SUREZHA EXCAVATIONS

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The 2023 excavations by ISAC of the University of Chicago at Tell Surezha on the Erbil Plain in the Kurdistan region of northeastern Iraq investigate the prehistoric roots of the earliest towns and later cities in northern Mesopotamia during the Chalcolithic period from roughly 5500 to 3500 BCE. Surezha is an ideal site for exploring the chronology, economy, and developmental sequence of the Erbil Plain in this period because the high mound at Surezha is largely prehistoric, with only limited later occupation from the Middle Assyrian period and the Iron Age. Located at the southwestern edge of the modern village of Gund-i Surezha, the ancient site of Surezha has three parts: (1) the prehistoric high mound, (2) the terrace, and (3) the Hellenistic through Islamic-period lower town. The cone-shaped high mound and terrace measure approximately 188 m from northwest to southeast and 150 m from southwest to northeast, with an area of approximately 2.8 hectares (fig. 1). The high mound rises to a height of 16 m above the terrace. The terrace surrounding the base of the high mound is about 2 m high and slopes gradually down over a distance of approximately 70 m to the lower town, which extends out from the terrace in all directions. Taken together, the archaeological deposits in these three areas total approximately 20 hectares.

In 2023, we signed an agreement with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) General Directorate of Antiquities to extend our excavation permit for five more years, from 2023 to 2027 (fig. 2). The

Figure 1. Drone image of the Surezha prehistoric high mound.

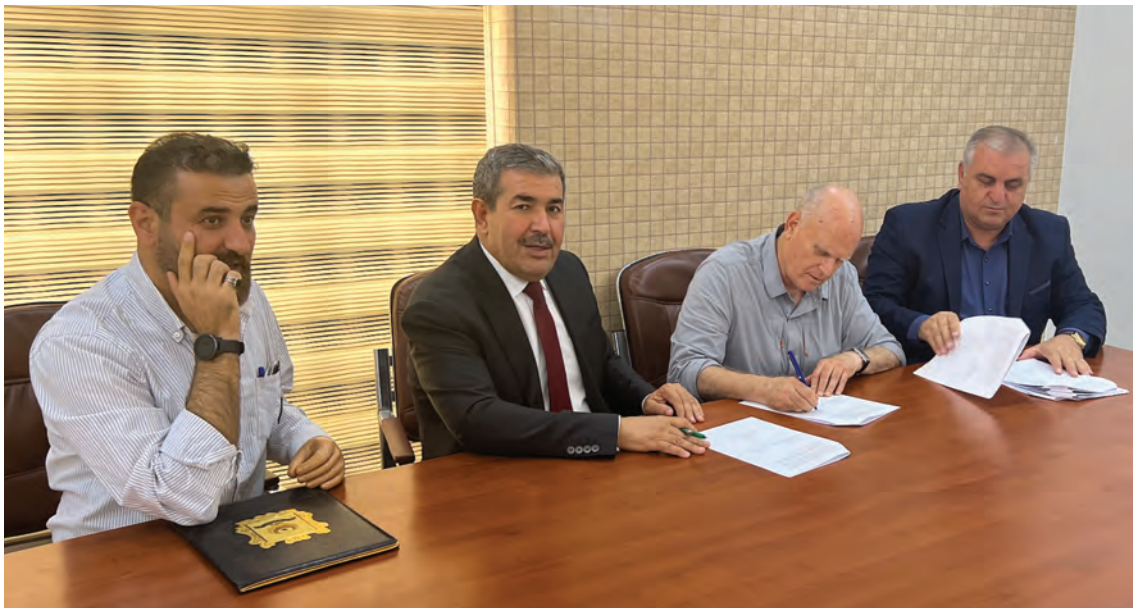

Figure 2. Signing ceremony for the five-year renewal of the Surezha excavations, 2023–27.

2023 field season took place from September 1 to September 30 and was codirected by Gil Stein and Michael Fisher; project staff members included Roonak Ahmadiniya, James Blundell, Christian Borgen, Joseph Harris, Isabella Lafreniere, Alejandro Gallego Lopez, Harrison Morin, Madeline Ouimet, and Lucas Proctor. Our government representatives were Rozhgar Rashid and Nader Babakr. Site excavations were carried out by eighteen workers from the Erbil Department of Antiquities and the village of Surezha. We are grateful to General Director of Antiquities Mr. Kayfi Ali and to Director of Antiquities for Erbil Governate Mr. Nader Babakr for permission to excavate at Surezha and for the many ways in which they have facilitated our work. The 2023 excavations focused on four trenches: operation 15 in Area A on the northwestern slope of the high mound, and operations 11, 12, and 14 in Area B on the southern slope and base of the high mound (fig. 3).

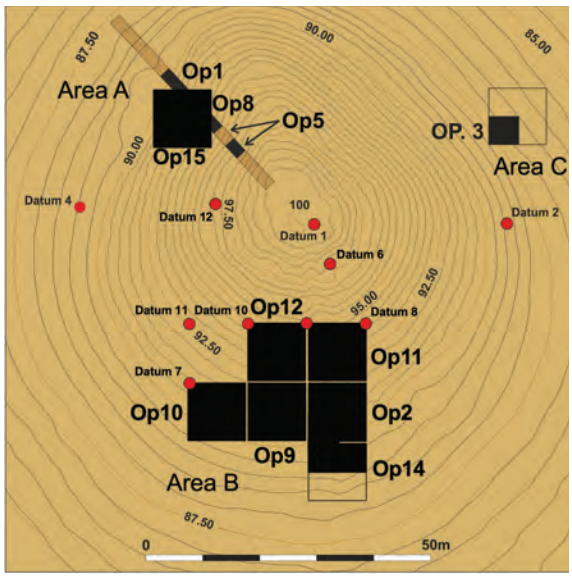

Figure 3. Topographic map of the Surezha high mound showing the main excavation areas.

