

CURRENT RESEARCH AT THE GRD-I TLE SITE (2021–2023). Remains of the Hellenistic-Parthian Period

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Following our paper published in the spring issue of Hungarian Archeology 2024, we continue to present the results of our 2021–2023 fieldwork at the Grd-i Tle tell site (KALLA et al. 2024). The previous article focused on remains from the Neo-Assyrian period (9th–7th centuries BC). Here, we summarize our results on the Hellenistic-Parthian and Islamic periods, during which the tell site reached its present state.

Keywords: Grd-i Tle, tell, Hellenistic-Parthian period, Islamic Period, fortress, house, canal, terrace

The Eötvös Loránd University Archaeological Mission to Iraqi Kurdistan began its fieldwork at the *tell* settlement of Grd-i Tle in 2016 (*Fig. 1*). The main objective of the project was to uncover a significant local administrative centre of the Neo-Assyrian period, but later periods are also well-represented at the site. Previously, we presented the results of our 2016–2019 fieldwork seasons (KALLA & DEZSŐ 2019) and the Neo-Assyrian remains unearthed during the 2021–2023 campaigns (KALLA *et al.* 2024). During this time, we came closer to understanding the formation processes of the 30-metre-high tell, including its habitation during the Hellenistic-Parthian and Islamic periods, the topic of this paper. Besides fieldwork and the primary processing of the find material on the spot, a geophysical survey was invaluable in this research phase.¹⁴

GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

Zsombor Klembala and László Nagy, associates of the National Archaeological Institute's Instrumental Survey department, conducted a successful two-week ground-penetrating radar survey covering a total of

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¹⁴ The fieldwork and the processing of the finds were supported by the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund – OTKA project entitled *Intensive archaeological investigation of a local administrative centre of the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (NKFIH ID: K 132429).

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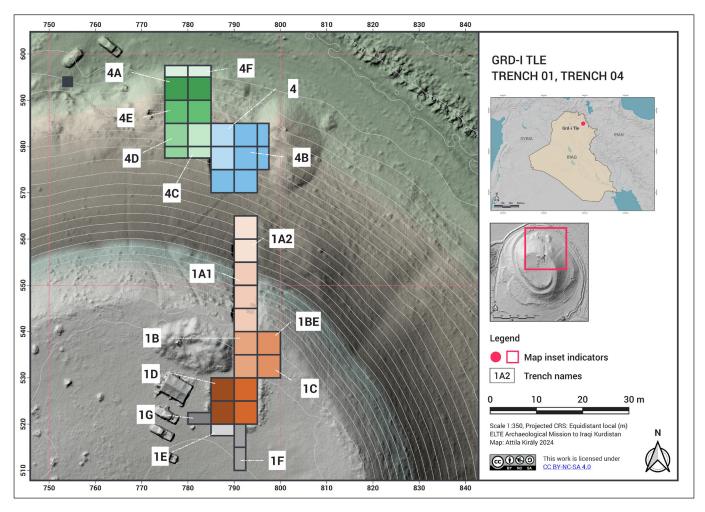


Fig. 1. Grd-i Tle, location of the site in Iraq and the position of the opened trenches on the top plateau and the northern slope of the tell

14,131 m² at Grd-i Tle in 2022 (*Fig. 2*). The survey areas included the *tell*'s top plateau (S1) and the lower plateaus and their surroundings in the south-southwest (S2, S5, S6, S7), west (S3), and north (S4). The steep eastern slope was not suitable for investigation. A single-channel Malå Ground Explorer (GX) instrument with a 450 MHz central frequency was used for the survey, which proved to be useful in detecting stone wall foundations characteristic of the upper layers below ground.

The measurements were conducted in a 0.5 m by 1.0 m grid with a 2.5 cm sample spacing. The clayey soil allowed a maximum of 1.3-metre penetration depth, which, although fell short of the expected depth on less conductive soils, was sufficient for detecting buildings close to the surface. We generated three-dimensional data arrays from the processed sections, divided into horizontal intervals to obtain anomaly maps or depth slices. The darker, i.e. higher-reflectivity, anomalies are areas with significantly different electrical properties from their surroundings, from which archaeological features can be identified based on depth, thickness, shape, and previous knowledge of the local archaeological record.

