

REPORT ON THE 1982 SEASON OF EXCAVATIONS AT KHIRBET ISKANDER

by
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Introduction

Between June 1-July 13, 1982, the second season of excavations took place at the site of Khirbet Iskander in the Wadi Wala. The site lies 24 km. south of Madaba, some 400 metres northwest of the bridge where the Madaba-Dhiban road crosses the *wadi* (Fig. 1, 2). This expedition took place under the auspices of the American Schools of Oriental Research and Drew University and was funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (grant no. RO-20386-82). Additional funds were obtained from student camp fees and private donors. The writer would like to express her gratitude to all for their support. A permit for this expedition was kindly granted by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. With a staff of twenty-four, Dr. Roger Boraas of Upsala College as field director and myself as director, the expedition set out to investigate more thoroughly the domestic EB IV occupation which was discovered in two soundings from the preliminary season in 1981. The preliminary season indicated through a sherd survey that occupation on the mound was densest in the EB III-EB IV periods; two soundings revealed evidence for what appeared to be substantial and permanent installations for the EB IV period (Richard, 1982).

The research goals of this project are specifically: 1) to identify and document the processes of change occurring at the Early Bronze III-IV transition, *ca.* 2400 B.C. in Palestine-Transjordan; and, 2) to investigate the little-known sedentary component of EB IV society. The problem-orientation of the research design for this expedition must be set against the background of late third millennium B.C. studies generally.

For the better part of this century, scholars have explained the disturbances in the archaeological record *ca.* 2400 B.C. by positing a sweeping movement from Syria

of Amorite nomads into Palestine, nomads who left destruction of the EB III city-states in their wake. This movement then is said to have culminated in a period of complete nomadic control in EB IV. Until recently, the archaeological evidence appeared to corroborate these views since the materials uncovered from Palestine-Transjordan were virtually all from grave contexts rather than from occupational deposits. New insights into the period over the last decade, derived both from the excavation of village sites and from studies which show continuity in the material culture of the EB III-EB IV peoples, suggest that explanations predicated on nomadic invasions/destructions must inevitably be put to rest (Richard, 1978, 1980).

The current working hypothesis for the EB IV period—the model of pastoral nomadism—characterizes the socio-economic organization of the population as partly nomadic/partly sedentary. This view reflects newer anthropological insights into the nature of West Semitic nomadism as documented in the Mesopotamian Ur III period and later at Mari (late third-early second millennia B.C.) Though it is true that the model of pastoral nomadism may include permanent villages, the question we are seeking to answer is: Is this model comprehensive enough to explain the archaeological record at the site of Iskander? Only continued excavation and a thorough comparative study of the EB III-EB IV levels on the mound will shed light on this question. The results of the expedition thus far suggest to the writer that continued excavation at the site of Iskander will offer significant insights into critical EB III-EB IV problems.

