

EL MABRAK: AN ARCHITECTURAL ANALOGUE OF THE AMMAN AIRPORT BUILDING?

by
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The el Mabrak building was first noted by Mr. Thomas R. Pickering, the former American ambassador to Jordan, in a helicopter overpass. Subsequently, ground exploration and surface sharding was done by the writer and Dr. Patrick E. McGovern. Dr. McGovern also arranged to have a ground plan of the structure surveyed and drawn by Mrs. Susan M. Balderstone through the kind auspices of the Department of Antiquities and its Director-General, Dr. Adnan Hadidi.

El Mabrak is located about 4 kms. southeast of the Amman Airport on the north side of the greenbelt highway linking Amman with Zarqa. From its siting on a flat terrace of exposed bedrock at the top of a hill, the Late Bronze (LB) Amman Airport Building (now covered over by a runway) would have been visible. The building appears to be isolated from other ancient remains, although a fuller survey of the area is needed.

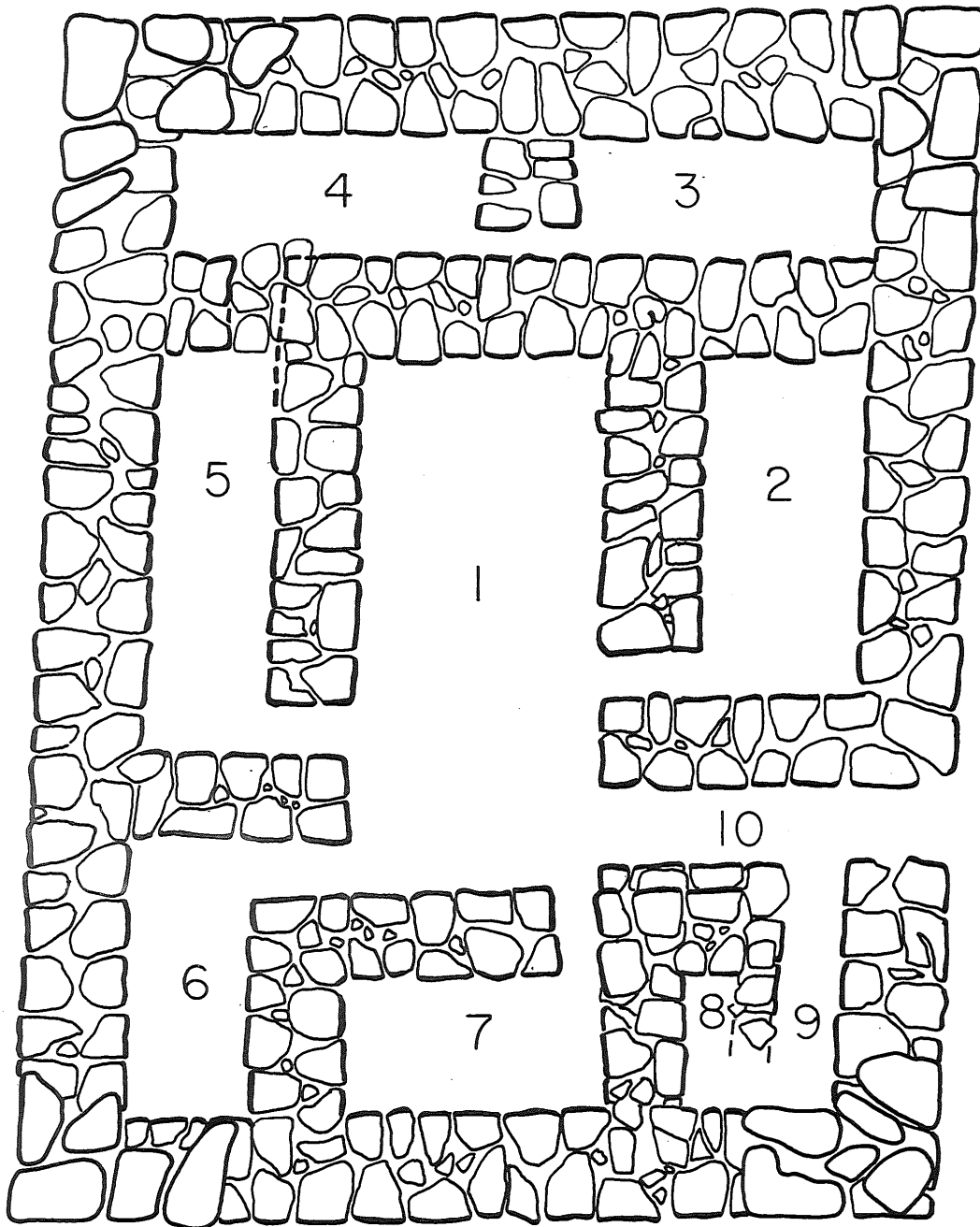
The outer walls of the structure are of uniform thickness (*ca.* 2.00 m.), and comprised of two lines of roughly shaped boulders (up to a metre in length) with dry cobble chinking (Fig. 1; Pl. C). The inner walls are similarly constructed, and bonded into the outer walls except on the northwestern side of the building where wall stubs or blocking walls exist between rooms 2/3, 3/4, and 4/5. Only a single wall course remains apart from the four outer corners, which have two or three courses built up with larger boulders (over a metre in length). In view of the lack of any other boulders in the immediate vicinity, perhaps the building was never finished. Alternatively, the stones may have been removed to another site, or a superstructure of mudbrick and/or wood has completely deteriorated and been washed away. Only a few patches of soil accumulation are now to be found inside and outside the building. The several non-descript body sherds recovered from

