

**RESCUE EXCAVATIONS AT TELL
SAHL ES-SARABET
1978/1979**

by
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The Department of Antiquities of Jordan organised two short seasons of rescue excavations at Tell Sahl es-Sarabet in 1978 and 1979. The project was funded by Amiantit Jordan Company Ltd on whose potential building land the site lies. The first season was under the direction of Mr. Emsaytef Suleiman of the Department of Antiquities. Excavations in 1979 were directed by Miss Alison Betts with the assistance of Mr. Hazzim Jasr of the Department of Antiquities. The cooperation and assistance of the staff at Amiantit, in particular the General Director Mr. Nicholas Nahhas is gratefully acknowledged. Dr. J. Sauer examined samples of pottery from both seasons. Photographs were taken by Salim Da'ajeh and Alison Betts. Plans

and drawings are by Mohammed Salim and Alison Betts.

Tell Sahl es-Sarabet is a low mound some thirty metres in diameter. It is situated on the edge of the Jordan Valley close to the northern end of the Dead Sea, only some two or three kilometres from the Chalcolithic site of Tuleilat Ghassul (Fig. 1). The tell consists almost entirely of Islamic deposits spanning several phases of occupation. In the first season a few chalcolithic sherds were found in the lowest level of Trench 1 (Pl. LVIII: 1). One of the primary objectives of the second season was to examine the possible extent of Chalcolithic occupation at the site.

