

Full Length Paper

Excavations at the Mound of Van Fortress / Tuspa

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The prime concern of this investigation was the extent of the lower settlement of the Van Fortress/Tuspa, the capital city of the Urartians, especially the mound, since all the previous excavators have suggested the presence of earlier levels beneath the Old City of Van. The 1990 campaign in particular revealed earlier Urartian levels in the Upper Citadel trenches thereby providing important data to work with. It was in this context that the capital city as a whole is considered necessary to fully understand the citadel and the lower settlement levels. Every corner of the outcrop, which is by itself, a monument was utilized by the Urartian architects. Royal rock tombs, monumental open air sanctuaries and palaces are the most prominent architectural features of the capital. Many cuneiform inscriptions either on the rock surfaces or on the stelae, further cement its position as a capital. It is possible to trace the cultural remains and chronology of the 200 years of Urartian rule from the levels of the lower settlement as it is feasible in view of the current excavations, that the second millennium culture and the transition to the Iron Ages in the region can be redefined.

Keywords: The Mound of Van Fortress, Iron Age, Urartu, lower settlement, stratigraphy

INTRODUCTION

The Van Fortress/Tuspa, the capital city of the Urartians, rises on a 100 meter high conglomerate rocky outcrop on the eastern shore of the Van Lake, measuring 1250m in length and a varying width between 70 and 80m in north-south axis (Figure 1* all figures are available after references list). The 750m long mound of Van fortress is located just north of the citadel and lies in an east-west direction parallel to the citadel itself. The area forms the northern section of the lower settlement, while the southern section is named, the Old City of Van. Both of them constituted the lower settlement of Tuspa.

The area, where the Van Fortress and the Lower City were founded, is the most fertile territory in the region, which was the primary reason for its occupation in the Chalcolithic, Early Bronze Age, Early, Middle and Late Iron (Urartian, Median and Persian periods) and Middle Ages. As is well known, mound-type settlements in the Van basin are few and far between. Excavated centres include Tilkitepe, Dilkaya, Karagündüz and the mound of Van fortress. Except the latter, all these are rural settlements located far from the royal Urartian centres. The earliest site, Tilkitepe, has a thick Halaf level. Excavations at Dilkaya on the Van Lake and Karagündüz on the Erçek Lake revealed layers reflecting Early Bronze and Iron Age cultures. There are only a few settlements that can offer a complete picture of the cultural history of the region and the mound of Van Fortress is one of them. Another important feature of the mound is its location near a royal Urartian settlement.

The second millennium BC culture, Iron Age chronology and the decline of Urartu have not

been fully investigated in the Van Basin especially for the mound-type settlements. Excavations at the fortresses and their cemeteries have not shown any new lights on the matter as the lack of stratigraphic data did not allow the evaluation of the architectural features and small finds from these fortresses. In this respect, one of the main aims of the renewed work at the Van Fortress is to overcome the shortfall and redefine the second millennium culture and the transition to the Iron Ages in the region.

The Lower City of Tuspa, just as it was a witness to the foundation of the Urartian Kingdom, inevitably contains important archaeological information of its decline and the arrival of new comers, afterwards. New excavations will allow a chronological re-evaluation of settlement character, its stratigraphy and finds from the capital and its surroundings.

TUSPA - VAN LOWER SETTLEMENT

In Urartian archaeology, what we know about the “lower settlements” is rather limited. Our information comes from the excavations at Karmir-Blur in Armenia (Martirosjan, 1964), at Bastam in north-western Iran (Kleiss, 1979) and at Ayanis in Van Lake basin (Çilingiroğlu and Salvini, 2001). In these centres, some buildings with mud brick walls rising on two or three courses of foundation stones have rooms opening to a courtyard. In Bastam and Karmir Blur in particular, it is possible to observe a relatively more developed and extended architecture. Here multi-roomed and independent buildings comprise of stone paved rooms, probably stables, and halls/rooms presumably designed as workshops as well as living spaces. In the area surrounding the citadel are humbler houses laid according to a pre-conceived plan and independent building groups with larger, more elaborate multi-roomed houses for the elites or merchants.

