SOME REMARKS ON THE FIRST TWO GEORGIAN-AUSTRIAN EXCAVATION CAMPAIGNS AT KHOVLE GORA, SHIDA KARTLI, 2011-2012.[1]

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ABSTRACT

The site of Khovle Gora represents one of the key sites for the research of the development of Late Bronze and Iron Age material culture. The resumption of the excavation by the Georgian-Austrian Expedition in 2011 addressed the stratigraphic evidence and site occupation periodization presented by Muskhelishvili in 1978. Within this reappraisal special emphasis was put on the question of the date of the appearance of 'red ware'.

The site of Khovle Gora is located 50km northwest of Tbilisi in the region of Shida Kartli approximately half way between the cities of Gori and Kaspi. It lies at a maximum altitude of 698.30m above sea level on the northern foothills of the Trialeti range

1 The version of the paper presented at the 8th ICAANE in Warsaw addressed the role of Khovle Gora in the context of the 'Urartu research'. The choice of this topic was based on the results achieved in the 2011 campaign, which provided some evidence corroborating Muskhelishvili's attempt to explain the emergence of red ware pottery because of Urartian influence, instead of Achaemenian influence as suggested by Furtwängler and Ludwig (2004). The results of the 2012 campaign, which finished just a few days before the beginning of the conference, could not be considered in this regard. Because of the new evidence obtained in 2012, it has become however advisable to wait for the results of the radiocarbon analysis in order to have a sounder basis for answering this issue. This paper can only touch upon the most important aspects of this research question. The authors wish to express their deepest gratitude to Prof. David Muskhelishvili and Prof. Guram Grigolia, the last two living members of the old expedition team, for their kind assistance and collegial handover of all documents in their possession pertaining to the excavation at Khovle Gora and explanations on site. We want further to thank Mr. Zviad Beglarishvili (Geoland.ge) for putting at our disposal a Leica total station free of charge for the documentation of the expedition in 2011.

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gently sloping down into the Kura valley (Fig. 1). The main mound is up to 15m high and measures about 100m to 70m at its base along its east-west and north-south axes. The site further encompasses two so-called town areas, extending south and north of the formermain mound, presumably covering an area of at least 25ha. A second mound, called Kenchikara, of similar size but markedly flatter is situated 320m to the north-east at the north-eastern corner of the northern town area and separated by a deep water furrow.[5]

The individual areas of the site of Khovle Gora were extensively excavated by G. Tskitishvili under the project direction of N. Berdsenishvili from 1954 to 1961. In sum, a sequence of eight Levels VIII-I dating from the Late Bronze to Late Iron Ages was determined. Moreover, during these campaigns 15 burials were uncovered next to the rivulet and creek flowing south and east of Khovle Gora, pointing to the presence of at least three spatially divided necropoleis sequentially coexistent with the occupation of the settlement.[6] The history of Khovle Gora was, however, primarily investigated and defined on the basis of the results achieved on the main mound. In short, the history of Khovle Gora can be divided into two main occupation periods.[7]

First, the Late Bronze Age occupation (levels VIII-VI): the settlement was restricted to the top of the mound on an artificial hill[8] and enclosed by a stone wall. Although the settlement was destroyed by a violent fire, no indications of abandonment or cultural break could be discerned. Rather the contrary is the case. In fact, the wheel-made black-grey and brown ceramic fabrics, mostly decorated with polished and incised designs characteristic of the Late Bronze Age levels, not only persisted into the Early Iron Age levels but continued to be produced according to the Bronze Age fashion and tradition even till the end of the occupation of Khovle Gora in the 4th century BC.

Secondly, the Iron Age occupation (levels V-II): the settlement progressively extended after the fire destruction across the slopes into the plain to the north and south, reaching its apex in Level II. The Iron Age dwellings on top of the hill remained, however, consistently delimited within the settlement by means of a deep moat and a stone fence both built in level V. The old excavators suggested that this part represented a fortified citadel housing the cult complex. In the dwellings in the surrounding towns several ceramic furnaces, amongst other things, were found, proving the existence of large

5 Judging from an aerial photography taken during the old excavation in the 1950s and a short survey conducted in 2012, the mound seems to cover the vestiges of a bigger building complex datable to the Late Iron Age. The site Khovle Gora can best be observed on Google Earth® at 437549.00 mE / 4640147.00 mN.

6 The burials along the easterly flowing creek were dated to the Late Bronze Age, the southern burials to the Early Iron Age (Muskhelishvili *pers. comm.*). The latter date is confirmed by the fortuitous find of two bronze bracelets (Pl. IV 5 and 6) found in the field next to the rivulet.

7 Muskhelishvili's (1978: 101) partition of periods assigns Levels VIII-IV to the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age horizon and Levels III-I to Early Antiquity. This partition relies above all on the appearance of so-called 'red ware' in Level III. The absolute date for each level was suggested as follows: Level VIII – 15th century BC; Level VII – 14th century BC; Level VI – 13th century BC; Level V – 12th-10th centuries BC; Level IV – 9th-7th centuries BC; Level III – 6th century BC; Level II – 5th century BC; Level I – 4th century BC.

8 So far it is not clear what is exactly meant by the term 'artificial hill'. Probably because the western slope of the hill was partly cut for fortification purposes.

scale organised pottery workshops, and hence of a highly developed pottery handicraft on site at least beginning from Level III (Lordkipanidse 1991: 71-73, 88).[9] The settlement was again violently destroyed by fire at the end of Level II. But this time it did not recover. In fact, the settlement strongly shrank thereafter to a small spot on top of the hill, after which it was rapidly abandoned during the 4th century BC.

