly above the Late Halaf occupation and is characterized by two distinct architectural levels (Peyronel *et al.* 2019: 36-41). In the earliest one a series of small square rooms probably devoted to storage of primary products are built on sloping terraces and underwent at least two rebuilding phases (Phases 7A-B). All the structures seem to have been emptied and ultimately levelled for the construction of a pottery workshop in the succeeding Phase 6B. The latter is documented by a large, chambered kiln (K.119) equipped with installations (Fig. 3). Its use is testified by vitrified plastered clay pieces, pottery slags and ashes retrieved collapsed in the

combustion chamber. The installation was abandoned at the end of the period, and filled with refuse debris rich in animal bones, pottery sherds and small finds (Phase 6A).

Vegetal and animal remains collected from the fillings offer a glimpse of natural resources exploitation at the settlement during the final phase of the Ubaid period. The faunal assemblage is dominated by domesticated species, with the absolute predominance of sheep and goat (mainly adult individuals), followed by cattle, while pig is represented by few remains of individuals killed before maturity. Among wild animals, gazelle, wild ass or onager, roe deer and hare occurred in the analysed sample (Peyronel *et al.* 2019: 85-86, fig.102). The vegetal remains include cereal crops (*barley*, emmer and einkorn) and cultivated legumes (lentils, common pea, bitter vetch, and a single possible grass pea seed) (Peyronel *et al.* 2019: 91-92, fig. 110).

The ceramic assemblage, mainly consisting in materials retrieved in the later phase, is characterized by painted simple ware in a high percentage, which find comparisons with other Upper Mesopotamian sites, clearly indicating that the Erbil plain was part of the broader Northern Ubaid phenomenon. The most recurring types, such as bell-shaped bowls, hole-mouth jars, and U-shaped urns, display dark monochrome painted decoration with bands under the inner rims or geometric motifs such as semi-circles, triangles and bands on the outside. The pottery shows general features (use of the wheel, buff pastes, surface finishing treatments, geometric painted decorations) that belong to the general Northern Ubaid repertoire, although it attests also local characters, such as specific decorative motifs that appear to be frequent in the Erbil and Makhmur sites (Qalinj Agha, Surezha and Tell Nader), which is allowing to define a regional cultural province (Peyronel *et al.* 2019: 41-42, fig. 47).

As it is in the previous phase, the LC 1 contexts attest a multiple craft's working area (Helawa IVA, Phase 5). The presence of pottery production is suggested by a series of layers of ashes and reddish clay with kiln by-products, misfired sherds and ring scrapers that should be the results of discarded fillings of kiln/s located in the very proximity of the excavations. Immediately to the east, an obsidian-knapping atelier is identified by a beaten reddish clay surface (SU B.60) associated with hundreds of obsidian flakes, semi-finished blades and micro-blades, and tools (Peyronel *et al.* 2019: 78-80, figs. 94-96).

The LC1 pottery horizon shows similar trends to those observed on several sites across Northern Mesopotamia at the transition between the Ubaid and the Late Chalcolithic: on one hand a sharp drop in painted productions and, on the other, the widespread introduction of chaff-tempered fabrics, together with mass-produced vessels (Vacca and Peyronel 2022). Painted bands and Ubaid-derived geometric decoration decreased but continued to be attested in the assemblage, together with comb incised decorations, which became now more common. The presence of Dalma Ware at Helawa and in the nearby site of Surezha suggests strong interactions also with the Zagros region (Minc, Alden and Stein 2019; Alden *et al.* 2021).

The LC 2 corresponds to the period of maximum site's growth (Helawa IVB, the site probably reached 10 ha) and intensive building activity (Peyronel and Vacca 2020b). Structures of different functions were built directly one over the others along the slope of the mound, showing frequent re-definitions of the occupation in this settlement's sector. The earliest LC 2 phase is marked by the foundation of an imposing building constructed on terraces over the LC 1 remains (Phase 4). It is composed of at least six rooms, of which only two were excavated (L.26, L.30), with carefully made mud-brick walls and plastered floors (Peyronel *et al.* 2019: 28-30, fig. 29; Vacca and Peyronel 2022). The building ended in a conflagration,

