

## Mādabā before Mesha: The Earliest Settlements on the City's West Acropolis

### Introduction

The discovery of the Mesha Stele in the late 19th century launched a flurry of archaeological investigations into the history of Iron Age Transjordan. Although excavations were initiated all over the region, particular attention was paid to the central Jordanian plateau and the Iron Age kingdoms of Ammon and Moab. To date, many important *tall* sites have been excavated, but few large urban centres have been the focus of prolonged and in-depth archaeological research. The city of Mādabā, located 30km south-west of Amman amidst the fertile plains of the central Jordanian plateau, presents an opportunity to explore such a site and to investigate the development of centralized institutions and the evolution of state-ordered societies in Transjordan.

The Tall Madaba Archaeological Project (TMAP) was initiated in order to investigate the role of an urban centre within the larger context of a regional settlement network. The evidence gathered from this urban centre can then be compared to remains from similar contexts at functionally different sites in the surrounding area. The project began in 1993 with a systematic survey of the urban core of Mādabā. Excavations started in 1996, with the exploration of a stratigraphic profile on the southern side of the *tall* (Field A). In 1998, work began on the west acropolis, and this work continues until today. Substantial remains from key periods in the site's settlement history have been discovered in two areas (Fields B and C) separated by a substantial, pre-Classical fortification wall. These remains reflect Mādabā's waxing and waning fortunes as a regional centre, from its beginnings in the late 4th millennium BC to its resurgence as a prosperous Byzantine town and to its final re-establishment in the Late Ottoman period (Foran 2007; Foran *et al.* 2004; Harrison *et al.* 2003, 2007).

Despite the wealth of archaeological material from the Classical and post-Classical periods already discovered on Mādabā's west acropolis, some of the most significant finds date to the period before the city became one of the key urban centres of the Iron Age Kingdom of Moab. By focusing on these earliest occupation phases, this paper will examine the origins of Mādabā's fortification wall and its early Iron Age remains in an effort to elucidate the Late Bronze/ Iron I transition in central Transjordan and to place Mādabā within the wider, regional context of the 12th to 9th centuries BC.

### Iron Age Mādabā

Textual sources stress the importance of Mādabā throughout the Iron Age. The Book of Numbers lists the city as part of a series of settlements that were destroyed by the Amorite King Sihon (Nm 21: 30). Mādabā appears in the Book of Joshua as part of the territory allocated to the tribe of Reuben (Jos 13: 8-9, 16). In the early 10th century BC, the region became a battleground between rival nation-states, at which time the Israelite King David defeated a coalition of Arameans and Ammonites (I Chronicles 19: 16-17; cf. II Samuel 10). The earliest epigraphic reference to Mādabā comes from the 9th century BC Mesha Stele. The text relates the victory of the Moabite King Mesha over the Israelites. Mādabā is described as a city that had been under Israelite control and was rebuilt by Mesha. The town and region appear to have remained part of Moab until the end of the Iron Age, as Mādabā is listed with other Moabite towns in a biblical oracle (Isaiah 15: 2) forecasting the devastation of Moab. These written sources are very clear about Mādabā's importance during the Iron Age, and the archaeological material recently brought to light on the west acropolis does not contradict these accounts.



Prior to our excavations on the west acropolis, the existence of an early Iron Age settlement at Mādabā was confirmed by a number of tomb assemblages collected from caves on the outskirts of the city (Harding and Isserlin 1953). Although the artefacts from these tombs provide excellent examples with which to compare material from stratified contexts, they do little to elucidate the exact nature of the settlement during this period. The west acropolis excavations<sup>1</sup> have, however, produced evidence of a substantial urban centre that was established at the end of the Late Bronze Age and continued to thrive into the Iron II period (Harrison 2009).

### Mādabā's Fortification Wall (Field Phase 11)

The most prominent feature on Mādabā's west acropolis is the monumental pre-Classical fortification wall that runs north-south through the area. It stands as high as 5m in places and is 7m at its widest point. This is the result of multiple rebuildings that occurred over several periods. The exterior face of the wall most likely dates to the Late Hellenistic period, while the interior represents the earliest phase of construction.

