

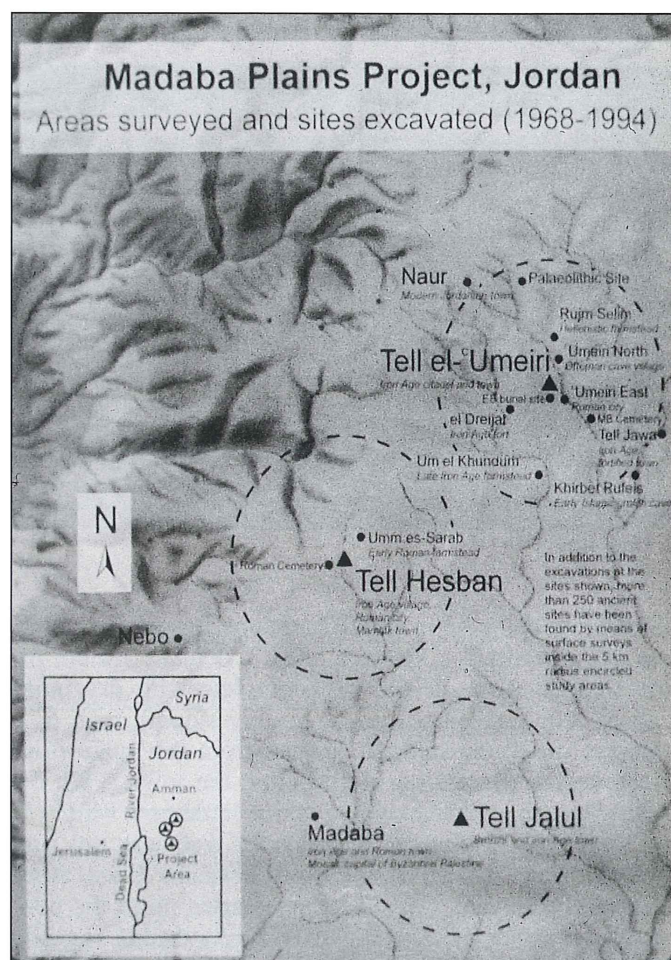
Excavation, Restoration and Presentation of Tall al-'Umayrī (Mādabā Plains Project) 1998-2000 or Telling, Untelling and Retelling the Story of Tall al-'Umayrī

Building on excavations in the Mādabā Plains region of central Jordan stretching back 34 years to the beginning of archaeological research at Tall Ḥisbān in the 1960s, the team at Tall al-'Umayrī continues intensive excavation and survey endeavors, maintains a strong program of site consolidation and has recently launched a major effort to restore and present the site to local and international publics (FIG. 1). Along with the support of the royal family of Jordan, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the Department of Antiquities, Dr. and Mrs. Raouf Abujaber, the American Center of Oriental Research, the Amman Training College, Mādabā Plains Project directors and staff, and local laborers, the size and longevity of the project have afforded us the unique privilege of uncovering 'Umayrī's varied past. These same factors and groups have also placed us in an exceptional position to present the results of our work for future generations to enjoy and learn from.

The three years since the Copenhagen conference have witnessed two excavation/survey seasons at al-'Umayrī (1998 and 2000) (FIG. 2), one Near and Middle Eastern Research and Training Act fellowship at ACOR focused on the study and partial restoration of the Iron I four-room house (1999), and redirected energy and investment into the presentation of the site. These have all led to the results and plans presented below.

Archaeological Results from the 1998 and 2000 Excavations, Chronologically Arranged

Early Bronze I — The lower southeast slope of the tall, Field K, produced a remarkably well preserved EBI dolmen in 1994, minus only the cap-stone (FIG. 3). Since then excavations have revealed 20 burials and as many ceramic vessels in addition to numerous pieces of jewelry (FIG. 4). As well, there were surrounding the dolmen multiple plastered and semi-plastered or pebbled surfaces, which dated to the same period, some extending up to ten meters distance from the burial (FIG. 5). This may be the first time in the eastern Mediterranean that use surfaces,



1. Study Area Map.

like the six uphill of the burial and three down slope from it have been directly associated with a dolmen. We also unearthed in connection with these use surfaces a cobbled hearth, and a stone table or platform.

