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## Excavations at the Old City, Fortress, and Mound of Van: Work in 2017

Erkan Konyar, Bülent Genç, H. Banu Konyar, Armağan Tan and Can Avcı\*

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Erkan KONYAR, Bülent GENÇ,  
H. Banu KONYAR, Armağan TAN and Can AVCI\*

## EXCAVATIONS AT THE OLD CITY, FORTRESS, AND MOUND OF VAN: WORK IN 2017<sup>1</sup>

The citadel of Tushpa, the mound of Van Fortress with its lower settlement, and the walled Old City of Van to the south of the citadel have been the sites of various cultures from the Early Bronze Age to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 1). In the 2017 excavation season, excavations and documentation work continued at the Tushpa citadel, on the Van Fortress mound, and at the Old City of Van, and research proceeded with the goal of understanding and solving the problems concerning these areas (Fig. 2). Within this scope, investigations were carried out at the New Palace area at the citadel of Tushpa in an effort to understand how this area was used structurally. Particular emphasis was placed on phases of occupation on the Van Fortress mound in the Bronze and Iron ages, with the main goal of analyzing the stratigraphy of the mound. This way, attempts were directed at revealing the post-Urartian level, the architecture of which was not understood clearly; pottery finds including cream-slipped ware, triangle ware and festoon ware; and small finds such as seals and metals, as well as their architectural context, and thus to understand the traditions that culturally changed or continued in the post-Urartian level. In addition, emphasis in this excavation season was laid on building levels representing the Urartian period, and architecture and occupational phases of the Early and Late building levels. Bronze Age building levels on the mound were also investigated, and Bronze Age-Iron Age transition was examined. At the Old City of Van, the goal was to understand the buildings in the area between Kaya Çelebi and Palace/Yeni Kapı and their functions.

### VAN FORTRESS MOUND

Through 2017 work at the Van Fortress Mound, which lies along the north of the citadel of Tushpa,

significant results concerning particularly the Early Bronze Age, Urartian, and Post-Urartian (Late Iron Age/Post-Urartian) periods were achieved (Fig. 3). Within this scope, the layering of Urartian architecture and the stratigraphical data on the Bronze Age significantly contribute to better understand the chronological span on the mound when evaluated together with the results of previous years.

### Late Iron Age/Post Urartu

Mudbrick walls that lie above the Late Urartian layer on the mound indicate a new settlement. A distinctive transformation in architecture and pottery is observed. In addition, there is a continuity of Urartian elements in small finds. Two floors could be distinguished in the area bordered by approximately 1 m wide walls made of 0.50 x 0.50 and 0.50 x 0.25 m mudbricks. The later floor was constructed with mud daub, with artificial grouts in places. The earlier floor below it was also made of compacted mud. *In situ* finds on the floor inform us on the quality and chronology of the area (Fig. 4).

During the excavation of the northern wall of the Urartian hall in trench M25, a Late Iron Age burial was found at the point where the western and northern walls of the room meet to form a corner; the southern side of the burial was lined by five courses of stones. The hocker burial was found with the legs pulled to the stomach and facing north (Fig. 5). The hocker burial coincides with the top of a mudbrick bench starting from the base of the north wall of the columned hall, which runs in an east-west orientation and continues to the wall opening in the wall.

The skeleton belongs to an adult female with bronze earrings on the ears, a bronze bracelet on the right arm, a bronze necklace on the lower part of

