The Hungarian excavations at Grd-i Tle (Ranya-Plain)

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The Hungarian Archaeological Mission in Kurdistan (Iraq) lead by Tamás Dezső and Gábor Kalla (Eötvös Loránd University of Sciences) conducted excavations since 2016 at Grd-i Tle, in the Ranya Plain of Iraqi Kurdistan.¹

The site of Grd-i Tle stands at a strategic location near Saruchawa village, in the north-western fringe of the Ranya Plain (36°15′16″ N, 44°45′21″ E; fig. 1). Before our program, the only fieldwork on this tell settlement was the brief survey of a Japanese team in 2015.²

Our five-year planned archaeological program had three basic goals. The main aim was to investigate a local Neo-Assyrian centre at the borderlands of the Empire. The available data suggested such a role for Grd-i Tle. The second aim was to establish a sequence stratigraphy of this settlement and to make a ceramic chronology for the region with it. The third goal was to make a detailed topographic survey for the site.³

Topography

Fieldwork started in September 2016 with a topographic survey. Attila Weisz (Salisbury Ltd.), using Leica Total Station TCRA 1101, produced a dataset of more than two thousand records that was adequate to build a high-density 3D view of the tell and the surrounding lowland. The entire location was divided by a grid system of 10 x 10 m squares for further research.

According to this survey, the top of the tell (602.32 m above sea level) is towering about 30 m above the “outer town” (572.90 m). Its circular highest plateau measured 76x86 m, which was followed by a 20-25 meters-wide middle plateau around the tell’s circumference 10-12 meters below the top. The western part of this middle plateau was destroyed by a road for vehicles in modern times (fig. 2). The mound is surrounded by a “lower city”, enclosed by an oval rampart (250x210 m), remains of which is used at the present for irrigation.⁴ At least during

¹ Preliminary reports about the campaigns 2016 and 2017 are Dezső et al., 2016 and Dezső et al, 2017.
³ The geophysical survey is planned for the next campaign in September 2019.
⁴ Dezső et al., 2016.
one period, a larger outer town also existed (at least 600x400m), which is now regularly flooded due to a rice-land, therefore we could not properly investigate it. Even surface collection had to be restricted at several spots in this area.

During three campaigns we excavated seven different surfaces to acquire information about the settlement (fig. 3). Four trenches (Trench I, Ia, IV, IVa) were opened on the top of the tell and on the northern slope at various heights in order to reconstruct the tell’s structure, its evolution, and its chronology. We plan to connect these surfaces to get a whole stratigraphy, but we met with several difficulties.

It became clear that the upper section of the tell is covered by thick layers of debris belonging to late Islamic, Hellenistic-Parthian and Neo-Assyrian citadel walls, that made it more difficult to reach the construction levels. In this section, Neo-Assyrian walls were recovered 4 meters below the surface. Surprisingly, in the lower section of the northern slope, beyond the middle plateau, we found remains of Neo-Assyrian houses almost directly beneath the surface at certain places.

Another trench (Trench II) was laid out on the edge of the middle plateau at the eastern side, to get information about this part of the settlement. Presently this area offered the most comprehensible stratigraphy, from the late Islamic until the Neo-Assyrian period. Two other trenches were made to investigate the “lower town” (Trench III) and a city gate (Trench V), all these areas yielded late Islamic material.

*The chronology of Grd-i Tle and the excavated remains*

The excavated levels and the finds from secondary positions show that the duration of the site extended at least nine thousand years, from the 7th millennium BC until the early or mid-19th century AD.

*Chalcolithic Period*

Until now the earliest phases of the settlement are only represented by finds mainly mixed with late Islamic and Hellenistic-Parthian material in contexts belonging to later periods. Sherds of Halaf and Ubaid painted ceramics and knapped stones (including exotic raw material – obsidian) are surprisingly abundant in these later levels, besides, much more rare items such as a stamp seal and a seal impression also came to light. The Uruk Period is

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5 Király, 2017.
represented by bevelled rim bowls and fragments of stone vessels; this period is followed by a long time-gap in the history of the site.

_Neo-Assyrian Period_

It seems that after the Late Chalcolithic Period the site was first occupied in the Neo-Assyrian times, or perhaps a little bit earlier, by Middle Assyrian settlers. No signs of Early Bronze or Middle Bronze Age occupation came to light until this day. The Neo-Assyrian levels were reached in four trenches at very different elevations with more than 20 meters differences among them.

