

EXPEDITION TO KHIRBAT ISKANDAR AND ITS ENVIRONS: THE 2016 SEASON

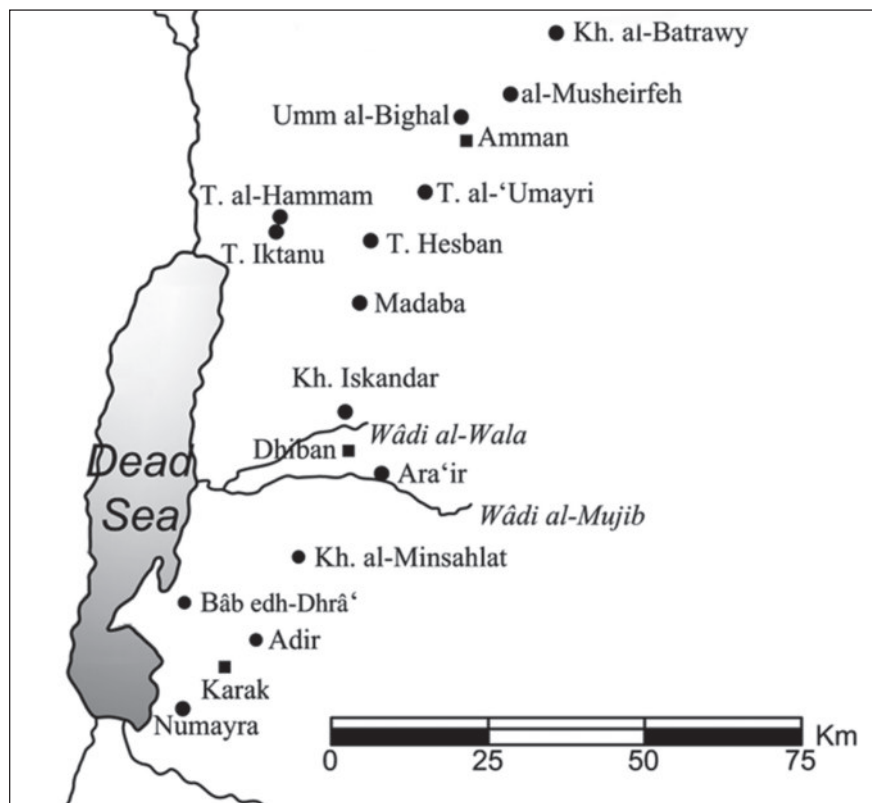
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Introduction

This short preliminary report summarizes the four-week season of renewed work at the site of Khirbat Iskandar from June 24 -July 21, 2016. The project operates under a permit from the Department of Antiquities.

The site of Khirbat Iskandar, located on the Wādī al-Wālah about 20-25 km south of Mādabā and just north of Dhībān (**Fig. 1**), is known as one of the major Early Bronze Age IV (EB IV) settlements in the southern Levant (c. 2500-1950 BC in the new, higher chronology; Regev *et al.* 2012). Its importance lies in the fact that it is one of the few sites to have substantial strata from

both the EB III and EB IV periods extant on the mound. The fortified Early Bronze Age (EBA) site of Khirbat Iskandar owes its prominence to the perennial stream in the Wādī al-Wālah, to the caravan route (“the King’s Highway”) that passed close by the site, and to the expansive agricultural lands contiguous to the site (Cordova and Long 2010: 21-35; Cordova 2007: Figs. 5.8 and 6.6, and see pp. 189-90). Data show that erosion and destruction of the floodplain from the end of EB III through the EB IV period gradually diminished the carrying capacity of the landscape, eventually causing the abandonment of the site near the end of the period.



1. Map showing the location of Khirbat Iskandar.

This year represents the ninth major excavation season at the site, the previous seasons being 1982, 1984, 1987, 1997, 2000, 2004, 2010, and 2013 (See Richard *et al.*, 2013 and bibliography cited therein). Along with two pilot seasons, Phase 1 in 1981 (Richard 1982) and Phase 2 in 1994 (Richard and Long 1995), two seasons were devoted solely to preservation and restoration; 1998 (Long and Libby 1999) and 2006, although restoration, preservation, and consolidation of walls is an integral component of each excavation season. The major archaeological periods investigated at the site thus far date to the EB III and EB IV, although earlier materials have been encountered on the *tall* and in the cemeteries (EB I and EB II).

