

Stations of the Ottoman Period in Iraqi Kurdistan: Preliminary Results from the Bazhera Archaeological Project

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Abstract In 2023, an archaeological research project was initiated by the University of Udine, in cooperation with the Dohuk Directorate of Antiquities and Heritage of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, on the site of Bazhera, on the eastern bank of the Nahr al-Khazir, in the Akre district. The site consists of a partially standing building, which would have played a role in the communication system of the region during the late Islamic period, as one of the stations in support of travellers. The main objective of the project is to reconstruct the functioning of this structure, its material culture and its relationship with other archaeological remains identified on the settlement and with the surrounding landscape, in order to provide new data regarding land management and protection of a frontier region of the Ottoman empire which has been neglected by archaeological research.

Keywords Ottoman archaeology. Ottoman material culture. Ottoman stations. Khans and routes of the Islamic world. Late Islamic Kurdistan.

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1 Towards an Archaeology of the Ottoman Period in Iraqi Kurdistan (VV)

The Kurdistan region of northern Iraq is undergoing a period of increasing archaeological research in an effort to uncover the stages of human occupation and land use over the centuries.¹ While research into the Islamic period has been a marginal field of archaeological investigation for many years, in the Iraqi area as in other regions of the Islamic world, thanks to this recent archaeological research, new data have emerged regarding settlement history during the Islamic period (from the seventh to twentieth centuries).² In the region on the eastern bank of the River Tigris, in the provinces of Ninawa (*al-Maw-sil*) and Dohuk, bounded by the Zagros mountain range, the University of Udine's *Land of Nineveh Archaeological Project* has identified around 400 sites dating to this period, attesting an intense occupation consisting of rural settlements and installations for land-use and land-management (Tonghini, Vezzoli 2020; Tonghini, Usta 2021; Usta, Tonghini 2023).³ Notwithstanding the growing interest in this period, regarding not only to the material evidence but also the analysis of written sources,⁴ much still needs to be done to better understand the nature of settlements, the material culture, and the relationship

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1 The article by Kopanias, MacGinnis and Ur (2015) provided a first discussion of this new season of investigations in the region, with an annotated list of archaeological projects, emphasising the richness of the archaeological landscape from the Palaeolithic up to recent times. Archaeological activities in the region have since been further increased; no less than 11 Italian archaeological projects were supported by the Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale in 2023, which make an important contribution to our knowledge of the history of this region and the enhancement of its heritage (*"L'archeologia italiana nel mondo"* 2023, 74-85).

2 Several studies have focused on examining settlement distribution, providing more precise dating (when possible) within the broad chronological span of the Islamic period, and an initial picture with regard to material culture - and more specifically, local and imported pottery productions (Nováček et al. 2016; Tonghini, Vezzoli 2020; Ahmad, Renette 2023).

3 The project of the University of Udine *Land of Nineveh Archaeological Project* (LoN-AP) started in 2012 under the direction of Prof. Daniele Morandi Bonacossi; it is a wide-ranging multidisciplinary research project which aims at studying the archaeological landscape of the region of Dohuk and at recording, conserving and promoting the heritage of this region, from prehistory to the Islamic era (Morandi Bonacossi, Iamoni 2015). <http://www.terradinive.com/>.

4 An example is the project *Land Use, Settlement Patterns and River Irrigation in the Upper Mesopotamia in the 16th Cent.: The Case of Mosul* by Dr Onur Usta (Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University), funded by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung Research Grant.

with the territory and surrounding regions. Documentary references, especially for pottery finds, are therefore still incomplete, posing an obstacle to the identification and interpretation of the evidence for this long period. The later phases of the region's history in particular, from its annexation to the Ottoman empire until modern times, have often remained marginal in archaeological studies, despite the fact that preliminary data from surveys provide evidence of intense and varied occupation.⁵ In an attempt to fill these gaps, a new group of studies on the Ottoman period is getting under way,⁶ one of which is the project presented here.

The region of Kurdistan was annexed to the Ottoman empire in the early sixteenth century. The Ottomans found a territory in difficulty with respect to resource and land management; this was initiated by the Mongol invasions in the second half of the thirteenth century and aggravated by the Timurid invasion in the early fifteenth century. From the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, this area constituted the border with the Safavid empire, the boundaries of which were sometimes ambiguous due to constant clashes between the two powers over these territories. The region has been occupied for centuries by Kurdish tribes who, depending on their interests in the territory, have supported one power or the other, going so far as to gain autonomy to control the territories around the Zagros mountains (Kaya 2022, 26).

