

CHARAX  
SPASINO  
2018





## MAIN EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF CHARAX SPASINO

226 AD	<b>SASANIAN</b>	Conquered by the Sasanian king Ardashir I Re-founded as Astarabadh Ardashir?
151 AD	<b>ARSACID (PARTHIAN)</b>	Local ruler deposed by Vologaeses III
116 AD		City submits to the Emperor Trajan
124 BC		Incorporated into Arsacid Empire on death of Hyrkanos
140 BC		Rebuilt by Hyrkanos, renamed Charax Spasinou
166 BC	<b>SELEUCID</b>	Rebuilt after flooding by Antiochus IV, renamed Antiochia
324 BC		Founded as Alexandria by Alexander the Great

## Introduction

Charax Spasinou is the premier ancient settlement in Basra Province, and our survey here represents the first large-scale investigation of the region's pre-Islamic history. The early origins of civilization lie in Sumer and Babylonia just to the north, but our area gained importance in Alexander's time, and this increased through the Arsacid and Sasanian empires. The founding of Basra by Utba bin Ghazwan at the Islamic conquest ensured that it remained significant. The recent opening of the world-class Basra Museum has underlined the province's position at the forefront of curating Iraq's incomparable heritage.

Life in the floodplain of southern Iraq has always been a challenge. Alexander's city bears the scars of conquest, flooding, erosion, and more recently of disturbance during the Iraq-Iran War and from looting. Our objective, with a grant from the UK Cultural Protection Fund, is to record the surface remains of the city and its environs, and to make a plan for its future protection and enhancement. A large part of

this has been geophysical survey, enabling us to peer below the ground and map the streets and buildings of the metropolis. We do this in partnership with the State Board for Antiquities and Heritage, and the young archaeologists who assist us are now using this technique to survey and assess sites themselves.

The German Research Foundation is also involved, providing funding for additional activities that include reconstructing the ancient river courses and paleoenvironment of the city.

With the fast pace of development, new sites are being discovered all the time. They need to be recorded and recognised for future landscape, development and heritage management. As part of our work at Charax Spasinou we are developing a management plan, which will make clear which areas need protection, and how that might be achieved. Maps showing the site boundary have been distributed to the local police and the municipal authorities as well as the State Board. Everyone has a role to play.

From just the survey, many exciting discoveries have come to light about Charax Spasinou, including a large Arsacid palatial structure. Much more remains to be found. We are grateful to all our colleagues from inside and outside Iraq for so much assistance, particularly to the Minister of Culture, Dr Abdulameer Al-Hamdani, and to Mr Qahtan al-Abeed, Head of Basra Antiquities, for smoothing the way, and also to the Municipality and people of Neshwa for their hospitality and enthusiastic assistance.



Our geophysics team in action



# Mapping the City

In our last report (2017) we described the amazing results from our geophysics trial: substantial buildings clearly showed on the geophysics plot of the 10 hectares covered. Our geophysics team has now mapped over 100 hectares of the city, revealing several areas very different in character.

Down by the ancient riverbed in the south (Area A), elements of at least 20 gridded city blocks are present. These are very large: each one covers about 13,000 sq m. Buildings within the blocks are densely packed and appear to be residential in nature, with the occasional larger building of different character, though further excavation is required to confirm this. Streets intersect at right angles, running around the edges of the blocks. One such street has been traced for over 800 m.

Further away from the river the city appears less orderly, the individual blocks are hard to discern and the orientation of one well-preserved street on the western edge is skewed to

the grid. Gaps appear in the geophysics plot. Buildings may be buried a little deeper under the land surface in these areas or are possibly entirely absent, as appears to be the case in one evaluation trench where no archaeological deposits were found, despite excavating to a depth of over 1.5 m. This may be due to extensive flooding in antiquity.

The history and phasing of these blocks has yet to be determined, but clearly the city grid owes its origins to the Alexandrian foundation of 324 BC. The plan was retained, and perhaps expanded and adapted subsequently: pottery recovered from our evaluation trenches in this area appears to date to the 1st to 3rd centuries AD.