The 1982 Season

Our goals this season were: 1) to

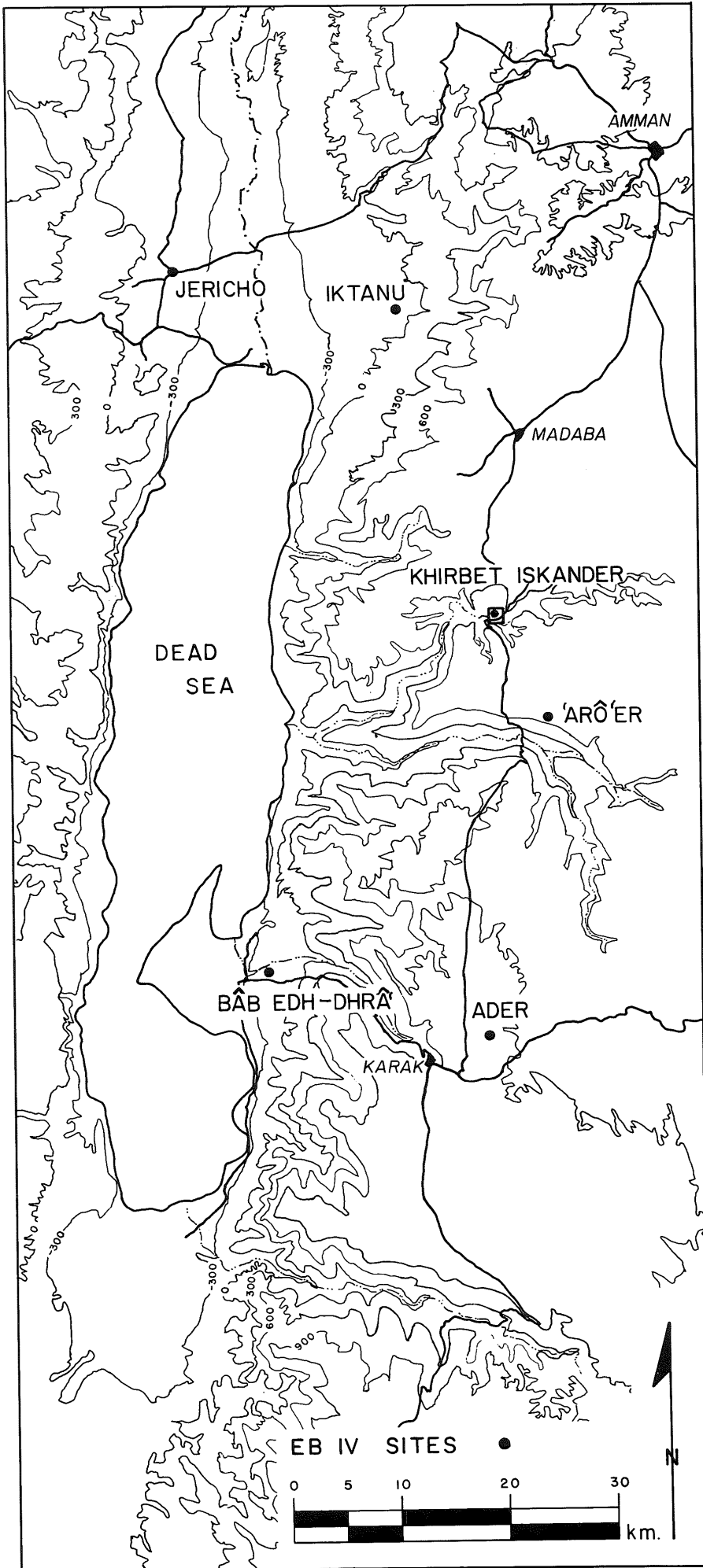


Fig. 1 Map of Jordan with EB IV sites

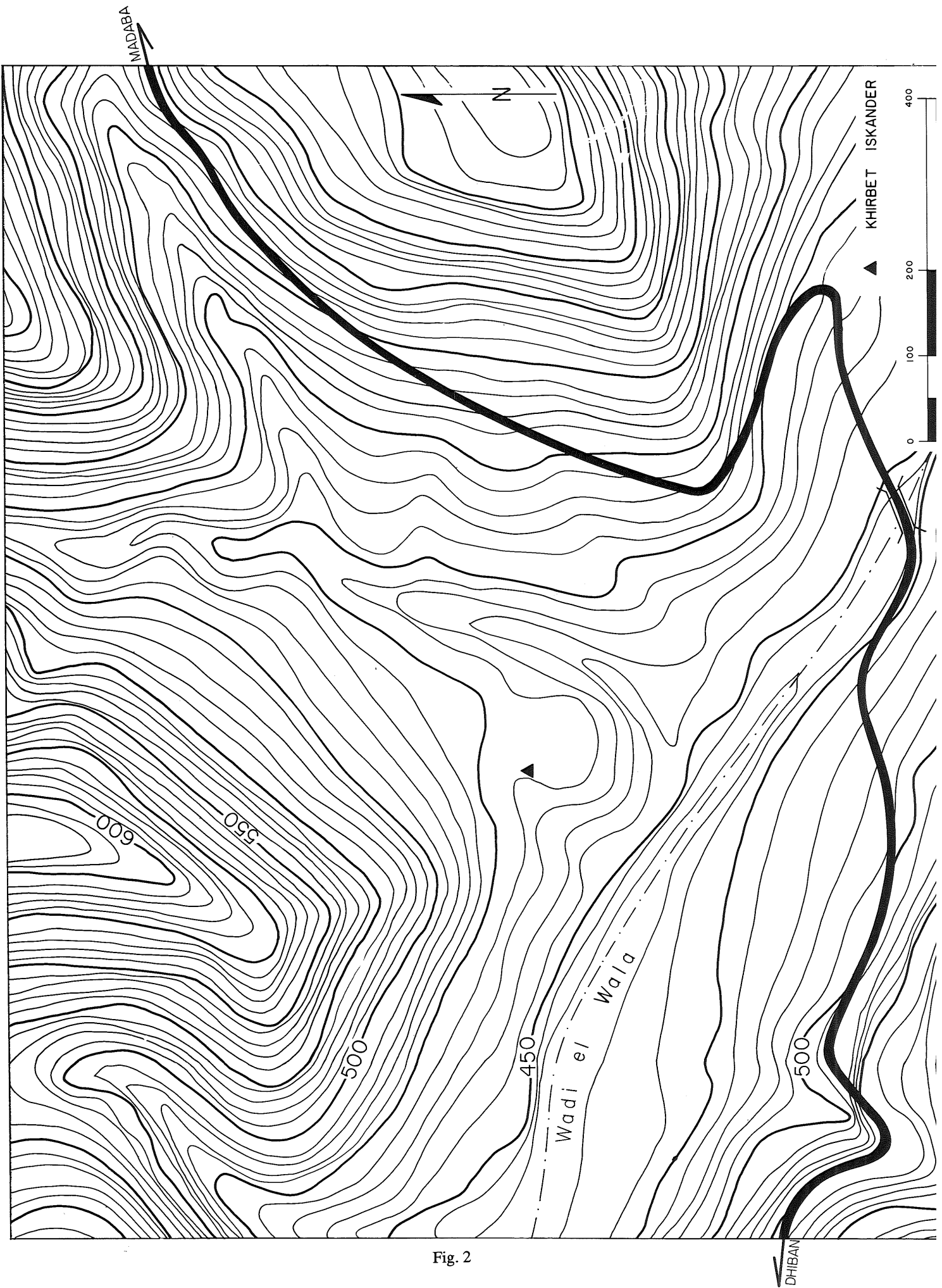


Fig. 2

expand Sounding A1 at the SW corner of the mound in order to trace laterally the substantial wall line and possible tower uncovered last year; and to clear larger areas of what appeared to be a domestic complex; 2) to expand Sounding B1 at the NW corner of the mound in order to expose what appeared to be the outer fortifications, and to investigate further the heavy mudbrick debris encountered last year in this area; 3) to open a new area (C) at the SE corner of the mound where a 2.00 m. wide opening in a substantial east-west wall had been noted; and, 4) to begin a systematic regional survey within a two-kilometre radius of the site (Fig. 3).

Sounding A1 was enlarged to a 5.00 m. square and contiguous 5.00 m. squares A2, A3, and A4 were opened to the east, north, and west of A1 respectively. The major architectural feature uncovered in A1 last year, east-west wall 1004-1047, was traced across the corners of A2, A3, and A4. The nature of this substantial wall (1.20 m. in depth, 0.80 m. in width) and its correct phasing have not yet been determined; the probability now exists that it is not a spine wall of a domestic complex but is rather a fortification or terrace wall. In each section uncovered there is a clear line of abutment discernible, thus suggesting perhaps the technique employed in its construction, i.e., short stretches of wall were built, each abutting the last. Likewise, further excavation is needed to determine whether or not wall 1047 is a tower.