In Trench Ia, we found an E-W oriented, 1.2 m wide massive stone wall which perhaps was a base of a revetment wall and an accumulation of Neo-Assyrian fine ware near to it, hence its age seems to be clear.

Remains of Neo-Assyrian houses were excavated in Trench IV and IVa, at about 15 and 20 m lower elevation than the wall of the same period in Trench Ia. Trench IV revealed a service room (fig. 4), perhaps a kitchen with a fireplace, several near-complete pots and stone tools (grindstones, mortars etc.). A remarkable find situation occurred there; at least three pots for beer brewing were set against a small compartment wall or a low bench, partly sunken in the floor or in a bench, almost perfectly aligned with a northern and a southern entrance to this room. At the southern wall, one more doorway was opened to a courtyard which was excavated at a 3,7x3 meters area. It was carefully paved with flagstones of various sizes, originating from different sedimentary rock formations in the vicinity. The overall setup of this courtyard was very decorative. On this paving, we found several iron blocks and among other fine wares a neck of a glazed aryballos. This house was destroyed by a fire, but perhaps before this event, the sunken vessels were deliberately smashed. Among the burnt debris above the courtyard, a human skeleton was found in a posture of downfall, without proper laying or grave goods. This adult individual was very probably deceased during this destruction event or events.

Directly over this destruction level, marked by burnt mud, charcoal and ashes a new building was constructed from which only a 1 m thick riveting wall foundation was found in the southern part of the trench. It was made of limestone blocks, cobbles, and baked brick fragments, and it stretched across the excavated area in E-W direction. This foundation was
renewed at least two times. Its date is not clear yet, because the layer over it yielded a mixed Hellenistic-Parthian and Neo-Assyrian material.

In the Trench IVa, on the lower part of the northern slope, we met with nearly the same situation (fig. 5) Here we excavated a room section of a Neo-Assyrian house, which northern part was eroded, but in the southern part, we found two bigger groups of finds on the floor, consisted of mostly whole or at least half vessels (cooking, storage and serving pots) and various polished stone artefacts. This represented a whole range of household utensils, from the fine wares until a hand-formed coarse bowl, all from the Neo-Assyrian Period (fig. 8). About 0.8 meters over these assemblages a paved surface extended, most probably a courtyard with mixed Hellenistic-Parthian and Neo-Assyrian material, so its exact date is not certain yet, but after the style of paving it seems to be Neo-Assyrian.

These two Neo-Assyrian houses in the Trenches IV and IVa were laying close to each other, in about 10-meter distance, but their elevation difference was approximately 8 meters (fig. 3: section). It suggests that the considerably steep slope of the modern tell existed already in Neo-Assyrian times, and the settlers adapted to it forming a terrace system for the houses. Also, the rooms of the single houses were laid in different heights. The courtyard in Trench IV was located 0.25 m higher than the kitchen. Similar arrangements can be seen on Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs as the Assyrian army are attacking cities of this type.

In Trench II at the middle of the east side of the tell, we excavated a stone wall foundation similar to the upper wall in Trench IV. This 1.20 m thick wall with a wide opening consisted not only of stones of various sizes but we observed sockets of vertical wooden poles supporting the wall (fig. 6). Inside the wall, an apparent foundational deposit was found – a 40 by 40 cm depression with an uneven floor covered by ash with a whole coarse hand-formed vessel inside it. The characteristics of the wall imply that it was a part of a larger building, big house or palace datable to the Neo-Assyrian period. The most important find was here a bronze bell with triangular openwork decoration and iron tongue\(^6\) together with a red stone bead originally belonging to a horse harness (fig. 7: 3).

The results of the excavation so far suggest that a significant Neo-Assyrian settlement existed here with elite households consuming valuable artefacts, fine ceramics including glazed, red slip (fig. 7: 4-5) and palace ware, expensive horse harnesses, bronze plates, lapis lazuli, and

\(^6\) For the Neo-Assyrian bronze bells see Curtis, 2013, pp. 97-100.
carnelian beads (fig. 7: 1-2). The houses were built after the patterns of the core area, with carefully paved courtyards (fig. 4-5).\(^7\)

The Neo-Assyrian Period consisted of at least two building levels, with a destruction layer between them. We found in the Trenches Ia and II bronze socketed trilobate arrowheads of Scythian type (fig. 8: 1-2) and iron arrowheads of Assyrian type\(^8\) perhaps referring to a siege (fig. 8: 3-4), but its date is not fixed yet.

