

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT GRD-I TLE IN THE RANYA PLAIN, IRAQI KURDISTAN

Atsunori HASEGAWA*, Shigeo YAMADA* and Barzan Baiz ISMAIL**

Introduction

The archaeological investigation of Grd-i Tle, reported here, was planned and undertaken as a part of the ongoing project “Historical-Archaeological Study of the Northeastern Area of Mesopotamia” (representative: Hirotoshi Numoto, Kokushikan University)¹⁾. This project has followed the excavation of the major site of Tell Taban (Hassake, Syria) in 1997–1999 and 2005–2010, which brought to light a large number of cuneiform-inscribed sources from the Middle Assyrian and Old Babylonian periods while shedding new light on the history and culture of the region [Numoto *et al.*, 2013]. After the excavations at Tell Taban ceased due to the turmoil prevailing in Syria since 2010, the project team now aims to investigate archaeological sites in Iraqi Kurdistan in the hope of finding further archaeological data on the second millennium BC from the northern part of Mesopotamia, hopefully including cuneiform documents. Grd-i Tle has been chosen for the site of our reconnaissance visit because of its size and location, which suggest a center of some importance in the region through the ages²⁾.

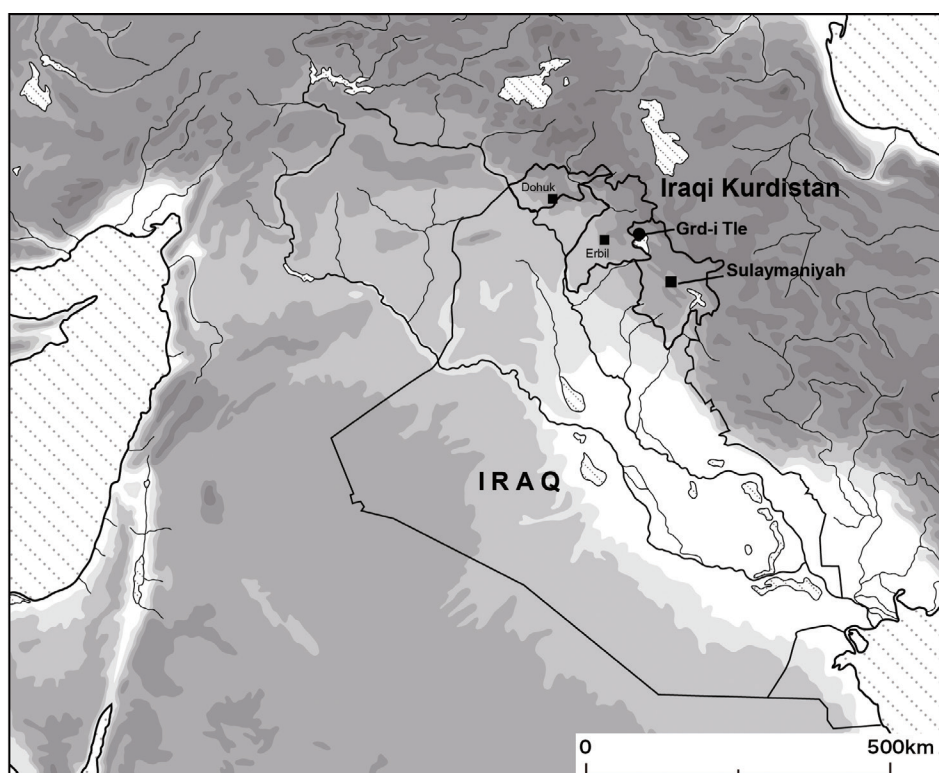


Fig. 1 Location of Iraqi Kurdistan and Sulaymaniyah Province (Produced based on Tsuneki *et al.* 2015: Fig. 2.1).

* University of Tsukuba, 1–1–1 Tennodai, Tsukuba, Ibaraki, 305–8571, Japan

** Sulaymaniyah Directorate of Antiquities, DGA, Kurdistan Regional Government, Iraq

1) The project is sponsored through funding by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) Kakenhi, Grant number 23401030 (representative: Hirotoshi Numoto).

2) The importance of Grd-i Tle was first suggested by Kazuya Shimogama in our internal meetings.

