

THE JISR SHEIKH HUSSEIN PROJECT, 1986

by
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Introduction

The Jordan Valley has been experiencing rapid development over the last twenty years as the need for agricultural land has increased. The consequence of this has meant the gradual encroachment of farm land on archaeological sites. The "Jisr Sheikh Hussein Project" (Fig. 1) was conceived to investigate the northern Jordan Valley specifically because of the late antique¹ archaeological data reported by M. Ibrahim, *et. al.*, in the mid-1970's.²

The project was conducted from March 1 to April 15, 1986. The two foci of the project were: site specific survey within the Jisr Sheikh Hussein region and rescue³ excavations at the site of Tell Qudsiya. Underlying the rescue nature of the work, was the understanding that this region might provide needed archaeological data concerning non-urban late antique occupation. Consistently the late antique archaeology conducted in Jordan has centred on major urban areas, i.e., Gerasa (Jarash), Pella (Ṭabaqat Faḥl), Capitolias (Beit Ras); or, has been salvage in nature without a research framework. Framing the "Jisr Sheikh Hussein Project" was the conception that late antique occupation of Jordan, particularly following *ca.* A.D. 525, that is from the rule of Justinian, was not limited to the major urban areas. Of particular concern was the elucidation of sixth, seventh and eighth century occupation; that is, the end of the Byzantine period, the Umayyad period and the beginning of the Abbasid period.

The Survey

A total of fifteen sites were surveyed

by the project, not all of these sites had been identified previously; however, it should be noted that the methodology employed, that is, as much control as possible over a site, demanded the division of what might normally have been identified as one site into separate segments. This was also necessitated in order to locate the sites clearly. The survey was site specific in nature primarily due to the time of year in which the survey and excavations were conducted. The spring is an intensive growing season for the Jordan Valley and the fields between sites were being cultivated. However, it should be noted that even during the hottest months of the year, indeed practically all year-round, the Jordan Valley is intensively cultivated. It is doubtful that any other time of the year would have enabled an in-depth survey of the areas between the sites. The total area of the sites encompasses 1,050 square kilometres, and the occupation ranges from *ca.* 3500 B.C. (the Late Chalcolithic period) to the present. The Palestine Grid maps 1:2,500 and 1:10,000 were used, courtesy of the Jordan Valley Authority.

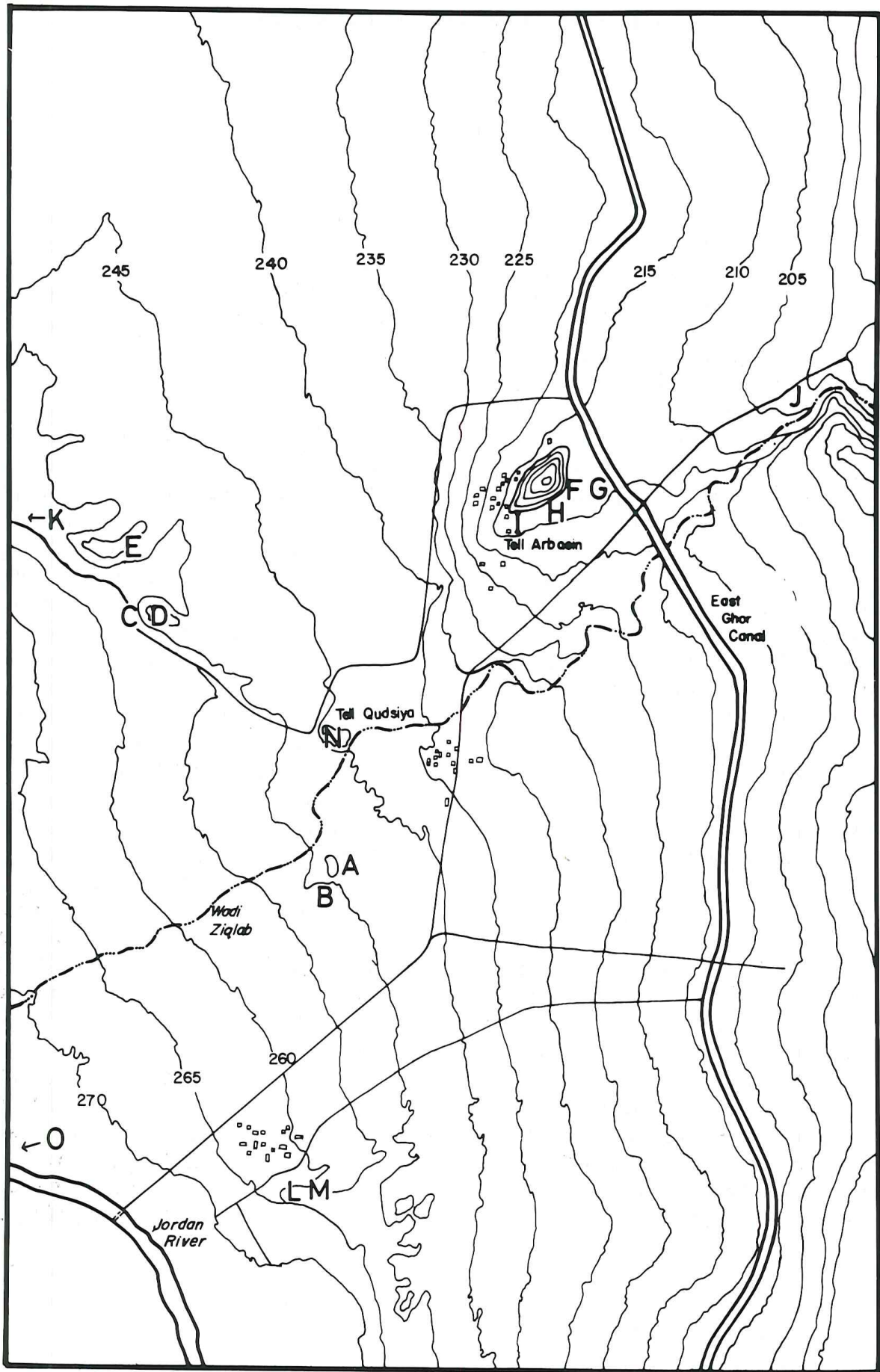
The survey method devised was one which would ensure total pick-up of material culture remains within selected gridded areas. In most cases, at least 10% of each site was covered. In some instances, however, e.g., Tell el-Arba'ein, this technique was combined with random collection of material culture remains when, i.e., extensive housing, a cemetery, intensive cultivation, or recent bulldozer cuts were visible, thus preventing controlled square sampling.

