

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ AND ADJACENT REGIONS

Edited by

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Contents

List of Figures and Tables.....	iv
Authors' details	xii
Preface.....	xvii
Archaeological investigations on the Citadel of Erbil: Background, Framework and Results.....	1
<i>Dara AL YAQOOBI, Abdullah KHORSHEED KHADER, Sangar MOHAMMED, Saber HASSAN HUSSEIN, Mary SHEPPERSON and John MACGINNIS</i>	
The site of Bazyan: historical and archaeological investigations.....	11
<i>Narmin AMIN ALI and Vincent DEROCHE</i>	
Short notes on Chalcolithic pottery research: The pottery sequences of Tell Nader (Erbil) and Ashur (Qal'at Sherqat)	19
<i>Claudia BEUGER</i>	
New Evidence of Paleolithic Occupation in the Western Zagros foothills: Preliminary report of cave and rockshelter survey in the Sar Qaleh Plain in the West of Kermanshah Province, Iran	29
<i>Fereidoun BIGLARI and Sonia SHIDRANG</i>	
Activities of Sapienza-University of Rome in Iraqi Kurdistan: Erbil, Sulaimaniyah and Duhok	49
<i>Carlo Giovanni CERETI and Luca COLLIVA</i>	
The Achaemenid Period Occupation at Tell ed-Daim in Iraqi Kurdistan	57
<i>John CURTIS and Farouk AL-RAWI</i>	
'Inscription D' from Sennacherib's Aqueduct At Jerwān: Further Data and Insights.....	65
<i>Frederick Mario FALES and Roswitha DEL FABBRO</i>	
The Land of Nineveh Archaeological Project: A Preliminary Overview on the Pottery and Settlement Patterns of the 3rd Millennium BC in the Northern Region of Iraqi Kurdistan	75
<i>Katia GAVAGNIN</i>	
Animal husbandry and other human-animal interactions in Late Ubaid-Early Uruk northern Iraq: the faunal remains from the 2012 excavation season at Tell Nader.....	87
<i>Angelos HADJIKOUMIS</i>	
Hawsh-Kori and Char-Ghapi: Why the Sassanids built two monuments in the west of Kermanshah and the south of Iraqi Kurdistan	101
<i>Ali HOZHABRI</i>	
Across millennia of occupation: the Land of Nineveh Archaeological project in Iraqi Kurdistan: The prehistory and protohistory of the Upper Tigris rediscovered	125
<i>Marco IAMONI</i>	
The Iraqi Institute: Education for Archaeological Research and Conservation	135
<i>Jessica JOHNSON, Abdullah KHORSHEED and Brian Michael LIONE</i>	

Two seasons of excavations at Kunara (Upper Tanjaro): An Early and Middle Bronze Age city	139
<i>Christine KEPINSKI and Aline TENU</i>	
Excavations of the Chalcolithic Occupations at Salat Tepe on the Upper Tigris, Southeastern Anatolia	147
<i>Tatsundo KOIZUMI, Minoru YONEDA, Shigeru ITOH and Koichi KOBAYASHI</i>	
Insights into the settlement history of Iraqi Kurdistan from the Upper Greater Zab Archaeological Reconnaissance Project	163
<i>Rafał KOLIŃSKI</i>	
Two Ottoman Trade Buildings (<i>Qaisariya</i>) in the Bazaar of Erbil from Building Archaeology to Refurbishment Planning	173
<i>Dietmar KURAPKAT</i>	
Ninevite 5 – culture or regional pottery style?	181
<i>Dorota ŁAWECKA</i>	
Back to the Land of Muṣaṣir/Ardini: Preliminary report on fieldwork (2005-2012)	189
<i>Dlshad MARF</i>	
New Researches on the Assyrian Heartland: The Bash Tapa Excavation Project	201
<i>Lionel MARTI and Christophe NICOLLE</i>	
Materials from French Excavations in Erbil Area (2011-2013): Qasr Shemamok	209
<i>Maria Grazia MASETTI-ROUAULT and Ilaria CALINI</i>	
Current Investigations into the Early Neolithic of the Zagros Foothills of Iraqi Kurdistan	219
<i>Roger MATTHEWS, Wendy MATTHEWS and Kamal Rasheed RAHEEM</i>	
About Bakr Awa	229
<i>Peter A. MIGLUS</i>	
Magnetic investigations in the Shahrizor Plain: Revealing the unseen in survey prospections	241
<i>Simone MÜHL and Jörg FASSBINDER</i>	
The Bazaar of Erbil within the Context of Islamic Trade Routes and Trade Buildings	249
<i>Martina MÜLLER-WIENER and Anne MOLLENHAUER</i>	
Halaf Settlement in the Iraqi Kurdistan: the Shahrizor Survey Project	257
<i>Olivier NIEUWENHUYSE, Takahiro ODAKA and Simone MÜHL</i>	
Contextualizing Arbīl: Medieval urbanism in Adiabene	267
<i>Karel NOVÁČEK</i>	
Filling the Gap: The Upper Tigris Region from the Fall of Nineveh to the Sasanians. Archaeological and Historical Overview Through the Data of the Land of Nineveh Archaeological Project	277
<i>ROCCO PALERMO</i>	
Satu Qala: an Assessment of the Stratigraphy of the Site	297
<i>Cinzia PAPPI</i>	

