

**TELL ŞĀFŪṬ EXCAVATIONS,
1982-1985
PRELIMINARY REPORT**

by
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In 1980 the plan for expanding Highway 15 called for the demolition of Tell Şāfūṭ, but that did not happen. Preservation of Tell Şāfūṭ is due to a high degree of cooperation between the Ministry of Public Works, the Department of Antiquities, the highway contractor, the consulting engineer, and archaeologists with the support of volunteers, Seton Hall University, and the American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR) in Amman. This tell, which borders Jordan's main north-south traffic artery, was destined to be removed for the most part in order to provide space and materials for the new four-lane divided highway which connects points south, such as 'Aqaba and the new airport, with points north, such as Jarash and Irbid.

At the insistence of Dr. 'Adnan Ḥadi-di, Director-General of the Department of Antiquities, the Prime Minister issued a stop order which the Department of Public Works implemented. The contractor suspended construction. The conditions were that an archaeological evaluation of the site would be made and specific plans to study the tell would be developed. These plans included the immediate objective of exposing sufficient architecture to elicit a commitment to preserve the tell and the following long range objectives:

- 1) establishing a ceramic sequence for the tell;
- 2) determining the range of occupation, and
- 3) obtaining a detailed investigation of each stratum of occupation.

Actual excavation began on April 10, 1982, and continued until August 21 for a first of several seasons sponsored jointly by the Department of Antiquities and Seton Hall University. As a result, His Excellency, Mr. 'Awni el-Masri, Minister of Public Works, issued a decision that the course of

the roadway was to be modified to preserve as much of the tell as possible. In contrast to the original plan to remove nearly the entire acropolis and everything south of it, nothing was to be taken from the acropolis, and less than three meters were to be taken off the south (highway) side.

Located 12 km northwest of 'Amman, Tell Şāfūṭ rises 928.32m above sea level¹. Below it to the north runs the Baq'ah Valley which drops as much as 300m from the summit. It runs ca. 5 km wide for ca. 10 km long in a northeasterly direction. To the south, the Şuweileḥ hills tower 160m overhead. From any distance in the valley, Tell Şāfūṭ appears to be nestled inconspicuously in the Şuweileḥ hills.

At the present time, the tell itself is bounded on the south by the highway, and on the west by a group of rather elegant houses, (the "suburbs" of the village of Şāfūṭ). Wadi Şuweileḥ, which flows towards the tell year-round, bounds the tell on the north after being joined by the tributary wadi that bounds the tell on the east. Springs that gush from the tell on its northwest extremity join Wadi Şuweileḥ, from which point the wadi is named Wadi Şāfūṭ as it flows into and through the village of Şāfūṭ. The area of the tell thus bounded contains 17,280 square meters or 17.28 dunums, approximately 4½ acres (Fig. 1 and Pl. XI,1). The acropolis is oriented ENE by WSW and in the time before any damage was done it measured approximately 18 by 70 meters (Glueck 1939:191).

Modern knowledge of the site developed in three stages, the first from surveys. On March 28, 1877, Selah Merrill noted Tell Şāfūṭ as one of four regionally important ruins, after Amman. In 1881, Rudolf Meyer placed it on the map for the

1. Corrected from 927.56 m as reported in *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan*. Vol. 3,

1987, edited by Adnan Hadidi, p. 279.

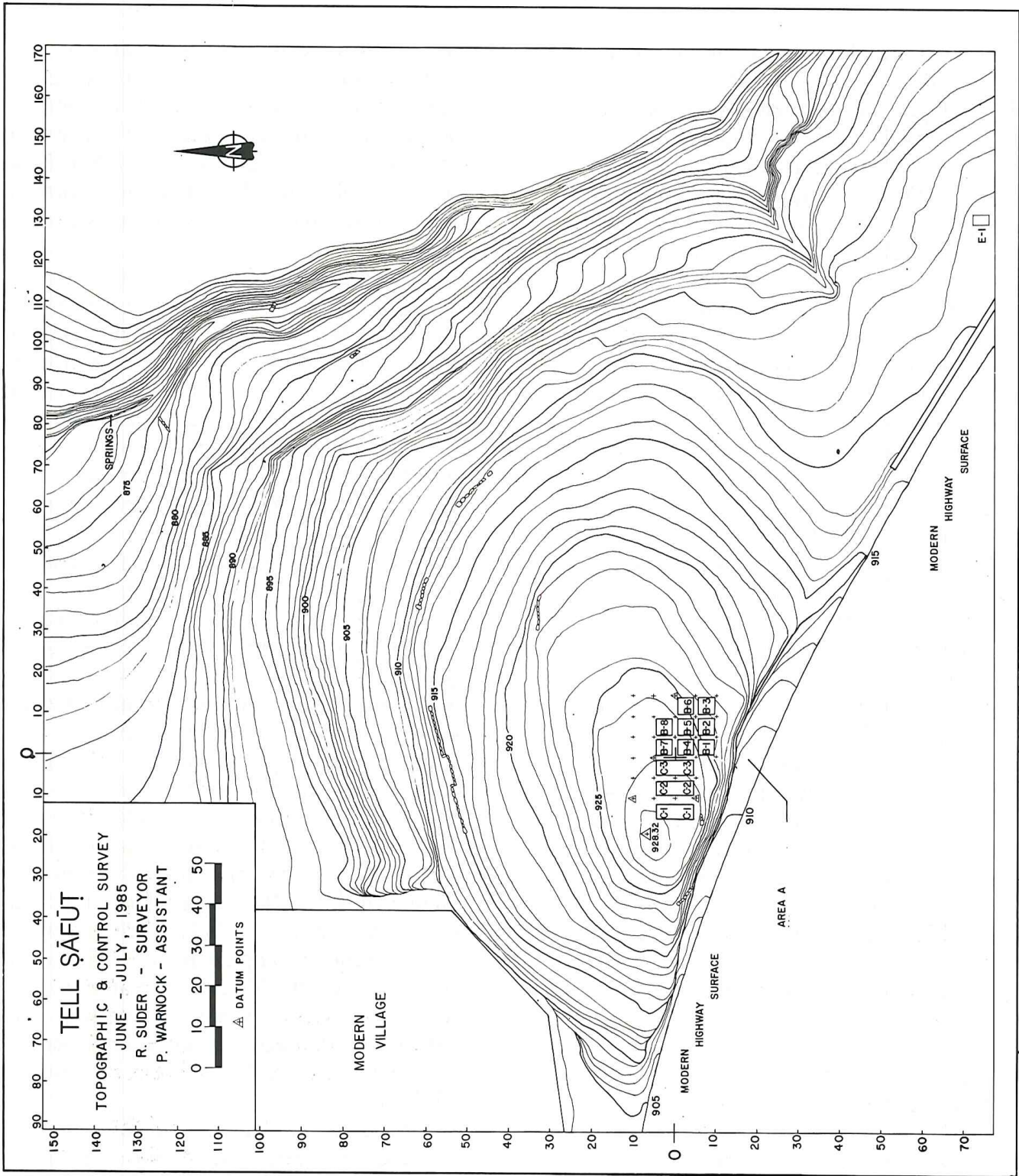


Fig. 1: Topographic map of Tell Şafüt

American Palestine Exploration Society. Millar Burrows (1931:11) noted its existence as an interesting site. By his calculations, occupation spanned eras from Late Bronze to Early Iron III, and the Hellenistic Period.

