

# EXCAVATIONS AT TELL IRBID AND BEIT RAS, 1985

by  
C. J. Lenzen, R.L. Gordon, A. M.  
McQuitty

## Introduction

During March through May, 1985, archaeological fieldwork was conducted at Tell Irbid and Beit Ras.<sup>1</sup> The work was a Joint Project of: The Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Yarmouk University--Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, and the Irbid/Beit Ras Project.<sup>2</sup> The work carried out at the sites was in the nature of salvage and rescue archaeological work. The information provided here is a preliminary report; subsequent reports will contain more detailed information.

Tell Irbid, the centre of the modern city of Irbid, and Beit Ras are located in northwestern Jordan, a rapidly developing region. The importance of the two sites in antiquity has long been recognized, particularly by S. Merrill, G. Schumacher, N. Glueck and G. L. Harding.<sup>3</sup> Schumacher and Merrill left detailed records and plans of the two sites as they were in the last quarter of the nineteenth century; Glueck and Harding, along with other archaeologists of the pre-World War II period, noted the importance of the sites, but hesitated to do in-depth research at them.

In the summer of 1984, the Municipality of Irbid, because of the need for a larger business district, began the removal of portions of Tell Irbid. Preliminary salvage work, that is archaeological work conducted as a site is being removed, was carried out by the Department of Anti-

quities and the Irbid/Beit Ras Project. Recognizing the significance of the tell, the Municipality aided in all aspects of the salvage work.<sup>4</sup>

After it became clear that the northwest escarpment of the *tell* would be removed, the Joint Project was formed in order to gain as much archaeological information as possible. Thanks to the foresight of the Municipality and the Department of Antiquities a portion of this section will remain for further archaeological work; and, a section of the city wall, dating from ca. 1300-1200 B.C., will remain for future generations of Jordanians to appreciate.

The archaeological work conducted at Beit Ras was in the nature of rescue archaeological work; that is, archaeology carried out prior to the development of an area where there may be development within the foreseeable future. The objective here was to investigate the archaeological importance of a known historically significant site presently occupied and being developed.

## Results of the Excavations

### *Tell Irbid*

Tell Irbid, viewed from the west, north and east, is an obvious part of the landscape of the Irbid plateau; from the south, the view is almost totally obscured by the extensive building activities of the

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Nabil Qadi, Yarmouk University, Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, supervised part of the excavations at both Tell Irbid and Beit Ras and was an invaluable part of the team. Dr. Mahmoud Hussein, Yarmouk University, participated in part of the excavations at Tell Irbid.

<sup>2</sup> See: McQuitty and Lenzen, March, 1983, *Illustrated London News*; and, Lenzen and McQuitty, *ADAJ*, XXVII, p. 635.

<sup>3</sup> Nelson Glueck, *Explorations in Eastern Palestine*

IV, AASOR, New Haven, 1951; Gottlieb Schumacher, *Northern 'Ajlun, Within the Decapolis*, London, 1890; Selah Merrill, *East of the Jordan*, London, 1881; and G.L. Harding, Notebooks, Department of Antiquities, Registration Centre, Amman, Jordan.

<sup>4</sup> The Mayor, Dr. Abdulrazik Tobaishat, as well as the engineers and workmen of Irbid, were most helpful. Dr. Tobaishat provided workmen both in 1984 and 1985.

last two decades. The configuration of the *tell* has altered considerably since 1930, as the population and its needs have increased.

The salvage excavations at Tell Irbid were carried out on the northwestern section of the *tell*. The general aim of the Joint Project, as in all salvage work, was to gain as much information as possible in a short period of time. Specifically, however, it was necessary to elucidate further the nature of the buildings and massive destruction excavated by the Irbid/Beit Ras Project in 1984.

The top of the *tell* encompasses ten hectares, mostly occupied by modern buildings. The excavated area, designated Area C, lies just beyond the west corner of the Irbid Secondary School grounds and extends twenty-seven metres to the north and twenty metres to the south in a broad arc roughly ten metres in width along the slope immediately below this point (Fig. 1). The segment of Area C from twelve metres south to sixteen metres north was left roughly level by the bulldozing, two metres below the school ground level. The remaining portions were left sloping steeply to the lower street (modern) level at the north and south. This slope was cut at the south end as well.

Initially, the entire area was excavated; later, using a combination of traditional probes and open-plan excavation, the area was divided into separate trenches (numbered "1" through "5"). The possibility of misinterpretation of the stratigraphic record did exist due to the way in which the bulldozers had cut the area. The pottery retrieved from the top layers of Area C indicated occupation of the *tell* from ca. 800 B.C. and from A.D. 1900 to the present. In wash, the late antique periods, i.e., the fifth century A.D., were represented.<sup>5</sup> However, the nature of these occupational periods can only be surmised at this point and will be clarified after

further excavation.

