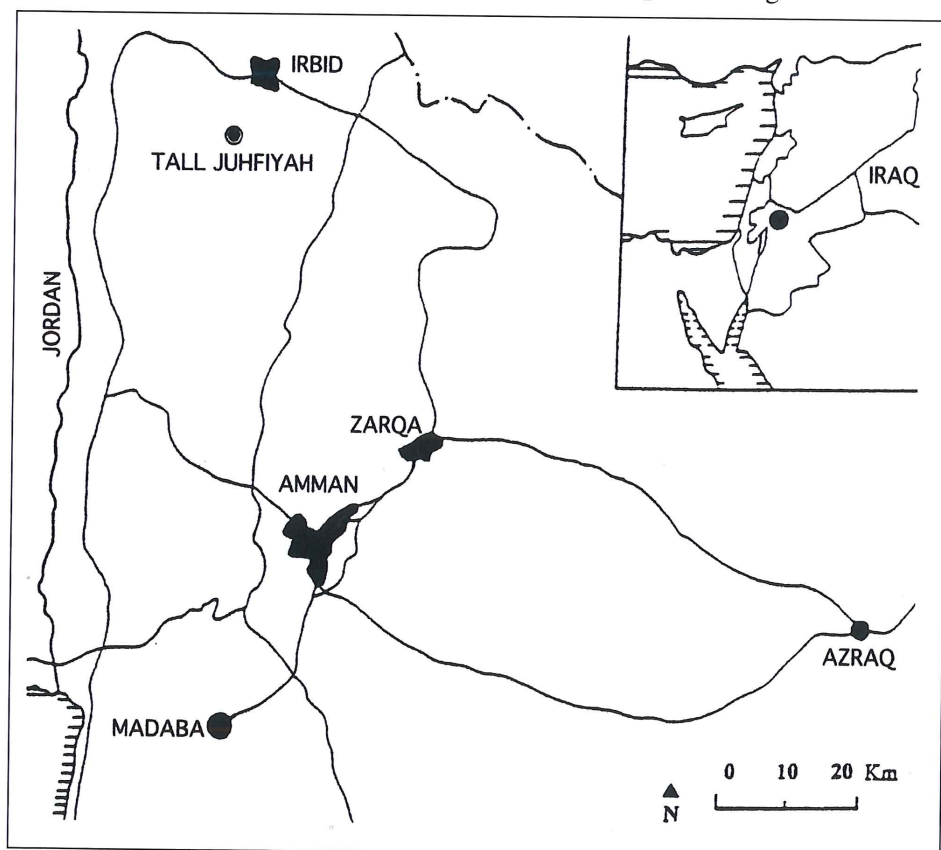


## Tall Juḥfiyah and Neighbouring Sites: Part of an Iron-Age trade-, defense- or com- munication system?

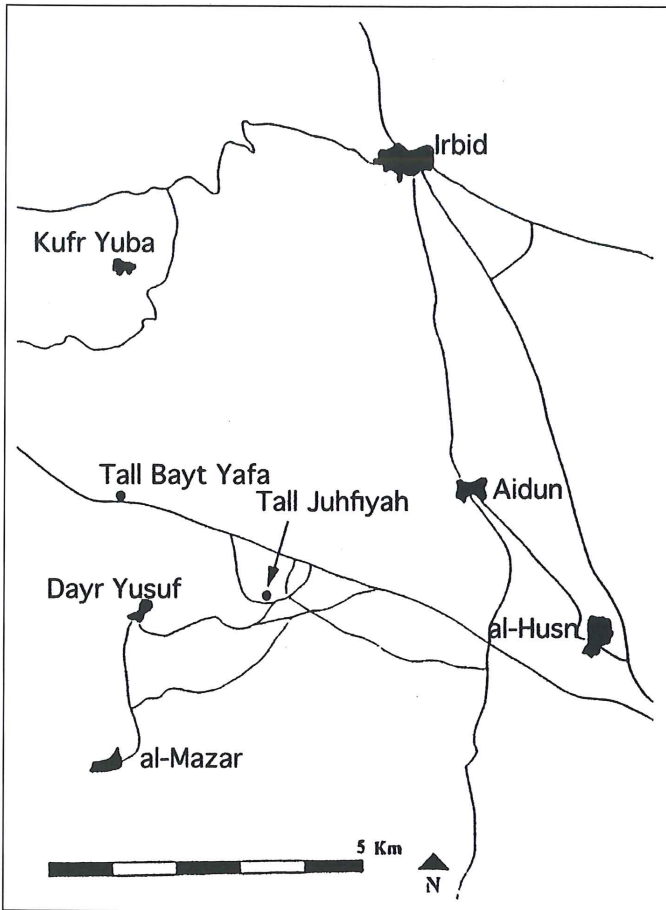
Several trips to the surroundings of the northern Jordanian city of Irbid (FIGS. 1, 2), during the past years, aroused our interest in a string of small archaeological sites. These sites, mainly situated to the west and southwest of Irbid are, among others (FIG. 3): Tall Juḥfiyah (FIG. 4), Tall Bayt Yāfā, Tall ash-Shiqāq (FIG. 5), Ḍahrāt Sawqa'a, Tall Kufr Yūbā and Qaṣr al-Ghūl (FIG. 6), which is situated already within the western suburbs of modern Irbid. None of these sites have ever been excavated. Surface pottery, however, suggests that they date primarily from the (late) Iron Age II, that is most probably the seventh to sixth century BC, a period of time often labeled with the term "pax

assyriaca" (Lamprichs 1996: 332-337; 1997: 436-446).