The city wall, founded directly on bedrock, is constructed of small, unhewn boulders laid in regular courses and secured with chinkstones (FIG. 1). The fill that seals against the base of the wall and

the bedrock contains scant ceramic remains that date exclusively to the Early Bronze Age. Examples of holemouth jars show a variety of rim forms, such as internally thickened (FIG. 2:1), rounded (FIG. 2:2) and square (FIG. 2:3). A small bowl with an inverted rim (FIG. 2:4) is also typical of this period. Although pottery from FP11 is limited, the forms show affinity with previously excavated pottery from Mādabā that dates to the EB IB/ EB II (ca 3250-2700 BC) periods (Harrison *et al.* 2000).

The bedrock ledges on either side of the fortification wall are dotted with numerous cupmarks. These installations, traditionally associated with food processing activities, have been documented at a variety of prehistoric sites across the southern Levant (see Grosman and Goren-Inbar 2007; Nadel and Lengyel 2009; Nadel and Rosenberg 2010; Nadel *et al.* 2009; Noy 1979 and references therein). They have also been found in an Early Bronze Age context at Tall al-'Umayri (Harrison 2000: 100). Unfortunately, the original context of these bedrock mortars was removed by later building activity; however, based on comparable evidence from other sites in the region, they are most likely associated with the EB occupation at Mādabā (FP11) or, perhaps, an as yet undocumented prehistoric settlement<sup>2</sup>.