Middle Bronze IIC — On the northwestern escarpment of



2. South View of the Tall.



4. Dolmen Contents.



3. Early Bronze Dolmen.



5. Surfaces Surrounding Dolmen.

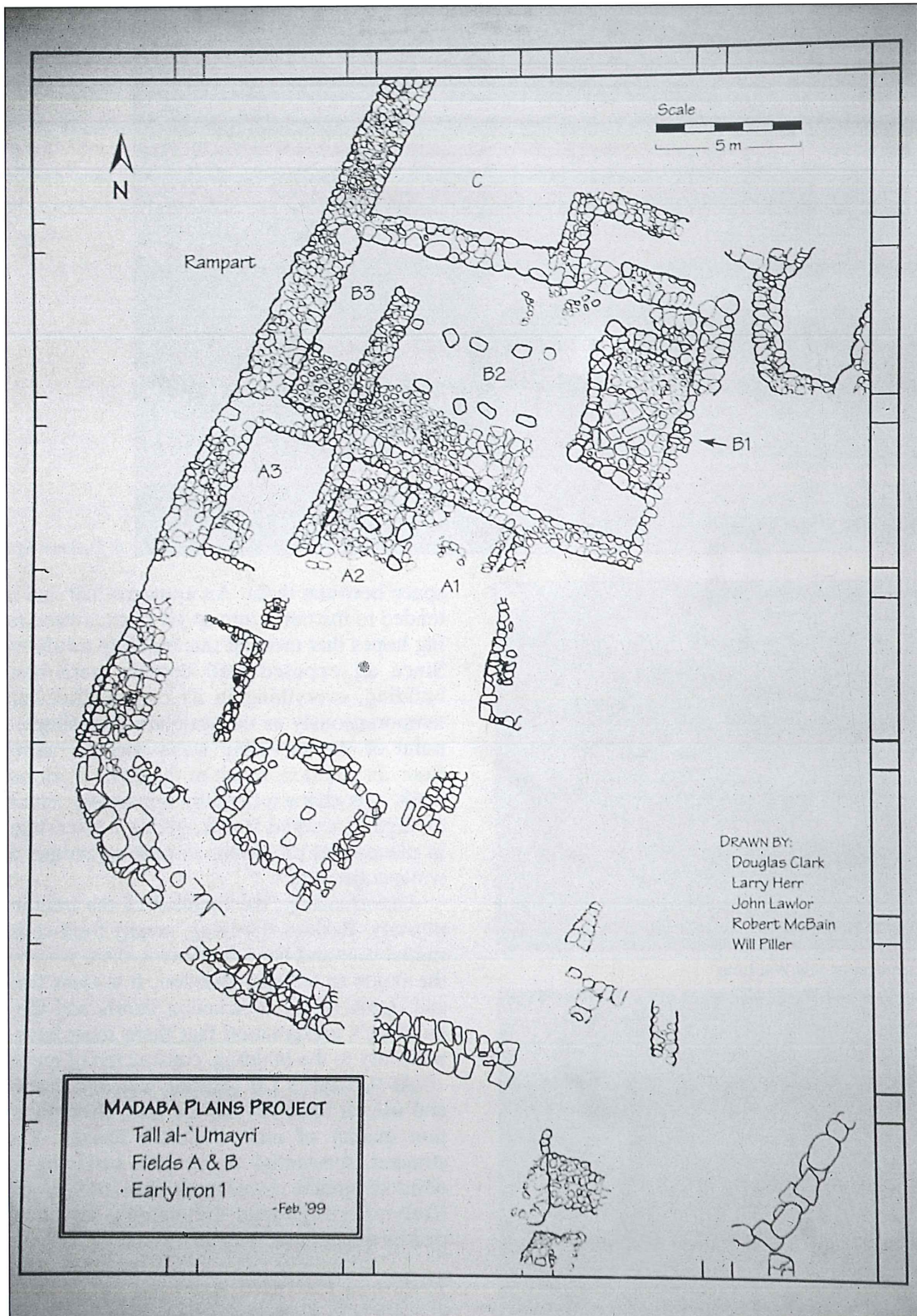
the tall we came upon MBIIC remains. Up to this point, we had unearthed a massive MBIIC defense system on the western slope of the tall, complete with dry moat carved into the bedrock and a steeply sloping terre pise rampart which extended 20 meters from the moat to its crest, before descending slightly into the town (FIG. 6). There was no evidence of an exterior settlement wall.

While the absence of a perimeter wall was not surprising, given the archaeological evidence from other sites in the Levant, this discovery alerted us to the possibility of uncovering more MBIIC architectural remains which might be associated with the defenses of the site as well as domestic structures during this period. These came in the form of a three-meter-long MBIIC wall segment of large (Cyclopean) stones approximately 18 meters inside the perimeter rampart crest. It constituted the lower wall stones of a building about which we know little at this point (FIG. 7). More important was the presence of an MBIIC wall segment at the northernmost exposed section of the town's western wall. It likely

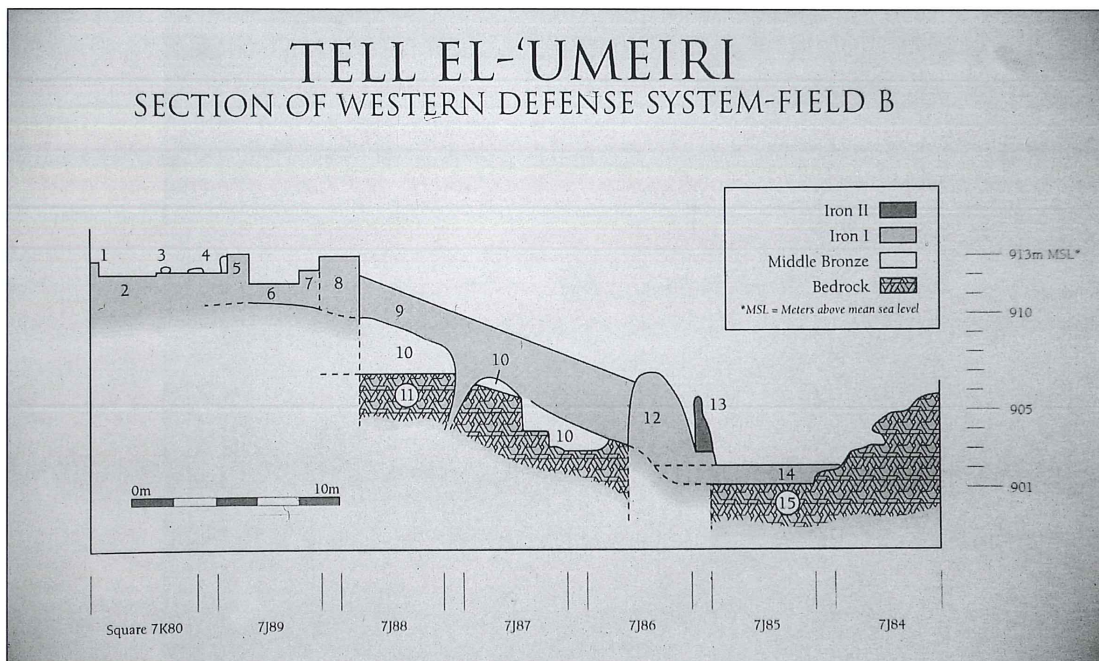
represents part of a corner tower, later added on to in order to create the western Iron I perimeter wall. Inside were the remains of another wall, mudbrick founded on courses of stone, along with a finely plastered water installation.

Late Bronze IIB — In remarkably close proximity to the MBIIC tower remains, and dug into the eastern portion of its destruction debris, there surfaced an impressively well-preserved two-room LBIIB building (FIG. 8). Given the extremely rare occurrence of coherent LB architectural remains on the Jordanian plateau as reflected in a major abatement in settlement history (the Amman Airport mortuary installation and fragmentary structures at Saḥāb are among the infrequent examples), this find may be more significant than its two virtually empty rooms, joined by a doorway, might suggest.

