

THE EXCAVATION OF RUJM EL-MEKHEIZIN

by
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Introduction

When Dr. Theodore Schneller planned the new Schneller Vocational School at Marka on the northeast edge of 'Amman, he noted an ancient ruin on a knoll (slightly over 720.00 m. above sea level) where he had planned the school director's house; so, he moved the planned house to the eastern slope and preserved the ruins from any disturbance. In 1972, the present director, Dr. Hartmut Brenner, drew the writer's attention to this antiquity site. Further examination in 1973 suggested that it might warrant excavation, as a follow-up of two previous excavations directed by the writer at Khirbet al-Hajjar and Rujm al-Malfuf South.¹ Surface sherding of the Schneller School ruin produced Iron Age pottery similar to the six/seventh centuries B.C. material of these two sites on the western side of 'Amman. No Ammonite towers or remains have been excavated before on the northeast side of 'Amman and this might add to our knowledge of this ancient semitic kingdom. Furthermore, exposed walls indicated this building was square (12.20 m. E-W x 12.25 m. N-S) while the Hajjar and Malfuf towers were round. Two exposed walls indicated a doorway. While later excavation showed these walls to be the end of a corridor, the initial encouragement to dig came from the prior observation that the Ammonite towers to the west of 'Amman, did not have doorways.

Dr. Brenner approved the excavation

on behalf of the Schneller School.² Permission was then sought to sponsor the excavation through the Department of Antiquities of Jordan which supervises all the antiquities sites in the country, the Friends of Archeology for funds and the American Centre for Oriental Research for equipment.³ Mr. Khamis Fahd of Ruseifah, and trained by Dr. Kathleen Kenyon in the excavations at Jericho, was once again hired for technical work. He was assisted by two general labourers from Ruseifah and the expedition was also opened to volunteers who wished to participate. Mr. Fahd also sought the identification of the site from long-time residents of the area who indicated that it is called Rujm el-Makheizin. Rujm el-Mekheizin is listed as site No. 254, an Iron Age site, in the Department's volume, *The Archeological Heritage of Jordan, Part I* ('Amman, 1973), listing over 450 antiquities sites in East Jordan. Compilers drew upon an unpublished survey of the area, conducted by G. Lancaster Harding.⁴ The map reference combined with local insistence that Rujm el-Mekheizin is inside the Schneller School, would seem to confirm the site's identity in its Arabic name. The ancient identification remains unknown. The excavation was conducted for two weeks in April 1973.

Three pieces of Roman ribbed ware were found on the surface of the tower at its south-west corner. All other sherds were from the sixth-seventh centuries B.C. with the possible addition of a few pieces of

¹ "The 1972 Excavation of Khirbet al-Hajjar," *ADAJ* 17 (1972) p. 47-72.

"Rujm al-Malfuf South," *ADAJ* 18 (1973) p. 47-50.

² His assistance during the excavation is gratefully acknowledged. Thanks to adequate water supplies, storage and work space, and other facilities, all but a minimum of the work was carried on at the site.

³ The support of all three groups is gratefully acknowledged. Assistance also came from volunteers such as Mr. and Mrs. Kindiger Geissler and especially Ms. Mary Doherty. Loss of work time from rain prevented several other volunteers from participating.

⁴ Dr. Bastiaan Van Elderen, the Director of ACOR, supplied the latter data.

Iron I ware. Outside the tower (north-west corner) around several wall stubs, a dozen pieces of Mamlūk/Ottoman pottery were found. The present dating of this material is 1500 A.D.⁵ The latter area was labelled Area B in the excavations and will be described first as representing the latest material on the site.

Area B

Two small trenches were dug at the north-west corner of the tower. "Square" 1 was an L-shaped trench designed to relate the tower to an Iron wall (B.1.5) traceable for 25.00 m. along the western side of the main tower. This long wall appears to be of similar construction as the outside walls of the tower. It consists of large (0.40-1.10 m.) flat limestone blocks, forming a wall usually two courses wide. It was founded on bedrock and in its extant remains varies from one to three courses high. At one point (just opposite the northwest corner of the tower) traces of plaster were found on the western face. The consistency of the plaster is similar to that found on the northern wall (B. 1:6) of the tower and at the juncture of the eastern wall (A.1: 5) with a type of "porch" (see further below) wall on the eastern side, Wall A. 2: 7. Plastered surfaces on the outside of walls have been found at Rujum al-Malfuf South and North, and Khirbet al-Hajjar. While the stratigraphy was disturbed, the wall stubs noted above were built against the plastered surfaces of B.1:5 and 6, suggesting that it had been there prior to the Mamlūk/Ottoman period, and thus most reasonably is original with the tower building itself. While no extensions to the east could be traced, it is possible that Wall 5 is what remains of a courtyard around the tower.