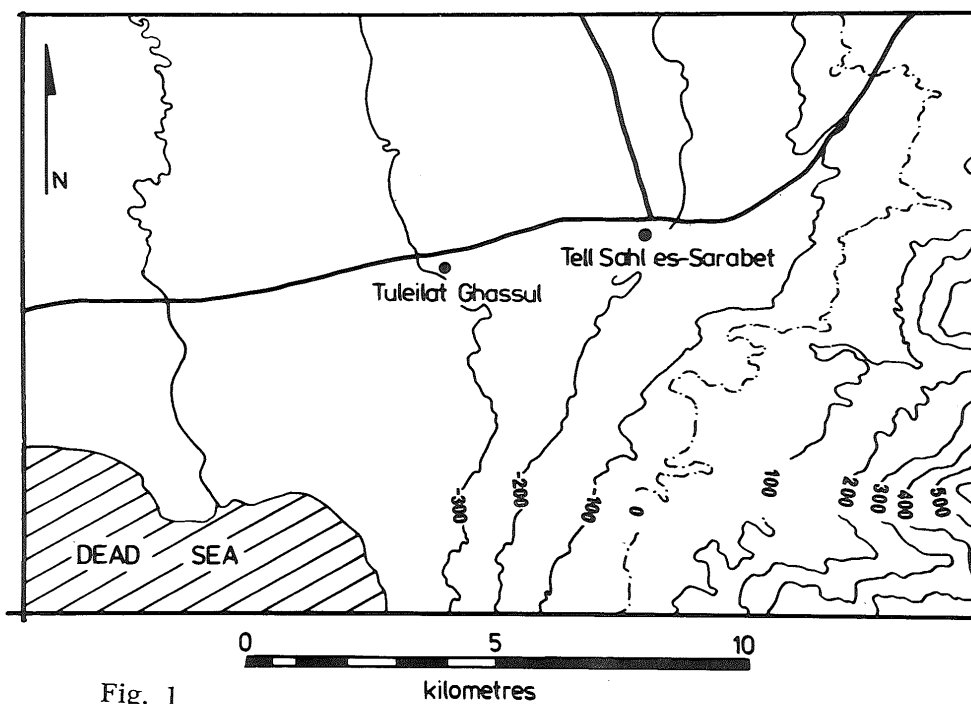
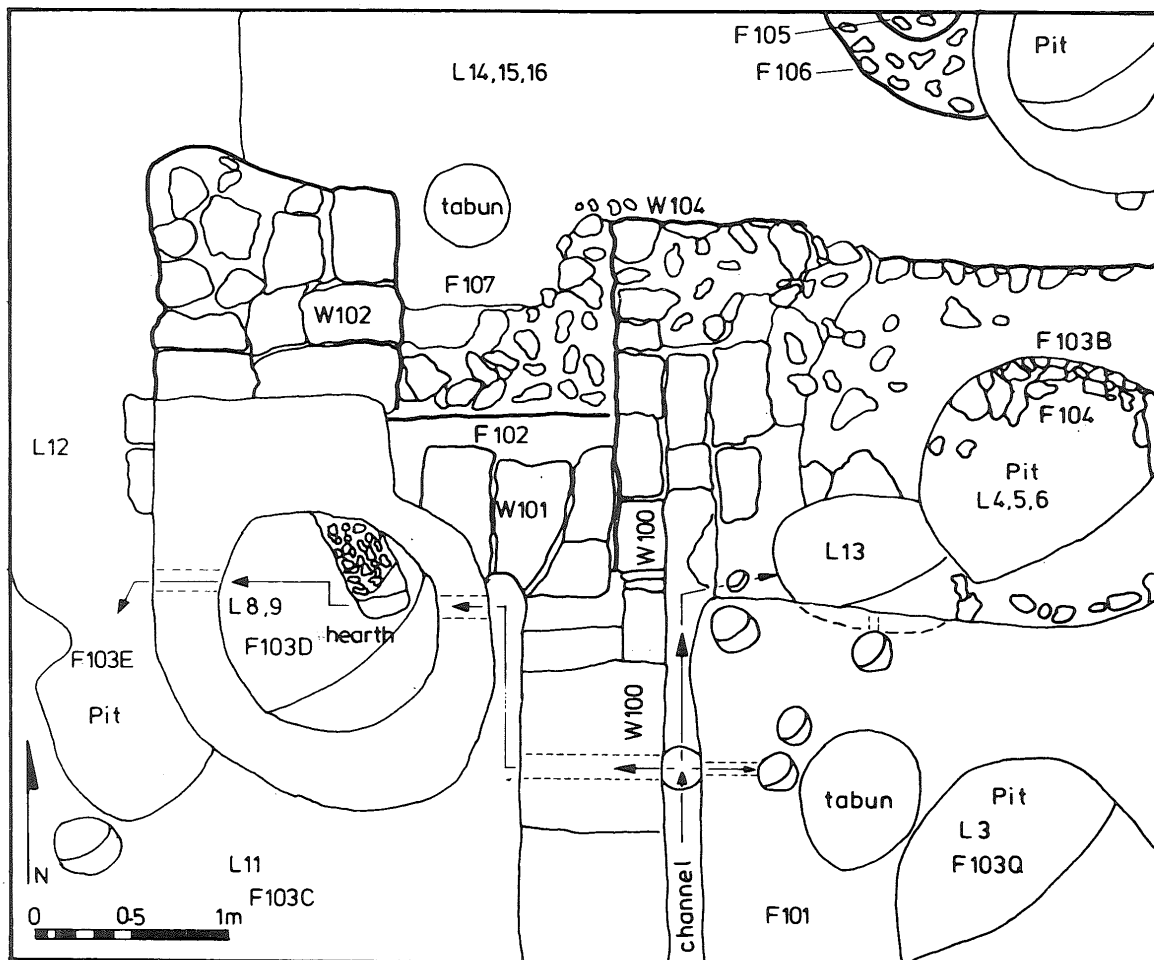


Fig. 1



TRENCH 1

Fig. 2

Excavations in 1978

The site has been considerably damaged on the eastern and southern sides. Consequently work in both seasons was concentrated on the western edge and the undisturbed portions of the centre of the mound. Two trenches were cut in the first season, one 5 × 6m sounding (Trench 1, Fig. 2), on the western side and a 6 × 6m trench (Trench 2, Fig. 3), further to the east, near the centre of the tell.

Trench 1 (Fig. 2, Pl. LVIII: 2 & LXV: 1).