When nearly completely cleared at the end of the 2000 season, the building consisted of at least two rooms encompassing a total of 31 square meters of floor



9. Topographic Plan of Iron I Architecture on Western Portion of the Tall.



6. Defense System Section.



7. Iron I Pit Founded against MB Wal Line.



8. Late Bronze Two-room Building with Janelle Worthington, Kent Bramlett and Jonathan Ponder.

space between them. An apparent hall and doorway extended to the north into as yet unexcavated remains, raising hopes that more of this building awaits our attention. Since all exposed wall corners were bonded in this building, everything in its construction happened contemporaneously as the structure took shape. The highest point of the surviving walls was 3.5 meters from the floor. In addition, much of the stone work on the interior walls was characterized by apparently naturally squared or slightly worked stones, giving a brick-like appearance in places and providing something unique among other walls at the site.

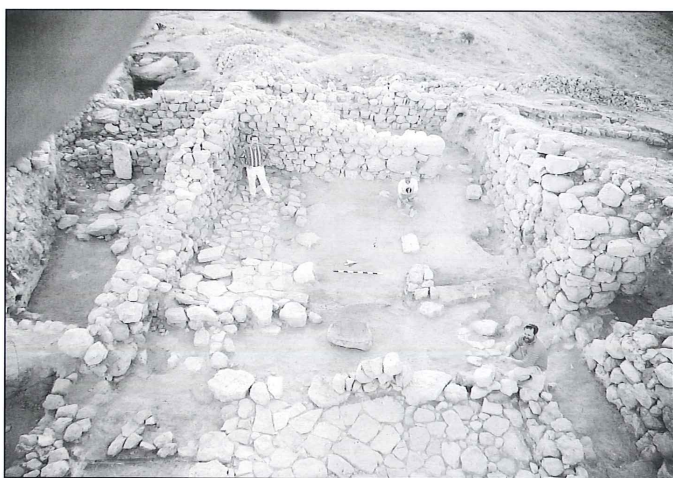
Unfortunately, the function of the building remains a mystery. Besides flat-lying, mostly food-consumption ceramic ware and bone fragments, there were no objects on the floors to indicate function. It is clear from the nature and depth of the destruction debris and the state of the building's preservation that there must have been a second story to the building, constructed of mudbricks.

Al-'Umayri's LB building was, if not public in nature and use, at least beyond the size, strength and construction quality of most domestic houses. The well constructed, substantial stone walls surviving to 3.5m high point to greater investment than private citizens could likely afford. Perhaps the building served a cultic function or might have been an official's residence.

Early Iron I — Al-'Umayri has produced several architectural features from the early Iron I period (FIG. 9). Especially significant are two buildings because of their state of preservation and apparent function. Both were pillared buildings, even if in different configurations, and

were constructed at or near the same time. Joined by a common wall, both had broad rooms connecting the structures to the western perimeter wall, initially suggesting to us a casemate construction.

The northernmost structure (Building B), one of the oldest (late 13th century) and certainly the best preserved four-room house found anywhere in the Levant, was virtually completely cleared in 1996 (FIG. 10). However, recent excavations have forced us to reconsider our understanding of the courtyard entrances into the building from the east. We had defined an entrance along the northern side wall of the courtyard and had assumed another in the northeastern corner of the courtyard. This did not make much sense to have both entrances in such close proximity and for some time we maintained doubts about the clarity of the corner entrance. We now know there was no entrance in the northeastern corner of the