The Battle of Chardiran (in present-day Iran) in 1514 marked the final seizure of eastern Anatolia by the Ottoman army. The Ottomans never directly and rigidly controlled this peripheral region and delegated management of the territories to Kurdish tribal leaders. In Mosul, they appointed a governor-general (*beylerbeyi*), while Kurdish families around the areas of Kirkuk and Sulaymaniya were put in charge of tax collection and the protection of the Iranian frontier.

⁵ Usta and Tonghini's study of the watermills (2023) revealed several aspects on the political and socio-economic management of water in the Mosul region and its hinterland in the late Islamic period. Work on settlement during the Islamic period in the LoNAP area is currently being published; it also proposes a new interpretation of the region's characteristics in the late Islamic period.

⁶ Among the projects aimed at an in-depth study of this period is the *Zeyd Archaeological Project* (ZAP). In 2022, the University Ca' Foscari of Venice started a project on the site of Tell Zeyd (under the direction of Prof. Cristina Tonghini), which constitutes an extraordinary observatory for studying the long-term settlement features, resource management and material culture of the area on the long period, between the seventh and nineteenth centuries. The first excavation campaign uncovered a workshop for the production of smoking pipes from the Ottoman period; investigation of the workshop area and adjoining spaces is providing for the first time in the region a chrono-typology for ceramic productions of the late Islamic period. An article will appear soon on the first season of excavation and preliminary results that emerged from the discovery of the workshop, by Tonghini et al. 2023. For a presentation of the project's objectives, activities and first results see <https://www.zeydarchaeologicalproject.net/>.

Like other outlying provinces of the empire, Iraq was not fully integrated into the Ottoman administrative system, thus remaining free from strict control by the central government (Çetinsaya 2009, 273). This situation was confirmed even after the Zohab Treaty of 1639, signed to settle border disputes between the Safavids and the Ottomans, which favoured the increased autonomy of local Kurdish dynasties, especially in the Zagros mountains region (Kaya 2022, 27; Ateş 2013, 96-100).

1.1 Stations and Outposts of the Ottoman Period: An Overview of the Archaeological Evidence

Archaeological evidence of later periods in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, especially from non-urban contexts, is rare and scarcely studied; among this, khans and other outposts for the protection of travellers, located in strategic areas for the control of the main routes, are certainly clear material evidence of the complex territorial management policy of this border region of the Ottoman empire.

Despite the not always stable situation of the Kurdistan region during the late Islamic period, on the border between these great empires, the area included between the Tigris in the west and the Zagros mountains in the east was traversed by several communication routes that branched off in a north-south and east-west direction. In this region, military actions intersected with commercial activities along major routes and merchants and pilgrims travelled along the same routes used by the two armies. The trade routes that departed from Baghdad in the direction of Mosul, then continuing to Diyarbakir and finally Aleppo, were marked by the presence of khans and forts that functioned as stopover stations (Peacock 2009, 2), as also recounted by Ottoman travellers, such as Matrakçı Nasuh (sixteenth century) and Eviliya Çelebi (seventeenth century) (Kale 2017, 132-3).

In the more distant frontier territories, the Ottomans delegated the construction of bases that protected borders and principal roads to local chiefs, without any financial support and without providing any particular guidance on how to build them. For this reason, in these regions, it is difficult to find regularity and continuity of construction (building techniques and materials) of the forts and stations; a different situation appears instead in urban centres or those with greater strategic importance for the control of borders and movement of people and armies (Peacock 2009, 19-20).

At the site of Bazhera (described in the following section, 2. The Bazhera Archaeological Project), which was the object of an initial archaeological investigation in 2023 with survey and excavation activities, the remains of a structure still visible today above ground may in fact provide a good example of a regional khan. This structure



Figure 1 Aerial view of the site of Bazhera. Credits: LoNAP. © A. Savioli

consists of an irregular square-shaped building with buttresses that may have served as a road station and point of control of the area between the Navkur plain (and the River Al-Khazir basin), to the south, and the access to the Zagros mountains, to the north [figs 1-2].

