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Aline Tenu. The 2016-2017 Excavation Seasons in Kunara (Iraqi Kurdistan). 11th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, Apr 2018, Munich, Germany. pp.435-444. halshs-03022473

HAL Id: halshs-03022473

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03022473>

Submitted on 25 Aug 2022

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PROOFS

Proceedings of the 11th International
Congress on the Archaeology
of the Ancient Near East
Volume 2

Field Reports

edited by Adelheid Otto, Michael Herles and Kai Kaniuth

Islamic Archaeology

edited by Lorenz Korn and Anja Heidenreich



2020, Harrassowitz Verlag Wiesbaden

PROOFS

The 2016-2017 Excavation Seasons in Kunara (Iraqi Kurdistan)

Aline Tenu¹

Abstract²

Kunara is located on the bank of the Tanjaro River, about 10 km south-west of the modern day city of Suleymaniah in Iraqi Kurdistan. It is a 7–10 ha site identified during a survey conducted in 2011 by the *Mission archéologique du Peramagron*, directed at that time by Christine Kepinski. Five seasons of excavation took place since 2012. They revealed levels, mostly dated to the last part of the 3rd millennium. Public edifices were discovered both in the upper and in the lower town. The sophisticated building techniques they show as well as the discovery of a finely carved cylinder seal, a sealing and about 100 cuneiform tablets and fragments indicate Kunara was probably a regional centre. The results of the 2016 and 2017 campaigns, conducted in different areas B, C, and E, all located in the lower town, are presented.

Introduction

Kunara is situated in Iraqi Kurdistan, about 10 km south-west of the city of Sulaymaniyah. It was identified in 2011 by a survey, lead by Christine Kepinski between the Bazian Pass and the modern city of Arbat. Kunara is the largest site we surveyed, with a surface area of 7-10

1 CNRS, UMR 7041 Archéologies et Sciences de l'Antiquité, équipe Histoire et Archéologie de l'orient cunéiforme.

2 The excavation and study campaigns in 2016 and 2017 have been generously supported by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Eveha Archaeological research and investigations, Total E & P Kurdistan Region of Iraq, team *Histoire et Archéologie de l'orient cunéiforme* (CNRS). We are very grateful to the Directorate of Antiquities in Suleymaniyah especially to Mr Kamal Rasheed Rahim Zewe, its director, and to Mr Hashim Hama Abdullah, director of the Museum of Suleymaniyah, for their help and their unwavering support. The Kunara team in 2016 and 2017 was composed by Aline Tenu (director, archaeologist, CNRS, UMR 7041, Nanterre), Zana Abd el-Kariem (archaeologist, Directorate of Antiquities), Amanj Hama Ameen (archaeologist, Directorate of Antiquities), Philippe Clancier (epigraphist, University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne), Daniel Etienne (topographer, Eveha), Florine Marchand (archaeologist, Free University of Brussels), Thomas Mabire (topographer), Fairidoune Faiek Mahmoud (driver, Directorate of Antiquities), Perween Yawer Minda (archaeologist, representative, Directorate of Antiquities), Shnw Nasier Mohammed (archaeologist, Erbil University), Halqawt Qadr (archaeologist, representative, Directorate of Antiquities), David Sarmiento Castillo (archaeologist, University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne), Mohammed Salih (archaeologist, representative, Directorate of Antiquities), Christophe Sevin-Allouet (archaeologist, Eveha), Cécile Verdellet (archaeologist, University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne).

I thank Rowan Lacey for correcting my English.

ha. The upper town, to the west, is separated from the lower town, to the east, by a modern asphalt road. The site is located in a meander of the Tanjaro river, a perennial stream. One of its sources lies in the Peramagron, an impressive mountain which dominates the entire area, and which lent its name to the Peramagron Archaeological Project.

Since 2012, five campaigns have taken place. One excavation area has been opened in the upper town (Area A), and four in the lower town, where excavations were preceded by a geomagnetic survey conducted by Christophe Benech³.

