

A Parthian city in the Iran-Iraq war: Incorporating the ancient site of Charax Spasinou into a modern conflict landscape.

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Abstract

The Iran-Iraq war had a profound impact on the landscape of southern Iraq. On the flat alluvial plain, Iraqi engineers moved huge quantities of earth over hundreds of kilometres to form complex defensive positions. Ancient archaeological sites were incorporated into the defences, often providing valuable rising ground and occasionally other defensively useful features.

The great Parthian city of Charax Spasinou lies 40km north of Basra. During the 1980s, the site became part of key Iraqi defensive lines protecting Basra, and its ancient ramparts were remodelled for 20th century warfare. New archaeological work at Charax Spasinou is providing an opportunity to record this fast-disappearing conflict landscape and to consider the relationship between modern conflict features, ancient sites and archaeological investigation.

Historical background

The Iran-Iraq war, which lasted eight years, from 1980-1988, is by far the largest and bloodiest conflict ever fought in the Middle East. It is often compared to the First World War due to the similarities it has with the Great War's Western Front in terms of tactics, casualties, mud, and the battlefield use of poison gas (Razoux 2015:471, Murray & Woods 2014:212).

Iraq, under Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath party, invaded Iran in 1980 with the intention of waging a short war and suing quickly for an advantageous peace. By the end of 1982, Iraqi forces had been pushed back to the pre-war border and faced defending their own land against a numerically superior and highly motivated Iranian army, whose goal was the annihilation of the Ba'athist state and export of the Islamic Revolution. The Iraqi response was to dig in, constructing vast and elaborate defensive earthworks up and down the 1,500km border. For the remaining six years of the war, the Iranians would throw hundreds of thousands of troops in human waves against these prepared defences but achieve little more than a bloody stalemate. The war would end with no clear

winner, with the border exactly where it had been in 1980, and with around a million Iranians and half a million Iraqis dead (Tucker-Jones 2018:98, Hiro 1989:250, Razoux 2015:568, Khakpour et al 2016:2). The war enduringly transformed the landscape of the Iran-Iraq border area, including its archaeological sites.

Landscape

The landscape of the border area between Iran and Iraq varies greatly from north to south. In the north it winds through the high Zagros Mountains; here the Iraqis laid mines in the mountain passes, and in the valleys and plains every vantage point, including ancient tells, was topped with a command post or artillery position. The central section of the border runs through the western foothills of the Zagros, passing Baghdad at a distance of little more than 100km.

However, the focus of this chapter is on the southern front, where the border runs across the south-east side of the huge alluvial plain of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The two rivers join at the town of al-Qurnah to form the Shatt al-Arab waterway, which runs southeast for 200km, past the city of Basra, to empty into the Gulf at al-Fao.

The landscape here is utterly flat, relieved only by man-made features. Settlement and agriculture is concentrated close to the rivers, but away from the Shatt al-Arab the landscape becomes increasingly empty. The ground is not sand but dull, beige alluvial clay and silt, which during the winter rains becomes a slippery, cloying morass, extremely challenging for the movement of men and vehicles. The land is low-lying and marshy in places, but north of al-Qurnah it becomes true marshland, passable only with boats or pontoon bridges.

War of the bulldozers: Military transformation of the landscape

The flat alluvium of the southern front, which would be the most heavily contested sector of the war, presented military engineers with an almost blank canvas on which to shape a militarised landscape. Both armies were accompanied by hundreds of bulldozers for the construction of defensive positions, and the use of bulldozers was so ubiquitous that Iraqi generals complained that their troops had no concept of digging their own defensive positions if bulldozers were not available (Murray & Wood 2014:300). The Iranians even incorporated bulldozers into their offensive activities; during night attacks, bulldozers would advance behind attacking troops and rapidly construct new

berms, behind which the attackers could retreat when repulsed without relinquishing all the land seized (Murray & Woods 2014:230-1).

The largest and most intensive earthworks were constructed by the Iraqis along the Iraqi side of the international border. As the war turned in Iran's favour through 1981-2, Iraqi military engineers applied themselves to the question of how to stop the Iranian advance and defend Iraqi territory. The important southern city of Basra, with its oil fields and access to the Gulf, was horribly exposed; there was just 18km of flat land between the Iranian border and the outskirts of Basra. To defend the city, enormous engineering works were undertaken, including a 60km long, 10m wide, earth embankment, and the construction of a huge artificial canal between Basra and the border. This canal was 30km long, 2km wide and 4m deep, designed to be impassable for tanks and vehicles (Razoux 2015:188). The border area was also extensively mined.

Defending Basra did not simply mean fortifying the city itself, but required the defence of its main supply line – the Basra to Baghdad highway. Between 1982 and the end of the war, the Iranians tried over and over again to capture the highway north of Basra in order to cut the city off from reinforcements and supplies (Karsh 2002, Tucker-Jones 2018). Consequently, the Iraqis constructed ever more elaborate defences between the border and the highway, stretching from Basra up to al-Qurnah, north of which the waterlogged marshes were thought to provide an impassable natural barrier. Major defensive lines were established parallel to the border, studded with bunkers and artillery positions, and augmented with minefields, barbed wire and electronic monitoring systems. A secondary line of defence was constructed parallel to the highway and the Shatt al-Arab (figure 1). Much of this huge defensive system remains visible today, and is clear on satellite imagery.

At the latitude of al-Qurnah the border makes a large step westward towards the highway and the Shatt al-Arab. The border here lies within 20km of the road; its closest approach to the highway. Close to this potentially vulnerable point lies a large archaeological site which was once the great Parthian port city of Charax Spasinou.