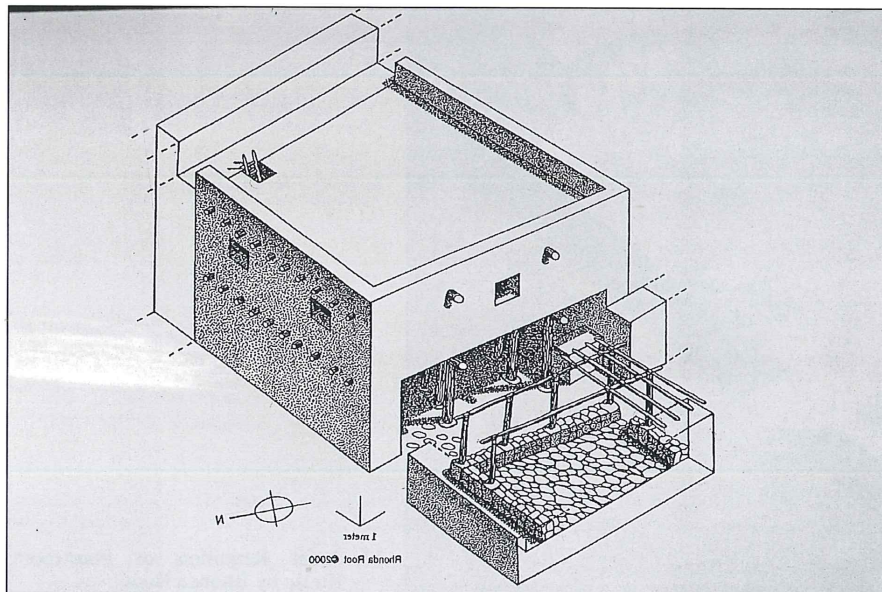


10. Early Iron I Four-room House after Excavation.

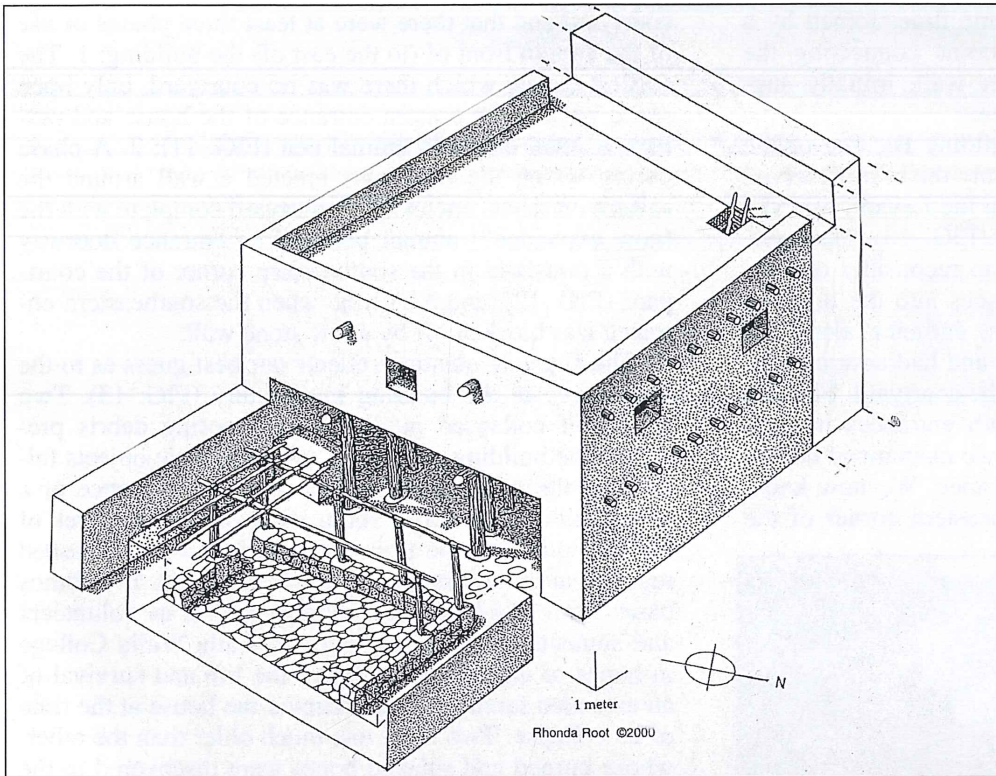
courtyard and that there were at least three phases of use of the area in front of (to the east of) the building: 1. The earliest during which there was no courtyard, only open space outside the eastern entrance of the house and perhaps a small enclosed animal pen (FIG. 11); 2. A phase during which the occupants erected a wall around the eastern entrance, enclosing a courtyard complete with the (now expanded?) animal pen and an entrance doorway with a threshold in the southeastern corner of the courtyard (FIG. 12), and 3. A time when the southeastern entrance was blocked off by a low stone wall.

The cutaway painting reflects our best guess as to the appearance of the building in antiquity (FIG. 13). Two meters of collapsed mudbrick and roofing debris preserved the building and, along with domestic objects fallen into the mix, clearly demonstrate the presence of a second story. The broad room itself produced scores of collared pithoi, some from both stories, which smashed together at the destruction of the house (FIG. 14). Pithos bases from this room now number 60-70, as volunteers and students are restoring them at Walla Walla College in hopes of understanding better the life and survival of an extended family which occupied the house at the time of its collapse. Two men, one much older than the other, whose burned and splayed bones were discovered in the broad-room debris, may have belonged to this family.

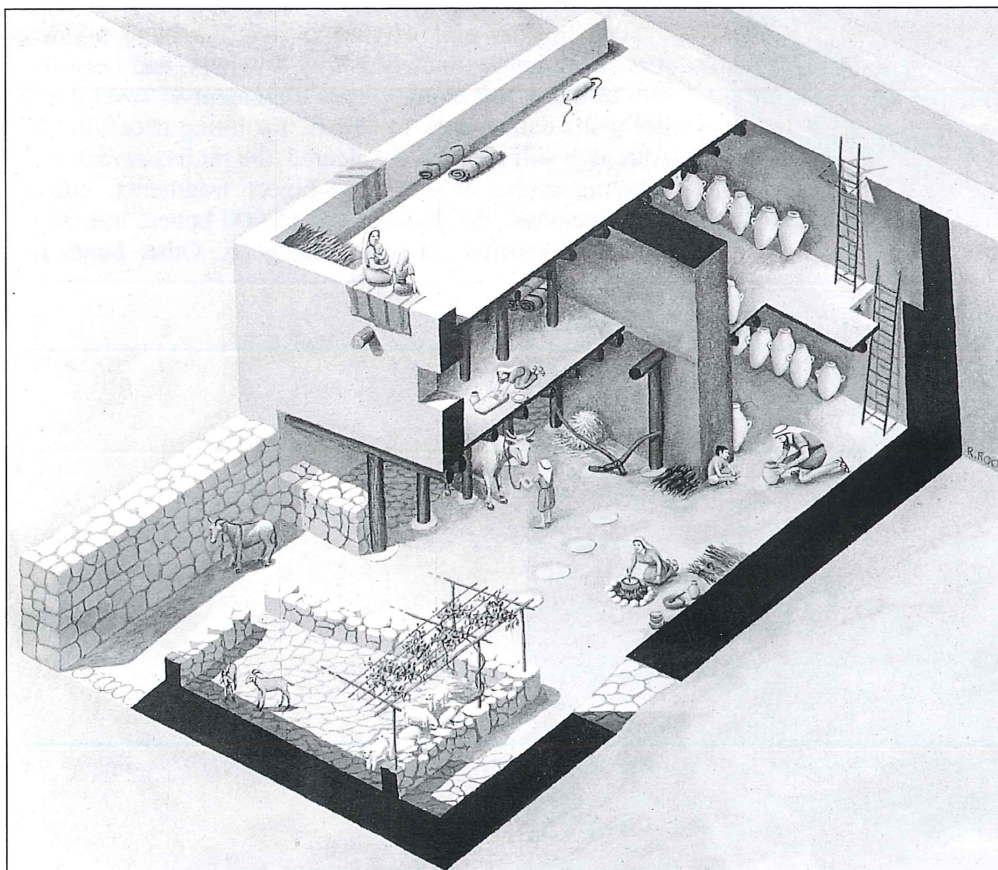
Two meters east of the courtyard a huge midden, measuring approximately 2.8 by 4 meters, had been dug out, utilizing the serendipitous alignment of several earlier walls dating back to MBIIIC for lining (See FIG. 7). Although still not entirely cleared, the pit has revealed an amazing cache of some 50 object fragments, almost 5,000 ceramic sherds and over 15,000 bones, mostly of the edible portions of sheep and goats. Other bones in-



