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ANDRZEJ KEMPISTY AT NEMRIK

The place was North Iraq, Upper Mesopotamia – the heartland of ancient Assyria.

Karol Szymczak and I went there in the fall of 1986, dreaming of a prehistoric site to excavate, God permitting, an early Neolithic site, but a Paleolithic one would do as well.

The early Neolithic in the Near East is the cream of the crop, because it was there that the Lord decided to civilize HUMANITY by putting it on the road towards the NEW. God's miracle took place almost 9000 years ago. Archaeologists investigating this phenomenon in the Near or Middle East can feel ennobled, because so little is still known about the phenomenon. Indeed, the gaps in our knowledge are enormous and Mesopotamia is one such GAP.

We have some knowledge of the Neolithic in the mountains and foothills of the Zagros, we know a great deal about the early Neolithic in the Levant, but back in the 1980s the map between these regions was completely blank: a hole, nothing and ignorance, despite Robert Braidwood having a go at M'lefaat in the eastern Jezirah before leaving Iraq (yet another revolution).

Dreams are one thing, but we did not have any early Neolithic site in our sight. We knew the Paleolithic from Iraq and we found its traces with Waldemar Chmielewski in the region of Masnaa on the Euphrates. Next was Eski Mosul, 'old Mosul' in Turkish, a large Iraqi town in the north of the country. A government program had been initiated to build a huge dam on the river there, triggering extensive salvage explorations. We joined the program and went to Eski to look around on the high river terraces along the Tigris, near the village of Faidah. We found the Paleolithic as expected, mainly Acheulian and Mousterian, mostly surface finds and eroded sites. Our Iraqi hosts listened with wonder when told about the oldest artefacts that were even 300,000 or 400,000 years old. For them it was entirely unimaginable. Polish cartographers had surveyed the whole country, but still we had no topographical maps to use. Maps were top secret and not for us. This hardly stopped our endeavour, we used whatever we could get our hands on — a hand-drawn copy of a wall map from the Faidah district (Faidah means excellent Arabic brewed coffee), an old sketch from a friend. These documents were hardly credible, but certainly we were not completely blind in the region.

We took a car and, following the indications in these doubtful 'maps', we set out together with antiquities inspector Mohammed Zaki to explore the WORLD OF THE PALEOLITHIC. We had results, the maps appeared to be correct, we spent our time drawing flint tools that we had found and got excited about the material and its publishing potential.

Then one day, the devil (or angel) led us astray. We made a mistake reading our sketch map and set off to the north-west, intending to turn left into a side road. We took that turn, but it turned out not to be where we wanted to go. It must have been an ANGEL, because we drove straight into an early Neolithic aceramic site. We found NEMRIK.

We had some scrambled eggs for breakfast first, which Mohamed made a local woman prepare for us, and then we headed out. Just outside the village, we found a clay floor without vegetation, and on this floor, micro-flints and some sherds. A quick investigation revealed stratified levels, stone-cobbled pavements, flints, and bones, but no ceramic sherds. The flint tools could have matched PPN, but there are no published parallels; the pottery turned out to be of Bronze Age date – according to Morgait and Munchayev who came to visit and had just arrived in Mosul. "Ja wsedga miechtal o takoi stoyankie" [I have always dreamed of a site like this one], exclaimed Nikolai Bader. So we knew we hit the jackpot – we found PPN!

Back in Warsaw, we set about organising funds for research from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology at the University of Warsaw. Getting through the red tape took time, but in the end we succeeded. We would go on to work at Nemrik and later at M'lefaat for several years.

The following year we worked in the spring and then again in the fall. Our Jubilarian, Andrzej Kempisty, was part of the team (Fig. 1). He would study the architecture we were expecting to find. Karol Szymczak and I looked at the flint industry, Ryszard F. Mazurowski – at the stone industry (he later made it his habilitation work). Rafał Koliński and Włodzimierz Bogusz helped out with the archaeology. Andrzej Reiche took care of



Fig. 1. The Nemrik team:
A. Kempisty, second from the
right (after S. K. Kozłowski,
*Nemrik. An aceramic village in
northern Iraq*, Warsaw 2002,
fig. 1, photo by A. Reiche).



Fig. 2. A. Kempisty in his Nemrik
house no. 4, photo by A. Reiche.

the Assyrian tell at the southern end of the site and was responsible for photography, while I worked with stratigraphy and took it upon myself to manage the general logistics. Wojciech Borkowski would join us later, along with Kazimierz Kuźma.

In the spring of 1987, we flew to Baghdad. We then took a taxi to Mosul and set up headquarters in Niniveh. Our inspector was Kerim Joma Yusuf, a friendly soul, and we were off and running.

The site grid was established, each divided into quarters, and each trench was dug to culturally sterile levels by the stratigraphic method with the experienced hands of Shirkatis/technicians and workers brought to the site. Andrzej set the documentation standards: a 1:20 scale for the general plans, 1:10 for the houses, and 1:5 for the features and other details. Each excavator had their own group of workers. We did the drawings (plans and sections), Reiche took photos, all the architecture was studied under the close supervision of Master Kempisty who



Fig. 3. Nemrik, the Neolithic site in its latest phase, drawing by A. Nowacki.

consulted, prompted, suggested, criticised, or praised (Fig. 2). He made sure that the house interiors were excavated with proper care, with attention being paid to the poorly-preserved plaster and the clay floor features, as

well as the small finds from their surface. Thanks to him we recognised wall plaster, traced foundation trenches, identified clay platforms and pillars, mapped post-sockets and stone installations mounted in the floors, and recorded small finds and heavy stone tools on these floors. We discovered stone trays leaning against the walls and statuettes of the gods of Nemrik alongside the burned skeleton of an inhabitant who lost his life trying to save one of the statuettes. Flint concentrations and professionally traced brick bondwork like the ones we found are seldom documented in the Near Eastern Neolithic. We explored and documented them thoroughly under the watchful eye of Master Andrzej who kept on smiling gently while checking stubbornly, advising, questioning, discussing, observing, and in effect standardising, improving, and enriching our understanding and documentation of the Neolithic architecture of Nemrik. He would be the one responsible for publishing it! (Fig. 3).

We spent time over details without losing sight of the bigger picture, took notes, documented the superposition of the houses, reaching an impressive number of more than twenty investigated features. These included round or oval, evolving into sub-rectangular. Habitations were naturally larger and more numerous, while the smaller ones served as stores and coffins.

Andrzej described them scrupulously and Małgorzata Dołęgowska continued this study in her diploma work at the University of Warsaw, supervised by the author. Her and Andrzej's work has just gone to the printers.

Operation Nemrik has thus ended in this fashion, 30 years later, to the glory of Polish archaeology, the glory of particular scholars and our Jubilarian – Andrzej Kempisty.

Glory to the victors!