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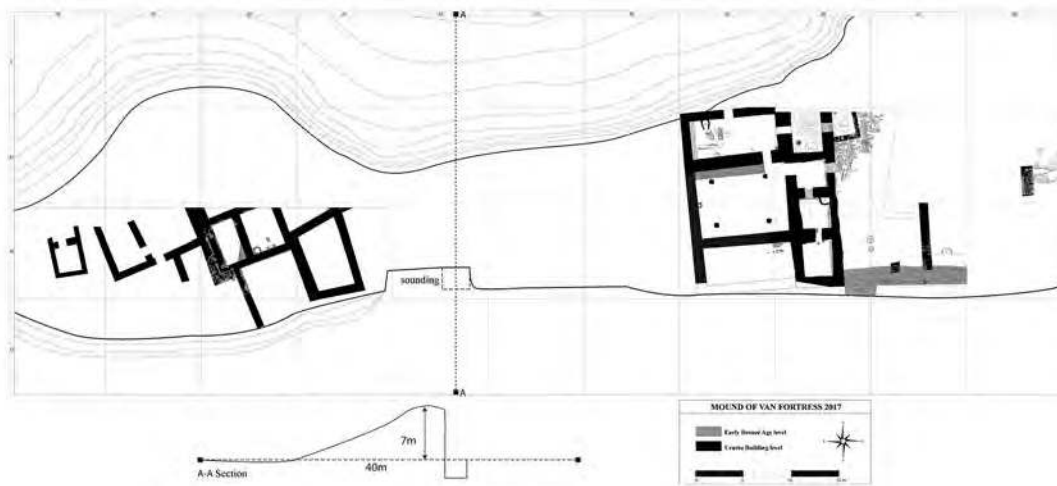
1) This work was supported by Scientific Research Projects Coordination Unit of İstanbul University. (Project n° SBA-2018/25220), Ministry of Culture General Directorate of Cultural Assessts and Museums – DÖSİMM and AYGAZ. We would like to thank all the organizations, which contributed to the excavation.



**Fig. 1: The citadel of Tushpa.**



**Fig. 2: Tushpa citadel, Tushpa mound and Old City of Van.**



**Fig. 3: Tushpa citadel, Early Bronze Age and Urartian architecture.**



**Fig. 4: Tushpa citadel, Late Iron Age/Post Urartian layer.**



**Fig. 5: Tushpa citadel, Late Iron Age hocker burial.**

the neck, and a *fibula* (Fig. 6). Various beads were also excavated. It seems that an alabaster seal with a running goat or deer figure on together with the string of beads was used as a necklace. The burial is 1.10 m long and 0.49 m wide, and the skeleton is 0.83 m tall. This hocker burial shows similarities with the hocker burial excavated in 2010 in trench N18 to the west of the mound<sup>2</sup> and the hocker burial excavated in 1938-1939 by Kirsop and Silva Lake at Analı Kız<sup>3</sup>.

Another burial in semi-hocker position, which is thought to be contemporaneous with this burial was excavated in an area near the northeast corner of the columned hall (Fig. 7). It is considered to belong to the Late Iron Age, as it was cut into the Late Urartian level and it shows a semi-hocker position. The hands are joined on the chest, the knees are bent, and the face is slightly turned to the south. It is considered to belong to an adult male in his forties.

2) Konyar 2011: 157.

3) Korfmann 1977: Plate 8-1/2.



**Fig. 6: Tushpa citadel, Late Iron Age hocker burial, objects found in the burial.**



**Fig. 7: Tushpa citadel, Late Iron Age semi hocker burial.**



**Fig. 8: Tushpa citadel, Late Urartian Building Level in the northern part of trench M25.**

### Urartian Period

A 9 m long and 4 m wide rectangular room in an east-west orientation was excavated within the Late Urartian building level in the northern part of trench M25 in 2016 (Fig. 8). Floors and wall foundations



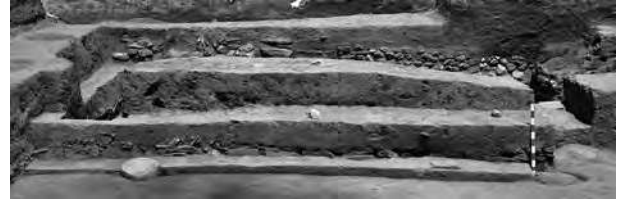
**Fig. 9: Tushpa citadel, Early Urartian Level in trench M25, hall with four column bases.**

belonging to the Early Urartian Building Level were identified just below this Late Urartian structure, as well as an associated 8.40 x 4 m room belonging to the Early Urartian Building Level with a plan that largely corresponds to that of the Late Building Level. During the continuing work, this Early Building Level was found to consist of two phases<sup>4</sup>.