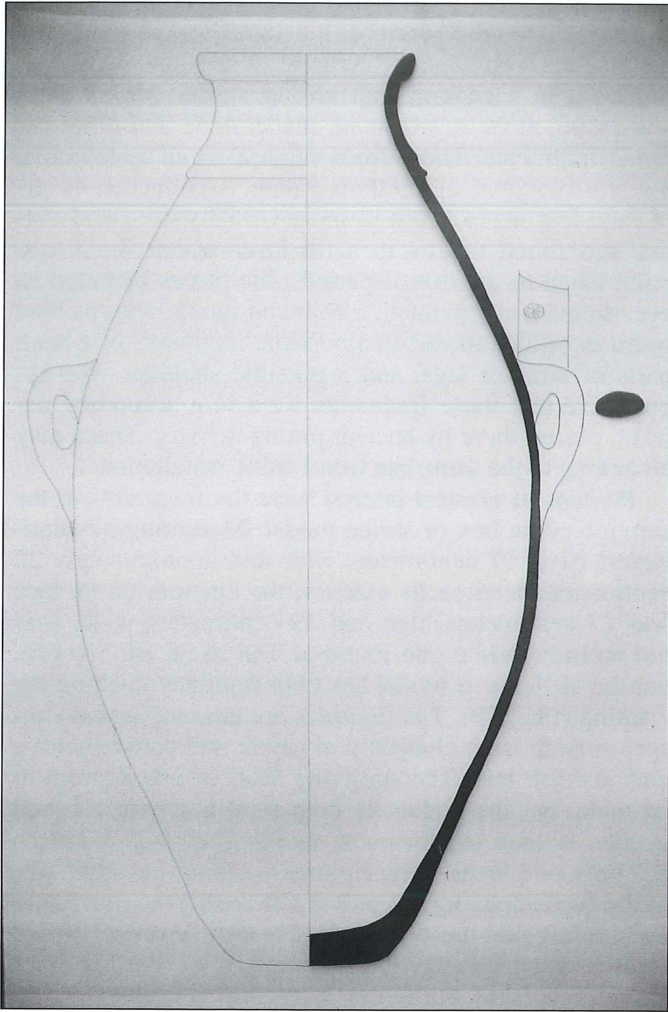
11. Building B-Drawing, First Phase.



12. Building B- Drawing, Second Phase.



13. Artist Rendition of Four-room House by Rhonda Root.

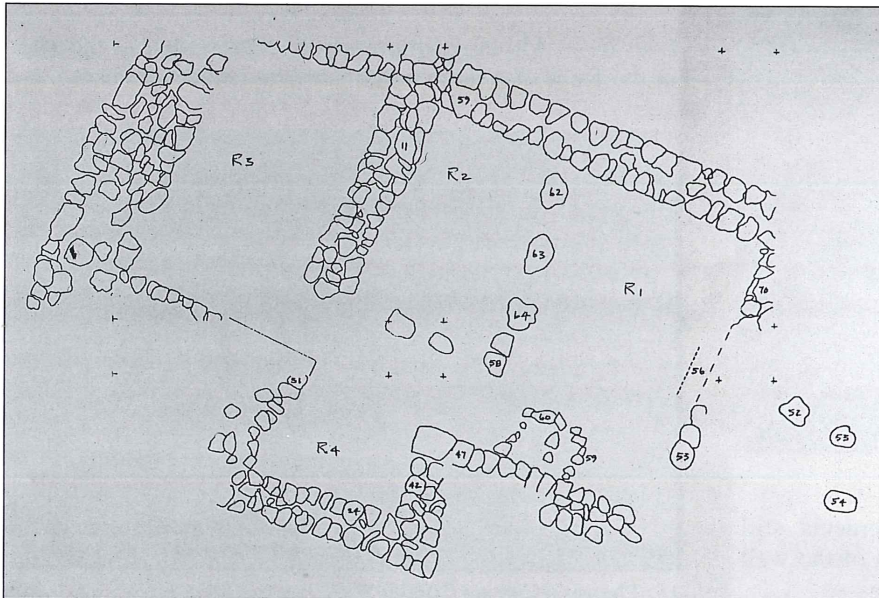


14. Collared Pithos Drawing.

clude those of cattle, gazelle, pig, lion, the Nile perch and one from a brown bear.

Building A, immediately adjacent to the south and sharing a common east-west wall, is now fully exposed and demonstrates features of both domestic and cultic architecture (FIG. 15). As earlier published, Room A1 clearly functioned as a domestic food-preparation area, its stone-ringed hearth, small basalt quern and grinding stone, and cobbled storage bin all pointing in that direction (FIG. 16). Room 2 (upper part of photo in FIG. 16) contained a standing stone with votive altar on a paved surface and was enclosed on the west and north by stone walls and the east and south by post-bases, likely supporting a curtain. This was clearly a cultic center of some kind. Room 3 was used for storage, having held seven to ten collared pithoi and producing thousands of grains of carbonized barley as well as other expected agricultural grains and vegetables. Along the southern wall of Building A, Room 4, nearly completely excavated in 2000, revealed what appears to be another cultic room or alcove (FIG. 17). In the southeast corner of the beaten-earth floor stood a naturally smooth, rectangular stone, leaning against the south wall. Seven additional, similar stones lay neatly arranged side by side with a north-south orientation in the southern half of the room. Although no "cultic" objects or vessels were found on the floor of Building A, the destruction debris of the second story provided two chalice bases.

The western perimeter wall, as currently exposed, extends 85 meters, curving sharply into the town at a point approximately three fourths of the length of the western wall (see FIG. 9), tantalizingly suggesting an entrance. Further excavation might confirm our suspicions of a gateway, but at this point we can at least posit a nicely



15. Plan of Building A.



16. Building A, Room 1.



17. Building A, Room 4.

plastered perimeter wall, some plaster fragments still clearly visible on the exterior curving portion of the wall (FIG. 18).

