

Stephen Hart
British Institute at Amman for Archaeology and History
P.O. Box 925071
Amman
Jordan

Stephen Hart

The Edom Survey Project 1984–85: The Iron Age

During the years 1984 and 1985, two seasons of survey work, generously funded by the British Institute at Amman for Archaeology and History, the British Academy and the Palestine Exploration Fund and supported by the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, were undertaken in southern Jordan on the Edomite plateau, the Jebel esh-Shara. The survey is bounded on the west by the edge of the escarpment, in the north by Tafleh and in the south by Ras en-Naqb. The area between Shobak and Sadaqa has been covered by the surveys of the Udhruh project and so was not visited by this survey. The eastern border of the survey area is fluid but represents the approximate line of the desert margin where settlement ceases.

The survey included all ceramic-utilising cultures, but in this paper I will discuss only the Iron Age (Edomite) period. Five sites were sounded in the second season, three of which produced Iron Age material, and a brief discussion of these is included here. A more complete report on these soundings will appear in *Levant* 1987. Survey method consisted of purposive vehicular transects, checking the more obvious habitation areas (springs, hill-tops, wadi margins, etc.) together with any other observed sites. By this method nearly all structures should have been located but it should be noted that evidence for temporary and transient occupation (such as camp sites) was not usually retrieved.

There is little or no evidence for the early Iron Age in the area surveyed. No sherds were found that dated unequivocally to the 12th–11th centuries BC although a few ambiguous forms were found. A few sherds of perhaps the 10th–8th centuries were found but nearly all sherds recovered were 7th–5th century BC forms. Edomite civilisation in a settled form therefore cannot be said to have started much before 700 BC. A brief discussion of causative factors may be found in Hart (1986) 54–55.

FIG. 1 shows the distribution of known Edomite sites within the survey area. 'Building' is an isolated building of unclear function, possibly a farm building or watchtower; 'Hamlet' is a small cluster of buildings and 'Village' is a large, unfortified group of buildings. 'Small fortresses' are single structures, usually in the order of 20–25 metres square and 'large for-

tresses' are buildings or settlements within a strong enclosure wall.

There is a small area in the south where settlement is very concentrated. Although rainfall is lower in the south than the north this is compensated for by numerous springs. The area is also more suitable for agriculture as local topographical variation is less severe. The large, walled site of Khirbet al-Munsouria may perhaps have acted as the capital or administrative centre for this area.

Defence is a feature of site distribution, with fortresses and watchtowers along all access routes. The eastern desert flank is protected by a long line of fortresses. More (unmapped) are to be found in the area around Udhruh (see A. Killick's contribution). Access in the south from the Wadi Hismeh to the Ras en-Naqb escarpment is guarded by the huge fortress of Khirbet esh-Shedeiyid. The Wadi Delaghah, running from Gharandal to the plateau was obviously an important access route, being guarded by the strong fortress of Ghrareh.

Wadi Musa was probably also an access route although no fortress has yet been located guarding it. A minor route apparently ran by Khirbet Ishra and a modern footpath can still be followed down into the Arabah. Buseirah seems to have acted as guard for all access routes in the north although small fortresses may yet remain unlocated.

