

The Ilisu Dam Project from an archaeologist's point of view

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About 37,000 hectares of land have been earmarked for flooding to make way for the Ilisu Dam Project, a part of the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP). The area in question has been the site of both temporary and permanent human settlement from prehistoric times to the present day. It accounts for one of the major gateways between Iran, the Arabian Peninsula, the Caucasus and Anatolia. The area is thus of archaeological interest both for the various traffic routes and for the number of settlement sites.

To the present day, no more than 7,000 hectares of the area earmarked for the dam project have been explored by archaeologists. Neither surveys nor excavations have been done on the remaining 30,000 hectares. The portion that has been the site of excavations is the area to the west of the dam, which will be the last bit to see the impact of the flooding, whereas the site of Catepe, that will be among the first to be inundated, remains completely unexplored.

There are serious issues as to the success and scientific reliability of the excavations that have taken place in the area. Most of these are connected to the dubious character of the organisation TACDAM, which is in charge of coordinating the archaeological activities in the area. To give just two examples, the former head of the excavation team at the Hasankeyf Site, Olus Artik, is famous for having had a luxurious two-storey house built on the site itself, while the excavations at the prehistoric burial site of Kortik Tepe in Bismil/Diyarbakir are being led by a classical archaeologist who consistently refuses to accept any prehistoric archaeologists or anthropologists on his team and insists on running the project all by himself. In short, the coordination of the field research in the area is a matter of chance and, not least, insider relationships.

Landmines present another obstacle to the full exploration of the area. At present, it is unknown to what extent landmines were planted during the years of the armed conflict and where. That is why a reliable, secure survey of the whole area and the identification of potential excavation sites amounts to a serious problem that needs to be tackled.