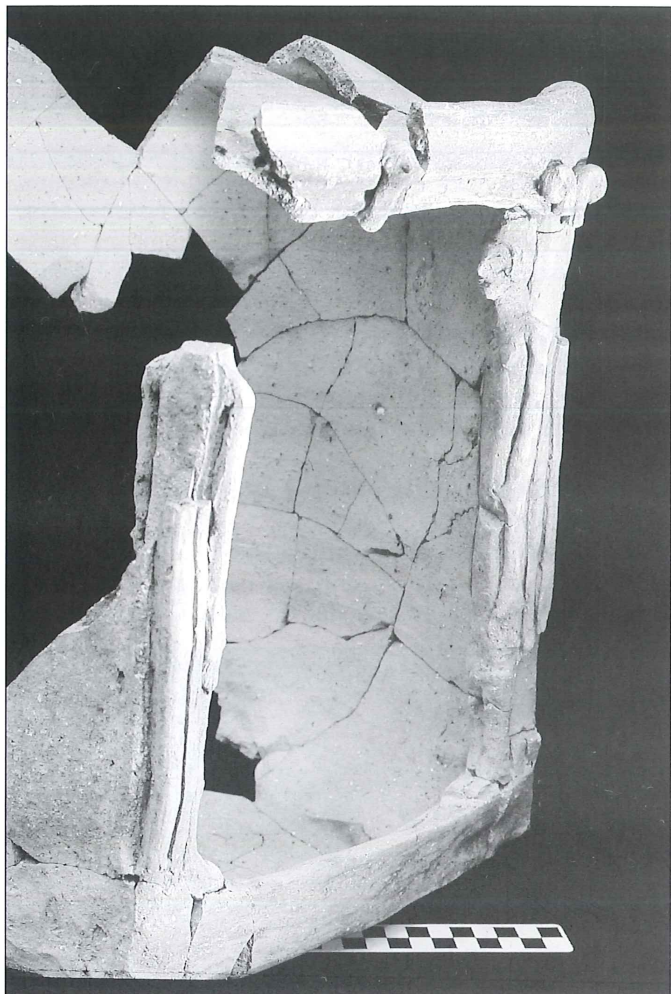
Late Iron I — In the southwestern portion of the tall, a destroyed use area surfaced, not linked as yet with any architecture, containing ceramic and stone artifacts—broken pithos, ceramic cult box or shrine model, limestone dish, stone bead, small quartz stone and other ceramic fragments. These finds suggest a cult installation, but no structure is currently apparent. A collection of terra cotta fragments of one or more virtually life-sized statues was found nearby in a fill layer which we at one point dated to the Iron II period. The pieces included an eye, dramatically painted; a chin and mouth with painted beard or tattoo; an ear; two possible fragments of a heel; parts of arms or legs; and a possible shoulder. We hypothesize that these fragments were in a secondary deposit, placed there by ancient pitting activity. These may all belong to the same late Iron I cultic installation.

Perhaps of greatest interest were the fragments of the ceramic cultic box or shrine model. Measuring 37 centimeters high, 27 centimeters wide and approximately 28 centimeters deep on its exterior, the opening on its face was 27 centimeters high and 19 centimeters wide. It is not entirely unlike one found at Tall al-Far‘ah (North), but the al-‘Umayri model has twin figurines flanking the opening (FIG. 19). The figurines are unusual in many respects. Both were elongated in height and painted with a dark reddish hue. The surviving head of one appears to be male, but the bodies of both figurines reflect mixed gender. Neither has the pubic area defined well, but each has only one breast. The figurine flanking the right side of the box’s opening has only a left breast; the one flanking the left side has only a right breast. A viewer would clearly recognize the female features of the figurines from the outside, but closer inspection would show otherwise (FIG. 20). Do we have here reason to suggest hermaphrodite components?

Iron II — Although impressively represented at the site in the form of a large administrative center and associat-



18. Plaster on Curving Exterior Wall.



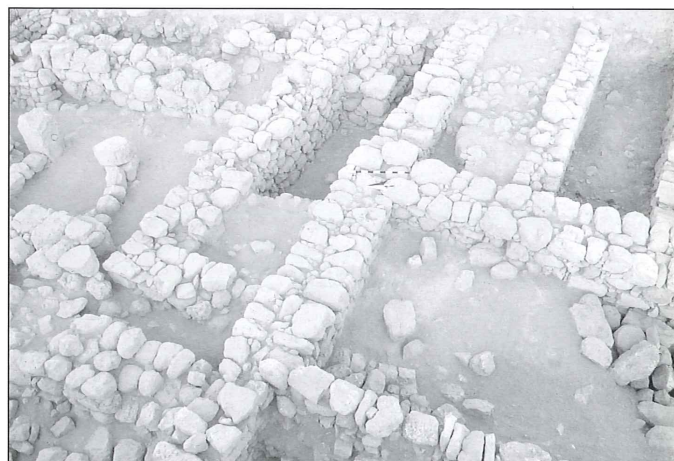
19. Figurines Flanking Opening to Ceramic Shrine Model.



20. Reconstructed Ceramic Shrine Model.

ed architecture in the western sector of the tall, the Iron II and Persian periods have received less attention in the most recent seasons of excavation (FIG. 21). Numerous surfaces and wall fragments from this period have surfaced, but few have given us a coherent picture of additional structures beyond the administrative center. In addition, a large, finely plastered floor we had thought belonged to the Persian phase of the center, turned out to be earlier. The walls we had associated with the plaster surface, excavation in 2000 demonstrated, post-dated the surface, having been founded in a trench which cut through the floor. So, the floor derived from a previous level (late Iron II) of the center and was built over the late Iron I surfaces containing the cultic remains described above.