Both "squares" reached bedrock. The surface soil (B.1: 1 and B.2: 1) was a reddish brown soil that appeared consistent down to virgin soil just over bedrock, throughout most of Square 1. Six pieces of Mamlūk/Ottoman pottery were found here. The soil throughout was mixed with small pebbles and stones ranging from

0.05-0.20 m. Virgin soil (B.1:4 and B.2:3) was red soil mixed with jagged bits of weathered bedrock. Locus B.2:2 was a firm gray dirt between surface soil and virgin soil in the E-W trench of B.2, which was aligned with the northern tower wall (B.1:6) and extended 1.50 m. south at its eastern end and 2.50 m. south at its western end (west of the long wall, B.1:5).

Other dirt loci include Locus B.1:7, a soft reddish soil with very few stones, forming a pocket against B.1:5. At first it was thought to be a foundation trench but subsequent excavation indicated it was merely an isolated pocket of dirt. It is possible that it was a small irregular storage pit but no evidence was found for this beyond its location, its softness and lack of stone. The sherds consisted of two Mamlūk/Ottoman and numerous sixth/seventh century B.C. pieces. A very narrow space between Wall B.1:3 and the west baulk of the N-S trench of B.1, left stratigraphy unclear, so the trench was expanded. This led to the clearing of a soft brownish soil, Locus B.1:8 just over a patch of beaten earth floor, Locus B.1:9. Unfortunately, this floor could not be traced as far as Walls 2 and 3, so the exact relationship is unknown. But Mamlūk/Ottoman pottery from Locus 8 on the floor and in Loci B.1:1 and B.2:2 beside Walls B.1:2 and 3, and B.2:4, seem to give a clear date to these walls and the floor was in all probability related to them as the floor of a room bounded by Walls B.1:2, 3, 5 and 6. A small blackened area 1.50 m. from B.1:6 indicates a hearth. However, since Locus 9 lay directly on virgin soil, B.1:9 would also seem to have been the surface soil for the Ammonite period of the tower. The Mamlūk/Ottoman users of the area must have cleaned down the inside of their "house" to that level. A few centimetres of soft brown to gray dirt (Locus B.1:10 and B.2:5) appeared in spots under Walls B.1:3 and B.2:4 while elsewhere the Mamlūk/Ottoman walls rested on virgin soil.

Wall B.1:2 is an E-W wall of unhewn stones *ca.* 0.20-0.65 m. Its extant remains are 0.20 m. wide (one course) by 2.50 m.

⁵ Dr. James A. Sauer, then Director of ACOR,

examined the pottery. His assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