What did become clear, however, is that this entire area was used as a domestic area in the EB IV period. As was discovered in Sounding A1 last year to the south and north of wall 1004-1047, house walls were encountered in contiguous squares below heavy wall tumble. In particular, in A4 two phases of domestic rooms were excavated, with new wall lines and an apparent third phase beginning to appear at the end of the season. Rough field stones of varying sizes comprised the walls of these rooms. In A2 one room was uncovered whose wall construction was superior to that of the A4 houses, more akin to the regular two-row, three to four course house walls encountered in Area B.

In A3 to the north of east-west wall 1004-1047, the area appeared to be an open courtyard, for three pits were found, one being encircled by small cobble stones. Thus in the greater horizontal exposure in Area A this year we have so far uncovered two major EB IV occupational phases. On the basis of additional architectural phasing revealed in last year's sounding, we expect to continue the exposure of earlier EB IV levels in a future season. It does not appear that we are very close to EB III levels, since some 3.00 m. down in the A1 deep probe EB IV pottery continues to appear.

In the northwest corner of the mound, Sounding B1 was enlarged to a 5.00 m. square and contiguous squares to the west (B2), to the north (B3), and to the northwest (B4) were opened. Excellent evidence was uncovered this season for the extensive domestic use of this area immediately within the northern perimeter wall. Further excavation showed that the major north-south wall shown last year to bisect B1 was but the western wall of a well-built and very typical Early Bronze Age broad-room house having dimensions of 4.00 m. in width and at least 7.00 m. in length. A socket in the southernmost stone of the east wall may indicate the presence of the doorway. Last season a *tabun* had been found constructed against the western wall in the interior of the house. The presence of the broad-room house in EB IV is significant in that it further strengthens the argument of cultural continuity between EB III and EB IV.