In the 1930s, Roland deVaux and Nelson Glueck conducted separate surface surveys and finally concluded that the site was an Iron Age fortification which did not prove to be older than the early Iron Age. They reported no Hellenistic pottery. In terms of political geography, the site was a fortified overseer of the Baq'ah valley and the surrounding hills to the southwest side of which lay Rabboth 'Ammon (modern 'Amman), the ancient capitol of the Ammonite kingdom. Nelson Glueck (1934:19) placed the main historical period of Şāfūt and its surrounding sites between early thirteenth and the eighth-seventh centuries B.C. Père Roland deVaux (1938:418), surveying the Salt region (which included Tell Şāfūt), mentions a wall line protecting the acropolis and notes that some of the associated pottery belongs to the Bronze Age. "Il y a un peu de Br. I et début du Br. II". But after Glueck gathered large quantities of sherds on the slopes and on the top of the mound, de Vaux felt compelled to agree with Glueck who maintained that all of them belonged to Early Iron I-II, "none earlier and none later."

The second stage comes from a cut into the structure of the tell itself. In the 1950s the southern edge of the tell was sheared off to make room for the new Na'ur-Jarash highway which was being re-directed away from the center of Şuweileh. Architecture thus exposed is described by Farah Ma'ayeh (1960:115) as "a sloping plastered 'glacis' revetment, resting on natural rock, and crowned by a wall. The glacis was constructed of different layers of sand, *huwar*, and earth, beaten into a kind of terre pisée. The discovery of this type of M.B. fortification, well known in west Jordan and throughout the Near East, here also on the East Bank, proves that East Jordan was occupied during this period, a fact which has previously been denied by some scholars."

However, no ceramic evidence was brought forward to support the conclusion that the glacis belonged to the Middle Bronze Age. Since subsequently archaeological literature argues that a glacis is not necessarily proof of Middle Bronze Age occupation, the question must remain open. James Sauer (1986:6) who conducted his own (unpublished) examination of the pottery from the cutaway section of the site is satisfied to include Tell Şāfūt among his Urban MB II-III sites, citing Ma'ayeh in support.

The third stage of present knowledge of the site comes from excavation. The alternatives at the outset of excavation in 1982 dictated a choice between two types of rescue objectives: one, to retrieve main artifacts together with some general notions of stratigraphy gained from rapid excavation, the other to rescue the tell itself, and save it from demolition by demonstrating its importance. This aim would be achieved by exposing sufficient architecture to persuade public officials to modify the plan of the highway as far as possible. Since the first option would have destroyed architectural features and rendered the site useless for future research, the second, more challenging but better option was adopted, as is evident. A second season (1983), however, proved necessary to reinforce and insure the objective of saving the tell.

Placement of the Areas: A through E

The 1982 season, begun by a team from the Department of Antiquities working under Moḥammad Darwish, concentrated on the endangered southern side of the tell, in what is designated Area A, the logical starting point, because it was certain that, even under the most generous plan, portions of it would be destroyed. Subsequent measurements of the tell showed that only the outer 2.5m of the southern face of the tell were taken (cf. Fig. 2). This segment, while not appearing to be archaeologically critical, did provide a splendid and fuller example of what now remains the outer and lower defense wall. Removed were one small casemate room

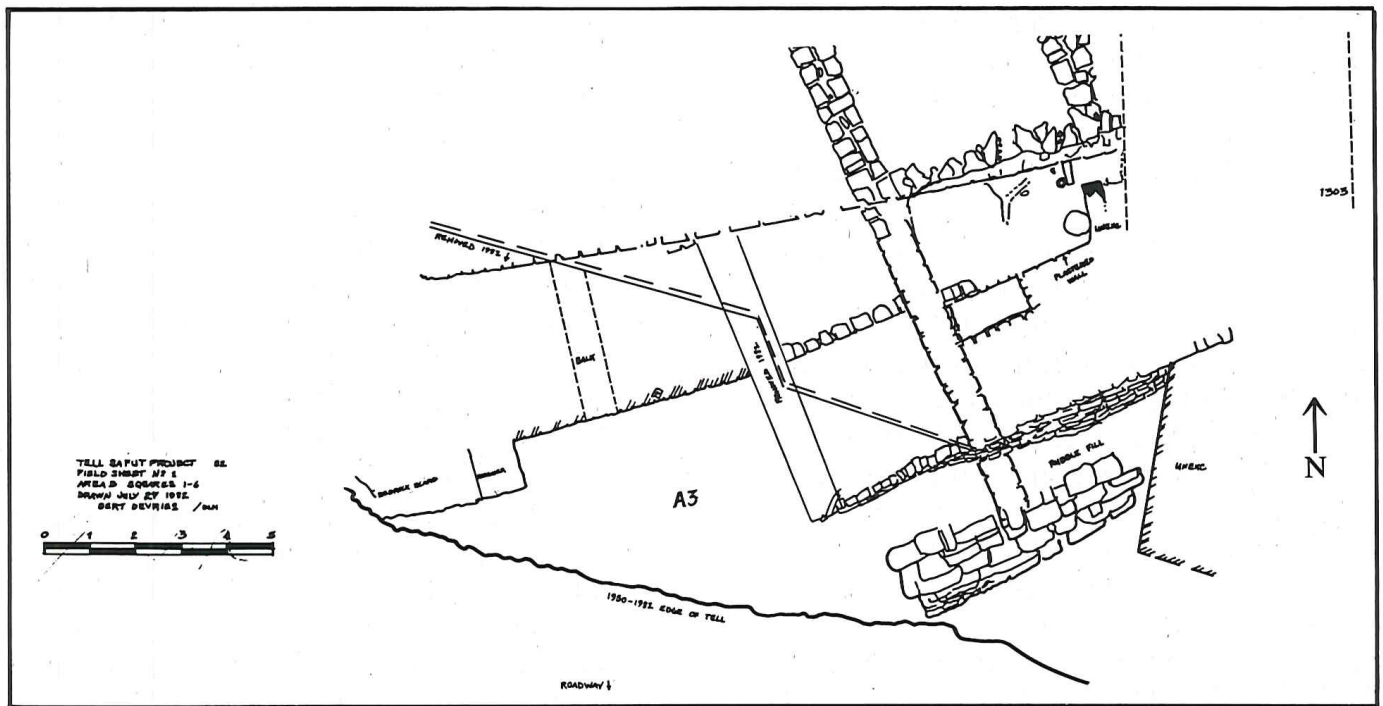


Fig. 2: Plan view of Area A.3, subsequently removed by roadway construction. Room C lies directly above "A3". Room B is to the right of C and Room A to the right of B.

(Room C) and part of another room (Room B) together with their associated outer perimeter defence wall against which was laid a rubble-filled battered wall (Fig. 3A and Pl. XI,2). These provided an excellent example of Iron Age defenses readily observable by anyone travelling the highway. Of these three rooms inside Area A casemate wall, the easternmost was the largest and highest in quality. The outer wall of the casemate structure had a stone core and measured 2.20m thick (cf. Fig. 3B). It was further supported by a dirt-filled battered wall that was built up against it. A curious feature characterized the wall in that, just outside the casemate room there was a 0.90m wide x 2m long x 2.25m deep pit of nicely faced stone on each side. Dating of a carbon sample from the bottom of it agrees with a pottery sample taken from the burn layer that ran under the outer wall and just above the original ground layer: Iron IIB, i.e., sometime between the end of 10th century and the end of the eighth. Above this pit to the north was the largest of the three rooms. Its four walls were plastered as was its cobble floor. It contained the largest and best repertory of ceramics from the site (cf. all samples on Figs. 5-8).

Area B, comprised of eight 5m x 5m

squares, lies directly north of A. Area C, now with some balks removed is comprised of one 10m square and one 5m x 10m square. It lies directly west of Area B (cf. Fig. 4). Area D, comprised of two 5m x 5m squares, lies south and slightly west of Area C from which it is completely detached. It was laid within the belly of the cut created in the construction of the 1950s highway at a point adjacent to the remains of the 'glacis'. Area D could not be laid directly against it and the retaining wall it supported because excavation there would risk undermining what remained of that wall and prove hazardous to the crew as well as to the highway below. Area E was located about 100m from the tell to the east, in a region pockmarked by mortars hewn into bedrock.

