

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE EXCAVATION AT AL-BĀLŪ' AND A FIRST SOUNDING AT AL-MIŞNA IN 1997

by

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This year's excavation took place from July 20 until August 15, 1997. The intention of the excavators was to confirm the results of the season of 1995 and to continue in the formerly discovered strata dating as far back as the EB periods. For this reason, a large area (E) was opened northwest of the Qaşr al-Bālŭ' and just north of Area A. The surface of Area E was almost free of the basalt boulders typical of al-Bālŭ' and thus offered a good opportunity for excavation (Fig. 1).

Area E

Area E consisted of several squares which all together measured 15x15 m. A large wall (40) running north to south was excavated. At its southern side two open courtyards were discovered which contained grinding installations and working areas (platforms) as well as pits. Only one beaten earth floor mixed with *hūwwār* was laid over the bedrock which was very irregular. Under the floor of the court east to wall 40 an area of ca. 2x3 m had been burned, as indicated by the charred surface of the bedrock. The burned remains of bones and charred pottery had been covered by a layer of sand until the floor was laid over it, sealing off the remains below. The pottery above and below the floor dates to the Iron IIB period.

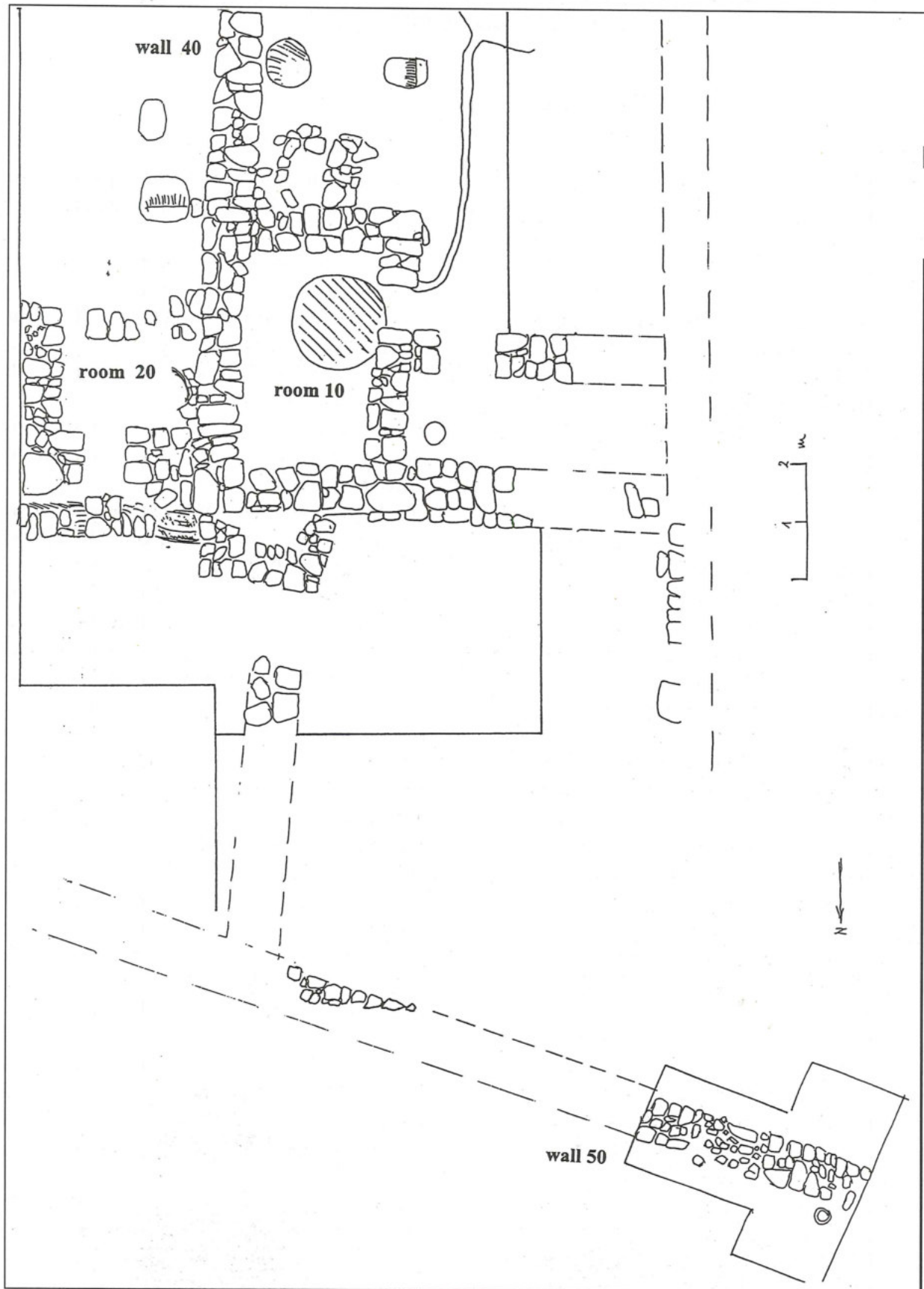
The court area west of wall 40 contained a pit (diam. ca. 1.20 m), several smaller grinding stones, mortars and pestels, and a stone lined shallow pit of rectangular shape (diam. ca. 0.60 m). Immediately at its western side a water channel was unearthed running from the door of room 10 (tentatively so called) southward into a large pit or crevasse which was hewn into the bedrock (Fig. 2). The channel also cuts the bedrock and is