In addition to the evidence from the west acrop-

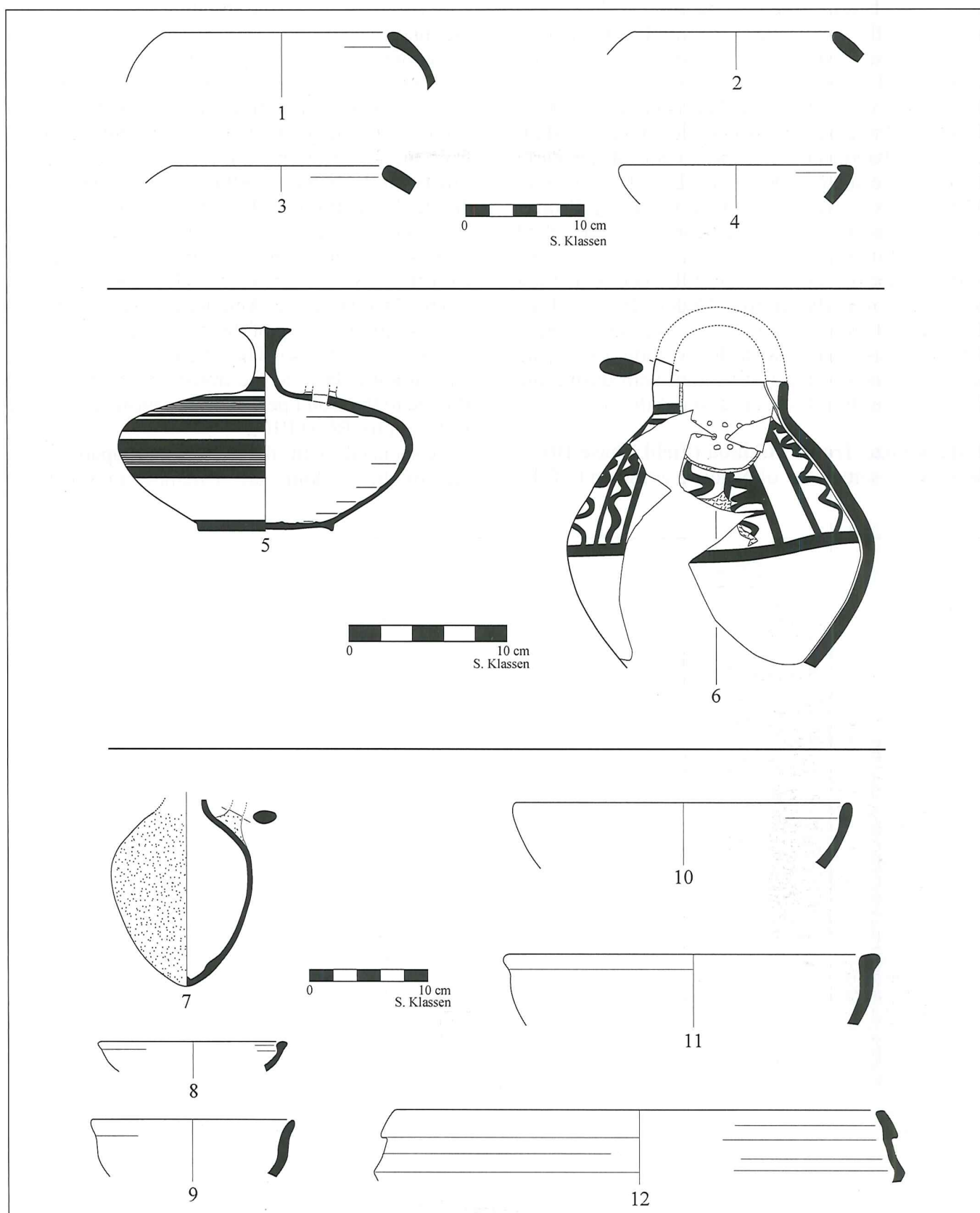


1. Mādabā's fortification wall.

<sup>1</sup> The earliest occupation levels were exposed in two excavation units (5M21U4 and 5M21V3) during the 2006 and 2007 seasons under the direction of D. Foran. The 2006 excavations were supervised by A. Graham; staff consisted of J. Lewis and J. Self; students included S. Genus, L. Herman, T. Kenward, E. Lui, I. MacLeod, Z. Mallinson, P. Raposo, E. Sufrin-Disler, F. Ting, M. Welte, C. Wiggins and B. Wyshnicki. Excavations in 2007 were

supervised by J. Lewis; staff consisted of Z. Mallinson, P. Raposo and B. Wyshnicki; students included R. Cumming, M. Franz, E. Loney, I. Ritchie, S. Ross, A. Toren, H. Turner and L. White.

<sup>2</sup> Although no prehistoric remains have been found at Mādabā, several Middle Paleolithic sites have been identified in the region (Bisson *et al.* 2007).



2. Early Bronze, Late Bronze and Iron I ceramics.



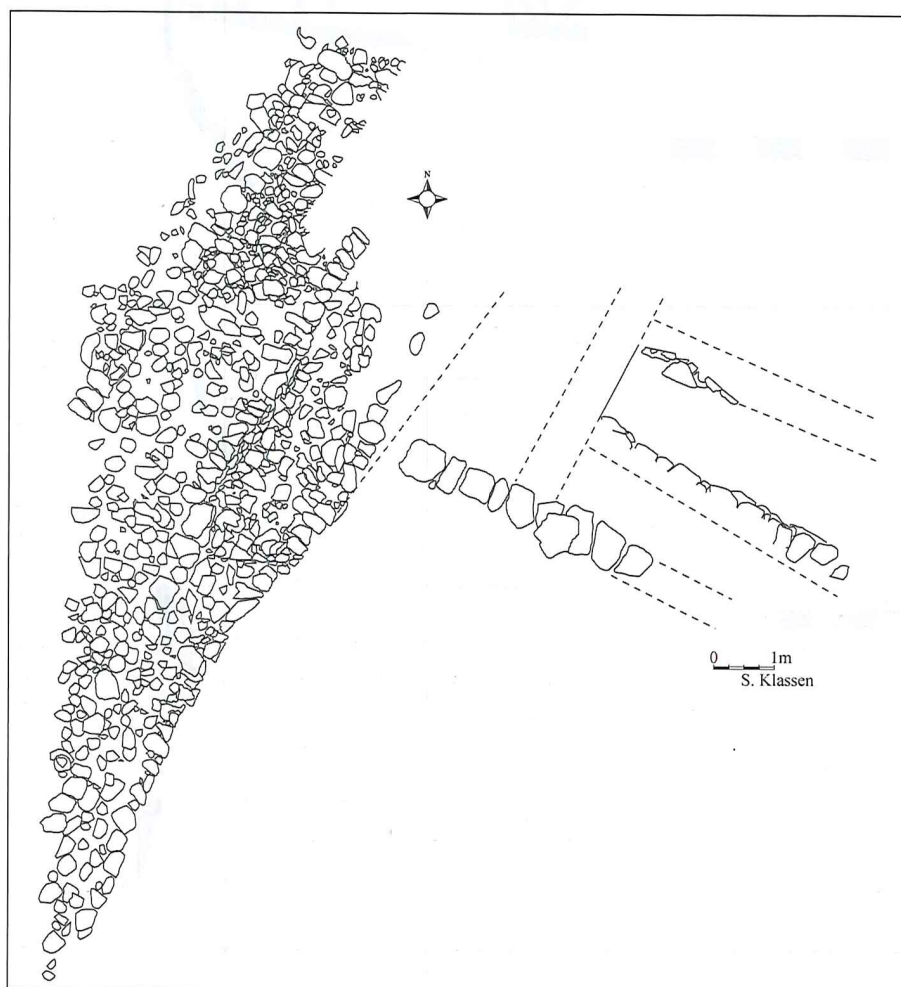
olis, Early Bronze Age occupation was also documented on the south side of the *tall*. Excavations in 1996 exposed two phases of a domestic structure constructed on bedrock dating to the Early Bronze IB/ II periods in Field A (Harrison *et al.* 2000). Based on the evidence from Fields A and B, Mādabā was abandoned from the middle of the Early Bronze Age to the end of the Late Bronze Age. When the site was reoccupied, the Early Bronze Age fill sealing against the bedrock was levelled off and a thin layer of *nari* plaster collected on the surface. Above this, a second fill layer containing a mixture of Early Bronze, Middle Bronze, Late Bronze and Iron I material was deposited. These layers are associated with the construction of the upper portions of the fortification wall during the Late Bronze/ Iron I reoccupation of the site.

