



## Southern Mesopotamia (RG 11)

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### First International Meeting of the Regional Group 11 “Southern Mesopotamia”

#### Summary

The regional group “Southern Mesopotamia” plays a special role within the ARCANE project. As early as the third millennium Southern Mesopotamia is rich in epigraphic, historical as well as archaeological data. The absolute-chronological periodization of larger parts of the Ancient Near East, therefore, is dependent upon the data from Southern and Central Mesopotamia. For good reason, the Mesopotamian periodization still serves as a backbone for local chronologies of the wider region.

On the other hand, most of the data derives from older excavations which do not fulfil modern standards in excavation and observation techniques. Therefore, one major contribution of the regional group “Southern Mesopotamia” to ARCANE will be the re-evaluation of old excavations and the extraction of only the data that derives from securely defined find circumstances. This will be an important augmentation for relative and absolute chronology.

Each of the participants of the group agreed to evaluate one old but important excavation site, and they discussed the relevant strata and excavation units. The sites to be re-evaluated will include: Fara, Ur and Uruk.

Most promising for ARCANE, nevertheless, will be the inclusion of the excavations in Nippur, el-Hiba and Abu Salabikh, which were conducted in the 1970ies and 1980ies. Some parts of these excavations meet the high standards of ARCANE. The members of the group have either access to the excavation data or they will be able to contact the excavation directors for data. During this First International Meeting, material from these sites, including some still unpublished and long awaited data, was presented and discussed.

In addition, some recent Iraqi excavations should be included, such as the sites Umma, Umm el Aqarib and Tell el Wilaya. Very unfortunately all of the Iraqi colleagues who were invited were not able to travel, due to the unforeseen closure of the airport in Baghdad shortly before the meeting. All Iraqi members of the Regional group will be invited to the German Archaeological Institute in 2007, on which occasion they will be able to study and discuss their material according to the ARCANE goals.

While presenting and discussing the working tools of ARCANE, i.e. the database and guidelines, the participants were in agreement that there is the possibility of setting up a stable Southern Mesopotamian chronological framework, and, further, that at least some of the well known archaeological data from older excavations will indeed contribute to chronological matters.

## Scientific Content

### **1. Presentation of the structure of ARCANE**

One first and important step of the meeting was to introduce the members of this group and discuss the aims and structure of the ARCANE project.

Therefore, the history of the project, its acceptance by the ESF and its official start in February 2006 were summarized.

Political and scientific changes have brought an increase of excavations in Syria, Turkey and the Levant. On the contrary, the old core region, Central and Southern Mesopotamia, is no longer able to contribute archaeological data that fulfils modern technical standards. Yet, on the other hand, epigraphic and historical data that is relevant for the absolute chronological framework is still available mainly in Mesopotamia. Despite the lack of recent excavations Southern Mesopotamia contributes a major part of chronologically important material; but a drastic revision of the sites with reference to stratigraphically secure material is needed.

The definition of the somewhat artificial term “third millennium” was discussed with special regard to the peculiarities of Southern Mesopotamia as well as the kind of material – art historical, epigraphic and / or environmental – available from Southern Mesopotamia. Due to the political circumstances, unfortunately there is almost no foreseeable possibility to add more samples for C 14 or other dating methods from the region. The different regions of ARCANE were denoted and the borders to neighbouring regions discussed.

The structure of ARCANE, its technical organisation and the modus operandi were presented and some aspects explained in detail for those who have recently become a member of the project.

### **2. Presentation of the “Guidelines for the ARCANE Procedures”**

Concerning the project itself, the necessity and internal development of the guidelines had to be explained. By going through all points of the guidelines which were agreed upon during the last meeting of the Steering Committee in February 2006, the scientific needs and particularities as well as the necessity of a common working structure and terminology became clearer to everyone. Despite the fact that the guidelines are available in written form, the very concentrated content made an explanation of the background of each paragraph advisable. Especially with regard to the difficult circumstances in Southern Mesopotamia – since there we are mainly dealing with “old” excavations –, the guidelines and proposed working procedures had to be discussed with special focus on the region. As far as this stage of the project is foreseeable, there will be data that can be processed as required in the guidelines. It is, nevertheless, obvious that major parts of the excavation data from Southern Mesopotamia will not fulfil the requested high standards of primary inventories, instead this data will mainly be consistent with composite and artificial inventories, as defined in the guidelines. This was expected by everyone and confirmed during the presentation of material.