A nine by nine meter rope grid was constructed. This was laid consecutively following either an east-west or north-

1. Late antique is being used here to define the period of time following *ca.* A.D. 270 to A.D. 1900.
2. M. Ibrahim, J. Sauer, and K. Yassine. 'The East Jordan Valley Survey, 1975,' *BASOR* 222:

p. 41-66.

3. Rescue archaeology is being differentiated from salvage archaeology, cf., C.J. Lenzen, "There is a Method to Salvage and Rescue Archaeology", forthcoming.



JISR SHEIKH HUSSEIN PROJECT AREA



Fig. 1: A map of the area surveyed by "JISR Sheikh Hussein Project". Each site is identified by its corresponding letter.

south axis, depending on the site. Each square of the grid measured three meters by three meters. Three people each spent ten minutes in each square for a total of thirty minutes. This provided for the anticipated total pick-up.

The definition of a site used by the project was dependent on previously conducted surveys. These identified sites were visited and surveyed using the method described. Architectural remains in conjunction with clusters of material culture remains did not, therefore, determine the initial definition. Once these sites had been surveyed, the surrounding area of the site was investigated further. For the identification of periphery or related sites, the definition used was a high concentration of material culture remains. In conjunction with this, the residents of the region provided valuable data concerning the location of sites about which they were aware and which had not been previously recorded. The addition of this to the survey meant that it was possible to be more comprehensive, although still site specific.

THE SITES

1. Tell Fendi (Site Identification: A)

Grid References: 205.000 (E), 212.503 (N),
Elevation: — 248m.
Total Size: 10,000 square meters
Survey Technique: 36 east-west grid squares,
i.e., 4 grids.

Description: This site consisted of a low, small tell with vegetation completely covering it. It is located 450 meters south of Tell el Arba'ein, and 1.1 kilometers of Tell el Araba'ein; and, 1.1 kilometers north of Sheikh Moḥammad.

Remains: Pottery dating from ca. 3500 B.C., the Late Chalcolithic period, dominated with a few body sherds identified as Byzantine. Worked basalt mortars and grinders were noted on the tell.

2. Tell Fendi el-Janubi (Site identification: B)

Grid References: 204.509 (E), 212.501 (N)

Elevation: — 252m.
Total Size: 10,000 square meters
Survey Technique: 18 east-west grid squares,
i.e., 2 grids.