plastered. The plaster is in very good condition. The entire length of the channel is ca. 5 m.

The courtyard areas were separated by wall 40 (no access between the areas). The size of the areas is not known since their outer peripheral walls have not yet been discovered. However, there are wall remains in the western court area.

East and west of wall 40, at its northern end, two rooms (10 and 20) were unearthed. In room 10, with a door at its western side, two floor layers have been discovered containing sherds from the Iron IIB period. When the two floors had been removed and bedrock was reached, a deep (1.70 m) underground pit of ca. 1.20 m in diameter was discovered (Fig. 3). The first floor had been laid over the pit indicating that this large installation had not been in use during the Iron II period. The fill which came out of this installation contained pottery dating to the Iron II periods. However, ca. 0.50 m above the groundfloor of the pit the color of the soil changed from brownish gray to reddish brown and white. The pottery taken from this locus clearly belonged to the Iron I period or to the latest phase of the Late Bronze period. Of special interest are the many body sherds with painting characteristic of the Iron I period (or the very late LB period).

In room 20, which measured only about 2.50 x 2.0 m, the remains of a bath installation was found. Stones set in oval fashion served as support for the later destroyed bath or basin. Thick remains of patches of plaster were still at the stones forming the walls of the tub which measured about 0.60 x 0.90 m. The pottery which was found there belonged to the Iron II period as well. Room



1. Sketch plan of Area E.



2. Plastered water channel running north-south in open courtyard.



3. Underground pit.

20 had an exit towards the north. However, this door had been blocked by small stones filling the doorway. The reason for this became evident when the area north of room 20 was opened. Here, a wall built immediately adjacent to the outer wall of room 20 strengthened the outer side. Also, a bastion-like installation built a little further to the west, its size being ca. 1.20x1.90 m, served

the same purpose of defense (Fig. 4). Ca. 5 m north of the opened installations and building complexes, an outer wall (50) which probably served the purpose of encircling the whole complex was discovered in two smaller sondage squares. The fill in front of the wall and bastion contained a large amount of pottery dating to the late Iron IIB-CIII / Persian periods, suggesting that the defenses were built during that time.

A wall closing a cave was discovered immediately north of room 10, ca. 1 m below the bedrock "floor" of that room. The wall in front of the cave formed one line with the other wall and the bastion serving the purpose of defense in this area. When the wall was removed, a shallow cave appeared which contained a few sherds of the Iron II period in its upper loci, while below and on the cave's floor only sherds dating to the late EB and prominently to the MB period were discovered (Fig. 5).