While these kinds of shelter structures have been studied in detail in other chronological and geographical contexts, for example in works on medieval caravanserais in the Levant and Middle East region (Önge 2007; Cytryn-Silverman 2010) or on Ottoman-era stations on the *hajj* route (Petersen 2008), this region of northern Iraq has not been investigated so far. Except for study and valorisation projects concerning a few khans in urban settings,⁷ no archaeological study has so far been carried out to determine how they functioned, who they housed, and how they fit into the management framework of borders, major trade routes and land or water resources during the late Islamic period. Nevertheless, various evidence confirms the presence of stations and territorial protection or control buildings,

⁷ An international project focused on the restoration and valorisation of the architectural heritage of late Islamic Koya also included the study of urban commercial buildings dating to the nineteenth century (*qaysariya*, a covered, enclosed commercial building). Other similar structures are attested in other main centres of Northern Iraq, such as Erbil, Sulaymaniya, Mosul, Kirkuk, Kifri, some of which are still in use. <http://koyaheritage.com/>.



Figure 2 Bazhera and the locations mentioned in the text

built in the late Islamic period in the region.⁸ Written sources also confirm this presence.⁹ Some of these structures appear today in isolated contexts, far from urban centres or main villages, but always located in strategic areas, from the point of view of land management [fig. 2]. Only a few of them have been identified and partially studied. To the east of the Yazidi shrine of Lalish, located in Sheikhan district in Nineveh Governorate, about 30 km west of Bazhera, stands a station (19.5 m × 9.5 m), the foundation or dating of which is uncertain, but generally associated with the early Ottoman period. It is rectangular in shape, with a domed central room, considered to be associated with the accommodation of visitors to the shrine.¹⁰

Following the direction of the mountains, south of Koya – a city located about 50 km east of Erbil, along the road that connects this centre with Klkesimaq, Dukan and Sulaymaniya – there is an inn, outside of the urban area. It is rectangular in shape (16 m × 4.5 m), with domed rooms and a large space supported by columns, built of stone, mud and plaster. Within the city of Koya itself is located another large caravanserai (Mahmud Agha Khan); it is a khan with two

⁸ Further elements, and especially archaeological investigations, are needed to clarify the dating of many of these buildings.

⁹ In the *vilâyet* (administrative division) of Mosul, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dozens of caravanserais are mentioned in the various districts, the location of which, however, is not precisely indicated (Eroğlu, Babuçoğlu, Özdil 2012).

¹⁰ *The Guide of Archaeology Site in Kurdistan Region* 2017, 45. The foundation of the sanctuary area seems to date back to the twelfth century.

floors and a large central courtyard, with rooms for storage, accommodation and stables, and decorative elements on the doors. Both structures are attributed to the mid-nineteenth century.¹¹

Moving westwards, on the River Tigris where today there is the Mosul Dam Lake, in the area of the so-called *Saddam Dam Salvage Project*,¹² several buildings, which have been interpreted as khans, were documented. In the southern region of the lake, a stone-built khan, consisting of a courtyard (22.5 m × 21 m) and rows of rooms on three sides, was identified in the village of Mishrifieh (site no. 17), probably founded during the Abbasid period but still in use in the Ilkhanid and likely Ottoman periods.¹³ Another khan with a similar plan has been identified in Tell Baqaq 3 (site no. 23), generally attributed to the Islamic period,¹⁴ caravanserai facilities have also been found in Hatara Kebir (Simpson 1997, 88).

The presence of these structures along the River Tigris during the Islamic period may be explained by the function of this watercourse as a transport and trade route that connected large urban centres, from Basra to Mosul, passing via Baghdad, and then directed towards western trade itineraries. Moreover, from Baghdad and Basra started the Iraqi *hajj* route towards Mecca and Medina (Petersen 1994, 47-56).

Archaeological evidence of the presence of other Ottoman period khans also comes from more southerly contexts, mainly located along the banks of the River Tigris. In the nineteenth century, khans were built in the area south-east of Samarra and Balad, to provide shelter stations for pilgrims (visiting the Shi'a shrine of Samarra) and travellers on their way to Baghdad.¹⁵

While these structures fulfilled the function of caravanserais, located on main routes and with rooms that were evidently used for housing travellers, goods and animals, it cannot be ruled out that this function could have also been provided by other types of buildings with a more clearly protective and defensive aspect, such as castles

11 *The Guide of Archaeology Site in Kurdistan Region* 2017, 17-18. Mahmud Agha Khan, one of the town's three nineteenth century khans, was founded in 1860-61 in a prominent area of the city, close to the Great Mosque. http://koyaheritage.com/#xl_xr_page_mahmud%20agha%20khan.