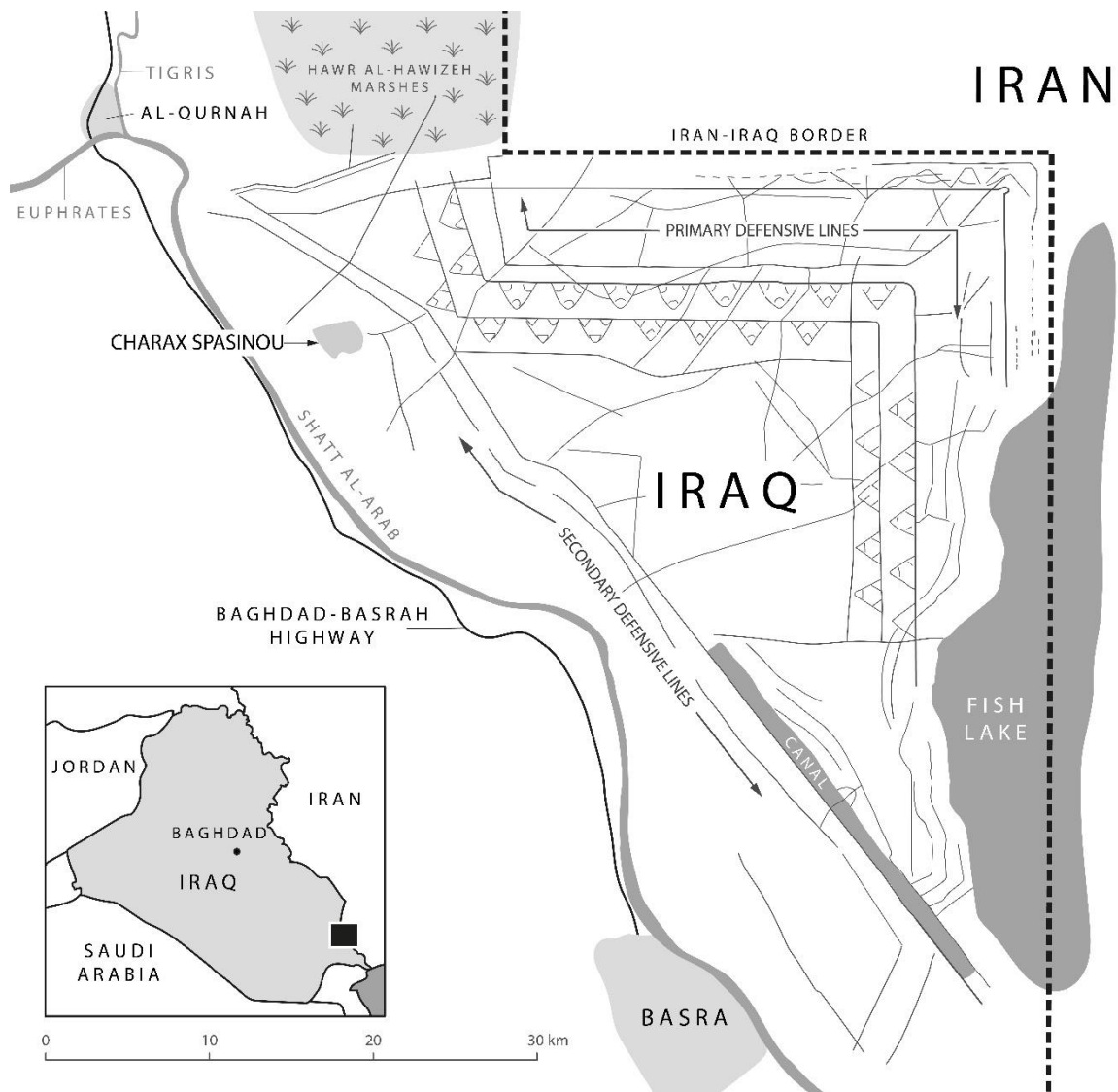


Figure 1: Iraqi defensive earthworks north of Basra. The network of berms and trenches on the Iraqi side of the border demonstrates the extent to which the landscape was transformed during the conflict. The canal east of Basra is now dry and the extent of Fish Lake, expanded by the Iraqis during the war, is now much reduced. The position and extent of Charax Spasinou is indicated, illustrating its situation in the Iraqi secondary line of defences, close to where the border approaches the Baghdad-Basra highway.

Charax Spasinou

The ancient city was founded by Alexander the Great in 324 BC as Alexandria-on-Tigris. It reached its peak during the Parthian period (247 BC – 224 AD) under the name Charax Spasinou, when it was the major port at the head of the Gulf. For three centuries the city thrived on trade, connecting the

maritime trade routes of the Arabian Gulf and Indian Ocean with the overland caravan routes through Petra and Palmyra to the Mediterranean world. It declined through the Sassanian period as trade decreased and the coastline shifted southward, being finally abandoned sometime in the Islamic period.

The Charax Spasinou Project (University of Manchester) is an archaeological survey project aimed at mapping and recording the site through drone survey, magnetometry and test trenching. The archaeological site covers at least six square kilometres, reflecting the ancient city's wealth and importance. Magnetometry survey has revealed an extensive classical city grid, residential neighbourhoods and large palatial buildings. The only standing ancient structure is the city's northern and north-eastern rampart which runs for a combined length of 3.4km, incorporating three baked brick bastions. The rest of the site is generally flat with some areas under occasional cultivation and the ancient remains visible as only slightly raised ground and scatters of pottery and baked brick fragments. The only upstanding features inside the ramparts are earthworks of the Iran-Iraq war.

