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From Jericho to Mount Nebo: Results of Recent Excavations of Conder's Circle

The Mt Nebo Survey has mapped the region around Jabal Nebo for archaeological sites in an area measuring 8km. by 8km. which includes two major wadi systems, Wādi Mūsā and Wādi 'Ayn Judaydah (Jadidah). Megalithic monuments and dolmen fields are prominent features in the landscape, as already recognized by Colonel Conder when he surveyed the region of eastern Palestine in the late 19th century. In his report he described and presented drawings of many of the dolmens with details that are still recognisable today (Conder 1889). Among Conder's discoveries, one in particular was remarkable. Close to a large dolmen field located on the southern slopes of the Wādi 'Ayn Judaydah (Jadidah), on a small spur, he observed a large circular structure which he described in the following way: (.. an oval platform surrounded by a rubble wall and divided into two irregular portions by a wall...). He was obviously puzzled by its shape and size. The platform resembled a large circle and measured more than 100 metres in diameter. Conder also contemplated its meaning, and he writes that the wall crossing the structure was oriented according to solstice indicating a ritual function of the monument. These were, however, speculations. The huge circle remained enigmatic.

During the Nebo survey (Mortensen and Thuesen 1998) Conder's Circle still remained a challenge for our understanding of the settlement system of the region. Sherds and other artefacts collected on the surface pointed to a date contemporary to the neighbouring dolmen field. The site was mapped as MN 1, in some way indicating its archaeologi-

cal priority in relation to other sites in the region. Therefore, it was decided that the monument should be closely investigated after the conclusion of the regional survey in 1999. This investigation included drawing a top plan and excavating test trenches in selected areas.

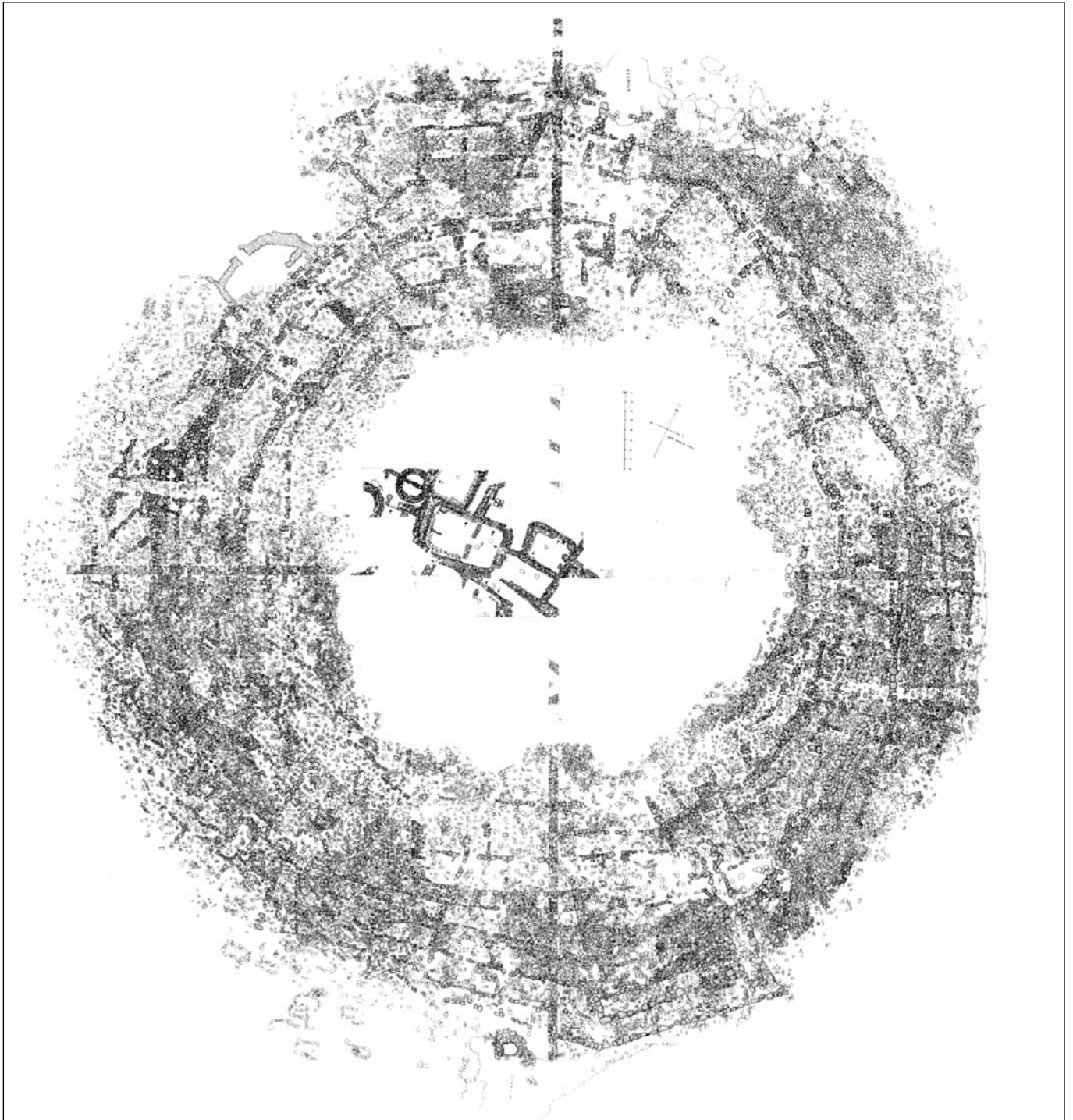
Four seasons of excavation and mapping of Conder's Circle have so far been carried out, beginning in 2000. Peder Mortensen has been in charge of the tedious and time-consuming work of measuring and drawing the entire structure (Mortensen and Thuesen 2004). The impressive result (FIG. 1) facilitates our continued work on the site and has revealed many of the architectural principles of the circular structure. Meanwhile small-scale excavations were carried out on the site in order to obtain a better understanding of its function¹.