12 *Saddam Dam Salvage Project* (formerly known as the *Eski Mosul Dam Salvage Project*) was an international archaeological salvage operation organised by the Iraqi Directorate of Antiquities in the 1980s in order to document the archaeological heritage of this region prior to the building of a dam on the River Tigris.

13 "Excavations in Iraq, 1983-84" 1985, 235-6.

14 "Excavations in Iraq, 1983-84" 1985, 228.

15 One is the khan al-Sa'yawiya ("Excavations in Iraq, 1981-82" 1983, 219). In order to avoid problems with some tribes in the region, the pilgrims would cross the Tigris at Balad and then continue on the eastern bank (Northedge 2012, 63-4).

or forts. These presumably served to protect territories, most of them associated with Kurdish emirates, but may also have been used to accommodate travellers and merchants. Several forts, castles and military outposts are attested in the region throughout the late Islamic period, which fulfilled various functions. A series of relatively small forts seem to have been built around the sixteenth century and restored or renovated in the nineteenth century; they are located on main roads that connect Erbil with northern and eastern territories, usually in elevated positions (Khanzad, Dere and Dwin castles are located on the main road from Erbil to Ruwanduz).¹⁶ They have been seen as part of the construction activities for the protection of the Soran Emirate (sixteenth-nineteenth century), which controlled a wide region east of the Tigris, including the cities of Erbil and Ruwanduz. Khanzad is a two-floor rectangular building with large circular corner towers, made of small sized stones bound with mortar; Dere is a hexagonal structure with rounded-shaped towers at each corner. The Dwin walled citadel, on the top of the Pirman mountains, was also once the capital of the emirate and was occupied by residential areas, a mosque, places for keeping animals and a water collection system.

The site of Qalat Lokhan is a fortress located on the north edge of the modern village of Ruwanduz, which was investigated by the *Rowanduz Archaeological Program* and seems to have been part of a network of towers and forts that protected the Soran Emirate (Danti 2014) - which likely included also the construction of the Sartka castle, situated further south near the modern village of Dukan, built with stones bound with mortar, used to guard the borders with the Baban Emirate¹⁷ and to protect commercial caravans.¹⁸

In the late Ottoman period, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, several outposts (*qishle*) of the Ottoman empire were established in Kurdish cities for the administration of territories.¹⁹

The region shows traces of various structures that served to protect borders and main routes, especially in the area of the mountains and along the rivers. These sites were part of a broader framework of infrastructures in support of land and water management, such as bridges to cross the main watercourses and mills.

A better understanding of the archaeological evidence associated with stations and khans of the Ottoman period, which also includes

¹⁶ *The Guide of Archaeology Site in Kurdistan Region* 2017, 14-16.

¹⁷ This was a Kurdish emirate existing from the sixteenth to mid-nineteenth century; the main centre was Sulaymaniyah.

¹⁸ *The Guide of Archaeology Site in Kurdistan Region* 2017, 29.

¹⁹ Akre *qishle* is a large rectangular structure with a large central courtyard and two floors that was founded in the second half of the nineteenth century. *The Guide of Archaeology Site in Kurdistan Region* 2017, 48.

buildings similar in plan to the Bazhera structure, comes from the *hajj* route in the Arabian Peninsula, where the forts erected to protect trade and pilgrims' roads were constructions of small size (circa 20 m across), employing simple construction techniques with the use of local materials, whose function was not so much to maintain military control of a region as to protect trade and pilgrims (Peacock 2009, 19). In his study of the *hajj* road during the Ottoman period, Petersen identifies two main phases of building typologies for these structures. A first phase, linked to the early years of the Ottoman conquest in the region of the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula (early sixteenth century), saw the construction of several buildings, mainly square in plan (about 20 m per side) and with a rectangular central courtyard surrounded by vaulted rooms; these generally have a ground floor, a first floor and an additional floor with a parapet. Generally, these buildings are constructed with locally available materials and have few decorative elements, usually located on the main door (Petersen 2008, 32-3). Another important phase, which took place in the eighteenth century, involved the construction of small, square-shaped stations with corner towers with gun slits (2008, 32-4). These buildings have no decorative elements, not even at the main entrance. They are organised around a central court and have one ground floor, usually with vaulted rooms used for sheltering animals or for storage, and a first floor (Shqairat 2020, 108).

These structures were all supplied by cisterns or water reservoirs, an extremely important feature for their function but also for the reception of pilgrims; other infrastructures along the roads, such as bridges, ensured their accessibility (2020, 104-5).