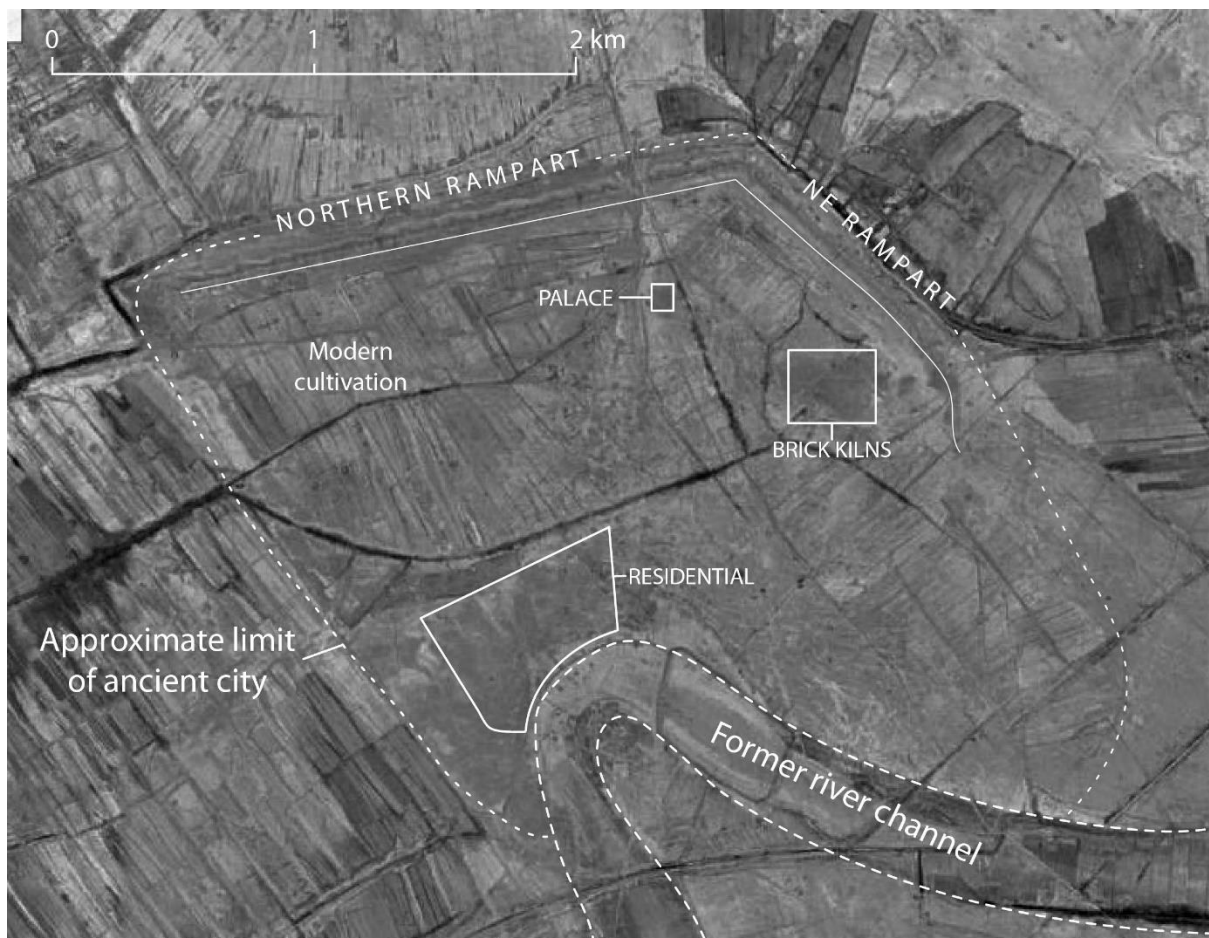


Figure 2: The site of Charax Spasinou today, illustrating the position and extent of the 3.4km long ancient ramparts and indicating other important features of the ancient city so far identified.

The war around Charax Spasinou

Given the position of Charax Spasinou, in a critical area for the Iraqi defensive system, it is unsurprising that the site was significantly impacted by the war. According to local representatives of the State Board for Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH), Iraqi government archaeologists were opposed to the occupation of Charax Spasinou by the military, but given the desperate nature of the conflict at the time, it is unsurprising that heritage concerns were not prioritised.

According to a local land owner, Ali Wehayib Abdul Abbas, the army arrived at the site in 1984 and the local villagers were evacuated. This suggests the occupation of Charax Spasinou may have been a response to *Operation Kheibar*, also known as the *Battle of the Marshes*; an offensive launched by the Iranians in late February 1984. The Iranians surprised the Iraqis by attacking across the supposedly impassable Hawr al-Hawizeh marshes using a flotilla of small boats. Their aim was to then turn south and seize al-Qurnah and the Baghdad-Basra highway which passed through the town, but the Iranians' initially successful advance was bloodily halted on the outskirts of al-Qurnah by Iraqi tanks, artillery, air attacks and the large-scale use of mustard gas (Murray & Woods 2014:228-30, Hiro 1989:103-4). The Iraqis also resorted to running a 200,000 V high-tension electricity line into the marshes close to the Iranian bridgehead, electrocuting thousands of Iranian troops (Razoux 2015:226-7).

The Iranians lost around 20,000 men, but they had come far closer to their goal than the Iraqis were comfortable with. Consequently, the Iraqis probably sought to reinforce the sector around al-Qurnah, in which Charax Spasinou lies. The Iranians launched a similar offensive, *Operation Badr* (the *Second Battle of the Marshes*), in March 1985. They briefly succeeded in capturing al-Qurnah, and with it the highway and bridge across the Euphrates, but again were defeated by superior Iraqi armour and air power with the loss of around 10,000 Iranian troops (Razoux 2015:319-324, Pelletiere 1992:88-90). This was the closest that the fighting would ever come to the new fortifications at Charax Spasinou. The site was never seriously attacked during the course of the war, but it was just within artillery range of the Iranian front lines and may have taken part in the sporadic artillery exchanges which characterised the day-to-day conduct of the war.

The refortification of Charax Spasinou

Unlike the utterly flat surrounding landscape, the ancient site presented the military engineers with some useful pre-existing topography; chiefly the 3.4km long city ramparts. Conveniently for the Iraqis, the ancient ramparts were oriented very suitably for the tactical situation in 1984. The

northern and north-eastern ramparts faced towards the vulnerable gap where the main defensive lines met the marshes, which the Iranians had just attempted to exploit in *Operation Kheibar*, and would soon attack again in *Operation Badr*.

