

EXCAVATIONS AT KHIRBET ISKANDER¹

Introduction

Khirbet Iskander (map reference 2233.1072) lies on the north bank of the Wadi el-Wala, a tributary of the Wadi el-Mujib, a few hundred metres west of the point where the modern road from Madaba to Dhiban crosses the stream. The site seems to have been noted first by Schick, in 1877², but the first proper study was that by Glueck, who describes the present appearance of the site, together with that of some of the neighbouring menhirs and stone circles, in some detail in the third volume of his *Explorations in Eastern Palestine*.³ Until the publication of the full report of the present excavations, which will be accompanied by a plan, the reader is referred to Glueck's description. The site is a fairly large one, though flat and not very noticeable. It occupies a strategic position, guarding the point where throughout ancient and modern times the main north-south road through East Jordan has crossed the Wala. The latter is a perennial stream with luxuriant vegetation in its bed (plate XII, 1), and Iskander, on its low isolated rise (plate XII, 2), must have been a pleasant and easily defensible settlement.

From a study of the surface sherds, Glueck dated the site to what he called the "E.B.IV-M.B.I" period, following Wright's terminology⁴; a period to which, according to him, most of the E. B. sites in East Jordan south of the Wadi Zerqa belong.

Recent work, especially that of Miss Kenyon at Jericho, and of Miss Tufnell on the publication of the Lachish material, has raised many new questions, while it has answered some old ones, concerning the M. B. I period — called now by Miss Tufnell the 'Caliciform Culture', and by Miss Kenyon the 'Intermediate E. B. - M. B.' phase. Problems concerning the so-called E. B. IV period have also become more acute, especially since this is a phase which seems to have been recognized only occasionally west of the Jordan, in any of the complete sequences available from excavation.⁵ It was, therefore, partly to throw light on this interesting but vague E. B. IV-M. B. I period that, in June 1955, trial excavations were made at Iskander. It was also hoped to see whether, in fact, any earlier settlement had existed there.

The Excavations

The work was done under the auspices of, and was largely financed by, the Ashmolean Museum. In the short time available only two small trenches could be dug, and this must be

¹ A brief note on these excavations appeared in Vol. III of this *Annual* (1956), p. 81, and a full report, now in preparation, will be published in the *P.E.Q.* The present abbreviated account is presented here at the request of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, to the staff of which, and particularly to its Director, Dr. Awni K. Dajani, I am indebted for encouragement and assistance. Full acknowledgments for other assistance, financial and otherwise, will appear in the final report.

² *P.E.F.Q.S.* (1879) p. 189.

³ *A.A.S.O.R.* Vols. XVIII - XIX (1939) pp. 127 - 129, and fig. 47.

⁴ Glueck, *op. cit.*, p. 251 and references.

⁵ The writer hopes to discuss the E. B. IV period at greater length in the full report on these excavations.

and throughout the following discussion, only tentative conclusions can be drawn from the evidence of such a small area excavated. The first trench was on the brow of the eastern slope of the mound, and the second on the northern edge of the site, which at this point is only a little higher than the anciently unoccupied area to the north.

Stratigraphy and Structures

Trench I. This trench, on the east of the site, reached bed-rock at a maximum depth of just under 3 metres. Three main phases could be distinguished :

1. Resting on bed-rock were the bottom six courses of a well built wall, the lowest three courses of which projected a few centimetres and had a slight batter. The wall was about 2.30m. thick at its base. Its function as a town wall, rather than as a terrace or house wall, seems to be indicated not only by its thickness, and the care with which it was built (and especially by the batter at the foot), but also by the fact that the hill slope had been carefully scarped to receive it, so that originally the lowest 2 metres of the wall would have backed up against natural rock, and the interior ground level would have been that distance above the exterior. As only a short stretch of this wall was uncovered, however, it is impossible to say whether it surrounds the whole site. The wall had been destroyed down to within 1.25m. of its base, and all contemporary occupation levels had been eroded. A thick layer of gravelly soil, derived from the destruction and subsequent erosion, ran up to the face of the wall, and a little similar material covered the top.