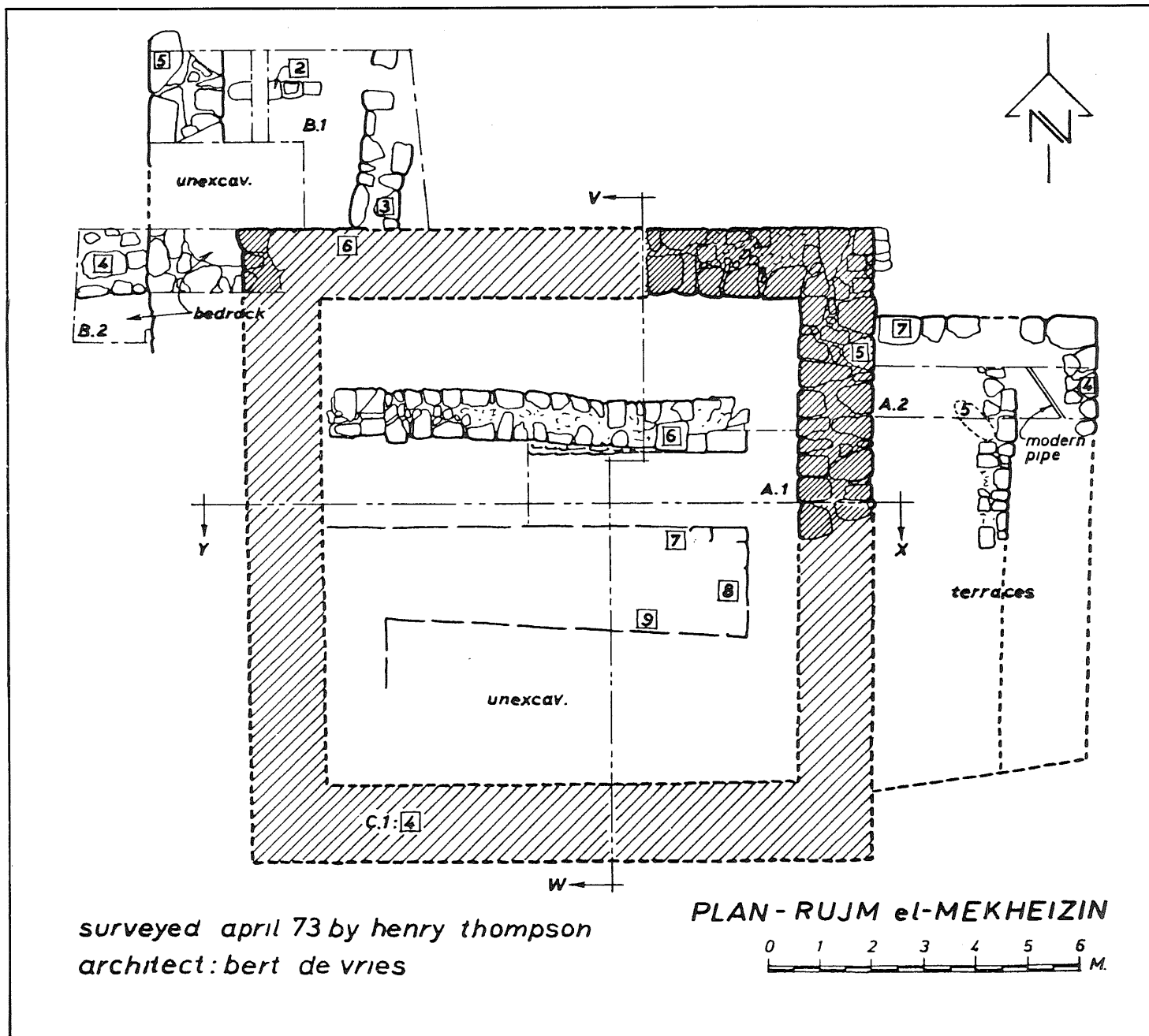


Fig. 1: Plan of Rujm el-Mekheizin

long x 0.30 m. (one course) high. It comes within 0.10 m. of touching B.1: 5 and runs at approximately right angles to it. It stops 0.75 m. from Wall 3, but the gap did not appear to be a doorway. Since the floor, Locus 9, could not be traced this far, however, this remains uncertain. B.1: 3 is made of unhewn stones varying from 0.20 m. x 0.45 m. to 0.25 m. x 0.80 m. Its extant remains are two courses (0.95 m.) wide and one deep (0.20 m.-0.35 m.) by 2.80 m. long (N-S). It extends north of tower wall B.1:6 at approximately a right angle and touches the plaster which coats the north face of Wall 6 at this point. The outside faces of Wall 3 are fairly even but the inside edges

are quite irregular. The inner space was filled with dirt and small rocks indistinguishable from Locus 1. Wall B.2:4 was similarly constructed of unhewn stone ranging from 0.20 m. x 0.30 m. to 0.65 x 0.80 m. Its extant remains are one course high (0.40 m.) and two courses wide (0.90 m. N-S) by 1.25 m. E-W from the long wall (B.1:5) to the western baulk of the trench. It is at right angles to B.1:5 and touches the plaster on the west face of Wall 5, noted above. All three walls are assumed to be Mamlük/Ottoman in date from the pottery in the stratigraphy against them. None had observable foundation trenches.