A LATE ISLAMIC FORTRESS

The geophysical survey revealed the presence of the walls of a Late Islamic fortified centre at the top plateau of the *tell* (ca. 4675 m²), while the Hellenistic-Parthian structures underneath were not visible. As our previous excavation covered only 3% of the area of this fortress, the remote sensing results allowed us to position the exposed parts in their full architectural context (*Fig. 3*).

The average 70–90 cm wide and 95 cm high Late Islamic fortification wall has an irregular polygonal plan, following the edge and ovoid shape of the top plateau. On the outside, the wall was accompanied by



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Fig. 2. Grd-i Tle, the 2022 GPR survey areas

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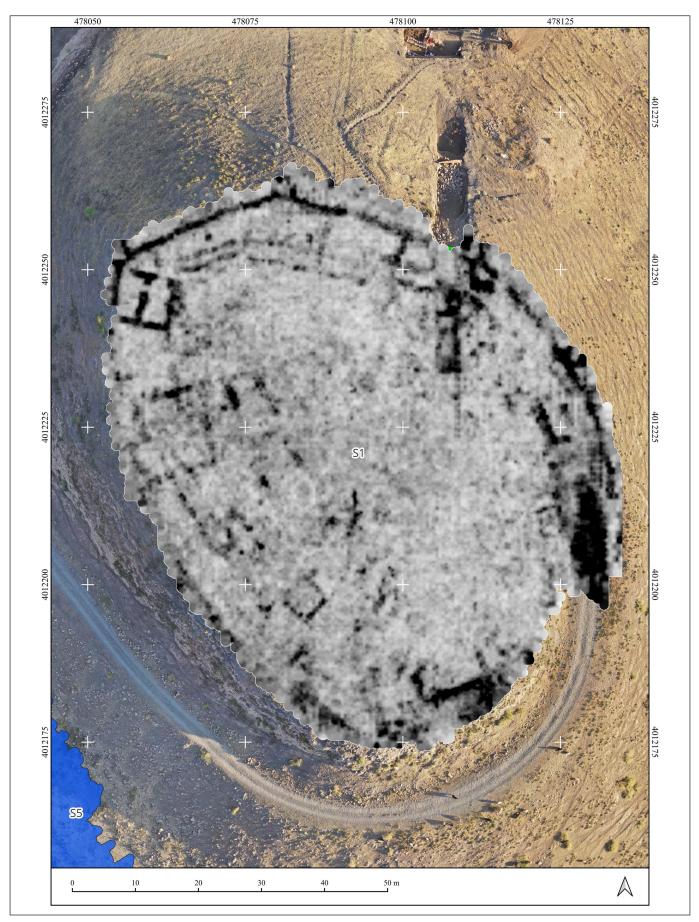


Fig. 3. Grd-i Tle, GPR survey anomalies detected at a depth of 40–60 cm on the top plateau of the tell. The walls of the Late Islamic fortress are visible

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horseshoe-shaped towers with a diameter of about 210 cm and a 65–80 cm thick wall, spaced almost evenly (ca. 25 m apart) on the vertices of the polygonal enclosure. The western side and the southeastern corner of the fortification were destroyed during the construction of a modern road leading up to the hilltop.

Based on their layout and other characteristics, most detected buildings on the top plateau belong to an Islamic horizon older than the enclosure, which means the GPR images mostly reflect the state of the fortress at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. The earliest identified building is probably a tower in the northwestern corner $(11 \times 9 \text{ m})$, the orientation and masonry of which are markedly different from the other structures.

Four distinct parts of the fort could be identified on the GPRS maps. Excavations were carried out in the eastern part of the northern one (ca. 65×27 m) in 2016 and 2019, revealing several east-west oriented buildings next to the enclosure wall, with two main construction phases. The archaeological record indicates a domestic-economic function in this sector.