### Late Bronze/ Iron I Mādabā (Field Phase 10)

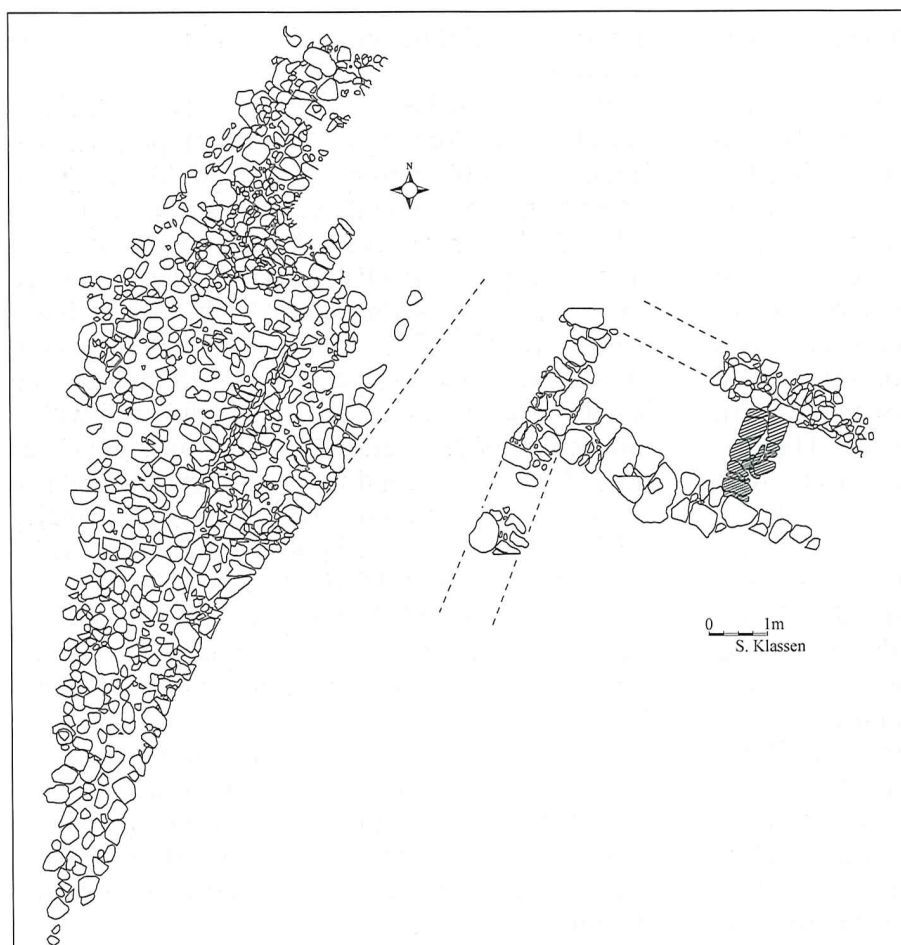
With the resettlement of Mādabā at the end of the

Late Bronze Age, a large structure was built against the inner face of the fortification wall. Because of the complex stratigraphy at the site and its location in the heart of the modern city of Mādabā, only small portions of this structure could be exposed. A single line of large boulders, which runs eastward from the fortification wall, forms the southern perimeter of the building (FIG. 3). Two parallel walls divide this portion of the building into three separate rooms. A north-south wall, which abuts the north side of the southern boundary wall, together with the city's fortification wall creates the back room of the structure. Although present in the exposed section, the top of this wall is hidden by later architecture (FIG. 4). The original construction of this building dates to the transition from the Late Bronze to the Iron I period, in the earlier half of the 12th century BC (FP10).