According to Prof. W. Kleiss the lower city of Bastam was founded for the workers and soldiers working there (Kleiss, 1980) and after the completion of the fortress it was transformed into a service area, where about 800 people lived. Altan Çilingiroğlu, the excavator of Ayanis, an important royal city founded by Rusa II on the eastern shore of the Van Lake, where the excavations revealed a lower city, claims that in founding cities Urartians conceived the citadel, the lower city and the infrastructures as a whole (Çilingiroğlu, 2004). In some cases, Urartian rulers planned lower cities in order to accommodate their captives, the same approach applied to the lower city of Karmir-Blur. The pre-planned houses form complex multi-roomed building groups, which appear sometimes in these settlements or in separate places. (Martirosjan, 1964: 264ff).

The royal building projects of the Urartians were certainly realized with great manpower after years of work. In this respect, craftsmen, workers and perhaps their families, the bureaucrats in charge, and soldiers would have needed housing, workshops or offices during the construction work. It was claimed that this type of settlement had been built before the actual project began as part of the Urartian settling policy, which necessarily bore a notion of lower settlement. Thus, the earliest settlements at the fortresses/cities emerged around the citadels. The surroundings of Van Fortress and Tuspa hosted the first settlers of the royal period.

What is called the Old City of Van stretches to areas in the south of the rock of Van. The scholars who had worked in the region earlier pointed out the presence of Urartian and much

earlier levels in the area. The American team did reach the Urartian levels at a spot now unknown (Lake, 1940; Korfmann, 1977: 256). Thus it was understood that the Old City of Van, which was occupied until the last century, has a stratigraphy going back to the Urartian period, and that at the mound of Van fortress i.e. the lower city of Van extending due north, existed Urartian layers and settlement.

The first excavations here were initiated by a team led by I. A. Orbeli in 1916, which was followed by the works of Kirsopp and Silva Lake in 1939 (Lake, 1940; Korfmann, 1977: 256). Excavations of the latter reached the Urartian levels at Tebriz Kapı, but they unexpectedly came to a halt due to the contemporary political problems in the region.

The second set of work in the north of the fortress (Erzen, et al., 1963) was undertaken by Prof. Afif Erzen of Istanbul University. It was reported that the soundings conducted in a narrow area yielded Early Bronze and Urartian layers.

Prof. M. Taner Tarhan, who led an extensive work at the mound of Van fortress (Tarhan, 1984; 1985; 1994), thinks that the lower city was first founded in the south of the citadel. The 100 meter-high Van Rock was protecting this area against the harsh north winter winds. After the 9th century BC, when population rose, the settlement area spread out of the walls, forming new districts around the citadel. According to Tarhan the houses there belonged to the elites close to the royal courtiers.

The excavations conducted in an area of 400m² at the westernmost tip of the mound between 1989 and 1991 revealed a building with 15 rooms. This complex, with stone foundations and mud brick walls, was termed, the "Early Architectural Phase", which was above a conflagration layer and belonged to the 8th century BC. "The Late Architectural Phase" (second phase), much destroyed by the later burials, is dated to the 7th century BC.

The Late Iron Age culture in the mound is represented by a specific kind of pottery, named *Festoon* or *Triangle wares*. Architectural features and *in situ* finds related to this period, on the other hand, have not been identified. This complex was cleaned and taken under preservation in 2010.

MEDIEVAL CEMETERY

It appeared that the excavated areas in 2010 campaign were parts of a cemetery which remained in use up to the 20th century. There are numerous examples of burials that disturb others in the trenches at Section A (M26, M27, M28, N27; Figure 2).

The 143 bodies found here demonstrate burial practices of different beliefs, the position of the bodies being one of the criteria (Figure 3). The Christians were placed in the east-west oriented graves as lying on their back with their heads looking west, while the Muslims lay on their right with their heads looking south.

