

Investigating “Conder’s Circle” at ‘Ayn Jadīda, near Mount Nebo

During six seasons, from 1992 to 1998, an archaeological survey was carried out by a small group of Danish archaeologists in the area around Mount Nebo. The survey was accomplished at the invitation of Professor Michele Piccirillo, under the auspices of the Department of Antiquities and the Franciscan Archaeological Institute at Mount Nebo. Covering approximately 35km², 747 sites and monuments - in time ranging from the Lower Palaeolithic to the Late Ottoman periods - were located, described and put on the map (Mortensen and Thuesen 1998). Many of these sites were already known — and in some cases investigated — by members of the Franciscan Archaeological Institute. Famous examples are the monasteries and churches at aş-Şiyāgha, Khirbat al-Mukhayyat and al-Kanīsa.

The earliest survey of the area, however, was undertaken for the Palestine Exploration Fund by Colonel C. R. Conder during his reconnaissance of Eastern Palestine in 1881. The Turkish Government had categorically refused any kind of foreign exploration in the area. In his subsequent publication Conder notes: “...when we remember the lamentable fate of Professor Palmer and his companions, betrayed by an Arab Sheikh, and butchered in the heart of the desert by Bedawin set on probably by the creatures of the rebel Egyptian Government, it will, I think, be allowed that our mission was pushed to the utmost limits.....it is not always, when things appear to be going smoothly, and Arabs are obsequious and Govenors apparently asleep, that a small party of explorers is really most safe. Thus our presence was certain to be discovered sooner or later, through the jealousy of some Government creature among the Bedawin....(But) although discovered four weeks after crossing Jordan, we did not finally leave Moab until the 29th of October,

and during this period of eleven weeks we surveyed in all nearly 500 square miles, discovered 700 rude stone monuments and obtained a volume of notes, plans, and drawings...” (Conder 1889: 85ff.). Even under these dangerous and stressful circumstances Conder succeeded in carrying out his measurements and drawings with extreme accuracy.

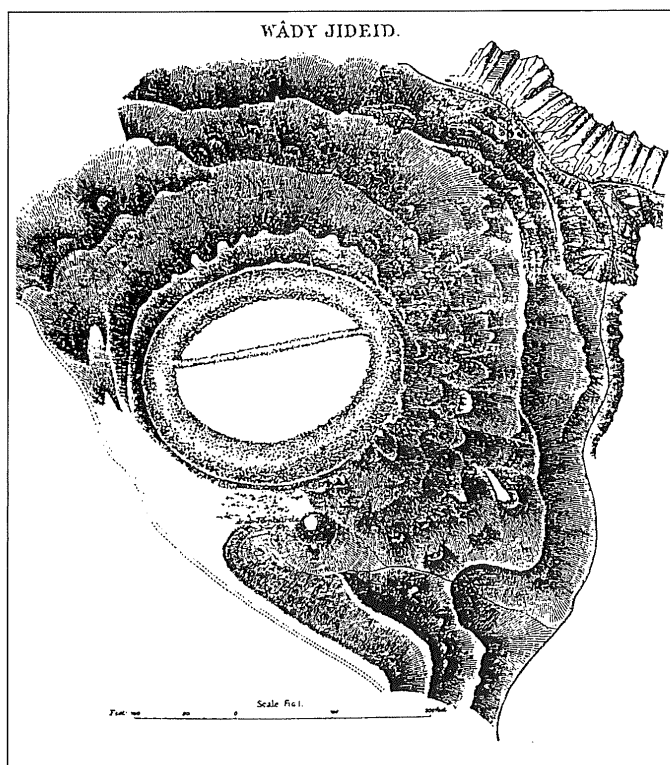
Four years ago — in continuation of our survey — we felt that a few supplementary investigations of megalithic monuments in the area might be useful. The first of these monuments is a large, roughly circular structure, discovered and first described in 1889 by Colonel C. R. Conder in his “Survey of Eastern Palestine”. The monument is situated above the spring of ‘Ayn Jadīda between a large Late Chalcolithic/Early Bronze Age settlement northeast of the spring and a high plateau towards the south with 157 contemporary dolmens, lines of stones and 21 menhirs, still standing (FIG. 1).