Associated with the earliest occupation surface of this building are a number of important



3. Late Bronze/ Iron I (FP10) building.



4. Iron IIA (FP9) building.

artefacts that allow for more secure dating. One of these finds is a well-preserved Mycenaean stirrup jar (FIG. 2:5). After comparing this piece with the detailed chronological sequence of stirrup jars from the Aegean, a date in the late 14th/ early 13th century BC has been established. The jar displays elements of both Late Helladic IIIA2 (1350-1300 BC) and Late Helladic IIIB1 (1300-1250 BC) examples. Its squat, globular shape, broad bands on the body, foliate band and wavy line decoration on the shoulder, and concentric circles and dot on the false mouth are consistent with Late Helladic IIIA2 (Mountjoy 1986: 77-81, fig. 94). The narrow shape of the false mouth and concentric circles painted on the bottom of the base have parallels with Late Helladic IIIB1 (Mountjoy 1986: 105-1081, figs. 128-131).

A second important piece is a painted biconical strainer jug (FIG. 2:6) dating to the end of the Late Bronze. The jug is made of a rather coarse fabric with chaff temper, includes a trough-like spout and strainer on its shoulder, and has a basket handle at-

tached to its rim. The strainer jug is slightly biconical but with less carination than the jars common to the Late Bronze Age (see Amiran 1970, Plate 47:11). Although this rounder shape is found in the Iron I period (see McGovern 1986, fig. 53:41-42), the decoration on the Mādabā jug consists of dark red vertical bands with vertical wavy lines painted between them, a design more common in the LB II period. The mix of shape and design suggest a transitional period between the LB IIB and Iron IA periods.

Other vessels attributed to this phase include a piriform jug with white slip (FIG. 2:7) that, unfortunately, lacks a neck and rim. The piriform shape, however, does find a parallel in the Iron IA period within the region (McGovern 1986, fig. 52:30). Bowls come in a variety of forms. Some smaller vessels have a thickened rim on the interior (FIG. 2:8); carinated examples have simple, everted tapered rims (FIG. 2:9). Larger bowls have simple rims with internal thickening (FIG. 2:10), as well as everted rims (FIG. 2:11). A carinated cooking



pot has an inverted stance with an elongated flange (FIG. 2:12).

In addition to the vessels listed above, numerous reconstructable collared pithoi were also uncovered (only the rims and necks are depicted in FIG. 5). Many of the rims display potters' marks, perhaps identifying the production centre or potter who produced the vessel. Most of the rims of these vessels were found in the eastern half of the building, while mostly body sherds and bases were collected against the fortification wall. These pithoi may have been stacked against the western wall of this space and then fell eastward. The majority of the collared pithoi have high necks with slightly rounded, everted rims (FIG. 5:1-4). These vessels are very similar to those found at Tall al-'Umayri (Herr *et al.* 1997; Herr 2001) in Stratum 12 (Herr and Clark 2009), Tall Ḥisbān (Ray 2001) in Stratum 21 and Tall Jāwā<sup>3</sup> (unpublished). One example (FIG. 5:5) has a vertical, thickened round rim with slight internal bevelling and a collar that could be termed 'vestigial' (see Herr 2001; Routledge 2008). Of the five pithoi illustrated here, this is the only one that does not show evidence of the rim being constructed in two stages, with the addition of an extra coil to add greater height. Based on preliminary research, it would appear that the collared pithoi at Mādabā are less diverse than those found at Tall al-'Umayri.

### Iron IIA Mādabā (Field Phase 9)

The building constructed against the inner face of the city's fortification wall underwent a second phase of occupation in the Iron IIA period (10th century BC). At this time, new courses were laid on top of the existing walls and the building was extended to the south. These new constructions are more substantial than their earlier counterparts, consisting of two parallel rows of smaller boulders secured with chinkstones (FIG. 4). A small wall, running east-west, was eventually added to the central room of the structure in order to sub-divide this space. Although more careful analysis of the remains is necessary, a lack of artefacts in the western half of the building indicates that the back room was no longer being used by this period. It may have been filled with soil, in order to reinforce the adjacent fortification wall, or ceased to function as

part of the building and was being used as a passageway.