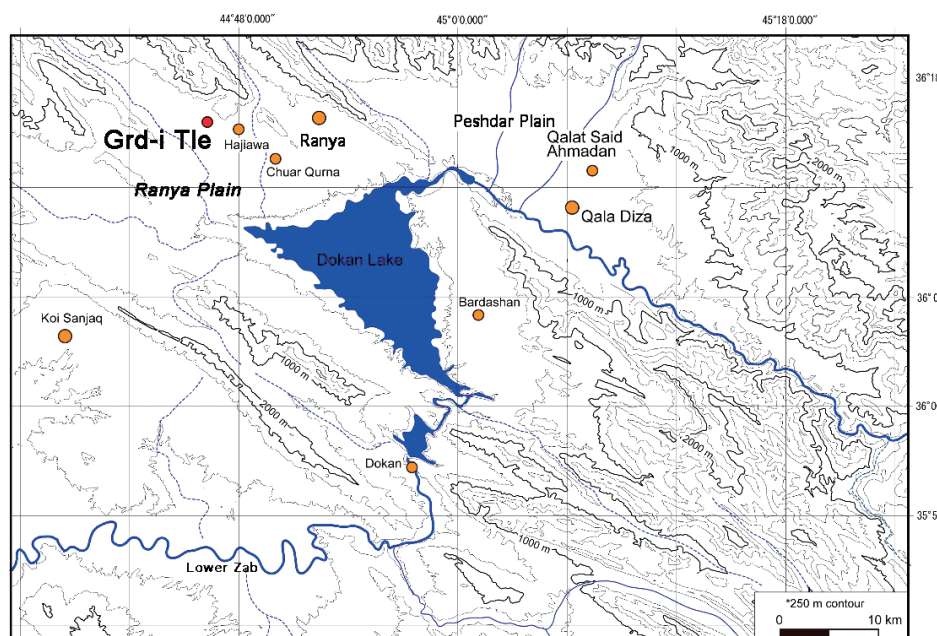


Fig. 2 Location of Grd-i Tle in the Ranya Plain (Produced based on Tsuneki *et al.* 2015: Fig. 2.4).

The site of Grd-i Tle ($36^{\circ}26'18''$ N, $44^{\circ}45'22''$ E) is located in the Ranya Plain, northwest of Dokan Lake, about 2.5 km northwest of the town of Hajiawa in the Ranya district, Sulaymaniyah Province, in the Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq (Figs. 1, 2). The Ranya Plain connects the Zagros highlands and upper Mesopotamia, and the Lower Zab flows through the plain before it joins the Tigris. In the 1950s, several sites, including Tell Basmusian, Tell Shimshara, Tell Kamarian, Tell Qarashina, and Tell ed-Dem, were excavated as part of the salvage projects prior to the construction of the dams and reservoirs at Dokan [Ingholt 1957; Laessøe 1959; Soof 1970], but few excavations were undertaken in Iraqi Kurdistan after the 1960s due to the political instability of the region. Only after 2010, with the improvement of political stability, many archaeological missions began in Iraqi Kurdistan [Kopaniyas *et al.* 2015]. Apart from the archaeological survey conducted by Giraud (Institut français du Proche-Orient at Erbil) over the entire area of Sulaymaniyah Province and the Ranya Plain Survey project of the Netherlands Institute for the Near East (NINO, Leiden) and the University of Copenhagen [Kopaniyas *et al.* 2015: 38–39], a number of archaeological sites have been excavated. For example, in the Ranya Plain, the major site of Tell Shimshara has been re-excavated by NINO and the University of Reading [Eidem 2012], and Bab-u Kur was excavated by the University of Copenhagen [Kopaniyas *et al.* 2015: 38 and 39]. In the Peshdar Plain, adjacent to the Ranya Plain to the east, Qalat Said Ahmadan [Tsuneki 2015] and Grd-i Bazar [cf. Radner 2015] have been excavated by the University of Tsukuba and the University of Munich, respectively. Following this trend of new archaeological works, we carried out a reconnaissance survey of Grd-i Tle (Fig. 3) over a short period, between 14 and 15 September, 2015.

Purpose of the investigations

Grd-i Tle has never been excavated before. According to online satellite imagery (Google Earth, accessed on 10 September 2015), the site looked like a tell-type mound with a flat top, and parts of its slopes look as if they have been scraped by the construction of a modern road. The aim of our visit at the site was to obtain more topographical and archaeological data on the site, which appears conspicuous in the northern part of the Ranya Plain, where no other larger mounds are to be found. The central purposes were to observe and document the current condition of the mound, and to roughly



Fig. 3 General view of Grd-i Tle (from the east).

estimate the date of its occupation by examining the potshards found on the surface.