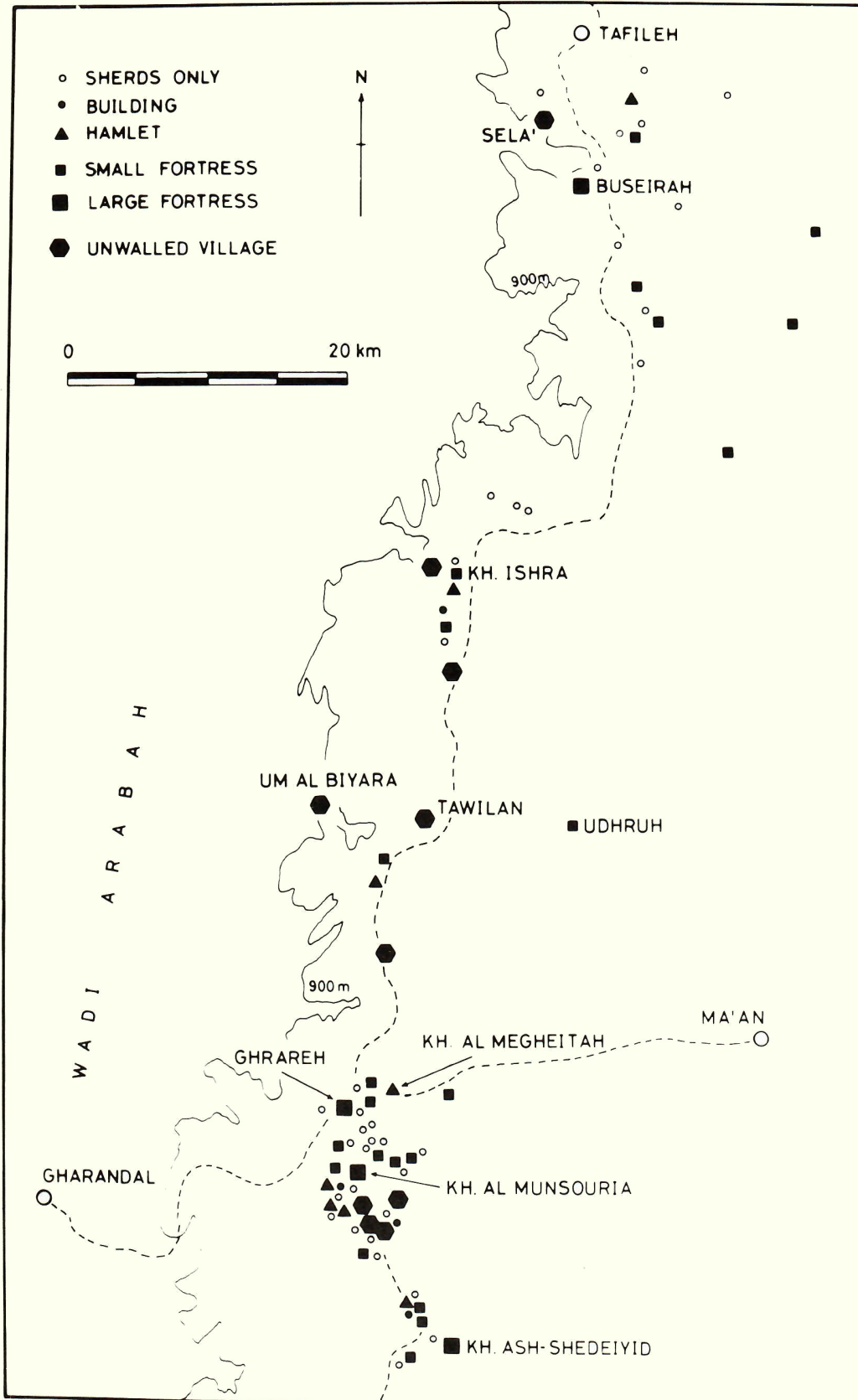
An interesting feature is the significant number of unfortified villages. Sela' and Um al Biyara, of course, have strong natural defences, both being located atop isolated massifs, but this is not general. Excavations at Tawilan, for instance (Bennett 1984) have produced no defensive walls. This suggests that the defences of Edom were, in general, quite adequate and within the borders life was usually peaceful.

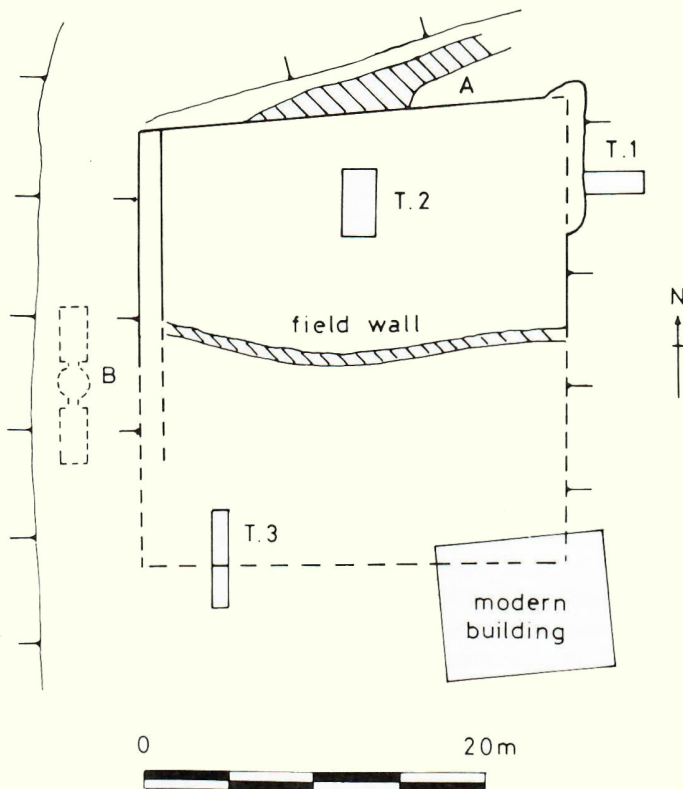
Khirbet Ishra (FIG. 2)