Further east on the inside of the river bend lies a single substantial building within a large rectangular enclosure (Area E). The building itself has been severely eroded by the river but measures at least 60x33 m with walls as much as 4 m thick. It has a distinctive plan of three rows

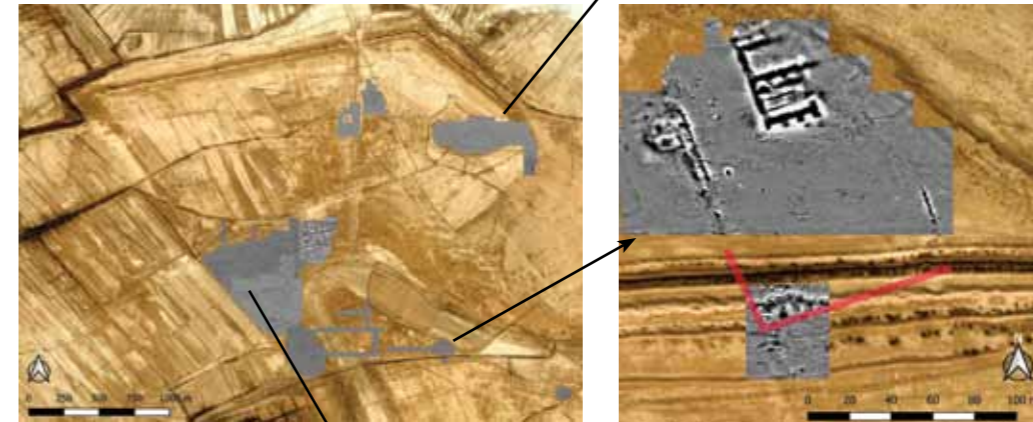
of small rooms separated by long courtyards or halls and sits within an enclosure some 100 m long. Date and function are not yet known.

Geophysics tells yet another story for the area close to the eastern rampart (Area B). This proved to be an industrial area, with a series of large kilns laid out along a 20 m wide canal or road. Adjacent buildings are densely packed and the blocks and streets are on a slightly different orientation from the grid in the south.

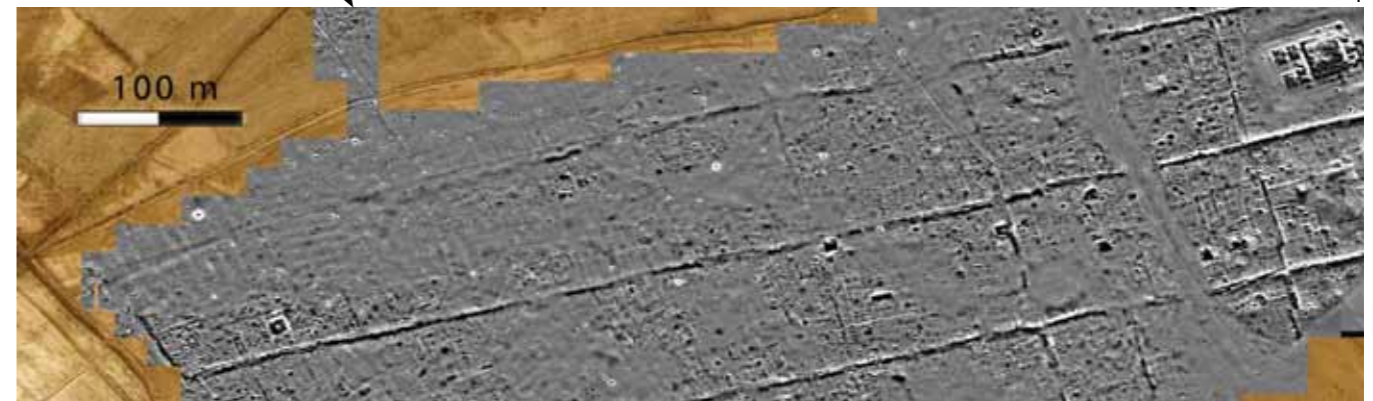
The geophysics programme has been hard work for the team under difficult conditions, sometimes because of intense heat, with daytime temperatures at the start in the high thirties centigrade, and sometimes because of torrential rain, which turns the area into a sea of impassable mud. Nevertheless, they have managed to walk 500 kilometres in total up and down the grid and their results show the huge potential of the city for further research and excavation.



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1. Areas of the city covered by the geophysics survey
2. Line of industrial kilns and road/canal in Area B
3. Monumental building with enclosure wall in Area E
4. Part of Area A where the Hellenistic grid has survived into later periods



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# Protecting the City



The eastern rampart of the city

Cities have always needed defences against their enemies, so Charax Spasinou was provided with ramparts to protect its people from flooding and foes. The former was the more dangerous, as the area is prone to severe annual flooding by the combined waters of the nearby rivers. Consequently the city battled with flooding for most of its existence, and was twice destroyed and rebuilt in the second century BC alone, firstly by the Seleucid monarch Antiochus IV around 164 BC, and then a second time by the local ruler, Hyspaosines ('Spasinou'), just a quarter of a century later.