The lack of plans and comprehensive descriptions of the findings was recently taken as a point of criticism to doubt the reliability of Muskhelishvili's typology, since its chronological setting has no comprehensible archaeological context and cannot therefore be taken as compound for the absolute dating of the ceramic development of Georgia in the first millennium BC. Mehnert (2008: 33) even wonders whether the periodisation was not rather constructed on the basis of the ceramic findings than on stratigraphic evidence.[10]

The conditions encountered in 2011 revealed, however, that the excavations had been carried out systematically. Thanks to unpublished photographs showing how the old excavations proceeded, kindly handed over to us by D. Muskhelishvili and G. Grigolia, the excavation methodology used by G. Tskitishvili could broadly be reconstructed. The main mound was cut by means of several trenches set in the four cardinal directions and supplemented by smaller soundingsages opened in-between. The north-south trench represented thereby the main stratigraphic trench. On the basis of the results achieved in these trenches, the individual levels were successively dug off on the whole western half of the mound, thereby departing always from the east profile of the main trench, whilst smaller cross profiles were left standing at regular intervals as further guidance. It can be asserted with some certainty that the used methodology secured a widely neat excavation of the individual levels. Not least also because of the quite regular stratification encountered, and above all thanks to the stone rampart fencing the slope, providing throughout an excellent benchmark in order to distinguish the Late Bronze from the Iron Age levels. The stone rampartlatter fulfilled the same purpose once rediscovered in 2011 (Fig. 2).[11] Equally, the other two important stratigraphic benchmarks, namely the burnt layers of Levels VI and II, could also be located (Fig. 3). The clearance of the east profile of the main stratigraphic trench clearly shows that criticism of the stratigraphic basis of the periodization reported by Muskhelishvili is unfounded.

The significance attached to the individual levels for the assessment of the timespan ascribed to the stages of ceramic development deserves closer attention. The reap-

9 Specialised handicraft applies especially to the production of the so-called 'red ware'. The appearance of this ware is generally ascribed to external influence from across the Lesser Caucasus. The evidence of Khovle Gora clearly shows that this pottery was produced locally alongside the black-grey and brown wares of Late Bronze production tradition. This underscores the fact that the appearance represents a technological innovation, the purpose of which is not fully understood yet.

10 Also Ludwig (2010: 85, fn. 1123) denies the chronological reliability, however without commenting their appraisement.

11 The Russian term 'каменных оград' (Muskhelishvili 1978: 99) has been correctly translated as stone fence but nonetheless mistakenly interpreted as a free standing structure with a stronghold character. The rediscovery of this stone structure clearly shows what the excavators meant by the term.

praisal of the absolute dates proposed for the diagnostic levels is therefore of first priority.[12] Both issues are central to the new excavations of the Georgian-Austrian expedition. The corrective actions will thereby strongly rely on the wide use of radiocarbon samples for dating.

This point applies to the pottery classifications of both the Late Bronze/Early Iron Ages and Early Antiquity horizon as defined by D. Muskhelishvili, corresponding to Levels VIII-IV and III-I. In light of the current state of research,[13] we can just touch upon this topic by addressing – on the one hand – the weak spots in the current integration of the Khovle evidence within the research and interpretation of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age horizon in Eastern Georgia (Goehring 2008), and – on the other – by shortly addressing one crucial aspect in regard to the date and cultural implication of the emergence of so-called 'red ware'.

The problem of the transition from the Late Bronze to Early Iron Ages former concernsis connected to the alleged evidence that only minor stages of development were discernible in the Khovle inventory of Levels VIII-IV, despite the assumed long timespan covered by this horizon.[14] As recently stressed by Ludwig (2010: 10), Muskhelishvili's date and time duration of Levels VIII-IV is based on the comparison of the ceramic inventory with specimens represented in the burial ground of Samtavro. As stated by Abramishvili, pottery was, however, not considered at all within the Samtavro chronology. This approach is further hampered because of the small amount of metal artefacts found at Khovle Gora. Consequently, the long time-span reconstructed for the burial ground of Samtavro – which itself is vividly disputed (Abramishvili 2003) – cannot be simply transferred to schedule the development of pottery production at Khovle. The reinvestigation of the layers relatable to Levels VIII-VI in 2011 revealed, moreover, that the these levels latter mainly consists of a layers of decay. Judging from the location of the old excavation trenches, it does not seem that other layers than those found by us could have been cut in the 1950s.

12 It should not be overlooked that Muskhelishvili's work represents a first and, due to a chain of adverse events, so far also only attempt to present and interpret the results of Berdsenishvili's expedition. As a consequence of Berdsenishvili's sudden death in 1965, who had at the time being coordinating the editing of the excavation results, the publication project came to a standstill. Additionally, the findings documentation was divided among several members of the expedition, which meant that part of it was inevitably lost over time. In light of these issues, the general appraisal of the typological development of the ceramic findings of Khovle Gora summarizing also the most important notes about the stratigraphy and history of the site has at least preserved the most important aspects for following expeditions. It is finally only thanks to his work that the complete findings inventory of Khovle Gora remained together and competently stored at the birth house of Ivane Javakhishvili in the village of Khovle, which was later converted to a museum. Without this information package, the archaeological reappraisal of the site of Khovle Gora would have been much more difficult.

13 Unfortunately, the results of the analysis of the radiocarbon samples were not yet completed at the time of writing this paper.

14 This view is shared also by Lordkipanidse (1991: 73), according to whom the typological repertoire and fabric remained unaltered from the 14th to 7th/6th centuries BC. He thereby relies both on the evidence from Khovle Gora, uncritically following Muskhelishvili's typology, and from Treli, limiting his comparison to burial assemblages consistently dated to the 13th-12th century BC only (see, in this regard, Ludwig 2010: 297-298).