Despite the work done in northern Jordan during the last decades (e.g. Mittmann 1970; Banning and Fawcett 1983; Banning 1985; Lenzen and McQuitty 1988; Ma'ani 1992) only very few excavations of Iron Age sites have been undertaken on the north Jordanian plateau. Furthermore, virtually no ancient texts are available to clarify the role of these sites, their nature, material culture, function or relationships among each other (Ottoson 1969). In addition to the general problems caused by this "state of research", an analysis and interpretation of those few Iron Age sites in the region which were at least partly excavat-



1. Tall Juḥfiyah: a general map.



2. Tall Juhfiyah: a detailed map.

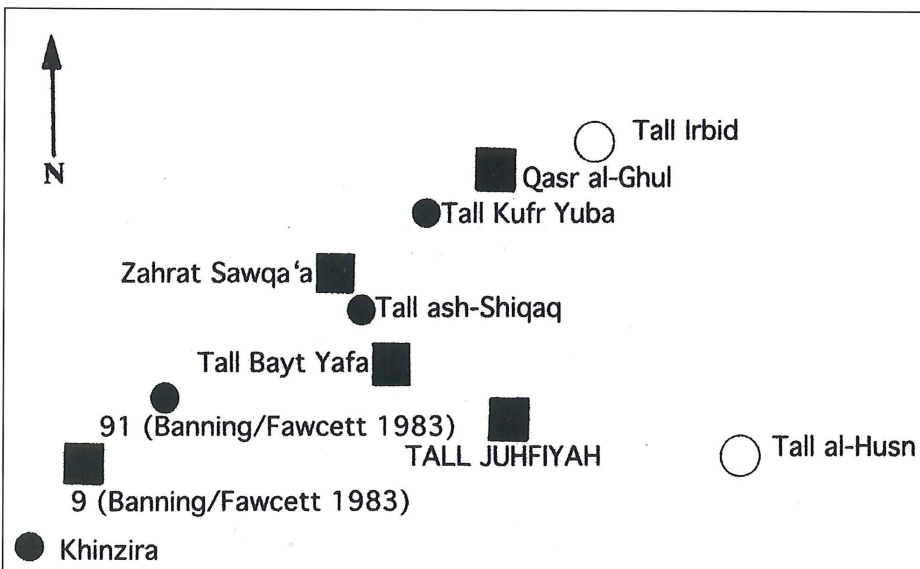
ed or surveyed scientifically [e.g. Irbid, Tall ar-Rumayth, Tall al-Fukhār, Tall Mughayyir, Tall al-Ḥuṣn (pipeline cuts), Tall Abil, etc.] is often rendered difficult by the following facts:

1. Iron Age layers are often disturbed by silos of the Persian period.
2. There are no regional systems for the classification of pottery and finds, often systems developed for other regions have to be used.
3. Exhaustive archaeological reports and publications are often not available.