Fig. 4. Different types of ceramic pipes found in different parts of the Late Islamic fortress

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The shape, floor plan, and structure of the buildings in the eastern sector (ca. 50×25 m) are similar to the northern one, indicating a similar economic function. The heavily disturbed southern sector (ca. 25×35 m) included probably a gate to the fortress, based on surface forms and a profile opened by the modern road (DEZSŐ *et al.* 2016; HASEGAWA–YAMADA–ISMAIL 2016). The most complex architectural remains have been unearthed in the western sector (ca. 40×40 m), probably housing the representative-administrative centre of the fort. The GPRS maps display probably clay walls raised on stone foundations there, as observed at excavated parts of the fort. This technique allowed the construction of one or, at most, two floors in a building.

During the 2021 and 2023 seasons, new details emerged about the use of the courtyard in trenches 1C, 1D, 1F, and 1G. On the upper level, a large number of open-top bread ovens ($tenn\bar{u}r$) were constructed, often in several layers. Under this level, several successive, short-duration living floors were detected, including a pavement of small pebbles, with a staircase leading to the inner, deeper parts of the courtyard. Ceramic pipes are one of the most characteristic and abundant small finds of the fortified centre (*Fig. 4*).

HELLENISTIC-PARTHIAN FEATURES ON THE SOUTHWESTERN PLATEAU

In addition to the top plateau, an extensive geophysical survey was carried out on the three lower plateaus on the south-southwest side of the *tell* and the agricultural area flanking them (S2, S5, S6, S7). Anomalies indicating a larger, multi-part building have been identified in Area S6, most prominently at a depth of 0.6–0.9 m. The northern part of Area S5 displayed archaeologically relevant anomalies at a similar depth. Shovel tests in S5 and S6, carried out in 2022–2023, indicate a Hellenistic-Parthian dating for these structures (*Fig. 5*). Their thick walls and multi-room floor plans indicate a non-residential function for these buildings, worth studying more extensively in the future.

HELLENISTIC-PARTHIAN FEATURES ON THE TOP PLATEAU

The northern wall of the Hellenistic-Parthian citadel was partly excavated in Trench 1B already in 2019 (KALLA & DEZSŐ 2019, 6). Its 4-metre-thick base, made of large stones, followed the contour of the *tell*, but it was not built on the edge. Instead, an inclined plinth reinforced the outer perimeter of the citadel wall. The plinth was also constructed from large stones and was at least two metres thick. A foundation deposit was found at the inner southern side of the citadel wall in 2022: a young small ruminant placed under the wall, probably in a basket that has decayed completely since.¹⁵

At least three Hellenistic-Parthian levels were observed inside the citadel wall. As in other parts of the *tell*, the Hellenistic-Parthian inhabitants built directly on the long-abandoned remains of Neo-Assyrian buildings, such as walls and pavements. During the 2021 and 2022 seasons, it has become evident in Trenches 1C and 1D that round stone installations were built on the paved courtyard of the Neo-Assyrian palace (KALLA *et al.* 2024, 11), the function of which is uncertain. Later, this level was raised with a 20 cm thick clay layer with one or two courses of carefully placed clay bricks bonded with fine sand on top. A large building was erected on the raised area, the foundation walls of which were excavated in Trenches 1C and 1D (2021), and 1E (2022) (*Fig. 6*). Unfortunately, the Islamic Period features destroyed its walls in many places, but at least four rooms could still be distinguished. The building has three different construction phases; the original large rooms were divided with new dividing walls into smaller ones in two phases. In the first phase, the core of the core-and-veneer walls was made of fired brick and stone rubble, while later, only stones were used: crushed stones in the first two phases, and pebbles in the third. The 1.25 m thick masonry and the large rooms indicate an important building in the first phase, which was later divided into smaller spaces. Among the most important finds from this large building are a small bronze cup (*Fig. 7a*) and an ivory awl decorated with an engraved running spiral motif (*Fig. 7b*).

¹⁵ In 2021, the work in trench 1B was led by Tamás Dezső, assisted by László Almády. Fruzsina Alexandra Németh and Ákos Ekrik worked in trenches 1C and 1D. In 2022, Gábor Kalla, Tamás Dezső, László Almády and Iringó Tatár worked in trenches 1C, 1D and 1E. In 2023, trench 1F was excavated by Attila Botond Szilasi, and trench 1G by Iringó Tatár.