Work in 2017 aimed to reveal the continuation of these Urartian building levels to the south. Urartian fill was reached in trench M25, beneath the Late Iron Age/Post Urartian level excavated in 2016. A columned hall to the south was reached through a 0.90 m wide doorway in the southeast corner of the rectangular room to the north.

This hall belonging to the Early Urartian Level in trench M25 had four column bases, and was 9 m long in the east-west direction, and 7 m wide in the north-south direction (Fig. 9). The south wall is 1.20 m wide and preserved to a height of 0.60 m. East wall is 1.20 m wide and 0.90 m high. The west wall is 1.20 m wide and 1.20 m high. There is a unit (altar?) in front of the west wall, which measures 0.54 x 0.37 m and which is constructed of small and flat stones (measuring 8-12 cm). The unit is 3.12 m from the southeast corner, and 2.60 m from the northwest corner. The north wall of the room is 1.20 m wide and 0.90 m high. Just above the north wall and in the same orientation is the south wall of the room of the Late Urartian building level. This wall is approximately 1 m wide and is preserved to a height of 0.80 m.

In front of the north wall of the columned hall is a bench that is 7.30 m long, 0.60 m wide and 0.50 m high. This bench is made of a single and double course of stones, depending on the size of the stones, in front of the wall (Fig. 10). The gap between the interior face of the wall and the stones making up



**Fig. 10: Tushpa citadel, Early Urartian Level in trench M25, bench in front of the north wall of the columned hall.**

the bench is filled with small stones of various sizes, and the top is laid with mudbricks. A sounding was opened in the western corner of the north wall of the hall extending in the east-west direction to clear this situation and the relation with the room to the north. An 0.80 x 1.60 m sounding was cut into the wall in this area to reveal the section of the wall and the bench, and the foundations were exposed. This way it became clear that the wall was 1.20 m wide and the bench belonged to the early building level.

It was found that a 1.50 m wide doorway in the northeast corner of the columned hall gave access to the room to the east. Mudbrick blocks that had fallen in this doorway were observed together with the debris. These mudbricks were recovered intact; they measured 0.48-0.50 m long, 0.30 m wide, and 0.10-0.12 m thick. The doorway was cleared completely and was found to connect to the room to the east of the hall.

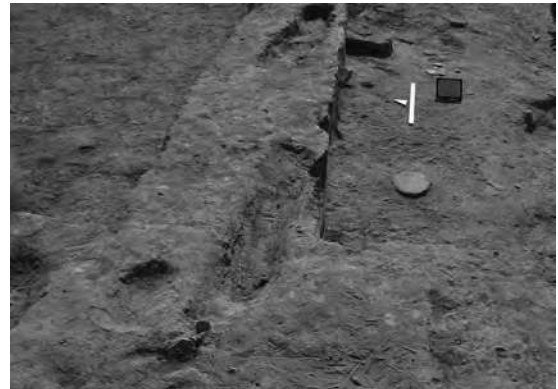
Approximately 1 m from the western wall of the hall, a bronze arrowhead was found on the floor. Bronze fragments in the form of plaques of various sizes were also found scattered on the floor. A layer of fire and ashes continued in places on the floor of the columned hall, which is dense on the northern part. As has been clearly observed at the base of the bench and next to the south wall, the floor was laid with mudbrick blocks. Similarly, mudbrick blocks laid on the floor in between the two columns in front of the south wall are also apparent. However, it should also be pointed out that the floor in this room was renewed at least once. A similar situation can be observed in the Early Urartian room just to the north.