The information available about the six sites we are talking about is so far largely due to (early) travellers (e.g. Schumacher 1893/Steurnagel 1926; Abel 1967) and to research done by N. Glueck (1951: 154-176), who visited the area during his extensive explorations in Eastern Palestine as well as to several more recent site-compilations (e.g. Zwickel 1990; Palumbo 1994) and maps (e.g. Höhne 1981, TAVO B IV: 6). All sources, however, are mainly confined to short descriptions and a rough dating of the sites. The suggestions regarding the functions of particular sites are therefore not well-founded. They vary from agricultural facility and fortification system to part of a trade or communication network.

A revisiting of the sites done in a cooperative effort between Ziad al-Sa'ad from Yarmouk University and ourselves was therefore aimed at clarifying the roles, material cultures, functions and relationships of the mentioned series of (hitherto enigmatic) ancient sites. A closer investigation of Tall Juhfiyah and neighbouring sites was carried out during our research (Lamprichs 1996; 1997; Lamprichs and Kafafi 2000) and showed, for example, that the settlement-pattern represented by these sites is almost semi-circular, or better semi-oval. Its open eastern part is limited by the city of Irbid to the north and by Tall al-Ḥuṣn to the south (FIG. 3).

Another intriguing aspect of most of these sites is that they share some common characteristics concerning location, size, shape, date and state of preservation: The once

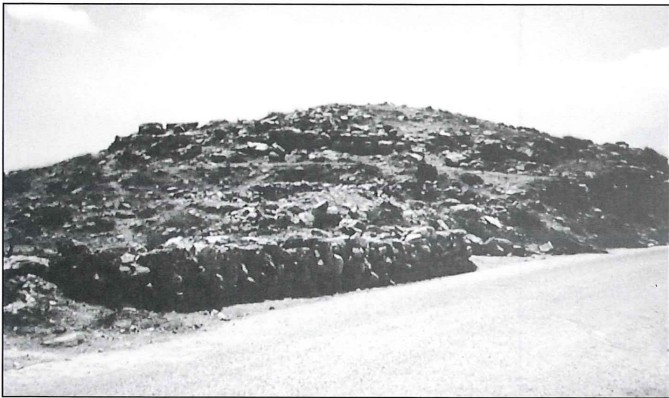


3. Tall Juhfiyah and neighbouring sites.

isolated sites are generally located on spurs or hilltops within cultivated agricultural lands, so that modern farming activities have sometimes encroached upon them.



4. Tall Juḥfiyah: a general view.



5. Tall ash-Shiqāq.



6. Qaşral-Ghül.

They are all situated in a prominent position at an altitude of 600m or more above sea level, which guaranteed them a panoramic view across the north Jordanian plateau. Some of the generally small sites are furthermore in range of sight of each other. The individual site's basic shape is almost oval or circular and the large quantity of huge stones found on their surfaces indicate that most of them once may have consisted of some sort of "massive installation", or at least contained such a building. Apart from numerous illicit diggings their general state of preservation is, with a few exceptions, quite good.

The pottery found on the surface is mainly from the Iron Age, most probably Iron Age II, as already said (FIG. 7). Typical so called Iron Age I pots (see e.g. Ji 1995) have not been identified so far. The pottery assemblage, however, also revealed earlier phases such as the Bronze Age and later ones such as Roman, Byzantine and Islamic phases of settlement, at least for some of the visited sites. For the Islamic periods, the most common forms are jars, small bowls and storage vessels. There are also very few sherds from the Ottoman period (Lamprichs 1996: 327-328).