Helawa: A New Northern Ubaid/Late Chalcolithic Site in the Erbil Plain	309
<i>Luca PEYRONEL, Agnese VACCA and Gioia ZENONI</i>	
From the banks of the Upper Tigris River to the Zagros Highlands. The first season (2013) of the Tübingen Eastern Habur Archaeological Survey	323
<i>Peter PFÄLZNER and Paola SCONZO</i>	
Gre Amer, Batman, on the Upper Tigris: A Rescue Project in the Ilisu Dam Reservoir in Turkey	333
<i>Gül PULHAN and Stuart BLAYLOCK</i>	
In the Neo-Assyrian Border March of the Palace Herald: Geophysical Survey and Salvage Excavations at Gird-i Bazar and Qalat-i Dinka (Peshdar Plain Project 2015)	353
<i>Karen RADNER, Andrei AȘANDULESEI, Jörg FASSBINDER, Tina GREENFIELD, Jean-Jacques HERR, Janoscha KREPPNER and Andrea SQUITIERI</i>	
New investigations at Shanidar Cave, Iraqi Kurdistan	369
<i>Tim REYNOLDS, William BOISMIER, Lucy FARR, Chris HUNT, Dīshad ABDULMUTALB and Graeme BARKER</i>	
Materials from French excavations in the Erbil area (2010): Kilik Mishik	373
<i>Olivier ROUAULT and Ilaria CALINI</i>	
Kurd Qaburstan, A Second Millennium BC Urban Site: First Results of the Johns Hopkins Project	385
<i>Glenn M. SCHWARTZ</i>	
The Sirwan (Upper Diyala) Regional Project – First Results	403
<i>Tevfik Emre ŞERİFOĞLU, Claudia GLATZ, Jesse CASANA and Shwkr MUHAMMED HAYDAR</i>	
Tracking early urbanism in the hilly flanks of Mesopotamia – three years of Danish archaeological investigations on the Rania Plain	411
<i>Tim Boaz Bruun SKULDBØL and Carlo COLANTONI</i>	
The Activities of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Iraqi Kurdistan (MAIKI): The survey area and the new evidence from Paikuli blocks documentation	417
<i>Gianfilippo TERRIBILI and Alessandro TILIA</i>	
The Kani Shaie Archaeological Project	427
<i>André TOMÉ, Ricardo CABRAL and Steve RENETTE</i>	
Philological and scientific analyses of cuneiform tablets housed in Sulaimaniya (Slemani) Museum	435
<i>Chikako WATANABE</i>	
‘Carrying the glory of the great battle’. The Gaugamela battlefield: ancient sources, modern views, and topographical problems	437
<i>Kleanthis ZOUBOULAKIS</i>	

New investigations at Shanidar Cave, Iraqi Kurdistan

Tim REYNOLDS, William BOISMIER, Lucy FARR, Chris HUNT,
Dlshad ABDULMUTALB and Graeme BARKER

Shanidar Cave (36°50' N, 44°13' E) in the Zagros Mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan, approximately 740 m above sea level (Fig. 1), has iconic status in Palaeolithic archaeology following excavations by Ralph Solecki between 1952 and 1960 (Solecki 1963, 1971).¹ It is central to debates about Neanderthal burials and behaviour, the origins of the Upper Palaeolithic and issues of Neanderthal-Modern Human interaction and succession.