The second research question addresses the sudden appearance of 'red ware' in Eastern Georgia. The evidence at Khovle again plays a major role for establishing its dating (Narimanishvili 1991). According to Muskhelishvili's report, 'red ware' was first found in Level III.[15] In the successive Levels II and I, it became the dominant fabric but without totally replacing the black-grey and brown wares. Due to the presence of so-called Scythian arrowheads (Muskhelishvili 1978: pl. LXII; see recently Mehnert 2008: 93-94)[16] and of a fragment of black-figure pottery,[17] Level III (Lordkipanidse 1991: 129) was dated to the 6th century BC (Lordkipanidse 1991: 129), and the appearance of 'red ware' therefore ascribed to Urartian influence. Recent results reached by the Georgian-German expedition in Kachetia, where 'red ware' was found in a clear Achaemenid context, favoured – on the contrary – the appearance as a result of Achaemenid influence, dating its emergence therefore to the 5th or rather 4th century BC (Furtwängler and Ludwig 2004: 178-179; Ludwig 2010: 109-112; Knauss *in prep.*). Also, based on the fact of the existence in Kohl-Tube of D. Barag's 1st group with the red ware from Grakliani Hill (grave # 217), we can assume a date probably no earlier than the middle of the 5th century BC (Licheli 2011: 135-156). Basically, it goes without saying that only an in-depth study supplemented by scientific dating will give a final answer to this question since none of the major key sites, such as Khovle Gora, Kvemo Kedi or Gumbati, furnish a comprehensive corpus at the moment. However, it should be stressed that D. Muskhelishvili had differentiated between an Urartian influence in Level III and an Achaemenid influence in Level II. True, this may have been induced by temporal reasoning. But preliminary re-examination of the 'red ware' specimens stored in the Khovle collection seems to confirm the existence of different types of red wares, the typological spectrum of which closely resembles also Urartian-like shapes. That is not to say, however, that Urartian vessels were imported or locally imitated at Khovle Gora. The question is rather whether there exists a relation between the Urartian-like vessels at Khovle Gora and the cultural development observable on the southern foothills of the Lesser Caucasus at so-called post or Late-Urartian sites of a 6th-century BC date[18], and if so whether this phenomenon may accordingly be regarded as an indication for a political formation process which may have influenced the socio-political landscape of the later kingdom of Iberia.

15 Some fragments seem to have been found already in Level IV (Muskhelishvili *pers. comm.*).

16 Two exemplars of local Transcaucasian type identical to those published by Mehnert (2008: pl. 97, 1-2) were found in 2011. The arrow head on Pl. IV, 2 lay directly on the surface of the stone fence. The other exemplar (Pl. IV, 3), originating on the other hand from the lower parts of the fill between the stone fence and the stone wall, remains visible in Fig. 2 and 3 in the foreground on the right hand. Since these types are otherwise reported to have been only found in Levels III and II, it can be deduced that the stone fence was still used at that time.

17 Unfortunately, the fragment could not be recovered in the Khovle collection.

18 The sites of Horom on the Shirak Plateau (Kohl and Kroll 1999), Aramus on the Kotayk Plateau (Kuntner and Heinsch 2010), and the sites along the southern shore of Lake Sevan in Armenia (Biscione, Hmayakyan and Parmegiani 2002) are the most notable in this regard. For an overview of the cultural development and persistence of the Lchashen-Metsamor culture into the Middle Iron Age, see further Avetysian, Avetysian, Navasardyan and Bobokhyan (*in prep.*).

The results of the 2012 excavation campaign shed some informative light upon this research context, for they indicate that the site of Khovle Gora was strongly fortified from Levels V to II. Hence, the site of Khovle Gora represents the first fortress known so far in Georgia dating to Achaemenian times. The fact that it does not represent a new foundation has to be specially emphasized.

The 'post-Level VI'[19] occupation was already identified in 2011 on top of the mound, where it was preserved as a kind of rectangular-shaped unit of layers left standing by the old excavators. Despite its quite spatially restricted expanse, it provided an excellent unit for the meticulous stratigraphic analyses of the occupation sequence performed in 2012 (Trench C). As it was clear that only very general conclusions could be drawn from these results as concerns the type and extension of the dwellings, the aim of the excavation of this part was mainly preparatory. In fact, the objective was the exposure of the reddish burnt wattle-and-daub structure which – because of its location at the centre of mound – very likely stands in close relation to the reported temple complex. Therefore, a more comprehensive investigation will be the goal of the next campaigns.[20]

As a result, our awareness of this structure, defining the oldest phase 3, is very limited so far. Unfortunately, not a single sherd could be found within the cultural layer associated to it, which spreads sealed by the structure's debris to some paltry stone structure remains to the south, the function of which is no longer discernible. The decayed area was, however, quickly levelled in phase 2, which is further characterised by the construction of a stone facility lying directly on the trimmed surface of the wattle-and-daub structure. The feature of this facility enables the determination of three sub-phases each defined by a minor restructuring of the stone facilityformer and by athe corresponding cultural layers (i.e. SE010 and SE011, Fig. 4). The finding of a hoard or cluster of several whetstones resting directly on the stone facility is most notable, as well as an almost 10cm high mud plinth abutting the stone facility which delimits a rectangular area (Fig. 4). Although the plinth was obliterated over time, the same area was retained and marked-off by a stone wall in the following sub-phase 2a. The youngest phase 1 was on the contrary characterised by a markedly thicker stone wall built with up to 50cm stone blocks, the debris of which had fallen northwards and was covered by a thick ashy debris layer. The preliminary analysis of the ceramic findings suggests a date in the 10th-8th centuries BC for the sequence worked out on top of the mound (Pl. I-III).[21]

19 It is so far not possible to precisely ascertain whether the structures excavated on top belong to Level V or Level IV, due to the interference of the east profile at the transition of the preserved upper limit of the stone fence, which is actually the stratigraphic benchmark fixing the beginning of Level V, and the northerly adjacent layers on top of the mound brought by the cut at that time of a test pit perpendicular to the main stratigraphic trench. The assignment to Level VI can safely be ruled out due to stratigraphic observations. The lack of 'red ware' in these layers further excludes a correlation with Level III.