Dating: The Late Bronze Age

The earliest occupation verified to date is accompanied by significant architecture dated to at least the Late Bronze Age. LB pottery appeared in probes to bedrock and virgin soil. In A.4, which tied the rest of Area A with Area B, LB II layers upon sterile virgin soil (probed 1.25m) were associated with an original wall of 0.75m long stones. A B.2 probe

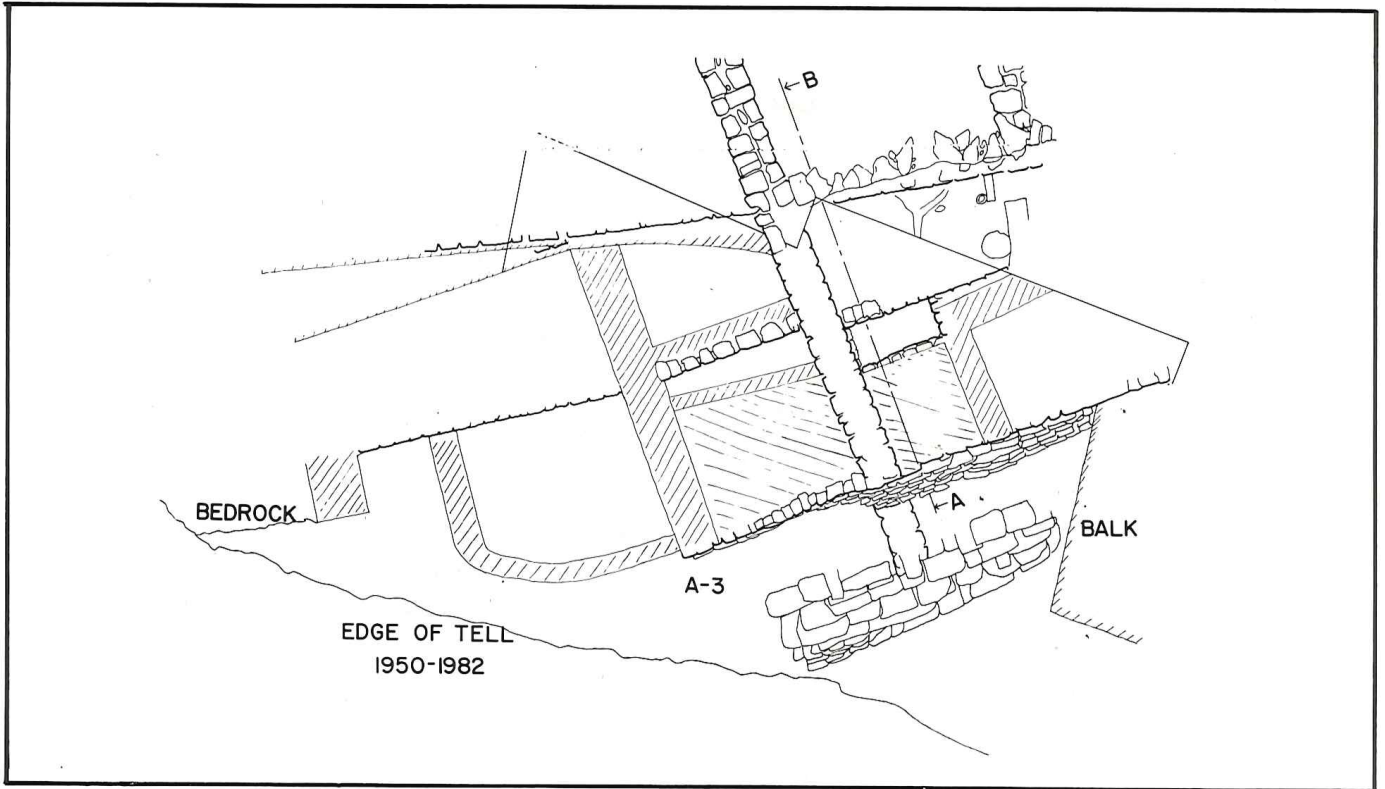


Fig. 3A: Plan view of Area A. Elevation of Section A-B is shown in Fig. 3B.

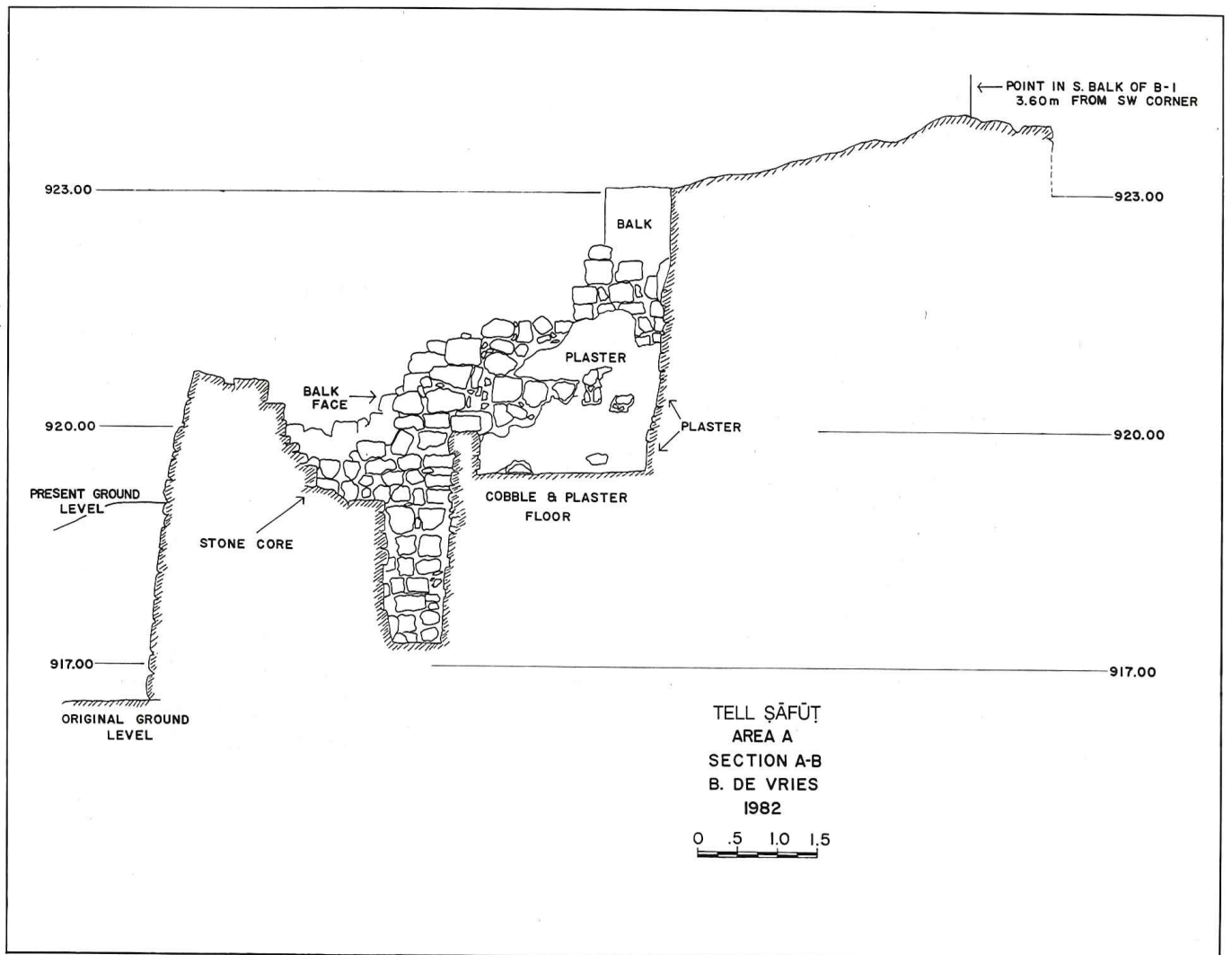


Fig. 3B: Cross-sectional view of Area A.1, architectural features.