Topography of Grd-i Tle

Preceding our visit to the site, a topographic map of Grd-i Tle was kindly prepared by Nobuya Watanabe and Shin'ichi Nishiyama (both of Chubu University), who were working on the nearby site of Qalat Said Ahmadan. They processed the map using Image Structure from Motion (SfM) software on the basis of aerial photographs taken by a model unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV)³⁾. According to the topographical map (Fig. 4), Grd-i Tle has an oval plan, measuring about 325 m north to south and about 265 m west to east, with a trapezoidal profile. The height of the mound is 584 m.a.s.l. at the top and 558 m.a.s.l. at the base. Therefore, the mound rises 26 m above the surrounding plain.

The mound is dissected by the modern road, which approaches it from the northern end, passes the western and southern slopes, and arrives at the flat top area (Fig. 5). The dissected section at the northwest part of the mound (Fig. 6) measures more than 5 m high, and some archaeological remains, for example, stone rows and burnt soil, are exposed (Fig. 7). In this area, it is possible to identify more than five cultural layers, which reach the level of the surrounding plain, although the natural ground is not exposed.

The southern part of the hilltop has a depression or shallow gully just above the dissected belt (Fig. 8), and large stone structures are visible on its section (Fig. 9). These features are possibly the remains of a town-wall gate.

3) The ortho-rectified photograph (ortho photo) and digital elevation model (DEM) were processed with SfM software, Photoscan Pro, after photographing was done by an autonomous UAV model. The GCPs (Ground Control Points) used to add the coordinates to the ortho photo were collected from Google Earth. Hence, its absolute coordinates may contain an error of around 5 m, which is sometimes the case with high resolution satellite imagery. However, the RMSE of the model is 0.18 m, and the relative accuracy is expected to be sub-meter. At the least, the overlaying of the ortho photo with high resolution satellite imagery shows a satisfying match. The absolute sea level of the DEM and the derived contour have the same problem (i.e. errors for absolute sea level may amount to several meters, while relative elevations are expected to be sub-meter) [N. Watanabe].

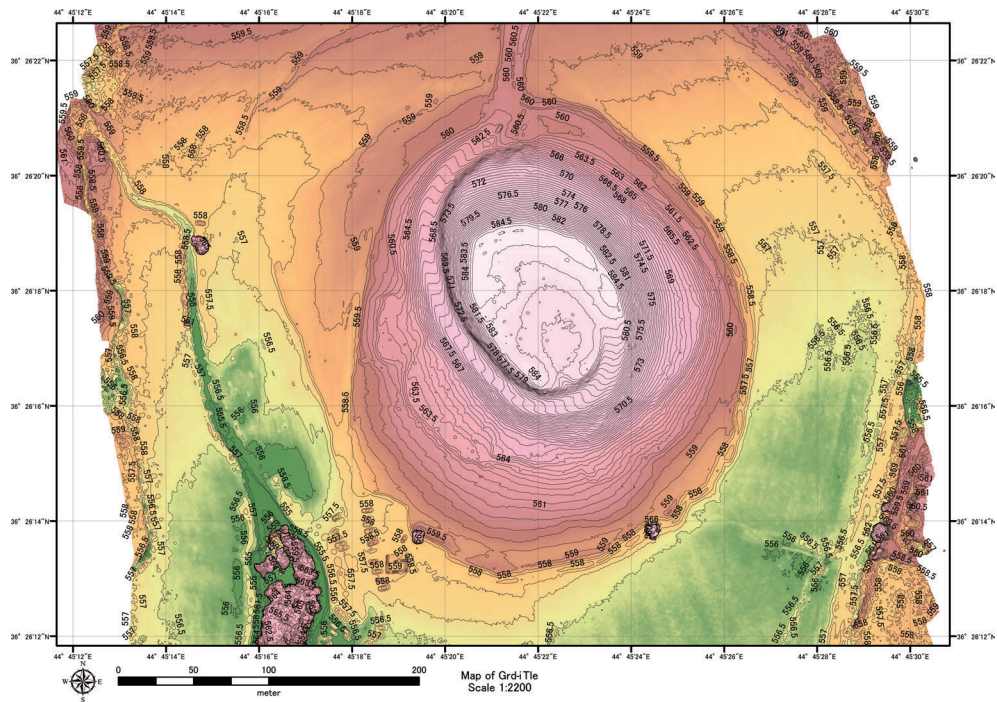


Fig. 4 Topographical map of Grd-i Tle.