The following summary of the excavations is concerned with the clear stratigraphic evidence from the 1985 excavations. Tentative phasing for the excavation is as follows:

Phase I: ca. 1150-800 B.C.

Phase II: ca. 1300-1150 B.C.

Phase III: ca. 3200 B.C.<sup>6</sup>

As is clear from the above, there are major gaps in the stratigraphic profile. These gaps are most easily explained by population shifts within the region as well as within the city. They present many interesting archaeological and historical questions. They are not explained by the removal of the *tell*; and, indeed, the evidence from earlier excavations would indicate more continuity of occupation.<sup>7</sup> The results of the recent excavations do indicate that one of the high points of occupation was during the period ca. 1200 B.C.

#### *Phase I*

Phase I occupation was identified on the north and south edges of Area C. The reference point for the discussion of the phases is the major wall, Wall 1 (Fig. 2). Wall 1 was constructed during Phase II and formed the western wall of Room 1 (Fig. 2), also part of Phase II. In Phase I, the area of Room 1, not the room itself, may have been reused; however, because of the bulldozer, this is unclear. Over Wall 1, adjacent to Room 1, layers of "smeared" mud-brick were excavated which contained pottery dating to Phase I. North of Room 1 (Fig. 2), pits and a *tannur* were excavated; these rested on Phase II layers. The pottery from these *loci* does not indicate a break in occupation, but rather continuity, although the character of the occupation may have altered somewhat.

In the south, the stratigraphic evidence is more complicated. The southern

<sup>5</sup> The authors are of the opinion that to use the traditional designations of EB, LB, etc., merely confuse the issue. This is a beginning effort to begin the discussion of excavations in terms of centuries. This becomes particularly relevant when discussing cultural continuity.

<sup>6</sup> This dates correspond to Iron I and II, Late Bronze and the Early Bronze.

<sup>7</sup> The Department of Antiquities has excavated in various places on Tell Irbid and throughout modern Irbid.

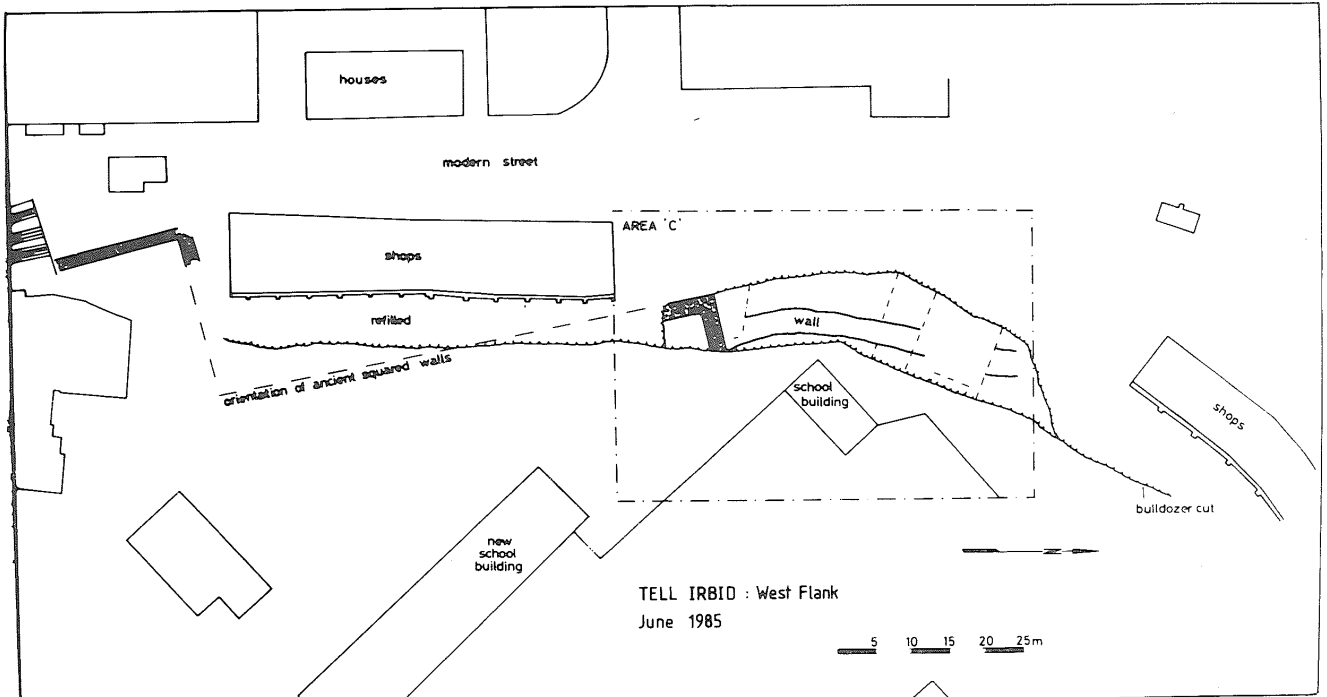


Fig. 1:

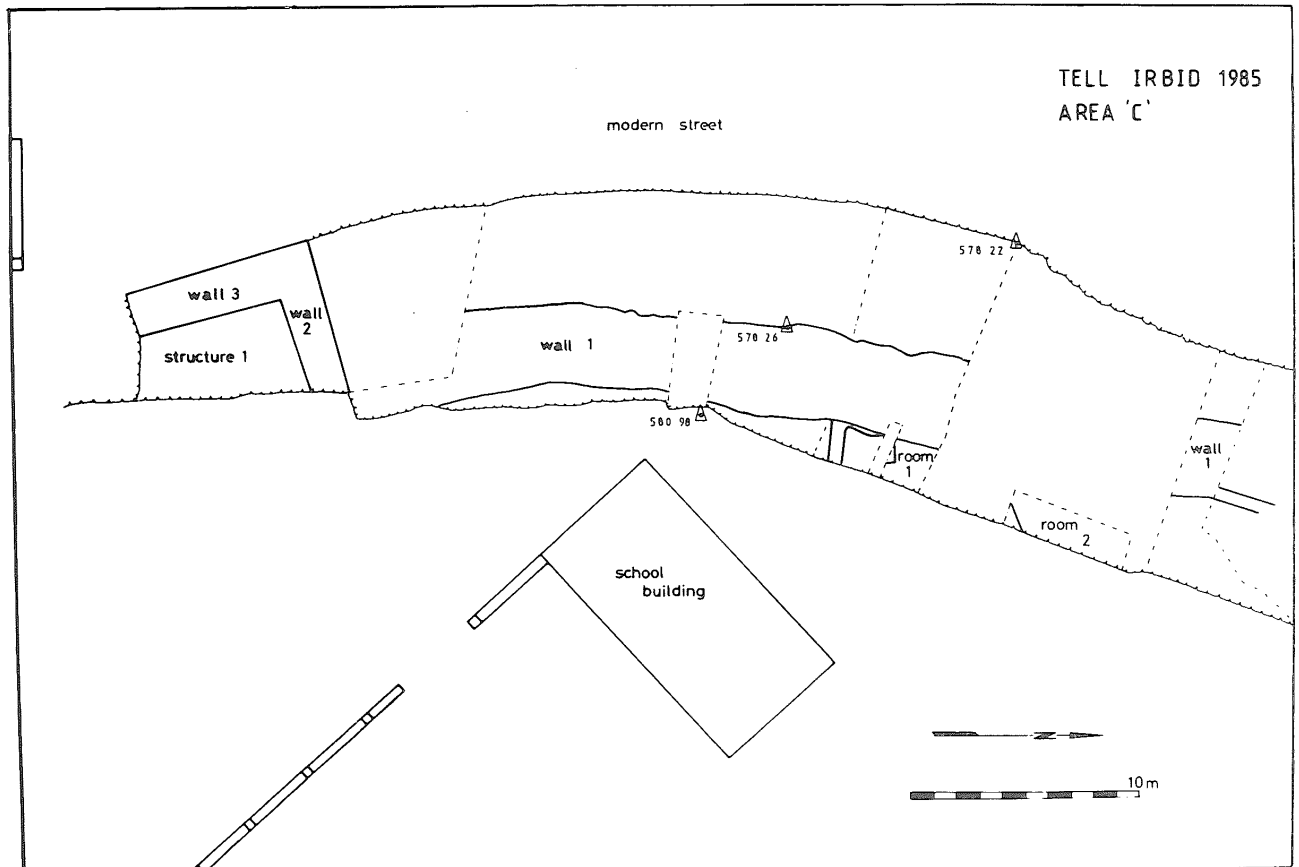


Fig. 2:

extension of Wall 1 was built over the Phase II destruction and thus sealed the lower stratigraphic evidence. There is, then, the possibility of two phases to Wall 1; further excavation should clarify this. For now, it should be noted that the character of the wall in the south was

somewhat different in that boulder-sized stones were used, rather than the blocks in the north (Pl. XXI, 1).