The ancient ramparts survive along the northern and eastern edges of the city as an eroded bank of earth 15–20 m wide and 4 m high. They have suffered considerable damage from military earthworks constructed during the Iraq–Iran War. The northern rampart runs for 2.4 km and the eastern one for 1 km that we can see, but geophysical survey suggests that this one had an extension, shown as two parallel linear structures likely to be different phases of city

walls. No visible trace remains of a rampart along the western edge, though there must surely have been one. For the south side, perhaps the river provided a natural boundary to the city.

The ramparts may have had towers all along, spaced at regular intervals, but today only the remains of two are readily identifiable, both made of baked bricks. Looters, Charax Spasinou's modern enemy, have partly destroyed one, using a bulldozer to cut a deep trench up to the tower, slicing through the corner, and then tunnelling in for several metres before giving up the hunt for 'treasure'.

We cleaned up the looters' trench to reveal a square tower, 11 m along each side, standing 5 m high. It was built of the same triangular bricks as the royal palace, which was in use during the second century AD, so the tower may well be of the same date.

The baked brick tower along the northern rampart after the robber trench had been cleared out. The vertical robber shaft is also visible



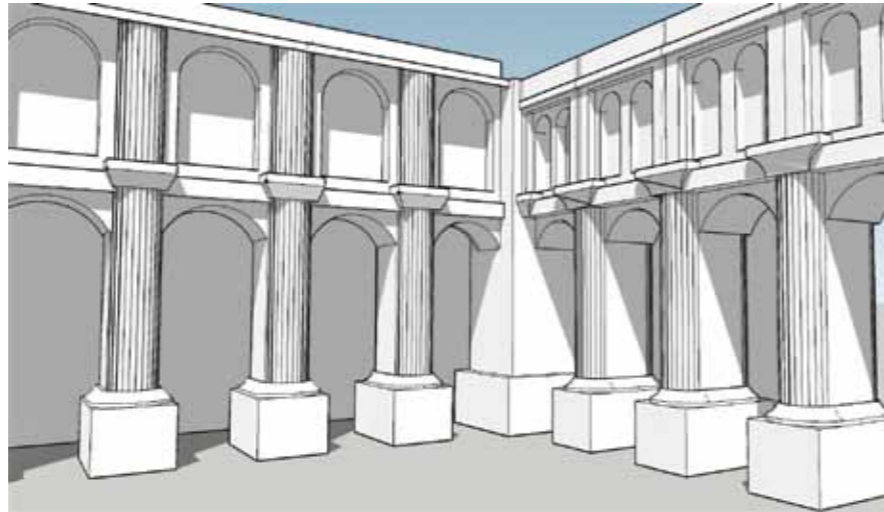


# The Palace

In the north east part of the city, just 400m inside the northern rampart, is a monumental building we have identified as a palatial structure. It first came to our attention as an area that had suffered significant damage from recent looting activity: bulldozed heaps of broken bricks and plaster fragments lay scattered around.

Once we had mapped the area, first by drone and then by geophysical prospection, it looked very much as though we were dealing with the remains of a single large building, covering at least 14,000 square metres. A 'peristyle' (courtyard with columns) showed clearly on the geophysics plot, as well as multiple suites of rooms.

An evaluation trench in the bulldozed area revealed huge plastered column drums, partly fallen. In the southwestern corner of the courtyard, plinths for three columns were found, enabling us to reconstruct the peristyle. So we know that it had large square columns in the corners, with five oval ones in between along each side. The oval columns were



Reconstruction of part of columned courtyard

fluted at both ends and their size, over two metres long and one metre wide, suggests they supported an upper storey.

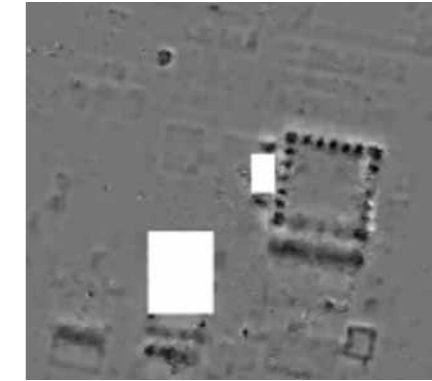
Along the western side, a columned entrance led into a suite of rooms set one behind the other. The main reception rooms were almost certainly on the south side. These await excavation. In one of the rooms to the north, we were fortunate to find a cache of 23 coins. These lay on the earliest floor of the palace. They were all low denomination bronze coins and very badly corroded. Many of them had been clipped in antiquity—a well-known way of debasing coinage! Fortunately, a