Khirbet Ishra is a small (c. 25 metre square) fortress, on which sherds of both Nabataean and Iron Age date may be found. The visible remains appear to be mostly Nabataean but the foundation is Edomite. It was chosen for soundings in the hope of finding evidence for the elusive Edomite-Nabataean intermediate period (cf. Bartlett 1979).

It is located atop a hill with steep slopes on two sides, guard-

1. Iron Age sites on the Edomite plateau.



2. *Khirbet Ishra.*

ing a spring and an access route to the Arabah. The outer wall has been rebuilt in the north-east corner, rather less carefully than in the original construction and on a slightly different line. 'A' may be an entrance—the slope and the rough wall suggest this, and there is an apparent gap in the main wall. 'B' is an underground cistern of presumed Nabataean date consisting of two rectangular chambers off a central, circular, shaft. The double wall on the west of the fortress is at two different levels on a steep slope.

It is not clear whether there is any direct continuity between the Edomite and Nabataean occupations. In T.1, outside the fortifications, the main defensive wall is founded on another wall of slightly different alignment and another wall, parallel to this lower wall, exists at the eastern end of the trench. All the pottery associated with the lower levels is Edomite.

T.2, inside the fortress, came down in the corner of a stone-paved room. Two rectangular stone blocks formed low benches in the corner. The floor had been swept clean in antiquity and no material was recovered from it. Judging by the surface pottery, however, the latest phase of the fortress must be 1st century BC or AD. The western wall of the room was founded on another, slightly offset wall below the stone slabs. All material from below the stone paving is Edomite.

T.3 was laid out to find the southern wall of the fortress. The outer face is clear but the inner could not be found and it seems that there was some horizontal rebuilding at this point.

While we have no direct evidence for the date of the latest

phase of the fortress, surface sharding suggests not earlier than the 1st century BC. Edomite pottery does not date much beyond the 5th century BC so there is an unaccounted-for gap. It seems most likely that the Iron Age fortress was abandoned and that the Nabataeans later decided to build on the same site, moved by the same strategic considerations that caused the fortress to be built in the first place, and utilising existing walls where feasible.

3. *Khirbet al-Megheitah* (FIG. 3)

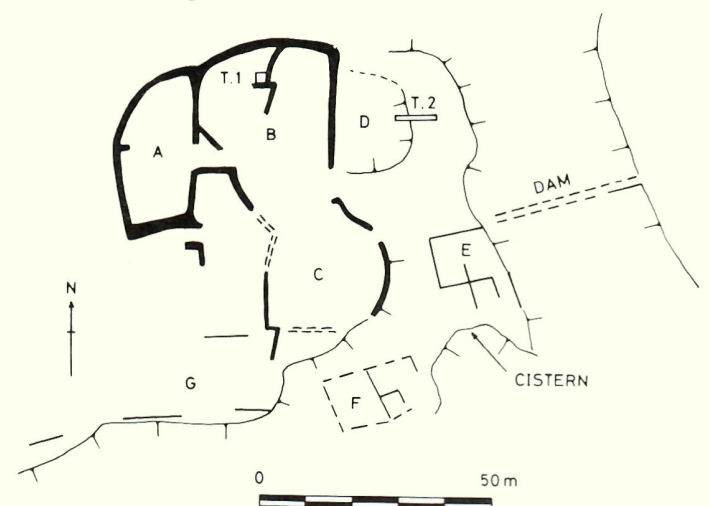
Khirbet al-Megheitah is a small site located approximately 2 km west of the spring at 'Ain Sadaqa. Both Iron Age and Nabataean sherds were found on the surface which, as at Khirbet Ishra, prompted the soundings. Only Iron Age material was found in excavation.