20 This cautious approach results from the short duration of the campaign (just two weeks) as well as the complex stratification consisting of several densely superimposed occupation horizons, the accurate understanding of which is indispensable for the continuation of the excavations on top of the mound as this part has been intensively unearthed, thus leaving little scope for further research.

21 All but the fragments on Pl. I, 3; Pl. I, 7 and Pl. II, 8 which belong to the group of 'red ware' is of a black-grey fabric.

A second emphasis was focused on the reinvestigation of the fortification wall (Trench D). Initially, this area was chosen under the presumption of getting easy access to the oldest Levels VIII-IV, as this occupation period has been reported to have been enclosed by a stone wall. Unexpectedly, not only an undisturbed layer could be found soon after surface cleaning but also two different foundation levels (Fig. 5). Most notably in this regards is the *in-situ* feature of a small oven with a corresponding occupation layer spreading flush with the younger foundation level and which contained fragments of 'red ware' bowls. Whereas the correlation of this building phase to Level II is therefore beyond doubt, it is not currently possible to determine what time span elapsed prior to its construction, as no findings were made below this horizon. Judging from the identical building technique used in both building phases it seems, however, improbable that the older building phase can be correlated with one of the Late Bronze Age levels.

The last point of this year's campaign was focused on the southern town area, where two 4 to 4m wide trenches A and B were opened in order to check the chronological as well as stratigraphic setting. Of course, only general observations can again be made, the most remarkable being, however, the confirmation of the existence of a large settlement dating to the 5th/4th centuries BC. In sum, three phases could be determined, all correlatable to Level II due to the frequent occurrence of 'red ware'. The two youngest phases II-1 and II-2 were both best brought out in Trench A.

Directly under the topsoil (SE001), which hardly exceeds 5cm in thickness, a 35 to 45 cm thick and very homogenous loamy brownish layer (SE002) follows, with only very few hand-sized stones and gravel. The latter This is all the more surprising as it lies directly on the youngest occupation layer SE009 of phase II-1. Nowhere could traces of occupational debris and especially of violent fire destruction be identified, despite the specification in Muskhelishvili`s report that the Level II occupation was destroyed. Phase II-1 consists of a pit (SE008) deepened from the surface of layer SE009. The sidewalls were revetted with thin stone slabs, except in its southern part which was disturbed by a later but pit. Pit SE008 reaches a maximum depth of 70cm and consists of several smaller partially intersecting deepenings, the sidewalls of which were likewise plastered with thin stone slabs, partly still preserved *in situ*. The accumulation of the occupation layer SE009 itself is associated on the other hand with two stone wall structures running at right angle to each other, representing the remains of the north-eastern corner of a house. The lack of stone debris points rather to a deliberate dismantling of the stone walls than to a violent destruction. To the north-east of the house the remains of further stone structure, to all probability a manure gutter, came to light (Fig. 6). The oldest phase II-3, determined in Trench B, consists of two pits (SE021 and SE022), both comprising several flat deepenings which were originally again plastered with thin stone slabs, as can be suggested by the scanty remains found *in situ*.

In conclusion, the investigation of the site at Khovle Gora is far from being accomplished. Its importance as one of a few multi-period sites so far thoroughly investigated in Eastern Georgia could certainly newly be underscored by the results of the

first two excavation campaigns, as they made clear that the available evidence has to be regarded as a first step in the evaluation of the vast amount of features achieved by the old excavations in the 1950s and 1960s and not as the final result. The systematic excavation and documentation as well as storing allow for a critical reappraisal uniformly integrable into the new Georgian-Austrian excavation project.

Future research will strongly implement scientific dating strategies as well as large-scale magnetometer surveying in order to better understand the layout of the Khovle Gora settlement, as well as to locate and to delimit the necropoleis. The major mound, although for the most part already intensively excavated, nevertheless provides a good basis for the research of two of the most important dating issues for the understanding of the cultural developments from Late Bronze to Late Iron Ages. Especially, the site of Khovle Gora provides excellent basic conditions for an in-depth study of the typological development and relation of 'red ware' to its forerunner wares of the Late Bronze Age tradition. In this regard the exact absolute dating of its emergence represents a major task for the future.