Research Design

The expedition's overriding research design includes two major objectives; to study culture change at the end of the third millennium BC in the southern Levant (a dramatic transition from urban institutions to non-urban (rural) economies), and to investigate the rise and collapse of urbanism at the site during the Early Bronze Age (3600-1950 BC). The substantial and well-preserved remains from the EB IV period have demonstrated there was a high level of complexity in the rural EB IV period, as well as strong continuities with Early Bronze Age tradition. Khirbat Iskandar is one of the major sites evidencing the permanently settled agricultural population which is gradually becoming better known in light of recent archaeological activity in the southern Levant (Richard and Long 2010). Excavations at Khirbat Iskandar and at other sedentary sites support an alternative view of EB IV society, which contrasts with the traditional model of pastoral-nomadism for the period. Strong cultural affinities with the preceding Early Bronze Age culture, as well as growing evidence for continuity with the succeeding Middle Bronze Age (D'Andrea 2013), raise questions about the term "Intermediate Bronze Age (IBA)", which is alternatively used for the period (Gophna 1992; Prag 2014; Mazar 2006). For the urban period, Khirbat Iskandar is revealing a typical pattern of multiple rebuilds of fortifications in the EB III period, adding to our knowledge about EBA occupation and set-

tlement in the central/southern Transjordanian plateau region.

Goals of the 2016 Season

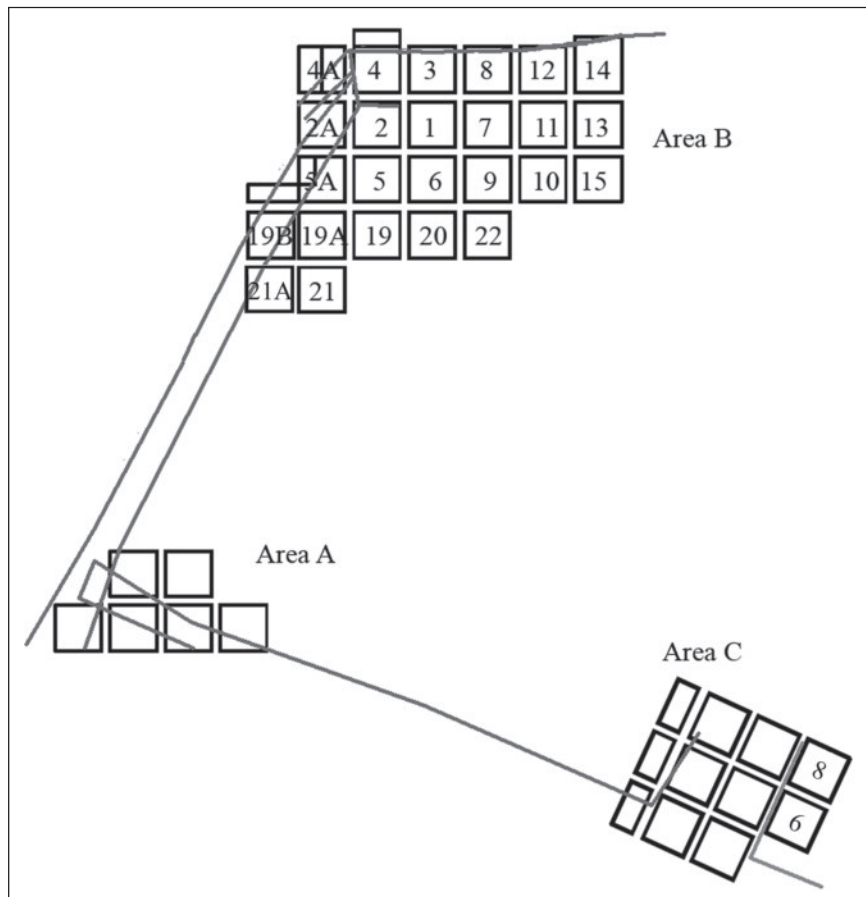
The purpose of the short four-week season was to clarify a few issues relevant to the publication of Vol. 2 of the Khirbat Iskandar Expedition Series, which is a final report on the EB IV settlements in Area B. One of these issues concerned the relationship of the EB IV phases in Area B with those in Area C, the latter field previously published in Vol. 1 of the Expedition Series (Richard *et al.* 2010). The intent, likewise, was to achieve more horizontal exposure of the EB III settlement, as well as to recheck connections with the fortifications (Richard *et al.* 2013; Richard 2016). In order to address these issues, the following strategies guided the work of the 2016 season (see topographic plan in **Fig. 2**):