The topsoil (Stratum I) contained Ayyubid-Mamluk sherds Pl. LXII: 1). Stratum II contained a mixture of Ayyubid-Mamluk and Fatamid pottery (Pl. LXII: 2 & LVII: 2). In this level was a round tabun, 70 cm in diameter, lying in the south-east corner. The tabun appeared to be associated with a plaster floor (F101 Fig. 2). In this floor, near the tabun, were four small deep round holes. In the western part of the trench was a round basin.

Stratum III was dated to the Umayyad period and contained painted and incised pottery and fragments of glass (Pl. LXIV: 1,2 & LVII). From this level were cut several large round pits. Three walls (W100, W101, W102) lay across the centre of the trench. These walls were constructed with "headers" and "stretchers" of two different brick sizes, 40 x 40 x 12cm and 40 x 20 x 12cm. Other features in this level included a thin plaster floor (F102) and a stone pavement (F104) lying to the east of Wall 100. At the end of this pavement was a stone wall (W104) composed of medium to large sized stones. A mud-brick wall (W103) apparently visible in the north section was found on further examination to be merely a series of fairly regularly spaced depositional layers.

The large round pits were connected by a channel leading from the south baulk along the east side of Wall 100 (Fig. 2). A stone pavement (F107) lay between walls 100, 101, and 102. F105 and F106, semi-circular features protruding from the east end of the north baulk and composed of pebbles and cement were the upper part of a large stone lined well lying within the baulk between trenches 1 and 3 (Fig. 4). A small hearth lay above the large pit beside Wall 101 and there was a round tabun immediately to the east of Wall 102. A plaster floor (F103) extended over much of the trench.

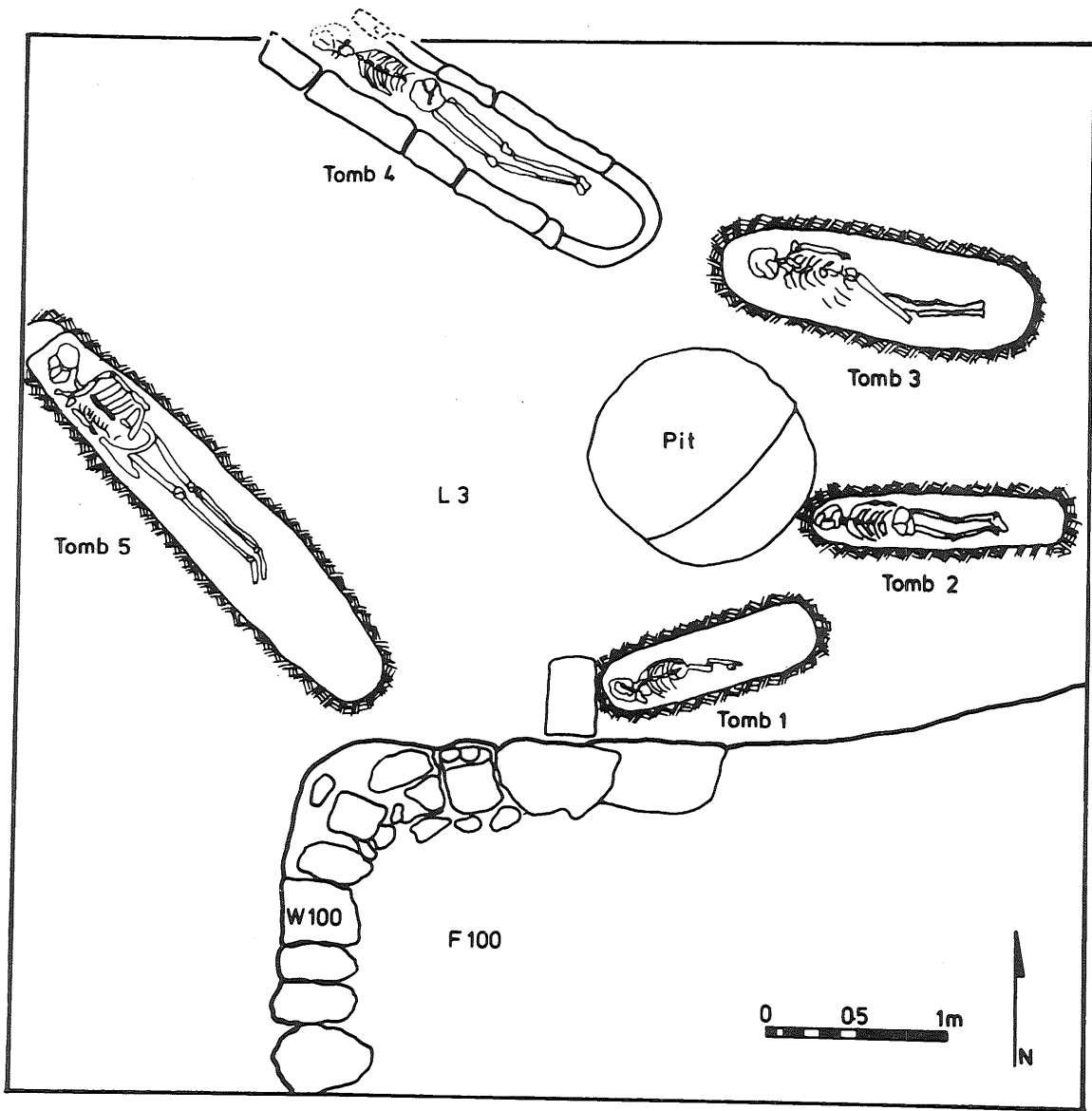
In Stratum IV were found a few Chalcolithic sherds. There was no evidence of occupation or structures in this level. The sherds lay near the north baulk.