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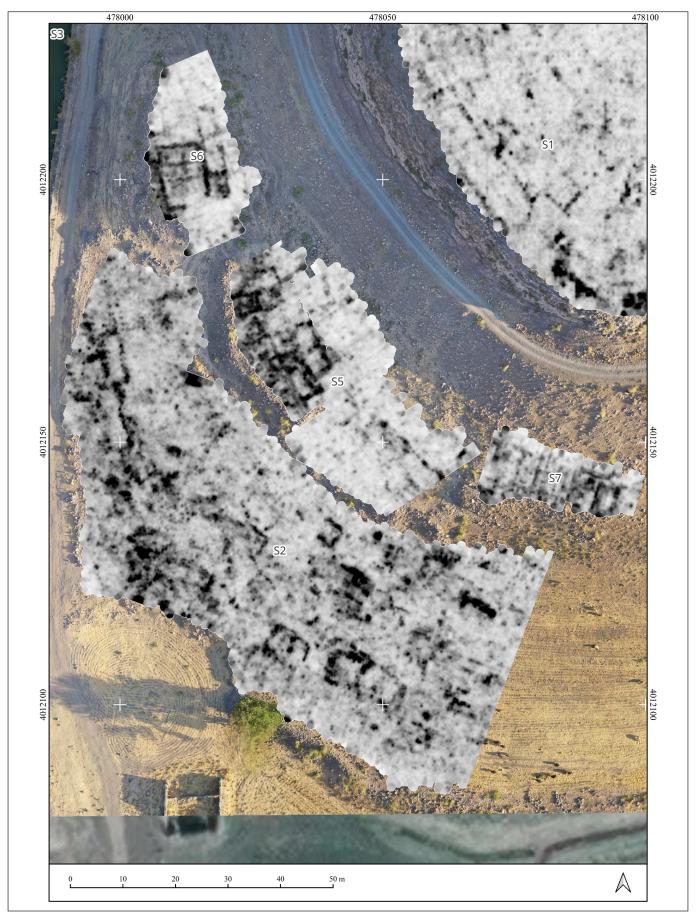


Fig. 5. Grd-i Tle, GPR survey anomalies observed in the southwestern part of the tell, with an Islamic settlement part in Area S2 and Hellenistic-Parthian buildings in Areas S5–S7

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Fig. 6. Grd-i Tle, a part of the monumental building on the top plateau, excavated in 2021 (Trenches 1C and 1D)

A drainage channel, excavated in Trench 1G in 2023, cut directly into the Neo-Assyrian strata, probably belongs to this building (*Fig. 8*). The 60–70 cm wide and 40 cm thick feature was found 1.6 m below the present-day surface; its excavated section inclined 10 cm from southeast to northwest. Its sides were lined with elongated and its top covered with flat stones. The gaps were filled with relatively small, 10 cm long pebbles, and the bottom was sealed with a 1–2 cm thick, yellow clay layer. The 20×20 cm inner space of the channel was filled with homogeneous, brown sediment almost completely devoid of artefacts. The channel was excavated at a length of 4.2 m; its line was broken in the middle of the trench.

HELLENISTIC-PARTHIAN FEATURES ON THE MIDDLE TERRACE OF THE NORTHERN SLOPE

In Trenches 4B, 4C and 4D, our objective in 2021 was to excavate a larger part of the Neo-Assyrian house complex following its identification in 2018 and preparation in 2019 (KALLA *et al.* 2024, 1–14).¹⁶

¹⁶ The excavation of trenches 4B and 4C was led by Gábor Kalla in 2021–2023, with the help of Ákos Kutyifa. Attila Király worked on trench 4D between 2021–2023.

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Fig. 7. Grd-i Tle, a small bronze cup with linear decoration and an ivory-handled awl with engraved running spiral motifs, found in the monumental building on the top plateau in 2021

Beneath the steep northern slope of the *tell*, the Neo-Assyrian levels were directly below the surface at some places. Further south, towards the core of *tell*, they lay at a depth of up to 6 metres. Almost all post-Assyrian layers belonged to the Hellenistic-Parthian Period. Five successive Hellenistic-Parthian phases could be distinguished there; the latest one could only be found at the highest excavated level, in the south part of Trench 4B, while the earlier four appeared in the entire Area 4. The construction phases were separated from each other by 10–30 cm thick fill layers. All layers were accumulated in a terraced structure; their northern parts were strongly eroded, and the southern parts extended towards the core of the *tell*. Thus, we managed to excavate only the outer parts of the buildings.