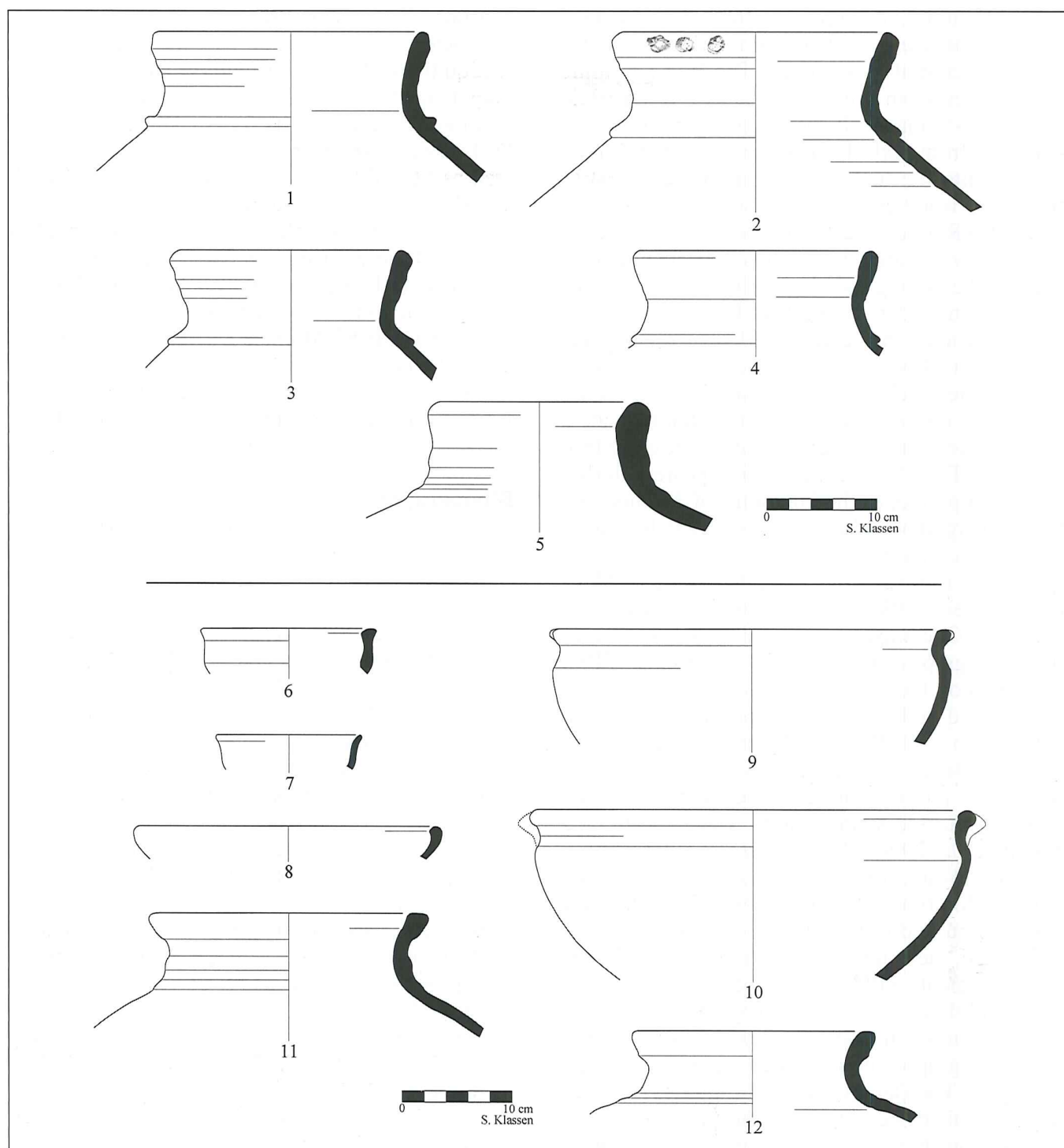
Pottery from FP 9 is similar to that of the earlier FP 10 but does show some developments. One small bowl (FIG. 5:6) has a vertical thickened rim on both the interior and exterior. A carinated bowl (FIG. 5:7) with an everted, tapered rim is similar to that found in FP 10, as is a simple rimmed bowl with internal thickening with a slight internal groove (FIG. 5:8). A new form that appears in FP 9 is the carinated krater bowl with multiple lug handles. Two types are indicated here: one with a rounded, slightly everted rim with horizontal lugs (FIG. 5:9) and a second with a thickened round rim and slight internal groove with sloping lug handles (FIG. 5:10). The collared pithoi of FP 9 show similarities to those from FP 10 but have a shorter neck. The first has a folded, flattened rim with a slight interior groove and a double vestigial collar, one on the lower neck and one on the upper shoulder (FIG. 5:11). The second has a rounded, everted profiled rim with a double vestigial collar on the shoulder. Although the rims of the Tall Mādabā FP 9 collared pithoi differ from those excavated at Tall al-'Umayri, the shorter neck resembles Herr's (2001) "Episode 2" forms as well as those from Saḥāb (Ibrahim 1978).