- 1) Reopen Squares C06 and C08 in Area C (the "gateway") to recheck the three-phase EB IV phasing and to enhance our comparative ceramic analysis with Area B.
- 2) Reopen Square B01 in Area B to expose more of the earlier Phases C-D structures.
- 3) Reopen Squares B4A, B5A/B, and B21 to recheck the fortifications and their relationship to EB III and IV interior phasing.
- 4) Recheck all drawings and sections for Area B; continue to consolidate standing walls.

The 2016 Season

Area C

As mentioned above, although the work in Area C had been completed, the architecture restored, and the final report published (Richard *et al.* 2010), the decision was made to reinvestigate the critical EB IV phasing uncovered in this area: the latest Phase 3a-b gateway, the Phase 2, and the Phase 1 domestic levels. We focused on Squares C06/C08 at the eastern perimeter of the gateway, where features, objects, and considerable debitage suggested a lithic workshop through several phases (**Fig. 3**, and Long 2010: Figs. 3.11, 3.26). Importantly, excavation had revealed remains of an earlier (Phase 1) settlement on the eastern side of the gateway, which appeared to yield transitional EB III/IV pottery (Long 2010: Figs. 3.1-2; Richard 2010: Fig. 4.5).



2. Plan showing excavation areas at Khirbat Iskandar.

Square C06

The restoration of Square C06 (Long and Libby 1999) was intended to illustrate the superimposition of three EB IV phases. Thus, the northern half preserved the Phase 3 structures, the southern half the remnant of a Phase 2 wall (6039) sandwiched between the later Phase 3 Wall 6005 and the preceding remains of a Phase 1 (6034) domestic structure (Long 2010: Figs. 3.19-20). The goal was to excavate soil layers west of these walls to obtain larger samples of pottery from more exposure of associated surfaces. Specifically, we endeavored to excavate the northern half of the square to the Phase 1 surface visible in the southern half.

Removing the Phase 3 table and benches (which will be returned in the future to their previous restored state), the team excavated the underlying surface, which may actually have been a restored surface, to reveal more of the Phase 2 wall. The rest of the season devoted itself to tracing more of the Phase 2 and Phase 1 surfaces and associated walls in Square C06

(Fig. 4). Excavation confirmed that a plaster surface sealed against the Phase 2 wall (6039), and that it overlay an apparent makeup layer of concrete-like and mud-brick material (6046). The latter covered a plastered interior surface made up of pebbles and flint inclusions (6045) that sealed against Phase 1 W. 6034. The latter was new information about the construction history of Phase 1 W.6034 emerging from a foundation trench (filled with reddish mudbrick material), which showed that Surface 6045 was laid subsequently to the wall's construction.

Importantly, excavation in Square C06 revealed there was a layer of mudbrick and ash lying beneath the Phase 1 surface, primarily collapse material in the south, whereas in the north there was some alignment of mud bricks. It is almost certain now that this pre-Phase 1 layer witnesses the destruction of the EB III settlement encountered everywhere in Area B below EB IV remains. Moreover, excavation revealed that the Phase 2 surface west of Wall 6039 was an outdoor surface (see below).