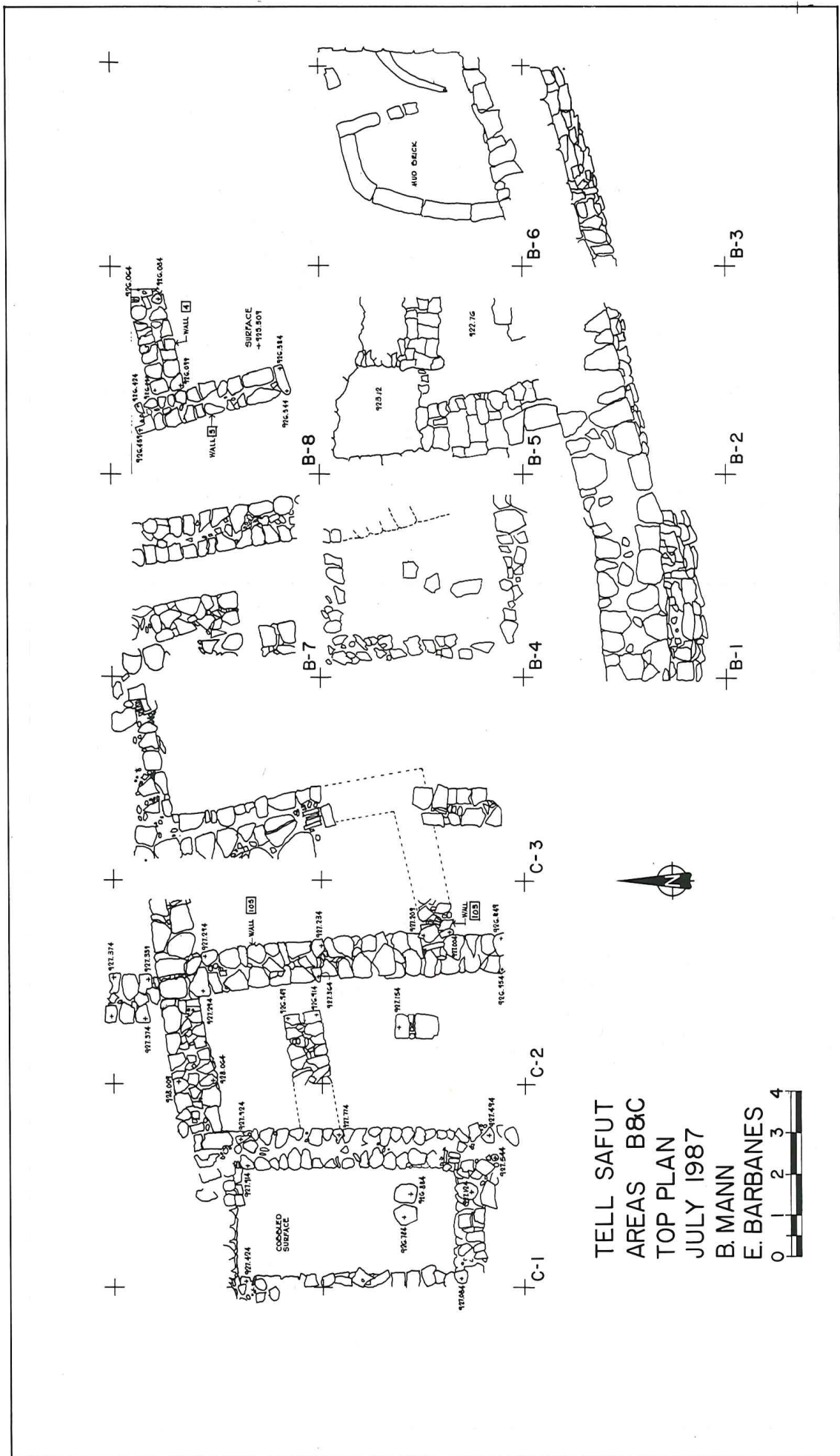


Fig. 4: Plan view of Areas B-C, excavated by end of 1985 season.

placed against a major wall with a narrow but sterile foundation trench penetrated over 1m of virgin soil and came onto bedrock. The earliest layers that ran up against it were pure LB surfaces. It may be that MB underlies LB at Tell Şāfūt, but not in the peripheral probes carried out to date. Some of the architecture on the acropolis is not precluded. This LB Age wall runs E-W for the length of Area B separating B.1-3 on the outside from B.4-6 on the inside. It enclosed what may have been a holy place. In addition to an LB ceramic chalice and a large quantity of charred two-row barley beneath tumbles of large mudbricks, some of which were still intact, was a bronze statue either of the Canaanite Ba'al, or simply the local tutelary god of Şāfūt itself, which, when cleaned, revealed, uniquely, a smiling deity with forearms wrapped in gold. Neither hand held anything, one appears to be extended in an open, palm-upward position, with the other in a closed fist. The flat-topped crown is another of the features that appears to be unique to this image. (Cf. Pl. XII:1,2).

Area D also testifies to the presence of LB. In the short time available before the road crew resumed highway construction, the "glacis" was investigated by placing two 5m squares, designated "Area D.1 and D.2," adjacent to the "glacis" and its foundation on bedrock. Direct sectioning of the "glacis" and its wall were impractical for reasons of safety of both staff and highway traffic below.

Initial study of the glacis was inconclusive. There is no question that the bedrock was cut in antiquity as foundation for the crowning wall, but all lowest course stones in the portion included in the square were gone. The composition of the inclined plane agreed with the earlier description, except that no signs of plaster appeared. It could have weathered away, or have been removed by the 1950s construction. There is an abundance of cementlike substance nearby, but it is clearly not part of a glacis. It should be noted that the crowning wall, as it was called, is curved, and that the segment on the west has its counterpart on the east.

The day after fieldwork ceased, the bulldozers cut a new section on the face of the tell (as well as from the hillock across the way where *close inspection* found no traces of occupational stratigraphy). Although the new section on the tell left the alleged glacis fragment intact, it seems that a new section of the glacis should have appeared somewhere, in either the west or the east segment of this crowning wall. It did not. However, only MB/LB pottery appeared in the layers immediately above the "glacis" itself, which proved to be sterile bedrock and crumbly limestone. Safety precautions continue to preclude further probing near what remains of the so-called glacis. The cut for the highway clearly shows natural geological stratigraphy which appears not to be amenable to the glacis as described and it may well be that what was thought to be a MB Age glacis is in fact to be dated to the 1950s A.D. In any case, what is curious is that only MB/LB pottery was present attesting to the probability that that wall and its counterpart to the west is at least LB in date.

Late Bronze Age Tell Şāfūt, then, was encircled by a substantial perimeter defense wall that crowned the acropolis. In accord, therefore, with Glueck's later opinion, though he never applied his revision to Şāfūt about which he claimed the earliest pottery belonged to the Iron Age, Transjordan was indeed occupied by a sedentary society.

Occupation of Tell Şāfūt apparently continued with no clear destruction layers to interrupt its continued existence into the Late Iron Age in which there is ample testimony to a flourishing Ammonite population. This may suggest that the Ammonites entered the region long before current opinion likes to place them there. But the question must remain open for two stratigraphic reasons: 1) the thin burn layer beneath the outer and lower perimeter defense wall described above in connection with Area A; and 2) a burned layer in B.4 which is still under study and which *may* be dated to the Iron Age, probably after Iron I. Burn layers *may suggest* destruction which may in turn suggest a change in who

controlled or occupied the site. Generally speaking, probes bear insufficient evidence for drawing firm conclusions.