Additional information concerning the nature of EB IV domestic occupation came to light in B2, just west of B1. Here another typical EB broad-room house was uncovered although not on a north-south orientation as in B1. This house showed two later additions of abutting transverse walls, one against the north and the east faces. Another *tabun* was found built up against the main house wall. The *tabun* itself consisted of an outer lining of limestone fragments and ceramic fragments, and an interior lining of mudbrick; its construction differed from the *tabun* uncovered in B1 in that the latter did not have the ceramic/limestone outer

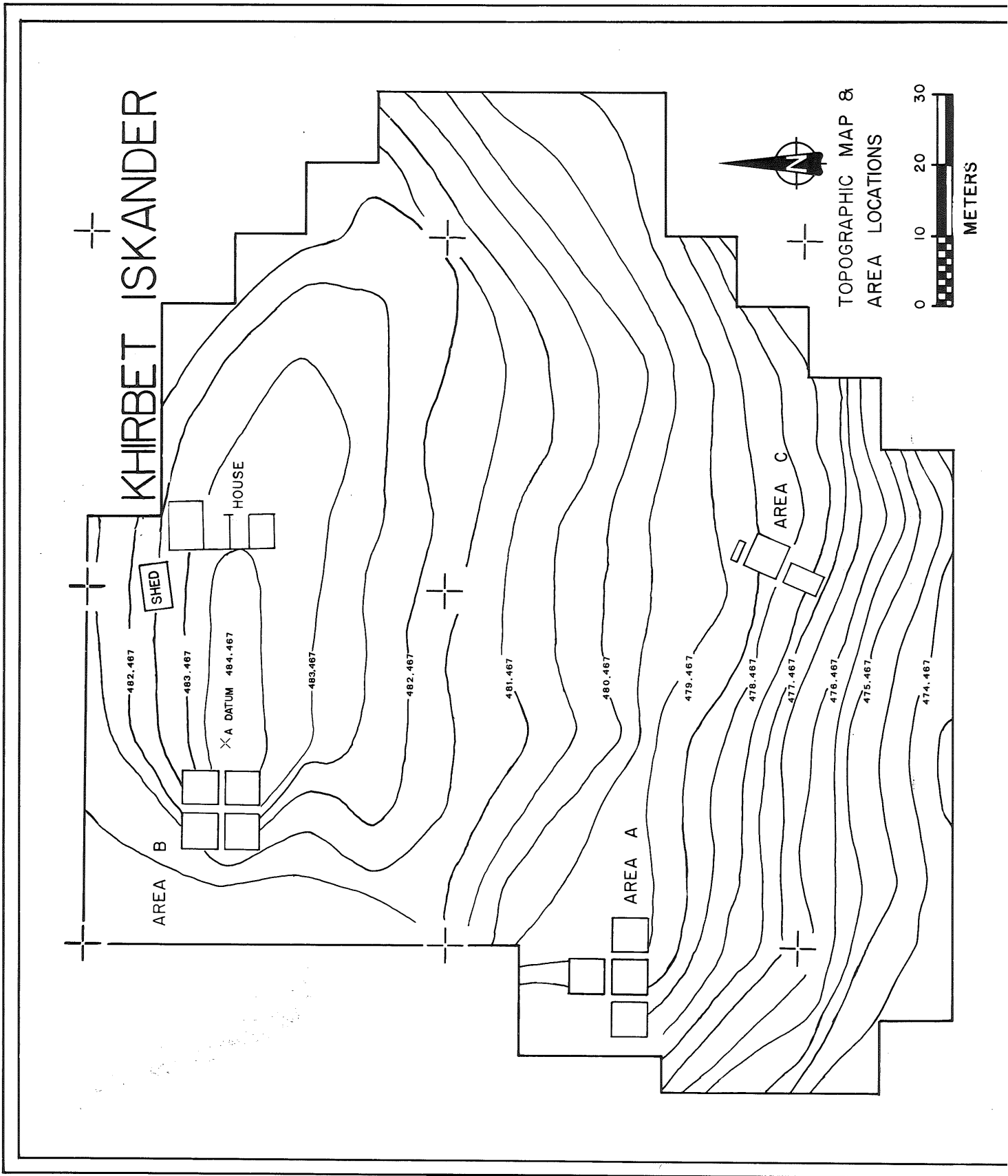


Fig. 3

shell. Both, however, rested on a foundation of small cobbles. Lying nearby on an associated surface were pounding stones, undoubtedly evidence pointing to a domestic work area. Numerous querns and grinding implements were found throughout Area B. The area west of the main wall consisted of a series of three small rooms or "bins" built up against the wall. These three unusual rooms were built of elongated stones mostly, with walls usually of one course and one row. The size of the partitions in these rooms plus the tiny entrances suggest that these rooms were used as pens for small animals; however, in the largest room, we did uncover a fine beaten earth surface. No materials were found besides pottery which might have suggested storage or work areas, although we do not rule out these possibilities.