In 2016 and 2017, three Areas of the Lower Town, B, C and E were excavated (Fig. 1), confirming that Kunara was a local or even regional centre by the end of the 3rd millennium BC.⁴

Area E

Area E has been excavated since 2015 under the direction of Florine Marchand. It is located to the north of the lower town. It yielded architectural remains belonging to a single level, which is unusual in Kunara. These remains comprise a monumental building and a small house, surrounded by exterior floors (Fig. 2).

The monumental building was identified during the first campaign conducted in the area, in 2015. Only its eastern limit is known. Indeed we excavated a wall (US 602-603-612), more than 20 m long, built with an earthen superstructure on a solid stone footing. Interestingly, the wall is not straight, and shows a recess to the east (603). In 2017, we discovered the south-eastern corner of the building (walls 612-653). However, its north-eastern corner is less clear but an interruption identifiable in construction (US 604-611) may indicate that other buildings were erected against the northern façade of the public edifice. If so, those buildings are now almost completely lost because the site was cut in order to build the modern road.

Generally speaking, the stone footing of the main wall is higher to the north where two courses of large blocks are preserved. To the south, we observed an interruption that may be related to the passage of a water pipe (see below). The superstructure of the wall has been partially preserved. In 2015, we identified layers of earth (at least 7, some of them visible to a length of 2 m)⁵. The horizontal joints are well visible but no vertical joint is. In addition, the layers fit the shape of the underlying stones. They were thus put in place when they were still wet. The building technique chosen by the masons was not mudbricks, but pisé or cob. The difference between both is still debated, but mainly concerns the presence or absence of temper, its nature and the use of wooden boards (Perello 2015).

We know almost nothing of the building but in the recess, a thick fill (US 610) may betray its relatively longer (compared to the other constructions of the lower town) occupation.

To the east, a small house was built. In 2015, we discovered lower stone footings which we interpreted as benches or partition walls within the main building,⁶ but in 2016 we understood that they actually defined a small domestic unit with three rooms, of no more than 26m². The largest room (about 15 m²) to the south was accessible by a threshold, carefully delimited by a semi-circular line of stones and covered by pebbles. From this room, one

3 See his report, in Kepinski *et al.* 2015: 61–63.

4 For reports on the two other areas A and D, see Tenu 2018: 654–655 with previous bibliography. See also Tenu 2019.

5 The architecture in Kunara has been studied in 2015 by Bérengère Perello (CNRS, UMR 5133, Lyon). See her report in Tenu *et al.* 2016: 145–148.

6 See the report of F. Marchand, in Tenu *et al.* 2016: 113–115.

could enter the northern room. The latter had also its own entry from outside and opened to the smallest room measuring less than 3 m². Pebbles sometimes partly plastered covered the floors (US 615/626 to the North; US 623 to the South), unfortunately much deteriorated, of the two biggest rooms.

The small room was almost empty whereas numerous potsherds were scattered on the floors of the two others. The functional analysis conducted by Cecile Verdelle⁷ shows that the two rooms were complementary. Storage jars have been discovered in both, but presentation vessels such as bowls and plates are almost completely absent in the north room. They are common in the south room where two jar stands were also found (Fig. 3). The room was thus probably dedicated to food consumption.

The house was surrounded by exterior floors. To the north (US 605), this floor was covered by potsherds, some of which were decorated with black motifs, probably made with bitumen.

To the east, we uncovered a water pipe made from terra cotta tubes (US 620). The water pipe, preserved to a length of 4 m, was covered to the south by stones. It is not connected to the house, and was already out of use in antiquity. We wonder if the water pipe was not originally associated with the public building before falling into disuse⁸. It might have passed through its exterior façade by the interruption visible in the footings (?) of the wall 612.

To the south, we found an open space (US 652) characterized by a badly preserved floor where we found nothing, except a bi-conical bead, made of stone, probably porphyry (M. 629).

A C14 analysis dates the building's occupation to the end of the 3rd millennium, 2201–2024 BC (Lyon-13454(SacA47551)).

The house in Area E is atypical. It is built against a public edifice, not included in a domestic quarter (living quarter? residential area?), but its ceramic assemblage does correspond to a domestic unit. It has two entries, which seems a bit too much for such a small, but well-built house. The link between the house and the public edifice is very strong because both were constructed together (contrary to what we thought at the beginning), so we wonder who was living there? The question may be resolved once we have started the excavation of the main building, in 2018.