In his 14 m-deep trench, Solecki located several Neanderthal burials, including an elderly individual with evidence of severe disability (Trinkhaus 1983) and

another, argued by Leroi-Gourhan (1975) to have been buried with flowers. Four major cultural phases were defined from the artefacts (Fig. 2) and a chronology was derived using radiocarbon: D: non-Levallois Mousterian associated with the Neanderthals (>45 ka); C: Baradostian Upper Palaeolithic, a regional variant of the Aurignacian techno-complex (33-27 ka); B2: Zarzian, a late Pleistocene industry (approximately 12 ka); B1: a proto-Neolithic cemetery (11 ka); A: Holocene activity (from approximately 7 ka).

In 2011, the Kurdistan Regional Government approached Graeme Barker about further work at Shanidar. The resulting project aims to contribute to major debates about Neanderthal societies in south-west Asia and their vulnerability or resilience to climatic change in comparison with *Homo sapiens*, while specific objectives are to establish a high resolution environmental and cultural record, and to re-investigate the Neanderthal burials, their chronology, context and contents. Initial fieldwork during summer 2014 was interrupted by the IS threat, but two phases of excavation were undertaken in 2015.

The excavations – a 4 x 4 m eastern extension of Solecki's main trench – are focused on the location at which the earlier fieldwork discovered most of the Neanderthal remains (Fig. 3). The removal of backfill has exposed approximately 10m of section in this area and the adjacent faces of the main trench to a depth of 4 m (Fig. 4). The sediments result from shallow wash, mud and debris flows, roof fall and aeolian deposition. Sedimentary and diagenetic processes, vegetation and climatic history are being investigated from sediment and micromorphological samples.

An approximately 0.5 x 0.5 m plinth of sediment, separating from the main face as a result of post-1960 boulder collapse, was excavated to investigate Baradostian activity (Fig. 4). Initial radiocarbon dates by the Oxford Radiocarbon Laboratory place the Baradostian c. 35,000-40,000 years ago. Ephemeral but persistent evidence for human activity is present throughout, with three shallow scoops of ash and charcoal, each around 30cm in diameter and probably used as hearths (cooking places). The size of these features suggests limited groups of individuals. An insubstantial assemblage of lithics from Baradostian layers indicates an attempt to maximise the use of available raw materials, mainly



FIGURE 1. LOOKING NORTH TO SHANIDAR CAVE; BUST OF RALPH SOLECKI IN THE FOREGROUND (PHOTOGRAPH BY G. BARKER).

¹ This article first appeared in the *Antiquity* Project Gallery for December 2015 and is reprinted by kind permission of the Editors.