and the collapsed walls sealed pottery vessels and objects *in situ*. After the destruction the building was abandoned and always during the LC 2, it was replaced by a stockpiling and food storage area (Phase 3), equipped with processing facilities and circular silos lined with mudbricks (S.13, S.15) and filled with ashy soil rich in carbonized cereals. The storage complex has three sub-phases of use and was terraced by a retaining wall to the south and paved with a clayey layer covered by a layer with charred vegetal remains and charcoals (Fig. 4). The archaeobotanical analysis of the samples from this stratigraphic unit (SU B.34) and from S.15 fillings has shown the predominance of barley, in addition to a small percentage of emmer and some sporadic finds of einkorn. Remains of emmer and einkorn (Peyronel *et al.* 2019: 93, figs. 111-112, 115; see also Minniti *et al.* in volume 1). AMS radiocarbon determinations obtained from barley seeds indicated the installation should be dated to the last two centuries of the 5th millennium BC (LTL-17210A, 5289±45 BP).

The overall LC 2 ceramic horizon is very similar during both phases and shows traits of regionalization, but at the same time attests a close relationship with the neighboring areas and especially with the Nineveh region, as testified by the occurrence of painted 'blob' decorations and also by the presence of specialized fine wares, such as the Gawra impressed ware (Gut 2002).

The latest LC occupation is documented both in Step Trench B and Operation B1 on the top of the mound. A large building (Building 1) discovered in 2018 might be dated to the very end of the LC 2 and early LC 3 period (Peyronel and Vacca 2020b). A radiocarbon date from charred seeds collected from the filling of room L.5, corresponds to calibrated ranges within 4000-3800 BC (LTL-17207A, 5137±45 BP). The building was partially destroyed by a fire and after the burning event a squatter occupation represented the last LC phase before the definitive abandonment. It is documented by hearths, installations, fancy structures and by some child burials in pit.

Building 1 consists in a large rectangular hall (L.232) with a plastered floor and a circular hearth (I.449), flanked by a row of rooms of different sizes excavated on its southern side (L.6, L.240, L.241, L.236, L.443), while to the west it is delimited by an outdoor area (L.442) paved with pebbles and pottery sherds (Fig. 5). The plan would be tripartite, with another row of rooms extending to the north, below the structures of the 2nd millennium BC, according to a well-known typology attested in several LC settlements in Northern Mesopotamia and north-eastern Syria (e.g. at Qalinj Agha, Gawra, Brak, Grai Resh, Hamoukar, Feres es-Sharqi) (Butterlin 2018).

Several container sealings with stamp seal impressions represent the most interesting finds in the building (Peyronel *et al.* 2019: 49-52, figs. 58-63; Peyronel and Vacca 2020b: 93, figs. 11-12). The cretulae were concentrated in the corner-room L.5 and in the central hall, and were sealed with square, circular or lenticular stamp seals depicting animals, plants, and geometric motifs. Their backs show impressions of textiles, baskets and other perishable containers, while no jar- or door-sealings have been identified in so far. Helawa adds important new evidence on the diffusion of stamp seals and sealing practices in Northern Mesopotamia during the Late Chalcolithic period. The Helawa glyptic imagery belongs to an interregional glyptic style elaborated in the LC 2-3 and is very similar to the figurative repertoire of the Gawra IX-VIII sealings, although it also shares elements attested in exemplars from Brak, Hamoukar, Hacinebi, Arslantepe (Pittman 2001).

The trend toward pottery homogenisation continues in this phase and is reflected in a more specialized and standardized production. Beside several lingering types and wares of LC 2 tradition, the assemblage is characterized by the introduction of new types, such as deep carinated cups and cannon spouted jars. Grey Ware becomes common, with a limited number of shapes, such as large carinated and beaded rim bowls and hole-mouth club-headed jars, completely absent in the previous phases, and comparable with the repertoire from Middle Ninevite 3 and Gawra VIII (Peyronel and Vacca 2020b: 95-101).

