

An Assyrian Winery in Khinis, Ancient Khanusa (Kurdistan Region of Iraq)

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Abstract Wine production and consumption played an important role in the imperial Assyrian court, as attested by both written and iconographic sources. However, archaeological data concerning wine production in the empire's heartland were lacking up to now. Since 2021, a project of the University of Udine in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has been investigating a large wine production area in the hinterland of the last two capitals of the Assyrian Empire: Khorsabad and Nineveh. The site, consisting of eighteen wine presses, is located in the immediate vicinity of Tell Khinis (Assyrian Khanusa) and close to the monumental, celebratory Khinis Archaeological Complex. Here a massive irrigation canal was built by King Sennacherib in the early seventh century BC and commemorated through the carving of impressive rock-reliefs and cuneiform inscriptions. The investigation results not only show the intensive agricultural exploitation of the area and the presence of a winery at the site during the Neo-Assyrian period, but also emphasise the *longue durée* exploitation of an agricultural landscape that was possibly also devoted to vine cultivation later, from the Early Islamic period onwards.

Keywords Assyria. Wine Presses. Wine Production. Mesopotamia. Islamic period. Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Wine in Assyria. – 3 The *Wine for the Empire* Project. – 4 The Khinis Wine Production Area. – 5 Conclusions.

1 Introduction*

This essay presents the first wine production area ever identified in the archaeology of ancient Mesopotamia, modern Iraq. This unique site is located in the hinterland of the last two capitals of the Assyrian Empire (Khorsabad and Nineveh), in the immediate vicinity of the site of Khinis, a large monumental complex that represents one of the most extraordinary landscape sanctuaries and commemorative sites of ancient Assyria.

The Assyrian Empire is considered the first world empire in human history.¹ Assyria originated from the city state of Ashur at the beginning of the second millennium BC and transformed into a large territorial state around the fourteenth century, to eventually become a vast empire in the ninth century BC. At its maximum expansion in the eighth-seventh centuries, the Assyrian Empire ruled over the entire Mesopotamia, parts of Anatolia and modern Iran, and the Levant and even Egypt, to the West [fig. 1]. The empire collapsed in 612 BC with the fall of the capital Nineveh to a military coalition led by the Babylonians and the Medes.

The Khinis Wine Production Area is located in the piedmont landscape that characterises the foothills of the Zagros Mountains at the northern edge of the Navkur Plain. This is considered one of the most fertile plains east of the River Tigris and served as the breadbasket of the Assyrian capitals of Khorsabad and Nineveh.²

Until the recent discovery of the Khinis Wine Production Area, there had been a lack of archaeological data regarding wine production in the heartland of the empire. What we know about the role of wine production – and especially consumption – in the Assyrian

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1 Frahm 2023; Düring 2020; Bedford 2009.

2 Morandi Bonacossi 2018.



Figure 1 Map of the Assyrian Empire with the location of Khinis. Map: F. Simi

Empire comes from the textual sources, the Assyrian palace reliefs and the material culture mainly belonging to elite contexts discovered during the excavations carried out in the Assyrian capitals.³

2 Wine in Assyria

In ancient Assyria, wine played an important role in various social, political, and religious events. It was used as a symbol of rank and status,⁴ and was closely linked with the expression of royal authority.⁵ The consumption, storage, and distribution of wine are well-documented by both written⁶ and iconographic⁷ sources.

³ Fales 1994; Powell 2005; Stronach 2005; McGovern 2019.

⁴ Ermidoro 2015, 204, 207; Stronach 2005, 183.

⁵ Stronach 2005.

⁶ Kinnier Wilson 1972; Fales 1994; Powell 2005; Ermidoro 2015.

⁷ Collins 2018, fig. 56; Portuese 2020, 59; Stronach 2005; Watanabe 1992.



Figure 2 Relief showing Ashurnasirpal II enthroned and with a drinking bowl in his right hand. From the North-West Palace at Khalku, Iraq, 865-860 BC. Now at the British Museum. Photo credit: Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

From the time of Ashurnasirpal II (884-859 BC), the small carinated (or round) drinking bowl (like that shown in the reliefs) became a symbol of power, prosperity and abundance [fig. 2].⁸

In the palace reliefs, wine seems to be often present when the king takes part in a ritual activity, such as for instance the ceremonial bull hunts. However, wine was also consumed on other occasions, such as festivals and special events like that described, for instance, on the so-called Banquet Stele⁹ found in the reception suite of Ashurnasirpal II's royal palace at Kalkhu. In the cuneiform inscription of this stele, Ashurnasirpal describes the incredible amount of wine, beer, and food served to almost 70,000 state guests on the occasion of the inauguration of his new palace at Kalkhu in 864 BC.