As significant as these discoveries are for expanding our knowledge of the little-known domestic side of this enigmatic period, they are overshadowed by the fortifications uncovered, fortifications which seem to have been used or reused in the EB IV period. In B4, situated at the northwest corner of the mound, excavation uncovered a corner bastion, obviously one of the square towers that Glueck had noted at the corners and at intervals in the outer fortifications (Pl. IV). Extending to the east of the tower in B3, the northern perimeter wall was found to be 1.60 metres wide and at least seven courses (Pl. V, 1). At some later time the perimeter wall, as evident in B3, was reinforced with a 1.00 metre wide wall. The southern half of square B3 was spanned by a mudbrick wall (Pl. V, 1). The presence of this mudbrick wall does provide some explanation to the extensive mudbrick debris found in Sounding B1 last year. By the end of the season we were able to determine that there were at least three phases of outer fortifications in the following stratigraphic sequence: mudbrick wall appears to be the earliest; next the outer perimeter wall was constructed; and finally a reinforcing wall was built up against the northern perimeter wall, effectively doubling its width. Upon removal of the reinforcing

segment of wall, we discovered a wall face bonding and cornering with the perimeter wall (as seen in Pl. V, 1). The foundation levels for these fortifications had not been reached by the end of the season and only one surface (in B4) had been uncovered, unfortunately yielding no pottery. The most that one can say presently, based on pottery from the lowest levels, is that these fortifications appear to have been used in the EB IV period; whether they were founded in the EB III, as seems likely, or EB IV is yet to be determined.

At the southeast corner of the mound, a new field (C) was opened comprising three squares on a northeast-southwest axis, where further conformation for the existence of EB IV fortifications emerged. Surface indications of a 2.00 m. wide break in a substantial east-west wall determined the location of this field. It was decided to excavate the eastern half of this area, including half of the presumed entrance. Upon excavation, the surface wall line mentioned above merged as the major architectural feature in the southernmost square: an east-west perimeter wall 1.40 m. in width and having two courses but made up of massive stones; it cornered at the west end of the square, effectively forming a face to the gateway. On virtually the same northeast-southwest alignment in C2 to the north appeared a multi-phased structure, of somewhat less massive construction, which we believe is a gate (Pl. V, 2). The structure included a bench running along its west face. It is clear that construction of this guard chamber incorporated an earlier domestic structure, part of which served as the threshold across the gateway. The eastern wall of this chamber appeared in the east baulk. Examination of the gateway surface by our geologist, Dr. Frank Koucky, led to the discovery that what appeared to be a plaster-like surface was really weathered mudbrick, and in fact a small probe in the gateway near the north baulk uncovered a mudbrick *in situ*. The size of the mudbrick was 0.35 x 0.35 m. Whether this evidence reflects the collapse of a mudbrick superstructure or an earlier mudbrick fortification (as in B3) will have to await further excavation. The mudbrick spans the 5.00

m. of the gateway. What must also await clarification from further excavation is the relationship between the structures in C1 and C2, for no soil layers connected them upon removal of the baulk in-between. Possibly the construction of a later wall discovered in the baulk had destroyed all connections. Tentatively, the phasing of the gate is the following: a domestic structure first occupied the area, represented by wall 2009, the southern wall of the guardroom; later a simple gate was constructed which incorporated the earlier domestic walls, forming a room about 2.50 x 2.75 m. having an entrance presumably in the southern wall (although what appears to be a blocked doorway exists in the western wall). At some later point (when the gate went out of use?) the outer perimeter wall was constructed.