AREA A: OPERATION 15

Operation 15 is a 10 × 10 m trench in Area A. The trench was laid out to overlap with the adjacent operation 1 step trench in the area with the Late Chalcolithic (LC) 2 deposits (ca. 4500?–4200 BCE), thereby ensuring a reliable stratigraphic connection between the two trenches (fig. 4). Beneath the overlying deposits of the LC 3 period (ca. 4200–3700 BCE), excavations revealed a complex of LC 2 architecture with at least seven mudbrick rooms whose layout suggests a nondomestic function (fig. 5).

These rooms were linked stratigraphically to a well-preserved LC 2 room with complete storage vessels and a stamp-seal impression that had been initially excavated in the step trench operation 1 in 2013. The southern portion of the LC 2 architecture had been cut through by a large Middle Assyrian pit. In 2023, work focused on excavating the large 5 × 5 m area of LC 3 and later deposits that overlay the LC 2 architecture in the southeastern corner of operation 15. A majority of deposits excavated were wash layers and an erosional gully, which show that this area of the mound was abandoned for at least part of the LC 3 period. Beneath these erosion deposits, two small wall stubs and a surface with a basin belonged to an intact LC 3 deposit that dates to the beginning of the LC 3 occupation on the site, while later LC 3 occupational layers may

Figure 4. Drone image of Area A operation 15 showing its connection to the 2013–15 step trench (at top) and the LC 2 architecture exposed in 2022–23.

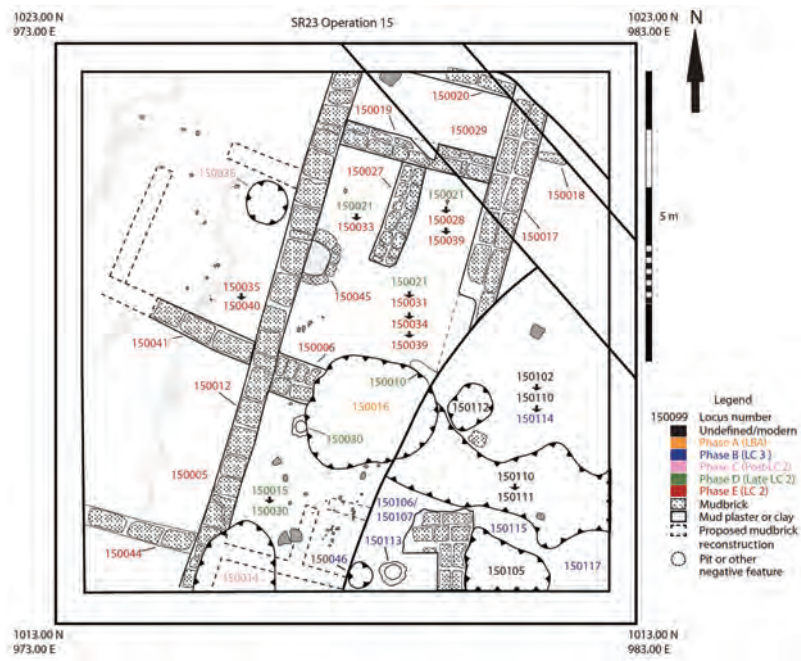

Figure 5. Top plan of operation 15 showing the large Middle Assyrian pit (locus 150016) cutting through the LC 2 architecture and (in the lower right corner of the trench) the overlying area of later LC 3 and post-LC 3 architecture that was partially excavated in 2023.

be present upslope. Future seasons promise to further delineate subphases within this phase. In the 2024 season, we hope to excavate the remaining 40 cm of LC 3 deposits overlying the LC 2 architecture that has been exposed in the northern and western portions of operation 15.

AREA B: OPERATIONS 11, 12, AND 14

In 2023, we continued our multiyear plan to expand the exposures in Area B at the southern base of the Surezha high mound in the two 10 × 10 m trenches designated as operations 11 and 12 (fig. 6).

Operation 11

Operation 11 is a 10 × 10 m trench at the eastern end of Area B, north of operation 2 and east of operation 12. The 2023 excavations started at the northern (upslope) half of the trench (fig. 6). Two main architectural features were excavated in this area: room 8, in the northwestern part of operation 11, and kiln 4, built nearby to the east in an open area along the sloping fifth-millennium southern surface of the high mound (fig. 7). Associated ceramics such as chaff-tempered "wide flower pot bowls" and internally beveled rim bowls date both installations to the LC 2 period.