The Late Iron Age

Tell Šāfūt did extremely well in the Late Iron Age. The significance of the site required the construction of another major defense wall sometime not before Iron IIB (ca. 721-609). Population expansion required a larger enclosure, perhaps twice the size. The walls are curved and, going westward, they abut bedrock at a point where the bedrock drops vertically for a distance of at least three meters. The architecture itself, therefore, rests on soil. Going east it disappears into the balk. It is not known whether casemate architecture continues around the tell for any distance or whether (and where) it abuts bedrock to the east or northeast as it does to the west. This is a matter for further investigation. In any case, this wall set on an earthen foundation contrasts with the LB wall referred to above in that the LB wall rested on bedrock in Area B. The best examples of pottery from a sealed locus are found within Room A, the casemate room inside the lower perimeter defense wall, dating to Iron IIC (cf. Figs. 5,6 and 8), with Ammonite forms and decorations characterizing finer pieces (cf. Fig. 7). The high loop handle of Fig. 8:22 suggests a late date. The cup is typically Iron IIC, while juglet 8:25 has been confused with LB. Of great interest, however, is the cookpot. Its carination is rather sharp and at the lower portion of the body in contrast to the usual location just below the handle. The type which does not round out at the handle, but does so closer to the base, has a curve that is characteristically not so sharp (compare Amiran 101:26 from Sahab with Fig. 8:23).

In 1985, the system of control datum points was expanded across the site and a contour map drawn at 1m intervals. A grid divided into 5 x 5m squares, set directly along the magnetic N-S axis of the tell, incorporated the previous, smaller grid with its architectural and topographic illustrations.

In order to study the relationship between Areas B and C, Squares C.2, C.3, B.7 and B.8, were excavated, a total of 125 square meters. It also connected previously (1982) worked squares in Area B on the edge of the acropolis with Area C, at the summit of the tell. C.1, 2 and the west half of C.3 contained the most impressive architecture, a major building (cf. Fig. 4). The architecture of the remainder of C.3 is less impressive, but evidences more activity. Perhaps they are the back rooms, the store and workrooms of an edifice with a north-facing front facade. B.7 and B.8 contained predominately N-S walls with only one cross wall, rendering interpretation as to function very difficult at this point. Unfortunately, the many N-S walls precluded the possibility of tracing one continuous stratigraphy of earthen layers from square to square.

Several observations emerged from the drawing of a contour map at one meter intervals. An exposed wall line is evident. This wall is continuously visible along its 32m length something like an inset/offset type of construction. Associated with this wall, two distinct benches are observed in the northwestern and northeastern quadrants of the tell at the level of 907m. The inclines are visible along the eastern side of the tell. One, 155m in length, rises from the 875 to 903m levels and runs in a southeasterly direction. Running northwesterly, the second incline is 105m in length, and rises from the 904 to 907m levels. They join at the 904m level, and end abruptly at the 907m level where there is evidence of erosion. These inclines, with their gradual slopes, probably represent the approach to the city, curving northwest toward the city gate, although no traces of a gate are clearly visible.

This system of entry indicates that the inhabitants took advantage of the regional topography and efficiently concentrated their perimeter fortifications where they would be most effective: on the southern side of the tell. This side, prior to the cutting of the road in the 1950s, was connected by a low saddle to the ridge further south. The gate, the weakest point in a defense system, was probably placed

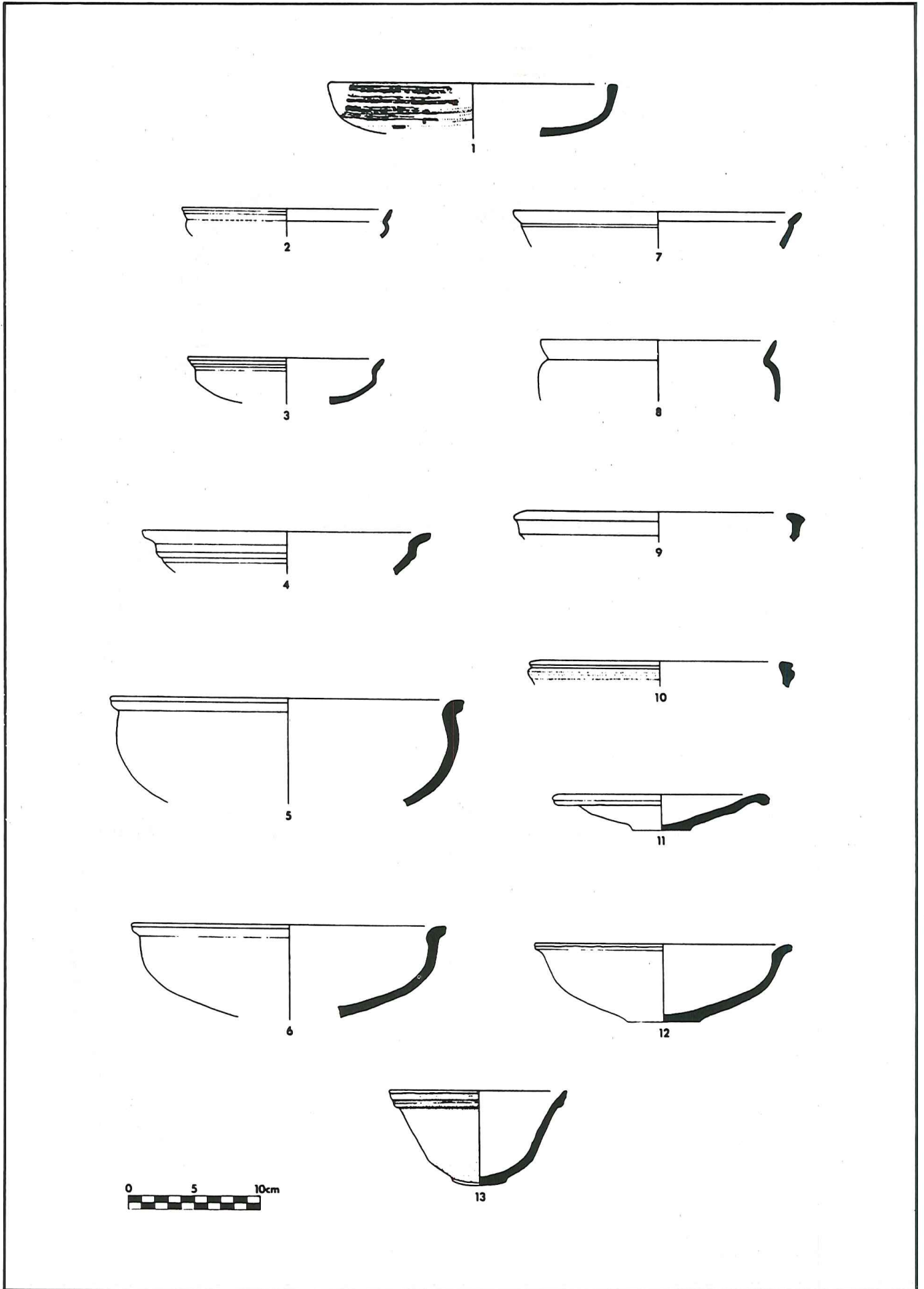


Fig. 5: A selection of bowl forms, Room A, Area A.1. (Line drawings by Leach Reynolds).