They were buried in rectangular simple pit graves with a depth of 0.50-1.30m, whose length vary according to the dimensions of the deceased. The 2010 campaign did not reveal chamber tombs or cist graves. Child graves are generally close to the surface.

The covers of the graves and other structural features follow different practices, but they do not offer any insight into the chronology and burial practices. In the graves with capstones, the top of the grave was covered with flat stones lined side by side and then with earth. In the case of wide graves, the stones were placed deep in the ground, just above the deceased, which reflects the Islamic *şakk* tradition. Another group of graves does not have capstones, but were covered with sloped flat stones, which prevented the slightly southerly leaned body from sliding. This type of cover stone reflects the Islamic *şami* burial practice.

Graves with wooden covers were also encountered. On two graves from N27 trench and one from N28 were covered with poplar branches. That they are not wholly decayed might indicate their later date.

Some graves have covers formed with half-worked small stones. Their sides were marked with bigger stones. In many cases, beneath these heaps of stones, in the grave pit, are flagstones placed just above the body. There are also graves lined with mud brick and again covered with corbelling of mud brick blocks.

Only few of the graves included *in situ* small finds as gifts. A child burial from trench N27 carries a bracelet made of 41 blue beads on his right wrist and some others yielded rings and glass bracelets. A child from the M28 grave has *in situ* anklets on both legs.

The grave layers and the filling earth from the burial pits yielded pottery and finds belonging to previously defined layers (Figure 4). Typical examples include: Karaz pottery of the Early Bronze Age (Figure 11), Urartian red slip and grooved wares, a small number of painted pottery from the Late Bronze Age and medieval glazed pottery decorated with sgraffito technique.

The two separate burial practices continued throughout the medieval and Ottoman periods, judging from the finds of glazed and decorated Byzantine pottery, Byzantine coins, Seljukid light-coloured pottery with stamping and Late Ottoman pipe pieces.

An 11th century coin (Constantine X, December 25th 1059-May 21st 1067) from burial pits in this area contributes to the stratigraphy of the medieval layers. Islamic pottery of the 12-13th century with stamping decoration has also been found.

URARTIAN LEVELS

Below the medieval strata lay the Late Iron Age and Urartian layers much disturbed by the burial pits. The former is mostly represented by the pottery, and although largely destroyed by the burial pits, one can observe mud brick walls with stone foundations showing some characteristics with the previously excavated Urartian architecture. Pottery, seals, bullae and bronze decorative pins belong to these layers.

Among the pottery from the cemetery the red slipped wares that are known as *Toprakkale Ware*, *Palace Ware* or *Binilli Ware* is dominant (Kroll, 1970; 1972; 1976; 1979; 1988), but they all come from the burial contexts. It is widely accepted that this type of pottery appeared with the emergence of the Urartian Kingdom and was used by the Urartian rulers and elites. The fact that it is widely encountered, albeit without any actual architectural context, gives us an idea of

the residents in the area.

Most of the red slipped wares from the mound are plates and bowls. Apart from the globular bowls with direct rims, deep bowls with everted rims and carination are also common (Figure 10). Flat shapes of the same type also exist. Deep bowls with thickened out rims constitute another common group. Generally they have ring bases, but flat type bases have also been found. On some examples there are stampings and marks especially in the base area applied while the paste was still wet. A unique Urartian chalice has the stamping decoration underneath the base.

A bulla found during the 2010 campaign gives important information about the nature of the settlement in this area (Figure 7). As is well known, finds of clay tablets and bullae are very rare in Urartu. The reconstruction of the cuneiform inscription can be made with the help of the texts from Karmir Blur and Bastam (Salvini, 1979: 127). It belongs to an office named LU A-sul-li. In the light of other examples, Salvini suggests that the upper line should be read as Sar<duri=i> Sardu<ri>hi>ni=i>, the abbreviated form of the owner. This type of abbreviation is known from Bastam and Ayanis. LU A-sul-li is apparently an office name, though its nature is yet unknown. Persons with this title appear frequently on the seals and bullae from the sites of Rusa II (685-645 BC), namely Karmir-Blur, Bastam and Ayanis.