Wall B.1:6 is the north face of the

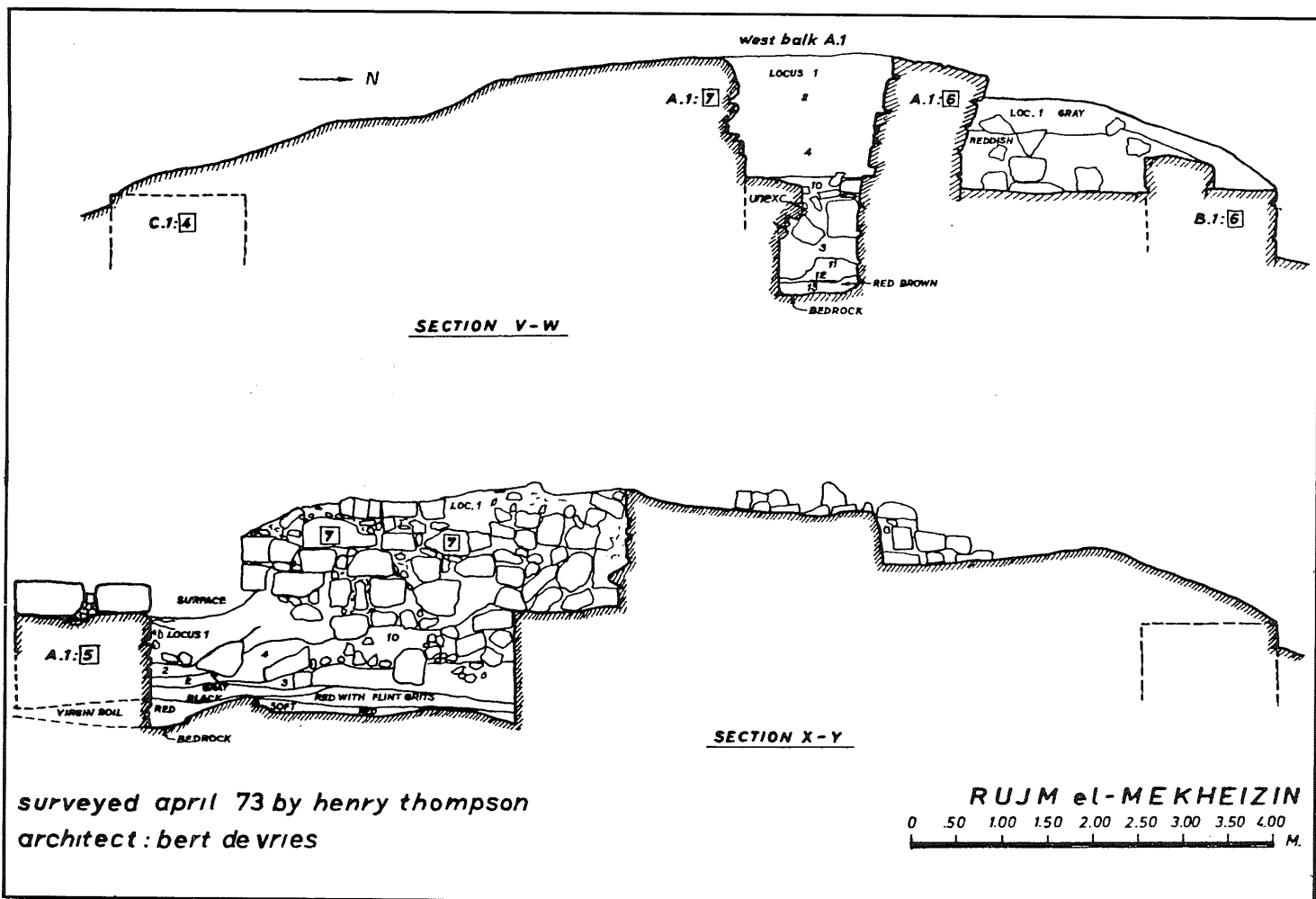


Fig. 2: Rujm el-Mekheizin, Section V-W, Section X-Y.

tower. It is made of unhewn blocks of limestone ranging from 0.50 m.-0.65 m. x 0.50 m.-1.00 m. It is two courses wide (1.50 m.) and up to three courses high with the courses ranging from 0.30-0.50 m. thick. Its maximum preserved height is 1.10 m. and it is 12.20 m. long. The plaster observed on the north face was noted above.

Area C

A check was made of the construction at the southwest corner of the tower. This area was designated Area C. Locus 1 was a soft gray, root-filled surface soil with many rocks ranging from 0.10-0.40 m. in size. It overlay a reddish soil with similar sized rocks. Three pieces of Roman ribbed ware were found on the surface while the rest of the sherds here were sixth/seventh centuries B.C.