### **3. Presentation of the Website and Database**

J.-P. Thalmann presented and discussed the revised database as finalized in November 2006. The general structure and the working tools of the database were explained as well as some reworked and recently defined parts, such as the important “Bibliography file”. In order to

avoid as many mistakes as possible when filling in the database in the future, some time was spent in focussing on the hierarchy and importance of the system of identification of files. The database structure in general and the foreseen work-flow were studied in some detail basing on a theoretical input of data from Larsa; it passed discussion without major enquiry and objection. However, since some internal links were not connected yet, only work with the finalized database will prove its practicability. J.-P. Thalmann informed the group that the final version will be finished within a few days' time and that it will be available on the website in January 2007, at the latest at the beginning of February 2007.

#### **4. Presentation of the state of archaeological work at relevant sites in Southern Mesopotamia**

All participants were asked to briefly present and analyze one or two of those particular Southern Mesopotamian sites, which should be taken into consideration by ARCANE.

**Ur:** Ö. Tunca discussed the excavations in Ur. Thereby, he focussed on the fact that despite a lot of important excavated and published structures from that site, with special regard to ARCANE pre-requisites one would face major problems when attempting to integrate material. The main problem is the kind of publication in which architectural structures, stratigraphical information as well as a larger part of the material were presented in a generalized form. All that is published about the architecture is actually a reconstruction, and therefore it will not be possible to include this. All archaic and 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium texts from Ur cannot be used to study chronology, because there is no link between the texts and the archaeological structures. The same applies to the pottery. Re-checking the validity of other archaeological finds would involve studying the material once more. To be specific, it is unclear where the material is stored now and it is also unclear whether or not it would be possible to identify the material. After the discussion all participants agreed that it might be worthwhile to re-examine some of the graves. Since this is a time-consuming task, this would only be possible if undertaken by a scholar who is studying the material from the graves anyway. In general there is the possibility of an internal seriation of graves and then to link this by comparison with material from better stratified sites.

The decision was made to contact Richard Zettler and a PhD student working on the Ur cemetery at the moment as to whether there is a possibility to include the graves in the ARCANE database.

**Uruk:** M. van Ess emphasized a similar situation in Uruk. Although the possibility exists of including a sequence of architectural data and the associated stratigraphy, there is nearly no possibility of connecting archaeological objects with this stratigraphy. There might be some areas in Uruk from which data could be extracted: the so-called "Sammelfundraum" (collected finds' room) of the "Gemdet-Nasr-Zeit" in the vicinity of the ziggurat. At present a M.A. student is re-examining all findspots of the material that was found in this area. Some remains of the Ur III-period within the Eanna sanctuary can be included as well. In addition, there will be some strata from excavations in domestic areas (excavations in K/L 12 and in the Archaische Siedlung/Archaic Settlement). Therefore, Uruk most probably will deliver mainly a sequence of architectural information.

**Larsa:** One building excavated during the latest excavations in Larsa (building B33) can be included. All of the material is published, and the stratigraphy and archaeological description are high standard. Two probable major problems will be that the archaeological material derives mainly from a settlement that reoccupied an earlier building and that the connection between the one and the other remains somewhat uncertain.

**Nippur:** A. McMahon summarized the results of 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium levels in several trenches and excavation areas in Nippur (WA 30c, WF, TA, TB, EA, WC-3). Especially area WF, a deep sounding, covered the whole range of 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium with its 14 levels. Some chronological markers (cuneiform tablets, sealings) in secure find circumstances are available for a few layers and offer a historical framework for larger parts of the sequence. Other trenches are more restricted in their sequence, yet they revealed enough objects or texts with historical data to allow secure dating. Older excavation such as those in TA and TB are published in a more schematic way and might need a re-assessment, as is certainly the case in the excavation at the North Temple. Nippur most probably will be the key site for the ARCANE project and would need a higher number of inputs to the database.