#### *Phase II*

Phase II is the major occupational phase excavated and is divided into the

following sub-phases: a) a transitional phase between the building of the southern extension of Wall I and Phase IIb; b) the destruction of this portion of the *tell*; c) structures extant during the destruction; and d) levelling layers, laid prior to the building of the Phase IIc structures.

Evidence for Phase IIa was found only in the south, below the extension of Wall 1 (Fig. 2). This transitional phase consisted of reuse of the large Phase IIc east-west wall, Wall 2, by realigning it slightly and building a mud-brick superstructure, the bricks of which and the surfaces associated with the wall were truncated by the building of Wall 2 (Pl. XXI,2). Surfaces were excavated to the north of the wall that suggest a courtyard use of the area. At this point, it is suggested that following the extensive Phase IIb destruction rebuilding did occur and that the excavated area only shows minimal evidence of this. In all likelihood, the major section of the structure associated with the courtyard layers was farther to the west, in which case it has been removed by the bulldozer, or possibly to the east.

Wall I was extended in Phase IIa, but was built in the north during Phase IIc. The total extent of Wall 1 is approximately forty seven metres across Area C. The remnant of Wall 1, that is the remnant left by the bulldozing, on the extreme north was only a mass of boulders. Though only one or two courses of Wall I were preserved at the ends of Area C, the top area of the wall, part of its face (on the south) and its construction were delineated. A section through part of Wall 1, aligned with Room 1 (see below), defined the construction of the southern part of the wall. All of the stones used in the wall were dry-laid and the two faces--west and east--showed no clear coursing. Between the two faces, a fill of cobbles and small boulders was used, which formed the mass of the wall and created its strength. The destruction layer, Phase IIb, was not found over this wall.

The Phase IIb destruction was massive and extended throughout most of the excavated area. It consisted of intensely burned mud-brick superstructure and stone substructure, roofing material, quantities of pottery and other material culture remains.<sup>8</sup> The concentration of the Joint Project's excavations on the north and south edges of the escarpment provides some phasing problems; however, based on the pottery, the two edges represent one destruction.

In the south, the destruction layer, including the area now hidden by the Municipality of Irbid's retaining wall, measured approximately ten metres high and was approximately seventy metres long. An area measuring six metres by four metres and three metres high was carefully excavated during 1985. The destruction debris here was contained by the walls of Structure 1 (Fig. 2), which was reused during Phase IIa. The walls of the structure were made of randomly-sized basalt and chert stones. The mud-brick superstructure had carved into the structure along with the roofing material; mud-brick and mud-plastering was found intact in certain areas. The north-west corner of Structure 1 had a dung storage bin in it with a thick plaster floor extending to the edges of the bin (Pl. XXII,1). Over this floor multiple layers of mud-flooring alternating with dung ash were excavated. It is from the lowest of these surfaces that a bronze arrowhead was recovered.<sup>9</sup>

Below Structure 1, Phase IIc was excavated; and, like Phase IIa, is only represented in the south, although similar layers were beginning to appear in the north when excavation was ceased for the season. This sub-phase consisted of the levelling of the Phase III structures and dumping of soil and pottery prior to the building of Structure 1. The dump contained quantities of chert chips and may have acted as a stabilizing layer for the building.

---

<sup>8</sup> Carbon 14 samples were collected by Lenzen and McQuitty in 1984 and are being analyzed by the British Museum, London.

<sup>9</sup> This was recovered by Lenzen and McQuitty in 1984. Mr. Graham Phillips, Jerusalem Fellow of the British School, 1984, dated this to the transitional Late Bronze/Iron IA period; our phase II.

To the north of this excavated section, below the Phase IIa courtyard layers, two support pillars were excavated. These suggest a large roof structure over the area. The contemporary Phase 11 features were: pillars, walls and surfaces. In all likelihood, these features are contemporary with the northern section of Area C.

On the northern edge of the area, Room 1 was built up against Wall 1. Mud-facing was found adhering to the inner face of the wall (to the east). Destruction debris (Phase IIb) filled the room and covered a group of objects that imply a cultic use to this portion of Area C.<sup>10</sup> These objects were (Pl. XXII,2): an incense stand, a basalt stand (not pictured), two bowls, a "cup and saucer" which was used as a lamp, a lamp, two goblets and two large storage jars.<sup>11</sup> The objects are well-preserved and indicate a date of ca. 1200 B.C. How extensive the cult was, etc. still needs to be researched.

To the north of Room 1, below the Phase I pits and the destruction, a surface with eleven vessels was found lying on it (Pl. XXIII, 1). These vessels ranged from storage jars to pitchers. They dated to the same period as those from Room 1 and Structure 1. It is probable that this surface and the vessels were part of a large storage room relating to Room 1. It should be noted that occupation was centred to the east of Wall 1, or "inside" of the wall.