2 The Bazhera Archaeological Project (VV, BH)

On this basis, and with the aim of providing new data on the material culture and land management of these later periods, in August 2023 an archaeological research project was initiated by the University of Udine, in collaboration with the General Directorate of Antiquities and Heritage of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, on the site of Bazhera, located on the eastern bank of the Nahr al-Khazir, about 20 km west of the town of Akre and 80 km north-east of Mosul and at a short distance from the Zagros mountains [fig. 2].

The site consists of a partially standing irregularly square-shaped structure with buttresses, flanked to the east and south-east by archaeological remains. The northern side of the enclosure is not standing. The masonry is well preserved, built in regular banks with local river stones bound by mortar. At the eastern end of the settlement, before a steep slope, is a cemetery area protected by a low stone wall. The settlement covers an area of about 3 hectares [fig. 3]. The

settlement overlooks a stream, an irrigation canal redirected by the Nahr al-Khazir, and the surrounding landscape is relatively well preserved, with cultivated fields.



Figure 3 Orthophotos showing study areas. Credits: DYA Survey Group

On the basis of preliminary analyses and comparison with other similar structures, this building, built as a protected space in a prominent position, could be interpreted as a station (a khan) for the reception and protection of travellers, goods and animals, attributable to the late Islamic period, when this region was situated on the border between two great empires, the Ottoman and Safavid, and occupied for centuries by local Kurdish entities.

The site is located in a region that shows several traces of occupation during the Islamic period. Data collected during the survey of the *Land of Nineveh Archaeological Project* (LoNAP), which investigated the human settlement and archaeological features of a large area of the Dohuk Governorate,²⁰ show that the region south

20 The site of Bazhera was one of those identified during this survey (site no. 510). The study of Islamic period surface material from this large survey project was conducted within the framework of the project *Land Behind Mosul: Settlement, Landscape*

of Bazhera, the Navkur Plain, was densely occupied during the Islamic period. Proceeding further north, at a pass leading to the Zagros mountains, water mills were identified, with phases attributed to the Islamic period (Usta, Tonghini 2023). The site of Bazhera lies in an area where water is readily available, a short distance from a pass that provides quick access to the interior valleys of the Zagros range, which were often under the direct control of Kurdish authorities during the late Islamic period.

The three-year archaeological project started on the site of Bazhera aims at studying the history of a settlement that played a key role in the communication network of this area, within a complex historical and political framework. Archaeological investigations of the main structure and related remains could help shed light on some of the features of the region's road and trade traffic network, where stations were areas of rest and protection for merchants and travellers. The archaeological study of this site would give an understanding for the first time in this area, of how such a settlement functioned – on one hand in relation to the users of the premises (where they stayed, how many could be accommodated, etc.), and, on the other, in relation to the surrounding territory (relationships with other installations and with agricultural areas). Through comparison with written sources from the Ottoman period, as envisaged by the project, it would also prove possible to reconstruct the network of stations and routes that passed through this territory and determine the role of Bazhera in this context.²¹

3 Season 2023: An Overview (VV)

In the course of the first campaign at Bazhera, an intensive archaeological survey was carried out in order to establish a distribution model for the site's occupation during the Islamic period and to collect surface finds that could provide more precise information on the dating of the settlement.²² The archaeological area was divided into 20 m x 20 m quadrants; all visible features were described, and finds collected

and Material Culture of the Islamic Period in Northern Iraq, a specific research chapter within LoNAP, under the direction of Prof. Cristina Tonghini (University Ca' Foscari of Venice). For preliminary results of the surface pottery evidence see: Tonghini, Vezzoli 2020; the final publication of the *Land behind Mosul* project is currently in preparation.

21 A preliminary study of written sources from the Ottoman period is planned for next year.

22 In addition to scientific investigations, events were organised on certain days to involve the communities in the site's investigation and the enhancement of the region's archaeological heritage. The team invited students at the elementary school of the village of Bazhera (Bajer Jer) and students at the Akre University Department of History.

(pottery, bones, glass, metals, etc.).²³ The surface data made it possible to ascertain an occupation for the late Islamic period (sixteenth-early twentieth century), as expected, and to highlight an important occupation during the early Islamic period (seventh-tenth century); to a lesser extent habitation in the middle Islamic period (eleventh-fifteenth century) has been documented by the pottery evidence.