J. Evans presented the excavation at the Inanna temple, a small sounding down to the water table. It revealed 20 different levels, 11 of them covering most of the historical periods of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium. The sequence and material is still mostly unpublished, with many completed manuscripts stored in the archives. ARCANE could foster the publication of material. There are nevertheless some material groups, which have not been studied yet.

**Fara:** H. Martin summarized the old excavations in Fara and highlighted two possible areas where partly stratified material can be worked out (DE 38/39 = Gemdet Nasr destruction level and perhaps pit 1 with an inner stratigraphy of the Ur III to ED III periods). All other excavation areas of the German and American excavations do not fulfil ARCANE requirements.

**Abu Salabikh:** A seriation of the published graves in Abu Salabikh would certainly contribute to ARCANE. In addition, there are some excavated houses which have not appeared in a final publication yet. A request for data will be made to the excavation director, Professor Nicholas Postgate.

**al-Hibba:** J. Evans described the different excavation areas at al-Hibba, which were uncovered between 1968 and 1990; most of them are not published but have been studied. Four areas will be of interest for ARCANE, which span the periods between the Early Dynastic I (Area A, G), Early Dynastic III (Area A, C) and Isin-Larsa period (Area B). There is ample and important glyptic material from both the ED I and ED III period, whereby area C offers in addition a great amount of material in situ. Al-Hiba might well be the second key site for the ARCANE project.

M. van Ess made a very brief summary of the possible potential of three excavations carried out by the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage: Umm el Aqarib for a late ED, Umma for Akkadian and Ur III-material and Tell el-Wilaya for its ED to Akkadian levels. The Iraqi colleagues, who were invited to the meeting, were unable to attend due to security problems. However, they will be invited to visit Berlin in the spring of 2007 and requested to bring their material with them.

## **5. Working steps for the first phase of the project, time-schedule, budget and deadlines**

The next practical steps for the project should be the analysis and preparation of material for input into the database. Each member of the group will assume responsibility for one “old” excavation and prepare the data of the site, whose material they have already studied. In addition, the excavation directors of some sites should be contacted and data requested (Abu Salabikh, Mashan Shapir). One point discussed was to contact the Team leader of the regional group “Central Mesopotamia” and propose changing the site of Gemdet Nasr to “Southern Mesopotamia”. As soon as the database is finalized, the input of data for some sites could start. For others sites, additional assistance and studies by MA or PhD students must be sought (Ur).

A second meeting of ARCANE is planned in February 2008. The meeting will focus on the comparison of material within the region. Due to the rather low number of sites that are of relevance for ARCANE, the regional group will most probably not be able to distinguish regional differences within Southern Mesopotamia – this despite the fact that previous research has already shown that differences must be taken into consideration.

Information about the general schedule of the ARCANE project, budget capacities and the possible problems deriving from this was also supplied.

### **Assessment of the results**

The first international meeting of the Regional Group 11 “Southern Mesopotamia” was aimed at two major issues.

The first issue was to implement and adjust the general guidelines and the general terminology of the ARCANE project to the peculiarities of the region of Southern Mesopotamia. This had to be discussed in detail and with the utmost care, since in contrast to other regions of the Near East Southern Mesopotamia lacks archaeological excavations carried out with the high standards common today, due to the political situation. All members of the group understood and agreed to the guidelines and to the necessity that a general thesaurus should be implemented to the ARCANE database.

The second issue was the study and discussion of sites and material to be included in the ARCANE project. The relevant units and assemblages were worked out for all sites under discussion, and steps established on how and where to proceed with the detailed study of material according to the ARCANE guidelines. The presentation of a number of unpublished but nevertheless well studied material complexes and sites gave new insight into the specifics of 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium Southern Mesopotamia. The comparison of the material is very promising and must be one of the next major steps.

The ARCANE project might well give new impetus to finally publish important excavation areas and material groups.