### Conclusion

Mādabā began as an Early Bronze Age fortified settlement built directly on a natural bedrock outcropping (FP11). The exact extent of this settlement is currently unknown, but future investigations will hopefully elucidate this matter. The most substantial architecture from this period is obviously the city's fortification wall, which eventually became the foundation of the Iron Age and Classical defensive systems.

After a period of abandonment during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages, the site was resettled in the Late Bronze IIB/ Iron IA transition period (FP10). At that time, work was conducted on the fortification wall and domestic structures were built against it. These houses were re-used in the Iron IIA period (FP9) and were abandoned at the end of the 10th or beginning of the 9th century BC. This type of layout, with domestic structures built against the inner face of a city's fortification wall,

<sup>3</sup> The Iron I ceramics from Tall Jāwā were examined by the authors with the permission of project director, P. M. Michèle Daviau.



5. Iron I and IIA ceramics.

is common among Iron I sites in central Transjordan. The early Iron I house (Building B) excavated at Tall al-‘Umayrī provides a useful parallel for the remains from Tall Mādabā. This house, uncovered at the north-western edge of the site, is built against the city’s perimeter wall and consists of a broad-

room with three adjacent rooms (Herr 2003; Herr and Clark 2009). Much like the Iron I building at Tall Mādabā, the Tall al-‘Umayrī house incorporates the city’s defensive wall into the structure’s broadroom.

In addition to the architectural parallels with



Tall al-‘Umayri, the remains from Tall Mādabā also demonstrate a number of similarities with other sites in central Transjordan. The Iron I ceramic assemblages from Tall Jāwā, Saḥāb, Tall Ḥisbān and Tall al-‘Umayri all share features with the assemblage from Tall Mādabā. However, the limited use of white slip and paint at Tall Mādabā distinguishes its Iron I corpus from pottery at sites to the south (see Routledge 2008 and references therein). Preliminary research would thus indicate a regionalism of the potting industry in the northern part of central Transjordan during Iron IA, similar to that which occurred in the Karak Plateau region during the Iron IB period (Routledge 2008). The common architectural and artefactual features among the sites of northern central Transjordan indicate a shared socio-cultural tradition during the early Iron I period. This homogeneity disappeared during the Iron II period, as the kingdoms of Ammon and Moab emerged with their own distinct architectural and ceramic traditions.

In order to further elucidate the nature of Mādabā's earliest settlements, further investigation is necessary. One impediment to this is the site's complex stratigraphy. The Iron IIB settlement (FP8), founded atop the Iron I and IIA remains, consists of a pillared building and the continued use of the fortification wall. The Iron Age remains are sealed by a thick layer of sheetwash over which multiple occupation phases, dating to the Late Hellenistic through Late Ottoman periods, were constructed (Foran *et al.* 2004; Harrison *et al.* 2003, 2007). Over 6 m of accumulated archaeological material make exploration of the Iron I remains on the west acropolis quite difficult. As new excavation fields are opened, the extent and nature of Mādabā's earliest settlements will hopefully be established.

An additional problem faced by TMAP is the ancient site's modern counterpart, which is constantly encroaching upon the few areas where excavation is possible. The Department of Antiquities has been very helpful in securing land and preventing new construction; however, only through co-operation and collaboration with the local community can we ensure the protection of the site and continued excavations at Tall Mādabā.

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