Fig. 5 The eastern slope, dissected by the modern road.



Fig. 6 The dissected section at northwest part of the mound.



Fig. 7 Some archaeological remains at the eastern slope.

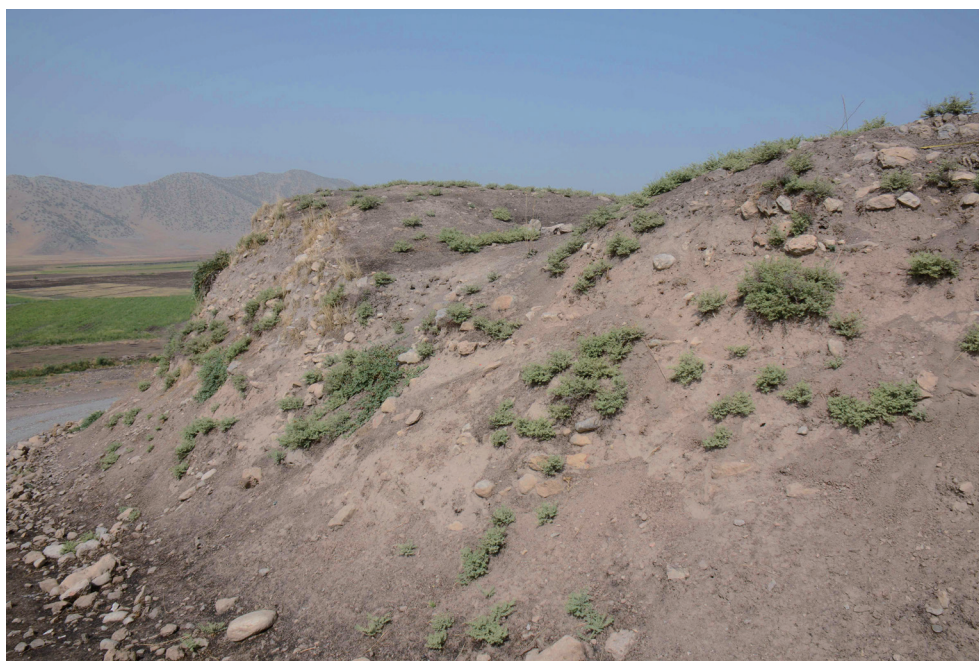


Fig. 8 The depressed surface, southern part of the hilltop.



Fig. 9 The large stone structures, southern part of the hilltop.

Material remains

A large number of potsherds were collected across the elevated mound areas. Because the artifacts have not been studied in detail, the descriptions and interpretation given below should be regarded as provisional. Most potsherds seem to date from the Iron Age, but materials from the Late Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Bronze Age, and Islamic periods were also collected. Among the painted sherds are those that belong to the Halaf and Ubaid periods. The former are decorated with horizontal bands and wavy lines on a buff surface (Figs. 10.1, 10.2). These decorations are applied on both the interior and exterior of the vessel wall. Their fabric is not fine, though some similarity is observed with the Halaf-painted wares excavated from Qalat Said Ahmadan [Tsuneki 2015, and pers. comm.].