The ancient ramparts are 13-16m wide and around 3-5m high, making them larger than the average berms thrown up by the engineers, which are generally 5-9m wide in the area surveyed. Charax Spasinou's ramparts are closer in dimensions to the largest military embankments which form the main defensive lines; part of the major embankment of the secondary line of defence, was surveyed by drone and is around 17m wide. It can be seen on satellite images to run for 60km southeast to meet the canal protecting Basra.

The manner in which the ramparts were fortified by the engineers is similar to how these main embankments were furnished. The infantry dug fox holes, each big enough for between 1 and 3 men at irregular intervals along the crest of the earthwork. At Charax Spasinou almost 250 foxholes remain detectable long the top of the ramparts, suggesting an infantry strength of 500-600 men for the defence of the ramparts, or 15-20 men per 100m of rampart. In some places, these were connected by a narrow infantry trench running behind the fox holes on the earthwork's reverse slope, but these trenches do not survive well and many have probably been lost to erosion. Along Charax Spasinou's north eastern rampart the infantry trench was dug along the very foot of the reverse slope with a small additional berm behind it. At its southeast end, this rampart also has a small berm 8m in front of the base of its forward slope (figure 3).

Vehicle positions were built against the reverse slope of the embankments for tanks and more lightly armoured vehicles. In some cases, these were simply protective, consisting of two small berms perpendicular to the embankment to protect the sides of vehicles parked behind it. Other emplacements facilitated a more active defence in providing positions from which tanks or self-propelled artillery could fire toward the enemy. In the case of the army-built embankments, these consist of a ramp of compacted earth against the reverse slope of the embankment, up which tanks could be driven until their guns could bear over the top of the earthwork. In the case of Charax Spasinou, the tank emplacements set into the ancient ramparts varied from this model in that the tank positions were embedded right into the top of the rampart rather than being just a ramp to the rear of the embankment.

This variation is likely due to the difference between the newly made embankments, which were built up using freshly disturbed surface material and were therefore relatively soft, and the ancient rampart which is made of heavy river clay, compacted through the course of two millennia. While the army embankments probably wouldn't have held the weight of a tank without risking collapse,

the rock-hard ramparts provided a solid firing platform. In total, 51 tank positions were cut into Charax Spasinou's ramparts, constituting the most visually dramatic military intervention at the ancient site.

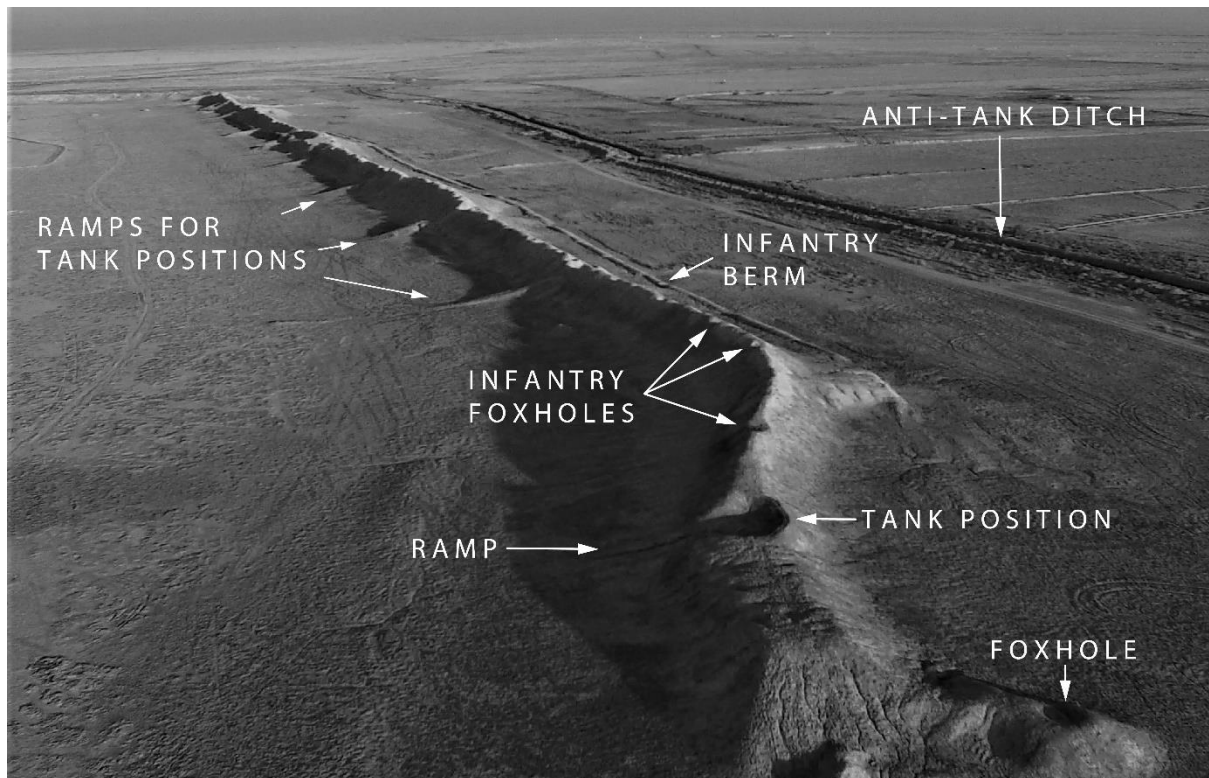


Figure 3: The northeast rampart of Charax Spasinou with military alterations. Tank positions and their ramps, cut at regular intervals into the top of the ancient rampart, are the most prominent visual sign of the war's impact on the archaeology of the site. Drone photo, view facing north.

The northern rampart has a large number of protective vehicle emplacements adjoining its reverse slope, growing increasingly dense towards the western end of the rampart. These consist of a series of three-sided bays which do not offer firing positions, only protection from enemy fire. This is perhaps an area in which transport, supply and communications vehicles could shelter, but could also have been used for storing supplies needed on the ramparts.