⁸ Stronach 2005.

⁹ Wiseman 1952.

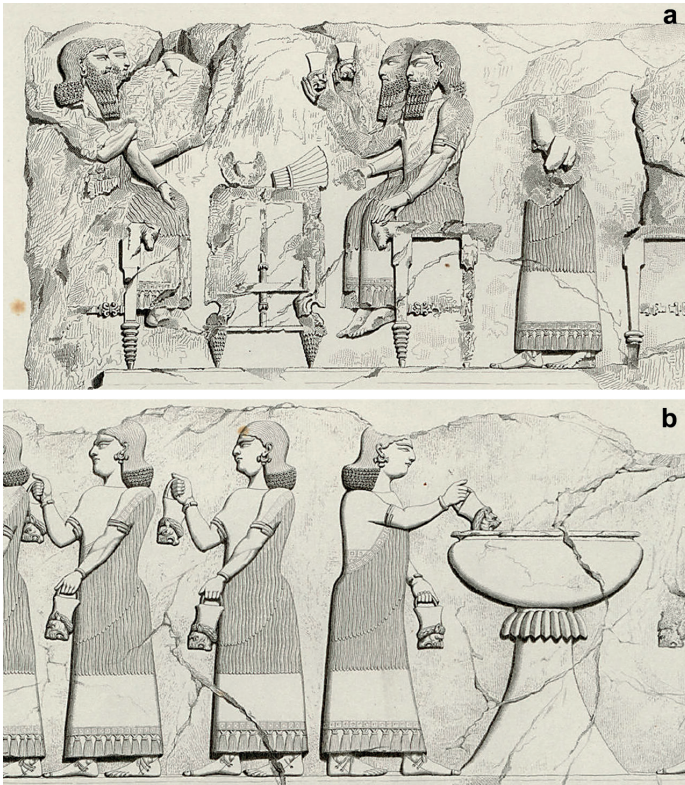


Figure 3 Drawings of palace reliefs from Sargon II's palace at Khorsabad. From Botta 1849 (Public Domain)

In the following centuries wine consumption seems not to have been restricted to the king, but extended also to include the imperial elite, represented by the officials of the Assyrian court.¹⁰ Wall reliefs from the palace of the Assyrian king Sargon II (721-705 BC) at Khorsabad depict small groups of officials and their staff drinking wine from lion-headed rhyta and celebrating in convivial fashion [fig. 3a]. The reliefs also show lion-headed situlae being dipped into large wine cauldrons by beardless attendants [fig. 3b]. These drinking vessels and cauldrons are almost identical to finds from the Assyrian capital cities and the Great Tumulus at Gordion¹¹ dating to the same period (end of the eighth century).

¹⁰ Powell 2005, 121.

¹¹ McGovern 2000.

As mentioned above, wine was not only drunk, but also (and at the same time) poured to offer libations in various ceremonial and ritual activities, as known from textual sources¹² as well as from palace art, e.g. a relief depicting King Ashurbanipal (668-627 BC) pouring wine on the dead bodies of four ceremonially hunted lions [fig. 4]. Wine was also offered to gods in temples on special occasions,¹³ as attested by a text from Ashurbanipal's Library in Nineveh that describes how two four-litre jars of wine (from Helbon in Lebanon and Izalla in Turkey) and six eight-litre jars of different types of beer are offered by the queen of Assyria in the temple of Ashur in the city of Ashur at a festival dedicated to Mullissu.¹⁴

The consumption of wine is also represented in a famous scene of King Ashurbanipal and his queen, Liballi-sharrat, depicted under overarching vines in a lush garden [fig. 5]. The type of drinking bowl held by the queen in her raised hand is well attested in the archaeological record. An almost identical gold carinated bowl with vertical ridges was found together with many other wine consumption vessels in the Queens' Tombs of Nimrud.¹⁵ More in general, the carinated bowls depicted in the Assyrian reliefs (with their highly symbolic value) are in fact known from many archaeological sites throughout the Near East.¹⁶

In the Nimrud Wine Lists,¹⁷ a group of c. 60 tablets dating to the eighth century BC that document the distribution of wine rations in the capital city, the queen is the most important recipient of wine¹⁸ in all the lists - which record the individuals (from court officials to musicians and the kitchen staff)¹⁹ who were entitled to get wine rations.