3. Plan of Area C (Richard et al. 2010).

Square C08

Square C08 had previously been excavated with the dimensions of 5.0 x 2.5m. Significant remains from three EB IV phases convinced us to return to expand the square to 5.0 x 5.0m, thus aligning it with Square C06, and to revisit the exposed but undated walls discovered in the short 2007 excavation in the area. As published in Vol. 2 (Long 2010: Fig. 3.26), Square C08 comprised two major structural features; a (Phase 3) paved room with a doorway at the north, and a southern area with a central massive stone base jutting out of the east balk. Excavation to expose the presumed northern extension of the Phases 1-2 architecture encountered in Square C06 had been attempted in 2007. Unfortunately, at the end of the season, the exposed

wall lines (mentioned above) which emerged in the constricted area remained unexcavated and undated (see Long 2010: Fig. 3.25).

In 2016, confirmation of the previously hypothesized 3B phase in C08 (Long 2010: Fig. 3:28) came to light in the excavation of the eastern half of the square. An addition to east-west W. 8002 (8002A) had been constructed in Phase 3B, as seen in the difference between W. 8002 (1.25m in height) and W. 8002A (0.60m in height), as well as in the continuation of the structure's interior plaster surface, discovered to overlie a Phase 3A pillar base (8064). These two elements affirmed the existence of a Phase 3B room (**Fig. 5**). Interestingly, though, the wall line (W. 8024) previously apparent in the balk (Long 2010: Fig. 3.53) took an unexpected configuration; a partial wall with collapse at

the south. As (**Fig. 5**) illustrates, there was an unusual curved wall/bench built against the southern and eastern faces of walls 8002A and 8051 respectively in the southern half of the square in Phase 3B. This structure connected with eastern boundary W. 8047; at the west, however, it ended short of W. 6009 to the south. Surface 8053 sealed against the four walls of this Phase 3B room: 8051, 8002A, 6009 and 8047.

In the earlier Phase 3A plan of the area, excavation confirmed the massive square stone base 8012 was correctly dated to this phase. Excavation revealed the base to be associated with a type of cobbled pavement/platform (8055), or row of pillar bases (including pillar base 8064 discovered at the north end). This new feature ran under and thus antedated the Phase 3B room just described (**Fig. 6**). The Phase 3A plan showed that the room included a doorway/threshold at the southeast juncture of eastern boundary W8047 with east-west W.6009. The complete Phase 3A architectural

plan thus shows that the rooms in C08 and C06 were of similar dimensions, and that stone base 8064, located in the middle of the room, was, in fact, a pillar base, rather than a work platform; an option which had been considered previously.

Since the goal was to expose more complete architectural units of the earlier phases, the Phase 3B bench-like structure, as well as the newly recovered Phase 3A pavement, were removed once fully documented. Continuing excavation revealed the expected northern extent



4. Square C06: lower Phase 1 wall and surface, and upper Phase 2 wall and surface (photo: G. Kochheiser).



5. Square C08: the Phase 3B structure at top, the Phase 3A pillar base at bottom (photo: G. Kochheiser).



6. Square C08, a view of the Phase 3A pavement underlying Phase 3B Wall 8002A (photo: G. Kochheiser).

of the C06 Phase 2, W. 6049. It is now clear that this is the western wall of a structure, as it corners with W. 8066 (Fig. 7). The excavation of a foundation trench along the northern side of W. 6009 revealed that a Phase 2 surface of the building covered a leveling of mudbrick materials, below which a Phase 1 pebble and flint exterior surface (8071) came to light, the same stratigraphy of which was discovered in Square C06. Below the Phase 1 surface, mudbrick and ash materials appeared, undoubtedly the top of the EB III destruction layer discovered throughout Area B below EB IV levels. Regrettably, due to the short season, the intended investigation of the EB III phase and the several undated walls which had been uncovered in 2007 could not take place. Although in the past it was suggested that EB III structures were reused in Phase 1, we were not able to confirm this hypothesis this year, or determine whether there was a hiatus or not in this area between the end of EB III and the beginning of EB IV.