As well as refortifying the ancient rampart itself, additional parallel layers of defence were added both in front and behind the rampart. 200m in front of the northern rampart, an 8m wide anti-tank ditch was dug, retaining traces of vehicle entrenchments along its rear edge. A similar ditch protected the north-eastern rampart, although at a distance of only around 100m. Part of this ditch

has been more recently re-cut as a drainage ditch for the adjacent cultivation. The northern rampart had a secondary, smaller ditch between the anti-tank ditch and the rampart along much of its length. Overall, the ancient ramparts of Charax Spasinou were transformed into a defensive obstacle as formidable as any purpose-built earthwork produced by the army engineers.

Military interactions with the archaeology

Archaeological landscape

Although the refortification of the city's ancient rampart is by far the most significant example of the reuse of archaeological features by the military, there is one other example, which demonstrates the willingness of the army to take advantage of archaeological topography on a much smaller scale. Inside the eastern rampart there is an area of low mounds, which are formed by a series of ancient brick kilns (figure 4). Magnetometry survey and limited test trenching suggests this is an industrial area of the city, with the brick kilns arranged along the side of a large linear feature, which is probably a canal. The line of kilns thus forms a low ridge of raised ground running NE-SW and the Iraqi army was quick to fortify this as one of many short irregular lines of defence established within the ancient city. A low berm was added on top of the pre-existing ridge of kilns and vehicle emplacements were embedded along its southeast side. One emplacement retains large fragments of a lightly armoured vehicle.

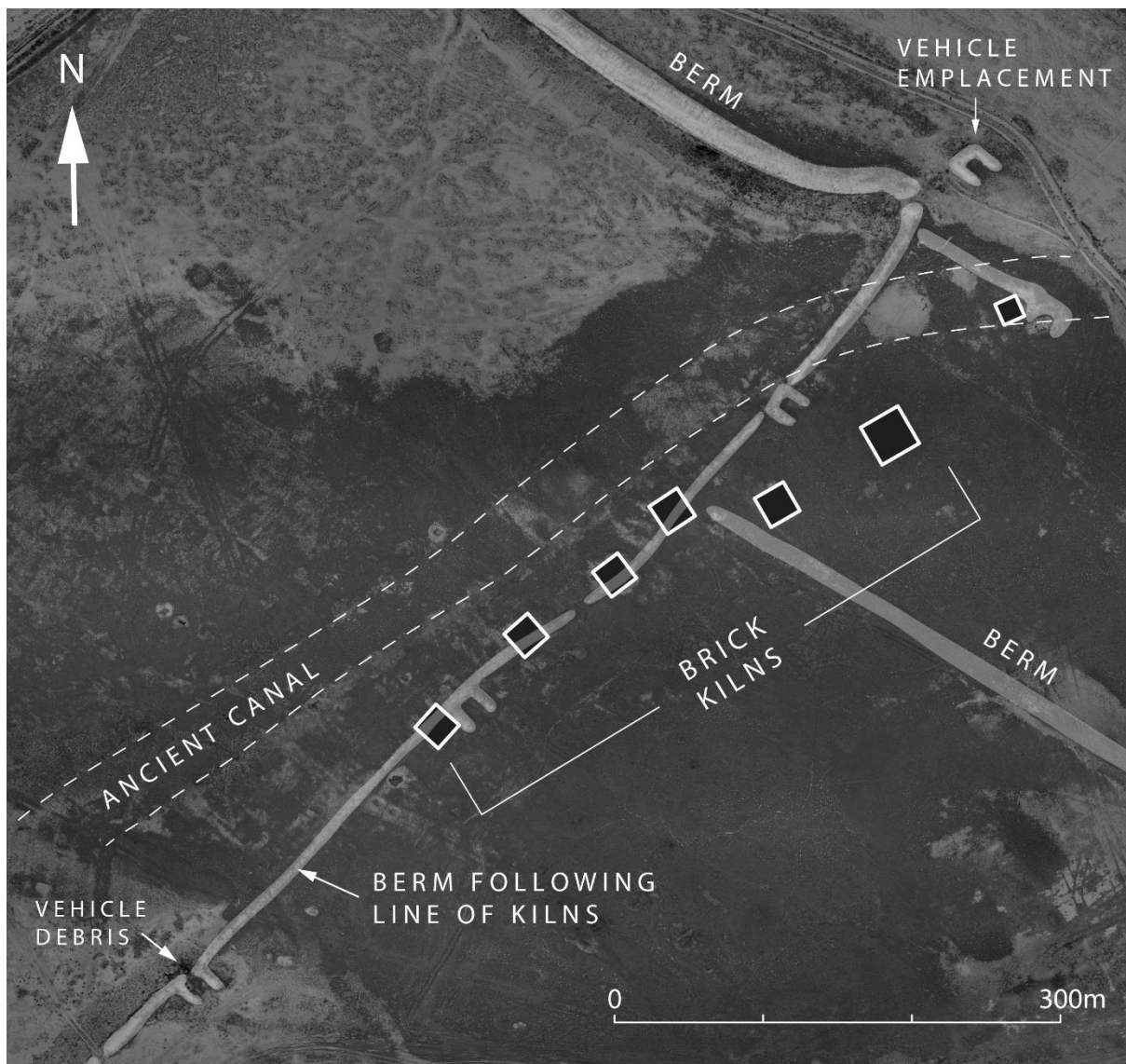


Figure 4: The positions of the underlying brick kilns are taken from the magnetometry survey results and indicated with white-outlined squares. The 1980s Iraqi military features are highlighted, including a long berm with integrated vehicle emplacements which runs along the top of the ridge formed by the row of kiln mounds.