An alabaster stamp seal from a burial fill found in 2010 represents a common example in Urartu (Figure 6). On the stamp area a long-horned and hooped mythical mixed creature with forked tongue. Similar depictions are observed on the stamp and cylinder seals found in the centres of the Rusa II's reign.

As can be deduced from the finds, the Lower City of Van contains the buildings that were used by the elites and merchants of Tuspa. We may also expect that the houses of the servants to the royal family and courtiers, workshops and barns were also in the area.

CONCLUSION: Work on the Previously Excavated Urartian Levels

In the 2010 campaign, the three trenches opened at the western tip of the Mound of Van between 1989 and 1991 were cleaned (Figure 8). Here Tarhan had excavated the foundations of a fifteen-roomed Urartian building in 1.60m deep. To preserve the remains, the walls had been covered with straw-included mud and flagstones. Despite these measures, after 20 years the plan is now unrecognizable. The 1989-1991 campaign had also revealed two graves (nos.214 and 215) to the west of these walls in the B11 section, which had been dated to the Late Iron Age due to their position partly disturbing the wall foundations (Tarhan and Sevin, 1993: 410). In the 2010 campaign, we found another *hocker* burial at the north corner of the same wall, again disturbing a part of it and another one immediately to the south without any actual context.

Near the *hocker* burial a broken fibula was found (Figure 9). In the Urartian landscape this type of fibulae are common in the 7th century (Muscarella, 1965; Köroğlu and Konyar, 2008). The burial at the corner offers richer finds that include crescent-shaped earrings of bronze and silver, bronze rings and agate, cornelian and glass beads (Figure 9). Chronologically, they share the same characteristics with the finds from the other 7th century Urartian centres. Stratigraphically

speaking, especially the pithos (?) burial disturbed the “Early Urartian Level” in some places and it is apparently related to the “Late Urartian Level”, which itself gives an impression of a kitchen or workshop.

During the integration of old trenches to the new trench system, the alleys removed between the K10 and L10 trenches, the floor related to the wall no.149 was also unearthed at the foundation level. We have found two hearths 40cm in diameter and 20cm in depth, *in situ* grinding stones and pottery suggesting at least two building levels.

The 2010 campaign obtained supporting evidence for the two-phase construction process of the Urartian buildings, a fact that had been revealed in the 1989-1991 campaign (Figure 5). Despite the existence of earlier Urartian architecture with stone foundations at the lower level, the following level represents a simpler architectural style. Further research and extensive excavations are needed to gain more information on the matter.

Tuspa - Van Fortress is the richest centre in terms of stelae and building inscriptions. Some of them have been preserved *in situ* until modern times and most of them were used as spolia. The churches in the Old City of Van have also been destroyed by the illegal digs. Today, one may observe holes measuring 3.5m in diameter and 3.5m in depth. In 2010, we were informed about an inscription in a treasure hunter pit reaching the foundations of Surp Pogos Church (Figure 12). It is dated to the reign of Sarduri II (756-730 BC) and mentions the king's campaigns. It was probably brought from the Analı Kız sanctuary and is now preserved in the Van Museum.

