Iraqi Kurdistan opened to archaeological research a decade ago. Since then, more than a dozen archaeological survey projects have been conducted there, supplemented by excavations – recording thousands of unknown archaeological sites and other cultural heritage relics threatened by rapid economic development and instances of vandalism. The new knowledge thus gained has led to a better understanding of the process of settlement and use of the fertile plains between the Tigris and the mountains to the east and their importance for successive empires – Assyrian, Persian, Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanian.

This project proposes to investigate two phenomena that have not been addressed in studies of the history of north-eastern Iraq. The first concerns the use of caves as shelters during the Stone Age (up to the Chalcolithic). The second concerns Christian settlement, and in particular, its duration during the Islamic era up to modern times. Both issues would be examined based on new source material from surface surveys conducted in an enclosed area of the mountainous Nahla Valley. The isolated area provides a clear picture of how resources were exploited and how the space was used and allows us to trace the evolution of settlement in greater detail.

The Nahla Valley is located northwest of Erbil, behind the first higher ranges of the Kurdistan Mountains. Culturally, it has been under the influence of, firstly, the Palaeolithic industries of Mustierian, Baradostian and Zarzian, then of the Mesopotamian civilization, and finally of Christianity and Islam. Between 1930 and 1960, Iraqi archaeologists collected information about monuments located there without verifying them in the field. They recorded 17 caves, two churches, and two "villages". A more thorough French historian of Eastern Christianity, Jean-Maurice Fiey, listed a ruined monastery with surrounding rock caves, 17 churches, the oldest of which was built before the 9th century AD, one cave, and four sacred sites in the area.

The project aims to reconstruct the settlement strategies of human communities at two diametrically opposed stages of development. It is assumed that environmental determinism played a greater role in the Stone Age (presence of karst caves in the slopes of limestone mountain ranges, access to diverse ecological zones on mountain slopes and in valleys). In the Christian era, in turn, the difficult access to the valley may have played an important role, creating a kind of refugium allowing Christians to survive until modern times.

The aim of the project is to verify the above-quoted figures by recording historical heritage sites from all periods and, in particular, to focus on understanding the two issues indicated above. Experience from the implementation of the Upper Greater Zab Archaeological Reconnaissance shows that there are more caves in the region than are known to Iraqi archaeologists. The proximity to one of the most important sites in the Middle East, the Shanidar Cave (30 km to the north), indicates that they may have provided shelter for small Stone Age communities. As for the presence of Christians, the goal will be to determine when they appeared in the Valley, as well as the dynamics of the continuation of their communities here until the 20th century AD. It is particularly important at this time to record the legacy of the Christians before it falls into disrepair or disappears altogether.

The fieldwork will be preceded by an analysis of declassified aerial photographs of the valley, which are the result of U.S. government spying programmes carried out in the 1960s and 1970s. This will identify the location of the villages mentioned by Fiey and potential archaeological sites. Field research will consist of verification of these identifications, interviews in villages, and traditional archaeological prospecting. Caves, architecture, cemeteries, and sites will be documented through measurements, photographs, and descriptions, and objects found on the surface will be collected for further analysis. Limestone mortar samples will be taken at churches for radiocarbon dating. It is also planned to use a metal detector within and around the structures to find coins allowing for more accurate dating of their period of use.

As a result of the project, knowledge of the historical heritage of an area that was previously virtually unknown will increase significantly. It is also expected that the authorities of the Kurdistan Regional Government, to whom the list of monuments with documentation will be handed over, will increase the protection of the historical substance. At the same time, the confirmation of the working hypotheses will bring new knowledge about the use of the country's peripheral regions, hitherto neglected in both field research and historical reconstructions. The results of the project will be published in a renowned scientific publication.

The PI conducted research of a similar nature in Iraqi Kurdistan between 2012 and 2017 and has the necessary field experience in cooperating with the Kurdish Antiquities Service and the local administration to successfully implement the project. His publication and promotional activity demonstrates his understanding of the importance of getting the information about the project's results into the scientific and public circulation.