Notwithstanding the significant role played by wine production and consumption at the imperial Assyrian court, as attested both by written and iconographic sources, archaeological data concerning wine production in the empire's heartland had not previously been found. The Nimrud Wine Lists are also important because they mentioned two winemaking regions possibly not too far from Assyria's heartland: Yaluna and Zamua.²⁰ Yaluna²¹ in particular is interesting

12 Powell 2005; Stronach 2005; McGovern 2019.

13 Ermidoro 2015, 124.

14 Fales, Postgate 1992, no. 184.

15 Hussein 2016.

16 Stronach 2005.

17 Kinnier Wilson 1972; Dalley, Postgate 1984, 22-5 and nos. 119-49; Fales 1994.

18 Kinnier Wilson 1972, 44.

19 Stronach 2005, 185.

20 Stronach 2005, 186.

21 According to Bagg (2017, 269-70), located in the Upper Khabur area.



Figure 4 Relief showing Ashurbanipal pouring wine (?) on the bodies of hunted lions, North Palace Nineveh. Now at the British Museum. Photo credit: Slices of Light ,CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 DEED, via Flickr

because according to some proposals it may also be tentatively located east of Nineveh in the direction of Aqreh (corresponding to our research area).²²

Regarding grape cultivation, some partial data come also from the ‘Harran Census’ dated to the reign of Sargon II, which records a census of estates and agricultural resources in the region of the upper River Balikh where tens of thousands of vines are listed.²³

In all ancient Mesopotamia, wine presses (Assyrian or otherwise) had never been recorded before; to date, the scanty archaeobotanical data attesting the presence of *Vitis vinifera* (from proto-historical times to the modern era) include only c. 30 archaeological sites [fig. 6].²⁴

For these reasons, the identification and excavation of the Khinis Wine Production Area represent an extremely important step forward in our understanding of wine production in Assyria and – more in general – in ancient Mesopotamia.

²² Kinnier Wilson 1972, 111, fn. 33.

²³ Johns 1901, 21; Fales 1973.

²⁴ ADEMNES 2015.

