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Destruction and Looting of Archaeological Sites between Fāra / Šuruppak and Išan Bahrīyāt / Isin: Damage Assessment during the Fara Regional Survey Project FARSUP

Adelheid Otto, Berthold Einwag, Abbas Al-Hussainy, Jacob A. H. Jawdat,
Christoph Fink and Hardy Maaß

Introduction

With the consent of the Vice Minister, the Director General of Antiquities Dr. Qais H. Rasheed, Chair of SBAH, a survey of Fara and the region between Fāra and Išan Bahrīyāt was conducted in October 2016, January 2017 and February-March 2018 ⁽¹⁾. The Fara Regional Survey Project (FARSUP) investigates the southernmost part of the Diwaniyah province (map Fig. 1a). The first two campaigns in 2016 and 2017 were uniquely devoted to an intensive survey of Fara (for a preliminary report see Marchetti, Einwag et al. 2017). During the campaign in February-March 2018 we investigated eleven sites along the ancient river course which led from Fāra towards the South, and eight sites in the region between Išan Bahrīyāt and Fāra (Fig. 1b). The team consisted of German and Iraqi archaeologists and graduate students, which did an amazing job under all circumstances. Our greatest thanks are due to all of them ⁽²⁾.

Most of the FARSUP area is today a remote region, far distant from any settlement or hamlet, situated in the steppic area. Even fields are not numerous, and mainly sheep or camel herds can survive here by grazing the modest plants. In spring 2018, the number of irrigated fields and small farmsteads had even decreased due to the lack of rainfall and the low water level of the Euphrates. The situation thus is very different from the one in the area of the QADIS survey region (see report by Marchetti et al., this volume), which is situated largely in the today irrigated zone, where modern fields and villages are abundant. In principal, the remote situation of the FARSUP region could be ideal for the conservation of the tell sites, since no modern agriculture, settlement activities or construction work of canals or streets contribute to their destruction. But unfortunately, this remoteness has led to most severe looting after the second Gulf War. It was easy for the looters, even though they came in

hundreds and were organized, to enter the area by from the south through the steppic area, without that this would be remarked by the locals or the police.

Assessing damage at the sites of Fāra / ancient Šuruppak and Išān Bahrīyāt / ancient Isin

Išān Bahrīyāt and Fāra are the two sites in the FARSUP area, which have been the target of the most devastating destructions. Both sites have suffered some damage by looting over centuries. But the systematic, organized illicit digging with machines and hundreds of looters took place between 2003 and 2006-7. It led to the nearly complete destruction of the extended site of Išān Bahrīyāt, the ancient Babylonian royal city Isin. Before that, scientific excavations had taken place only during eleven campaigns between 1973 and 1989 under the direction of Barthel Hrouda ⁽³⁾. The tremendous damage at Isin, caused by hundreds of illegal diggers, has already been reported before (Stone 2008, 2015; Emberling and Hanson 2008). Today, the whole area of the mound is literally pierced by illicit trenches, which penetrate the soil until a depth of 8 m in places (Figs. 2, 3). Below the surface, tunnel systems were driven into the ground, which makes the site quite instable. Usually, illegal holes have a roughly round shape; but

here, many illicit trenches are square or rectangular. This might indicate that the looters had some experience with scientific excavation methods.

In order to develop systematic plans for the protection of sites it is imperative to understand the main goal of the illicit digging. It is difficult to assess what was the looters main target at Isin, but we can be sure, that pottery and stamped bricks were clearly not their main interest. These were left behind and are still lying abundantly around in the debris near the looting holes. Fig. 3a and 3b show a baked brick lying in a deep looting hole at Išān Bahrīyāt. The brick bears the stamp of the standard inscription of king Amar-Su'ena of Ur (Steible 1991, Amarsuen 2. We thank Prof. Claus Wilcke for this information).

The damage at Fara is equally devastating (Fig. 4). Thousands of looting holes, one beside the other, varying in size (1-6 m) and depth (1-4 m) destroy completely the upper levels of the main mound. This is especially dramatic, since the third millennium levels of the so-called Fara period were lying in most places directly below they surface. They contained the bulk of material and all the tablets. Since Andrae and Koldewey claim that this level „with the good old tablets“ lay appr. One meter below the surface, we have to accept that this level of the main

mound was completely destroyed within the last 15 years.