date survived on one: year 461 of the Seleucid Era, which equates to 149/150 AD. So the palace was definitely in use around this time, but for how long we are unsure. We do know that just one year later, the local monarch was deposed by his overlord, the Arsacid 'King of Kings' Vologaeses III. Some 75 years after that event, in 226 AD, the Arsacids were themselves overthrown by the Sasanian monarch Ardashir I who conquered Mesene and took over Charax Spasinou.

Our palace fell into disuse at some point and it may have been deliberately demolished, perhaps as a direct result of one of the above events.



Recent bulldozer destruction in the palace



Individual columns forming a peristyle are visible in the geophysics plot (white rectangles represent looted or disturbed areas)



Cleaning up the courtyard for photography



Part of a fluted column fallen off its plinth



Column bases in SW corner of courtyard

# Coinage of Charax Spasinou

Charax Spasinou established its own mint in the second century BC, and from then on it struck its own coins. When it came under the Arsacid Empire later on, the king of Mesene was one of the few local rulers allowed to issue coins. This is perhaps a reflection of the city's crucial role in international trade. Bronze coins are numerous on the surface of the site today. So far, almost 300 coins have been recovered, nearly all picked up in the course of our geophysical survey. The group of 23 found in the palace complex is a notable exception.

The coins range in date from the 1st century BC to the 4th century AD, and the great majority belong to the locally produced coinage of the kings of Mesene. Some show the known features of kings such as Attambelos III and IV on the front, while on the reverse is an inscription and the seated figure of the god Heracles, a motif that is common on coins from Charax Spasinou. Most of the coins are of low value, probably chalkoi (1/48 drachma) and dichalkoi (1/24 drachma). Many were produced not in



1 Bronze coin from surface. 7003:36. Tetradrachm. Obv.: head of king facing right, with large diadem, small beard and broad streaks of hair. Rev.: seated Heracles with club. Inscription behind ΒΑΣ[ΙΛΕΩΣ] ΑΤΤΑΜ[ΒΗΛΟΥ]. Possibly Attambelos III.  
2 Bronze coin from surface. 7006:1. Tetradrachm. Obv.: head facing right; hair in ringlets and crown tied with a fillet. Rev.: seated figure of Heracles holding up to the right the head and skin of a lion. Possibly Attambelos IV.

single flans, but in rows of flans that were first struck by dies and only cut off afterwards.

The examination of our coins is in its very early stages, and further study will shed light on the dating of the various quarters of the city and on our understanding of how the city developed. The

3 Bronze coin from surface. 7001:7. Drachm (?). Obv.: male head facing right. Diadem around top of head. Hair rendered as raised dots. Rev.: seated figure, probably Heracles. Inscription no longer readable. Issued by a king of Mesene in the 2nd century AD.  
4 Bronze coin from palace horde. 5036:2. Obv.: head facing right. Hair bunched on top of the head, and in a bun at the back. Rev.: seated figure facing left. Seleucid era date letters visible below ΥΕΑ (right to left) = S.E. 461 (149/150 AD).

presence or absence of coins from mints other than that of Charax Spasinou will be used to map commercial links across the region, while an analysis of local coin production will assist in the reconstruction of the history of the Arsacid Empire generally, and of Mesene in particular, which is still so poorly understood.

# Objects from Survey

Collecting and examining artefacts found on the surface forms part of our survey. Objects found on the surface are usually in very poor condition, due to exposure to the elements, but they still contain useful information. They help us to determine what historical periods are represented in the buried settlement beneath, and approximately in which areas of the city. We find more objects in our evaluation trenches, and these are sometimes in better condition.

The largest category of such artefacts, by a very long way, is potsherds. As shapes and styles of vessels changed over time, it is often, though not always, possible to tell the date from the form, even from a small piece. Thus from a few tiny fragments of a polished red fabric, known as *terra sigillata*, we have confirmation of contact with the Roman Empire, where this kind of pottery was made between the 1st century BC and the 3rd century AD. Other 'travellers' among the ceramics are the large storage jars which arrived at Charax Spasinou from all over



the ancient world, bringing oil, wine and other liquids. They are lined with bitumen to make them waterproof, and shaped to be long and thin, so they could lie easily in the holds of ships.