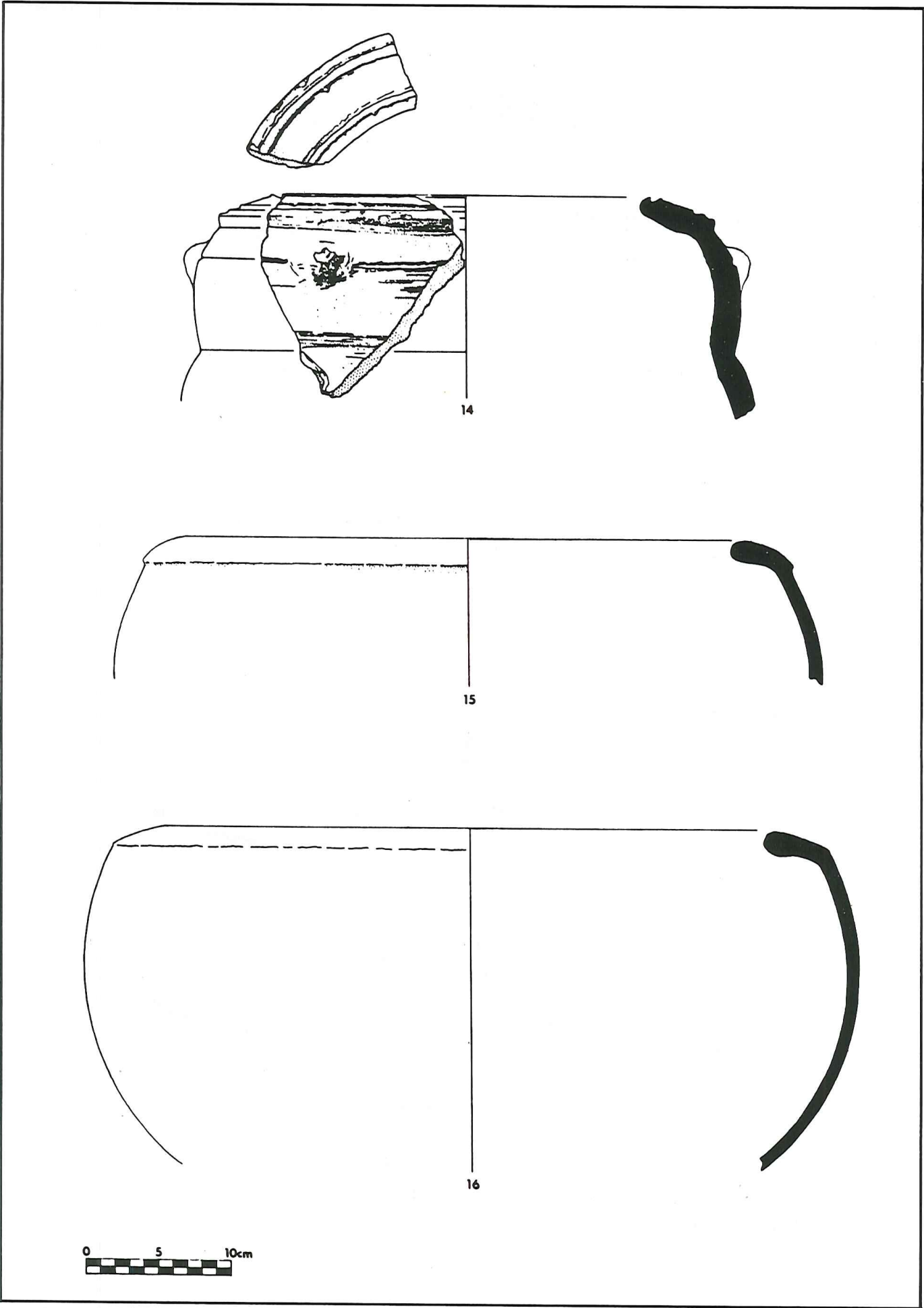


Fig. 6: Typical hole-mouth vessels, Room a, Area A.1.

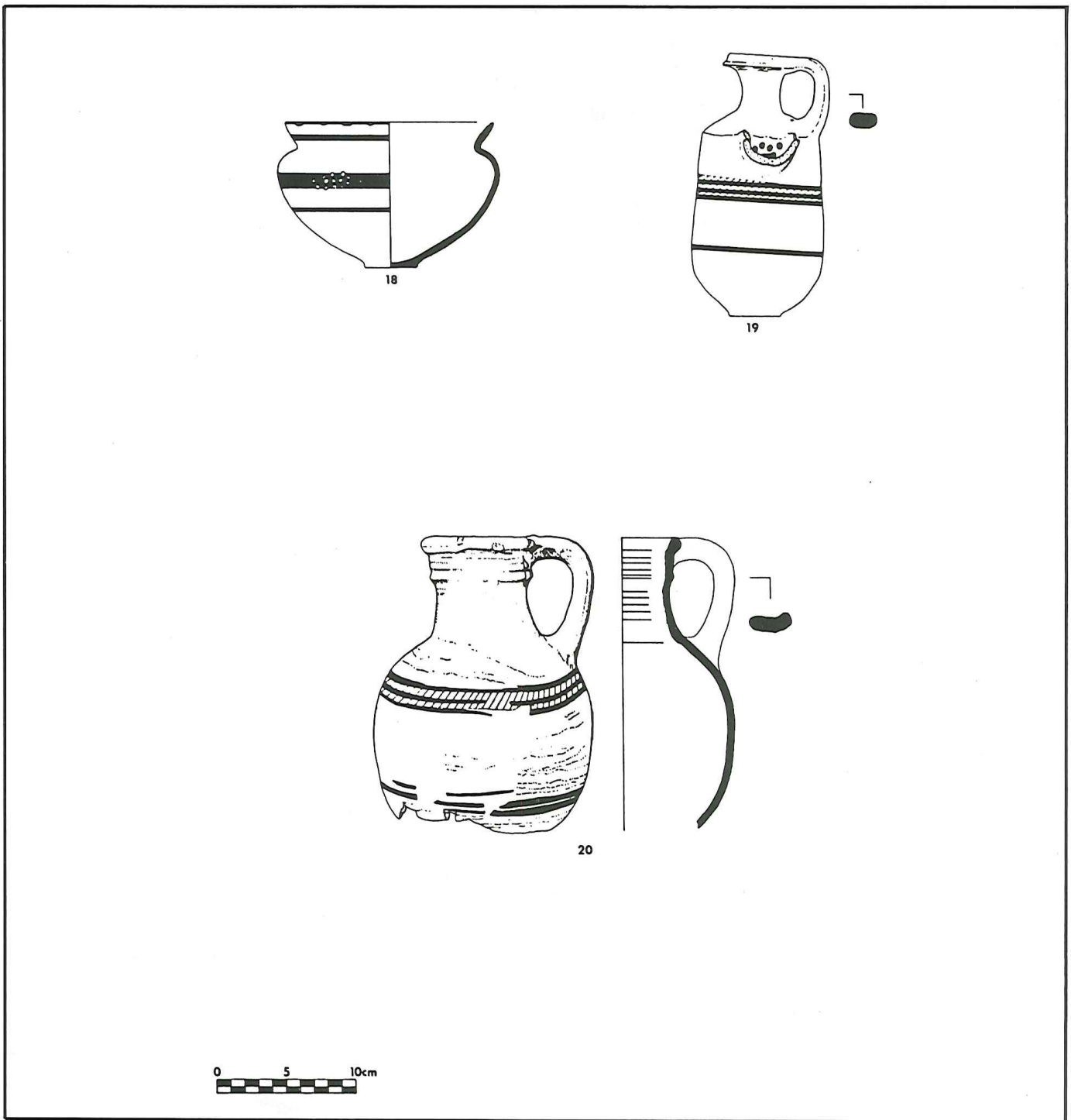


Fig. 7: A selection of painted vessels, Room A, Area A.1

on the north, where it would be tactically strengthened by the natural defenses of the site. The approach there is long and narrow, further increasing the ease of defense against oncoming troops.