Wall 4 is the south face of the tower and is of the same description as B.1:6. Wall 3 is of unhewn stone about 0.25 m. x

0.40 m. It is 1.30 m. wide (three courses) and extends 3.00 m. from Wall 4 to an interior wall A.1:7.

Area A

Area A was the first area excavated. "Square" 1 is a trench plotted to give a longitudinal section through what originally appeared to be a doorway formed by walls 6 and 7. These later appeared to be interior walls forming a corridor and the soft boulder-filled soil tended to fall away from Wall 7 so these aims were only partially realized. However, the metre-wide trench extending from the east tower wall (A.1:5) for 4.00 m. - 5.25 m. did provide evidence of the stratigraphy within the tower for its preserved height of 2.50 m. above bedrock.

Locus 1 was a dusty gray surface soil 0.10-0.25 m. thick, with small stones about 0.10 m. with the usual roots. It was initially excavated in a small probe from Wall 5 to Wall 6. Excavation was then extended to

the entire trench. Potsherds are sixth/seventh centuries B.C. in date with the possible inclusion of a few Iron I sherds. Locus 2 was a reddish soil with larger stones, up to 0.25 m. It was first observed in the probe trench and continued throughout the extension of the trench. Pottery fabrics were similar to Locus 1, with the additional interest of the only significant pottery find of the excavation. At the bottom of Locus 2, on top of a burn layer (A.1:3) was an almost complete bottle. Its distinctive form and painted decoration have numerous parallels in the Amman area. It has been called an Assyrian import. (Fig. 3.) The many examples might serve as evidence of an extensive commerce between the Ammonites and Assyrians. However, lacking more detailed evidence of that trade, the frequency of this bottle might also be seen as evidence of a fine quality pottery tradition in the Ammonite repertoire itself. One exact parallel is of special interest because it is fairly closely dated to about 650-675 B.C. by the seal of Adoni-Nur in the same tomb. The bottles seem too large for perfume and too small for standard oils. Perhaps they were for **perfumed** oils or unguents. This function would explain their presence in tombs.⁶ An iron object comes from this same locus. It may be a large arrowhead or small spearhead but is now rusted beyond recognition, and would probably disintegrate in any effort to clean it.

The probe trench was stopped at the burn layer, A 1:3, and the trench was extended westward through the corridor. Two additional strata were accumulated here. Locus 4 was a dark, fine, ashy soil with large rocks up to 0.50 m. Potsherds were sixth/seventh centuries B.C. Locus 10 was a loose, powdery, reddish soil, but with small pockets of charcoal and rocks from 0.10-0.75 m. in size. The sherds were similar to Locus 4, plus a few possible Iron I sherds. Both layers are interpreted as fill

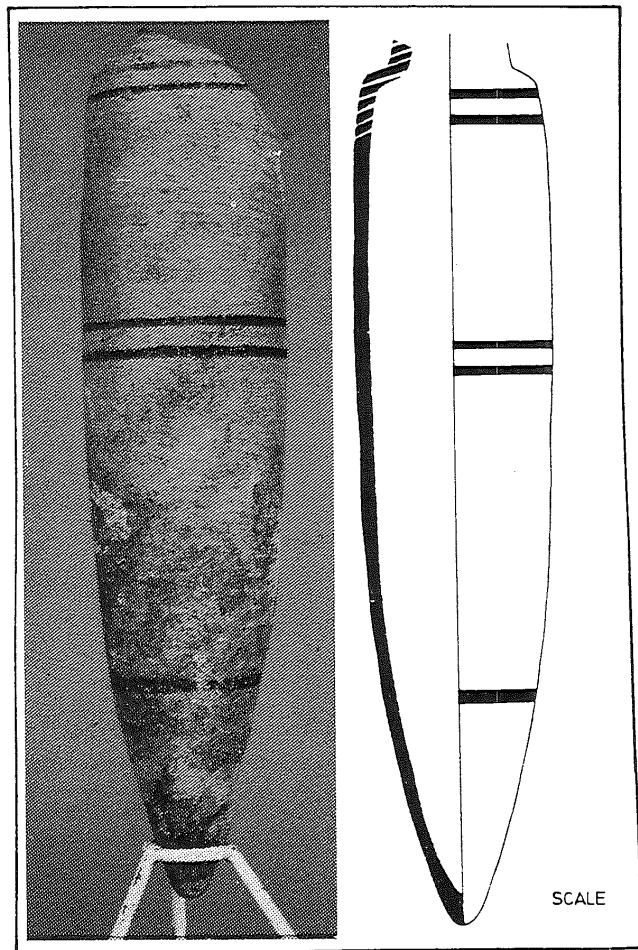


Fig. 3: Rujm el-Mekheizin "The Assyrian" bottle from Area A.