The earliest Hellenistic-Parthian building was erected directly on the Neo-Assyrian ruins. The newly built walls and ovens were dug into the previous structures in the southern part of Trench 4B, excavated in 2023. We have the most comprehensive picture of these earliest Hellenistic-Parthian buildings, even if not all details are clear (Fig. 9); they were partly excavated in Trench 4B in 2019 (KALLA & DEZSŐ 2019, 5), in Trenches 4C and 4D in 2021, and in the southern part of Trench 4B in 2023. After initial ambiguities, we interpret the excavated features as part of a multi-room structure at least 20 metres long. Unfortunately, only one long wall has survived in fairly good condition, and only parts of the short walls and dividing walls, rendering the floor plan difficult to reconstruct. Like in younger structures, the wall foundations consisted of stones laid in clay, and the clay brick parts of the walls had already eroded, as well as most of the floors. The original



Fig. 8. Grd-i Tle, drainage channel excavated in 2023; it probably belonged to the large Hellenistic-Parthian building on the top plateau (Trench 1G)

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pavement of square, fired clay bricks was found in some places, as well as its foundation, made of potsherds and pebbles rammed into clay. Trench 4C contained a probable courtyard, while next to it, in the southern part of Trench 4D, a bread oven ($tenn\bar{u}r$) and two round stone structures of unknown function were found. A rectangular working surface of large stones, brick fragments, and some bricks laid in a herringbone pattern was uncovered north of the long wall.

The next layers in the sequence were identified as a renewal of this building, followed by a thick fill showing traces of industrial activity, which we already described in our previous report (KALLA & DEZSŐ

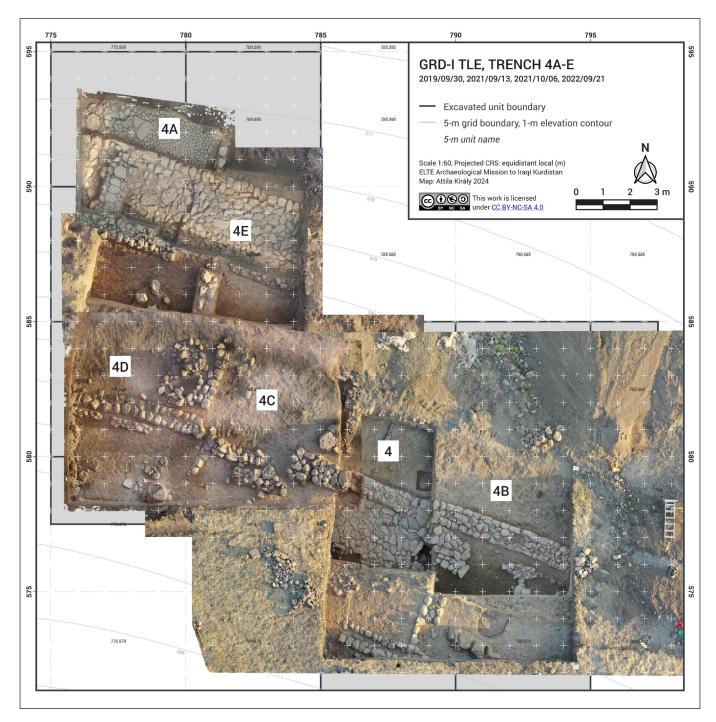


Fig. 9. Grd-i Tle, northern slope. On the middle and lower plateaus, Hellenistic-Parthian buildings were excavated between 2019 and 2023, which were built directly on the ruins of Neo-Assyrian houses on two terraces. There was a 5-metre difference in level between the lower terrace in the upper part of the picture (4A) and the upper terrace (4B, 4C, 4D) at the bottom. In Trench 4, a part of the Neo-Assyrian house excavated in 2018 can be observed, while an upper Hellenistic-Parthian building appears at the bottom, in the southern part of Trench 4B