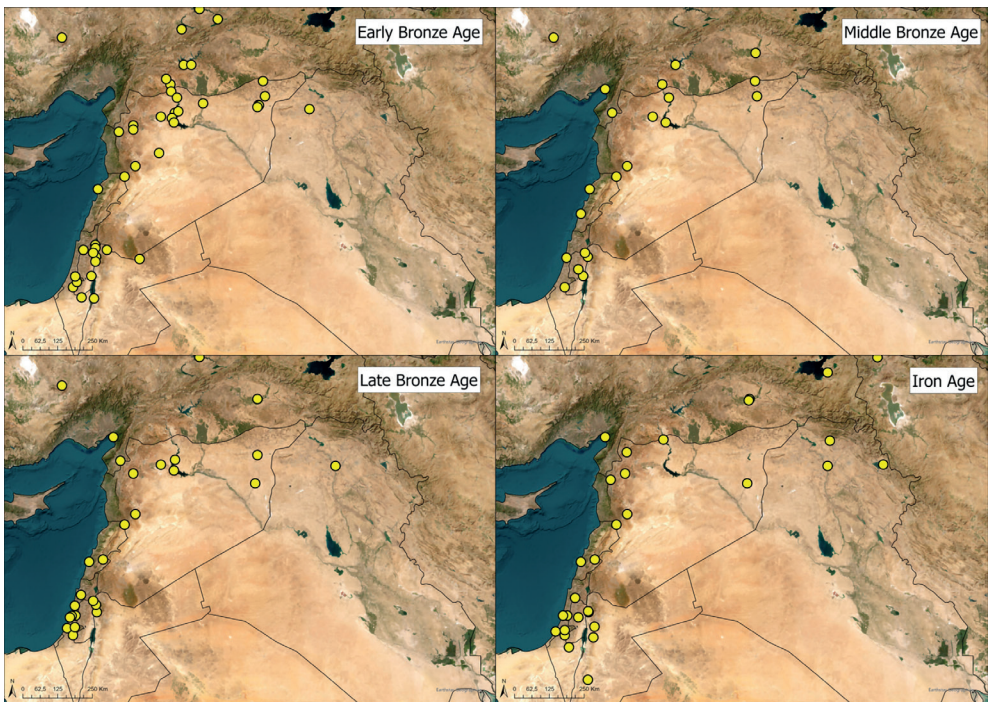


Figure 5 Relief of the Banquet of Ashurbanipal from Nineveh. Now at the British Museum (photo credit: Allan Gluck, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 6 Archaeological sites with archaeobotanical evidence of *Vitis vinifera*, third to first mill. BC. Data retrieved from ADEMNES 2015

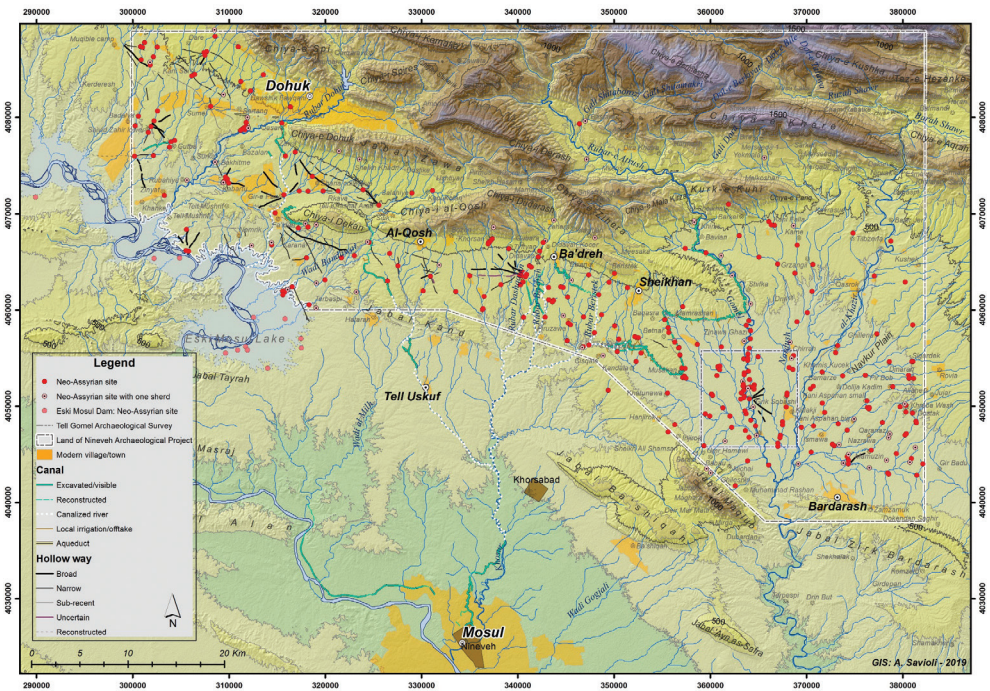


Figure 7 Location of the Land of Nineveh Archaeological Project survey area and distribution of the archaeological sites discovered in the 2012-2022 survey campaigns. © LoNAP

3 The Wine for the Empire Project

The *Wine for the Empire* project stems from the wider Land of Nineveh Archaeological Project (LoNAP) of the University of Udine.²⁵ LoNAP aims at investigating, using a multidisciplinary approach, the hinterland of the ancient Assyrian capitals of Nineveh and Khorsabad in the modern Governorate of Duhok,²⁶ Kurdistan Region of Iraq [fig. 7]. Since 2012, the project has been conducting a regional archaeological surface survey in order to investigate the settlement patterns and land use of the aforementioned territory, thus involving also the study of water management and use in this very fertile region of Northern Iraq.²⁷ The multidisciplinary project has also focused on

²⁵ Morandi Bonacossi, Iamoni 2015; Morandi Bonacossi 2018a; 2018b; 2018c.

²⁶ Morandi Bonacossi, Iamoni 2015, 11.