### Phase III

Phase III is represented by an area measuring two metres by two metres on the southern edge of Area C. The pottery assemblage from this probe area is consistent; that is, dating from ca. 3200 B.C., and containing rims of holemouth jars, bodysherds and rims from grainwash jars, and parts of jugs and juglets. Only one structure was found associated with these early layers--a destroyed wall. This is, however, indicative of early settlement on

the escarpment.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the excavations, similar pottery forms were found in later layers: and, on the northern edge of the escarpment, below Wall 1, the stratification seemed to parallel this area.

### Conclusions

From the stratigraphic discussion above, it is clear that Tell Irbid was occupied for extensive periods during antiquity. One of the high points was that period of ca. 1200 B.C. An interpretation of Wall 1, Room 1 and Structure 1 is in its preliminary stages; however, the following possibilities exist: a) Wall 1, which forms a curve or arc was a defensive wall with gates to the north and south; b) Structure 1 appears to have been a tower and, therefore, part of the defensive system; c) Room 1 was built up against this defensive arc precisely because of this protective factor. The fact that outer walls, on the outside of Wall I, have been noted in the surveying would suggest that this arc was not viewed as an exterior defensive wall.

### Beit Ras

Beit Ras is the modern name for the ancient city of Capitolias, one of the Roman decapolis cities. Over the last few years, the central part of the village has been altered considerably because of the needs of the people for new road, electricity and water systems as well as because peoples' tastes in housing have changed. The work undertaken by the Joint Project concentrated on an area within the old village of Beit Ras that had been partially altered within the recent past for a new road system and that had visible archaeological remains. From previous archaeological work conducted at Beit Ras and secondary research, the history of Beit Ras was generally known as was the *general* stratigraphic profile.<sup>13</sup> It was a large Roman city, an important Byzantine ecclesiastical cen-

<sup>10</sup> Mr. Jonathan Tubb, The British Museum, and Dr. James Sauer, President of ASOR, are to be thanked for "pushing us" in the right direction.

<sup>11</sup> The positioning of the objects suggested a storage

place, not a place of primary cult use.

<sup>12</sup> See: Lenzen and McQuitty, forthcoming.

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 3 above.

tre, a significant Umayyad city, and a city that gradually became a village in the following centuries.

The area investigated by the Joint Project was located in the centre of the village along the modern main east-west road and the east of the mosque. The area defined by the Joint Project measured one hundred metres (north-south) and fifty metres east-west, and was designated Area A.<sup>14</sup> Lower than the modern street, there is a "sunken" area within Area A. In this area, there is a west facing arch on the east and parallel one to the west. These two arches, along with the late constructions above them, served as the eastern and western limits of the area (Fig. 3). The eastern and western lines of Area A were jogged somewhat in order to avoid interference with present day housing. The northern limit of Area A was a field wall.

Six separate parts of Area A were excavated during the season.<sup>15</sup> The tentative phasing is:

Phase Ia: A.D. 1900 to the present

Phase Ib: ca. A.D. 1516-1700

Phase II: ca. A.D. 1100-1516

Phase III: ca. A.D. 950-1100

Phase IV: ca. A.D. 750-850

Phase V: ca. mid-seventh century A.D.-  
A.D. 750

Phase VI: ca. A.D. 334-mid-seventh century A.D.

Phase VII: ca. A.D. 100-334

This phasing delineation is tentative in nature and is dependent on the preliminary analysis of the pottery, architectural remains, and the stratigraphy.

Unlike Tell Irbid, Beit Ras provided an opportunity to acquire data concerning the most recent past, e.g., 1516 to the present. This is a little known archaeological period in Jordan. Phase Ia, A.D. 1900-the present, consisted of housing and a facade built in the sunken part of Area A. Also within the phase, there seems to have been extensive moving of soil in the area to form olive groves, build houses, etc. The result of this was that excavated layers, although purely of one period were

not *in situ*.

The Phase Ia constructions--housing and facade--were built across from and against a series of nine vaults, which faced north. The facade was supported by the earlier vaults and merely abutted them; at no point did it bond with the vault stones. At the entrance to the vaults, one metre to one and a half metres of soil was present when the facades were constructed and steps were built to reach the floors of the vaults. The facade was constructed of re-cut stones and architectural fragments from the ancient city. The size of the stone appears to have been the major criterion for stone selection and not any aesthetic reason. Facing the vaults is an arch which is bonded to an earlier, probably Phase VI, wall. The bonding is of smaller stone, but the idea was to make the ancient wall and the arch appear as one architectural unit (Fig. 4).