After a long period of abandonment, the top of the mound was reoccupied at the end of the MBA and during the LB I. Excavations in Operation A documented the presence of a building, probably a large residence, refurbished several times. The sector excavated includes four rectangular rooms (L.411, L.415, L.416 and L.425), some of which are equipped with processing food installations (Fig. 6). A wide open space, probably a courtyard (L.432), with two tannur and a plastered installation has been partially excavated to the north. A large amount of pottery has been retrieved crushed on its floor, including preservation jars, kraters, goblets and bowls.

The 2nd millennium occupation extended over the whole site as clearly indicated by the ubiquitous presence of MB-LB pottery on the surface (Peyronel, Vacca and Zenoni 2016: 316, fig. 7; Oselini 2020). In Operation D, located to the east of the mound, a series of buildings with mud-brick structures and installations, characterized by several refurbishments, additions and changes have been excavated in 2016-2018. In the earliest phase a multifunctional building complex with storage facilities and a food processing sector, including a battery of tannur, have been brought to light (Peyronel *et al.* 2019: 56-64). It is composed by two wings: to the south-west a space delimited by a curvilinear mudbrick wall is equipped with three circular tannur (T.91, T.92 and T.93) separated by thin partition walls, and to the north-east a sector with two large rectangular rooms (L.175, L.358). Samples collected from the filling layers in the tannur were rich in charred seeds and charcoals. The main cereal crops recovered are barley, emmer, and free-threshing wheats in almost equal proportions (Peyronel *et al.* 2019: 93, figs. 113-114).

Pottery associated with the buildings in Operations A and D can be dated to the end of the MBA and to LB I (16th-15th centuries BC). The main ceramic types include Late Khabur Ware goblets, hemispherical bowls with rounded or triangular rims, deep and slightly carinated bowls, bottles or flasks with globular body, small to medium-size jars with thinned rim, big jars or vats often coated with bitumen and decorated by incised wavy and horizontal lines under the square rim, and pie-crust pot-stands (Oselini and Peyronel forthcoming).

The MAIPE excavations at Helawa are providing useful data to build up a reliable stratified sequence for the pre- and proto-historic periods, to study the emergence of local socio-economic complexity especially during the crucial LC 2 phase and to shed light on a short-period occupation dating at the transition between the MBA and the LBA.

During the long LC 1-3 period it seems clear that the local community gradually developed in complexity without any apparent break with the earlier Halaf and Ubaid-related villages. Helawa also experienced intense interconnectivity, testified by the circulation of common types of pottery, obsidian and other precious raw materials, the adoption of common commodity branding and control practices (container sealings) and use of glyptic sharing a similar repertoire of images over a large area including Northern Mesopotamia, the Jazira and south-eastern Anatolia. However, the supra-regional network of interactions was ultimately

embedded in a composite pattern of social, economic and cultural behaviors, revealed by differences in local pottery horizons, settlement organization, and resource exploitation.

While Helawa shows an uninterrupted occupation during the LC period and according to data from the EPAS survey the plain was densely settled during the second half of the 5th millennium BC, there is evidence that this occupation was unstable (Peyronel and Vacca 2020b). Firstly, rebuilding operations, terracing interventions and functional changes suggest frequent re-organization of the settlement: the Ubaid-LC sequence along the southern slope has revealed workplaces (Phases 6 and 5), residential buildings (Phases 4 and 2), and storage areas with silos (Phase 3). Secondly, we have clear indications of the destruction and conflagrations that put an end to Phases 2, 3 and 4.

A similar situation has been observed at Tepe Gawra, where the period XIIA and VIII settlements suffered conflagrations, possibly resulting from violent conflicts (Butterlin 2018: 270-279). Although a much larger area has been excavated at Gawra than at Helawa, the evidence seems to point to the instability of the LC communities at both sites. This did not result in the interruption of occupation, but rather in changes in the settlement's spatial composition and use. Only at the end of the LC 2, or more probably at the very beginning of the LC 3 (c. 3800 BC?), after the destruction of Buildings 1 and 2 and a short-lived quarter re-occupation, Halawa was definitively abandoned, remaining unsettled until the late Middle Bronze Age. In the Erbil Plain other settlements were also abandoned roughly in the same period (Tell Nader, Qalinj Agha) and a drop in overall occupation during the LC 3 has been evidenced by the EPAS survey – in contrast to dense occupation in the following LC 4-5, marked by the appearance of Uruk assemblages (Ur *et al.* 2021). More archaeological investigation on LC sites is needed, since the lack of stratified complete LC sequences prevents at the moment to evaluate the survey data (Surezha is the only site with ongoing excavations which is occupied during the whole LC period, although the LC 4-5 phases are attested only by surface finds; Stein and Alizadeh 2014).