Area B

At the northwest corner in Area B, there are 25 5 x 5m squares, where two major EB IV phases (A-B) and multiple EB III phases (C-D-E) have come to light. Phase A at the top was a well-built and well-preserved extensive neighborhood village settlement (Richard and Long 2005: Fig. 5), while the earlier Phase B settlement was quite different, providing an intriguing accumulation of data reflecting unusual complexity for the period, including a public complex with storeroom and ritual activity areas (Richard 1990). The latter settlement was built into and atop the destruction



7. Square C06-08, showing the continuation of Phase 2 W. 6039 cornering to the east (photo: G. Kochheiser).

layer of the EB III (Phase C1) settlement, with reuse and rebuilding of earlier walls evidenced, including the fortifications (Richard 2016). The Phase C1 settlement included what appeared to be a public building, or at least a central room for storage, auxiliary workrooms, and a large courtyard (Richard *et al.* 2013: Fig. 11), built within the fortifications.

An earlier Phase C2 settlement (the construction phase of the outer (later) fortifications) had been exposed only in limited areas. A Phase D level was mostly known from the inner (earlier) mudbrick/stone fortification. As for the western trace wall, it had been assumed that the “rubble” perimeter wall (B05A002), which abutted the northwest tower, was the only candidate for a western trace wall, although questions about this wall and its unusual construction abounded. In 2013, the discovery of a major EB III fortification (W. 4A006) just west of the “rubble” wall confirmed that the latter wall had been constructed subsequent to W. 4A006 (see below and Richard *et al.* 2013; Richard 2016: Fig. 3). Likewise in 2013, a small probe area in the western half of Square B01 provided new information about the depth of EB III occupation on the site, information we aimed to explore further in 2016 (see below). With this general background on earlier work in Area B, we turn to the 2016 excavation season.

The discussion will begin with Square B01. The eastern half of the square had been left at the C1 settlement level (below the destruction layer), while to the west the C2 settlement was represented by a lower surface associated with several hearths. The 2013 season had uncovered (below the Phase C2 hearth level/surface) the remains of a 1.0m high stone structure running under the Phase C tower platform (Richard *et al.* 2013). On the interior of the structure, excavation revealed a series of surfaces and mudbrick debris layers, the upper surfaces of which appeared to connect with Phase D surfaces to the west, while the lower surfaces and the founding level of the wall were at a great depth, making it difficult to associate with other architecture or phases thus far exposed. We very tentatively termed the lower surfaces and construction phase of the wall Phase E. The pottery appeared to be diagnostic for early EB III. With these discoveries in mind, we decided

in 2016 to investigate this enigmatic building further, by excavating in the eastern half of Square B01 (a Phase C1 wall was a natural boundary for the work). As we shall see, the nature of the discoveries here were such that it was not possible to trace the building.

Lying below the Phase C1 surface in the east, a layer of mudbrick debris and ash was encountered, within which excavation revealed an unusual mudbrick horseshoe-shaped *tabun*/bin (B01136) (**Fig. 8**). There was an extensive firepit, and much ash and mudbrick debris. Cook pot fragments were found inside the feature. The *tabun*/bin had been constructed on a plaster surface and contiguous to a wall (B01139), which emerged beneath and on a different alignment from overriding Phase C1 wall B01072. Found lying on the surface between the mudbrick feature and the wall were two very large perforated weights (**Fig. 9**). These new discoveries from this season have considerably clarified the Phase C2 settlement in this area. It is now clear that the lower level of mudbrick, ash, and burning encountered previously related to activity areas, not to an earlier destruction. The *tabun*/bin, in combination with multiple hearths discovered to the west, suggests there was a significant work area in this vicinity, differing considerably from the later Phase

C1 remains above, which we termed a central room, probably for storage. Clearly, more work is needed to comprehend the plan of the Phase C2 settlement, but it is possible that the area so far excavated functioned as a kitchen, although the hearths might indicate other activities/industries, perhaps the firing of pottery.

Fortifications

As mentioned above, we reopened several squares along the western perimeter of the mound, in order to recheck stratigraphic connections between the occupational phases and the fortifications. We expanded Square B4A into a full 5.0 x 5.0m square in order to investigate the new fortification line on the west, hoping to find a foundation trench, exterior surfaces or perhaps a road. Unfortunately, although a few compaction layers were encountered, there did not appear to be evidence of a surface/road, probably due to the eroded slope. The excavation did, however, uncover several interesting aspects about the wall. First, it stands to a height



8. Square B01, with a view of Phase C1 *tabun*/bin (B01126) and W.B01139 jutting out on a different alignment from overlying Phase C2 W.B01072 (photo: G. Kochheiser).