The overall area of the ancient city Šuruppak covered more than 200 ha in the Fara period (Martin 1988). This extended area was already in antiquity divided into a main mound rising up to max. 10 m, several less prominent mounds, and an extended, shallow lower town. Four thousand years of abandonment led to heavy erosion and transformation of the mound, and to a different texture of the soil within the mounds and the lower town. While the fabric of the elevated mounds is soft and inhomogenous, the soil of the flat lower town is much more condensed and harder due to precipitations. This seems to be the main reason why heavy to massive damage occurred in appr. 90% of the surface of the main mound, while the lower town was only looted in a few places. (Fig. 5: Map of Fara, indicating the various grades of destruction through illicit digging).

At both sites, the main target of the looters were clearly the elevated areas of the mounds. The destruction of an area is directly proportional to its elevation. Apparently, the higher a mound is, the more attractive it is for looters. Also the colour seems to have influenced the illegal diggers. Dark colour, attesting burnt or ashy debris, attracted the looters much more than bright soil, which seems to be – in

their opinion – purer and less rich in artefacts. The drone photo shows how the looting pits destroy much of the elevated mound Fara B (which is the smaller mound east of the main mound), but not the shallow lower town, which is a completely flat area without visible remains during the dry season, but where house plans became visible after rain (Fig. 6).

At Fara, wherever there had been rims or bodies of large vessels visible on the surface, the looters made holes. Quite evidently, they knew that large pithoi were one of the standard types of the Early Dynastic graves. Generally, graves of the third to first millennium seem to have the reputation to be especially promising for grave goods, such as jewellery, ornaments, weapons and other gifts for and belongings of the deceased. The locals stated that looters use to walk around a site and examine it with a stick in order to feel the softness of the ground. Soft earth is deemed a rewarding looting ground, perhaps because this is usually interpreted as a grave's location.

As concerns the looting at Fara, we suppose that the main target were indeed the Early Dynastic III graves, which are abundant in most of the site, and lie mostly close to the surface. Our guess is, that the looters knew or experienced that jewellery and cylinder seals were accompanying the bodies in some of the graves.

Walter Andrae and Robert Koldewey, who conducted the most extensive, scientific excavations so far at Fara between June 1902 and March 1903, reported, that a few Early Dynastic graves contained cylinder seals (Heinrich – Andrea 1931). Since seals are among the objects which are small and solid and can be easily smuggled even across borders, they are especially favored by looters. Unfortunately, cylinder seals continue to be sold all over the world on the art market at high prices, even if their provenience is not proven. Clearly, pottery was not the focus of the illicit diggers, since even complete Early Dynastic conical bowls and other vessels were left behind near the looted graves at Fara. Probably many graves had contained some jewellery, since singular small beads from carnelian, limestone, lapis lazuli, shell and other material were lying around some looting holes. Apparently they had been lost or overlooked by the illicit diggers. Many graves must also have contained stone vessels. We documented fragments of dozens of bowls and pots from calcite, marble and sandstone (Foto 7: Stone bowl in the debris of a looted grave at Fara). They were left behind, even if they could have been restored by glueing. Evidently, only complete objects were searched for. This impression is corroborated by photos showing

looted artefacts which had been confiscated by the Iraqi Police in 2004 (al Hamdani 2008, p. 225): all the objects are in a complete state of preservation.

In order to assess the damage caused by the thousands of looting pits at Fara, we tried to calculate the loss. Given the enormous density of sherds and other artefacts on the surface of Fara, we investigated systematically, how much material – pottery and objects – can be estimated for this mound. We therefore undertook the systematic seaving of a looting pit's debris, which had been outside the pit along the edges, but had since the assumed looting in 2003-6 (a cigaret packet was still in good shape) fallen again back into the pit. The pit was situated at the most elevated point of the main mound of Fara, close to Walter Andrae's trench IV (c-d). A terracotta ring, already visible on the surface, may have been the reason why the looters began to dig here. The ring is the uppermost end of a terracotta gully, which was built from terracotta tubes, each 65cm in diameter and 70cm in height. It bears witness to the uppermost eroded Akkadian/Ur III level. Below this level, an ED IIIa/b grave had been dug into an ED II/IIIa building, of which a wall from plano-convex mudbricks was visible at the edge of the pit. We sieved the complete debris of the pit, counted and

weighed the pottery and all the other objects. The pit had a total surface of appr. 10 sqm and was 1.5-1.8 m deep, which gives a total volume of appr. 15-18 cbm. In total, we retrieved 2247 sherds, weighing all together 114 kilogramm. Most of them were fragments of conical bowls, bottles and pots, most of them dating to the ED II-III period, but also three solid footed goblets of ED I date were identified. Besides this enormous amount of pottery, only a few objects had been left behind in the pit: a polishing tool, a fragment of a stone vessel, beads and a flint blade.