Area B

Area B has been excavated since 2012 under the direction of the author. It was opened in order to excavate a monumental building revealed by the geomagnetic survey conducted in 2012. Since then, 4 sectors have been excavated (B₁, B₂, B₃ and B₄), and in 2017 the first two (B₁ and B₂) were joined up. Two main levels have been identified.

The first one, level 1, is the most recent. Architectural remains were very close to the modern surface and badly preserved. We found stone footings, usually one course high. The function of the structures is unknown, but their dating to the very end of the third millennium BC is based on sherds discovered on a floor level in 2015 (Tenu *et al.* 2016: 119; Tenu *et al.* 2019).

⁷ See her report in Tenu *et al.* 2018: 31-41.

⁸ A similar case is attested in Area B, see Tenu *et al.* 2018: 10.

Level 2 corresponds to the structures visible on the magnetic map (Fig. 4). They are not part of a single edifice but belong to four different buildings organised in an orthogonal layout and separated by passageways protected by pebbles.

The two southern buildings are only known by their north-eastern and north-western corners. The walls were built on stone footings with earthen superstructures where “loaves⁹” of earth can easily be distinguished. To the east of the main edifice, we found a third construction with at least two rooms and what seems to be a later and lighter construction – maybe a kind of shelter (see Tenu in Tenu *et al.* 2016: 212–123 and Perello in Tenu *et al.* 2016: 139–140) (Fig. 5).

The western part of area B is occupied by a large building. Its eastern façade is now completely excavated. It measures about 40 m in length and has an unique entrance, marked by a monolithic threshold. A ramp (US 119) gave access to it. The northern limit of the building was partially excavated in 2013 (sector B₃) and 2017, in the former sector B₁ where the northeast angle was unearthed. Both sectors are not yet connected but walls 130 and 134 (2013) are most likely the extension of walls 702 and 703. If this is the case, the northern façade was at least 25 m long. The exterior wall, 1.60 m thick, is comprised of a massive stone footing and an earthen superstructure in which “loaves” of earth are recognizable. Thus, the same technique was used for the main building and for the southern one. This may be a convincing argument for the contemporaneity of the entire sector.

The edifice itself is still poorly known. Entry through a chicane room (194) was easy to control. A small room (164) located to the south with a bench and a *tannur*, was probably designed to accommodate guards. The other spaces we found are not connected to the entrance. To the west of 164, we partly excavated another room (184) whose floor is 40 cm higher. This feature may suggest that the architects had to adapt to the ancient topography of the site which rises slightly toward the north-west. Indeed we observed that the lower course of the stone footings were not laid at the same elevation, sometimes even in the same wall (see Tenu in Tenu *et al.* 2019).

In the east of the building, we excavated three rooms in a row. To the north, no partition wall has been uncovered. The area was thus largely open and three passages gave access to a possibly central (?) court or room. Circulation inside the building follows two different systems: to the north the space is open with no restrictions, to the south the circulation is constrained, and watched and guarded.

The edifice, given its dimensions and the thickness of its walls, could hardly be a private house. Some clues may indicate its ancient function. We found bronze pins, some beads, and numerous potsherds; these mainly correspond to vessels used for food consumption and for reception (carinated bowls, a finely decorated bowl (Fig. 6), but also cooking pots probably linked to these activities).

In 2017, we discovered three fragmentary moulds used to cast bronze blades. They were associated with burnt and ashy soils. Close to them were found well-polished tools and numerous lithic artefacts (see Florine Marchand, this volume). This area may have been devoted to craft activities. We have no precise information concerning the organization of metallurgy at that time in the Zagros foothills, but we may suppose that tin and copper sup-

9 The “loaves of earth” correspond to earth modules used when still wet, contrary to the mudbricks which are first sundried (see Perello in Tenu *et al.* 2016: 139, note 13).

plies were tightly controlled by the authorities. In addition, in 2012, a cylinder seal (M. 105; Kepinski *et al.* 2015: Fig. 23), finely carved in a greenish stone, was uncovered.

All our discoveries indicate that the building was a prestigious residence, which might have accommodated the *ensi* 2 whose title appeared for the first time in 2017 on two Kunara tablets.