layers built up in the collapse of the upper portions of the interior walls 6 and 7. The lower, Locus 10, lay directly on the burn layer, A.1:3. At the top of 10, the bottom of 4, a distinct change appears in Wall 6 on the north side of the trench. The extant top of the wall (four courses) leans to the north while the lower four courses are fairly straight (vertical). Locus 10 may be the debris of a collapse immediately or soon after the fire represented by Locus 3. At some later date, an earthquake may have shaken the tower and a structural fault caused Wall 6 to shift and lean to the north, while the more firmly built Wall 7 stood firm. Alternatively, the shift and lean may represent a rebuilding but this is not apparent in Wall 7 and the lean to the north would hardly be deliberate. So Locus

⁶ G. Lancaster Harding, "An Iron-Age Tomb at Sahab," *QDAP* XIII (1948) p. 92-102. *Ibid.*, "The Tomb of Adoni Nur in 'Amman," *PEFA* VI (1953) p. 48-50. *Ibid.*, "Two Iron Age Tombs from 'Amman," *QDAP* XI (1945) p. 67-74. Ms. E. Henschel-Simon, "Note on the Pottery of the 'Amman Tomb," *QDAP* XI: p. 75-80. Olga

Tufnell, *Lachish Vol. III, The Iron Age*; London, 1953. *Ibid.*, "Notes and Comparisons," *PEFA* VI, P. 66-72. R.A.S. Macalister and J. Garrow Duncan, "Excavations on the Hill of Ophel, Jerusalem, 1924-1925," *PEFA* IV (1926) p. 177f, and Fig. 189 (undecorated specimen). Macalister, "Some Interesting Pottery Remains," *PEQ* [1915] p. 35) an undecorated specimen from Tell al-Ful).

4 is interpreted as additional fall in relation to the quake. While the two loci did not appear to extend to the outer Wall 5, a reexamination of the baulk suggests that in the initial probe trench, Locus 2 consisted of two layers (of very similar consistency) at that point. The lower one is probably equivalent to Locus 10 as being initially deposited directly on the burn layer A.1:3, while the upper one continued up and over Locus 4.

Locus 3 was a burn layer ranging up to 0.50 m. in thickness with numerous pieces of charcoal. With small exceptions, these disintegrated within minutes after excavation. One piece, about 0.05 m., appeared to be formed of rushes and mud while other fragments of charcoal gave the impression of wood and in one case a stick of wood. This suggests a roof of cross beams, brush and mud. The analysis is further confirmed by two roof rollers discovered in Area C, one on the present day surface and the other imbedded in Locus 2. The burn layer would seem to mark the destruction of the tower. The debris layers suggest no further occupation. It is interesting to note that not one sherd of the Mamlūk/Ottoman period was found on the tower itself, suggesting that secondary occupation was confined to the outside of the tower. Since A.1:3 extended throughout the excavated area of A.1, it is assumed that the destruction was total. What remains problematic is the nature or cause of the conflagration. With the possible exception of the iron object in Locus 2, no weapons were found, not even a slingstone. This would seem to argue against destruction by enemy conquest, and in favour of an accidental fire. Further, the complete lack of objects would seem to suggest abandonment or disuse prior to the destruction. The tower seems to be an Ammonite watchtower, guarding the northeast approach to the capital of Amman. There are at least two additional towers in the neighbourhood, one to the southeast and one to the northwest. If Rujm el-Makheizin became disfunctional, it may be either that its purpose was covered by the others or the destruction of Mekheizin came in a time of

relative peace in the Ammonite area. This may point to the mid-seventh century B.C. period when Assyria reigned supreme over the whole area of the Fertile Crescent and small client states like the Ammonites were free to develop in peace.

