

BIJAN (IRAQ)

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In the late 1970s, the Iraqi government decided to build a large water reservoir some 93 km long on the middle Euphrates. The dam was to be built 7 km north of the city of Haditha. Before being flooded, the area became the object of intensive archaeological research, known as the Qadissiya Dam Project. In the years 1979-1983 several Iraqi and foreign teams were asked by the Iraqi Department of Antiquities and Heritage to participate in investigating thoroughly this previously little known area. The Polish Archaeological Mission under Prof. M. Gawlikowski was among the first to begin archaeological research in 1979. The mission worked at Bijan, an island site on the middle Euphrates, until 1983; eight field seasons were accomplished during this period. The first three campaigns were directed by Prof. M. Gawlikowski, the following five by Dr. M. Krogulska.

Bijan is one of a series of three islands containing archaeological sites, all three on the middle Euphrates. Excavations have shown it to have been a Neo-Assyrian fortress built from water level. With time an elongated sandbar was created along the western wall and specially along the southern wall, which closed off the stronghold; in modern times this sandbar was overgrown with bushes and partly planted with date palm trees.

The head of the island consisted of a platform 25 m wide, extended south with walls 5 to 6 m thick. The platform and walls were built on large limestone blocks to a height of up to 6 m above water level. The area enclosed by the walls was filled in to the top of the stone walls with earth brought in from elsewhere. In this way an artificial island was created on the Euphrates. The quay and gate leading into the island-fortress were located in its southeastern end. The first Assyrian stronghold was built in two phases and, finally, measured 185 m in length and 75 m in width. The upper

parts of the fortress, built on a stone platform, were of mud brick which has not survived to modern times. The fortress was destroyed already in antiquity. The small finds from these layers are mainly potsherds dated to the 9th 7th century BC.

Overlying the destroyed Assyrian fortress there was a Parthian layer, separated from the former occupation by a hiatus of some 500 years. From the Parthian period we have burials, some traces of buildings and a rich repertory of pottery with a few terracottas as well. Among the Parthian ceramics we may distinguish storage vessels caulked with bitumen inside, locally made cooking pots and glazed vessels. The latter constitute mainly imports, i.e., small bowls known also from Seleucia-on-Tigris, Dura-Europos, 'Ain Sinu, Shahr-i Qumis and Ana (an island some 25 km distant from Bijan to the north, also presently underwater).

Directly on the top of the Parthian layer there was a Roman one. Two phases could be distinguished. The first comprised a reoccupation of existing Parthian buildings by the newcomers, the second – a rebuilding of the fortress. At this time new fortifications were constructed on top of the Assyrian walls and a new gate leading to the fortified interior was built in the southeastern part of the island. Inside the stronghold new buildings were built on a completely new plan, comprising an official area and a storage and domestic section. It would appear that a Roman military detachment was stationed there in the 2nd-3rd centuries AD. Its presence is confirmed by the finds of pottery, lamps and coins. In the period in question the island would have been one of the southernmost Roman military posts.

The finds from this period included a large store of pithoi, so-called "torpedo jars", made watertight with bitumen inside, Brittle Ware cooking pottery comprising chiefly two-handle pots and pans, although some more rare forms, such as plates are also to be encountered. There were also some glazed Parthian vessels (Fig. 1).

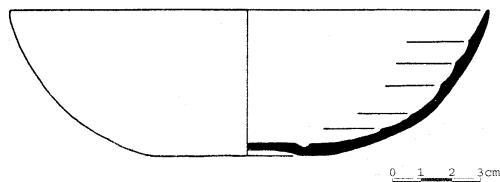


Fig. 1. Glazed bowl, Parthian period.

Among the terracotta oil lamps it is possible to distinguish lamps of western origin connected with Palmyra – the known Syrian imitations of "Bildlampen" with figural decoration, lamps of the Euphrates type known from Dura-Europos and one mold-made lamp decorated with appliqué and incised ornament, which has no parallels. A second group of lamps is formed by lamps recalling Eastern traditions. These are wheel-made lamps with elongated nozzles added onto the body of a type known as Mesopotamian. All the coins found in this layer came, from towns located on the Syrian coast.

After another 600-year period of abandonment a new occupation began on the island, in the Abbasid period which could be separated into two phases as well. The first phase coincides with Samarra pottery lasting till the end of the 9th century AD, the second is dated to the 10th century AD. The dating of the two phases was made possible by numerous finds of pottery, which included the doubtless imported glazed ware, a luxury item, known also as Samarra ware, a white ware decorated with incised and chiseled ornament known also from Samarra and many other Iraqi sites, pottery decorated in relief form, be it barbotine or molded, glazed multi-colour bowls accompanying the regular household glazed pottery, some interesting types of Brittle Ware (Fig. 2) and local cooking pots as wessells storage vessels and the so-called *quq* or vessels for drawing water from river or with the aid of a *na'ura*. The list ends with terracotta oil lamps.

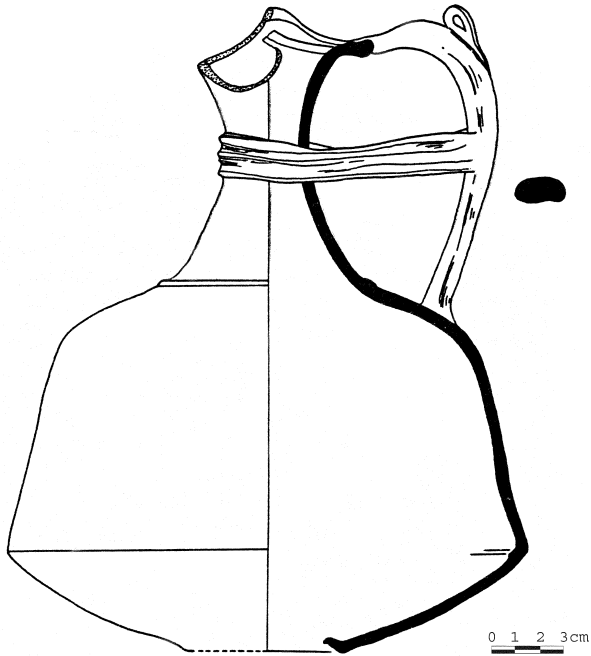


Fig. 2. Jug, Brittle Ware, Early Abbasid period.

Apart from the pottery, the finds included numerous glass vessels and metal tools. Among the more interesting finds there are lamps and fragments of a vessel of grey soapstone, which were doubtless imported to the island.

It would appear that twice in its history the island served as a border stronghold; in the Neo-Assyrian and in the Roman period. After both periods of occupation it was abandoned, both times for long stretches of time. On the levelled surface of the island, when the island was no longer a frontier post, settlements or even trade factories were installed. There seems to be no, other way to explain the presence of luxurious imported pottery on the site.