Kiln 4 is a two-chambered updraft kiln composed of a lower fuel chamber with a central, plastered brick wall that originally supported the floor for an upper, probably domed chamber where the ceramic vessels would have been placed for firing (fig. 8). Unfortunately, the upper firing chamber no longer survives. The floor separating the two chambers would have been pierced with circular vent holes that allowed the heat from the burning charcoal in the fuel chamber to rise into the upper firing chamber. The kiln was located in the corner of a walled open area or courtyard that seems to have extended westward into the adjacent operation 12. Ceramics from contemporaneous trash deposits and outdoor surfaces in the courtyard date kiln 4 to the LC 2 period. The accumulation of sediments and the sequence of superimposed work surfaces built up against the outer walls of kiln 4 suggest that this installation was used for an extended period of time before falling out of use (see north baulk section, fig. 9). Overall, the excavated northern half

Figure 6. Drone image of Area B operations 11 (right) and 12 (left).

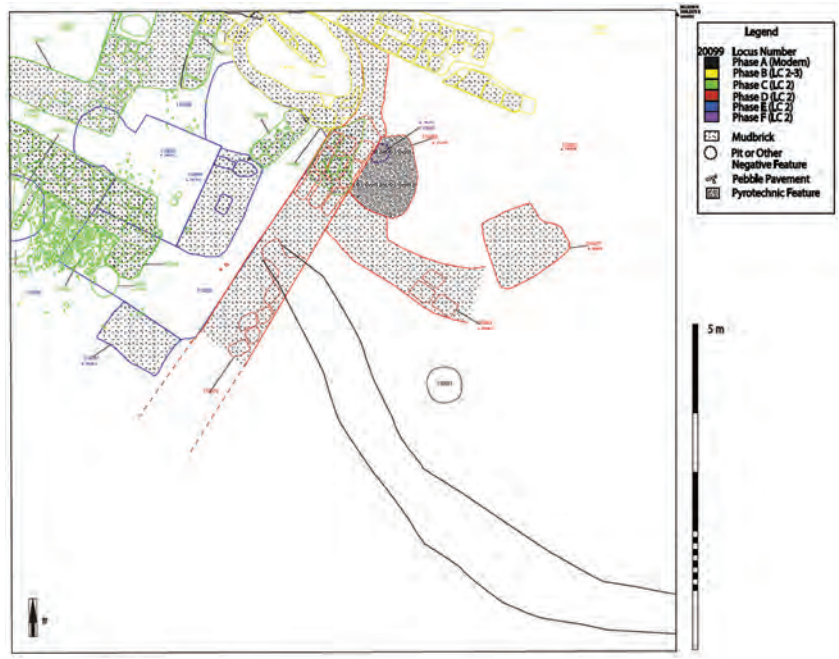

Figure 7. Operation 11 top plan.

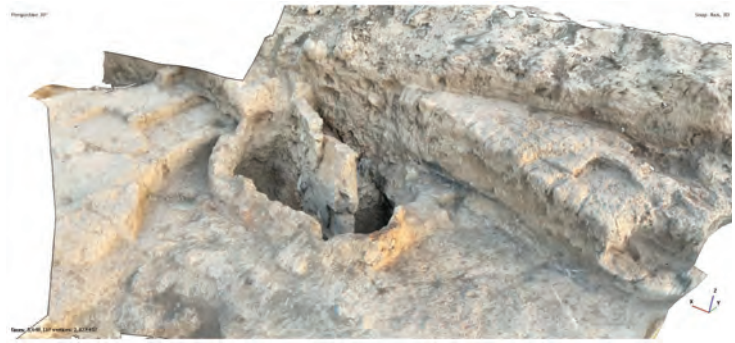

Figure 8. 3D scan of kiln 4 in the northwestern corner of operation 11—originally a two-chambered updraft kiln, of which only the lower fuel chamber survives. The kiln dates to the LC 2 period.

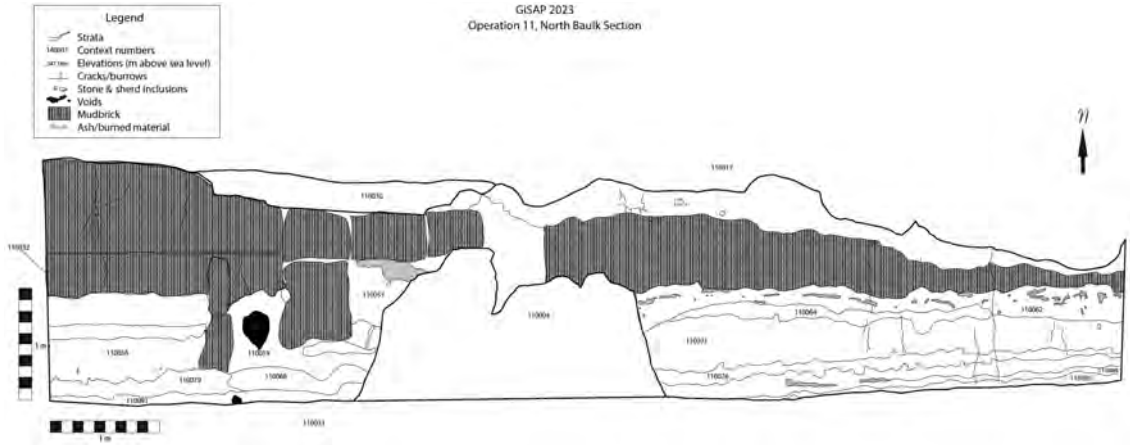

Figure 9. Operation 11 north baulk section. The shaded areas show mudbrick walls that sealed off the eroded kiln 4 (center) after its abandonment.

of operation 11 seems to have been an open-air industrial or craft production area in the LC 2 period, with little or no evidence for houses or domestic occupation.