2. The remains of this wall were sealed by a series of thin streaky levels, of soft grey ashy material and of yellow and brown clay, none of which was associated, in the small area exposed, with any structure. The fact that the big wall of Period 1 had been destroyed to a level below that of the top of its scarp and all contemporary occupation layers eroded, suggests either that there was a period of desertion between the destruction of the wall and the laying down of the Period 2 levels, or that the site was deliberately cleared at this time. It is indeed possible that the streaky grey and yellow layers of Period 2 themselves represent a period of decay, when occupation material and clayey earth spread over the destroyed wall and down the slope; or that they are part of a rubbish dump. But the presence of well defined surfaces of clay and of soft grey soil, and of burnt patches where fires must have stood, suggests rather to the writer that we have here a definite undisturbed occupation deposit, perhaps a series of courtyard levels, going with buildings further towards the interior of the site and not reached by the present excavations. This is further suggested by the fact that these thin streaky levels were overlain by a thicker deposit of yellow bricky debris, probably the destruction level of a building.

3 (i). There was evidence of a gap in occupation between the end of Period 2 and the beginning of Period 3, the upper levels of the former (especially the brick debris mentioned above) having been disturbed by what seemed to be root- and animal-holes, which suggested that at least this part of the site had reverted to nature. Into this eroded surface newcomers had dug a large and deep foundation trench (2m. deep and at least 3m. wide), to receive either another defensive wall or a terrace wall. Very little of the wall itself remained, it having slipped down into the wadi below. The stratification here was confused, and presents problems of interpretation which will be discussed in the full report. Suffice it to say here that the wall may have been rebuilt on one or more occasions during this period.

(ii). At a slightly later date a stone building was erected over this complex of walls, the large foundation trench being sealed by a cobbled area associated with the building. Some of the upper courses of the Period 3 (i) wall were still exposed, and were incorporated into the new structure. The main feature of the new building was a roughly cobbled courtyard, about 2.50m. \times 4.00m. in extent, sub-divided into working areas by low partition walls, and with a stone socket for a roof support in the centre (plate XIII, 1). The courtyard wall on the east (downslope) side had mostly disappeared; but on the west a substantial stone wall 1.50m. high and .75m. thick still survived (plate XIII, 2). The uppermost stones of this wall just protruded above the present ground surface, and must have been among those noticed by Glueck.

Trench II. This trench, on the northern edge of the site, where there were many surface indications of buildings, was not completed, reaching a depth of 2.25m. without touching bed-rock. Although no complete structures were found, the foundations of several superimposed stone walls were uncovered. Two main periods seem to be represented, corresponding closely to periods 2 and 3 of Trench I. The lower of the two periods was represented by the same alternate grey and yellow streaky occupation levels as had been found in Trench I. In the upper period, at least three, and perhaps four, phases of building were discovered. The uppermost wall, of which only one course remained, and that almost resting on the surface, could be traced for a good distance on the ground, and proved to be part of a rectangular room 9.50m. \times 7.50m. in size, with walls .75m. thick. The meagre remains of the walls of these latest building phases, and their close proximity to the surface, makes their sequence a matter of some uncertainty, especially in view of the small extent of the area excavated. We shall return to this point in the course of the discussion of the pottery, below.

The Pottery

With the exception of several worked flints (plate XIV, 2), a broken basalt pestle and two spindle whorls (plate XIV, 3), and a pottery animal figurine¹ (plate XIV, 1), the only objects found were potsherds. In the brief discussion which follows, only the most important facts concerning the pottery will be mentioned, and one or two tentative conclusions drawn from them. It will be convenient to treat each of the three main periods outlined above separately, though the two trenches may be considered together.

Period 1. In the levels immediately associated with the stone wall of Period 1, very little pottery was in fact found. The three sherds illustrated (fig. 1, nos. 3, 4, and 8) all come from the gravelly soil sealing the remains of the wall, presumably representing its destruction and the subsequent erosion of the site. The sherds are all of coarse greyish ware, very gritty, and poorly fired, and the shapes may best be paralleled in the Late Chalcolithic and early E. B. periods elsewhere. (Cf., for example, the short jar neck and the square-cut hole-mouth rims from the Chalcolithique Supérieur of Tell Far'ah²).

¹ Cf. a similar figurine from the M. B. I. level at Byblos : Dunand, *R.B.* LIX (1952) pl. VI, first object in fourth row from top.