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Figure 1

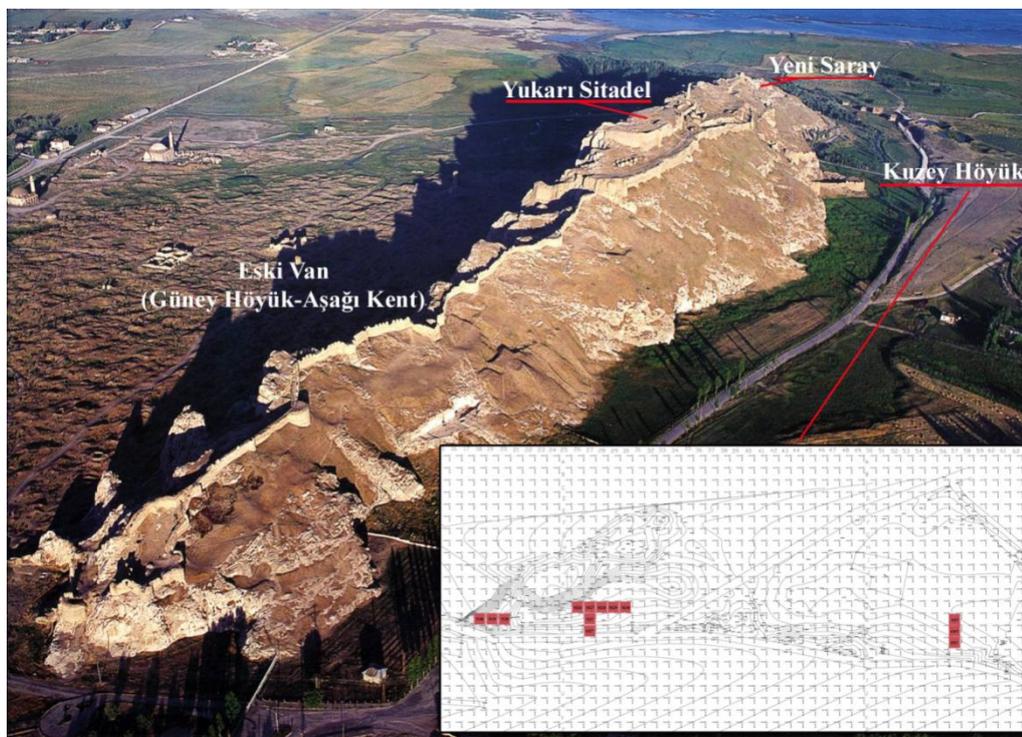


Figure 1: Van Fortress from the air; the citadel and the lower city surrounding it.