The main objective of the excavations was to obtain insights into the function of the monumental circular stone enclosure. In the landscape today, the structure appears as a huge ring or enclosure of stones and boulders, which is most easily recognized from the surrounding hills and aerial photos. The structure measures more than 100 metres in diameter and has a thickness of 10-15 metres. Today it has a rather flat top with steep slopes on the outer side, especially towards the west, where the monument is not protected by steep wadis. The inner face slopes moderately. In many places fragments of walls could be observed on the surface of the enclosure and there was a clear indication of a protruding rectangular structure in the SE section.

The detailed measuring and plan-drawing of

¹ Inge Mortensen assisted in the mapping of the site. In the excavation the authors were assisted by Carmelo Pappalardo from the Franciscan Archaeological Institute and one or two local workmen. I wish to express my appreciation and gratitude to our Jordanian colleagues in the Department of Antiquities at 'Ammān

and Mādabā, for always being helpful and supportive, and to the Franciscan Archaeological Institute at Nebo under the direction of Michele Piccirillo for many years of fine and productive collaboration and hospitality.



1. Conder's Circle.

the monument eventually produced an overview of the main principles of the structure by combining the many small sections of recognisable walls on the surface. In addition, two-one metre wide test trenches were cut N-S and E-W across the site and through its centre. In the trenches, excavations were completed down to any recognisable struc-

tures. The observations made in the trenches also supported the mapping of walls visible on the surface of the enclosure.

Inside the enclosure, the trenches revealed remains of thick-walled stone architecture, located primarily in the central and NW section of the enclosure. After this discovery it was decided to open

RESULTS OF RECENT EXCAVATIONS OF CONDER'S CIRCLE

larger areas in 5 by 5 metre squares beginning at the very centre of the structure where the two trenches cross each other and where stone walls had been discovered. During two seasons of excavations more than 200m² have been opened up. The aerial photo shows the extent and position of the squares (FIG. 2).

According to the finds, the enclosure and most of the remains at the site dates back to the EBA I (ca. 3300-3000 BC). There has been some recent agricultural activity in the southern part of the enclosure, and during the Byzantine period a large wall was built across it. It is the remains of this wall that Colonel Conder recognised and which appears on his drawing. During the Byzantine period, the population apparently used the enclosure and divided it with a wall into a habitation area in the north with small fields in the south. The re-use of building stones and field clearance may explain why so little is left of the original EBA structures inside the enclosure.

As a main objective of the project was to understand the enclosure, the few overlying Byzantine remains were removed in order to obtain a better impression of the EB architecture. The results so far suggest that the enclosure and the associated architecture belong to one coherent phase of activity. The building located inside the enclosure shows only minor modification, such as dividing a larger room into two smaller units and re-use of earlier foundation walls. This interpretation is also supported by pottery and other small finds.