Description: This was a ploughed field bordering Tell Fendi. The fields to the west and the north-west of this site were investigated and no other evidence of ancient occupation was found.

Remains: No architectural remains were visible; however, the entire area had a dense concentration of pottery vessels usually associated with the Mamluk sugar industry.

3. Salim el-Yusef (Site identification: C)

Grid References: 204.007 (E), 213.500 (N)
Elevation: — 247m.
Total Size: ca. 700 square meters
Survey Technique: 18 north-south grid
squares, i.e., 2 grids

Description: The site slopes to the Jordan River on the west and also slopes away to the north and south, creating the impression of a promontory, ca. 40.00 meters above the river.

Remains: The material culture remains consisted of pottery dated to the end of the fourth millenium B.C. ("EB"), the tenth/eleventh centuries A.D. (Fatimid) and the fourteenth/fifteen centuries A.D. (Mamluk).

4. Salim el-Yusef (Site identification: D)

Grid References: 204.006 (E), 213.503 (N)
Elevation: — 244m.
Total Size: 1,500 square metres
Survey Technique: 18 east-west grid squares,
i.e., 2 grids.

Descriptions: Because the top of Salim el-Yusef, "C", had been ploughed within the recent past and thus flattened, this section was surveyed as a separate site in order to control the data.

Remains: This site produced the exact data as "C".

Grid References: 204.006 (E), 213.503 (N)
Elevation: — 244m.
Total Size: 2,000 square meters
Survey Technique: Random collection of surface sherds.

Description: This site forms part of the northern section of the Salim al Yusef area, comprising steep marl slopes with tombs cut into the hillside. Because of the marl, there was no vegetation. The tombs had been robbed recently.

Remains: All of the remains were pottery, dating to the Early Bronze IV period.

6. and 7. Tell el-Arba‘ein (Site identification F and G)

Grid References: 205.505 (E), 213.508 (N)
Elevation: — 204m.
Total Size: Total of “F”, “G”, “H”, and “I” is 50,000 square meters

Survey Technique: 18 north-south and 18 east-west grid squares, i.e., 4 grids.

Description: Tell el-Arba‘ein is the highest point in the area. The tell has housing around it and on top there is a cemetery which has a concrete retaining wall surrounding it. The cemetery area was impossible to survey; the area to the west of the cemetery and the area in front of the cemetery’s southern gate was surveyed as areas “F” and “G” respectively. The area had been disturbed and partially cleared. There was little vegetation as the area is potentially a road for the village of the same name. The cemetery and the survey squares were located adjacent to the television station.

Remains: The only material culture remain found was pottery which dated from ca. 3500 B.C. to ca. the eighth century B.C., some Byzantine body sherds were found as well as pottery from the end of the nineteenth beginning of the twentieth century.

Grid References: 205.500 (E), 213.507 (N)
Elevation: — 222m.
Total Size: See “F” and “G”
Survey Technique: This section of the village of Tell el-Arba‘ein was surveyed using a random method.

Description: This part of Tell el-Arba‘ein was located on the western edge of the village in an area where walls were visible from the surface. The walls were made of basalt and were dry-laid, only the top of the stones was visible; therefore, no conclusions can be drawn concerning the date of the walls or the possible number of courses. However, based on other excavations and surveys, it is likely that the walls do not pre-date the sixth century A.D.

Remains: The only material culture retrieved was pottery which dated from ca. the fourteenth century A.D. to the present.

9. Tell el-Arba‘ein (Site identification: I) (Pl. LII,1)

Grid References: 205.009 (E), 213.505 (N)
Elevation: — 225m.
Total Size: See “F” and “G”
Survey Technique: The survey technique employed was random.

Description: This area of the site was located ca. 700 metres south of the cemetery and was an area that had been recently bulldozed and cut-back. There was dense vegetation in the area.

Remains: The only remains were pottery dating from ca. 3200 B.C., the sixth/seventh centuries A.D., and the fourteenth century through the present.

10. Abu ‘Arabi esh-Shamali (Site identification: J) (Pl. LII,2)

Grid References: 206.501 (E), 214.005 (N)
Elevation: — 200m.
Total Size: 3,000 square meters

Survey Technique: 18 north-south grid squares, i.e., 2 grids.

Description: This site is located north of Tell Abu 'Arabi, an epipaleolithic site surveyed by M. Ibrahim (1975) and M. Muheisin (1984) and across Wadi Ziqlab. "J" is located on the steep northern slope of the wadi. The architectural remains visible were a wall across the wadi which in all probability was a dam.