Except for the deep probe in A1, where EB IV diagnostic sherds are becoming less frequent, all occupational phases thus far excavated on the site date to EB IV. We are finding many new forms and it is clear that the pottery from Iskander will certainly expand the corpus of known forms. We have the typical beveled rim, round-based holemouth cooking pots alongside the cooking pots with everted rim and moulding, the latter being the first examples of this form attested in Jordan (Richard, 1982). Work is now proceeding on a study of the important stratigraphically controlled pottery sequences for the EB IV period. We found the typical Early Bronze Age sickle blades of the characteristic trapezoidal shape. A wide range of grinding and pounding implements as well as numerous fragments of querns were found on the site, attesting to intensive cultivation; the usual stone and ceramic spindle whorls came to light, as well as the larger stone digging weights. One exciting find occurred literally on the last day and that was the discovery of a gaming stone, of the type known from Bâb edh-Dhrâ', Arad, and numerous other sites, especially in Cyprus. This particular example is probably what may be called the classic type, that is three rows of ten cup marks, also known as the 3 x 10 pattern. It is a surface find so we cannot be sure of its

exact date, except to say the Early Bronze Age. Thanks go to Dr. David McCreery, director of the American Center for Oriental Research, for noticing this important artefact on his visit to the site.

One other new piece of information concerning the occupation span of the site did come to light this year and that is that there are later materials on the mound. In each of the three areas excavated, sherds dating to the Late Bronze/Iron Age plus a few Roman sherds, and possibly several from the Middle Bronze Age, were found in the uppermost tumble layers. The total number did not exceed a dozen or so examples and none of these later pieces was stratified. Our preliminary regional survey showed fifteen sites within the immediate vicinity of Iskander, seven of which had been visited by Glueck. The materials collected suggest dense occupation in the Wadi Wala during the Iron Age and the Roman/Byzantine periods. On the basis of the sherds collected, one can suggest tentatively that Iskander was the major Early Bronze Age site in the immediate area.

Conclusion

The significance of the Khirbet Iskander excavation lies in the fact that to date it appears to be a *tell* site evidencing quite substantial and permanent remains from the EB IV period. Apart from one-period sites in the Negev which seem to portray the seasonal occupation of pastoralists (Cohen and Dever, 1978, 1979, 1981), the bulk of our information concerning the sedentary side of this culture derives from sites in Transjordan, namely, 'Afo'er (Olávarri, 1969), Ikhtanu (Prag, 1974), Ader (Cleveland, 1960), Bâb edh-Dhrâ' (Rast and Schaub, 1976, 1979), and a new site presently under excavation, Tell el-Hayyat in the Jordan Valley. The best evidence so far for EB IV domestic occupation comes from Bâb edh-Dhrâ'. Thus far it appears that the EB IV settlement existed primarily in various areas outside the town proper. Except for a recent discovery showing EB IV remains superimposed on a portion of the EB III city wall (Rast, 1979: 33), there does not yet appear to be stratigraphic continuity

between EB III and EB IV in the town proper.

At Iskander we already know that EB IV occupation does continue in the town proper, although until further excavation, it will not be known if there is a stratigraphic break or uninterrupted continuity at the EB III-EB IV transition. Given the presence of EB III sherds on the mound and now the considerable fortifications, we have little doubt that significant EB III occupation exists at Iskander. Thus, future excavation at the site should provide evidence sufficient to describe and, hopefully, to explain the factors bearing on the cultural transition which everywhere in Palestine-Transjordan appears to have been so abrupt. An interesting new thrust to EB IV scholarship will be the investigation into the reasons for the seeming disparity in settlement patterns and levels of subsistence to the west and to the east of the Jordan River.

What this past season of excavation and Parr's earlier work (1960) have made clear, however, is that substantial EB IV domestic remains are found along the perimeter of the site at each corner within the bounds of considerable fortifications. Glueck had already noted this in his survey (1939: 127-129). Having only protruded

into the later EB IV layers on the site, we can only comment on the state of the settlement in its latest phases. In these latest levels was discovered at the southeast corner of the mound a gateway with one guardroom, a structure of significant proportions whose associated surfaces contained clear EB IV pottery. In the northwest the latest phases witness to a period of well-built and substantial broad-room houses with associated domestic equipment (*tawabeen* [ovens], bins or work areas, agricultural implements). Included in this area were a square corner tower and at least three phases of fortifications (perimeter wall, reinforcing wall, mudbrick wall). If, as seems to be the case, some phase of these defensive structures proves to have been used, if not erected, in the EB IV, our overall evaluation of this culture must be reconsidered, at least for Transjordan. Finally, at the southwest corner of the mound, excavation uncovered several phases of houses on either side of a substantial wall, a wall which includes a possible tower. Following the last EB IV settlement, the site was abandoned.

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