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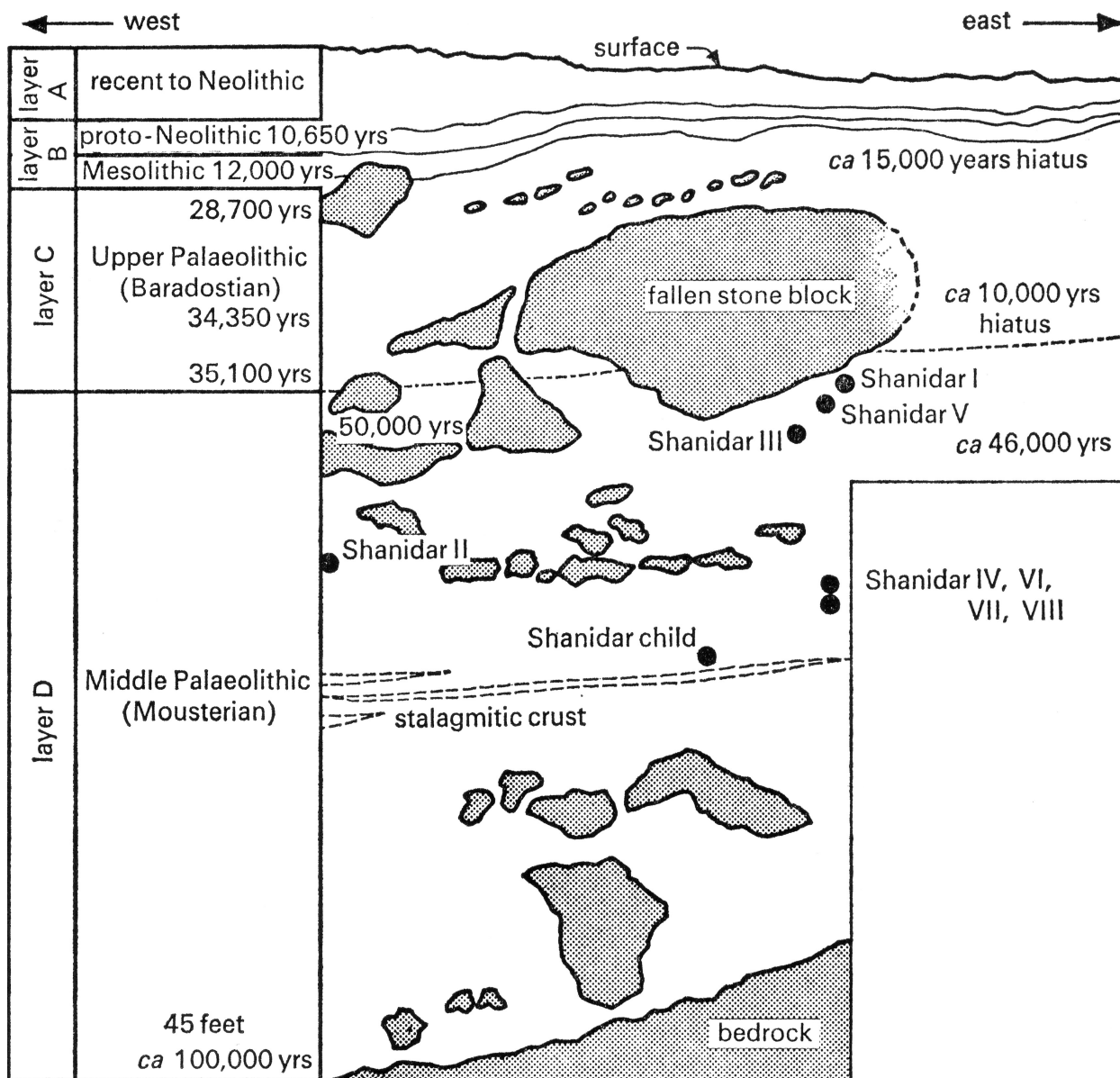


FIGURE 2. SCHEMATIC CROSS SECTION OF THE SOLECKI EXCAVATION, SHOWING HIS MAJOR CULTURAL LAYERS, THE KEY RADIOCARBON DATES AND THE RELATIVE POSITIONS OF THE NEANDERTHALS (REPRODUCED WITH KIND PERMISSION OF RALPH SOLECKI).

river pebbles, with frequent small cores and core shatter fragments, and core edge-trimming flakes. The frequency of multiple burins implies that the retooling of hunting equipment may have been significant (Fig. 5). The amount of burnt bone present in the highly fragmented faunal assemblage could indicate its use as fuel, which is consistent with initial pollen work that suggests a steppeland environment. The emerging picture is of small groups making regular short-term visits for shelter and tool maintenance in extreme conditions.

Around the findspot of the Neanderthal individual – Shanidar V – discovered by Solecki, we have found further Neanderthal remains including a hamate, the distal ends of the right tibia and fibula, and some articulated ankle bones, scattered fragments of two vertebrae, a rib and long bone fragments. The tibia and fibula were in articulation with the ankle bones (Fig. 6) and lay, foot uppermost, on an approximately 45° slope. These elements are missing from the list presented by Trinkhaus (1983), making it probable that they belong

FIGURE 3. THE EASTERN EXTENSION OF THE SOLECKI TRENCH IN 1960, WHERE MOST OF THE NEANDERTHAL REMAINS WERE FOUND; THIS AREA IS THE MAIN FOCUS OF THE NEW EXCAVATIONS (REPRODUCED WITH KIND PERMISSION OF RALPH SOLECKI).