Most of the pottery is locally made, however, and even from the battered fragments that survive it is obvious that workshops of Charax Spasinou produced very sophisticated ceramics indeed, with fine glazes and elegant forms. The first two or three centuries AD are the best represented. We have so far found very little pottery from earlier periods of the city (Hellenistic and Early

Parthian), although the lowest archaeological layers have yet to be investigated in any detail.

Other items give us occasional glimpses into the rich life of the citizens of Charax Spasinou: a group of long iron nails in the palace courtyard point to large, heavy wooden doors; lamps speak of activities after dark; pieces of glass vessels are a hint at artistic accomplishments. Fragments of figurines and numerous scraps of jewellery, such as semi-precious stones, are glimpses into the everyday life of ordinary people living long ago in this city buried beneath our feet.

Storage jar lining street. 3059.01. Ht. 800 mm.  
Head from moulded clay plaque. 7003.220. Ht. 43 mm.  
Clay lamp fragment. 3074.1. Length 92 mm.  
Iron nails from the palace (longest nail ht.118 mm).



# Remains of the Iraq–Iran War 1980–8

The Iran–Iraq War (1980–8) severely scarred Charax Spasinou, leaving it littered with military debris and extensive, intrusive earthworks. These displaced a huge amount of archaeological material. The damage is lamentable, but it is also testament to an important phase in the history of the area. The Charax Spasinou Project is documenting the recent military occupation of the ancient city along with the rest of its past.

During that war, Charax Spasinou was a strategically important point on Iraq's front line. Through the war's later years, Iran made repeated attempts to capture Basra, often mounting attacks just to the north, close to Charax Spasinou, to try to cut off the highway to Baghdad. In response, Iraqi engineers constructed a complex system of defensive earthworks, into which the ancient site was incorporated.

The ancient ramparts of Charax Spasinou were put to use again. They provided a ready-made defensive barrier, which the military engineers were quick to

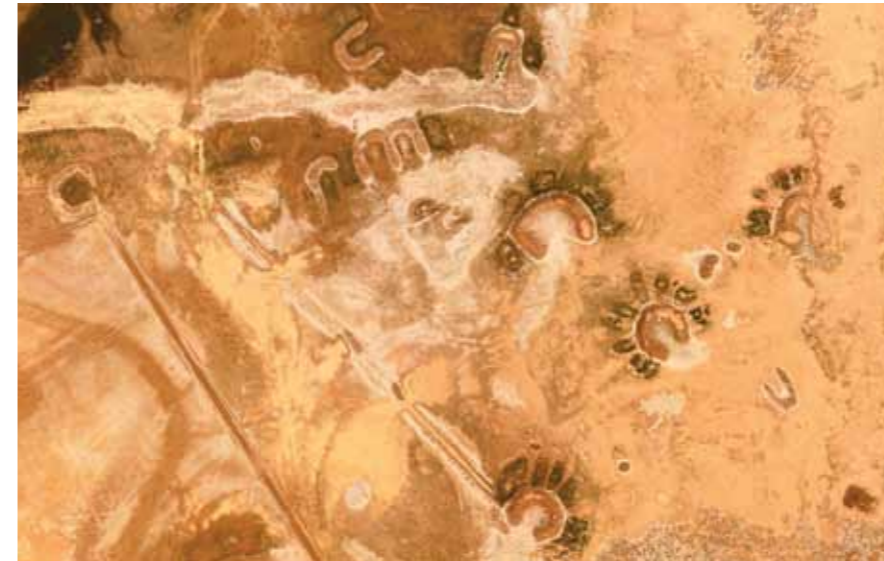


The ancient ramparts with infantry trench and dugouts cut into the top. To the left, behind the ramparts, a fan of mortar positions can be seen connected by a trench

adapt for modern warfare. Fifty gaps were bulldozed into the top of the ramparts, with earth ramps behind, to allow tanks and artillery to be embedded. Along the crest of the ramparts at least 220 infantry dugouts were added, with a communicating trench running across the reverse slope behind

them. Each dugout was large enough to accommodate two to four soldiers, so around 700 troops could man the city walls if the sector was threatened.