Area C

Area C opened in 2012 was directed in 2015–2016 by David Sarmiento Castillo. Beside a medieval grave, four main levels are documented. The most recent, level 1, badly preserved, is dated, on the basis of the pottery, to the Iron Age. During the survey we had already collected Iron Age sherds (Tenu 2018: 100–104) and a floor in Area A gave a C14 date of 1110–909 BC. Even if the Iron Age is poorly attested, we may suppose that the lower town and the upper town in Kunara were occupied at that time. This settlement may correspond to one of the fortresses or towns mentioned by the Assyrian King Ashurnasirpal II (883–859) in the narrative he gave of his campaigns in the region (see for instance Grayson 1996: 203–205).

A second level (2) is more extensively understood even if, due to its proximity to the modern surface, it was damaged. The stone footings we discovered can be assigned to the very end of the 3rd millennium and are probably contemporary with level 1 in area B. Indeed they show striking similarities in building technics and share the same orientation.

This level (2) was partly constructed beneath but also against remains of the preceding level, level 3. Heavily burnt, it comprises three main spaces (Fig. 7):

- to the east, exterior floors with different kinds of features (*tannurs*, water pipes) accessible via a staircase
- to the north, two contiguous buildings
- to the south, a half-buried cellar.

The two northern buildings are very different. The older one, to the west (B. 517), comprised, at the beginning, only one room (L. 516), and was then enlarged by the addition of at least two rooms (not yet wholly excavated). At the same time, another construction rose to the east (B. 279). As yet, no connection between them has been found.

Three entries gave access to the eastern building, which consisted of only one room (L. 277), about 90 m². In the centre, a structure (US 537) made with layers of burnt clay showed several “cupules” of different sizes. Almost no pottery has been found in this space. In the adjacent building (B. 517), the situation is different even though we also discovered a clay cupule (US 538). The floors were covered by sherds belonging to different classes of pottery shapes: ram-shaped spout, sherds with snakes and scorpions, but also five Internal-Handled Bowls (Fig. 8). This layer also revealed a jar sealing (M. 223) with a mythological scene, in a very “Akkadian” style. Another sealing (M. 570) has retained the imprint of fabric, and of a string. It was probably put on a bag, which has completely disappeared, and this imprint testifies to the use, in Kunara, of perishable containers.¹⁰ The shapes of the non-functional pottery, the animal decoration, and the presence of cupule structures might indicate that cultic activities took place there.

To the south, six rooms of the half-buried cellar have been identified so far. Its floors were covered by sherds, especially from storage jars, but also from strainers, and fine ware. In a

¹⁰ During the study campaign that took place in May–June 2018, we also noticed that tablets might have been stored in baskets (see Clancier, Monerie and Tenu in Tenu *et al.* 2019).

single room (L. 505), which is only 10 m² large, Cecile Verdellet identified at least 17 storage jars of different types, and of different sizes but all with opening diameters between 30 and 40 cm (see her report in Tenu *et al.* 2019: 46–49). Tablets were found amongst the potsherds in four rooms (L. 217, L. 242, L. 219 and L. 505) (see below). We have no clue that they were stored in jars, but as far as remains of the roof were found above them, it appears that they did not fall from an upper level but were kept in the cellar, in baskets and/or on wooden shelves (see Ouraghi in Tenu *et al.* 2016: 130; Perello in Tenu *et al.* 2016: 145).

Under the cellar, the top of walls belonging to an older level (the fourth, and last one) appeared. Until now, we know nothing about this ancient – and not yet excavated – structure. Its dating remains undetermined, but we noticed that the building technics are quite similar to the ones of Level 3 and that the architectural remains of both levels follow the same orientation. As a result, they were probably built in a short period of time.

So far, 116 inventory numbers have been given for tablets and fragments, but each number does not correspond with certainty to a single tablet. Indeed the tablets are very badly preserved: some of them shattered into pieces, in other cases, only the core – without the writing surface – has survived. A very long and delicate cleaning is therefore needed, in particular when the cuneiform signs are filled with hardened ashes.