Above the spring of ‘Ayn Jadīda Colonel Conder found what he in 1889 described as a large circular platform surrounded by a rubble wall (FIG. 2). He writes: “*The Survey camp was pitched inside the circle, which is divided into two irregular portions by a wall 6 feet thick running in the line, 260 degrees true bearing; that is in the direction approximately of the great cairn of Rujm el-Mekheyit on the hilltop to the east about in the line of the summer solstitial rising of the sun...*” (Conder 1889: 98-99).

Unfortunately, this intriguing hypothesis, that the wall dividing the circle into two irregular segments might have something to do with mid-summer rituals carried out at the site, more than 5000 years ago, was disproved when a section through the monument showed that the so-called wall was a superficial line of stones from the Byzantine Period, probably representing the division between two ag-



1. "Conder's Circle" at 'Ayn Jadida seen from SW in September 1992. (A car parked in front of the monument gives an impression of the size of the circle).



2. Colonel Conder's plan of the circle at 'Ayn Jadida, September 1881.

ricultural fields within the large circular structure.

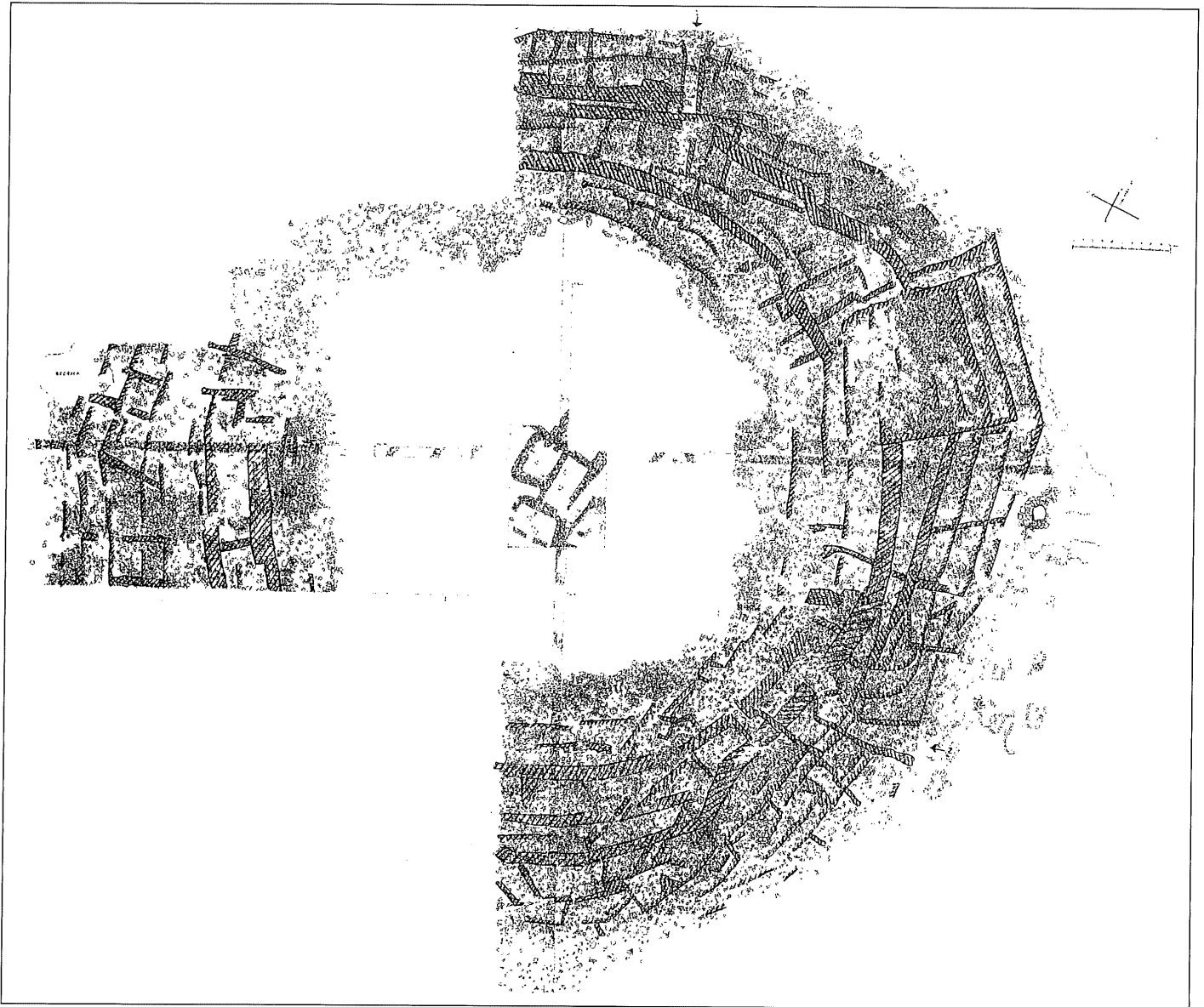
In order to determine the date of the circle and to get an idea about its function we started in the year 2000 an investigation of the monument, including a detailed map of the circular wall, a cross section through the monument and subsequently an excavation in the central area within the circle. These investigations are still in progress, so what we can present in this context is just a brief preliminary