Operation 12

Operation 12 is a 10 × 10 m trench located immediately west of operation 11 in Area B. Although the two adjacent excavated areas were contemporaneously occupied during the LC 2 period (fig. 10), they seem to have differed markedly in function. In contrast to the largely open courtyard area around the operation 11 kiln, the excavated area in the northwestern part of operation 12 comprised a series of three mudbrick rooms (fig. 11) that seem to have been domestic houses. After the houses were abandoned and filled in with erosional wash, the western part of operation 12 was used as a cemetery, with pits for at least seven child burials, often in ceramic pots (figs. 11 and 12), and one adult burial. Only one burial had grave goods; eight shell beads measuring 1–2 mm in diameter were excavated from child burial 108. Although most of the burial pits were dug after the houses were abandoned, room 2 in the northwestern part of operation 12 had at least two child burials (pits 151 and 159) that had been excavated into the floor just inside the doorway and sealed while the room was still being used for habitation. The 2023 exposures in operations 11 and 12 give good evidence that the southern slope of the Surezha high mound was occupied in several ways during the LC 2 period. At different stages, and in different parts of operations 11 and 12, there were houses, a burial area for children, and an industrial area for ceramic production.

Operation 14

In 2023 we continued work in operation 14, immediately south of operation 2, to expose more of the Ubaid-period occupation in Area B at the southern base of the high mound. Operation 14 expanded our exposure of Ubaid architecture from 5 × 5 m to 10 × 5 m immediately beneath the present-day ground surface (fig. 13). The 75 m^2 exposure in the southwestern part of operation 2 and the northern half of operation 14 shows that this area was densely occupied during the Ubaid period. We know from the area exposed in operation 2 that the Ubaid architecture lay immediately below LC 1 domestic architecture, with a great degree of continuity in the orientation and location of houses and walls between the two periods.

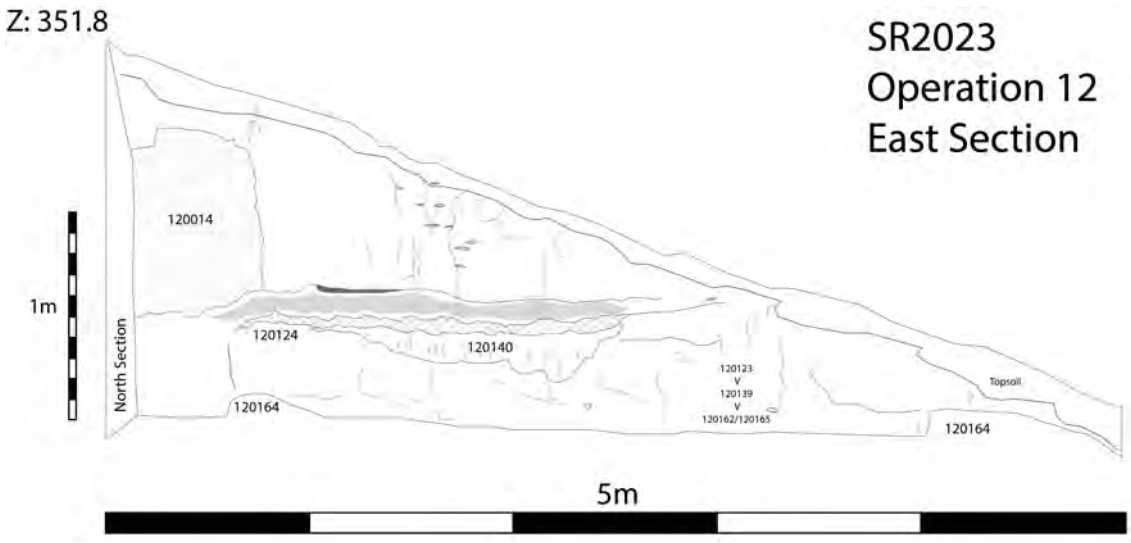

Figure 10. Operation 12 east baulk section.

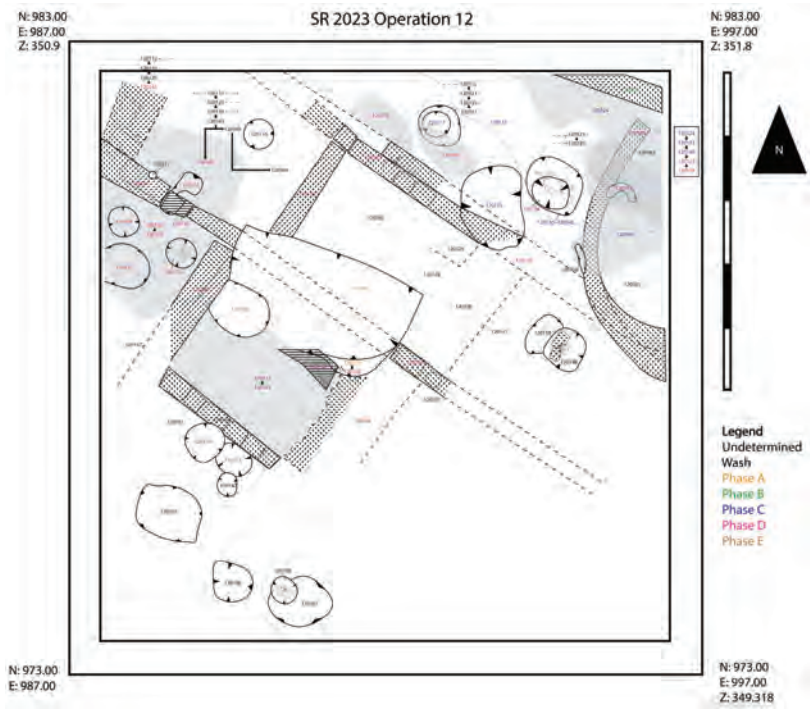

Figure 11. Operation 12 top plan showing an area of domestic architecture that was abandoned and then used as a cemetery area with a series of pits containing child burials (often inside pots). The curved wall in the northeastern corner of the trench was part of the courtyard that extended into the adjacent operation 11 with its kiln (locus 4).