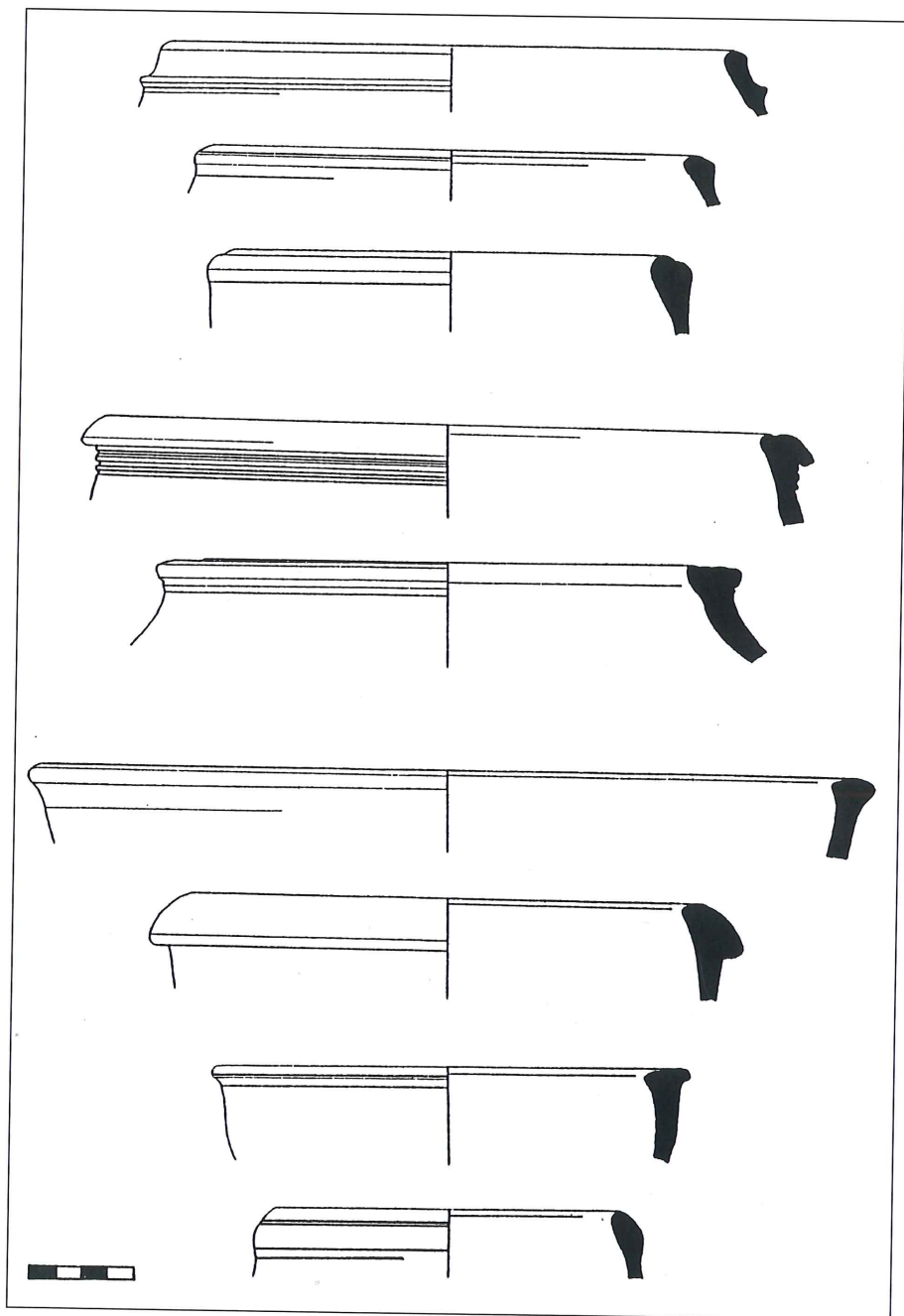
The collected Iron Age pottery includes, among others, cooking pots, bowls and a form of krater with an incised decoration on the rim (FIG. 7). Cooking pots, however, with a very typical elongated rim, which is triangular in section, are completely missing as mentioned above (Lamprichs 1996: 332-337; 1997: 453-454).