The walls of the building are constructed on a stone foundation of which only the lowest courses are preserved. There is no indication of how the superstructure was constructed in the areas exposed



2. Aerial photo of Conder's Circle showing excavated squares.

so far. The buildings were built on an uneven surface which has resulted in some variation of building and floor levels across the site. The large central room seems to have been dug down as a basement, but here the floors have not been reached. In other rooms, no clear floors have been identified so far owing to the limited preservation of the walls. The remains reveal a building composed of a number of rectangular rooms connected through doorways (FIG. 3). In some of the rooms there are large stones, probably supports for pillars carrying a roof. There are corridors and open areas. In the western part of the enclosure two large circular structures are located, one of them built up against the wall of the building. The contents of the circular structures did not yield any clear evidence of their function, but the shape and context of the structures are suggestive of their use as storage facilities.

The architecture displays a number of characteristic features. The walls are built with two rows of stones forming the wall faces. These stones are normally 30-50cm. in size. Between these rows is a filling of smaller stones. The rooms have rounded corners and on the inside low benches are built along the walls. This tradition has facilitated our work in identifying outer and inner spaces. Doors are placed in the centre of the long wall and at the door sill the pivot stone for the doorpost is, as a rule, placed on the interior side of the doorway.

Of special interest are some stone-built features found in two of the rooms of the building. They are semi-circular structures built up against a wall (FIG. 4). The outer facings comprise large flagstones set on edge; inside the feature is packed with stone pebbles. One of the features was looted between two seasons and we therefore excavated the one found in 2005. It turned out to be empty. We concluded that the features functioned as small platforms or supports.

The most intriguing structure at the site is the monumental circular enclosure. The mapping of recognisable wall fragments on the surface combined with observations made in the trenches has made it possible to obtain a better understanding of the structure (FIG. 1). The enclosure is a highly complex construction, which is in fact is not round but polygonal. It comprises several concentric walls, built as stairs and with a wider wall on top. In the SE part there is a rectangular foundation, which is reminiscent of a tower. The entire enclosure represents a considerable investment and co-ordination



3. Remains of architecture found inside Conder's Circle. Doorways indicated with arrows.

of resources in order to separate the enclosed building from the outside world. The protective character of the enclosure walls is enhanced by using the natural topography of the area, by placing the site on a spur on the wadi slope, where it is protected on three sides by steep slopes and ravines. The monumental enclosure was a fortification that protected

the enclosed buildings and their contents.

The most abundant artefacts are potsherds, which provide us with the most precise date for the site. Figures 5-8 show some of the typical shapes, which place the site within an EB I context, perhaps with a beginning in the very Late Chalcolithic period. The inventory includes both open and closed