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2019, 5). The 2022 excavation of a grated kiln identified in Trench 4B in 2019 has revealed that the structure has a closed, 1.9 m deep underground firing chamber. Contrary to our previous idea (KALLA & DEZSŐ 2019, 5), this kiln was perhaps used for producing brick instead of glazed pottery. Two more construction levels were found in the southern part of Trench 4B, but only in a small area, so no large connected features could be identified (KALLA & DEZSŐ 2019, 5, Fig. 8).

HELLENISTIC-PARTHIAN FEATURES ON THE LOWER TERRACE OF THE NORTHERN SLOPE

A Neo-Assyrian building in the lower part of the *tell*'s northern slope, found in 2018, represents the lower terrace of the site, situated approximately 5 metres below the Neo-Assyrian residence on the middle terrace. The building of the lower terrace, abounding with finds, was overlaid by a stone pavement with uncertain dating (KALLA & DEZSŐ 2019, 9; KALLA 2021, 52–53).¹⁷

The connection between the two terraces and the individual levels was examined in the last three seasons on a continuous, 20×10 -metre surface (Trenches 4A, 4E, and 4F). The layers of the Hellenistic-Parthian Period accumulated horizontally on three terraces under the sloping mantle of the *tell*. We uncovered the remains of residential buildings, a burial, and two stone-paved terraces there.

Our current understanding of the Hellenistic-Parthian history of this settlement part is as follows: The lower terrace is situated about a metre above the foot of the *tell* today. The western half of its excavated part, approximately $4.5 \times 3.0-2.0$ metres, was occupied by a stone-paved courtyard, and in the eastern half, we found several successive floors of a room with a bread oven (*tennūr*). A young person was buried next to the oven, most probably when it was still in use, in a flexed position on their left side, facing south, without any grave goods. This level was created above the ruins of the Neo-Assyrian building mentioned above, with a roughly 80 cm thick, homogeneous, clayey fill. Directly under the pavement, we found three artefact concentrations interpreted as foundation deposits, which originally consisted of whole, or almost whole, broken pots. Similar ones were found in the south part of Trench 4B in 2018 (KALLA & DEZSŐ 2019, 6, Fig. 9).

After this building was abandoned, a significant levelling was started, the foundation of which was a paved surface, of which ca. 800×250 cm was excavated. Large stone slabs were spread in one layer, closed

by a wall foundation of similar stones laid in a row in the north, following the curve of the *tell* but its orientation inclined slightly towards NW–SE (*Fig.* 10). A large amount of material, perhaps horizontally laid mud bricks that have been disintegrated since, was then accumulated on the paved surface in a ca. 1.5 m thick layer, on top of which, we uncovered a room of a building with at least two thin layers of rammed clay floor.

A well-preserved drainage channel was uncovered in this accumulation layer (*Fig. 11*). The channel consisted of a shaft about 1.5 metres deep and a horizontal section about 4.5 metres long, which drained the water from the building on the top of the fill to the north. The horizontal section was placed directly on the stone pavement, leading to its northern edge, from which the water could flow freely. The shaft had a rectangular cross-section and a 25×35 cm square upper opening; it was constructed



Fig. 10. Grd-i Tle, northern slope. On the surface of the lower plateau in Trench 4A, a Hellenistic-Parthian terrace foundation made of large stones was excavated in 2022, on which a drainage channel had been placed. A former paved terrace and details of a Neo-Assyrian house excavated in 2018 appear at the bottom of the image

¹⁷ trench 4A was excavated by Nóra Szabó in 2018, trenches 4A, 4E and 4F were excavated by Attila Király between 2021–2023.

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Fig. 11. Grd-i Tle, northern slope. The Hellenistic-Parthian drainage channel in subsequent stages of excavation in 2022. The bottom of the feature was made of fired bricks covered with bitumen, the top layers consisted of clay and stone rubble capped by large, flat blocks

from heavy, 50–60 cm long stones, with smaller stones and clay in the gaps. The construction pit of the shaft was filled up with rubble containing a large amount of stone.