The counting and weighing of the material within the pit allows to calculate the amount of pottery within the main mound of Fara. If we assume an average height of 8m above the surrounding plain level, the main mound could contain 3.000.000 kilo of pottery.

Damage Assessment in the FARSUP Region

Twenty sites were surveyed in the FARSUP region between Isin and Fara in February – March 2018 (Fig. 1b). Eight of them had previously been surveyed by Adams and Nissen in the 1970ies (Adams and Nissen 1972; Adams 1981), the twelve other sites were documented and surveyed for the first time. Today, satellite images and remote sensing techniques are an enormous help in

order to detect sites in advance and to search for them systematically in the field. Additionally, we made drone photos during the survey, which give more precise informations about the exact dimensions of sites and help to detect settlement remains which are not visible on the satellite imagery.

Along the ancient river bed, which passes by Fara and continues southwards towards Uruk, there is a continuous chain of sites (see Fig. 1b). They are dating mainly to the Early – Late Uruk period, and to the Old Babylonian – Kassite period. Every single site bore looting holes, which were directly proportional in number and size to the height and colour of the mound.

Eight sites were surveyed in the area roughly 10 km east of Isin Bahriyat/Isin, in the steppic area south of the Nahr al-Atshan. They are mainly dating to the Old Babylonian – Kassite and to the Parthian – Sassanian – Islamic period. Some very large Sassanian – Islamic sites exist in this region. The most prominent and extended one is Tell at-Tawila, a more than 1km long flat site with abundant glazed or stamped pottery on the surface. This site, however, shows few traces of looting. This is especially striking, if compared to two nearby sites, situated less than 1km apart, which had fallen victim to intense looting, some of which quite recently (Fig. 8:

Drone photo of recently looted Old Babylonian – Kassite sites FARSUP 16, 17). The material in the debris around the looting holes confirms their Old Babylonian – Kassite date. All the Old Babylonian to Kassite sites were heavily looted. At some of them, the looters applied a certain method: they dug small rectangular trenches in alternating rows (Fig. 9: Systematic looting „test pits“ at the site FARSUP 18). Evidently, some holes were very recent. Since we surveyed the site one week after heavy rainfalls, we were sure that the looting had occurred within these days, since the debris, which had been removed from the looting holes, was still fresh and loose and showed no traces of rain.

Local people and the SBAH staff confirmed, that sites which date to the more recent, especially the Sassanian – Islamic periods, are usually less damaged by looting. Apparently, the looters are mainly targeting on objects such as cuneiform tablets, complete figurines, cylinder seals and jewellery, which are mainly found at sites of the Bronze and Iron Age. Apparently the looters' focus has been and continues to be on third and second millennium sites. Within these, graves seem to be reputed for being most promising to find precious objects such as cylinder seals and jewellery. But since only complete objects seem to have been

of interest for the illegal diggers and dealers, hundreds of cubit meters of ancient habitat containing millions of broken artefacts have to be irrevocably destroyed in search of a handful of compete objects, which lose most of their value if detached from their context.

The enormous destruction of whole sites and the irreversible annihilation of the cultural heritage is a tragedy. The extinction of collective memory and identity stands in no relation to the money, which can be made from selling the artefacts on the black market. It is a shame, that there is still an international market for illegal artefacts, which are sold and exported by criminal dealers to ruthless clients all over the world.