² R. de Vaux, *R.B.* LXII (1955) p. 555, nos. 11 and 16,

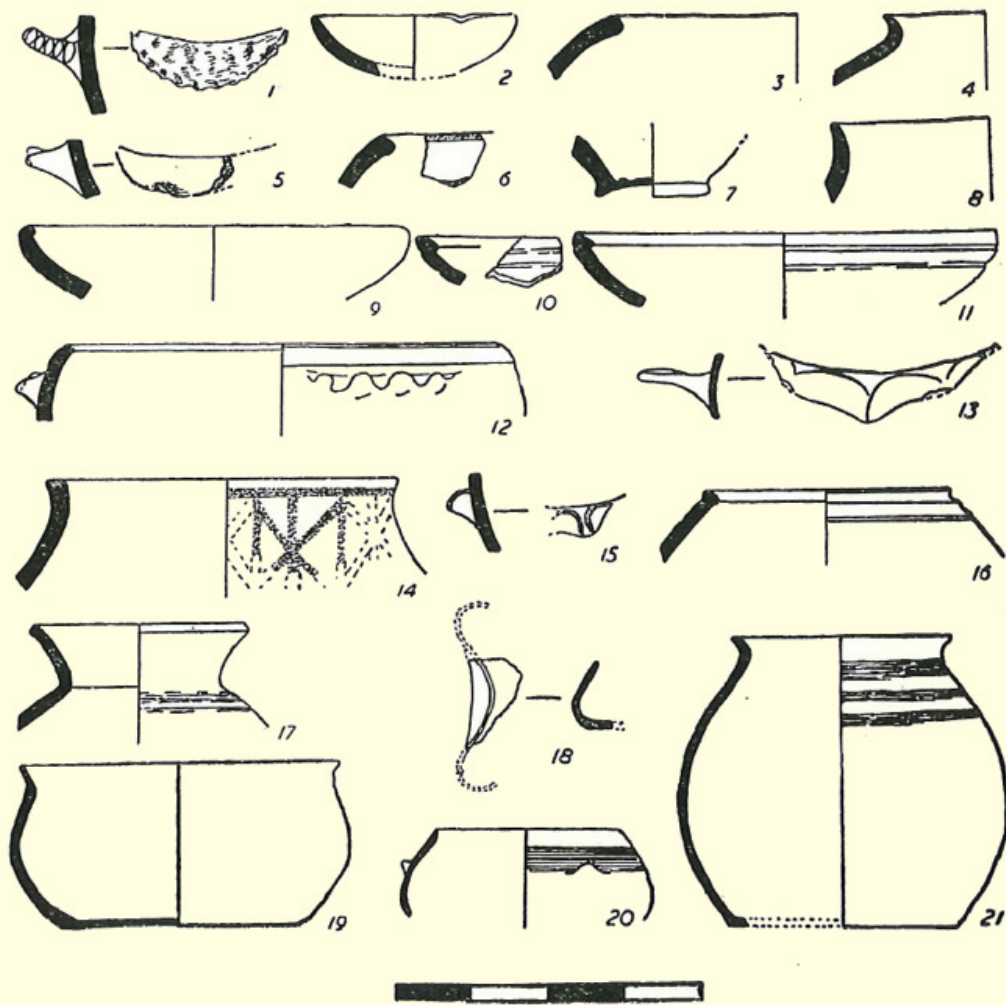


Fig. 1.

Period 2. The sherds from the streaky occupation or midden accumulation of Period 2, in both trenches, belong to the Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Ages. A full analysis of their types and dating must await the final report, when it will also be discussed whether or not there is a typological and chronological development through the successive layers of this period. The important fact to be noted here, however, is the presence of many undoubted Late Chalcolithic sherds.¹ Two ledge-handles may be mentioned, the one (fig. 1, 1), a thumb-indented handle, for which parallels may be found in Stages VII-IV at Megiddo², the early E. B. levels at Jericho³, and the early caves at Tell Duweir⁴; and the second (fig. 1, 5), a variant of the same form, also found in the Chalcolithic caves at Duweir⁵. The hole-mouth jar rim illustrated (fig. 1, 6) is of coarse, gritty, grey ware, hand-made, and has a band of red paint over the lip (cf. Tell Far'ah, *Enéolithique Moyen*: *R. B. LIV* (1947) p. 406-7, no. 5.). Also probably of the Late Chalcolithic or beginning of the E. B. period is the lamp fragment illustrated (fig. 1, 2), which has highly polished red exterior and interior surfaces, and a small indentation in the rim, now heavily discoloured with smoke⁶. Other sherds from Period 2 include pinch-lapped ledge-handles and a red burnished stump-base, indicating that the site was not deserted in the later phases of the Early Bronze Age.