Recently excavated Iron II remains from the north-western portion of the tall were also fragmentary in nature and preservation. Further clearance of a pillared building, begun in 1996, revealed two surfaces associated with three segmented pillars and stone quoins be-



21. Overview of Iron II Administrative Center.

tween them (FIG. 22), although external walls are as yet unclear. Previously, a hole-mouth pithos, cut vertically in half, was found in situ in the building (See in FIG. 22 between the piers). The 2000 season produced a similar pi-

thos, preserved in its entirety as it was completely buried to its top in the floor with which it was used (FIG. 23). Its foundation trench was clearly defined along with the



22. Pier-and-quoin Construction.



23. Hole-mouth Pithos.

stones laid in the bottom to steady the jar. Contents have not been fully analyzed yet, but included the skeleton of a small rodent which found its way into the pithos, but was unable to exit.

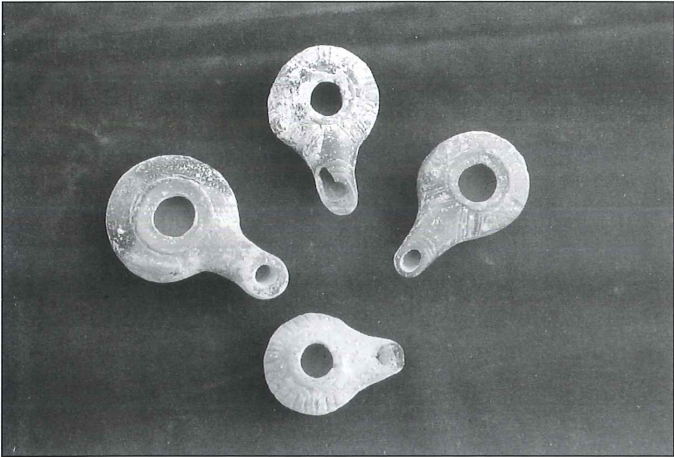
Late Hellenistic – Field L, on the southern lip of the site, has produced a Hellenistic farmstead with a room at least 12 meters long (north-south) (FIG. 24). Upon the latest surface associated with the courtyard's use, abandoned household items included numerous intact and reconstructable ceramic vessels (pithoi, jars, cooking pots, lamps and a unique group of hand-made juglets) (FIG. 25), stone grinders and pounders, a few metal objects, beads, a scaraboid seal and bronze coins.

Restoration, Consolidation and Presentation Efforts at Tall al-'Umayri

Inter-seasonal consolidation of exposed stone walls and buildings over the past several years has paid off handsomely as the annual loss due to natural erosion and



24. Hellenistic Farmstead.



25. Lamps.

goats of approximately one course of wall stones per year or two has been halted. The entire site looks better and will last longer as a result of the stone mortaring we have undertaken following each excavation season.

While these endeavors have been helpful in basic preservation of the site, the Mādabā Plains Project al-'Umayrī directors sense the need for more intensive efforts to preserve and present the site. We have stories to tell about this place. If "telling" is the process by which a tall is formed into a complex layer cake of occupations and settlements over the millennia, then what archaeologists do when they take a tall apart by means of excavation is "untelling". We must now "retell" the story by preparing al-'Umayrī for a more complete presentation to the public. It is a part of our common history and culture. Its treasures are part of a rich and varied legacy deriving from a long and distinguished history of human settlement and occupation.

In order to retell the story of Tall al-'Umayrī we have set out on an ambitious restoration project which will cost approximately \$100,000 US. Involved are the following:

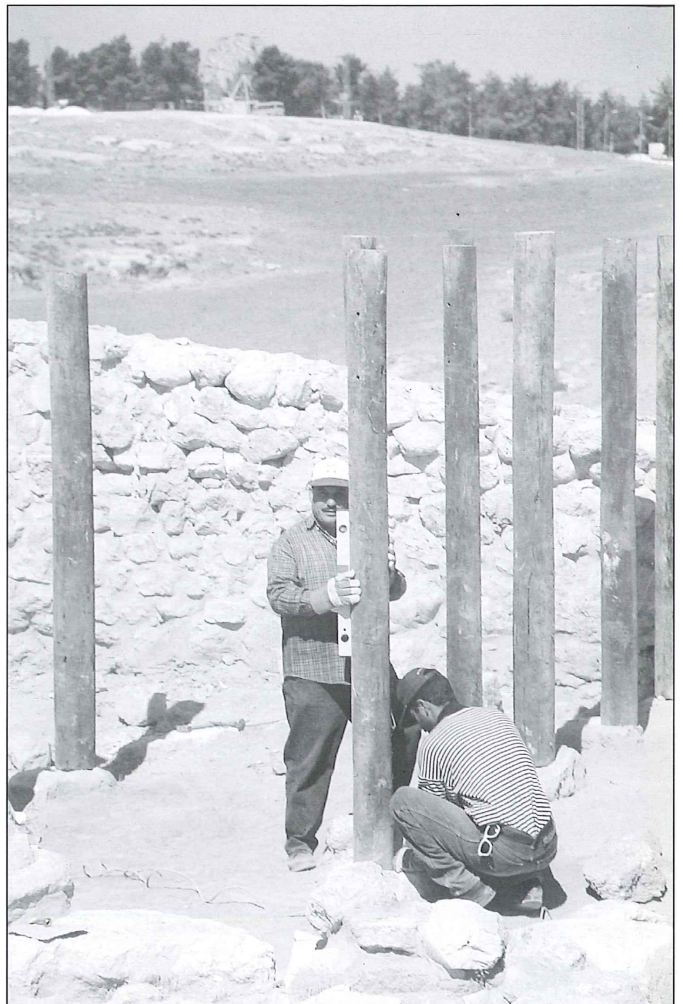
- continued consolidation of all architectural features on the site.
- stone/shrub/tree boundary/border around the site which would identify the perimeter in an aesthetically pleasing way.
- viewing platform on the site, overlooking the western fields of excavation with their Middle Bronze, Late Bronze, Iron Age and Persian remains.
- viewing platform constructed to the west in the 'Ammān National Park with its panoramic overview of the entire site and its environs.
- walking paths and steps, driveways and parking lots.
- partially reconstructed four-room house, building on its excellent state of preservation from the past.
- replica, one-to-one-scale four-room house to serve as an interpretive visitor center, furnished with fabricated ar-

tifacts to illustrate life during the early Iron Age.