The fact that the Iraqi army used this low ridge of kilns demonstrates that those in charge of laying out the defensive earthworks were not oblivious to the underlying ancient city. The new military landscape was not simply imposed over the pre-existing landscape as a rigid system, as appears to have been the case in the highly regular frontline defences along the border (see figure 1). Rather, the military landscape at Charax Spasinou was moulded around the archaeological landscape. The refortification of the ancient ramparts turned the site into a defensive strong point, which in turn impacted the Iraqi defensive organisation in this part of the sector. A concentration of anti-aircraft

and artillery positions, vehicle emplacements and other earthworks at the centre of the site suggest that the interior of the ancient city, protected by the ramparts, became a command post or staging area for Iraq forces. A large conical mound in this central area is most likely the support for a communications array. As well as the strategical importance of its location, Charax Spasinou's role in the war was determined by its archaeological remains; chiefly the substantial standing ramparts.

Archaeological materials

There is no question that the military personnel occupying Charax Spasinou during the war were aware that they were entrenched on an ancient site. Archaeological material is obvious at the surface in many areas, generally in the form of sherd scatters and concentrations of baked brick. Ancient coins are not uncommon at the surface, as are pieces of carnelian, which show up particularly well after rain. Such objects have value locally and would certainly have drawn the attention of soldiers posted to the site for any length of time.

The main source of interaction between military personnel and archaeological material was of course through the construction of earthworks. Almost 1,000 military earthworks have been mapped within the approximate area of the ancient city, with a combined area of over 116,000 square metres. It is unlikely that archaeologists will ever excavate Charax Spasinou to the extent that the Iraqi military did in the 1980s.

Approximately half of the mapped features were dug into or against the ancient ramparts, but the soldiers and engineers would probably have found few artefacts while digging their foxholes and tank emplacements here. The main body of the rampart is made of re-deposited natural; heavy river clay heaped up in basket loads. It is almost sterile in terms of cultural material. The only other structures along the ramparts are three large baked brick bastions, approximately 15m square and standing to several meters high. However, these were mostly left untouched by the military as they were too hard for even bulldozers to make much impact on, and certainly too tough for hand-dug foxholes to be sunk. Archaeological encounters along the ramparts were more or less limited to interaction with the gross structures themselves.

Around 450 earthworks have been mapped across the interior of the ancient city and these excavations are far more likely to have brought soldiers into contact with archaeological material. The majority of the mapped earthworks are above-ground bulldozer-constructed features, such as berms and emplacements for vehicles and artillery. The most common features are vehicle emplacements, which number around 150 within the site, made by pushing surface material into

banks around 3 sides of a vehicle to form a U-shaped earthwork (see figures 4 and 7). At Charax Spasinou, the archaeology lies just below the surface in many areas, and it is clear from sherds and bricks embedded in these embankments that many are made from archaeological deposits. In some areas, military earthworks cut down into more substantial ancient structures. There is at least one example where the construction of a vehicle emplacement cut into a large palatial residence just below the surface, throwing up large blocks of carved limestone, which remain embedded in the side of the earthwork (see figure 5). Such stonework is extremely rare at Charax Spasinou due to the city being remote from any stone sources.



Figure 5: Limestone blocks disturbed from a large, high-status building below by the construction of a military earthwork (left). These blocks represent the only architectural stonework so far identified at the site. A test trench is under excavation in the background; the scrubby vegetation between the test trench and the earthwork marks the bulldozer scoop from which the stone blocks originate.

As well as the work of the bulldozers, many soldiers would have had the opportunity to dig into the ancient deposits by hand. The interior of the city is scattered with rows of foxholes and arrays of mortar positions and machinegun posts. These were often substantial dugouts involving the disturbance of considerable material (see figure 6).

There is no direct evidence that Iraqi military personnel engaged in anything which may be termed archaeological enquiry while stationed at Charax Spasinou (or any other site) during the Iran-Iraq war, as occasionally happened in other conflicts where soldiers were dug into an archaeological landscape for an extended period, such as during the First World War (Saunders 2007:4-9). However, it would be surprising if soldiers did not pick up artefacts from the site, either as souvenirs and curiosities to take home, or as saleable objects. During the war it was certainly common for soldiers to take home military souvenirs, such as shrapnel and shell casings, as keepsakes and gifts (Deqan 2006:21-22) so perhaps a Parthian coin or a carnelian bead may have added some variety to these souvenir assemblages.



Figure 6: A battery of large mortar positions linked by an infantry trench dug within the ancient city. This represents the excavation by hand of a large volume of archaeological deposits.

In the case of collecting objects to sell on, it is likely that such activities by the military at Charax Spasinou may have acted as the forerunner to refreshed looting efforts after the war, which continue to this day. The construction of military earthworks brought a huge quantity of ancient material to the surface, which could be combed through by local villagers after the military had left. Secondly, the spread of military earthworks across the whole site would have acted almost as test trenches for would-be looters, providing soundings across the site to identify the richest areas. Otherwise the vast, flat expanse of the ancient city gives few clues as to where the best places to dig might be. This phenomenon of military excavations acting as a catalyst to civilian looting is known from other sites such as Thessaloniki (Saunders 2007:7).

Archaeological interactions with military remains

As well as being recording as the latest period of occupation at the site, the features and remains left by the Iran-Iraq war have impacted the work of the archaeological survey project in several ways.

First, there is the problem common to most sites of modern conflict; that a quantity of ordnance remains at the site, some of which could still be live. The surface of the site is littered with debris such as bullets, shell casings, mortar components, vehicle debris and communications wiring.

Fortunately, the majority of the unused munitions at the site were disposed of by the Iraqi army at the end of the war, and any metal left exposed at the surface since the 1980s is now degraded beyond any danger, due to the extremely harsh surface environment. However, there remains a small degree of risk from any ordnance which has become buried, and consequently the survey team avoids entering depressions, dugouts and trenches left from the war. The Iran-Iraq war detritus impacts the magnetometry survey in two respects; firstly, the large amount of metal debris remaining at the surface causes considerable interference due to its strong magnetic signal, and secondly, gaps have to be left un-surveyed where military earthworks either make it impossible to walk with the magnetometer or have left potentially ordnance-bearing depressions.