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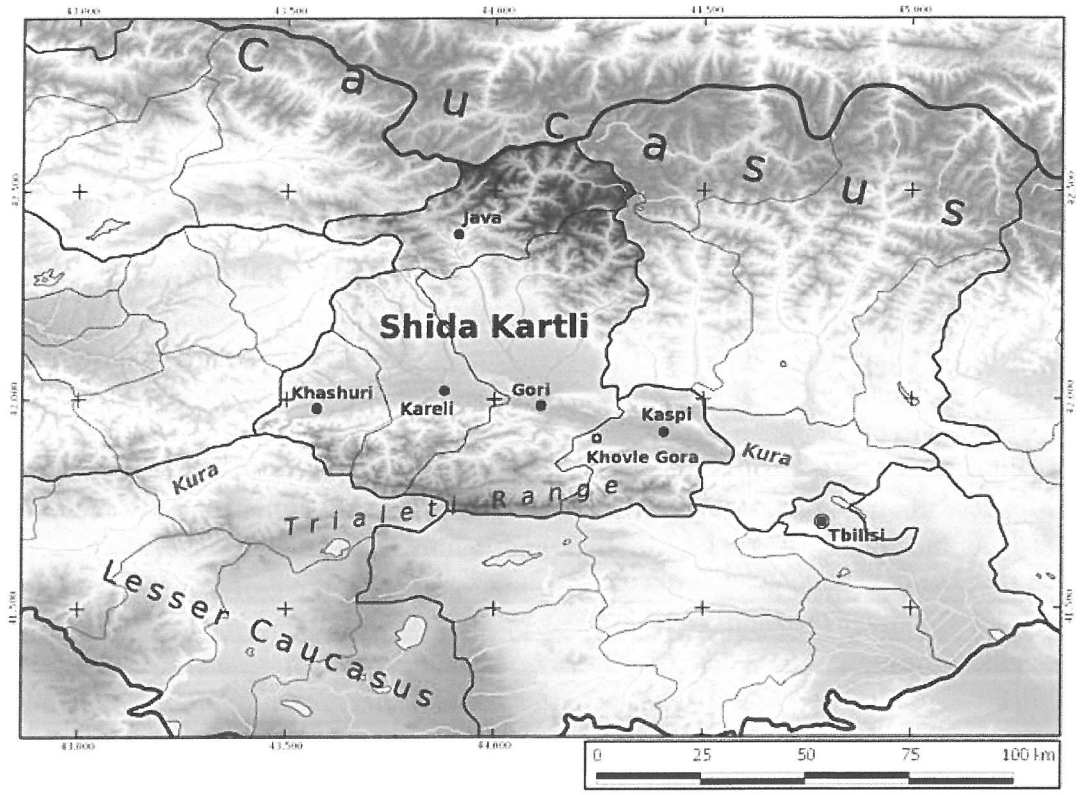


Fig. 1: Topographic map of Shida Kartli (map based on maps-for-free.com).

Fig. 2: Level V stone fence, Khovle Gora 2011 (Photo: W. Kuntner).

Fig. 3: East Profile of the main stratigraphic trench as cleaned in 2011, showing the burnt Level VI and II layers (Photo: W. Kuntner).

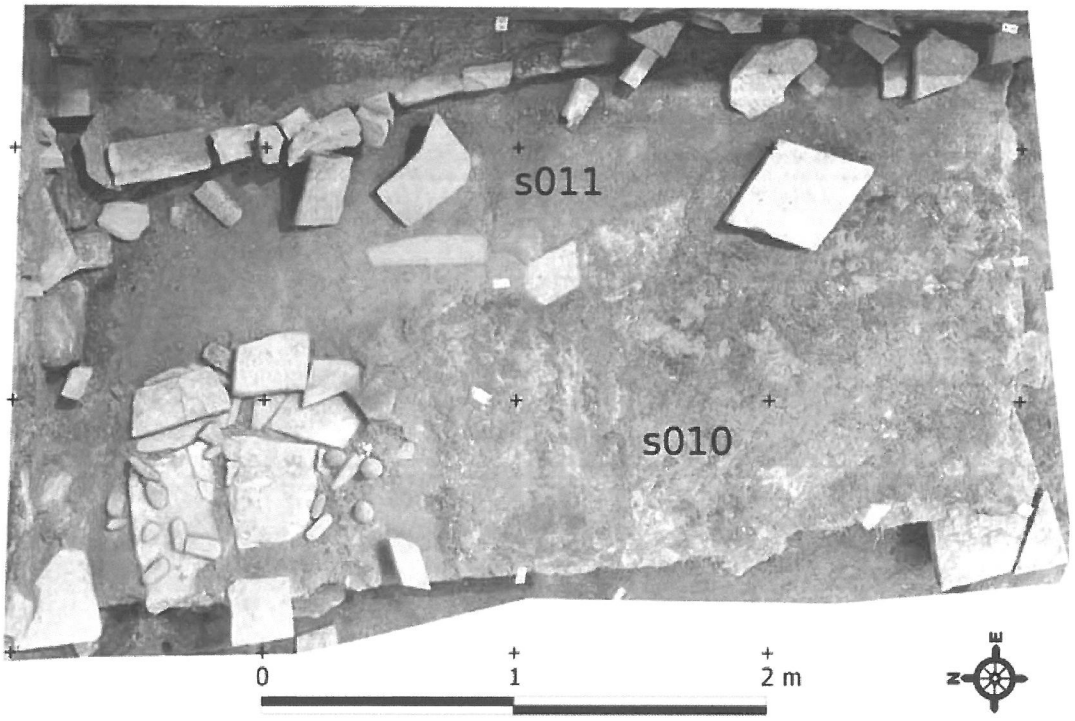


Fig. 4: Trench C 2012 – phase 2 showing a hoard of whetstones on in the left-hand in the foreground (Photo: W. Kuntner).

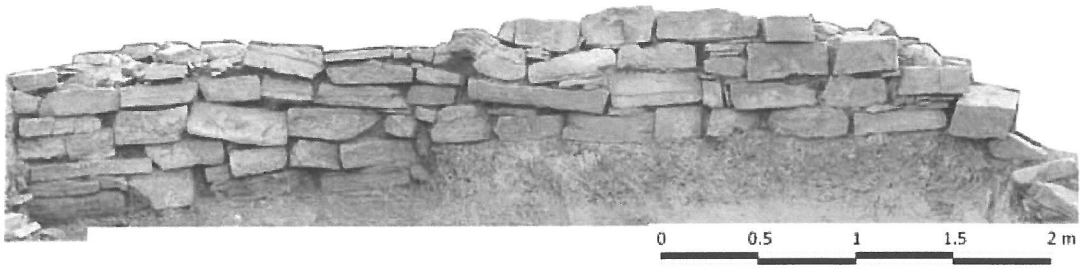


Fig. 5: Trench D 2012 - Southern Façade of fortification stone wall showing the pre-Level II (left) and Level II (right) building phase grounding on different foundation levels (Photo: R. Gietl).