Remains: The only material culture remain retrieved was pottery, an extremely dense concentration of sugar pot sherds. The total number collected was 2,400.

11. Yarfa (Site Identification: K)

This site is located on the Jordan River.

Survey Technique: A random method of sampling was used here because of the proximity to the Jordan River and because of the vegetation.

Description: This site is owned by the Halabi family and is part of one of their farms in the Jordan Valley. The site was covered with high vegetation at the time of the survey. It is located ca. 8.5 kilometres due west of Tell el-Arba'ain.

Remains: No architectural remains from ancient occupation were visible. There were eight basalt cut stones scattered in the area. The retrieved pottery was dated from the fourteenth century through to the present.

12. Sheikh Moḥammad (Site Identification: L)

Grid References: 205.005 (E), 211.009 (N)
Elevation: —250m.
Total Size: 1,200 square meters
Survey Technique: Random survey and 18 east-west grids squares, i.e., 2 grids

Description: This site and "M" form an area extending over a shallow wadi, creating a promontory. "L" was the western part of the site: "M" was the eastern part

of the site. It is located ca. 12.4 kilometres south-southwest of Tell el-Arba'ain. The site is presently occupied; there is a village with mud-brick housing.

Remains: The retrieved material culture remains consisted only of pottery which dated from ca. 3500 B.C. to ca. 3000 B.C.; a few Byzantine body sherds were also found.

13. Sheikh Moḥammad (Site Identification: M)

Grid References: 205.002 (E), 211.501 (N)
Elevation: —262m.
Total Size: 1,200 square meters
Survey Technique: 1 grid.

Description: This was the eastern area of the site described above. The area surveyed was located near a recent road-cut and an elevation triangulation point.

Remains: No architectural remains were visible from antiquity. The pottery retrieved primarily dated to the same period as site "L".

14. Tell Qudsiya (Site Identification: N) (Figs. 1, 2)

Grid References: 205.001 (E), 213.002 (N)
Elevation: —243m.
Total size: 8,900 square meters
Survey Technique: Random survey and 62 grid squares, i.e., 7 grids.

Description: Tell Qudsiya is a low lying tell located 6.5 kilometres from the Jordan River and 5.5 kilometres from Tell el-Arba'ain. It is surrounded by orange groves and cultivated fields. Within the last ten years, the southern edge of the tell has been bulldozed, and the area around the modern house on top of the tell has been flattened. The tell measures approximately seven dunums. At the time of the survey, there was very little vegetation on the tell itself.

Remains: The material culture remains retrieved from the survey consisted of pottery dating from the mid-fourth century A.D. to the present.