To give some more details on the column bases, the column base in the northwest corner is 1.30 m from the west wall, and 0.28 m from the bench to the north. This base has a diameter of 0.50-0.51 m. The moulding on the top of the base on which the column would have stood is 0.35 m in diameter. The column base in the northeast corner is 1.50 m from the east wall and just to the east end of the base of

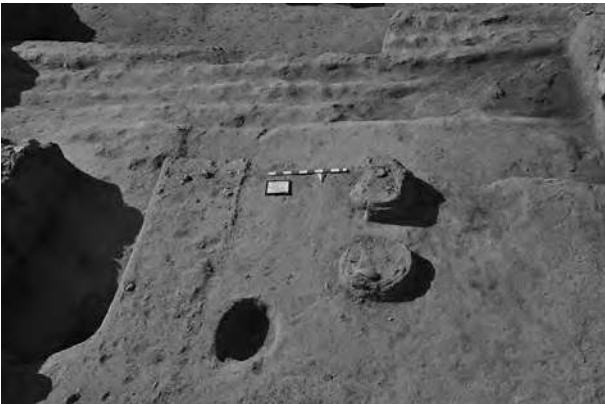
4) Konyar *et al.* 2017: 127-142.



**Fig. 11:** A similar column base which is found in a room in excavations carried out in the area west of the mound in 1991.



**Fig. 12:** Tushpa citadel, Early Urartian Level in trench N25, room to the south of the columned hall.



**Fig. 13:** Tushpa citadel, tannurs belonging to the Early Urartian Building Level in trench N26.



**Fig. 15:** Tushpa citadel, Early Bronze Age Layer, section to the south of the Bronze Age floor.



**Fig. 16:** Excavation areas in Old City of Van.



the bench. This column base has a diameter of 0.51 m, and the moulding on top of it has a diameter of 0.32 m. The southwest column base is 1.40 m from the west wall and 0.70 m from the south wall. It measures 0.51 m in diameter and its top moulding has a diameter of 0.35 m. The southeast column base is 1.50 m from the east wall and 0.75 cm from the south wall, and measures 0.51 m in diameter. A similar column base was found in a room in excavations carried out in the area west of the mound in 1991<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 11). As the two north columns were constructed according to the north wall and quite close to the bench, they could have been later additions to the room.

Column bases have been similarly used in large halls and rooms in Urartian fortresses and lower settlements. For example, a column base found in a large room at Erebuni<sup>6</sup>, a column base excavated at Karmir Blur<sup>7</sup>, and column bases found at Qaleh İsmail Ağa, Mahabad, Allahverdikand and Bastam<sup>8</sup> are similar to the column bases found in the Early Urartian Building Level in trench M25 discussed above. The column bases found in Bastam and Mahabad are particularly similar.

There is another room to the south of the columned hall in trench N25. This room measures approximately 9 x 4 m, and has a 0.60 x 0.60 m hearth adjacent to the north wall, which is shared with the columned hall. However, the south wall of this room has been disturbed by the asphalt road extending to the south of the mound, and the absence of a doorway providing access to the columned hall to its north or to the rooms to its east and west suggests that the entrance doorway was on the south wall (Fig. 12).

We can say that the nature of this rectangular plan complex extending in the east-west axis that we have unearthed in trenches M25 and N25 in the lower settlement, which connects to the four ante-rooms to the east, has changed with the hall with the four column bases that we have unearthed this season. This building, where various finds like tablets and seals were recovered, seems to have belonged to better off people. The hall with the column bases in particular is noteworthy with its size, design and function. The placement of the column bases near the corners of the rectangular plan room, the bench in front of the north wall, the 1.50 m wide doorway on the east wall, the mudbrick paved floor, the rectangular plan unit, which could be an “altar”

made of small and flat stones in front of the west wall, and the absence of any features like hearths or tannurs to heat the room all give the impression that it was a special room. This room, which we consider was used for various public purposes, could also have been used with cultic purposes. The platform in front of the west wall supports this interpretation.

Two tannurs with 0.60 m diameters were unearthed by 2017 excavations in the area to the west of the wall with stones foundations, which belongs to the Early Urartian Building Level and extends in the north-west direction and which was unearthed in trench N26 in the previous seasons (Fig. 13). The exterior of the tannurs were supported by pottery sherds. The south wall of this area is located in the sloping part of the trench, and therefore was disturbed by Medieval burials.