Trench 2 (Fig. 3, Pl. LIX: 1, LXV: 2).

Stratum I, topsoil, contained Ayyubid-Mamluk sherds. An 'L' shaped stone wall (W100) with an associated packed mud floor (F100) was found in the south-east part of the trench (Fig. 3). The upper layer of Stratum II was composed of approximately 50cm of black soil containing a considerable amount of charcoal and burnt material. Below this was a layer of yellowish soil containing Fatamid and Ayyubid-Mamluk sherds. Into this were cut five tombs. The burials were in the traditional Islamic manner with the head at the western end and the face turned to the south (el-Qibleh). The graves were covered with large stones and layers of mud.

Tomb No. 1 (Pl. LIX: 2)

This contained the skeleton of a child, apparently with the right arm and leg cut off.



TRENCH 2

Fig. 3

On the left leg was an iron anklet. A bronze toggle pin lay near the left shoulder (Pl. LXVI, 2: 22).

Tomb No. 2 (Pl. LX: 1).

This was the grave of a young girl wearing a necklace of red and painted beads with a small bronze chain (Pl. LXVII: 1).

Tomb No. 3 (Pl. LX: 2).

The grave was covered by large stones and contained the skeleton of a woman. Around her neck was a necklace nearly three metres in length made up of a variety of beads of different colours, shapes and sizes. She also wore a bronze pendant and a broken bronze ring set with a carnelian and had a small square glass mirror. The excavator (Suleiman) suggests that she may have been the wife or daughter of a sheikh or tribal leader (Pl. LXVII, 2 & Pl. LXVIII: 1, 2).

Tomb No. 4 (Pl. LXI: 1)

This was a large tomb with the body surrounded and covered by large stones. The body was that of a man with an iron finger-ring near the arm (Pl. LXVI: 2, no. 23).

Tomb No. 5 (Pl. LXI: 2).

This contained the skeleton of a man without any ornaments.

Excavations in 1979

Two further trenches were opened up in the second season. One (Trench 3) Fig. 4 5 x 6m, was set out immediately to the north of trench 1, separated from it by a 1.0m baulk. The second (Trench 4), Fig. 5, 4 x 6m, was cut to the east of Trench 2, close to the limit of the undisturbed area in the centre of the mound.

Trench 3 (Fig. 4).