report.

The total extent of the monument varies from 92m EW to 102m NS. The central platform is almost circular, varying from 50 to 52m in diameter. It is surrounded by a rampart, 18-29m wide and founded on bedrock, sloping towards the north and east, so that the height of what remains of the rampart varies from 3 to 8m above bedrock.

It was our first impression that the rampart was just an earthen construction containing a number of small and larger stones. However, looking more carefully we were able to distinguish a number of walls, some of them composed of undressed ashlar, and in some cases preserved to several courses, on the surface of the rampart and in the sections.

In order to get an impression of the pattern of these walls, incomplete as it might well be, we decided to make a plan showing every stone and fragmentary wall as they appeared on the surface of the rampart. The plan reveals a complex and surprisingly irregular system of walls (FIG. 3). On the top of the rampart are the foundations of two, or sometimes three major walls, the thickness of which varies from 1.6 to 2.2m. On both sides of these walls terraces slope towards the plateau on the outside, and towards the inside platform. The terrace walls are cut diagonally by a number of smaller walls dividing the terraces into minor segments, many of which are now filled in with stones, possibly from the collapsed walls. These heaps of erratic stone formations contributed to our difficulties during the planning of the site. However, a few observations may be added at this stage of the investigations:



3. Partial plan of the circle, October 2003.

Towards the southeast the foundation of a large square building or platform protrudes from the top of the rampart, and towards the east, along the outer wall, the foundations of two buttresses or small towers appear, each 3m wide and protruding 70cm from the wall. Finally, there are perhaps two entrances across the rampart, one from the south and one from the northeast, but it is our impression that the main entrance to the monument may be from the west, which we have not yet measured and drawn.

On the face of it, the complex and very irregular system of walls, terraces and segmentation walls might perhaps suggest, that we are dealing with several phases of construction of the rampart — but not necessarily so. A slightly similar early Bronze Age

monument with a system of segmented walls around a somewhat later burial, has been reported by Israeli archaeologists in the occupied Golan heights. However more striking, as parallels, are a number Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments from the eastern Mediterranean — small oval or circular settlements or ritual buildings surrounded by numerous defensive walls, in some cases connected by segmented walls and with buttresses like at ‘Ayn Jadida. The earliest known monument of this type seems to be the Late Chalcolithic settlement of Dimini in Central Greece — with a megaron, which has been interpreted as part of a ruler’s house, protected by six irregular defensive walls (Tsountas 1908: pl. II). Like ‘Ayn Jadida, the fortification at Dimini is a little less than a 100m wide.

Moving into the central platform, we have — until now — uncovered an area of 115m². The excavation has revealed what seems to be part of a large building. The stone foundations and the lower part of the walls rest directly on a layer of greyish clay. They are made of stones and small ashlar, dressed and preserved in 2-3 courses to a height of 20-38cms (FIGS. 4-5).

The rooms are rectangular, some of them with slightly rounded corners. They are connected by doors, marked by one or two steps from one room to another by door socket stones — and on the plan: by arrows (FIG. 4). There were no clear indications of floors, but in all rooms there were one or two large stone ashlar placed in such a way that they may originally have functioned as bases for wooden pillars supporting the roof.