Phasing of Squares C.1 and C. 2 was achieved by observing soil loci, types and levels. Results show six phases, five of which are Iron IIC/Persian, and underlie Phase I, the surface layers to which no valid assignments to specific historical periods can be made. The five phases show

three living surfaces separated by two large, disorganized fills or collapses. Generally speaking, the levels of each phase drop from the center of the acropolis as they go upward. Given the fact that the sedimentary bedrock of the tell is quite level, it is not likely that the earliest occupation covered the entire surface of the exposed bedrock, and therefore a MB stratum may remain to be found. Phases 2, 4, and 6, apparent living surfaces, can be detailed as to soil colour, content and

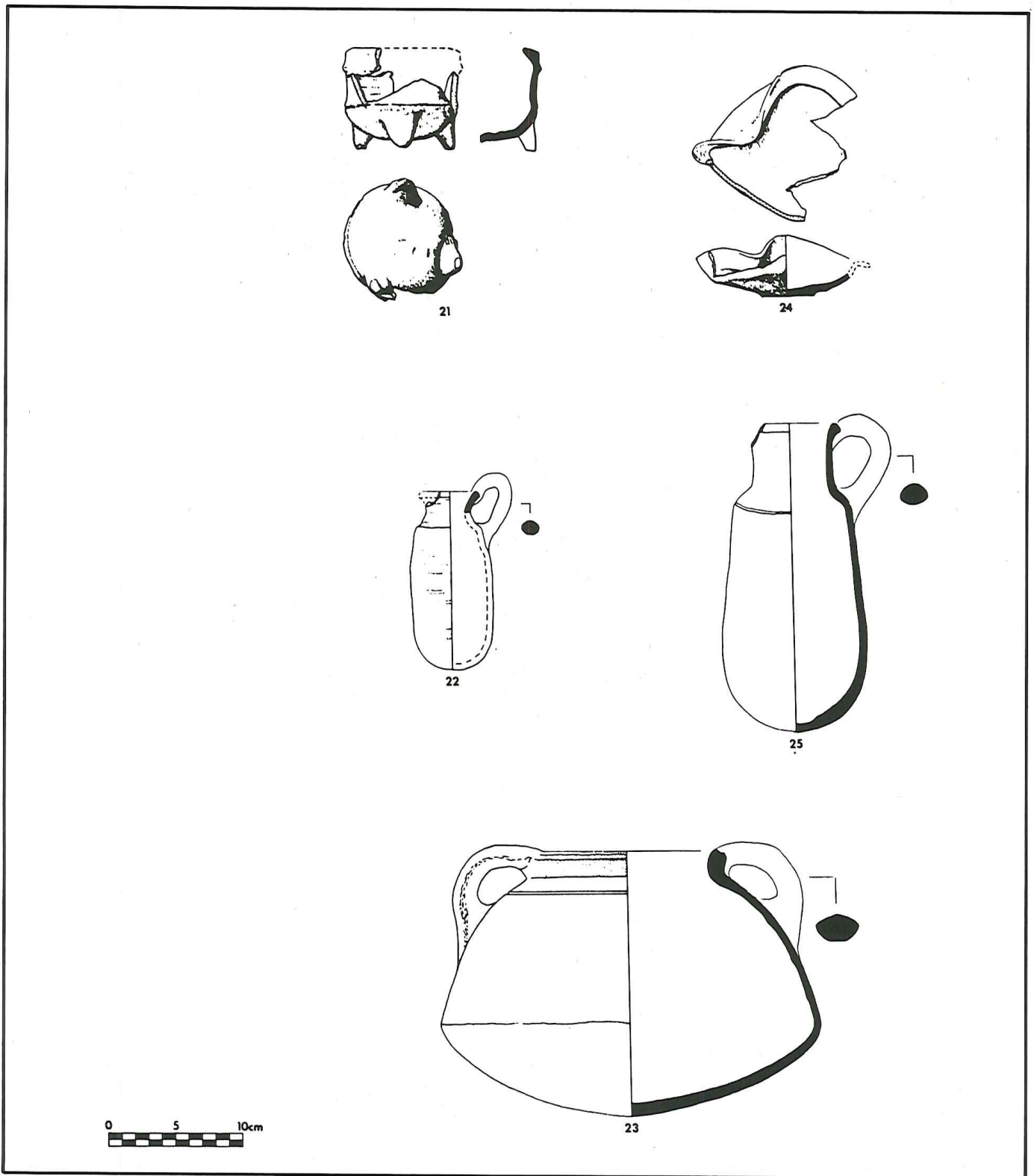


Fig. 8: Miscellaneous vessels, Room A, Area A.1.

levels and related to their architecture.

Phase I is composed of surface debris, rock tumble and general deterioration of the uppermost loci. Associated with this phase are two articulated burials. In 1982, C.1 at a level of 927.13m yielded an adult male 21-23 years of age, laid on its side facing south, presumably to face Mekka. Another articulated burial, excavated in

1985, in C.3.19 at the 926.20m level is a *ca.* 3 year old female, also facing south, but with the corpus resting on its torso. She wore a necklace of small glass beads. A tiny cloth fragment of her burial garments survives. Both internments involved partial dismantling of ancient Iron age walls, purely by accident, no doubt. Hence, it is no surprise that a few Byz. body sherds

have appeared at otherwise unexpected levels.

Phase II, the latest Iron IIC phase, is characterized by a fairly consistent series of living surfaces, consistently described as compacted to highly compacted, light brown, brownish yellow, or pale brown soil containing limestone chunks and scattered bits of charcoal, together with quantities of flat lying sherds, with little or no rocks to speak of. Starting with 1982 C.1 and continuing eastward through C.2, C.3, (adjacent) B.7 and finally B.8, the Munsell readings are 2.5YR5/4, 10YR7/3, 10YR6/4, 10YR6/3, 10YR6/4. On Living Surface 1982 C.1.16 were a shallow bin, a large restorable jar and a low crosswall. Surface C.2.11 corresponds with it as does Dump C.3.5 which contained a basalt mortarium, imported fossils, hammer stones and grindstones. Surface B.7.8 on the west side of N-S Wall B.7.3 compares with Surface B.7.6 on the east side of N-S Wall B.7.3. These compare with Surface B.8.11 on the west side of N-S Wall B.8.3 and Surface B.8.8 east of it, where it runs up to E-W Wall B.8.4. Although each surface is relatively level in itself the distance above sea level decreases from west to east. Thus, 927.34 in the west drops to 926.87, 926.50, 926.35, 926.28, 925.98 and 925.71, for an overall drop of 1.63m over the distance of 25 metres.

Phase III consists of a series of collapses and debris, *not* described as being heavily ashed or burned. Because of the thickness of these loci, the degree to which the cultural remains should be associated with the series of underlying surfaces remains ambiguous in many, if not in most cases. Among Tumble C.2.102 is the upper portion of a late Babylonian seal impression, a bulla, with string impressions clearly visible on the back. On the front, a worshipper, in priestly function stands before a platform on which there is an altar and a fire stand. (*Cf.* Fig. 9 and Wimmer 1987: Fig. 3).

Phase IV is characterized by stone pavements or floors C.1.28 and C.3.12, in the main house, and by Earth Surfaces B.7.12, B.7.13, B.7.17, B.8.10, B.8.19 and

B.8.14. These are variously described as compacted or hard-packed, with mudbrick chunks or mottled with mudbrick, light gray, light brown, or yellow brown soil. Charcoal fragments and quantities of flat-lying potsherds are reported consistently. Some pottery is clearly reconstructable.

Munsell readings arrived at independently from square to square for the earth surfaces are: 10YR7/3, 10YR7/2, 7.5YR6/4, 10YR6/4, and 2.5YR6/4.

Earth Floor B.7.12 was partially paved, a skull was cradled inside of a large potsherd, probably caught in the destruction immediately on the floor. Floor B.7.12 runs up against N-S Wall B.7.5. B.8.19 runs up against Walls B.8.20 and 22. The excavation has not yet reached to foundation. Numerous metal objects were with Surface B.7.17, a spear or dagger blade with three rivets in place, along with what we call a military standard. This 1cm thick, 24cm diameter iron disk was held in place by a 17cm long hollow shaft making it suitable for mounting on a pole. Opposite the shaft and presumably at the top of the standard is a rectangular loop, perhaps for affixing banners. It, too, is attached securely with heavy rivets.