The upper levels revealed a series of pits filled with loose ash and charcoal cut into a harder light-brown soil. Scraps of bone in the fill suggest that these pits were for domestic waste. The pits also cut through a thin hard-packed layer of purple silicate which extended over the north-east section of the trench. In the south-east corner was a clay tabun lying in a shallow ash-filled depression. Two small shallow channels ran down to end in cup shaped hollows close to the tabun. A round hole approximately 7cm in diameter opened near to the tabun and led into the adjacent pit. Against the east section were two shallow ash-filled pits with flat plaster-like bases.

Beneath this level lay a more substantial complex of structures. Part of a stone and plaster well extended out of the eastern half of the south section immediately below the tabun. A stone built plaster-lined channel came out from the west section, passed under a wall and led into the well. The well was surrounded by a sloping hollow filled with soft pale grey ash into which led a shallow channel. The wall (Wall A Fig. 4) ran north-south for almost the length of the trench in two sections separated by a hard-packed pise block with some small stones. It was stone built and had no connecting or associated walls. This level also revealed a clay tabun and two deep straight sided regular pits. One of these contained very pure ginger coloured sand and the second was connected by a small channel to the hollow surrounding the well.

Below this complex lay virgin soil. This was cut into to a depth of 1.5m but no evidence of chalcolithic occupation was discovered. Follow-