Figures 2 and 3



Figure 2: Trenches in section A, 2010

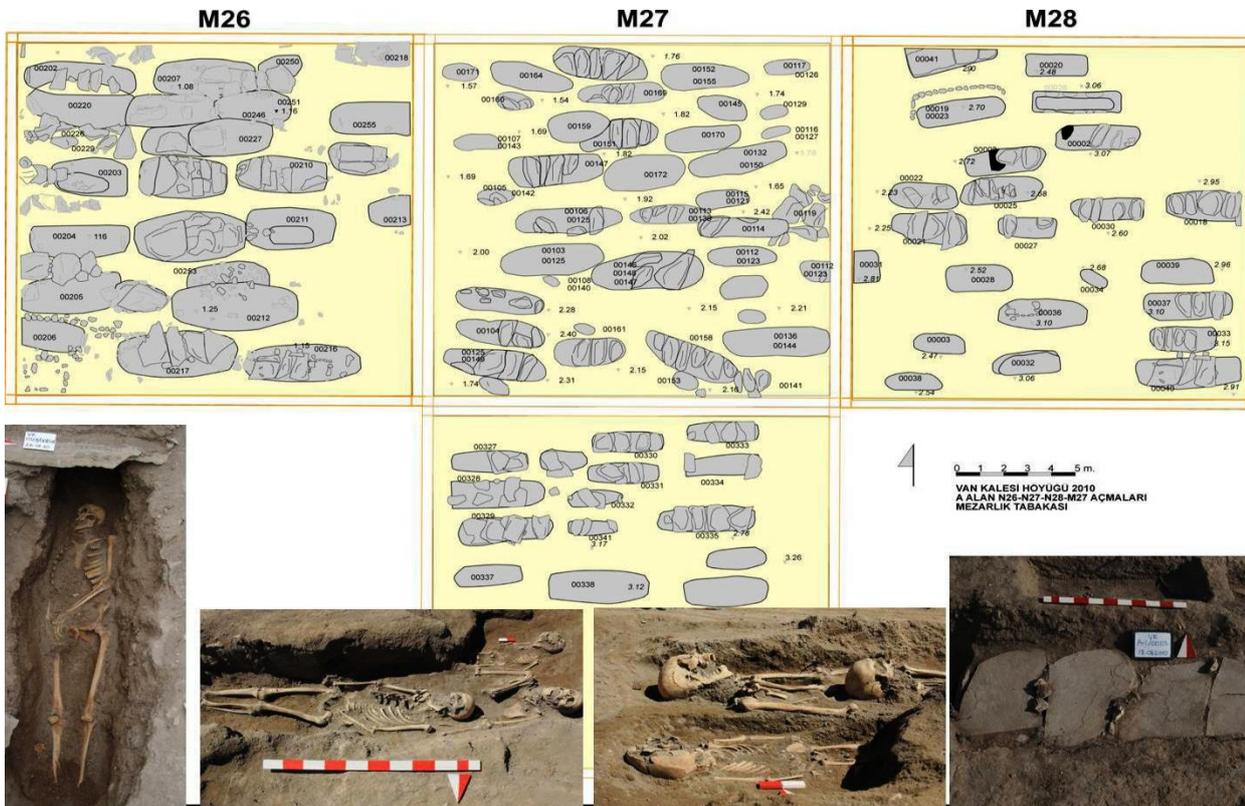


Figure 3: Trenches in section A; general plan of the cemetery, burial types and forms.

Figures 4 and 5



Figure 4: In situ grave goods and pottery from the fillings.

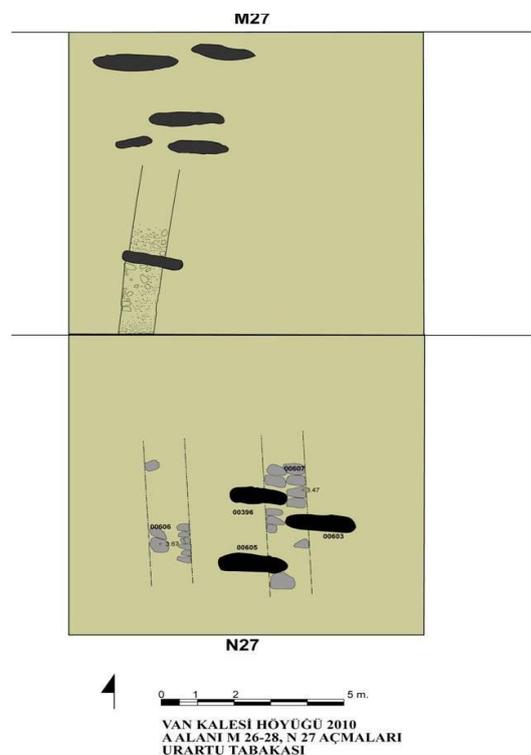


Figure 5: Urartian architecture in the section A

Figures 6 and 7

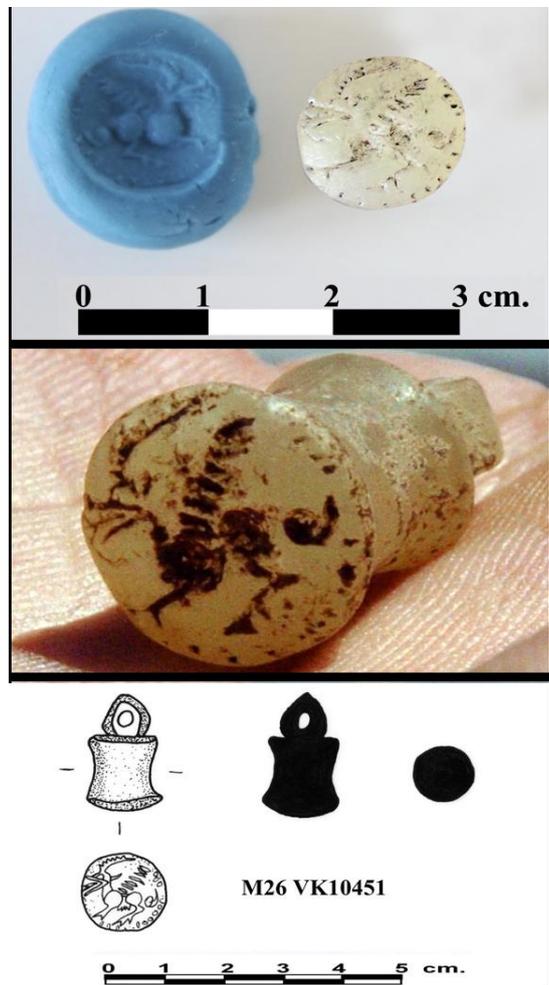


Figure 6: An alabaster stamp seal with a string hole from the medieval grave filling.