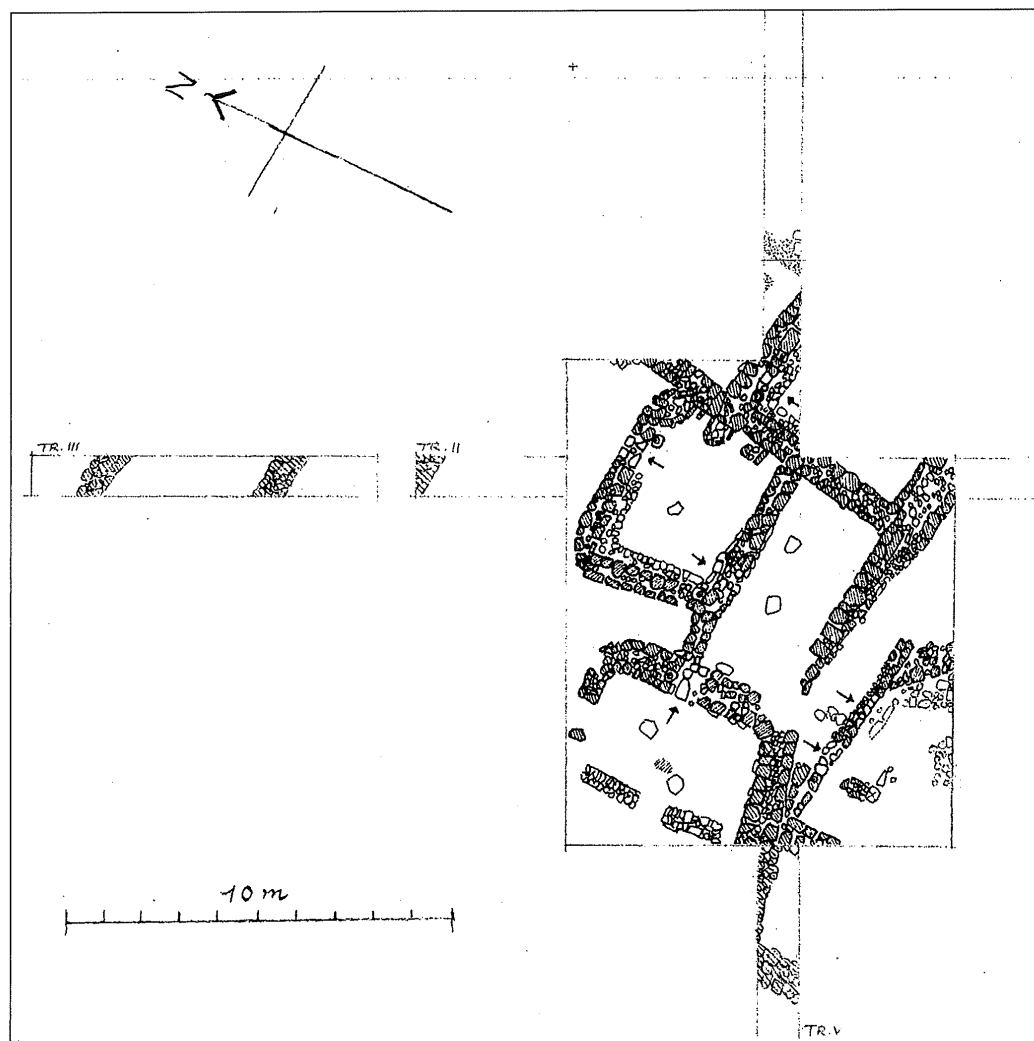
In one of the rooms there was a small fireplace and a kind of table made of standing stone slabs and filled in with smaller stones. Three similar tables or constructions were found in another room

along the eastern wall: one of them square and two of them semi-circular (FIG. 6).

So far, the rooms and walls all seem to belong to one period. Hundreds of sherds were found in all rooms, but no complete pots *in situ*. Most of the sherds derived from large cooking pots, many of them with knobs or ledge handles characteristic of the Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age. A few sherds were painted or represented fine, red-slipped and polished pots with small lug- or loop-handles. Apart from pottery, there were animal bones, fragmentary mortars and querns of basalt, sherds of basalt vessels, in some cases decorated with knobs, a few beads of stone, and points, sickle-blades, and scrapers made on tabular flint.

In conclusion, it seems that the rooms we have excavated until now represent the domestic quarters of a large building, that can be dated within the transitional phase, incorporating the Late Chalcolithic and the Early Bronze Age IA periods.

The function of Conder's circle is not yet clear,



4. Segment of the building in the central part of the platform.



5. The excavation of the building in the central part of the platform, as seen from NE, October 2003.



6. Two of the three small “tables” along the eastern wall in one of the rooms, October 2003.

but it is tempting to believe that in the future it must be interpreted in a wider context in connection with the contemporary settlement northeast of the spring and the large number of dolmens, lines of stones and menhirs on the plateau just above this unique monument.

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