

The focus of the project will be the countryside in Southern Mesopotamia (Al-Qadisiyya province, Southern Iraq) in the hinterland to the Southeast of Nippur, the ancient religious capital of the Sumerians and home of the main god Enlil, will be focus of the study. This area, off-side of the urban center, will be examined through a combination of excavation and survey of known sites from the period under the leadership of Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians until the reign of the Seleucids (1st Millennium BC) without excluding the overlapping material culture of other periods. Earlier work of landscape archaeology until the 1980ies as well as the recent work (2016-18) of a team from Bologna, mainly focusing on the 3rd Millennium BC, exposed only a part of the huge potential this region has for the study of the 1st Millennium BC.

As a pilot study for further exploration will serve the excavation of Ishan Hafudh 25 km Southeast of Nippur. With this archaeological site, for the first time a rural settlement prospering in the middle of the 1st Millennium BC will be excavated. Ishan Hafudh is promising because of a set of finds made in the 1920ies. An amount of more than 80 bullae with sealings point on the importance of this small site during the 5th century BC. Examples without a sealing but including a description (in Babylonian cuneiform script) of an unfinished sealing point towards the existence of a seal-cutters workshop at Ishan Hafudh. Small settlements named after the profession of the inhabitants, known from the cuneiform archives of nearby Nippur from the 5th century BC, existed in the region. Therefore, the site could be a settlement of "seal cutters".

The work will include also an examination of the surrounding plain where already during the 1920ies other sites could be detected which are to be re-identified in lack of a precise map. With the support of modern drone photography and satellite imagery a geo-referenced map should be produced including the collection and analysis of pottery of promising sites for further research.

Another factor of importance this area provides for the study of long-term processes is the situation on an old channel running from Northwest to Southeast which was on main cultic as well as economic axis from Nippur (Enlil's city) down via the administrative center at Drehem and the sanctuary of Ninlil (Enlil's wife) at Tummal 1500 years earlier. It went out of use when the central government broke down during the first half of the 2nd Millennium BC, for Ishan Hafudh the last datable find comes from the reign of Ur-Ninurta. It was only again re-introduced into service during the Neo-Babylonian and Persian period (622-333 BC) through the settlement of large deported groups of people from places as far West as Egypt and the western Anatolia coast (Ionia and Caria).