9. Square B01 stone weights lying on surface associated with *tabun*/bin B01126 and W. B01139 (photo: G. Kochheiser).

of 1.75m, which, along with its width of 2.0m, reflects the remains of a substantial western fortification in Phase C, matching in depth and wall construction the northern outer wall trace. Its founding level lay below a layer of mud-brick, upon which remnants of a stone structure (W. 4A024) were found resting up against it (**Fig. 10**). The partial remains of the feature could have been large stones laid in a foundation trench or, alternatively, may have been a revetment or even the remains of a curvilinear “tower,” a segment of which was found on the interior (eastern) side of the fortification previously. Of great interest was the discovery of EB IV pottery at levels associated with the lower levels of the fortification, and the remnant stone structure built against it, raising the possibility that the latter represented some sort of exterior revetment constructed in EB IV. In this same Sq. B4A extension, another remnant stone structure (W. 4A018) came to light in the western balk, whether it is the partial remains of a wall or sim-



10. Square B04a showing the remnant stone structure/revetment on the western side of EB III western fortification W. 4A006 (photo: G. Kochheiser).

ply rubble could not be determined.

In an attempt to determine the line of the western fortification trace wall (B4A006) downslope to the south, and to clarify a previously excavated segment of a wall line thought to represent the inner western perimeter “rubble wall” (B2A053), we reopened and extended Square B5A/5B to investigate the relationship of these two wall lines. Interestingly, the projected line of W. B4A006 did not materialize in the western edges of the square. Rather, in a northern extension of the square, a substantial wall segment came to light, although the season ended before it was possible to determine if a) it was the continuation of Wall B4A006 and/or b) what its relationship to Wall B2A053 (the “rubble” wall) was. It is possible that the two walls overlap at this point, but this is highly speculative; it is more probable that W. B4A006 is further to the west and down slope.

Hoping to uncover more of the inner western perimeter “rubble” wall (B2A053) further down slope, where Phase B EB IV architecture and whole and restorable vessels had been found in Square B21 (Richard *et al.* 2013), we opened a half square to the west (B21A). In the latter, an amazing number of walls emerged in this somewhat constricted space. Due to the considerable slope of the mound at this point, connections with walls to the east, on the other side of the balk with Square B21, were not immediately apparent. Thus, we extended the square further to the west in order to, hopefully, expose more complete architectural units and, especially, to investigate the stratigraphical relationship of Phases A-B walls to the “rubble” wall. In this extension we did encounter what appeared to be the inner line of “rubble” W. B2A053, against which the uppermost surfaces and wall lines seemed to abut. However, the season ended before we could excavate further to discern, definitively, the relationship of the Square B21A structures to the “rubble” wall. Presumably, the same stratigraphical relationships observed at several points along the western perimeter pertain here as well. It has been shown that the Phase A occupants built walls that abutted and/or partially overlay the “rubble” wall, while the Phase B occupants reused and rebuilt the “rubble” wall (Richard 2016 and Richard *et al.* 2013).

Consolidation of Walls

As in every season, the team continued the important consolidation of walls across the site, with a view toward facilitating ultimate preservation and restoration of the walls in Area B in the future (as in Area C). Although continued maintenance has been done over the years in Area C, it was necessary once again to consolidate several walls in danger of collapse. A number of EB III and EB IV walls were consolidated throughout Area B.

Summary and Conclusions

The 2016 season was extremely important for the new information uncovered about the architectural plan and the EB IV phasing/ceramics in Area C. We will, in the future, return to investigate the important EB III/IV transition and earlier EB III levels. In Area B, the excavations in Square B01 provided us, finally, with information about the Phase C2 settlement, about which little was known beyond the fact that it was the construction phase of the outer fortifications. The significant, newly revealed work activity area is of great interest, along with the clarification of the earlier mudbrick/ashy materials just below the Phase C1 settlement. Although there are still questions about the fortifications vis-à-vis the EB III-IV occupational remains, we believe that we have a good grasp of the construction history of the fortification system at the site, and hope to find even more definitive evidence in future.

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