The base of the horizontal channel section was laid out in two rows, each of six fired bricks measuring approximately $40 \times 40 \times 8$ cm, which were covered with bitumen after the walls had been completed. The base of the walls was made up of a course of half-bricks, with another course of 15–20 cm stone blocks and pebbles bonded with clay on top. The structure was capped with large, wide stones. The horizontal section declined from about 5–7 cm from south to north, and a 25 × 35 cm opening was left for drainage. The bottom of the opening was a flat piece of limestone with its surface smoothed and pitted by water.

SUMMARY

Compared to the previous excavations, we got a better overview of the subsurface layers with the help of the GPR survey in 2022, which greatly advanced our understanding of the Grd-i Tle settlement. With this method, previously unknown or only partially known buildings with their exact location, depth, and presumed wall thickness were detected. We identified large Late Islamic sections of the settlement on the top plateau of the *tell* and Hellenistic-Parthian ones on the southern-southwestern side.

The almost complete ground plan of the now-buried Late Islamic fortification, which once completely occupied the top plateau, has emerged. The data obtained during previous excavations indicate that the local political centre, surrounded by a wall fortified with bastions, had probably two construction phases. The older phase could be dated between the end of the 17th or the beginning of the 18th century and the second half of the 18th century. The reconstruction of the fortress may have taken place in the mid-18th century,

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at the time of the Mesopotamian campaign led by the Persian Shah Nadir (1743–1746), when Iranians achieved significant military success along the Euphrates. Although we have no information about the role of the Rania Plain in these conflicts, the fortress was reinforced perhaps to protect the northern part of the plain and the road leading to Rawandiz, the seat of the Sorani Emirate at that time, or because of the damage caused by the war had to be renovated. Historical and archaeological data show that the fortress could have been demolished in the first half of the 19th century. After it had been abandoned, the top plateau of the *tell* was levelled deliberately (NÉMETH 2023).

The fieldwork of the last three seasons (2021–2023) significantly improved our knowledge about the Hellenistic-Parthian period of the site. Greek settlers, who came to the Rania Plain with Alexander the Great, reoccupied Grd-i Tle, abandoned several centuries before, around 330 BC. The ruins of the Neo-Assyrian settlement were used to erect new buildings in the citadel and on the hillside terraces created in the Neo-Assyrian Period. They probably expanded the settlement significantly and inhabited the area that is now a rice paddy. When the Seleucid Empire, which took over the legacy of Alexander the Great, lost its eastern territories after a Parthian uprising in 146 BC, a new political entity emerged in the region, the Kingdom of Adiabene, the eastern border of which ran probably through the Rania Plain. Adiabene, centred in Erbil, was a client of the newly established Parthian Empire and became a buffer state between the two great powers, the Parthian Empire and the Roman Empire, until AD 224, the establishment of the Sassanid Empire (MARCIAK 2017). The political changes in this nearly 500-year Period are barely perceptible in Grd-i Tle. Local traditions dominate the pottery record; a few artefacts count as good chronological markers, and barely any coins. No traces of major artistic activity have been found yet, in contrast to the settlement of Qalatga Darband, located 20 kilometres east of our site. There, recent English excavations recovered the most important archaeological monuments of the Kingdom of Adiabene, including classical-style capitals and marble statues (MACGINNIS et al. 2020). No Parthian coins are known from Grd-i Tle so far; only early Hellenistic ones were found during the first fieldwork season (KALLA & DEZSŐ 2019). The amount of characteristic Parthian glazed ceramics is also almost negligible. The post-Assyrian period is marked mostly by the appearance of Mediterranean-type tegulae. The exact chronology of this period at the site is yet to be determined by the detailed processing of the relevant pottery record and the ongoing radiocarbon dating of the burials. Overall, the site gives an impression of a service settlement engaged primarily in industrial activity, with quite a few large households. Nevertheless, the contribution of such a provincial settlement to the distance exchange networks and major historical processes of the area poses an intriguing question for the future. What is certain is that Grd-i Tle displays a very specific version of Hellenisation in the area, in which local traditions seem more important than external influence.

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