Under Locus 3 was an interesting reddish soil (Locus 11) with very few stones. It was soft and rather sandy in texture with flint granules and tiny rock fragments. Three small pieces of brick came from this matrix. The pieces were extremely friable and disintegrated when exposed to the air. It is possible that the upper portions of the interior walls had courses of mud-brick which caved in under the roofing material before it burned. It is not impossible, however, that Locus 11 is a clean sand brought in for flooring material. Its upper surface did not reflect flooring use but that could have been obscured by the fire of Locus 3. A more likely floor is a thin black layer, Locus 12, under the flinty sand of Locus 11. This ashy layer was only 0.02-0.05 m. thick but it extended throughout the trench and lay over Locus 13, a red clay-like soil down to bedrock and containing the irregular rock fragments of weathered bedrock. Locus 12 was not a very firm layer so it does not represent a beaten earth floor and its softness in turn might suggest that the tower as a whole was not in use for a very long time. An alternative interpretation could be that Locus 12 represents the floor of a little used basement. The tower walls and interior walls are clearly strong enough to support a second story. If our burn material represents a floor of that upper story and the basement ceiling, the upper floor would have carried the ware of daily use. While the pottery dates the last use of the tower to the Roman period, it is worth noting that the tower of Rujm el-Malfuf North, had unused basement rooms, implying that the functional activity within the tower took place on the upper floor.⁷ The pottery of Loci 11 and 12 was the usual sixth/seventh centuries B.C. material.

Wall 5 is the eastern tower wall and is of similar construction as B.1:6 on the north and C.1:4 on the south. It is 12.40 m.

⁷ Roger S. Boraas, "A Preliminary Sounding at Rujm el-Malfuf," *ADAJ* XVI (1971) p. 31-46.

long and has a small portion of plaster remaining at the junction with A.2:7, described below. A.2 was excavated to bedrock as was A.1, showing A.1:5 to be founded on virgin soil over bedrock. Outside (east face of Wall 5), this is only 0.02-0.10 m. thick over bedrock but inside (A.1:13) it ranges up to 0.30 m. thick. One would expect that a wall as heavy as the tower wall (1.50 m. thick) would have been founded on bedrock but the same phenomenon was noted in B.1, where Wall 6 rests on virgin soil, Locus 4, rather than bedrock. Apparently the builders considered this firm enough for their purposes. Haste might have been a factor also though the walls appear to have been carefully constructed. The virgin soil foundation applies to the interior walls. A.1:6, as well and presumably then to the other interior walls also.

Wall 6 is made of unhewn stone ranging from 0.30 m. up to 0.80 m. long. It is two courses wide (1.05 m.) and up to eight courses high in its extant remains. The upper four courses are partially broken off the east end which appears to begin 0.95 m. from Wall 5. The upper four courses were shifted and leaned to the north as noted earlier in relation to Locus 4. Each course is about 0.30 m. thick and there are numerous small to medium filler stones which helped maintain a uniform horizontal level to each course, again suggesting careful construction technique as in the outer tower walls. As noted earlier, Wall 6 was probably an interior wall supporting an upper storey raising the tower's height to aid its function as a watchtower. Wall 7 appears to be of similar construction but is much thicker, ranging from 1.80 m. at its western end to 2.20 m. on the east. The eastern end is in fact so thick that initial observation of the above-ground remains, suggested that the eastern end of Wall 7 was another wall and it was recorded as Wall 8 and the southern edge of Wall 7 was recorded as Wall 9.

Area A, "Square" 2 was a trench plotted from A.1:5 across (W-E) what appeared to be a porch or series of terraces in pre-excavation examination. A total of three N-S walls are visible. Wall 3 is 2.00

m. from A.1:5 while Wall 4 is 4.00 m. away. Wall 9 is 9.00 m. from A.1:5. The distance between Wall 9 and Wall 4 raises the question of its relationship to the other walls. This question is strengthened by Wall 7. The latter is an E-W wall of similar appearance (unhewn stones ranging from 0.30 m. x 0.40 m.-0.60 m. x 1.00 m.) to the outer walls of the tower, A.1:5, B.1:6, and C.1:4. It joins but is not bonded to, A.10:5, at right angles, 1.75 m. from the northeast corner of the tower. Plaster, similar in consistency to that found on the outside of B.1:6 and 5, appears in the corner formed by the east face of A.1:5, and the north face of A.2:7. This suggests that A.2:7 is contemporary with the tower walls, except that it is one course wide rather than two. Wall 7 extends 4.30 m. east of A.1:5. Its last stone is a huge boulder which seems to form a corner with the outside (east face) of Wall 4. This further suggests that Wall 9 is an additional feature. However, its visible remains are similar to Walls 3 and 4, although only one course in width is visible. Unfortunately, dense garden shrubbery made it advisable not to excavate Wall 9. Wall 10, an E-W wall near the southeast corner of the tower, cannot be traced further east than Wall 4. However, its visible remains are also similar in appearance to Walls 3, 4 and 9, and no excavation was attempted here. A peculiar feature of Wall 10 is that it is not at right angles to A.1:5 but veers to the north, so the complex of Walls 7, 4 and 10 forms a trapezoid rather than a rectangle.