Unfortunately, the illicit digging is continuing also in 2018. Certainly, it is not comparable in extent to the systematic, organized destruction, which took place on a large scale and in an organized manner during the years 2003-2006. But it still causes irretrievable destruction of the fragile cultural past of Iraq. All possible measures must be taken by the local authorities and the international community to stop the ongoing illicit digging and to prohibit the trade of this dirty material. Otherwise the looting of Iraq's unprotected sites will go on and will result in the annihilation of this ‚Heartland of Cities‘

Footnotes

1- Our sincere thanks go to Dr. Qais Rasheed for giving us the permission and all support to conduct this project. Further thanks go to numerous SBAH staff members, who helped us in many respects in Diwaniyah and Afak. We are deeply obliged to Prof. Abbas al-Hussainy who contributed to the success of this season in many ways. Warm thanks go to Prof. Nicolò Marchetti who allowed us to participate at his QADIS survey in 2016/17. Funding was provided by the LMU Munich/Germany (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München) and the Association of the Friends of the LMU.

2- In February-March 2018, the Iraqi members of the team were five people of the SBAH staff Basim Jabbar, Jacob Abdulhassan Hassan, Ahmed Hameed Hesoon, Ahmed Swadi Jasim, Sabah Hashim Gaphel, and seven graduate students Haneen Tahir Hameed, Muna Makki, Ahmed Salah Sahib, Safaa Qasim Kareem, Hussam Hadi Kareem, Ali Filis Mashy, Hassan Jabbar Khadem. German members of the team were Dr. Adelheid Otto, Dr. Berthold Einwag, Christoph Fink, M.A., Hardy Maaß, M.A., Pierre Borsdorf, M.A., Friederike Einwag und Johannes Einwag. We thank also the team of 10 policemen who took care of us and protected us during the survey.

3- Excavations took place on behalf of the Bavarian Academie of Sciences

(Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften) and the LMU Munich (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München) and were supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft DFG. Preliminary reports were published by B. Hrouda, *Isin- Išān Bahrīyāt. Die Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen Band I, 1977; Band II, 1981; Band III, 1986, Band IV, 1992.* Recently, the cuneiform documents dating to the 3rd to 1st mill. BC have been edited by Claus Wilcke, *Keilschrifttexte aus ISIN – IŠĀN BAḤRĪYĀT.* Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, *Abhandlungen Neue Folge 143, München 2018.*

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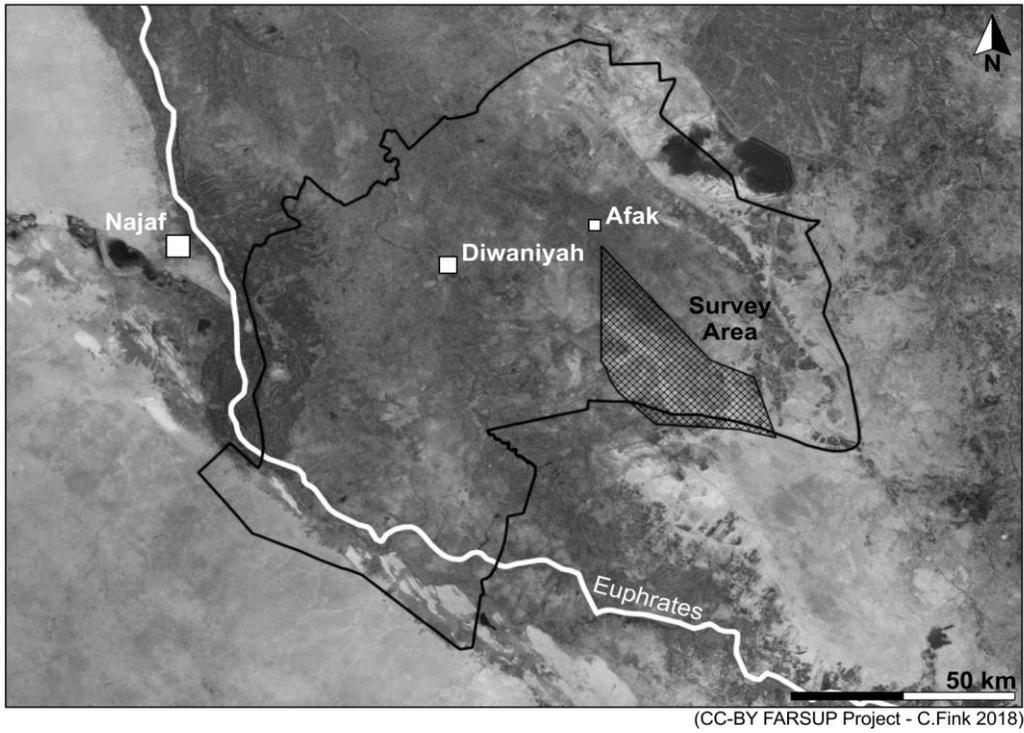


Fig. 1a. Situation of the Fara Regional Survey Project area within the Diwaniyah province (Map: Christoph Fink).