RESULTS OF RECENT EXCAVATIONS OF CONDER'S CIRCLE



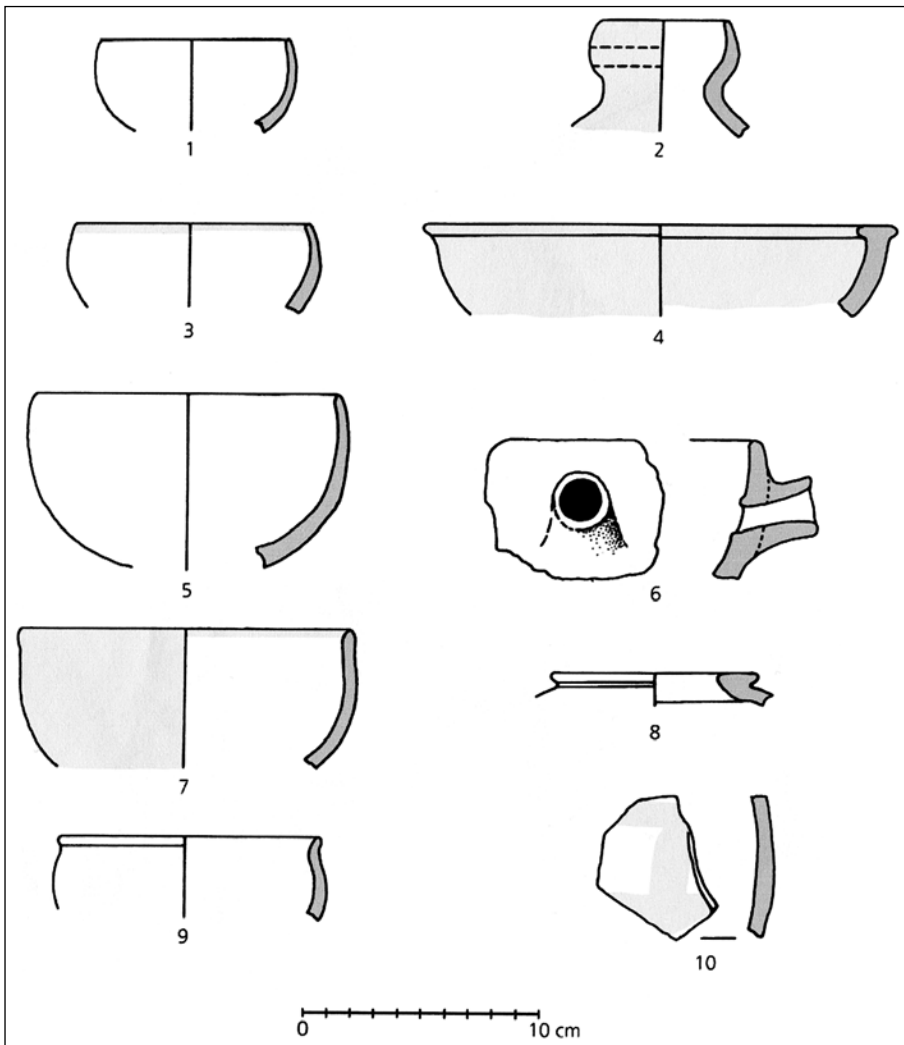
4. Semi-circular feature in the central room.

shapes. Very large storage jars were found broken in the fill of the large central room, indicating that this room had been used for storage. Another typical ceramic attribute is the ledge handle, which occurs in several variations. Normally the pottery is

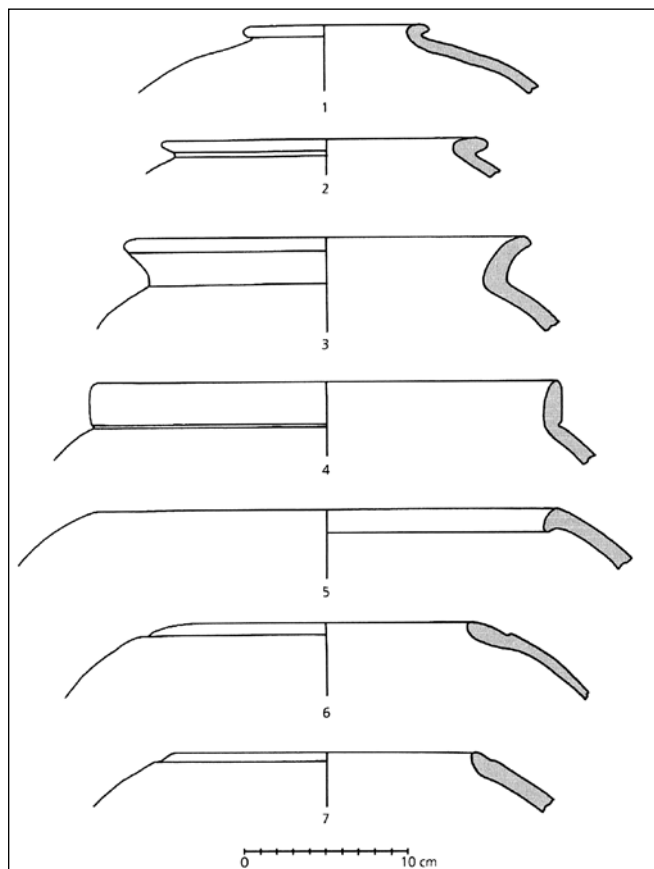
undecorated and coarse-tempered with small chips of flint. The surface shows many shades, ranging from buff-reddish to black. In a few cases there are traces of reddish-brown paint. Finger indented bands are applied to the large jars. Other diagnostic finds include fan scrapers of tabular flint and Canaanite blades. Fragments of basalt vessels were also recovered.

We have earlier argued that the finds from Conder's Circle place the monument within a regional system including a large dolmen field on the hill to the west and south of the enclosure, and a large village or settlement that was discovered during the survey and is located closer to the wadi and the spring (Thuesen 2004). This interpretation is now supported by finds from the excavation of the site.