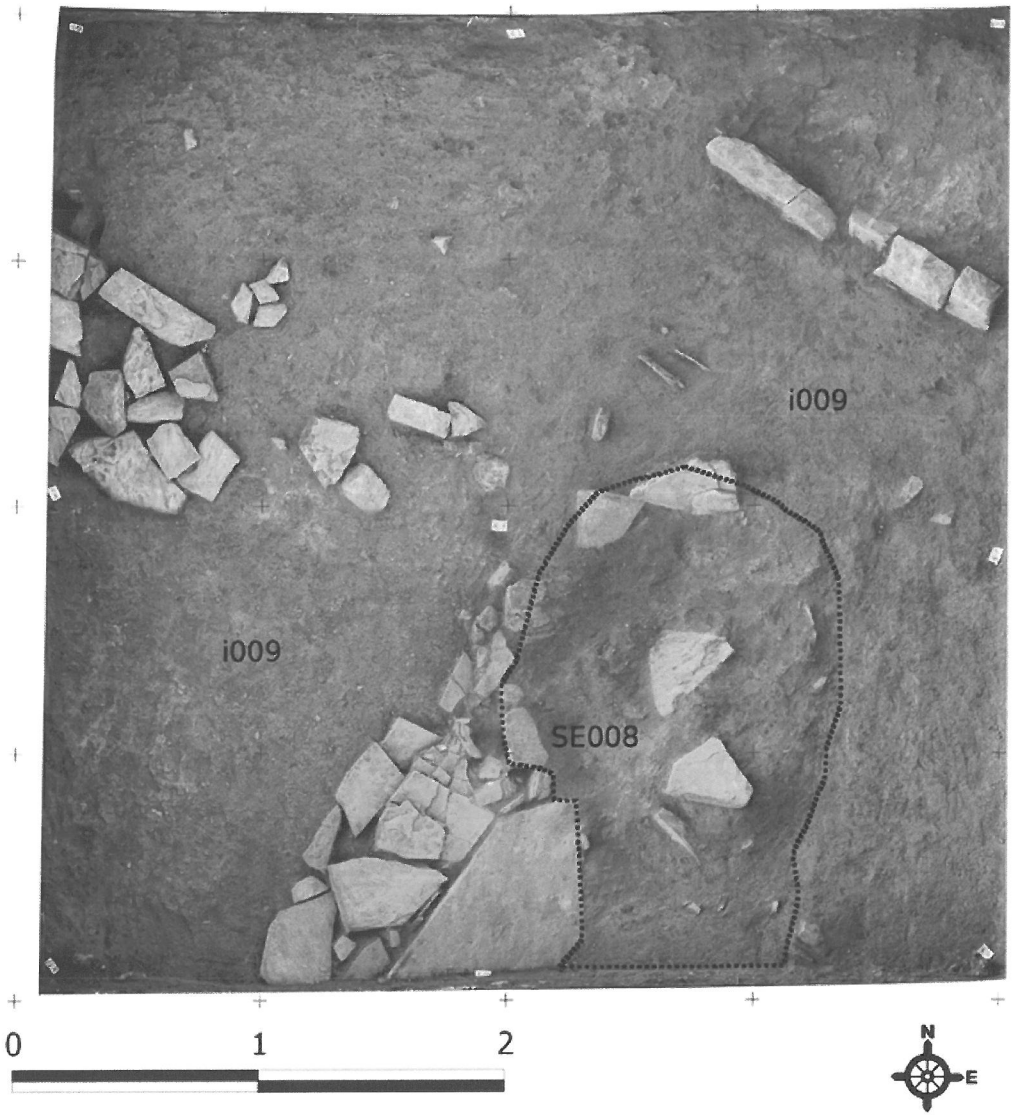
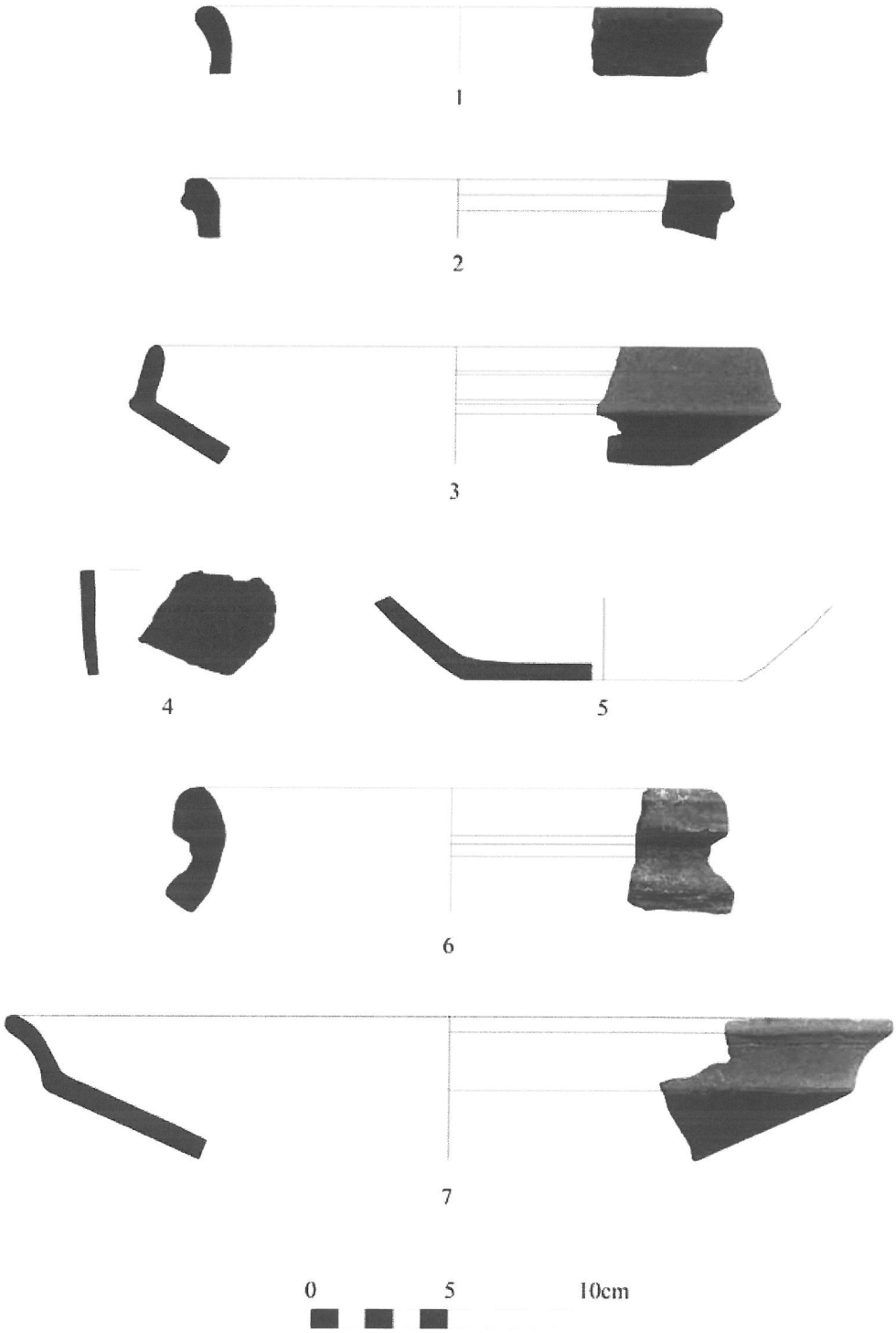