Built up against this same ancient wall are two houses at the eastern end of the sunken area. One house, originally a dwelling unit, was partially removed during the season (see below). The other house is a *tabun* house which only recently went out of use. The construction techniques, use of space, arches, etc., were recorded and are typical of the period from 1900 to the present. This construction provided an opportunity to excavate recent construction to understand the building techniques better; and, an opportunity to discuss the construction techniques with the villagers. This provided comparative data for the earlier excavations at Tell Irbid. Part of the roof of the *tabun* house was removed as a probe. This probe showed that the construction was of beams, twigs and mud; and, this information proved to be parallel to the data from the Tell Irbid thirteenth century B.C. structures. Also in relationship to finding out more about late construction, as well as to determine the possibility of finding part of one of the *decumanii* of the Roman city *in situ*, a seven metre section (east-west) of the soil left after a new road was built in

<sup>14</sup> This designation is based on Lenzen and McQuitty's survey.

<sup>15</sup> The excavated areas are not designated squares or areas.

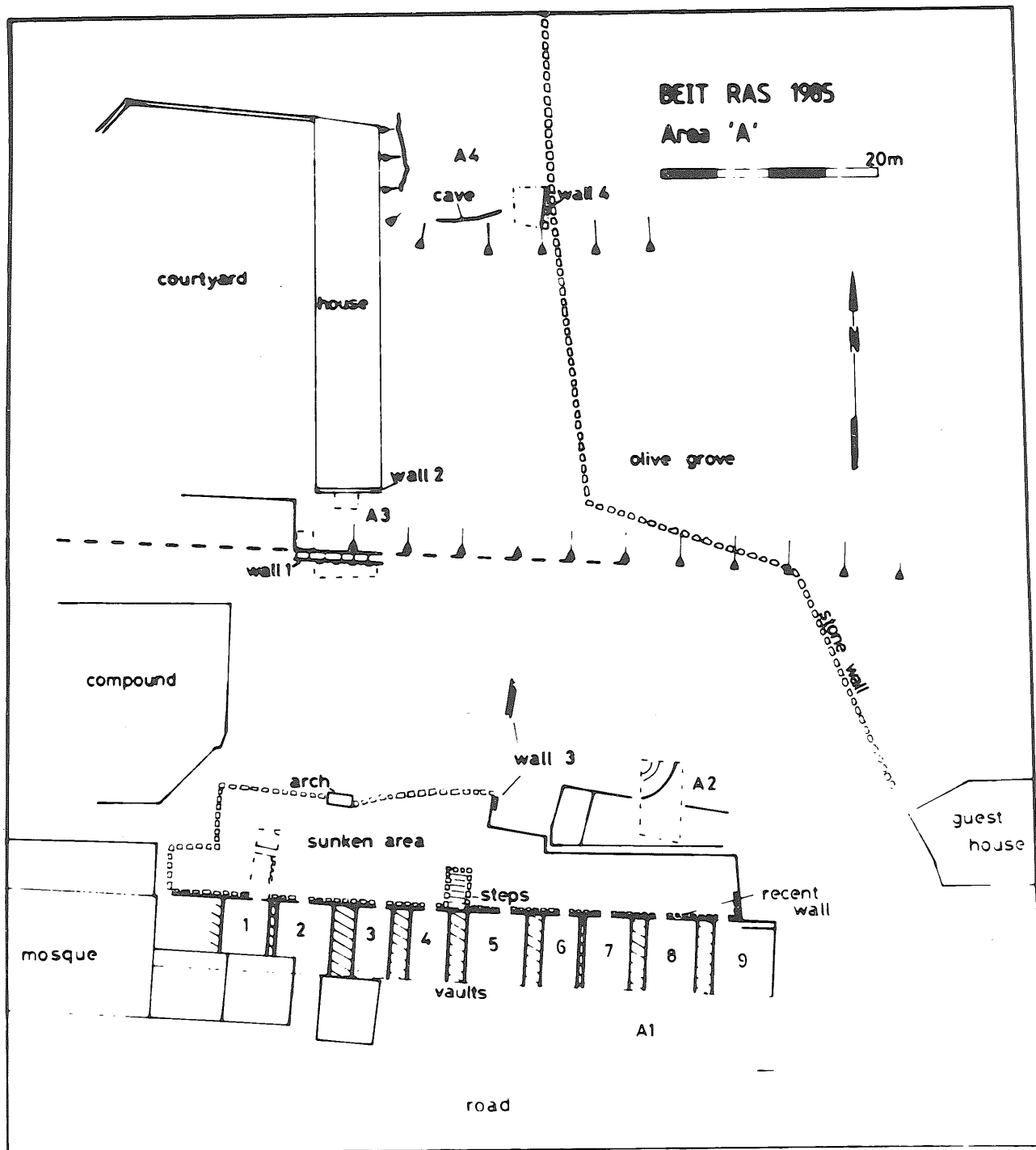


Fig. 3:

the village was trimmed and a 2.00 x 2.00 m. probe was excavated, to the south of the vaults. Successive layers of mud-flooring and dung ash were found within what had been a large stone and mud structure, removed within the last ten years. This flooring technique was also found in the Tell Irbid structures. Below the foundations for this structure, foundation stones for an earlier structure were found; however, no dating evidence was retrieved. This structure was built prior to

the living memory of the villagers. Founded on bedrock were two cyst burials which contained pottery dating to ca. A.D. 1700. It appears from this small probe that the vaults of Phase V-VII abutt the bedrock. No remains of the Roman, Byzantine or Islamic city plan were found.

Because the nine east-west vaults were known and had been partially investigated previously,<sup>16</sup> a major part of the work during the season concentrated in this area. The two side vaults--one facing east,

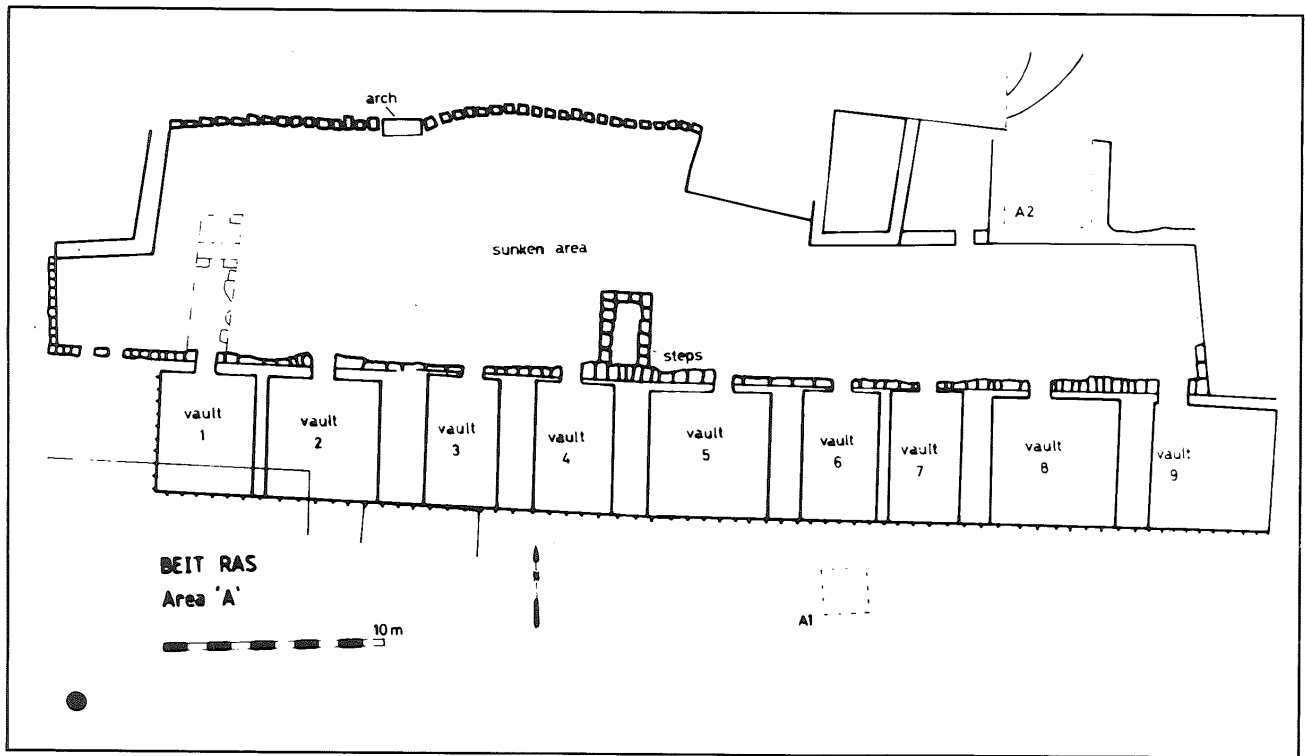


Fig. 4:

the other west-were not investigated as they have been or are being presently used as cesspits. The nine north facing vaults were all investigated and recorded; two of them, Vaults 1 and 6, were carefully excavated. The measurements of each vault varied (Fig. 4). This is accounted for partially by the amount of debris in each vault, but, more significantly, by the conclusion that these vaults post-date the Roman period and are irregular reuse of the area. It seems probable that Vault 9 is Roman in date; and, that Vaults 1 through 8 were constructed during the sixth to eighth centuries A.D.