²⁷ Morandi Bonacossi 2018b, 87.

the monumental irrigation network built by King Sennacherib in the early seventh century BC to irrigate what is considered the breadbasket of Assyria and to bring water to its capital, Nineveh.²⁸

The Khinis Archaeological Complex belongs to this large irrigation network, and comprises a series of celebratory rock reliefs and monuments located in a symbolically and ideologically important location, where the 'Khinis Canal' starts, fed by the diversion of water from the River Gomel [fig. 8].

In this fertile and symbolically charged landscape, the LoNAP team brought to light a cluster of eighteen rock-hewn structures, identified as wine presses. They thus constituted a wine production area, which is located less than 500 m west of the monumental complex of Khinis and less than 100 m north of the small archaeological site of Tell Khinis, identified with the ancient Assyrian village of Khanusa [fig. 9].

The *Wine for the Empire* project is based on an archaeological excavation of the wine presses identified by the LoNAP team, a targeted intensive survey of the nearby site of Tell Khinis and a comprehensive reconnaissance of the hillside region surrounding the installations.²⁹

The project was initiated with multiple aims, including the interpretation of the structures as wine presses, their chronology, and the identification of grape cultivation evidence in this area of the Zagros foothills. The project was carried out following a multidisciplinary research method combining archaeology (excavation and survey), archaeobotany (analysis of plant remains), geoarchaeology (collection of soil samples and geomorphological survey of the hillside surrounding the Wine Production Area), ¹⁴C date determinations and organic residue analysis of rock samples from the wine presses.

The present contribution presents the preliminary results of this still ongoing research.

28 Morandi Bonacossi 2018a; 2018b; 2018c; Morandi Bonacossi, Qasim 2022.

29 The project benefited from the multidisciplinary collaboration of archaeologists, archaeobotanists and geomorphologists, with the support of local workers from the nearby village of Khinis. For further details, see "Acknowledgements".



Figure 8 The Khinis Archaeological Complex, Duhok Governorate (Kurdistan Region of Iraq). In the centre, the Khinis cliff with the “Large Panel” and four of the twelve rock-cut niches sculpted with the image of Sennacherib under divine symbols. In the lower right, the “Sculpted Monolith” (which has partly slid into the river) that marked the canal head. Photo: F. Simi. © LoNAP

Figure 9 Processed satellite image showing the location of the Wine Production Area, Tell Khinis and the Khinis Monumental Complex. Source: Esri

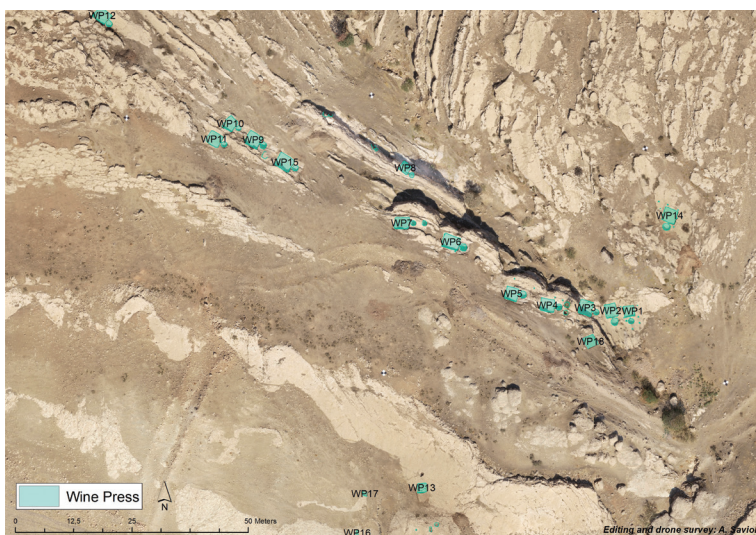


Figure 10 Drone photo showing the location of the wine presses in the Wine Production Area. Photo: A. Savioli © LoNAP

4 The Khinis Wine Production Area

The Khinis Wine Production Area features a total of eighteen wine presses [fig. 10]. In the 2021 field season, four out of the eighteen installations were excavated and/or cleared of the debris filling them in order to bring the structures back to light. During the last fieldwork campaign of the *Wine for the Empire* project, which took place in September 2022, eleven wine presses were excavated, while three more were detected in the survey and have not yet been investigated.