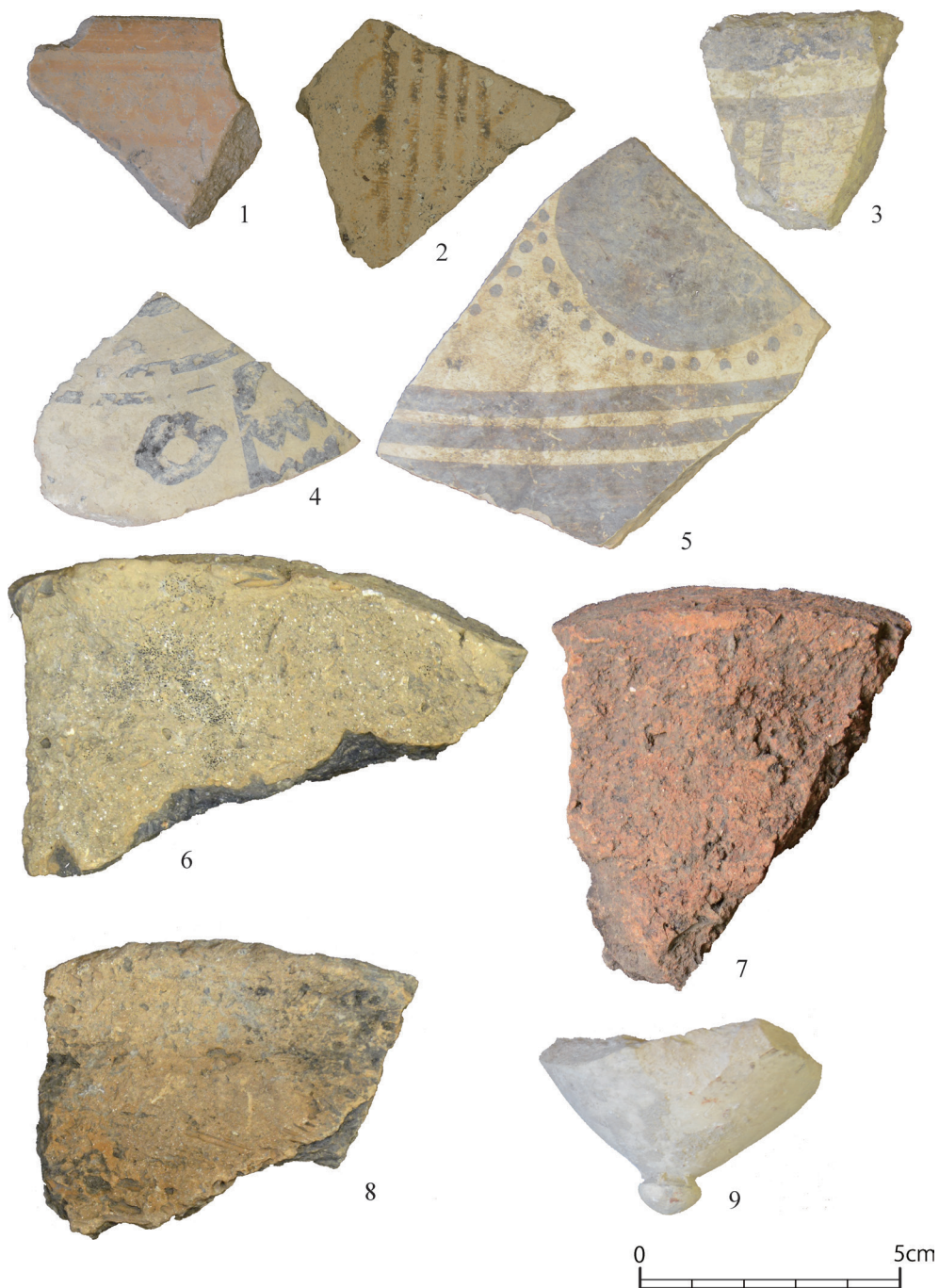


Fig. 10 Photos of surface collection from the site.