One should, perhaps, remark here that the presence of Chalcolithic and early E. B. sherds in these levels overlying the wall footings of Period 1 does not necessarily mean that that wall is itself of such an early date. So long as the origin of the streaky grey layers which constitute Period 2 in both trenches is in doubt - i. e. whether they are undisturbed occupational accumulation or a later rubbish dump - the possibility remains that the early sherds are derived from elsewhere on the site, and have no bearing on the date of the Period 1 wall.

Period 3. Although the pottery of the final main period from both Trenches I and II is sufficiently similar to warrant its being treated as a whole, it may be better at the moment, in view of the uncertainty of the sequence of the building phases near the surface of Trench II, to direct our main attention to the Trench I material, using sherds from the second trench for illustrative purposes only.

At first glance the material from Period 3 seems to be a mixture of Glueck's E. B. IV and Miss Kenyon's E.B. - M.B. forms, including, as it does, grooved inverted rims (fig. 1, nos. 10 and 11); "rolled" inverted rims (no. 9); grooved "tea-pot" rims (no. 16)⁷; incised decoration (nos. 17, 20, and 21 — all from Trench II, but many similar sherds from Trench I); and everted jar rims with square-cut lips (no. 17)⁸. One envelope ledge-handle was also found, in Trench II. All these forms were undoubtedly found associated together in the occupation and destruction levels of the stone building in Trench I (Period 3 (ii)), and while

¹ Père de Vaux, who saw this pottery, was immediately struck by its resemblance to the material of the *Enéolithique Supérieur* at Far'ah.

² Engberg and Shipton, *Notes on the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age Pottery*, fig. 5 (Form 14G).

³ K. M. Kenyon, *P.E.Q.* 1952, p. 78, and fig. 5, no. 4.

⁴ O. Tufnell, *Lachish IV*, p. 151, fig. 7 (Form 2), and pl. 11, nos. 31 and 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, fig. 7, no. 1 (Form 1).

⁶ Cf. Engberg and Shipton, *op. cit.*, Form 21C (Red High Polish Bowls), Stages VII - IV.

⁷ *Lachish IV*, p. 175, and pl. 67, no. 454. (Caliciform)

⁸ K. M. Kenyon, *A.D.A.J.* III (1956), p. 49, fig. 8, no. 7. (EB - MB)

it is possible that a certain amount of extrusive earlier material is included in the body of sherds recorded as coming from this phase, it is unlikely that there is enough of these completely to alter the character of the group. It should be borne in mind, also, that no examples of the forms mentioned above were found in the Period 2 levels immediately beneath the walls and cobbled floor of the Period 3 building. In any case, the mixture is not unprecedented. Grooved bowl rims are known from the E. B. - M. B. tombs at Ajjul¹, while many examples are illustrated from Tell Beit Mirsim, strata H-I². There is no reason to suppose, therefore, that we have here at Iskander anything but a chronologically homogeneous group of pottery. Its chief interest lies in the fact that within it the E. B. tradition still seems strong, both as regards the forms, the ware, and the decoration, while at the same time the E. B. - M. B. characteristics are also strongly in evidence. The implications of this situation at Iskander, and its bearing on the study of the E. B. - M. B. period elsewhere in Palestine, will be discussed in the final report.

PETER J. PARR.

Addendum. Two sherds illustrated on fig. 1 deserve a special note. The one, no. 7, is the ring-base of a medium-sized vessel, possibly a jug or jar; the second, no. 14, is the neck of a large jar, with a decoration (faint in places) of reddish-purple paint on a pink, wet-smoothed surface. The neck shows signs of having been made on the wheel. Both sherds are of the buff ware, evenly fired, typical of Period 3 at Iskander, from which, in fact, they both come. The base has the harsh texture and green hue typical of some E.B. - M.B. material elsewhere.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48, fig. 7, nos. 1 and 2.

² W. F. Albright, *A.A.S.O.R.* XII (1930 - 1), pls. 3, 4, and 5 *passim*; XIII (1931 - 2), pls. 20 and 21 *passim*. Professor Albright, however, maintains that the grooving on the rims of bowls from strata H - I at Tell Beit Mirsim is different from, though related to, that found on bowls from late E.B. sites such as Bab ed-Dra; cf. *A.A.S.O.R.* XII (1930 - 1), p. 11.