The stratigraphic results of the excavation of Vaults 1 and 6 are consistent with each other. During Phase I, the vaults were used for storage, animals (Vault 1) and living (Vault 6). Prior to this, they were used for living quarters and large storage holes and cisterns were dug into the floors (Phase II). All evidence of Phase III and Phase IV use of the vaults was removed in antiquity. The style of the tessellated pavements found inside of the vaults does, however, provide a clue to the date (Pl. XXIII,2). (Probes through the make-up for the tessellated pavements did not pro-

vide dating evidence.) The inside of both vaults had a simple utilitarian pavement with a border pattern of angled tesserae. The tesserae were uniformly large, *ca.* two centimetres cubed, and were made from the locally available limestone. The bedding, although adequate, was not substantial. Outside of Vault 1, a tessellated pavement of the same pattern was found (Pl. XXIV, 1). This outside pavement extended below both the east and west baulks of the probe area; and, one can assume it originally extended in front of all nine vaults. To the north, this pavement was limited by a two-course wall. This would suggest that when the vaults were built, the outside pavement and the wall were built as well; and, thus, a redefinition of the space from the Roman period is suggested.

Excavations in the house, early twentieth century, across from Vaults 8 and 9 helped to support the notion of the redefinition of the space. A water installation, perhaps a pool, was excavated. The material culture remains indicated a date of construction during the late seventh or early eighth century A.D. A tessellated pavement was found in association with

<sup>16</sup> See: Lenzen and McQuitty, forthcoming.



this installation and was dated to the same period. Happily, a rebuild of the pavement was also found and this dated to the ninth century (Pl. XXIV,2).

To the north of the vaults, approximately thirty-three metres, another section of Area A was excavated. A wall, measuring one hundred metres east-west and of fine header-stretcher construction, was partially visible. Probes against this wall showed that the wall and the buildings around it were robbed during recent memory and thus no conclusive date of this wall is yet available. On construction alone, it can be dated to *ca.* A.D. 200. This was a high terrace wall which could have separated the upper part of the Roman city from the lower part of the city. Together with a heavy, massive foundation wall built against it and to the south, this wall supported a massive structure. Architectural fragments from the Roman period would indicate that a public building was destroyed to build the foundations. Because of the nature of the material culture remains excavated, e.g., gilded mosaic, glass lamps, it is suggested that these walls were the foundations for the major church in this area, as suggested by Schumacher.

To the north of the large wall, a cave, partial arch and a wall were visible when excavations were started. This area had been recently bulldozed, creating problems for excavation in that large slabs of the limestone were throughout the area. The cave, like many caves, cisterns, etc., in Beit Ras, had been used for a cesspit within the recent past; therefore, only one section of it was excavated. It appears that this entire area was used as an industrial area: inside the cave surfaces were found dating from *ca.* A.D. 600 to 1500; and, outside the cave surfaces and walls were found dating from *ca.* A.D. 200 to 750.

### Conclusion

The excavations in Beit Ras indicate that occupation of ancient Capitolias was continuous from *ca.* A.D. 200 to the present. There does not seem to be a major

hiatus in occupation, although there is a lack of information from the period of *ca.* A.D. 800 to 900. It seems likely that continued excavation in this area of Beit Ras will produce more data relative to the importance of this occupied ancient site.

### Acknowledgements

The support of Dr. Adnan Hadidi, Director-General of the Department of Antiquities; Dr. Mo'awiyah Ibrahim, Director of the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, Yarmouk University; Dr. Abdulrazik Tobaishat, the Mayor of Irbid; Dr. Andrew Garrard, the Director of the British Institute in Amman for Archaeology and History; and, Dr. David McCreery, the Director of the American Centre of Oriental Research is gratefully acknowledged. The Irbid Office of the Department of Antiquities was, as always, supportive and encouraging of our work.

The Irbid/Beit Ras Project, for this aspect of their work, was supported by a generous contribution from the Friends of Archaeology and by anonymous donations; these are gratefully acknowledged. Without the support of the archaeology graduate students of the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, many members of the international community of Amman and Irbid, who unstintingly gave of their time and energy, and the graciousness of the people of Irbid and Beit Ras, the project would not have been nearly as exciting and as successful.

C. J. Lenzen  
Yarmouk University  
Institute of Archaeology and  
Anthropology

R. L. Gordon  
Yarmouk University  
Institute of Archaeology and  
Anthropology

A. M. McQuitty  
London, England.