The final Ubaid mudbrick architecture exposed in operation 14 shows evidence for one house to the west of a narrow street or alley, oriented northwest–southeast, and one or possibly two contiguous houses on the eastern side of the street. The houses consist of small rooms and associated courtyards. The rooms often contained small, mudbrick storage bins. Because excavations did not reach the floors in these rooms, the room deposits recovered consisted mostly of mudbrick collapse and wash with Ubaid ceramics, but very few small finds. We hope to widen and deepen our exposure of the Ubaid levels in operation 14 in the 2024 field season.

Figure 12. Operation 12 infant burial in a jar, dug into earlier, abandoned domestic architecture.

SCIENTIFIC ANALYSES: FAUNA AND CERAMICS

Animal Bone Remains

Analysis of the Surezha animal bone remains is being conducted by project zooarchaeologist Dr. Max Price (Durham University, United Kingdom). Faunal remains from seven seasons at Tell Surezha (2013, 2016–19, 2022–23) are helping us reconstruct animal-herding practices in the Erbil Plain in

Figure 13. Composite image of Ubaid architecture in contiguous operations 2 (top left) and 14 (bottom).

the fifth and fourth millennia BCE. A total of 131 animal bone fragments from the 2023 season were identified to the genus level (a portion of the 2023 fauna remain in Erbil and were not analyzed). These data were added to the existing Tell Surezha database of fauna from all excavation seasons to date (table 1).

Our faunal samples from each phase are still small and need to be larger for greater reliability. However, the consistent rank-order pattern from the Ubaid through LC 3 shows that sheep (*Ovis*) and goats (*Capra*) occurred most frequently, with pigs (*Sus*) as the second most common animal and cattle (*Bos*) as the third most common taxon. The vast majority of the post-Halaf animal bones are those of domesticated animals. However, the presence of *Gazella* bones (especially in the LC 1 faunal remains) shows that hunting continued as a subsistence practice.

Ceramics

The 2023 excavations recovered 11,287 ceramic sherds from operations 11, 12, 14, and 15. Of these pieces, 1,585 were diagnostic sherds (rims, bases, handles, painted sherds, etc.), and the remainder were body sherds (table 2).

Table 1. Surezha faunal remains identified to the genus level.

Identified taxa	Halaf	Halaf–Ubaid	Ubaid	Ubaid–LC 1	LC 1	LC 1–2	LC 1 or 2	LC 2	LC 2–3 and post–LC 2	LC 3	Middle Assyrian	Islamic
Ovis/Capra, of which:	10	20	52	30	487	308	1	136	89	94	64	2
Ovis	(2)		(4)	(3)	(69)	(29)		(13)		(9)	(5)	
Capra		(1)	(2)	(2)	(22)	(43)		(19)	(2)	(3)		
Ovis/Capra/Gazella		2	7	4	50	6	1	8	7	9	2	1
Sus	1	7	36	35	351	42		5	14	80	10	1
Bos	3	12	15	9	172	31		9	16	23	7	
Canis		2	2		98	6		1		1		1
Vulpes					1	1		7				
Equus					1							
Dama/Cervus					2				1			
Capreolus					1							
Mustelid (cf. *Mustela)*					1						1	
Gazella	1		1		31	3		13	2	1	6	
Lepus	1							2				
Bivalve (Unionoida)		1			12	5		6	2	6	1	
Potomon sp.					2							
Bird			5	2	7			43*	1**	1	3	
Fish					1***			3				
Total	**16**	**44**	**118**	**78**	**1,216**	**402**	**2**	**190**	**132**	**215**	**94**	**5**

*Identified birds include *Buteo* sp. and Columbidae ND (species not determined).

**Eggshell.

***Identified fish include Cyprinidae ND (species not determined).

Table 2. Ceramics collected in 2023.

Operation	Total sherds	Total diagnostics
11	2,946	582
12	2,256	451
14	1,480	172
15	4,605	380
Total	**11,287**	**1,585**

Analyses focused on using the pottery from operations 11 and 12 to improve our understanding of the LC 2 ceramic typology and chronology. Of this pottery, 177 LC 2 diagnostic ceramics were drawn and inked. Some of the most useful ceramic forms for recognizing deposits dating to the LC 2 period were "wide flower pot bowls," double-rim jars, flat/plain internally beveled rim bowls, and globular or holemouth jars (figs. 14–17). Based on these analyses, we determined that the 2023 excavations had exposed occupation levels dating to the LC 2 period in operations 11 and 12—contemporaneous with the operation 15 exposure in area A.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the 2023 excavations at Surezha are giving us a better idea of the LC 3–LC 2 transition, the LC 2 occupation of the mound, and the Ubaid period at the site. In the 2024 field season, we plan to continue and expand these lines of research on the chronology and economic organization of the Erbil Plain and northeastern Mesopotamia during the fifth and fourth millennia BCE.