Wall 3 is about 0.70 m. wide and 8.00 m. long. Its extant remains are two to three courses (0.50-0.70 m.) high and two courses wide. It is built of unhewn stones 0.20 m. x 0.20 m. to 0.30 m. x 0.40 m. in size. Wall 4 is of similar description though the stones range up to 0.60 m. in size. Both walls appear to be dated in the Mamlūk/Ottoman period, as noted below.

Locus 1 was the surface soil between A.1:5 and A.2:3 while Locus 2 was surface material between Walls 3 and 4. This area had been disturbed by a modern water pipe and no further excavation was attempted here. Both loci were gray dusty soil with roots and small stones (.02-0.15 m.) and

the usual sixth/seventh centuries B.C. Iron Age pottery. A single piece of Mamlūk/Ottoman material came from Locus 2. Locus 5 was a modern intrusive burial at the bottom of Locus 1, resting on Locus 6. The latter was a gray soil resting on virgin soil, locus 8. After excavation, examination of the baulk showed variations of colour: gray, reddish gray, red with white grits, and a thin layer of gray clay. The pottery sherds from Locus 6 were sixth/seventh centuries B.C. and Mamlūk/Ottoman. This suggests the latter date for Walls 3 and 4. They are thus comparable to the walls outside the tower exposed in Area B. The complication of Wall 7, however, suggests that the builders here utilized Wall 7, as well as the tower wall, for their later construction.

Summary

The excavation results confirm the surface sherd analysis that the tower is dated to the sixth/seventh centuries B.C. It is therefore most likely an Ammonite tower, of the square type, similar in function to the nineteen towers on the western side of Amman. As a watchtower, it would have guarded the northeastern approaches to ancient Rabbath Ammon. The strength of the walls indicates a secondary function as a fortress though it is too small to hold more than a tiny force of troops who could have fought only a delaying action. In addition, Wall A.2:7 suggests an adjacent room of unknown function and uncertain design. It is possible that the later Mamlūk/Ottoman Walls 3 and 4 (and possibly 9) followed older foundations, thus preserving for us the original design. Adjoining buildings have been noted on the Ammonite towers to the

West of Amman.⁸ A more speculative note is that Wall B.1:5 presently traceable for 25.00 m. but only on the western side of the tower, represents the remains of a large courtyard around the entire complex.

In the Mamlūk/Ottoman period, additional structures were built at the north-west corner of the tower, and built or rebuilt along the eastern side. These may have been squatters or shepherds. The very limited quantity of Mamlūk/Ottoman pottery suggests that their stay was not extensive. Not one sherd of this pottery fabric was found on the tower itself. While the sixth/seventh centuries B.C. pottery was common, if not abundant, the lack of a firm floor may indicate a limited occupation in the earlier period as well, though as noted above, the main occupation may have been on a second floor, now destroyed.

In either case, one might note that the present landscape outside of the well-watered grounds of the Schneller School, is quite barren. There does not seem to be an indication of springs in the surrounding *awdiyah* and the question of water source naturally arises. *Ca.* 5.00 m. northeast of the northeast corner of the tower, is a rock-cut cistern, now plastered and used as part of the water system of the School. Another cistern lies further to the northeast, *ca.* 100.00 m. Workmen who helped build the school from 1958 onwards remembered the large size (up to 8.00 m. deep and 8.00 m. wide at the bottom of a generally round or bell-shaped hole) and their possible use as storage pits by *bedouin*. There was and remains no indication of date. It seems reasonable, however, that the two may have been ancient cisterns dug in one of the two occupation periods.

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⁸ George M. Landes, "The Material Remains of the Ammonite Civilisation," *BA* 24 (1961) p. 71. Cf.

also the report on Khirbet al-Hajjar.