The inner area of the main building was also divided into sectors and described by archaeologists, who collected potsherds. All the ceramic material has been studied and documented, giving a preliminary picture of types attributed to the Islamic period attested on the site.

An 11 × 11 m test pit (Sounding 1) was dug with the aim of proceeding with the stratigraphic excavation of one of the structures located to the east of the main building [fig. 3], in order to provide information on its possible relationship (at a chronological or functional level) with the main enclosure and to determine the nature and chronology of the archaeological evidence characterising the settlement.²⁴ A square-shaped room, delimited by four walls (all of which have almost completely collapsed), was brought to light (it was already partially visible on the surface) [fig. 4]. The masonry consists of an internal and external face made with medium to large-sized stones, split only in the inner face ('spaccato' technique), and a core composed of soil as a binder with small-sized stones. A deeper excavation next to the interior of the west wall likely revealed the probable foundations of the structure. The stratigraphy and finds indicate as *terminus post quem* the late Ottoman period (eighteenth-early twentieth century). The presence of some tobacco pipes is particularly significant (for absolute dating). The continuation of the excavation in this area planned for the next season will hopefully yield to provide more information on its function, which has not clearly emerged yet.

23 Since pottery finds were not abundant, it was decided to collect every fragment identified, even non-diagnostic ones, in order to be able to analyse them in detail and define the chronology of occupation of the site.

24 The archaeological excavation of Sounding 1 was conducted under the supervision of Dr Margherita Dallai (PhD, University of Florence) and Carla Stancanelli (postgraduate, Ca' Foscari University of Venice) in cooperation with Khaled Aziz Mahmud (Directorate of Antiquities and Heritage of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq). Students at the University of Udine (S.I. Bernal, A. Bettin, V. Ridolfo) and archaeologists of the Directorate of Antiquities and Heritage of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Lawand Shamal Ahmad and Rozhan Mahir Rashid) also participated in the operations, with the support of workers from the village of Bazhera (Malek Mirali Ali, Muhammad Khaled Ali, Hamza Abed Shanket and Niçirvan Osman Muhammad).



Figure 4 Sounding 1 after removal of surface layers

The intensive survey of the site led to the identification of the cemetery area of Bazhera, located south-east of the main building and delimited by a low stone wall [fig. 3]. It is characterised by the presence of unworked stones, placed on their longest sides, facing east [fig. 5]. The limits of the tombs are unclear; however, the buried stones indicate the orientation of the bodies – which, in accordance with Islamic practices, are buried on their side, facing towards Mecca. Only a few more complex tombs have been identified; these are rectangular structures formed by walls with stones of various sizes not bound with mortar, also with one or two oblong stones buried in the centre and facing east.²⁵

²⁵ In order to find elements for comparison, the team visited a neighbouring cemetery with very similar characteristics. The village of Baqusbe is located north of Bazhera and has a much larger cemetery area, located on a hill overlooking the River al-Khazir. Here, a number of carved stones were also identified, with engraved or relief decorations with geometric figures that are difficult to interpret; a couple of stelae with



Figure 5 The cemetery area with the stones facing east

DYA Group Survey based in Dohuk (Iraqi Kurdistan) carried out the topographic recording of the site, produced a 3D model of the main building and processed the DEM (Digital Elevation Model) of the area.²⁶

4 Archaeological Analysis of the Main Enclosure (CT)

4.1 The Enclosure

One of the main goals of the first season of fieldwork at Bahzera was to study and document the structures preserved above ground, in order to derive an initial set of data on the construction history of the structure and to formulate specific questions for further research.

The structures currently preserved above ground belong to an enclosure of which three sides - east, south, and west - are visible today [fig. 6]. The standing structures are preserved to a maximum height of about 4 m, measured on the outside; the interior is now covered by layers of rubble.

inscriptions were also attested. Both cemetery areas, documented and photographed, will be the subject of a BA dissertation at the University of Udine (student S.I. Bernal).

²⁶ I would like to thank Zerevan Binavi and DYA Survey Group team for support during archaeological activities at the site.