Fig. 1b. Map of the surveyed sites in the Fara Regional Survey Project region (Map: Christoph Fink).



Fig. 2. Looting holes at Iṣān Bahrīyāt/Isin, 2017 (Photo: Berthold Einwag).



Fig. 3a. Deep looting hole at Iṣān Bahrīyāt with stamped brick in the debris (Photo: Berthold Einwag).



Fig. 3b. Close-up of the same brick, stamped with the standard inscription of Amar-Su'ena (Photo: Hardy Maaß).

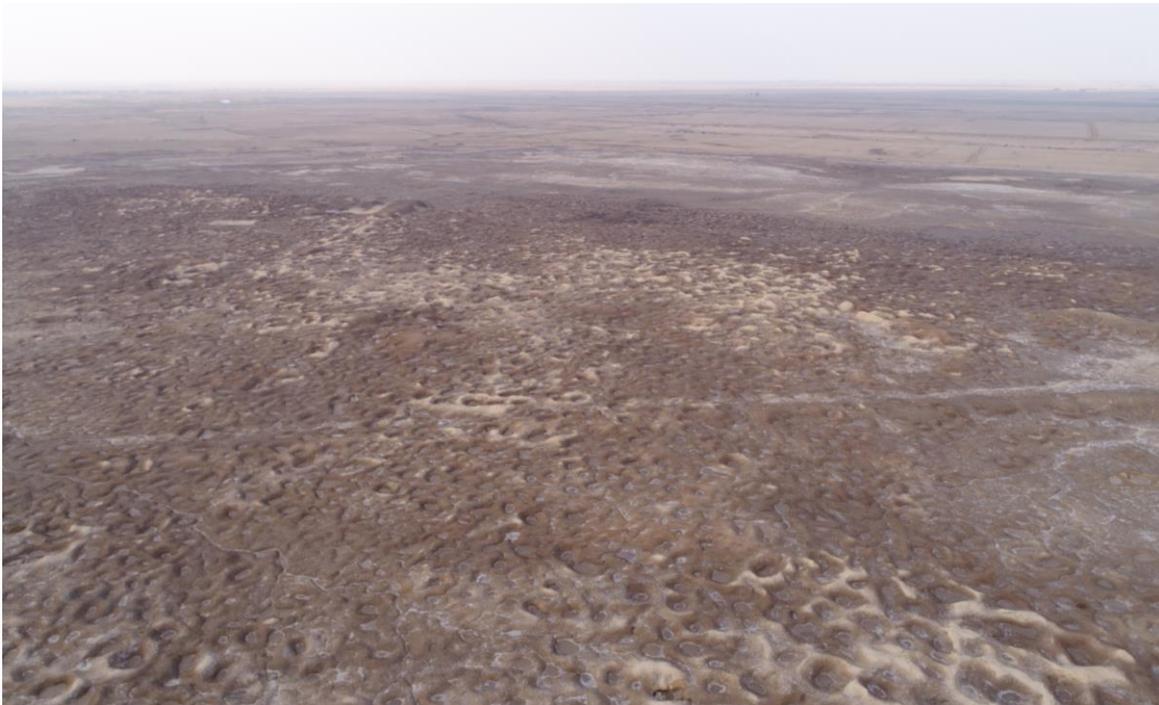


Fig. 4. Fara, main mound: Complete destruction of the upper levels through extensive looting, state 2018 (Drone photo: Friederike Einwag).