the surface, which can be broadly dated to the Late Bronze-Iron Age, are unreliable indicators for either the date of construction or use of el Mabrak.

The ground plan of el Mabrak (Fig. 1) is rectangular (*ca.* 18.00 x 24.00 m.) and oriented northwest-southeast. The internal space is divided up into six rooms around a central court. A stairwell (8 and 9 on the plan) with several stretchers still in place opens off the main hallway (10), which leads to the court and whose entrance is off centre in the southeastern wall. The hall is undercut by a bedrock depression, several metres deep, which appears to have been intentionally hewn out. A channel, now silted up, possibly connected the depression with a bedrock hollow, outside the southeastern corner of the structure. If so, the depression may have served as a cistern, which was filled by water runoff collected in the outside hollow. Since the depression extends into the central courtyard, it was accessible from here.

Except for rooms 3 and 4, all the surrounding rooms can be accessed from the court. Assuming el Mabrak was never finished, perhaps the intention was to cover the interior bedrock with a layer of soil or paving stones (*cf.* the Amman Airport Building -- Hennessy, 1966: 157), and then provide entrances above the lower wall course to the back rooms. More likely, the wall between rooms 4/5 was probably a stub to begin with, like that between rooms 3/4, which was later filled in. In that case, rooms 3 and 4, which may have served as storerooms, would be reached through room 5.

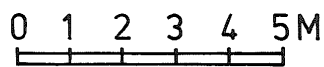
The similarity of the el Mabrak structure to the Amman Airport Building is all the more striking because of the physical proximity of the two buildings. Common features include general layout, orientation, and wall construction technique (lines or roughly shaped



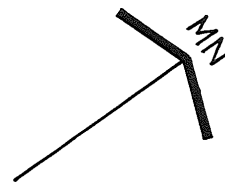
el Mabrāk

Scale - 1 : 100

Susan M. Balderstone



A.R.A.I.A. Architect.



30.11.1978.

Fig. 1: Overview of the el Mabrak structure looking west. The central courtyard is at the middle of the picture with rooms 4 and 5 in the background.

boulders with dry chinking). A more detailed examination, however, reveals that the Amman Airport Building has (1) a smaller (15.00 x 15.00 m.), square layout, (2) only a single entrance to the surrounding rooms off the central court, and (3) apparently no staircase to an upper level.

Without dateable intact loci, any exact determination of the relationship of the el Mabrak structure to the Amman Airport Building and its function (e.g., an isolated tribal shrine) is impossible. On the basis of architectural analogies, however, it may be suggested that el Mabrak was a domestic structure. The *Quadratbau* or middle courtyard house type (Type IV in Yassine, 1974) has a long history in Palestine. Beginning as early as Middle Bronze at Megiddo (Area AA, Strata XII and X--Loud, 1948; Yassine, 1974: 378-80) and on Mt. Gerizim (Boling, 1975), the type continued through the Late Bronze Age and into later periods (Fritz, 1971). Recent excavations at Rujm al-Henu East

and West (McGovern, this volume) further support such an architectural tradition, especially in the Amman region. Parallels from further afield might also be cited. For example, the so-called Assyrian Open-Court Building (Amiran and Dunayevsky, 1958) is found at Assur (Preusser, 1954: 20) and Tell Halaf (Albright, 1956: 74). A Neo-Babylonian example occurs at Babylon (Reuther, 1926: 77ff). Considering its earlier occurrence and longer history in Palestine, however, el Mabrak should probably be viewed as yet another example of a native architectural type. In general, the archaeological materials which have been recovered from *Quadratbau* structures point in the direction of domestic use rather than a limited cultic function. Systematic survey is urgently needed in the Amman region to document all examples of this building type.

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