### Early Bronze Age

The work carried out on the ashy layer just to the south of the tannurs found in trench N26 showed that the stone foundations of the Early Urartian Building Level disturbed the Early Bronze Age layer (Fig. 14). The debris mixed with mudbrick collapse was removed, the floor level was reached, and two building phases were identified in the area. This Early Bronze Age floor seems to have been used as an open area. There is a 1.10 m difference in elevation between the two Bronze Age floors. The elevation difference between the Bronze Age floor and the Early Urartian Building Level wall is 0.60 m. This 0.60 m deep mudbrick collapse fill belongs to the Bronze Age. The Bronze Age floor in trenches N26 and N27 is 12 meters long in the east-west direction, and 6 meters wide in the north-south direction. A section that is 4 meters wide and 12 meters long in the east-west direction to the south of the Bronze Age floor is depressed in places and bulges in others, giving an appearance that resembles a canal (Fig. 15). The bulges in the form of a canal are between 0.10-0.20 m deeper than the floor to the north. These bulges extend in the east-west direction and are 0.30-0.35 m wide on the interior, and they can be considered to have a function in between the rooms.

### WORK AT THE OLD CITY OF VAN

Excavations that started in the previous years at the Old City of Van continued by extending the

5) Tarhan and Sevin 1992: 424, Resim 17

6) Stronach *et al.* 2009: 203, Pl. 5

7) Oganessian 1955: 22, Pl. 6

8) Kleiss 1970: 46, Tafel 27; 2015: 78, 87, Abb. 210



**Fig. 17: Old City of Van, Maarif Dükkanları (“Education Stores”).**

excavation areas. The work extended to an area of approximately 1,000 m<sup>2</sup>, and concentrated on the city’s civil and public architecture. Information from 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century etchings, photographs, maps and sketches were used for labeling, evaluations and comparisons during the fieldwork (Fig. 16)<sup>9</sup>.

A large group of buildings consisting of five individual units were unearthed on the southern border of the 2017 excavation area. The buildings were located in the north-east direction, were partitioned within themselves, and were probably two storied. The westernmost building used the southern city wall as its main outer wall, covered an area of 30 x10 m, had 3.90 m thick walls, and was separated from the other units by an alley to its south. The building was heavily disturbed, and its stone material was clearly taken away in time to be used elsewhere. The 30 m long street to the east of the building was cut by the city wall to the south, and therefore must have been an alley for exclusive use by these buildings.

The other four buildings follow each other in a north-south axis and in two groups of two adjacent buildings each, and repeat the same plan. 3.20 m wide streets in between them, plan layout and material uniformity suggest that this group was planned and constructed simultaneously. A water well was uncovered at the point where the northeastern building abuts the alley. This well is 4 m deep and still holds water.

This building group is labeled *Maarif Dükkanları* (“Stores”) in documents, and confirms this information by their simultaneous construction in the same plan layout (Fig. 17). Establishing estates and



**Fig. 18: Old City of Van, Bölge Adliye Binası (“Provincial Court”).**

constructing buildings for rent to use these estates for charity is considered a part of the Ottoman tradition of charitable foundations. The income from this place must have been left to the Ministry of Education.

A multi-roomed small building to the north of the main road that extends in the east-west direction excavated in the previous seasons and to the diagonal southwest of the *Maarif Dükkanları* was excavated in the 2017 season. Three of its southern rooms were excavated in 2013, and it was designated as the courthouse in the sources; the complexity of its plan indicates that it was augmented by various additions in time (Fig. 18). Two square plan rooms, two rectangular plan rooms adjacent to them to the north, a stone paved corridor extending in the north-east direction, and rooms located to the north of this corridor define the western border of this building. The extent of the disturbance of the northern rooms makes the identification of its size difficult. Therefore, the building cannot be categorized architecturally, but the finds strongly suggest that it was a courthouse as recorded in sources. Numerous pieces of burnt paper were found to be court records and documents. Numerous writing sets were also found in the same area.