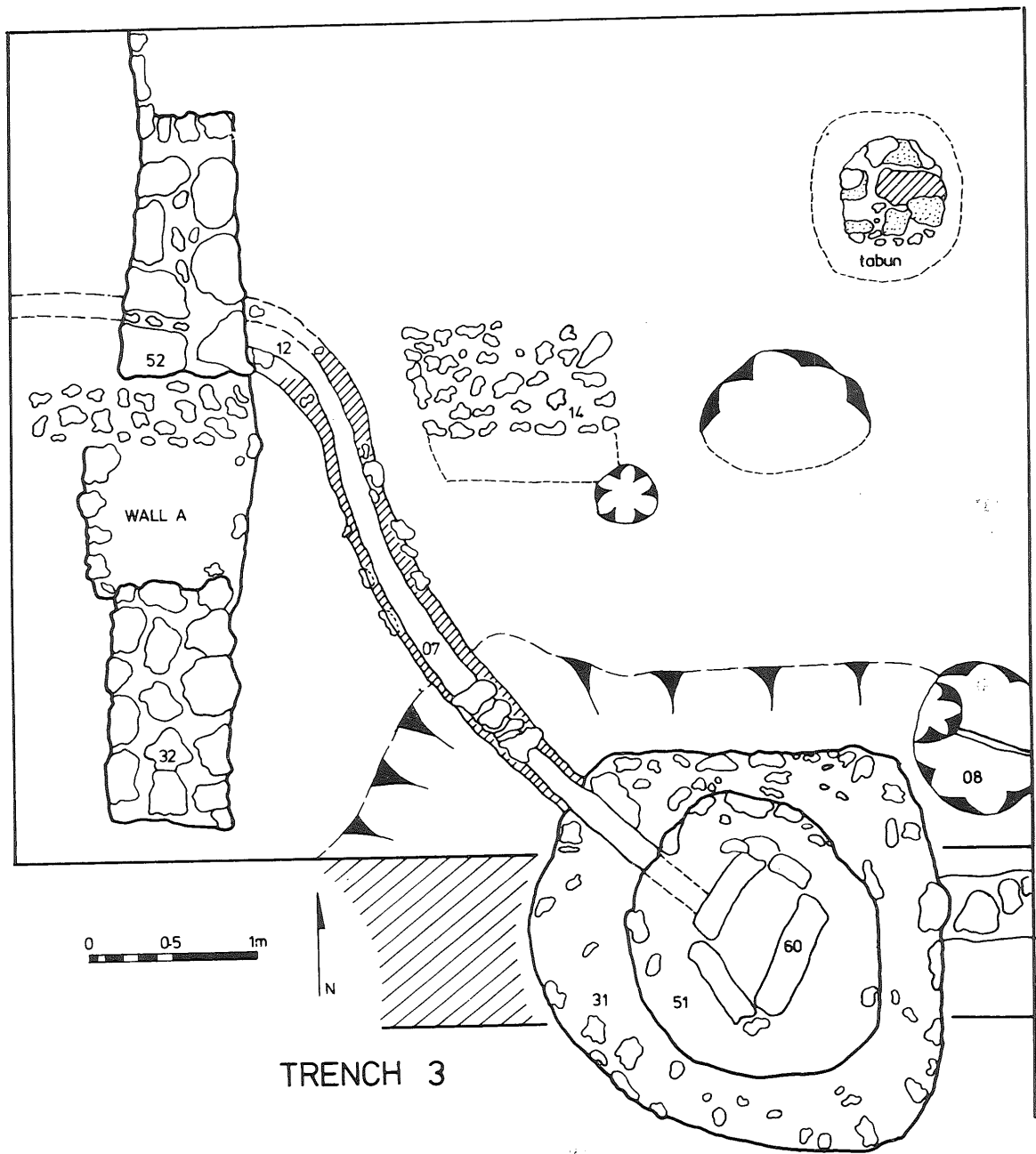


Fig. 4

ing excavation of Trench 3 down to sterile soil, part of the south baulk was removed to obtain a complete plan of the well. It was found to extend into Trench 1 and was roughly 2.5m in diameter with a rectangular mouth 0.5m across surrounded by four large stones (Fig. 4). The channel led directly into the well through an opening below one of these stones. A second channel led in from the east.

Trench 4 (Fig. 5).

This trench contained only domestic structures. The butts of two walls protruded into the trench in the top level. One consisted of four courses of mud brick and the other was a more substantial stone structure. Below this lay three connecting walls (B, C, D) built of mudbrick on stone foundations (Fig. 5). Most of the mudbrick superstructure had been lost and only odd bricks remained. The majority of the stones were irregular in shape but two from Wall C were regular rectangular blocks, one with a door socket on the lower side. These must have been robbed from an earlier building elsewhere on the site. To the south of these walls lay what was probably a courtyard or open space with a clay tabun.

The only structure in the level below this was a wall lying almost directly underneath Wall D. This building had a plaster floor against the north side of the wall. Both wall and floor had been partially truncated at the eastern end. To the south, again probably in an open space was a pebble tabun. The fourth level consisted of a shallow stone-filled depression in the south-west of the trench. This covered a shallow ash-filled pit cut into sterile soil. A second and similar pit was found in the south-east corner.

Finds (1979)

The topsoil of both trenches contained quantities of glazed sherds of the Ayyubid-Mamluk period. It is likely that these relate particularly to levels now eroded away as the pottery associated with the excavated structures was also Ayyubid-Mamluk but with very few glazed sherds and a predominance of painted wares. Trench 3 also contained earlier wares of the Abbasid period, notably fine cream sherds with delicate incised decoration. Other finds were rather few, a bronze pin, a spatula and a fine Islamic pottery lamp (Pl. LXIII: 1), from Trench 3, as well as a quantity of glass fragments. A partially complete pot lacking both base and rim was found in Trench 4 (Pl. LXIII, 2), as was a corroded Roman coin lying just above sterile soil in the rock filled hollow of the fourth level. There are two other coins from the 1979 season but both are surface finds and are thus of little use for accurate dating purposes. Other finds include a fragment of a stone bowl and pieces of iron and bronze, none of which are readily identifiable as artifacts.

Conclusions

It is likely that the latest phase of occupation at the site - probably associated with the Ayyubid-Mamluk sherds in the top-soil of all four trenches - is now completely robbed out or eroded away. The name of the mound, Tell Sarabet, means, roughly translated "The Mound of the Little Columns", and people acquainted with the site mention having seen pieces of broken columns lying on the surface. Only one of these now remains, a plain drum with fragments of plaster still adhering to its surface. These columns, coupled with the finding of tesserae in the topsoil seem to indicate that the final period of occupation was perhaps more