The wine presses were hewn from the mountain limestone bedrock. Each structure comprises three elements: a rectangular treading basin, a smaller, sunken circular or sub-circular vat, and a connecting channel linking the two structures [fig. 11].

The rectangular treading basin has a short side from 2.10 to 3.50 m long and a long side ranging between 2.05 and 3.70 m. The diameter of the circular vats ranges between 1 and 1.30 m. The preserved depth of both installations varies depending on the erosion of the mountain's surface.

At the present state of research, the Khinis wine presses represent a unique discovery in Mesopotamia. However, their layout resembles that of similar structures that were used elsewhere for the production of wine. This specific press type is known from excavations in

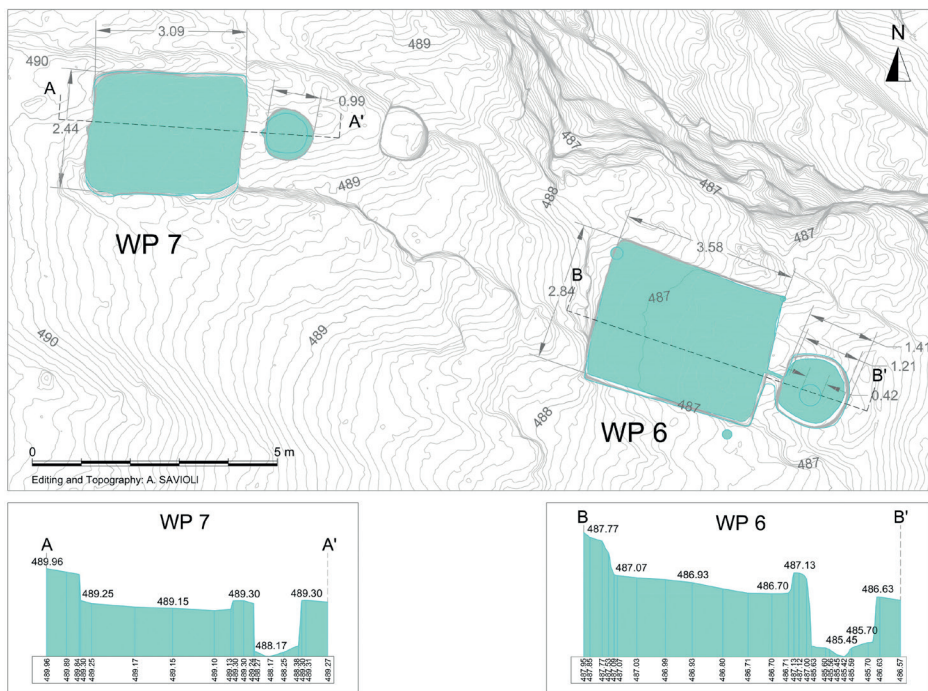


Figure 11 Plan and section of wine presses 6 and 7. © LoNAP

the Levant and also from iconographic sources.³⁰ Those at sites on the Lebanese coast - such as Tell Burak, in Israel - such as Tell Ta'anek and Neshar-Ramla, in Jordan and in the Syrian Orontes Valley near Apamea show the same layout of the structures, although not all of them are hewn from the bedrock.³¹

Thanks to these comparisons, stages in wine production have been reconstructed based on the aforementioned similarities. In the first stage, grapes were trodden in the rectangular treading basin; in the second stage, the must remaining in the grape skins was pressed out; thanks to the slightly sloping floor of the basin, the liquid could easily flow through the connecting channel into the circular vat. In the third stage, the grape must was left in the circular vat for the first part of the fermentation process.³²

³⁰ Avrutis 2015; Guasch-Jané, Fonseca, Ibrahim 2013; Orsingher et al. 2020.

³¹ Frankel, Gadot, Bachi 2009; Herzog 1989; Hirschfeld 1983; Lapp 1969; Orsingher et al. 2020; Stager, Master, Schloen 2011.

³² Frankel, Gadot, Bachi 2009, 77.