Figure 6 General view of the main building. Credits: LoNAP. © A. Savioli

The enclosure has four three-quarter circle corner buttresses, plus two semicircular side-buttresses on the south and west sides. The north side of the enclosure has not survived, but its original course is indicated by the two corner towers that once connected it to the west and east sides. The south and west sides appear to be preserved for their entire lengths (the western side is, however, partially collapsed in the northern part). The south side measures about 34 m (measured on the inside) and has a semicircular outer buttress at the centre. The west side measures about 27 m (measured on the inside) and, like the south side, has a semicircular buttress in the centre. Middle buttresses on the other sides are not currently visible. The east side has a peculiar shape: the south-east buttress is not in line with the north-east buttress, and therefore, to connect, the south-eastern portion bends westwards to meet the portion coming from the north-east, creating a recess. The wall fragments visible today do not allow us to understand the exact configuration of this side, or to hypothesise the presence of specific defensive elements that may have determined this specific layout, such as a bent entrance.

No traces of the original entrance are preserved; the original limits of the opening seen today on the eastern side are not visible, and the northern side is completely collapsed, therefore without excavation it is not possible to establish its contemporaneity with the original layout. The masonry visible today has no openings of any kind, or specific defensive elements, such as crenelations [fig. 7].



Figure 7 Masonry of the western external wall

Figure 8 Greater width of the lower courses of the western internal wall

The collapse in the interior means that it is not possible to understand whether multiple storeys were present. However, the thickness of the rubble deposits, as well as a greater width of the lower courses of the internal walls seem to suggest the presence of a roofing system [fig. 8]. The thicker masonry, in fact, could have supported vaulting.

The extreme homogeneity of the construction that can be observed today suggests the absence of major interventions on the structure, and thus would seem to indicate a single construction phase. Only by means of the excavation of specific portions of the deposit will it be possible to acquire information useful for reconstructing the layout of the enclosure and understanding the details of its occupation phases.

4.2 Building Technique and Materials

The foundation of the structure is not visible today. The standing walls are very homogeneous in terms of building techniques and materials, including the buttresses. The masonry is built in regular banks that can be identified all along the internal and the external faces. The height of the bank varies from 27 cm to 58 cm; the choice of a specific height for a given course does not seem to relate to its position in structure: thicker banks are not necessarily used in the lower parts [fig. 9]. Unworked cobbles of medium (around 25×13 cm) and small size (around 12×9 cm) are bound together with abundant mortar [fig. 10].



Figure 9 Regular banks of the masonry (eastern external wall)

These cobbles were likely been collected from the banks of the neighbouring wadis, where their presence can also be observed today. The masonry is built with two faces and a core, with a thickness of about 70 cm. The building material is carefully laid in series of rows in the faces, with elements of larger-sized pieces at the bottom of the bank and smaller ones at the top; blocks are laid lengthways. In the core small sized cobbles are generally used, with a higher percentage of mortar.



Figure 10
Characteristics of stone
placement in the horizontal
banks (western internal wall)

The mortar is tough, made of abundant sand of variable grain size and lime;²⁷ it is abundant and extrudes between stones. The original finishing can be observed east of the south-west buttress [fig. 11]: the mortar is not smoothed but extrudes against the formwork; no clear traces have survived on the surface of the mortar to indicate the nature of the formwork (wooden planks?). The upper layer of each bank shows a regular surface obtained by a rough smoothing of the mortar [fig. 12]. The construction seems to have proceeded homogeneously by horizontal levels, as a single bank can be followed along the whole structure visible today. The passage from one portion of formwork to the adjacent one has left no traces in the faces of the walls. An interruption can only be seen on the external faces in proximity to the circular buttresses [fig. 13], where a different formwork was presumably required; no interruption is perceived on the corresponding portion of the internal face.

The internal face of the walls presents a peculiarity: in several cases the blocks are cut as to obtain a more regular surface; this operation seems to have been carried out once the wall was already completed. It never occurs on the exterior, where irregularities were presumably not inconvenient.

27 Petrographic analyses of the mortar are being conducted in the CIBA laboratories of the University of Padua (Centro Interdipartimentale di Ricerca Studio e Conservazione dei Beni Archeologici, Architettonici e Storico-Artistici).



Figure 11 Detail of the mortar binding the stones (south-eastern buttress)

Figure 12 Detail of the rough smoothing of the mortar (from the collapsed north-eastern buttress)

4.3 Interpretation and Dating

On the basis of the preliminary analysis carried out so far, no clear indication as to the function of the structure seems to emerge. The absence of elements clearly related to defence is certainly relevant, although the fragmented condition of the building clearly limits the interpretation of negative evidence. However, the building of a robust structure in such a prominent position, overlooking the valley and dominating the surroundings, is compatible with the function of a khan.

As to its dating, only hypotheses may be put forward at this stage of the research.