Figure 7: Urartian bulla from medieval grave filling.

Figures 8 and 9



Figure 8: Urartian architectural remains unearthed during Prof. Tarhan's campaign in 1989-1991 were cleaned and preserved.



Figure 9: Urartian silver earrings and a bronze fibula found in situ near the hocker and pithos (?) burials.

Figures 10 and 11

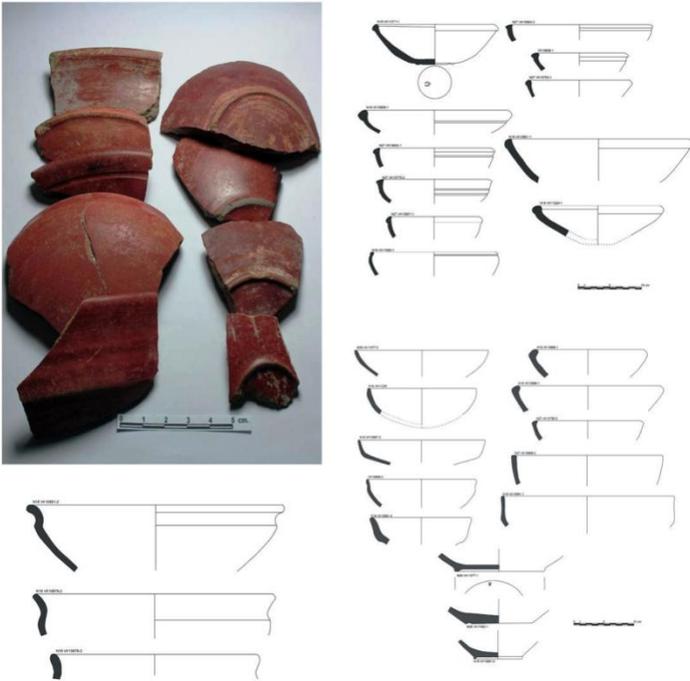


Figure 10: Urtartian red slip palace wares from the grave fillings in section A.



Figure 11: Early Bronze Age – Karaz ware from the grave fillings in section A.

Figure 12

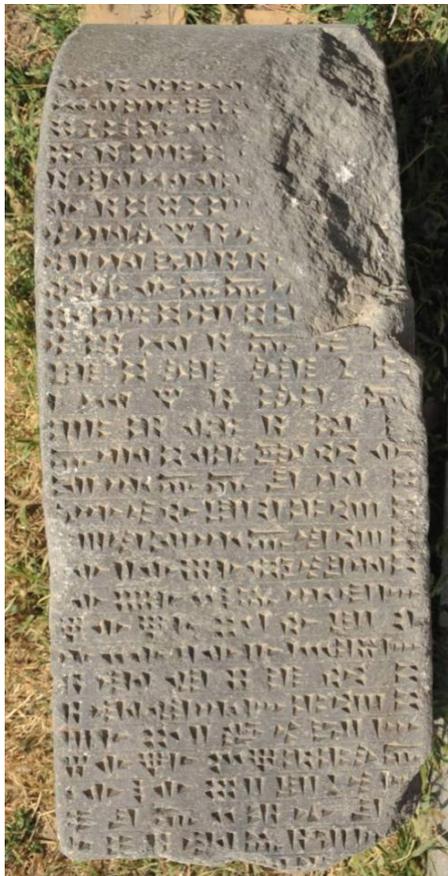


Figure 12: A stela from the reign of Sarduri II reused in the Surp Pogos Church.