The work on the tablets is still in progress, but we have already learned that the texts belong to an administrative archive we called the “flour office.” That office recorded entries and deliveries of different kinds of flour. The flour was probably produced in the immediate environs of Kunara and in fact, the names of at least 16 towns or villages are attested (but unfortunately not the ancient name of Kunara itself). Tablets are written in Akkadian, but the toponyms do not seem to be Akkadian or Sumerian. They are probably local, perhaps Lullubean. six anthroponyms are now identified, unfortunately poorly preserved. Some of them may have been Akkadian, but this hypothesis needs to be confirmed. In 2017, two tablets (M. 515 and M. 517) provided the first political title in Kunara: *ensi*₂. It reveals Kunara’s important position, but as the term can mean “governor” or “king,” the precise status of Kunara is still unknown. The tablet M. 517 gives a second title: *sukka*1. The word designates a very high official, and we can assume that he was subordinate to the authority of the *ensi*₂. At last, the tablet M. 225 found in 2015 records a flour entry made by a man, who was probably a vassal of the Kunara *ensi*. Kunara was thus a local regional centre with a centralized administration (see Clancier, Monerie and Tenu in Tenu *et al.* 2019: 66–67).

Was Kunara an independent kingdom, part of the Lullubean territory, or a site controlled by a Mesopotamian state, maybe an outpost of the Akkadian or of the Ur III Empire on the road to the Iranian plateau? This question summarizes the key issues in our research. In the last centuries of the 3rd millennium BC, there were several public edifices in Kunara both in the lower and in the upper towns. They revealed an original assemblage of pottery, lithics, tools, beads, tablets, seals and sealings which testify to local traditions (especially visible in the building technique), but also to Kunara’s integration into a long-distance exchange network with Anatolia, and Mesopotamia. The nature of these exchanges (commercial, diplomatic, but also probably military) is at the heart of our reflexions to situate Kunara in the wider context of the Ancient Near East at the end of the 3rd millennium BC.

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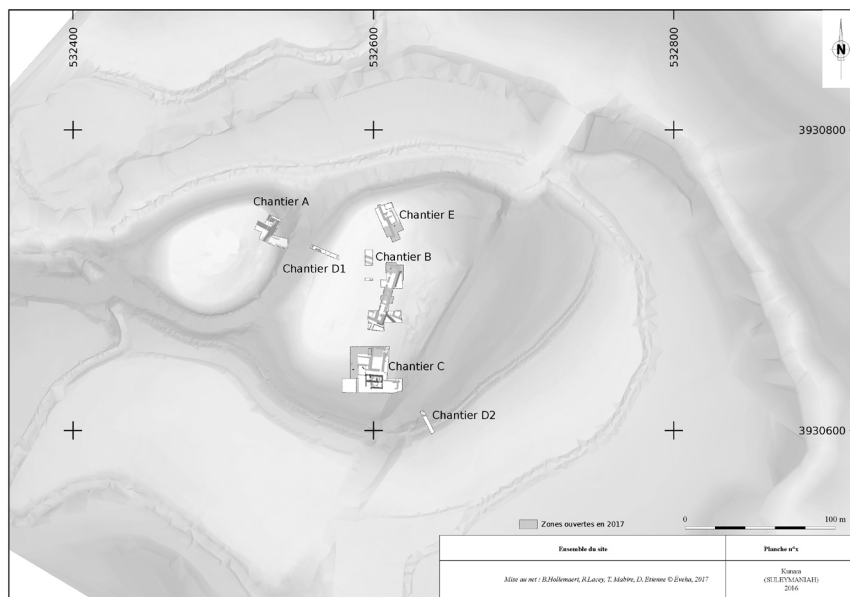


Fig. 1: Topographic map of Kunara (B. Hollemaert, R. Lacey, Th. Mabire, D. Etienne, Mission archéologique du Peramagron)



Fig. 2: General view of Area E looking North (Mission archéologique du Peramagron)



Fig. 3: Complete potstand from Area E (623_support 1) (Mission archéologique du Peramagron)