Figure 12 Wine presses located uphill on the mountain and at the bottom of the wadi (in the red frame).
Photo: M. Cusin. © LoNAP

The wine presses at Khinis are generally quite well-preserved, though their locations on the hill slope have determined their different states of preservation: they have in fact been eroded to different degrees by the water running down from the hill slope and the wadi. Wine presses 1 and 2, located at the bottom of the wadi running from the mountain, are very well preserved, as are also the wine presses hewn in the limestone uphill on the mountain [fig. 12]. Much poorer is the state of preservation of the two wine presses numbers 12 and 8, which are heavily eroded due to their locations on the mountain slope and in the wadi, respectively.

The wine presses' chronology has been defined by combining different sets of data coming from the contexts in which they were hewn, the results of their excavation, and the survey of the area surrounding them. The zone around the wine presses, which was investigated for an area of 5 km², contained few potsherds; however, the few sherds collected from the surrounding area date to the Neo-Assyrian period. This result is also mirrored by the ceramics recovered from the intensive survey of the nearby site of Tell Khinis, where the Neo-Assyrian period is that most represented. Furthermore, the pottery collected from the fills of the wine presses shows that the Neo-Assyrian and Islamic periods are the most represented epochs. In terms of quantity, the Islamic period pottery is more attested than ceramics dating to the Neo-Assyrian period [chart 1]. However, given that the Islamic era covers a very long span of time (seventh to twentieth century), the Neo-Assyrian period appears to be very well represented in the ceramic assemblages from the wine presses.

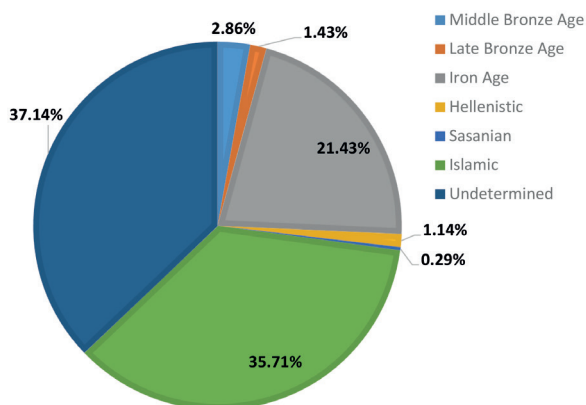


Chart 1 Percentages by period of the pottery found in the wine press fills

Assemblages reflecting the Neo-Assyrian pottery tradition - hammer-head bowls, carinated bowls, banded-rim jars - were found in wine presses 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 13, 14 and 15 [fig. 13].³³ These types were spread all over the territory of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, in particular in its core region and in the northern Iraqi Tigris valley and plains. The archaeological evidence collected indicates that the Khinis winery was first established in the Neo-Assyrian period.

The existence of an Islamic period phase of use of the Khinis Wine Production Area points to the *longue durée* use of these structures, whether in their primary function as wine presses or reused for other subsistence activities. The latter hypothesis is suggested by the evidence provided by archaeobotanical remains. Their analysis shows the presence in the upper deposits of both the rectangular basins and the circular vats of ashy soil and carbonised plant remains, represented by cereals and wild taxa. This evidence, combined with the recovery of Islamic pottery fragments from the fills of the presses, indicates that the structures were possibly reused for other purposes (cereal processing), although the simultaneous continuation of the use of the area for wine production is also possible. A further important result from archaeobotanical analysis is the presence of

³³ The chronology of the Neo-Assyrian ceramic assemblage is confirmed by comparisons with the sites of Ashur (Haller 1954), Nimrud (Lines 1954), Nineveh (Lumsden 1999), Khirbat Hatara (Negro 1997), Khirbet Khatuniyeh (Curtis, Green 1997), Khirbet Qasrij (Curtis 1989).