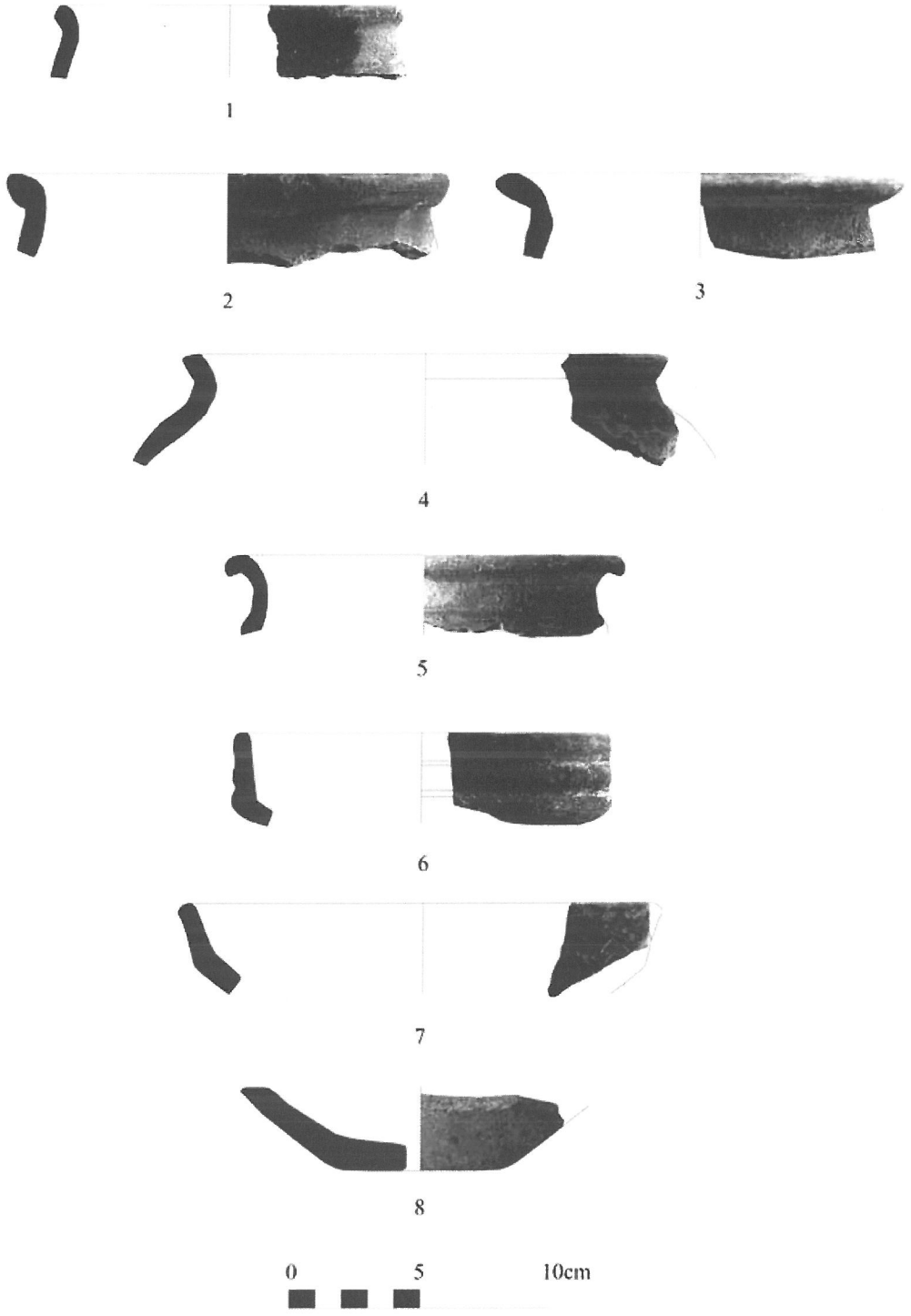