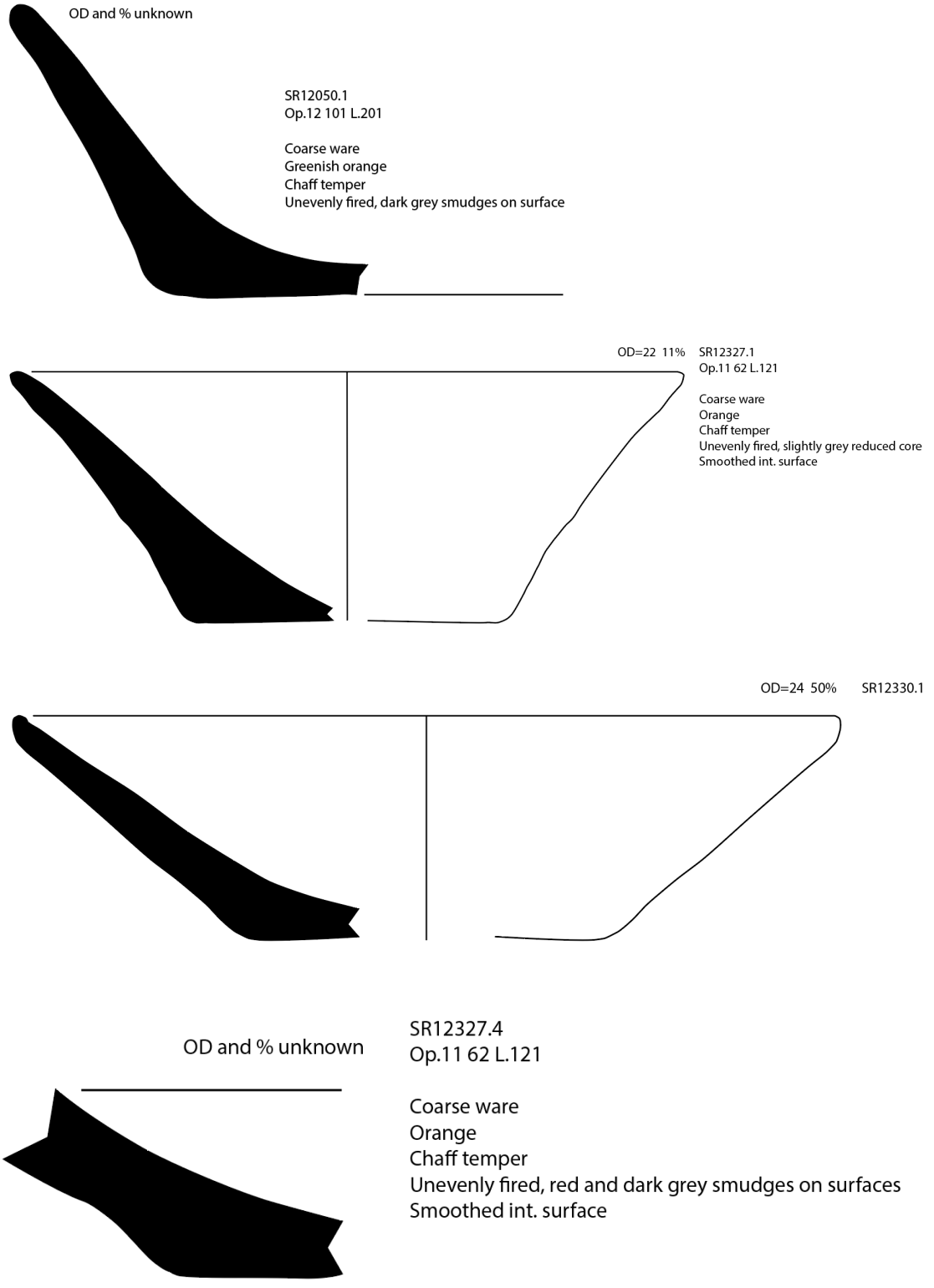

Figure 14. LC 2 ceramics from operation 11: "wide flower pot bowls."