Conder's Circle is unique in its structure and position in the Judaydah (Jadidah) wadi system, which connects the plateau and the Jordan valley. The finds demonstrate the presence of a substantial



5. Pottery, open shapes.

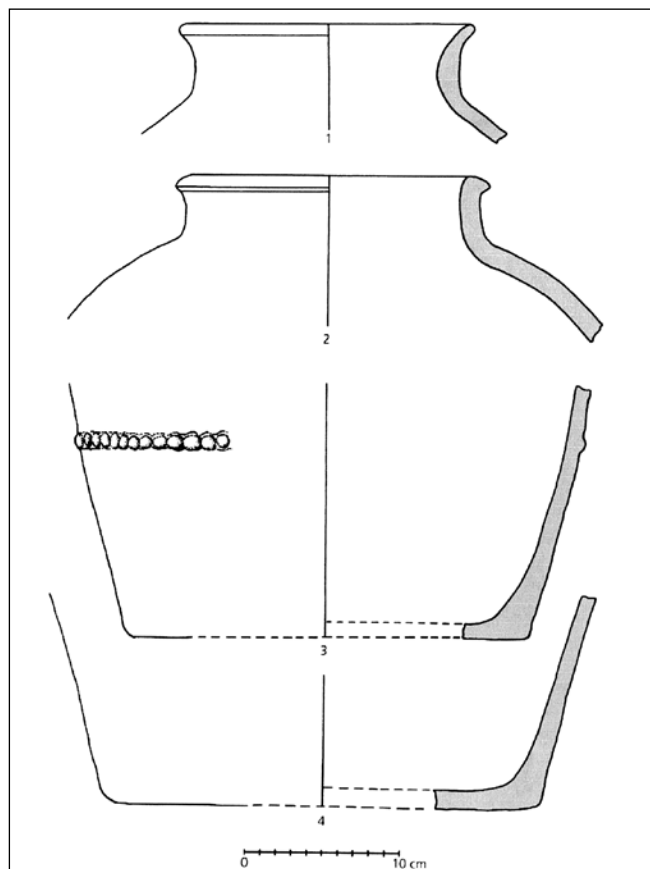


6. Pottery, closed shapes.

population with an economic potential that allowed for the construction and co-ordination of a huge fortification that was probably used to protect agricultural products, as indicated by the round silo-like structures and the numerous large storage jars found in the large central room.

The Nebo survey has not only documented a large number of archaeological sites. It has also demonstrated that what might at first sight appear to be a topographically complicated and difficult landscape for human activity did not necessarily result in marginalisation. During the Late Chalcolithic and EBA, the Wādī Judaydah (Jadīdah) was an area of intensive human activity and settlement. The escarpment leading down to the Jordan valley was not a hinterland, but an important area of cultural activity.

Furthermore, we are now beginning to appreciate that the region also was part of a larger regional system, as newly released finds from Jericho have demonstrated. During Garstang's excavations in the 1930s, followed by Kenyon's discoveries in the 1950s, architecture was found at Jericho that shows close parallels with that from Conder's Cir-