- digitized video production and large-screen viewing monitor in visitor center for brief segments of al-'Umayrī's rich and varied history, available in several languages.
- interpretive signage for the entire tall and platforms.
- permanent guard house

To this point we have been able to maintain seasonal consolidation of stone structures, as well as construct stairways for accessing the site. In addition, wooden guard railing around the major excavation area protects the site and visitors from harm. We have also drawn up plans for one of the observation towers.

More apparent to any visitor to al-'Umayrī is the partially restored four-room house and courtyard (FIG. 26). By using spent utility poles for posts, beams and rafters (imported Danish Spruce instead of local juniper, cypress or oak), carpenters reconstructed the wooden infrastructure of the house, demonstrating just how much wood it takes. With the use of an imported chain saw



26. Initial Stages of Reconstruction.

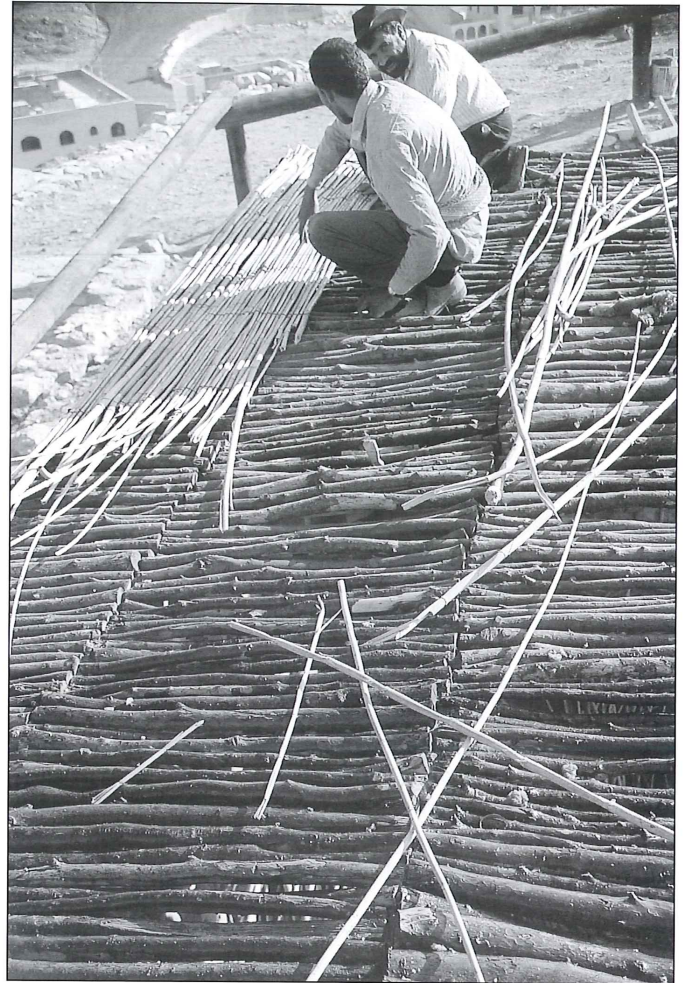
(rather than tools available to Iron I builders), we cut everything to approximate ancient standards. Spans between posts would have been covered by shorter poles than appear in our reconstruction, but the idea is preserved in the restoration. Small local branches, treated to protect them against the weather and insects, were cut and placed tightly adjacent to each other to provide the ceiling and undergird the second-story floor (FIG. 27). Over these, the builders lashed reeds purchased in and transported from the Jordan Valley (FIG. 28) on which "no-maintenance" concrete was poured instead of the normal mud and clay which constantly demand maintenance (FIG. 29). Our masons fabricated mudbricks, again of concrete, and placed about 150 of them where we project second-story walls would have been (FIG. 30).

The results we have already realized in our efforts to preserve and present Tall al-'Umayri are significant. First of all, the site looks remarkably good, even inter-seasonally when left to the vagaries of natural and human

interventions. Due to the consolidation of stone structures, the excavation areas remain clear of vegetation, making them more identifiable by visitors. In addition, these efforts have extended the useful life-span and aesthetic ap-



27. Branches Being Laid in Place.



28. Reeds Being Lashed to Ceiling Branches.



29. Concrete Flooring.



30. Fashioning of Concrete Mudbricks.



31. Four-room House Following Partial Restoration.

peal of the tall, ensuring an extended future for the archaeological remains which constitute the exhibits of this outdoor museum.

Second, the restoration endeavors undertaken thus far—construction of stairways, paths, guard-railing and benches—have made the site accessible. More important, the partial reconstruction of the walls, wooden infrastructure, first-story ceiling/second-story floor and second-floor mudbrick wall layout have all provided excavators and visitors with a more complete picture of what human and animal domestic life were like during the extremely important Iron I period. It is so much easier to visualize where animals were stabled, food prepared and stored, worship conducted, life lived, love made, and families housed with the reconstruction completed to this point. The ancient world comes alive more readily, the story of our ancestors more easily told.

Finally, because of the joint efforts involved in reconstructing the four-room house, we now know by experience what it takes to build a house and maintain it (FIG. 31). This was no small undertaking for people strapped with endless chores demanded of them by the very business of surviving in hard times. Work was difficult during the early Iron I period and the rewards few. Children seldom survived until their teen years. Disease and discomfort, disaster and death stalked every family. But a hill-country agrarian culture depended on stable domestic housing and the four-room house proved an ideal match for this environment. And now we also know what it took in terms of human investments of time and energy to accomplish the task.

Specific-gravity calculations of the original construction materials of Building B result in the following measurements of mass for the four-room house:

- Stone flooring	8tons
- Stone walls	280tons
- mortar and plaster	14tons

- Wooden posts, beams, rafters, cros members	27 tons
- Mud/clay ceiling/floors	14tons
- Mudbrick walls	124tons
TOTAL	467 tons

Thus, in addition to archaeological excavations at Tall al-'Umayri, efforts to preserve and present our findings have provided us with a more complete understanding of and appreciation for the human dimensions of ancient life in central Jordan.

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