To the east of this building is the series of stores unearthed in the previous seasons. Work continued in the area to the east of this series of stores in 2017. This building is identified as *Tekalif-i Harbiye Binası* (“War Taxes Building”) in a sketch plan of the Old City of Van, and is noteworthy with its spacious architectural layout. This large building is located to the north of the main road, and makes up the corner of another road that forks from the main road to-

9) Cuneo 1986: 125-184; Konyar 2018.



**Fig. 19: Old City of Van, Tekalif-i Harbiye Binası (“War Taxes Building”).**

wards the north (Fig. 19). The building has a façade on the south with four flagstones paved rooms, and is bordered on the west by an 18.60 m long wall that runs in the north-south direction. It is connected with the free space to its west through a 0.70 m gap at its center. Perhaps these two spaces were used as a single space in time. The flagstone paved four rooms with a façade on the south have various dimensions, but they are all rectangular.

This building is located in an area that is surrounded by public buildings at the center of the city, and the nature of its plan suggests that it was built with a different function in previous times and in time went through a change in function. The information from the sketch plan of the Old City of Van has been confirmed by the work undertaken so far, which suggests that the information on this building is also correct.

2017 season included work in the area that makes up the other side of the road to the east of the building.

The south and west walls of the building form façades facing the road, and there is a 16 x 2 m rectangular area to its south that runs parallel to the road, and the middle of this area was left open (Fig. 20). The interior part of the separator which does not form a façade was probably used for feeding animals. There is an interior vestibule that extends to the east and connects with the stone vestibule that surrounds the building on its southern façade. The hallway has a 2.60 m doorway and is paved with flagstones, and connects to three rooms. This room of 13.40 x 3.60 m, is bordered by a wall on the east and opens to the outside on the west. The wall to the north following this opening is three-tiered. A



**Fig. 20: Old City of Van, Zaptiye Karakolu (“Police Station”).**

2.70 m section on the south part of the wall turns to the west. This section was cleared and consisted of two courses of stone masonry, and it is probably also the wall of a building to the west that has not yet been identified. The wall continues to the north for 3.60 m, then recesses 1 m to the east and then continues to the north for 13.40 m. The second area in the middle was designed as a hallway, but then must have been divided according to need. No bordering wall to the north is visible. Also, the beveled corners of the north walls of the rooms to its east and west turn parallel to the road, which, together with another course of stones found here, suggest that the building continues to the north and that this area was an inner hallway on the vertical axis.

The building marked as *Zaptiye Karakolu* (“Police Station”) in the sketch plan of the Old City of Van is also known as a police station by the locals. However, archaeological data do not support this designation.

Work in 2017 concentrated on the aforementioned areas and aimed to reveal the city’s public architecture. Although this has been largely accomplished, it still needs more work.

#### **YENİ SARAY (“NEW PALACE”) AREA: DOCUMENTATION WORK**

The area between the Ottoman Towers and the tomb of Argishti I and just to the right (south) of the path going up to the citadel is called Yeni Saray (“New Palace”) (Fig. 21). It is considered to have been built by Argishti I (786 -764 B.C.), as it rises just above this king’s tomb<sup>10</sup>. Only the foundation pits cut into the bedrock, walls of the rooms, leve-

10) Tarhan 1994: 35.



**Fig. 21: Yeni Saray (“New Palace”) area.**

led platforms and the floors of the building have been preserved to the present. Foundation pits, cut 0.30-0.40 m deep into the bedrock define the straight lines on which stones would be placed to form the leveled areas/platforms on which the walls would sit. Buildings could be constructed by the walls that rose between these pits and the flat surfaces thus formed. Structures built on the terraces seem to indicate a complex that increases in height from the north to the south. The southernmost part ends with the precipice of the Van cliffs. This is one of the most original applications of Urartian rock carving art.