Other khans are present in the region. They have never been studied in detail, but they are usually ascribed to the last phase of the Ottoman period.

The masonry typology may provide some chronological indications, but for the area this is still in the process of being established.²⁸

The masonry in banks seems to have appeared in the region in the late Ottoman period. So far, this type of masonry has been studied in detail only in relation to milling installations, and therefore

²⁸ A masonry typology for the area is being established in the framework of the *Lands behind Mosul* research programme (University Ca' Foscari of Venice, directed by C. Tonghini), part of the *Land of Nineveh Archaeological Project* (LoNAP: University of Udine, directed by D. Morandi Bonacossi): Tonghini, Usta 2021.



Figure 13
Interruption of the banks
for the construction
of the tower (western external wall)

any similarities should be treated with caution. In the group of mills excavated in the Wadi Bandaway (site no. 124 of the LoNAP survey), this banking technique is employed for the building of the millhouse. In Period 4 (late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries, Tonghini, Usta 2021, 109-13), natural cobbles are used together with split stone (usually limestone), the latter in much larger quantities. In Period 3, the use of cobbles prevails over that of other types of material, and the masonry shows similarities to that studied at Bazhera (2021, 105-9). Period 3 at Wadi Bandawai pre-dates Period 4; as regards absolute chronology, it has been tentatively ascribed to the early Ottoman period, i.e. to the sixteenth century (2021, 115). Given certain technical similarities, and taking into account the historical context, a similar chronological horizon may fit the building of the khan at Bazhera. The continuation of fieldwork, especially excavation, may in the future provide more conclusive evidence in this respect.

5 Conclusions (VV, BH)

The first campaign of archaeological investigations at Bazhera indicated a distribution model for the occupation of the site during the Islamic period and permitted an in-depth analysis of the structure preserved above ground, with gathering of the first data regarding its possible function.

The masonry of the preserved enclosure is well preserved, built in regular banks with local river stones and mortar. The extreme homogeneity of the masonry would seem to indicate a single construction phase. Although only the archaeological excavation planned for the next campaigns may resolve doubts related to the function of this space, the building currently documented does not show any specifically defensive features. The thickness of the rubble deposits on the inside and a greater width of the lower courses of the internal walls suggest the presence of a possible upper floor. These elements, in addition to the fact that the building stands in a prominent position overlooking a watercourse and a short distance from an important pass leading to the valleys of the Zagros mountains, suggest that this building could have been used as a khan or station to receive travelers, merchants, pilgrims.

The surface pottery collected on the site,²⁹ and comparisons with well-dated construction techniques present in the same region, in relation to watermills, seem to indicate its attribution to the late Islamic period, more probably to the early Ottoman period.

However, the pottery collected on the site and the other available archaeological evidence point to a much longer occupation of the settlement, already from the early Islamic period, which only further archaeological work will be able to define.

The archaeological evidence and written sources, although still scarce and uneven, help to reconstruct a broader picture of the management of the territory between the Tigris and Zagros mountains during the late Islamic period. Although these regions were not fully integrated into the central system of the Ottoman government, the presence of the Kurdish emirates and the need to protect these border territories with the Safavid empire led to the careful management of the most important areas. A network of caravanserais, both urban and extra-urban, located on the main roadways, along the River Tigris and its tributaries and at the entrance to the Zagros range, was present throughout the late Islamic period. It was supported by the presence of other defensive and protective posts (which probably

²⁹ The dating of the ceramic material is based on the typology identified for the LoN-AP project (Tonghini, Vezzoli 2020), whose complete and final publication is currently being prepared.

also served as refreshment areas for travellers and armies) and by a system of infrastructures that guaranteed circulation within the territories and the management of agricultural and water resources. However, at the current state of research, there does not seem to be any standardisation in construction techniques or a regular sequence of these stations, confirming the lack of planning by a central government but rather the action of local entities.

It should also not be forgotten that this region was connected to a broader communication network, which was also part of the system related to the movement of pilgrims from Iraq to the Arabian Peninsula.

The continuation of the excavations in 2024 has the objective of bringing to light both the eastern limits of the structure, which present unaligned masonry, where the entrance to the khan could possibly be located, and the organisation of the interior spaces, in an attempt to understand the function of the space and the presence of an upper floor. Only with an overall view of the settlement, which will therefore also involve the continuation of excavations outside the khan, it will be possible to reconstruct the site's role in a broader framework, including the management of the territory and its connection to the road system of the region during the late Islamic period.

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