The extent to which the suggested chronological classification of the Iron Age pottery is valid for Tall Juḥfiyah and the neighbouring sites remains debatable. This is due to its source, that is the comparison to non local or regional material. As shown for example by Dr. Kamlah, then Tübingen University (Kamlah 2000: 120-127), who analyzed the Zayraqūn (Zeraqon) survey, the Palestinian

classification and dating scheme (e.g. Amiran 1969) for Iron Age cooking-pots is not generally valid for north Jordanian pottery found on the plateau (see also Hendrix *et al.* 1997). Similar results have to be expected for other vessel shapes as well. Only a regional pottery sequence, still missing for the Iron Ages, based exclusively on quantitative and stratigraphic information from north Jordanian sites, can solve basic problems such as these.

The brief listing of general characteristics such as shape, location and size given so far, are typical of almost all the sites mentioned above. Fundamental differences

were observed only once: at Qaşr al-Ghül. Small deviations, however, were found at Tall Kufr Yübā and Zahrāt Sawqa'a. Tall Kufr Yübā, one of the largest sites visited, did not, for example, have an Iron Age founding but is a settlement that was already in use during Early and Middle Bronze Age periods. At Zahrāt Sawqa'a the original shape of the main settlement is still unknown. Due to a heavy surface disturbance, showing only sparse remains, a rectangular or rather more the expected circular/oval reconstruction of the sites shape are both possible.



7. Tall Juḥfiyah: a selection of pottery.

Qaşr al-Ghūl (FIG. 6), however, as already mentioned differed in many aspects. Its location at the upper course of Wādī al-Ghafr is, of course, of some strategic significance but it is not at all a prominent position by topographic means. Furthermore no panoramic views across the north Jordanian plateau are possible and Qaşr al-Ghūl is not in a reach of sight of any of the other mentioned sites. It consisted most probably only of a rectangular tower and was not surrounded or even integrated within cultivated agricultural land. Its Iron Age date given by Glueck (1951) is also questionable and shows clearly that the other findspots (i.e. Tall Juḥfiyah, Tall Bayt Yāfā, Tall ash-Shiqāq, Ṣahrat Sawqa'a and Tall Kufr Yūbā) form a homogenous group of sites from which Qaşr al-Ghūl has to be separated.

Despite results such as this, and further evidence made available by our research activities, it is still impossible to give an exact indication of the function and status of the sites. It remains, for example, unclear if there are any convincing parallels to the distribution and function of the so-called "Rujm al-Malfuf buildings" found in and around 'Ammān (e.g. Yassine 1988; Najjar 1999; Thompson 2000) or to similar installations known from central Jordan (Younker 1989; 1991; 1996) and from Palestine (e.g. Ron 1977; Mazar 1982; Kletter 1991). The same is true for comparisons made between them and agricultural facilities called "field towers" or "watchtowers for crops" (cf. Isa. 5.2, Chr. 26,10) as well as particular defense systems of the past (Gese 1958; Hentschke 1960; Fohrer 1961; Graf Reventlow 1963; Kletter 1991: 33-34).

In order to clarify the precise nature and role of the mentioned sites, more fresh evidence is needed, from both archaeological surveys and in particular excavations. For the time being we can only make suggestions, discuss them properly and try to verify them by the data available.

None of the functions and status of the sites, mentioned so far, ranging from part of a (regional) trade, communication or fortification system to agricultural facilities or settlements of different clans or families can be excluded at the moment with certainty (Najjar 1999: 103-106).

Against the assumption that the sites were part of a communication system is the fact that almost all sites are in line of sight of each other. A special mediator-role, which would in that case be expected at least for some of the sites, could not be assigned to any of them. Only Tall Juḥfiyah, Irbid and the so far not mentioned Kawm Natfah are situated in one line and the latter may have taken a mediator-role between Tall Juḥfiyah and Irbid, which are not in sight of each other.