4. Bastion and defense wall at northern side of Area E.



5. Walled cave serving as tomb in Area A.

The building complexes dating to the Iron II period with several phases of re-building tell the story of the later historic phases of al-Bālū' with hints at its former history dating back as far as the late EB, MB, and early Iron periods.

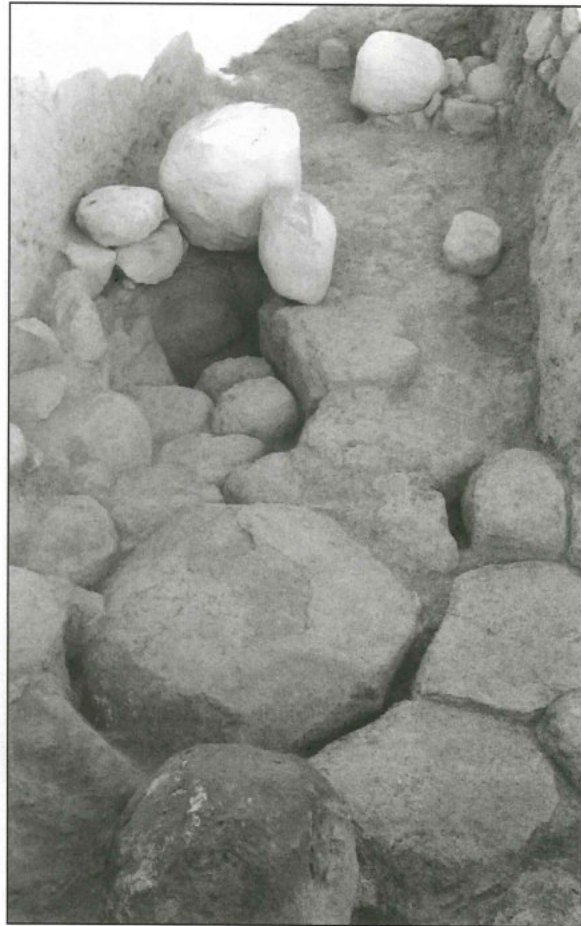
Area D

Area D is the area of the casemate wall which has been formerly excavated to the length of ca. 60 m. Close to the Assyrian-type house, a cultic installation had been already discovered in 1995. Two standing stones were carefully set up near the outer wall of the house. A number of wedge stones give these two huge boulders the necessary support. From these two standing stones channels lead downhill into a pit which is about 6-7 m away. The pit contained bones of sheep, goat, and cow, and may indicate that sacrificial rites were performed here. This view is now strengthened by the discovery of another standing stone (ca. 1.70 m) which stands immediately above the deep pit. The excavated area behind the standing stone contained one flat stone which may have served as a table or as an entrance into the sacred precinct (Fig. 6).

Sounding at al-Miṣna

In the summer of 1997 a small sounding was carried out at the site of al-Miṣna in order to compare the stratigraphic and ceramic situation with the one at al-Bālū'. Al-Miṣna is the nearest major Iron age site south of al-Bālū' and lends itself to such a comparative investigation. The small ruined hill is situated just 2 km northeast of ar-Rabbah and can be reached through the fields by turning off the main road in ar-Rabbah or the road that connects al-Qaṣr with Ḥmūd (PG: 22.3/76.7). Various wall lines can be detected on top of the hill as well as at the periphery and at the slopes. There is also a probable gateway that faces the east.

The surface is spotted with sherds comprising EB, MB, LB, IR, Roman - Naba-



6. Sacred precinct in Area D.

taean, Byzantine and Islamic. A small sondage square (3x3 m) was opened on top of the hill. There, it appears as if al-Miṣna had a substantial settlement during the second half of the Iron Age. Various phases can be distinguished by various floors one on top of the other. The ceramic forms are closely related to the ones found at al-Bālū' and various architectural remains can be associated with these Iron Age phases. Underneath the Iron Age layer, a mix of MB and LB sherds appeared, but no clear layer could be established as yet. Underneath yet another floor, remains of EB came to light. Besides a variety of EB sherds, a wall was discovered. Bedrock has not yet been reached during this summer's work.

Acknowledgements

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