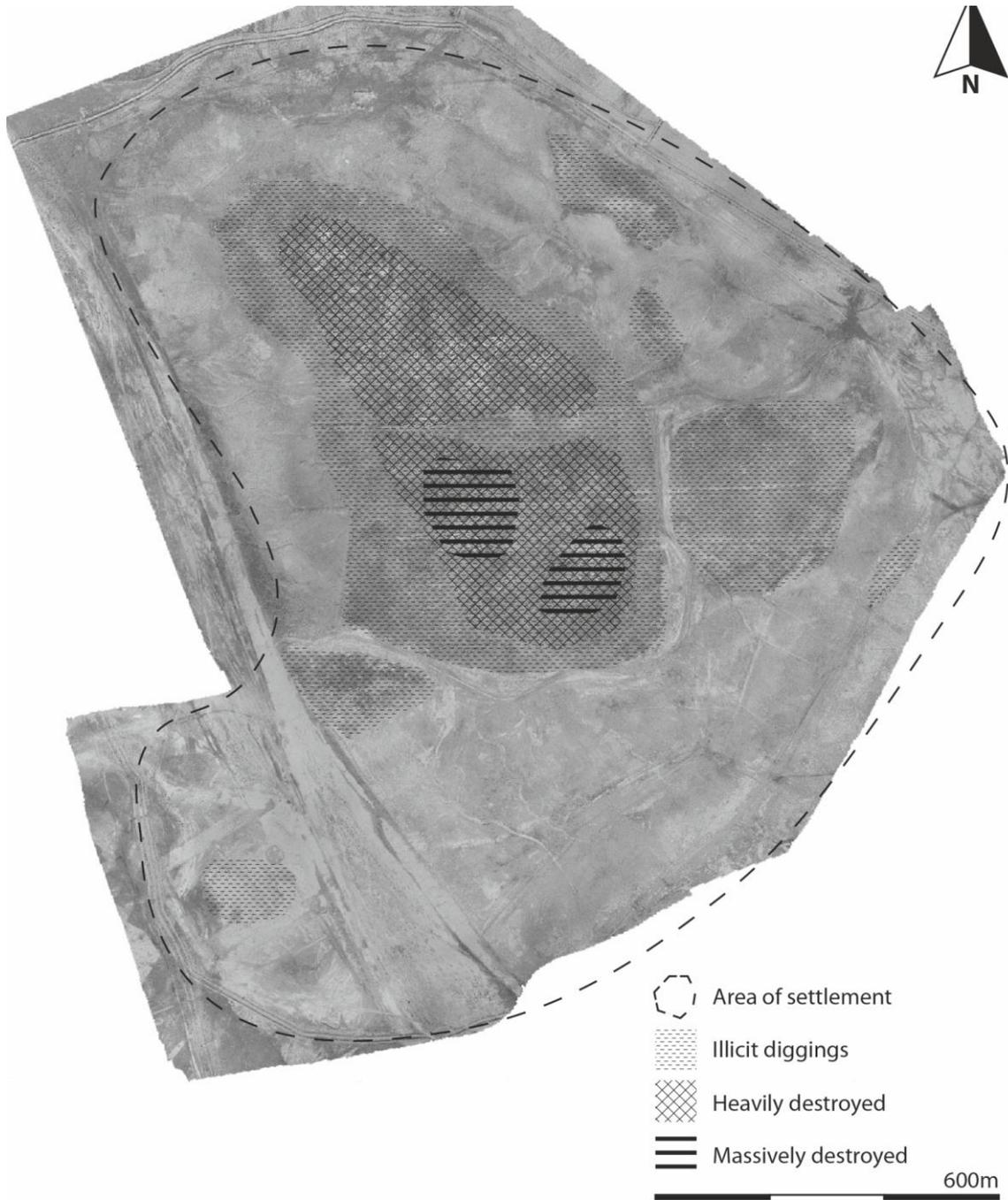


Fig. 5. Map of Fara, indicating the various grades of destruction through illicit digging (Map: Christoph Fink).



Fig. 6. Fara, Mound B: Large looting pits destroy much of the elevated mound; due to less severe looting in the shallow lower town, some Early Dynastic house plans become visible after rain, February 2018 (Drone Photo: Johannes Einwag).



Fig. 7. Early Dynastic IIIa stone vessel in the debris of looted graves at Fara (Foto: Adelheid Otto).



Fig. 8. Drone photo of recently looted Old Babylonian – Kassite sites FARSUP 16, 17, March 2018 (Photo: Berthold Einwag).



Fig. 9. Systematic looting „test pits“ in rows at the site FARSUP 18 (Photo: Hardy Maaß).