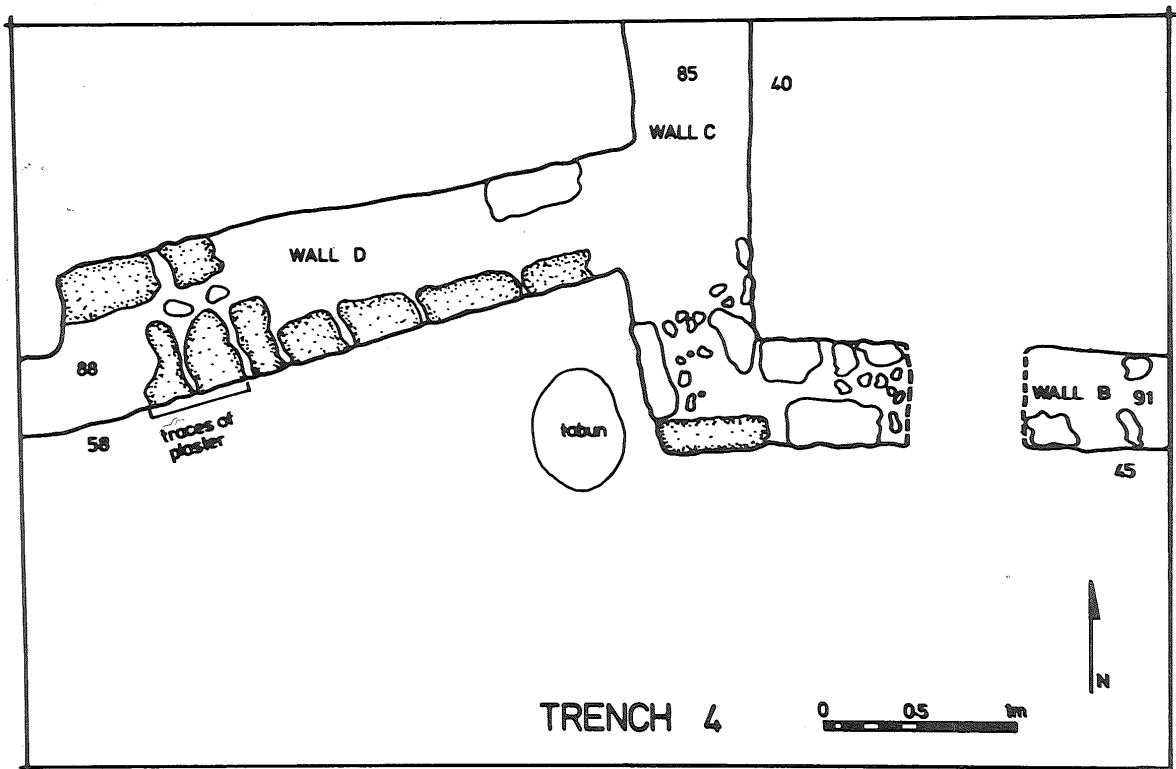


Fig. 5

impressive than the structures revealed in excavation. This hypothesis is substantiated by the discovery of a number of well-dressed regular stones around the site, now incorporated into later buildings.

One of the principal aims of the 1979 season was to investigate the possibility of Chalcolithic occupation below the Islamic levels. However, although a few possible Chalcolithic sherds were recovered, a sounding a metre and a half into sterile soil failed to reveal any evidence for prehistoric occupation. It seems most likely that the site never had more than a surface scatter of Chalcolithic sherds, possibly left by a picnic party from nearby Ghassul.

The excavations have not provided an adequate explanation for the complex revealed

in Trenches 1 and 3 (Figs. 2,4). It seems clear that it was meant for some industrial purpose, but only the western edge of the complex was cleared and it is probable that much of it was not uncovered. Perhaps the most likely explanation is that it was a glass factory. The process of glass-making requires a considerable amount of water, which in this case would be provided by the complex system of channels supplying the well or cistern. The fine pure sand filling one of the pits could also be part of the glass-making process. However, no furnace, nor any slag or glass waste was recovered although considerable quantities of glass fragments were found. Thus, this interpretation can only be presented as an unsubstantiated hypothesis.

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