However, there are some ways in which the remains of the Iran-Iraq war have assisted the study of the ancient remains at the site. One example mentioned above is the stone blocks brought to the surface in one area by a bulldozer-built vehicle emplacement (figure 5). This is the only architectural stonework found so far at Charax Spasinou and this single indication of the presence of stone architecture is helpful in the interpretation of the magnetometry results, as well as providing us with information about the nature of the underlying building prior to any excavation. As mentioned above, the 450 earthworks across the interior of the city in many respects act as a crude set of test trenches, bringing samples of buried archaeological material to the surface all over the site.

A further example of the military earthworks proving archaeologically helpful came during our investigation of the ramparts. As discussed above, the ramparts are made of extremely tough clay, which is very difficult to dig with hand tools. This, combined with reluctance to cause visible damage to the site's only standing structure, made examining the ramparts through excavation highly problematic. Fortunately, the military interventions in the ramparts had left us with several pre-cut sections through at least the upper structure where vehicle access points had been cut. Much of our knowledge of the structure and materials of the ramparts comes from cleaning up one of these military-made sections.

As a final note on the interaction of the archaeological project with the military landscape, members of the team are constantly reminded of the men who lived at the site in the 1980s by the objects left

on the site. Common finds include ration cans, uniform buttons, helmet liners and occasionally clothing; army socks appear to survive particularly well. Although military debris is not collected as survey material, several team members have accumulated small collections out of personal curiosity.

The erasure of the military landscape

Much of the military landscape shaped by the Iran-Iraq war is likely to endure long into the future. The frontline defences, close to the border, are largely protected from human interference due to restricted access to the still sensitive border, the remoteness of much of the land from roads and settlements, and extensive uncleared minefields. Only wind and rain are slowly acting to wear down the berms and fill in the ditches. However, this is not the case for the area surrounding Charax Spasinou. The site lies relatively close to the Shatt al-Arab, is easily accessible by road and is in an area of rapidly expanding settlement and cultivation. This means that, as well as natural erosion processes, the military landscape is being erased by human actions, in some cases at a rapid rate.

Much of the area around Charax Spasinou, including parts of the site, has come under cultivation at some point or another since the end of the Iran-Iraq war. Although some larger berms and emplacements, which were clearly too much trouble to level, have been ploughed around, drone photos reveal the scars of ploughed-out military features on the site and in surrounding fields. At least 34 ploughed out features can be identified within the archaeological site. A further agricultural issue for the Iran-Iraq war remains is that, in several cases, what appear to be military ditches have been recut, in total or in part, for irrigation or drainage purposes. This practice destroys the character of the military features and frequently throws into doubt the original age and extent of many of these ditches.

By far the greatest threat to the integrity of the military landscape surrounding Charax Spasinou is the deliberate removal of upstanding earthworks for building purposes. There is a substantial amount of housebuilding and development underway in the local area as the surrounding villages expand. Due to the low-lying, semi-waterlogged nature of the ground, it is necessary to build up a platform of earth under new houses to keep the structure dry during the wet winter months. The earth cannot simply be pushed up from the surrounding area without effectively digging out a lake around the new building, so the earth has to be brought in from elsewhere. The favoured source of building earth in this area seems to be the Iran-Iraq war earthworks. The practical basis for this is that, because the earthworks lie above the surface, the earth in them tends to be drier than earth dug from below the surface, but also it is practically easier to scoop the upstanding earthworks into

a truck with a JCB than to dig down for the material. It is also likely that this practice is encouraged by landowners who may consider it beneficial to clear the land of earthworks with an eye to possible future cultivation. The result is that the military earthworks are rapidly disappearing from a large area around the expanding settlements. The use of bulldozers is forbidden on the archaeological site, meaning that the earthworks at Charax Spasinou are so far almost untouched by this process, but we have observed the process in action nearby during off-site survey and the tide of clearance can be clearly mapped in sample areas surveyed in the surrounding area.



Figure 7: An area approximately 4km southeast of Charax Spasinou, which features a high concentration of vehicle emplacements protected by a series of berms. The military features in the southern part of the surveyed area, indicated in black, have been recently removed. Standing military features have been shaded to make them more visible.

A war to forget

The remains of the Iran-Iraq war are treated with little reverence in Iraq, as illustrated by the ease with which they are trucked off for building material, but this is not the case in Iran. The war is remembered very differently on the two sides of the border. For Iran, the war was the fire in which a new Iranian national identity was forged following the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The war, in which Iraq was the initial aggressor, was used by the new regime to generate huge patriotic and religious fervour in defence of Iran, Shia Islam and the revolution. Martyrdom in the war was elevated to a supreme religious virtue. The conflict is revered as a great national struggle defined by heroism, religious virtue and terrible, but glorious, sacrifice (Khakpour *et al* 2016, Moosavi 2015).

In Iran the war is known as The Holy Defence and is heavily memorialised. There is an entire week of commemorations each September, and in 2017 Iran opened a huge new museum; the Holy Defence Museum, which covers 21 hectares (Daftari 2017). Important battlefields on the Iranian side of the border are preserved as sites of pilgrimage, traditionally visited in the spring during the Nowroz new year festival. Even the earth of the battlefields, imbued with the blood of martyrs, is considered sacred and is brought back by pilgrims to plant in gardens (Wellman 2015:576).

Attitudes to the war in Iraq are far more mixed. One issue is that the memory of the Iran-Iraq war has been pushed into the background by subsequent conflicts; the invasion of Kuwait, leading to the Gulf War in 1990-1, then the US invasion of 2003 and the insurgency which followed, and finally the war with Islamic State, which has barely ended at the time of writing. In the face of almost continuous conflict and turmoil, Iraq now has little opportunity for reflection and memorialisation of a war which has become eclipsed by more recent tragedies.