Excavations that were carried out in this area under the direction of Prof. Dr. M. Taner Tarhan in 1980s reported 12 rooms<sup>11</sup>. Rooms n° 1 to 9 were on the rock platform formed on a 27 x 20 m area. Sewage pits, wall foundation pits carved out of the bedrock that separate the rooms, and sockets were taken as references to identify the number of rooms. However, the wall traces in this area, except for those of room n° 1, are very indistinct and can be interpreted differently. Room n° 1 extends in the north-south direction and measures approximately 11 x 6 m. The platform formed by leveling the bedrock to the west of this area contains the traces of other rooms and measures 20 x 20 m. To the east of the rocky height that forms the highest point of the New Palace were rooms n° 11 and 12. Here, room n° 11 shows more distinct structural features. The approximately 4.50 x 11 m room extends in the east-west direction, and the height of its southern and western walls that were cut into the bedrock reach 4 m.

Bronze discs in cavities cut into the rock found in excavations have been accepted as the most im-

portant criterion in identifying the nature of structures. Bronze votive discs or plaques could be placed in the foundations of royal or sacred structures in the Near East<sup>12</sup>.

Documentation work was undertaken in 2017 season with particular reference to foundation pits cut into the bedrock in the New Palace area. The purpose of this documentation work was to identify the distribution area of the foundation pits and axis in order to trace possible building groups. As a result of this work, foundation pits were evaluated in four groups. This indicates a pyramidal structuring that rises according to the depth of five terraces or four rock levels. The foundation pits at the lowest part quite close to the elevation of the plain were most probably associated with defense.

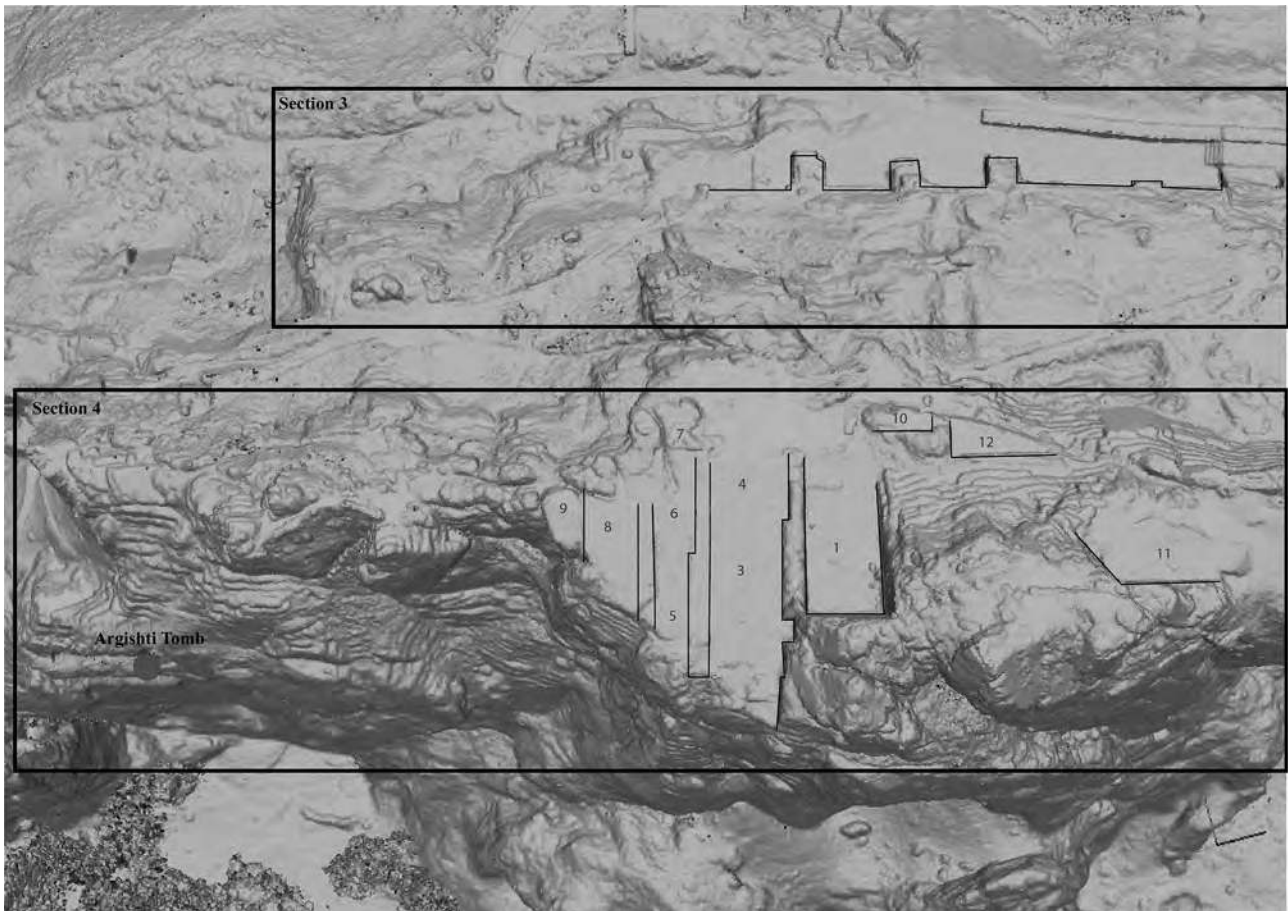
The second group of foundation pits extends at a higher elevation and also in the east-west axis. There is a relatively fewer number of foundation pits in this area. They do not show a distinct integrity or continuity. This must have been done to create flat surfaces and leveling in unsuitable parts of the site and to place foundations or city walls.