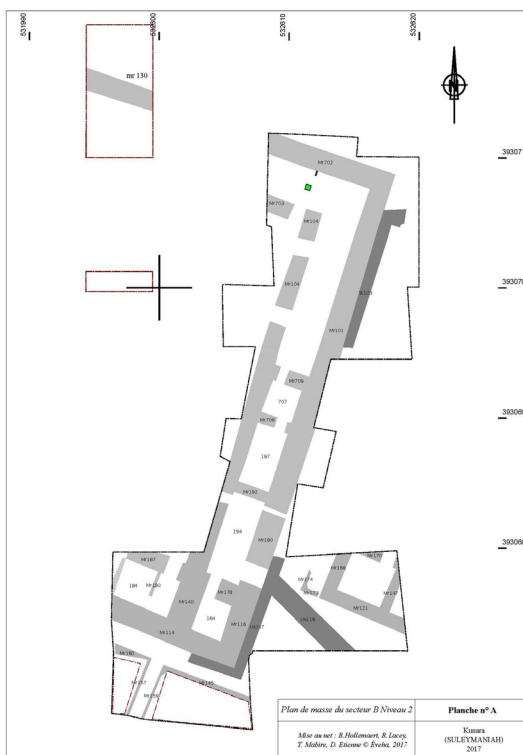


Fig. 4: Schematic map of level 2 (Area B) (B. Hollemaert, R. Lacey, Th. Mabire, D. Etienne, Mission archéologique du Peramagron)

Plan de masse du secteur B Niveau 2	Planche n°A
Mise au net : B. Hollemaert, R. Lacey, T. Mabire, D. Etienne © Evchi, 2017	Kourou (SULTMANIAH) 2017



Fig. 5: General view of Area B looking North-East (Mission archéologique du Peramagron)



Fig. 6: Fine Bowl from Area B (177/03) (Mission archéologique du Peramagron)

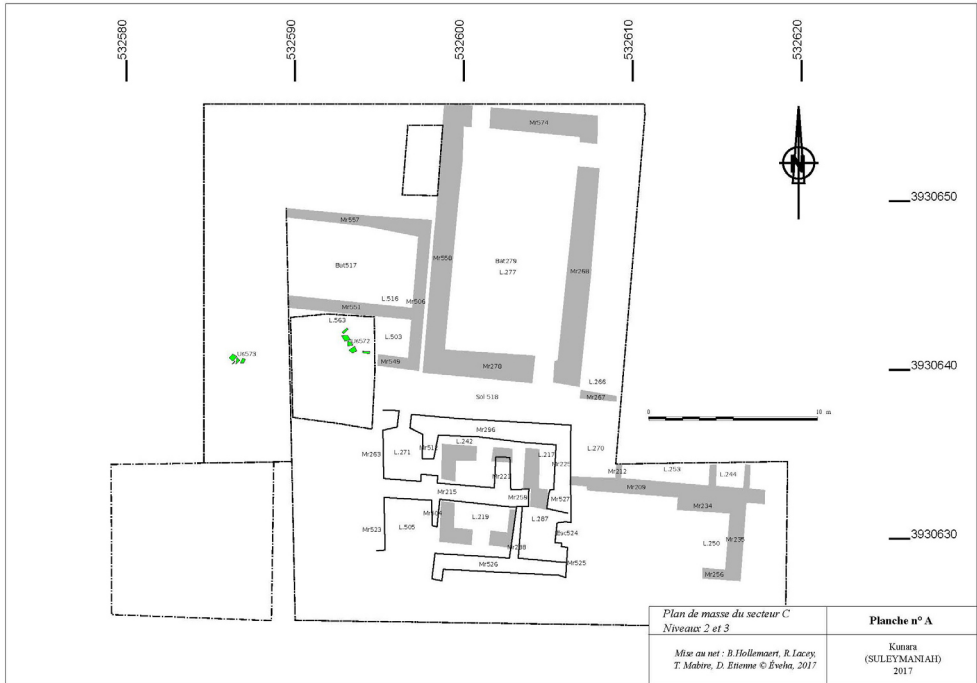


Fig. 7: Schematic map of levels 3 and 4 (area C) (R. Lacey, Th. Mabire, D. Etienne, Mission archéologique du Peramagron)



Fig. 8: A complete Internal-Handled Bowl (M. 533/1) (Area C) (Mission archéologique du Peramagron)