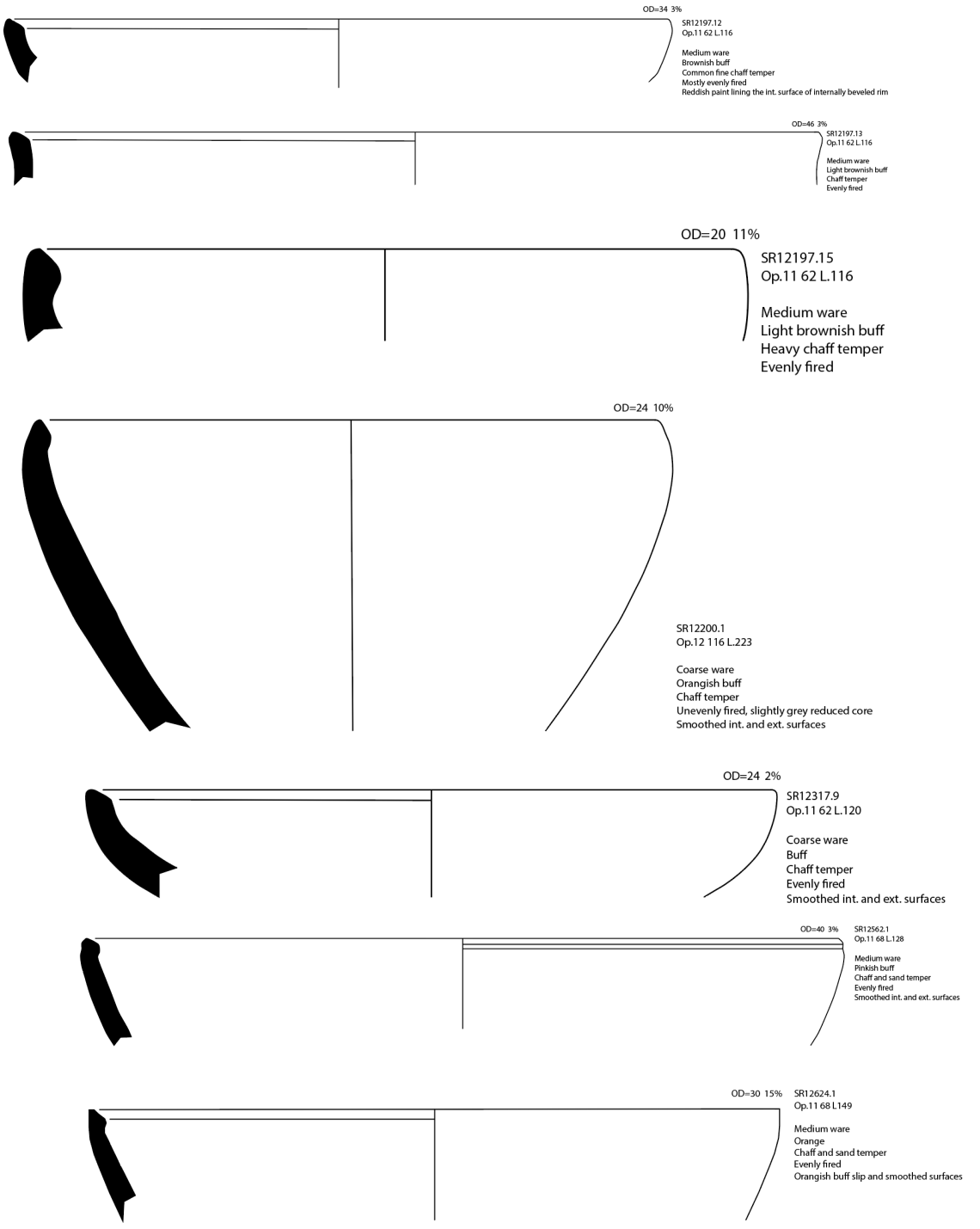

Figure 15. LC 2 ceramics from operation 11: flat and simple, internally beveled rim bowls.