The third level foundation pits and rock-cut spaces in the New Palace area indicate a more definable architectural layout and building (Fig. 22). We can say that the main structures of the palace began to rise in this area. Rock-cut flat surfaces/spaces and walls dividing them were created in the 125 x 15 m area in the east-west axis. In this context, it is possible to talk about five spaces in the same axis created by cutting dividing walls into the bedrock, although some cannot be followed clearly. Southern walls were cut into the bedrock like the dividing walls and were quite high. Benches were placed next to the walls. Stone and mudbrick applications of this kind of structures exist in similar Urartian palaces. This type of rooms or structures with benches seem to have functioned as storage rooms.

The upper part of this area, which we designate as the fourth part, forms the highest section of the New Palace area and was arranged in a more integral way compared to the other areas. This part takes up a 145 x 50 m area. Foundation pits and walls made to create the terraces on which the group of structures sit rise in narrow steps just above the third group. This area can be considered in two sections. The middle section rises in steps up to the highest point of the bedrock in that part. These steps/terraces rising above the foundation pits probably created an area on which a high tower-like structure would sit. The south of the area is a steep cliff. A different

11) Tarhan 1989; Tarhan 1994.

12) Luckenbill 1927: n° 73, 84, 97, 98, 99, 100, 102; Genç 2015: 116-119.



**Fig. 22: Yeni Saray (“New Palace”) area, third level foundation pits and rock-cut spaces.**

arrangement is noted to the east and west of the area. A rectangular plan room in the north-south axis with high walls cut into the bedrock is the most striking area. Just to the west of it is a wider flat area, also created by leveling the bedrock. Drainage channels and other arrangements on the floor belong to the substructure system. Important building groups probably stood there. To the east of the area are ruins that were arranged differently from the bedrock in the form of steps cut into the bedrock, which probably reached the tower-like structure at the highest point. To the east of the structure that we consider to have been planned like a tower are flat surfaces cut into the bedrock as is the case to the west, as well as structures that border these surfaces in places, also cut into the bedrock.

To the southwest of the New Palace at a lower elevation is the tomb of Argishti I, also cut into the bedrock. Chamber tombs of kings beneath

the royal palaces are known from Assyrian examples<sup>13</sup>. However, considering settlement traditions and building materials, it would be a bit of a stretch to draw a parallel between Assyrian and Urartian practices just because of their locations. Also, burial chambers could be directly accessed from the lowest floor rooms in Assyrian palaces. The tomb of Argishti I on the other hand is to the west of the New Palace area. The choice to create a structure with its façade facing the north that was accessed by steps and that gives the impression of an independent group of structures, while it was possible to take advantage of the bedrock in Urartian and build a rock-cut tomb into the floor of the New Palace area further weakens the link with Assyrian examples.

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13) Haller 1954: 171, Fig. 186.

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