Probably of more significance, however, is the way in which the causes and motives behind Iraq's part in the war have come to be viewed in the present. While Iran can cast itself as the victim of an unprovoked attack, Iraq acted as the initiator of the conflict under the direction of Saddam Hussein, and it is his legacy which looms large over the memory of the war in Iraq. For Iraqis, the war with Iran was wrapped up in Ba'athist propaganda and the personality of its leader. While, fundamentally, most Iraqis who fought, fought to protect their homeland from foreign invasion, they did it under the banner of Saddam Hussein and their efforts were presented in terms of the defence of the Ba'athist regime (Moosavi 2015:11). It would be grossly simplistic to say that the memory of Saddam Hussein is now universally despised by Iraqis, but the legacies of his rule and the horrors he inflicted on large sections of the Iraqi people have coloured perceptions of the Iran-Iraq war to the point where it is broadly considered to have been a bloody and unnecessary conflict, fought in a bad cause.

This Ba'athist taint which hangs over the Iran-Iraq war has resulted in an extremely minimal culture of remembrance and memorialisation in Iraq, compared to the rich legacy of commemoration on the Iranian side of the border. During the Ba'athist post-war years there was a state sponsored programme of events and memorials to the war, including Martyrs Day, celebrated on the 1st of December, and a series of national monuments. However, these commemorations were all thickly packaged in Ba'athist propaganda and most were abandoned after 2003, when the trappings of the former regime were cast down.

An illustrative microcosm of the conflicting emotions surrounding the Iraqi perception of the war is the Victory Arch; the famous monument in Baghdad consisting of a pair of huge bronze arms crossing two curved swords. This was commissioned by Saddam Hussein, reportedly being of his own design, in 1986 as a monument to his yet-to-be-attained victory over Iran and as a memorial to the Iraqi martyrs of the war. After the fall of Saddam, the new regime in Baghdad began to purge the capital of Ba'athist monuments, of which the Victory Arch was considered a particularly egregious example (Whitaker 2004). Demolition of the arch had actually begun in 2007 before it was halted by a disparate group of mostly Iraqi individuals and organisations who argued that the Victory Arch should be preserved as an important historical monument, no matter what its political connotations (Semple 2007). It is this latent understanding, that the Ba'athist era's material manifestations mark a key period in Iraqi history and are meaningful for the country's cultural memory, that may hold out some hope for the future study, and perhaps preservation, of the material remains of the Iran-Iraq war. There are already organisations, such as the Iraq Memory Foundation, working to record and preserve the history and monuments of the Ba'athist era, along with the memory of all its horrors.

Conclusions

The site of Charax Spasinou is an evocative example of the unpredictable interaction of modern conflict processes and ancient remains in the formation of an archaeological landscape. While on a superficial level, the military occupation of the site might simply be seen as damage to the archaeological record, viewed in a wider context and in greater depth it can be seen as a creative, or even regenerative, as well as destructive process. The long-abandoned defensive ramparts of the ancient city returned to military relevance and were re-fortified. The city, in some respects, reverted briefly to being a living settlement, with a defined role in the newly reorganised landscape of military defence; a role which was substantially shaped by its ancient archaeological remains. The Iran-Iraq war features and material at the site can be considered as a true occupation phase, which represents an extremely important period in 20th century regional history.

Charax Spasinou is also an example of the difficult but sometimes rewarding relationship between conflict remains and modern archaeological research in a palimpsest landscape. The intrusion of military earthworks into earlier archaeological deposits can provide data as well as destroy it. In a site as vast as Charax Spasinou, where archaeological resources will never be equal to the area, military excavations may prove the only window possible onto sub surface deposits over much of the site.

During the current period, in which there is little enthusiasm for the memory of a war tainted by a political past which Iraq is striving to put behind it, the military landscape is being rapidly erased from this area. In a further example of the sometimes-surprising interaction between modern archaeology and landscapes of conflict, the heritage management measures now in place to protect the ancient city will also preserve a bubble of the Iran-Iraq war landscape after it has been cleared from the surrounding area. Perhaps in the future, with a longer historical perspective, Iraqis will find as much interest in the remains of this pivotal conflict as they do in the ancient remains of the great Parthian city below.

Acknowledgements

The Charax Spasinou Project is supported by the British Council's Cultural Protection Fund. The project is made possible by the collaboration and kindness of our colleagues from the State Board for Antiquities and Heritage.

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Figure Captions:

Figure 1: Iraqi defensive earthworks north of Basra. The network of berms and trenches on the Iraqi side of the border demonstrates the extent to which the landscape was transformed during the conflict. The canal east of Basra is now dry and the extent of Fish Lake, expanded by the Iraqis during the war, is now much reduced. The position and extent of Charax Spasinou is indicated, illustrating its situation in the Iraqi secondary line of defences, close to where the border approaches the Baghdad-Basra highway.

Figure 2: The site of Charax Spasinou today, illustrating the position and extent of the 3.4km long ancient ramparts and indicating other important features of the ancient city so far identified.

Figure 3: The northeast rampart of Charax Spasinou with military alterations. Tank positions and their ramps, cut at regular intervals into the top of the ancient rampart, are the most prominent visual sign of the war's impact on the archaeology of the site. Drone photo, view facing north.

Figure 4: The positions of the underlying brick kilns are taken from the magnetometry survey results and indicated with white-outlined squares. The 1980s Iraqi military features are highlighted, including a long berm with integrated vehicle emplacements which runs along the top of the ridge formed by the row of kiln mounds.

Figure 5: Limestone blocks disturbed from a large, high-status building below by the construction of a military earthwork (left). These blocks represent the only architectural stonework so far identified at the site. A test trench is under excavation in the background; the scrubby vegetation between the test trench and the earthwork marks the bulldozer scoop from which the stone blocks originate.

Figure 6: A battery of large mortar positions linked by an infantry trench dug within the ancient city. This represents the excavation by hand of a large volume of archaeological deposits.

Figure 7: An area approximately 4km southeast of Charax Spasinou, which features a high concentration of vehicle emplacements protected by a series of berms. The military features in the southern part of the surveyed area, indicated in black, have been recently removed. Standing military features have been shaded to make them more visible.

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