Phase IV elevations, starting with C.1.28 through B.8.19 are 926.76, 926.28, 926.12, dropping to relatively level 925.27, 925.31, 925.22 and 925.27. Again, floors further away from C.1 are lower.

Phase V Layers are variously described as collapse, ashy layer, or destroyed by fire. They contain mudbrick fragments, hammerstones, grinding stones, mortars, many loomweights, bronze fragments, and a small bronze bowl, quite fragile and incomplete. These layers average .50 to .60m in depth.

Phase VI, the deepest clear phase excavated thus far, again discloses a series of surfaces. Surface C.1.30 is made of a mudbrick material at the 926.31 level. The same material is visible in C.2.118 at the 926.39 level, in C.3.21, within a hardpacked surface overlaying a wall at the 926.33 level on the south end, and C.3.19, which on the north end at the 925.22 level, contained a heavy iron bar that measures

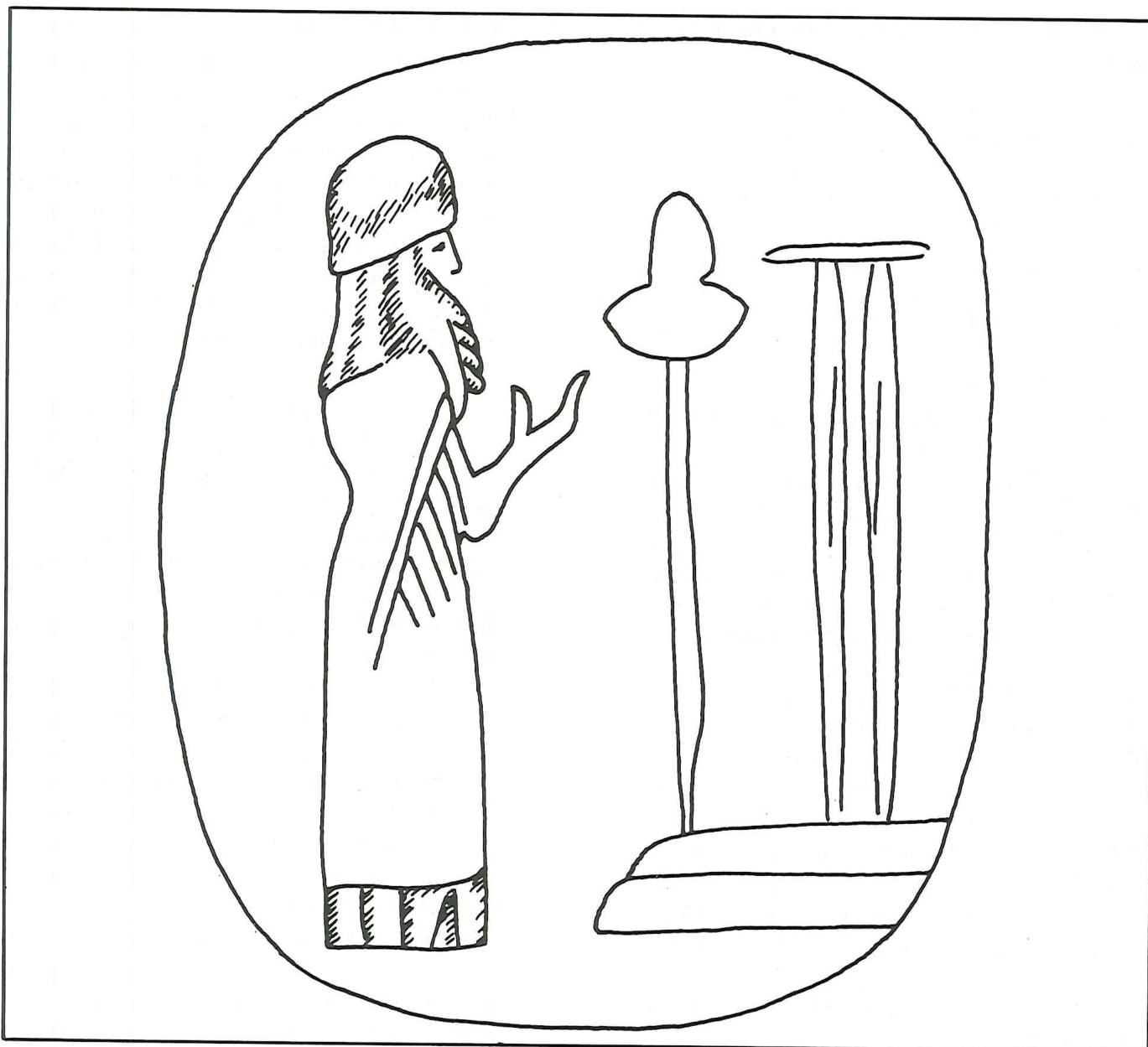


Fig.9: Late Babylonian seal impression from Tell Şäfüt 1985. Worshipper stands, hands upturned before fire stand and altar on raised platform. (Line drawing by E. Barbanes).

3cm x 4cm x 80cm long. Its function may be related to that mentioned in 2 Samuel 12.31ff which speaks of iron bars for prying stones loose for tearing down the walls of Ammonite cities. B.7.16 had a partial stone floor running under N-S Wall B.7.5 at the 925.71 level, while the more extensive Stone Floor B.8.23 is significantly lower at 924.96. It supports an unbaked clay storage bin, whose upper portion has been sheared off. This surface runs up against N-S Wall B.8.21 which ends on the south with a doorway.

Phase VI probably includes the thus far lowest and outermost room, Room A, which is in the casemate wall of Area A. It contained several cookpots smashed *in*

situ, a small, characteristically Ammonite but riderless horse, six characteristically Late Iron figurine heads, some painted, some with eyes inset, along with loom weights and a good deal of other pottery reflecting a rich variety of forms.

Conclusion

Phasing in relation to architecture shows that a major domicile dominated the tell on the west, adjoined to which are less important but still significant structures, presumably providing needed support systems such as workshops, or storage areas which were reasonably built at slightly lower levels. We are able to connect the

mudbrick detritus floor in B.8 with its counterpart in B.5, excavated in 1983, and proceed from there to integrate the relevant stratigraphy of B.5 into our scheme. The 1983 mudbrick locus in B.4, however, will require further stratigraphic exploration. It is here that Iron I material is known to lie sealed beneath an ashy burned layer.

The plentiful supply of fresh water, particularly in contrast to the rest of Transjordan, coupled with the topography of the region about Tell Šāfūt, provides the potential for a high degree of agricultural self-sufficiency. That the inhabitants availed themselves of this potential is evidenced by the immense number of grinding stones, mortars and pestles found in every square. Occupied possibly as early as the Middle Bronze Age, the site flourished in the Late Bronze and Late Iron Ages. Tentatively, we can conclude that the Iron IIC/P building was a well-fortified villa, quite possibly the regional residence of the government. An extensive sphere of influence seems likely if the placement of the wall fragments at 905m proves to be a valid indicator of the size of the Iron II population. Such a settlement would be expected to yield written records, but no ostraca have been uncovered to date. Only further excavation can clarify the role of Tell Šāfūt, whether it may have been primarily an administrative center, a trade center, or something else. In any case, the maintenance of Tell Šāfūt preserves the opportunity to examine one of the few remaining examples of an ancient, highly developed sedentary society in a region previously thought to have been solely nomadic.

While modern development in the Amman vicinity is swallowing up all available land, the courage of the leadership in Jordan is to be commended for their commitment to tempering the demands of progress with the protection of cultural resources.

Acknowledgements

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