An interpretation of the sites as part of a trade network is very unlikely as well. Apart from what was already discussed, the atypical semi-circular settlement pattern and, in particular, the short distances between the sites are

prime arguments against this suggestion. Only the already mentioned site of Qaşr al-Ghūl, located in a strategic position at the upper course of Wādī al-Ghafr, which was presumably an important route that connected the Jordanian plateau with the Jordan Valley and vice versa, may be labeled by terms like trade or protection of trade routes.

A further suggestion, already made by Glueck (1942; 1951) in the 40's and 50's of the last century, that most of the sites may have contained some sort of "fortified building" and were therefore part of a complex "watchtower" or "fortification system" securing the area around Irbid against threats from the outside by offensive military actions, is not convincing either. The military characteristics of the sites appear to be, if at all, mainly defensive. They could have sheltered, for example, the population of the immediate vicinity rather than providing a base for a military effort or attack against outside threats. The spatial distribution of the sites most likely follows natural geographical contours or a culturally motivated division of cultivable lands, characterized by the transition zone between the 'Ajlūn hills and the northern Jordanian plateau. "Military lines" or "borders" are not apparent. Furthermore the visited sites are not aligned in any clear sort of "military order" and no surface evidence of weaponry was noted. The semi-circular settlement pattern mentioned in the beginning may, therefore, be attributed to topography and to the division of farmland only.

A domestic function of the sites as "agricultural facilities" or small "clan or family settlements" seems more appropriate for the time being. This, however, does not preclude a defensive function in time of emergency.

Like the agricultural facilities known as "field towers" (e.g. Ron 1977; Dar 1981) or watchtowers for crops (Younker 1996) in other regions, the north Jordanian sites visited by us are generally on agricultural land, mainly in vineyards and plantations, or areas that were once such. Here and there they are found mainly at an altitude of more than 600m and generally the distance between them is not too far. In Palestine the smaller ones were often used for dwelling or for storing agricultural tools and products during summer since they offer many advantages, such as convenience in harvest time, protection from the heat during the day and from the cold at night. Furthermore they offer a solution to the stone-surplus as a kind of container for superfluous stones.

The larger sites, on the other hand, may represent centers of different "clans" or "families" from where the farming activities on the accompanying fields and vineyards (of a particular clan/family) were organized.

Without further data, however, the exact line between field towers or centers of a clan/family, private and public functions, or defensive or offensive facilities, will remain unclear. Anyhow, most probably the sites and their facilities served many functions, which perhaps depended on

topography, or on climate, or on human needs and activities. It goes without saying that such needs could change with time.

**Summarizing:** Tall Juḥfiyah, Tall Bayt Yāfā, Tall ash-Shiqāq, Ḥahrat Sawqa‘a and Tall Kufr Yūbā are quite homogeneous sites dating mainly to the (late) Iron Age II. Their function is probably best described by terms like agricultural facility or center/building of a clan or family. In consequence, the sites would fit into a social structure characterized by private land and ownership where most of the clans or families own one of the facilities connected with the visited sites. Furthermore it is then reasonable to conclude that the analyzed sites are an impressive archaeological expression of the so called “pax assyriaca”. During this period of time the inhabitants of northern Jordan were presumably able to carry out farming activities of great diversity and extent, since they benefited from relative internal and external security. To what extent the Assyrian empire directly participated in that process is not clear, since there is no evidence of large Assyrian garrison forces in the area. One can assume, however, that Assyria encouraged intensive agricultural use of the land, or at least did not interfere with it, since Assyria had a direct economic interest in maintaining “provinces” like Gilead, to extract more tribute (Lamprichs 1995: 112-129, 237-249).

However, as already said above, these hypothesis as well as the already given ideas and research results are only a first step in a more encompassing project. More investigations, especially excavations like the one planned at Tall Juḥfiyah and systematic surveys are necessary.

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