Within the ancient ramparts are a range of defensive positions, and an infrastructure of roadways



Concentration of earthworks in the centre of Charax Spasinou, perhaps a command position. The smaller U-shaped earthworks are vehicle emplacements while the larger C-shaped earthworks are probably anti-aircraft or artillery positions

and staging areas. A series of mortar batteries were emplaced behind the main defences in three-chambered dugouts. Large C-shaped earthworks probably mark the positions of anti-aircraft batteries and artillery. However, the most common feature across the whole site are vehicle emplacements. These were constructed using military bulldozers, which pushed earth into protective embankments around three sides of each tank, truck or armoured vehicle,

leaving a U-shaped ridge of earth behind. At least 200 vehicle emplacements lie within the ancient city walls, many in a large cluster just to the northeast of the site's centre, which appears to have been a central assembly area or possibly a local HQ.

So far over 3,000 military features have been mapped at Charax Spasinou and the surrounding area, but these extensive remains are now disappearing. The up-cast



Remains of a Soviet rocket-assisted mortar. Unused ordnance was disposed of by the Iraqi army at the end of the war, but empty casings and other debris can still be found

alluvium in the defensive earthworks provides a handy source of material for local construction projects and the upstanding features are being steadily removed by the truckload. The signs of Charax Spasinou's last phase of occupation are rapidly being erased. It is understandable that local residents might not wish to be reminded of this unhappy chapter in Iraq's history, but we should make a record of it to inform future generations.

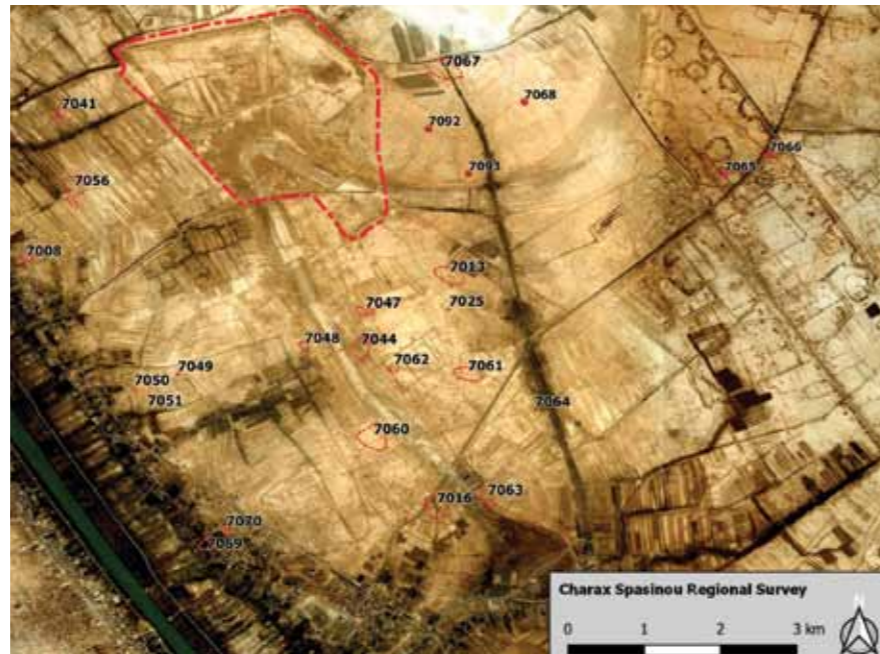


# The Regional Survey

The landscape around Charax Spasinou has been reworked both in ancient and modern times, and this makes it much harder to reconstruct the history of the area. However, a surprising number of archaeological sites survive, even if many are somewhat battered.

The Charax Spasinou Regional Survey has so far located and recorded over 25 previously unknown sites within an area of 50 sq km around the city. Many of these are invisible to remote sensing techniques and must be found by walking on foot—our tireless team walked over 130 km of transects in the 2018 survey. Other sites are buried up to 2 m below the modern land surface and are found only by accident in the sides of canal cuts and other deep trenches.

Many have suffered damage and face ongoing destruction from agriculture, the digging of canals and irrigation ditches, modern settlement encroachment, and systematic soil extraction. Nevertheless, by examining the small pieces



Boundary of protected area of Charax Spasinou and location of new sites

of pottery and occasional other fragments that survive, we can date them and add to the history of the area.

Most of the sites we find date to the Arsacid and Sasanian periods, and to more recent times. Not surprisingly, this also corresponds to the periods of occupation at the major sites of Charax Spasinou and its successor city Forat. Some of these smaller settlements

probably represent the rural hinterland of these cities, which was presumably subject to intensive agricultural exploitation. As a result of our survey work we have now defined, in collaboration with our SBAH colleagues, a provisional boundary for the site of Charax Spasinou itself, encompassing all known areas where archaeological remains are present and enclosing an area of just under 8 sq km.

*With special thanks to:*  
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