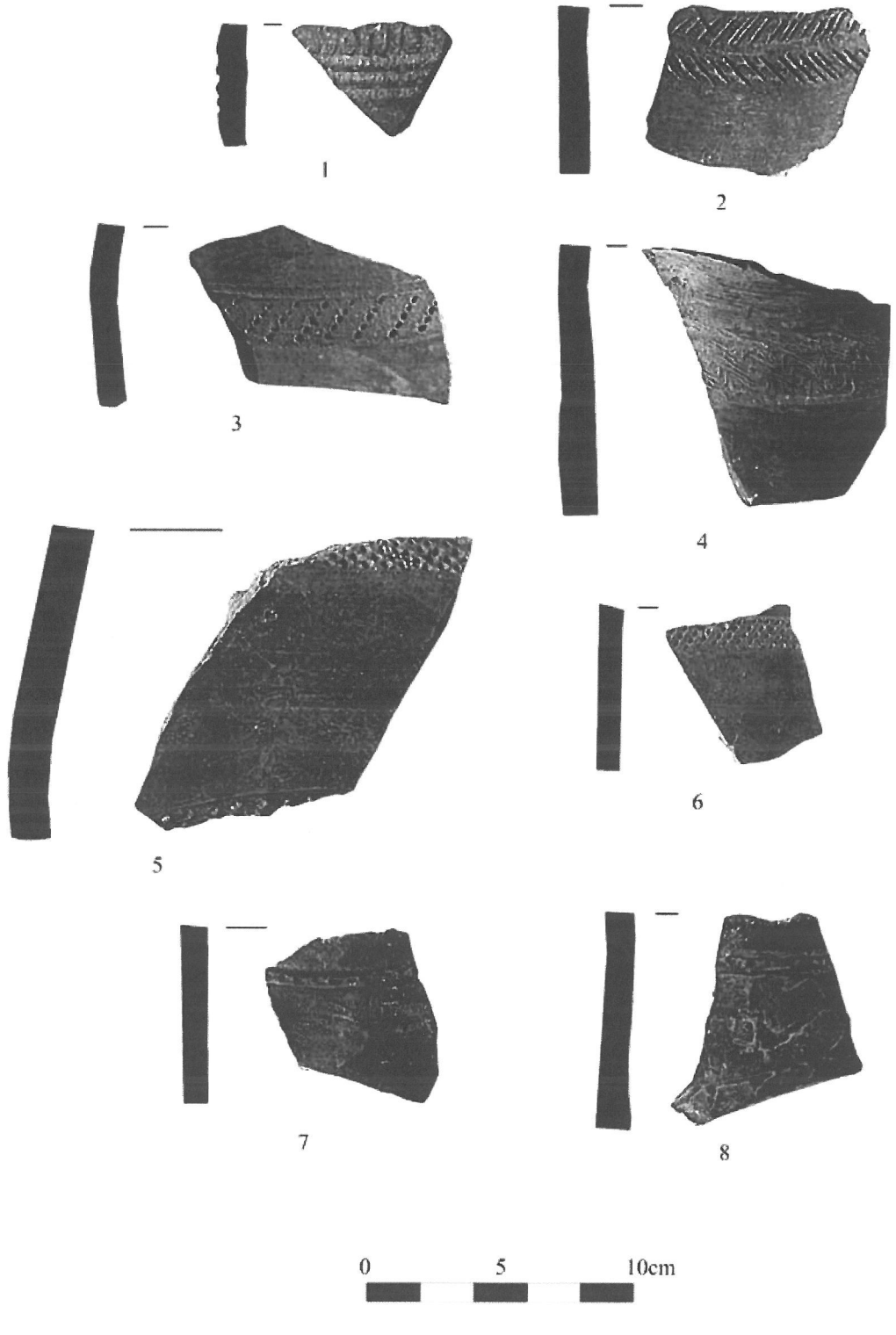
Fig. 6: Trench A 2012 – Phase II-2. Occupation horizon showing stone wall remains cut by pit SE 008 in phase II-1 (Photo: R. Gietl).



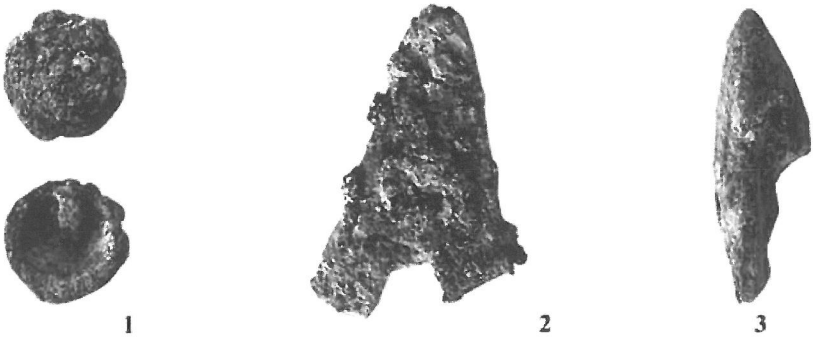
Pl. I



Pl. II



Pl. III



Pl. IV