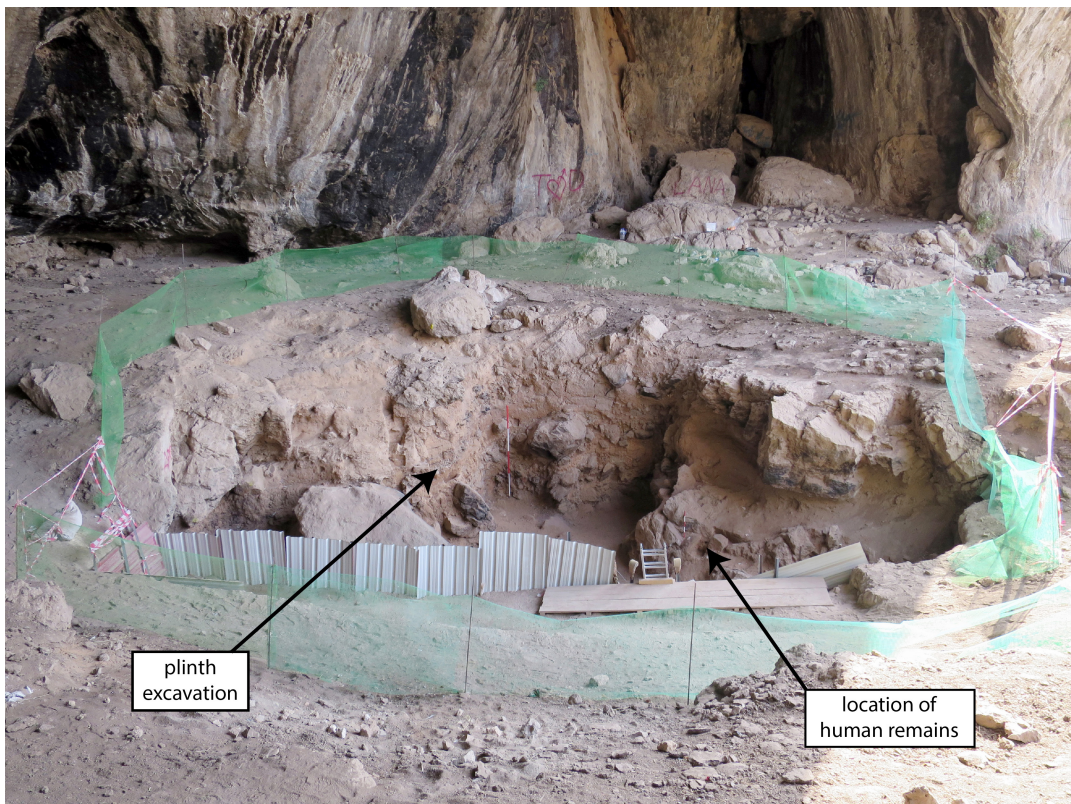
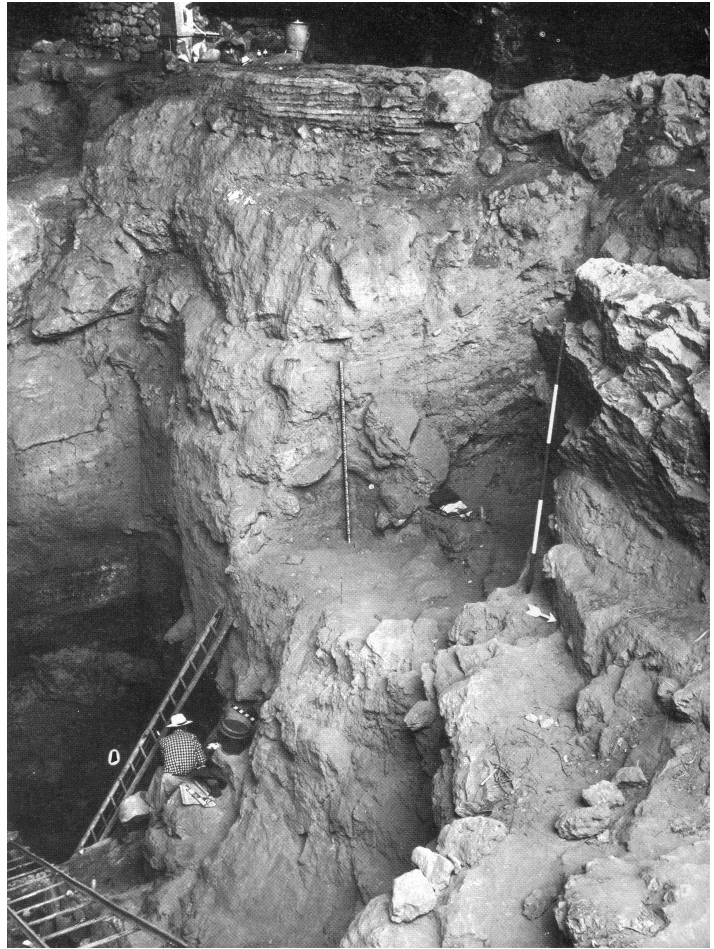