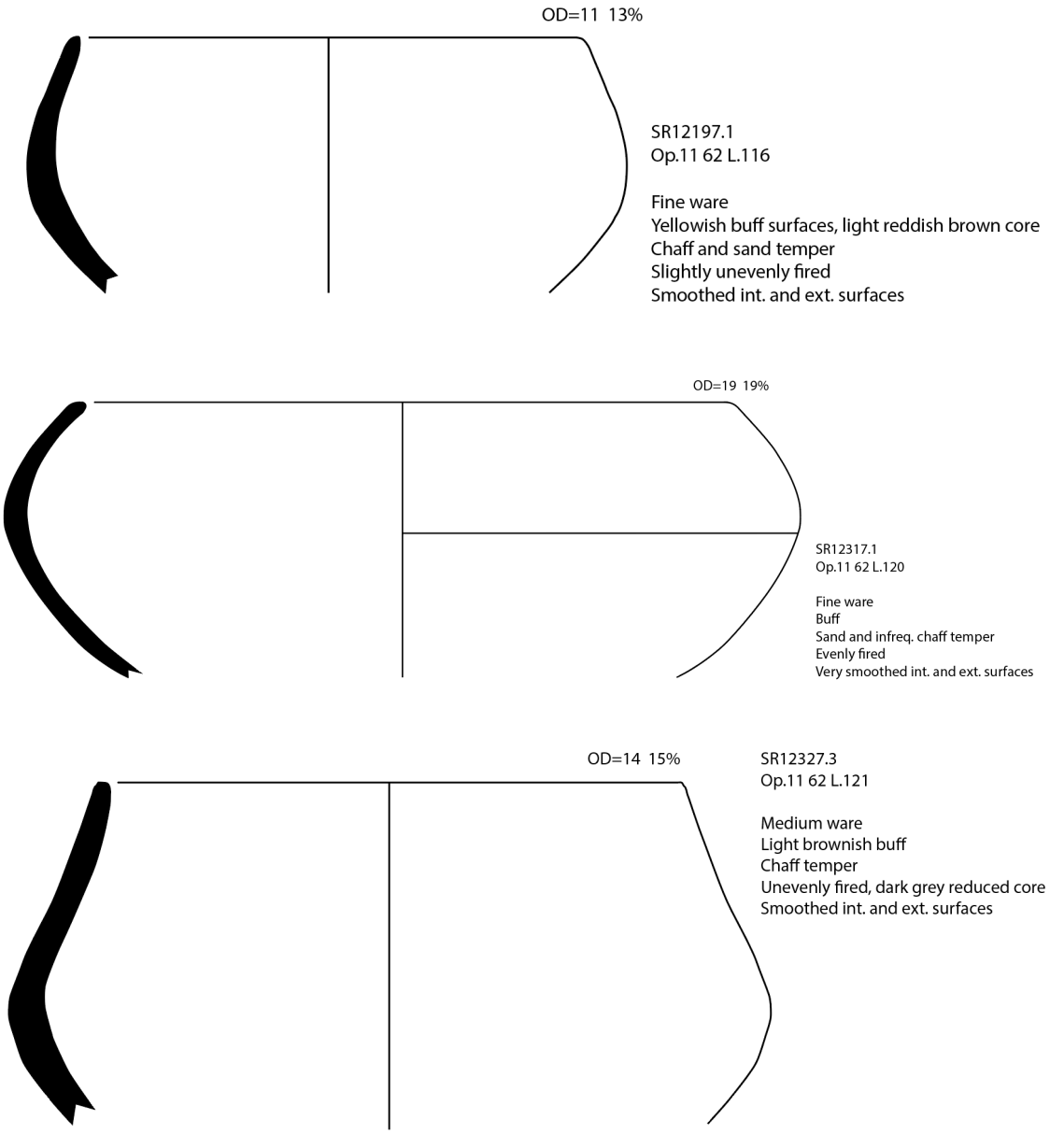

Figure 16. LC 2 ceramics from operation 11: globular vessels and holemouth jars.

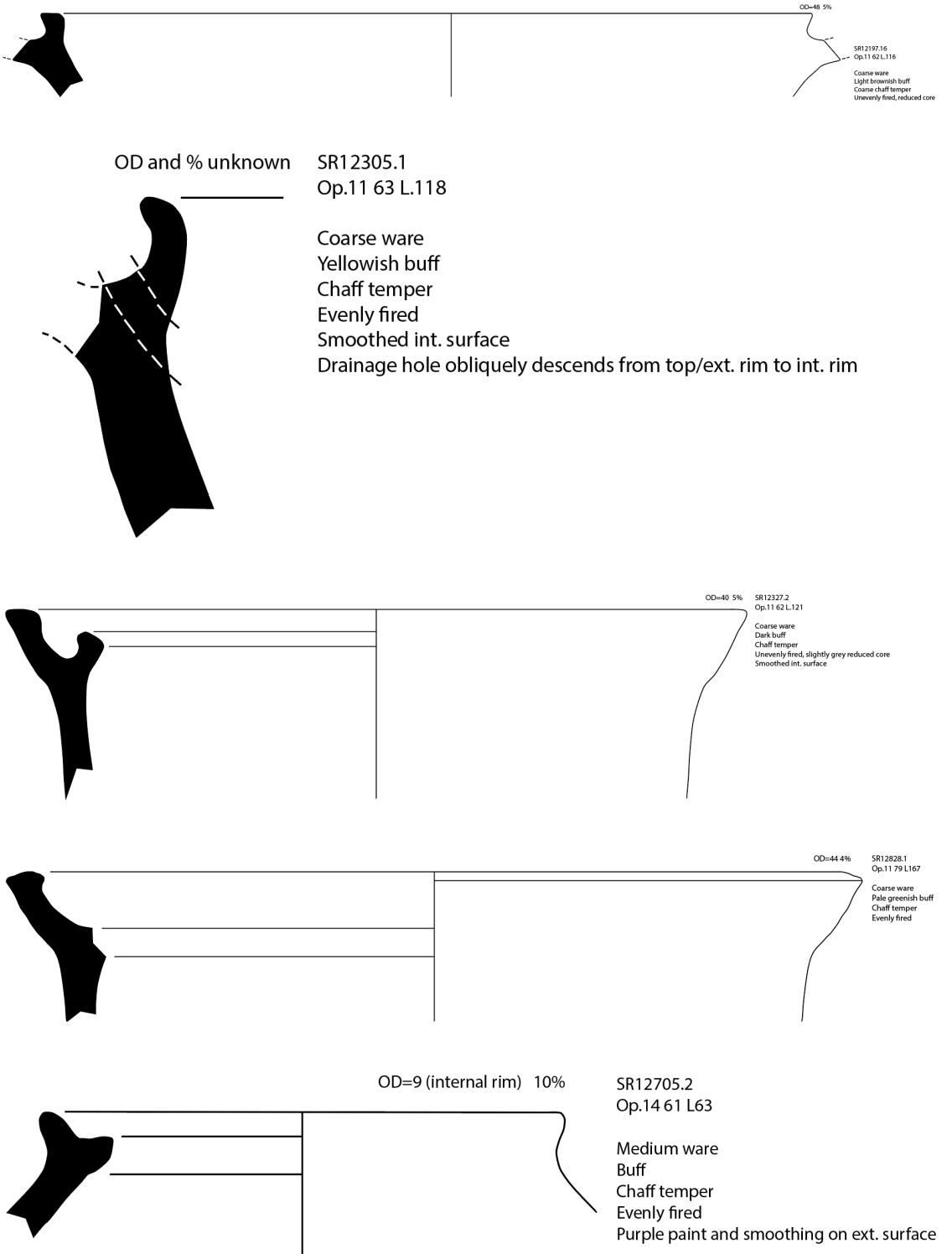

Figure 17. LC 2 ceramics from operation 11: double-rim jars.