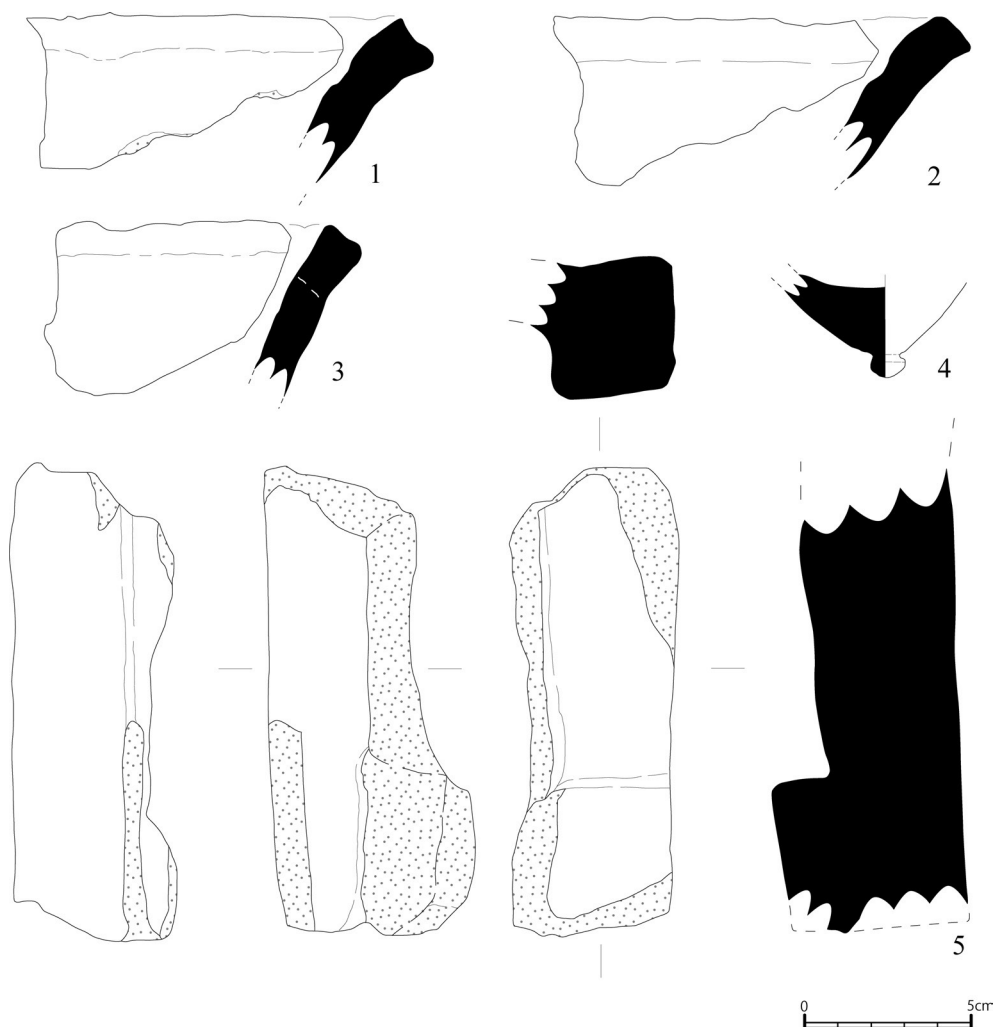


Fig. 11 Figures of surface collection from the site.

The shards, which are probably from the Ubaid period, are painted in a dark color on a cream-slipped or greenish buff-colored surface [Fig. 10.3, cf. Jasim 1985: Fig. 184; Fig. 10.4, cf. Jasim 1985: Fig. 136: 13; Fig. 10.5, cf. Jasim 1985: Fig. 149: 16]. Diagnostic sherds from the Uruk period were also found. They are coarse plain sherds with an everted rim, so-called ‘bevelled rim bowls’ (Fig. 10.6 = Fig. 11.1; Fig. 10.7 = Fig. 11.2; Fig. 10.8 = Fig. 11.3). Another notable sherd possibly from the Bronze Age has a nipple base made by scraping. This resembles nipple-based beakers that are known from the Middle Assyrian period [Fig. 10.9 = Fig. 11.4; cf. for example, Pfälzner 1995: Taf. 169 d (Tell Brak); Numoto *et al.* 2013: Fig. 4 (Tell Taban)]. Some sherds with a red slip possibly belong to the Iron Age. No parallel types have so far been recovered from the surrounding regions, but some similar examples are known from the Iron Age in Northern Mesopotamia [cf. Hausleiter and Reiche 1999]. In addition to potsherds, we found fragment of a clay house model (Fig. 11.5) and some mud brick fragments.

Conclusion

Grd-i Tle is a tell site, with an oval plan measuring about 325 m × 265 m. Almost all of the potsherds recovered are likely to be dated to the Bronze, Iron, and post Iron Ages. In addition, some sherds belong to the Half, Ubaid, and Uruk periods, although the quantity of the collected samples are not large. Based on the observation of the dissected section of the mound, the building layers continue

from just below the surface of the hilltop to the base of the mound without interruption. It is thus believed that Grd-i Tle has a good chronological sequence, ranging from the prehistoric to the historical periods.

Grd-i Tle is located between the Lower Zab, now largely submerged under Dokan Lake, and the mountainous area of Bitwata, where the rock relief of Iddi(n)-Sin, a king of Simurru from the early Old Babylonian period, was discovered. While a number of tell-type sites have been located and are now partly submerged in the Dokan dam salvage area along the Lower Zab, there are no conspicuous tell-type sites in the northern part of the Ranya Plain except for Grd-i Tle. Given the unique geographical location of Grd-i Tle, the site seems to have been strategically important through the ages.

In the Ranya Plain, several sites in the Dokan Lake region have been excavated, as mentioned, and further archaeological data on those sites are expected to be published in the near future. However, for the purpose of establishing a long local chronology of the Ranya Plain as a whole, the unique site of Grd-i Tle, located in the northern area of the plain and apparently continuously occupied from the Neolithic period until the Iron Age or later, seems to be of significant value in terms of further archaeological investigations.

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