FIGURE 4. GENERAL VIEW OF THE EXCAVATION AREA, LOOKING EAST, SHOWING THE LOCATIONS MENTIONED IN THE TEXT; SCALES: 2 M AND 0.5 M (PHOTOGRAPH BY G. BARKER).

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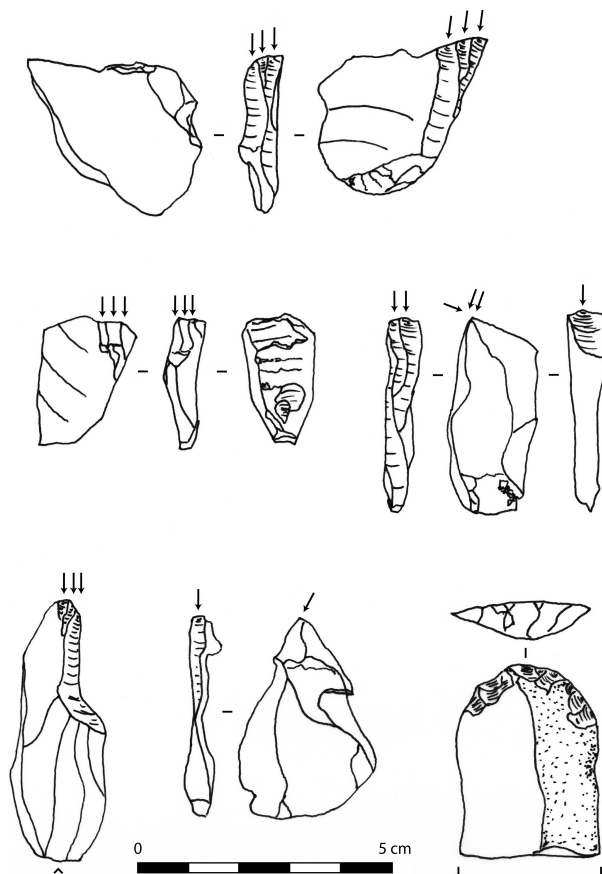


FIGURE 5. A VARIETY OF BURINS AND (BOTTOM RIGHT) AN ENDSRAPER FROM THE SEDIMENTS OF BARADOSTIAN AGE (ILLUSTRATION BY T. REYNOLDS).



FIGURE 6. THE HUMAN RIGHT TIBIA AND FIBULA IN ARTICULATION WITH ANKLE BONES NEAR SOLECKI'S SHANIDAR V NEANDERTHAL SKELETAL MATERIAL AND PROBABLY PART OF THE SAME GROUP; SCALE: 8 CM (PHOTOGRAPH BY G. BARKER).

to Shanidar V, although a new individual cannot be ruled out. An animal burrow truncated the area where the rest of the foot would have been, but some scattered phalange fragments were recovered. The surrounding sediments showed no sign of a grave cut. The lack of a visible cut, the orientation of the anatomical elements and disturbance by animal burrowing all closely match Solecki's observations (1971, 238-42). There is a notable absence of worked lithics around the bones or, indeed, from any of the exposed pre-Baradostian sediments. This contrasts with the amount of material published from the Mousterian (Skinner 1965; Akazawa 1975), but it should be noted that a further 9 m of deposit lies beneath the level reached by the new excavations.

The new fieldwork at Shanidar is undertaken with the permission of the Kurdistan Directorate of Antiquities, which is warmly thanked, as is the Leverhulme Foundation for its financial support.

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