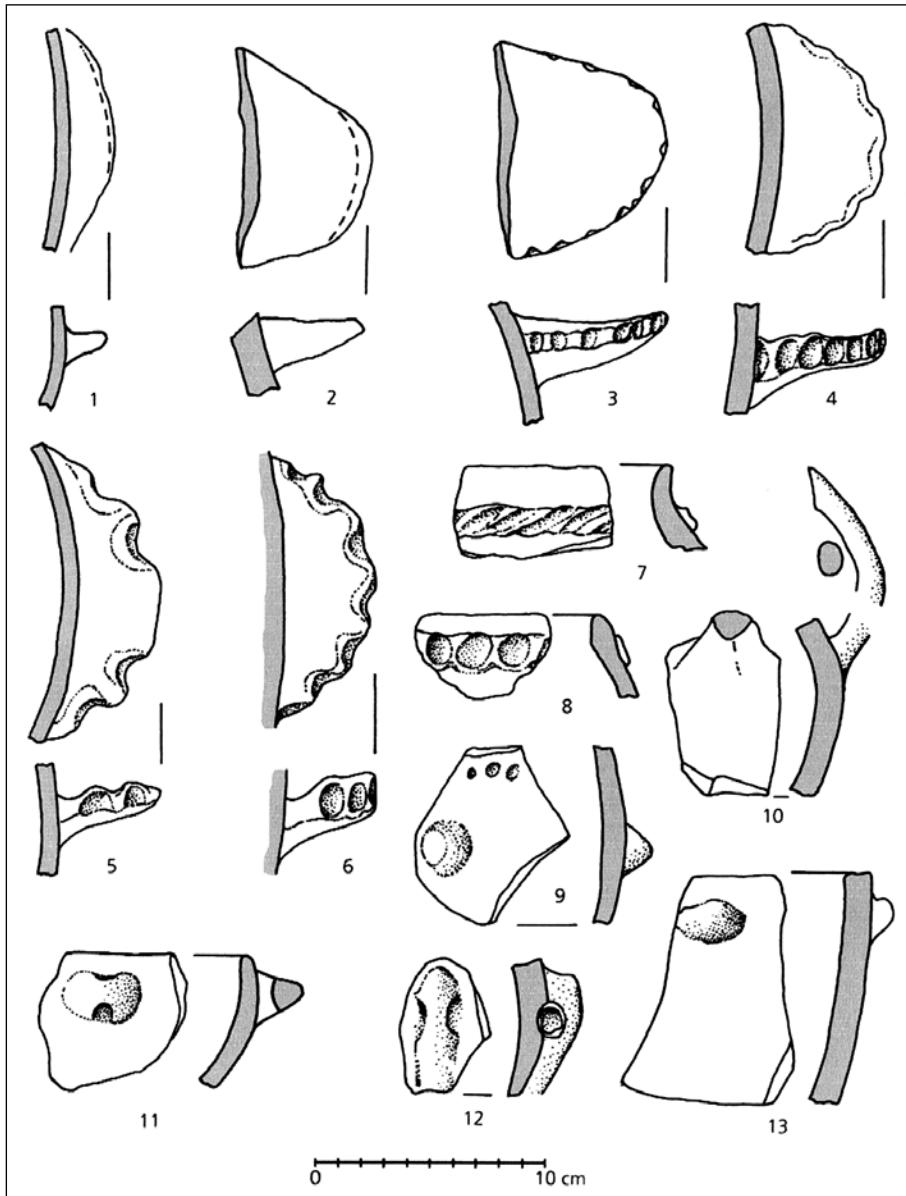
7. Pottery, storage jars.

cle, as recently suggested by the Palestinian-Italian expedition to Tall as-Sultān / Gerico (Nigro 2005: Pianta II and III), e.g. rectangular architecture with rounded corners, silos and interior benches along the walls (FIG. 9). It therefore appears that there was a direct cultural and material link between Jericho and 'Ayn Judaydah (Jadīdah).

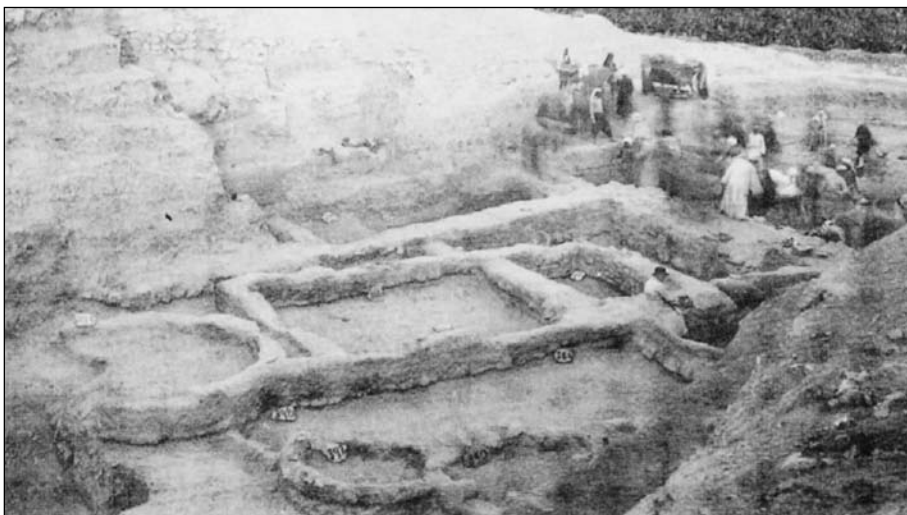
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RESULTS OF RECENT EXCAVATIONS OF CONDER'S CIRCLE



8. Pottery, ledge handles.



9. Architecture from EBA I Jericho (after Nigro 2005).

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