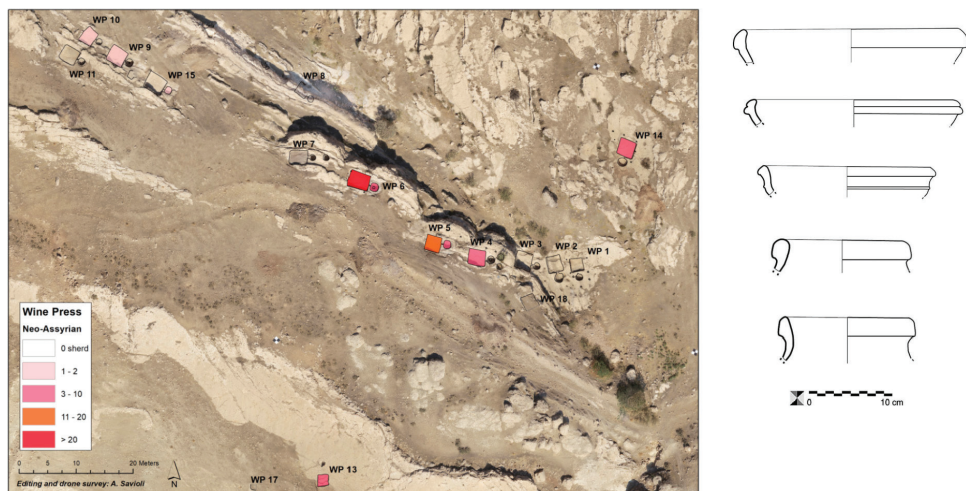


Figure 13 Wine presses in which Neo-Assyrian pottery is attested; on the right, the main Neo-Assyrian ceramic types. © LoNAP

Vitis vinifera in the fills of the wine presses: the presence of grapes in the area is demonstrated by the discovery of grape pips and pedicels, and fruit skins from the lower deposits, in both the rectangular treading basins and the circular vats.

To obtain a more complete picture of the Khinis Wine Production Area, based not only on archaeology and archaeobotany, other analyses are still being carried out. The survey of the area surrounding the wine presses and the soil sampling conducted by our geoarchaeology team are aimed at furnishing data about the productivity potential of the terraces adjoining the Khinis Wine Press Area in terms of grape cultivation. To identify possible biomarkers of grapevine products, especially tartaric and malic acids, chemical organic residue analysis will be conducted. To this aim, rock samples were collected at different spots of the treading basins, circular vats and connecting channels of each wine press. They are currently being analysed by means of gas chromatography and mass spectrometry³⁴ in the laboratory of the Equip de Recerca Arqueològica i Arqueomètrica of the University of Barcelona.

34 Barnard et al. 2011; Olcese, Razza, Surace 2020, 41; Pecci et al. 2013.

5 Conclusions

The Khinis Wine Production Area represents a unique and massive concentration of wine presses in a site associated with the Khinis canal intake structures built in the early seventh century BC by Sennacherib - and commemorated by cuneiform inscriptions celebrating the construction of this regional irrigation system and impressive rock reliefs depicting the king in front of the main Assyrian deities. The dating of the wine presses' construction phase to the Neo-Assyrian period has allowed us to identify the first grape processing and wine-making area ever discovered in Assyria and - broadly speaking - in ancient Mesopotamia, and to shed light for the first time on the archaeology of wine production in pre-classical West Asia. The 'industrial' character of the Khinis winery with its 18 wine presses well fits into the wider scenario of grapevine cultivation in the Iron Age Near East.³⁵ Cuneiform sources and the scanty archaeobotanical evidence available show during the Iron Age a vigorous increase in *Vitis vinifera* cultivation in comparison to the Middle and Late Bronze Age,³⁶ pointing to a marked expansion of grape cultivation and wine production in first millennium BC Northern Mesopotamia, which was probably stimulated by the growing demand for this royal and elite beverage in the Assyrian court and the peripheral imperial administration.

The archaeological evidence collected from the Khinis Wine Production Area also indicates that the wine presses had been reused during the Islamic period, in particular in the Early and Late Islamic phases. During the centuries of the early Caliphates and the Ottoman Empire the region was inhabited by numerous Christian communities that still populate the region. Clear evidence of their presence is provided by the archaeological record, as well as by Syriac textual sources.³⁷ The latter give us information on grape cultivation and wine production, which must have been so abundant that wine was integrated into the Mosul region Abbasid taxation system, as reported by the tenth century geographer Ibn Hawqal.³⁸

The Khinis Assyrian and Islamic wineries show that the roots of the present-day winemaking by the Christian Assyrian and Chaldean communities living in the region between Southeastern Turkey and Northern Iraq are much deeper than hitherto imagined and go back to the time of the Assyrian Empire and its royal and elite wine production and consumptions.

³⁵ Amit, Yezerski 2001; Orsingher et al. 2020; Castellano 2021.

³⁶ ADEMNES 2015.

³⁷ Book of the Governors of Thomas of Marga: Wood 2018.

³⁸ Kennedy 2016, 233.

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