**Hellenistic-Parthian period**

The remains of the Hellenistic-Parthian period were found in several trenches, at levels close to the Neo-Assyrian levels. It is clear that the settlement of this period extended over the whole tell, with a citadel constructed of big stones. Most probably this was the time when the outer city was established as well. Nevertheless, until now the extant remains of this period were excavated only in Trench II. We observed at least four building phases of the Hellenistic-Parthian period in Trench I and Ia.\(^9\) The debris of this citadel wall was scattered throughout the upper parts of the tell’s slopes, as shown by our excavation at a larger surface in Trench Ia. We found characteristic Hellenistic-Parthian material: pottery, pieces of the Mediterranean roofing system – *tegulae* and *imbrices*, and Macedonian coins in more trenches (Ia, II; fig. 8: 5).

In Trench II we found two Hellenistic-Parthian building levels. The walls of the lower level were laid deliberately on Neo-Assyrian ceramic sherds in order to stabilize the wall’s larger stones. We excavated two rooms of the first house, with 0.65 m wide stone foundation walls that were partly destroyed through a late Islamic robber pit. The remarkable feature of this building was a courtyard carefully paved with great flagstones (fig. 9).

Between the remains of the two Hellenistic-Parthian buildings was a 1-meter thick filling with many traces of industrial activities, iron slags, big amount of small burnt clay pieces and charcoal. Only a small section of the second, later building could be excavated, the Late Islamic pits and graves destroyed its eastern part.\(^10\)

The inner chronology of this period is not defined yet, it is a task of further research.

\(^7\) Preusser, 1954 (Assur); Mallowan, 1966, pp. 184-200 (Kalhu); Miglus, 1999, pp. 132-175. For this area of the Neo-Assyrian Empire see the houses in Gird-i Bazar (Kreppner et al., 2017).

\(^8\) Dezső, 2016.

\(^9\) Dezső and Mordovin, 2016.

\(^10\) Dezső et al., 2017.
Late Islamic period

It seems that the Hellenistic-Parthian period was followed by a long time-gap; Grd-i Tle has been occupied again during the Late Islamic period. Human presence during previous phases of the Middle Ages is dubious to our current knowledge. Nevertheless remains of the Late Islamic period (17th-early 19th century AD) are omnipresent at the site inside the perimeter wall of the lower city. Among the surface finds were many contemporary coins, including several Safavid silver coins (fig. 8: 6). Remarkable finds from intact layers are two late 17th-century Nurembergian tokens (fig. 8: 7).

At this time on the top of the tell, a fortification was built, perhaps directly over the remains of the Hellenistic-Parthian citadel wall (fig. 10). In Trench I, we excavated a part of this stone fortification wall with a semi-circular tower. Traces of this wall can be seen at the edge of the highest plateau, and remains of a gate are visible on the south side. Evidently, the present surface of the plateau is formed by this fortress, so its extension was 76x86 m. The excavated intramural part of this fortress was of domestic character and yielded large numbers of bread-baking ovens (tannūrs) and many cooking vessels. At least three main habitation strata of the Late Islamic period were detected, characterized by particular types of pipes and lead bullets. It seems likely that Gird-i Tle was a stronghold of the independent Kurdish Soran Emirate subdued by Ottoman troops in 1835. Perhaps the systematic destruction of the fortification walls can be assigned to this event.

In Trench III we found traces of a contemporary lower town, an oven, and an intact bronze bowl. This lower town was surrounded by a wall whose remains are now used for irrigation. In Trench V and Va, we excavated the remains of a gate that led to the settlement from the south.

At the eastern side of the tell, stones of an extensive graveyard were scattered all over the slope. Therefore the period of use is uncertain yet, but most probably it was Late Islamic. Here in Trench II, we excavated nearly 50 cist graves, mostly infant burials at approximately 40 m². The burial rite was documented in several cases. The bodies were laid in shallow pits on their backs in an extended position, sometimes with slightly flexed arms and legs, on their right sides, facing South, in East-West direction. After the placement, the pit was lined with stone slabs or blocks, finally, it was covered with one or more slabs (fig. 11).

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11 Dezső and Mordvin, 2016.
12 Masek and Mordvin, 2016.
13 For the graves excavated at the season 2016 see Kalla and Szabó, 2016.
The plans for the next season
We plan to investigate the Neo-Assyrian houses at a larger scale and to conduct an extensive geophysical survey in the following season of 2019.

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