The history of the Erbil plain during the following Bronze Age periods is better documented by on-going excavations at sites such as Kurd Qaburstan, Aliawa, Bash Tape, Qasr Shemamoq. However, Helawa is offering the unique opportunity to shed light on a small rural settlement with a short-lived occupation, without substantial later phases, dated to the crucial period at the transition between the MBA and the LBA, at the rise of the Mittani power (Osellini and Peyronel forthcoming). The evidence brought to light in so far seems to indicate the presence of a large building atop the mound, probably the residence of some high-ranking person (Operation A) and a quarter of houses with production facilities in the lower eastern part of the settlement (Operation D). Thus, the MAIPE expedition is carrying out a multidisciplinary project that has already allowed outlining the development of human occupation at Helawa and Aliawa in the south-western Erbil plain. These first results were possible also thanks to the international collaborative environment of archaeological research in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, supported by the farsighted cultural heritage policy of the national institutions, and by a strong involvement of the local communities.

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Helawa

Kurdistan Region of Iraq
Topographic Map
2019

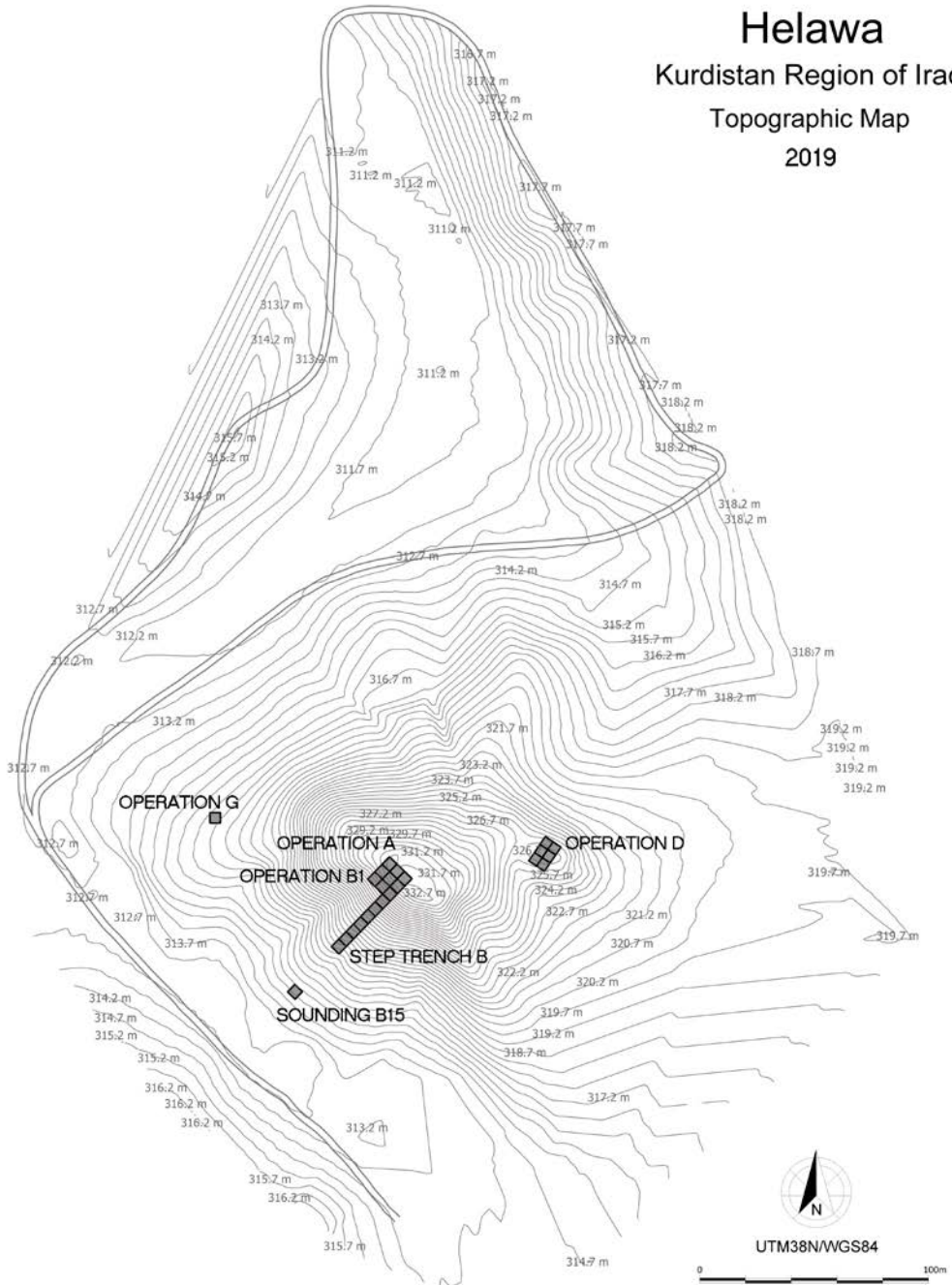


Fig. 1: Topographic map of Helawa with indication of the excavated areas



Fig. 2: Late Halaf structures (Phase 8) – Step Trench B

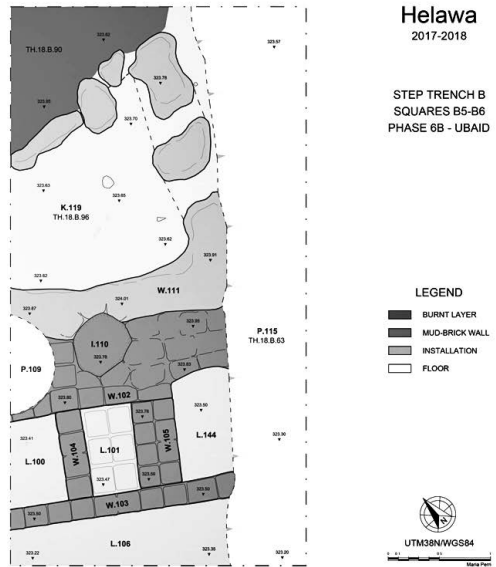


Fig. 3: Late Ubaid kiln (Phase 6B) – Step Trench B

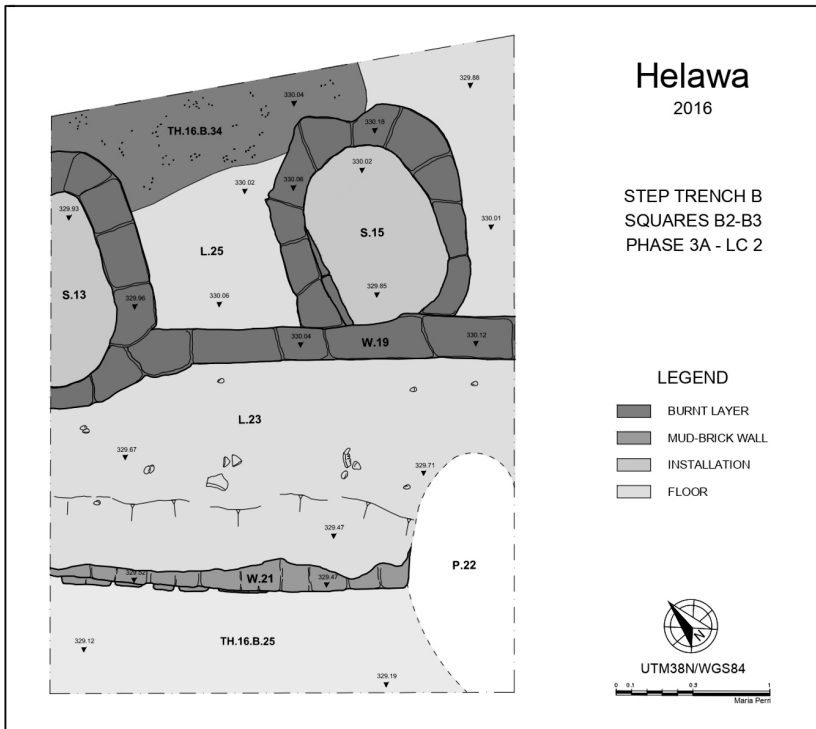
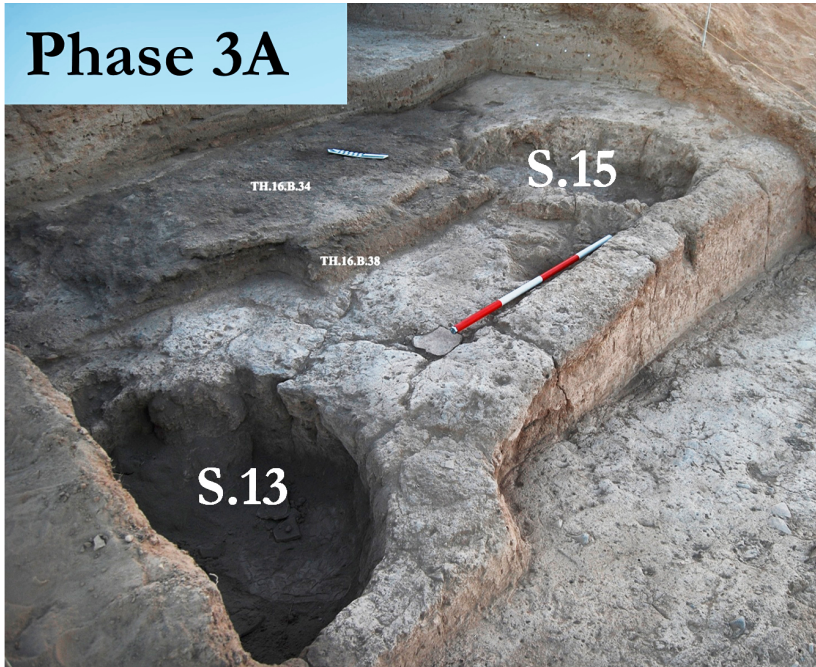


Fig. 4: Late Chalcolithic 2 Silos (Phase 3) – Step Trench B

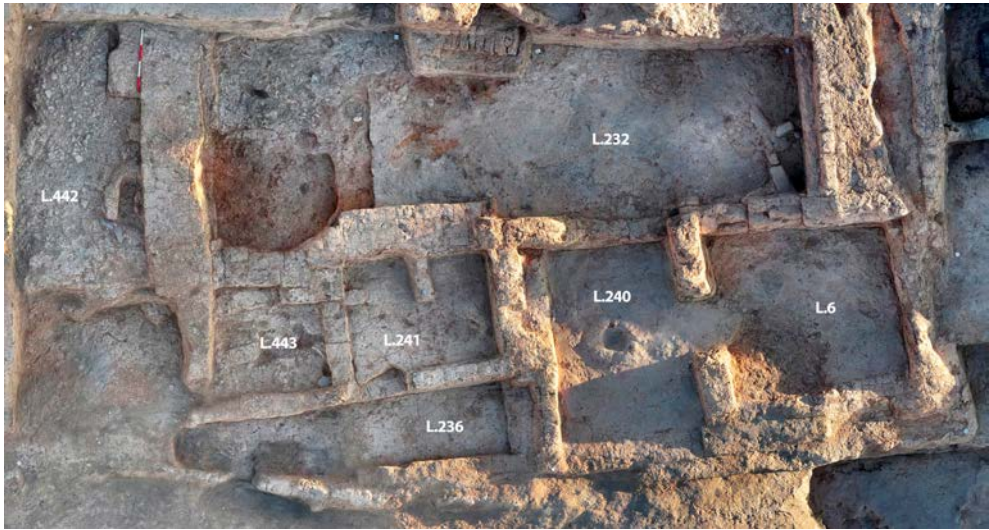


Fig. 5: Late Chalcolithic 2/3 Building 1 in Operation B1



Fig. 6: Late Bronze I Building in Operation A