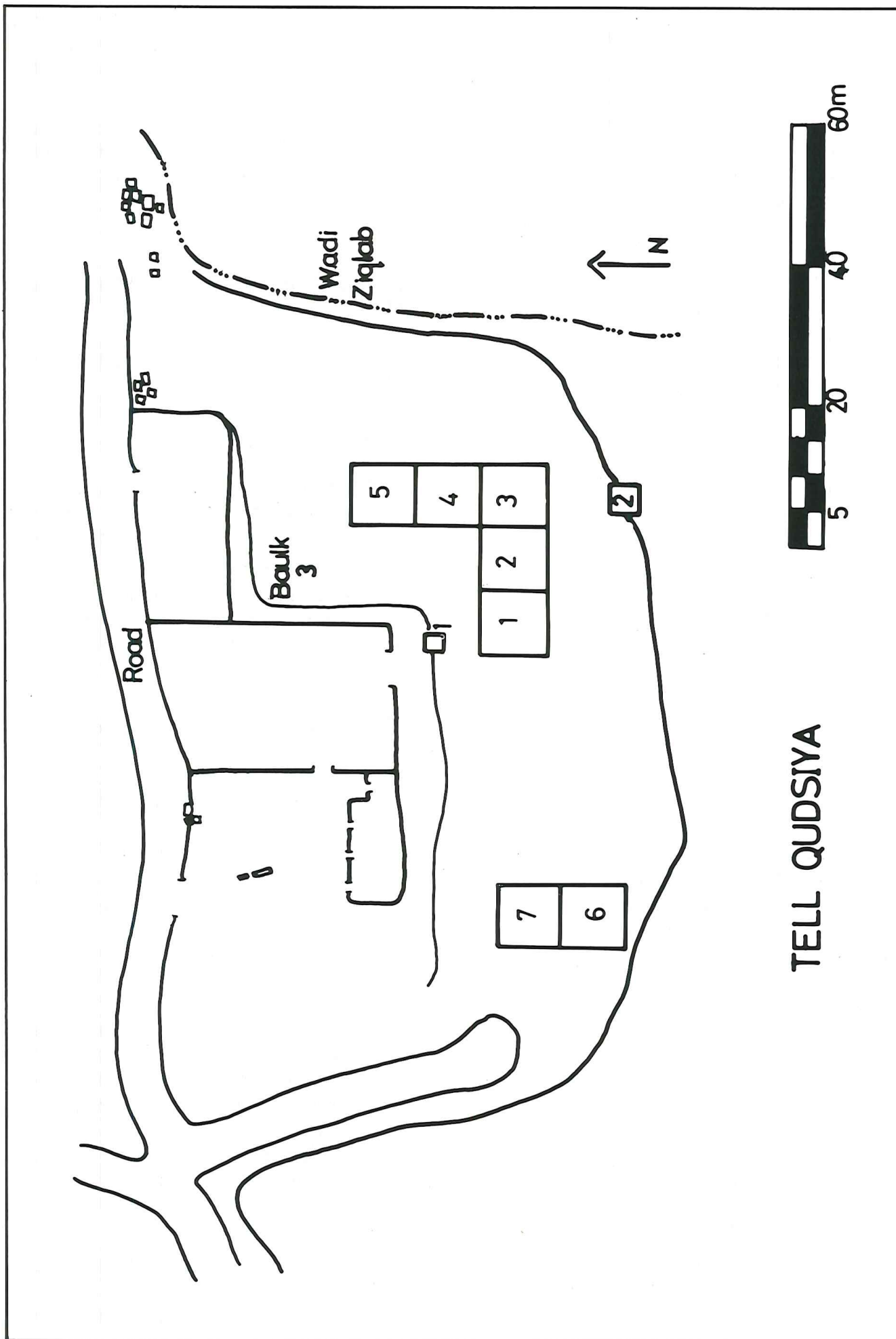


Fig. 2: A plan of Tell Qudsiya, site 'N', locating the survey squares and the excavated areas.

15. Khirbet Sheikh Hussein (Site Identification: O)

Grid References: Located on the Jordan River
Elevation: —280m.
Total Size: Approximately 30 dunums
Survey Technique: A random survey of this site was done.

Description: This site is located adjacent to the Jordan River and was covered with vegetation at the time of the survey; there were cultivated fields with tomatoes and oranges. An area of possible tombs was identified, although no material culture remains were retrieved from here.

Remains: The retrieved pottery was dated from the fourteenth century to the present.

Analysis

The sites surveyed can be divided into three general groups: those having only early occupation (pre-300 B.C.), those having only late occupation (post - 300 B.C.), and those having continuous occupation. Site "A" had both early occupation and late occupation; site "B" had only late occupation; site "E" had only early occupation; site "K" had only late occupation; sites "C", "D", "L" and "M" had both early and late occupation; and, sites "N" and "O" had only late occupation. Sites "F", "G", "H" and "I" taken together show continuous occupation to the present. Site "J", if it is understood in relationship to the epipaleolithic site and the modern occupation there, has had occupation at least during three periods: epipaleolithic, Mamluk and modern.

The lack of visible architectural remains at the sites indicates that the ploughing that has been done at the sites has not yet exposed deep remains. It, therefore, would be possible to excavate at all of the sites. However, the possibility of excavating any meaningful data at Tell el-Arba'ain seems doubtful. Of the sites surveyed, it is difficult to determine a hierarchy of priority for archaeological work. From the beginning of the "Jisr Sheikh Hussein Project", it had already

been determined that rescue archaeological work would be conducted at Tell Qudsiya because the site contained a high concentration of late antique pottery and because the earlier bulldozing had exposed some architectural remains. This determination had been made because of the research framework relative to the late antique periods.

Excavations at Tell Qudsiya

The excavations at Tell Qudsiya consisted of: the trimming of a bulldozer created north-south baulk and two probes, one to the south of the modern house, Probe 1, and one on the south-east section of the tell, Probe 2. Although the excavations were limited, they indicated occupation from approximately the mid-first century A.D. to the present. The site was a rural farmstand site, serving much the same function in antiquity as it does today. Notable from the excavations is a clear late eighth through ninth century use of the tell.

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