The site appears to be a small hamlet located on a rise at the edge of a wadi. On FIG. 3, 'A', 'B' and 'C' are large enclosures, possibly for animals; 'D' is an open pool or cistern; 'E' and 'F' are housing as are, probably, the scanty remains at 'G'. All these houses are eroded close to bedrock and no attempt was made to sound them. A cave cistern is located between 'E' and 'F'. A small dam blocks the wadi, whether for the retention of water or soil is not clear but probably the latter.

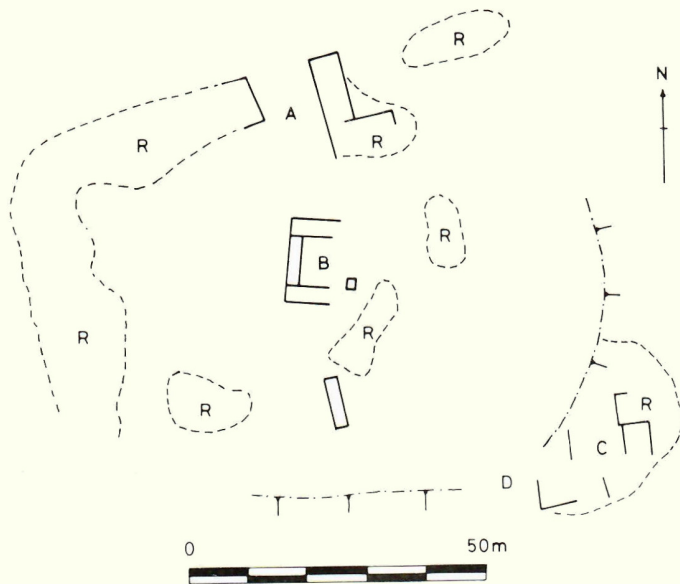
T.1 came down on a rough surface associated with a dry-stone wall. Only small sherds were found on this surface and it appears to have been external in nature, possibly within an animal enclosure or possibly with a building.

T.2 cuts across the edge of a rock-cut cistern or pool. The bottom of the pool is cut smooth and level to a depth of approximately one metre. The overall capacity of the pool is some 200–250 cubic metres.

All excavated material was standard Edomite Iron Age and, despite a thin scattering of Nabataean surface material, it seems probable that the only major period of use was in the 7th–5th centuries BC.

3. *Khirbet al-Megheitah.*

4. Ghrareh: further excavations in 1986 have shown that the 'main gate' ('A') is in fact two Nabataean buildings in fortuitous alignment.



Ghrareh (FIG. 4)

Ghrareh is an Edomite fortress located on a steep hill at the head of the Wadi Delaghah, the southernmost access route to the plateau from the west. The remains are skeletal, much having disappeared due to stone-robbing, ancient and modern, and ploughing. However the main gate ('A') and what appears to be the headquarters building ('B') still survive. The western wall survives, but precise outlines are lost under rubble ('R').

Much of the material from the eastern and southern walls must have contributed to the small group of Nabataean buildings ('C'). It is possible that the fortress had a second gateway in the south-east corner ('D') but if so, no structural surface remains can be traced. Isolated piles of rubble may indicate the presence of buildings but more probably are the result of field clearance.

A small sounding was made in the south-west corner of the main building. The sounding revealed a single period of

use with 70–80 cm of deposit above a bedrock floor. The walls, founded directly on bedrock, are of large stones interspersed with smaller snecking stones. Plaster fragments in the deposit suggest that the walls were plastered but none was found *in situ*. Much Edomite pottery was recovered from the small sounding, including a complete storage jar. From the scattered, broken pottery it would appear that the building was looted before it was abandoned.

In summary, the survey has helped to clarify the situation during the Iron Age on the plateau. It has long been realised that Glueck's identification of Edomite pottery as being early Iron Age (Glueck 1934, 1935) was mistaken but it was uncertain as to whether any true Early Iron Age material was present. Furthermore, while Glueck's survey was excellent within its own constraints, he did not have the time or resources to survey in great detail. The current survey has found many sites which he overlooked. It has also shown that before the 7th century BC there was little in the way of settlement on the plateau.

The soundings at Khirbet Ishra and Khirbet al-Megheitah have failed to support the hypothesis of direct continuity between the Edomites and the Nabataeans. While there is almost certainly some continuity of population (total depopulation of a region being unlikely), it would appear that civilisation on the plateau collapsed somewhere in the 5th century BC and did not again emerge until the Nabataean period.

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