

REPORT ON THE 1981 SEASON OF SURVEY AND SOUNDINGS AT KHIRBET ISKANDER

by
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Introduction

A brief season of survey and soundings was conducted from July 10 - August 10 at the site of Khirbet Iskander. This expedition was affiliated with the American Schools of Oriental Research and Drew University, and was funded principally by a grant from the Zion Research Foundation, a nonsectarian foundation for the study of the Bible and the history of the Christian Church. The writer is most grateful for this support. The writer would also like to express her gratitude to Dr. Adnan Hadidi, Director-General of the Department of Antiquities, for the financial and logistical support he extended to this project. Seton Hall University and several private donors provided additional financial support which is also gratefully acknowledged. For the inception of this project, the writer would like to thank Dr. James A. Sauer, former director of the American Center of Oriental Research, for it is he who in the summer of 1980 suggested to the writer the site of Khirbet Iskander for excavation. In light of current research and of interest in late third millennium B.C. studies, and in light of their knowledge of this important Early Bronze Age site, Dr. Sauer, Dr. Hadidi, and Mr. Peter Parr, have all encouraged the writer to renew excavations there.

The site itself is situated on the north bank of the Wadi Wala, some 400 meters west of the bridge where the Madaba-Dhiban road crosses the Wadi (see figs. 1-2). A perennial stream, whose primary source is the Ras el-Wala -- a spring just east of the site, flows through the Wadi. Consequently, the area around the site is intensely cultivated and, in fact, even in summer enjoys quite a lush vegetation. The Wala flows into the Wadi el-Mujib and ultimately into the Dead Sea. Khirbet Iskander lies 23 kilometers in a direct line

from the Dead Sea and 56 kilometers south from Amman.

Although the site has been known for some time (Schick 1877; Brunnow and von Domaszewski 1904; Musil 1907), Nelson Glueck (1939) was the first to investigate it systematically. Although he located the site on either side of a secondary north-south wadi which joins the Wala from the north (Glueck 1939: fig. 47), his "western sector" constitutes the mound of Khirbet Iskander as it is visible today (see pl. LXXXVIII). Based on the EB IV sherds found on the surface and on the stone-circles and menhirs discovered, Glueck concluded that Khirbet Iskander was a one-period EB IV site. His detailed description of standing domestic structures, a defensive perimeter wall with large square towers, and an east-west wall presents the image of a large settlement and indeed a stronghold. Important new information was uncovered by Peter Parr (1960), who excavated two deep soundings and found domestic EB IV occupation and a portion of what was possibly the outer wall. Even more important, the EB IV occupation he encountered proved to lie above earlier material on the mound, a discovery which enlarged the occupational history of the site beyond that observed by Glueck.

The 1981 expedition to Khirbet Iskander sought to establish the stratigraphic profile of the site and to determine if, in fact, the site could shed light on the EB III-EB IV cultural horizon for which, aside from Bâb edh-Dhr'a, no stratified sequence is known. Though a great deal of material from the EB IV period has been published, the overwhelming majority derives from tomb deposits. This state of affairs had induced the view that the population was virtually non-sedentary: a one-sided and, as we are beginning to see, distorted view of EB IV

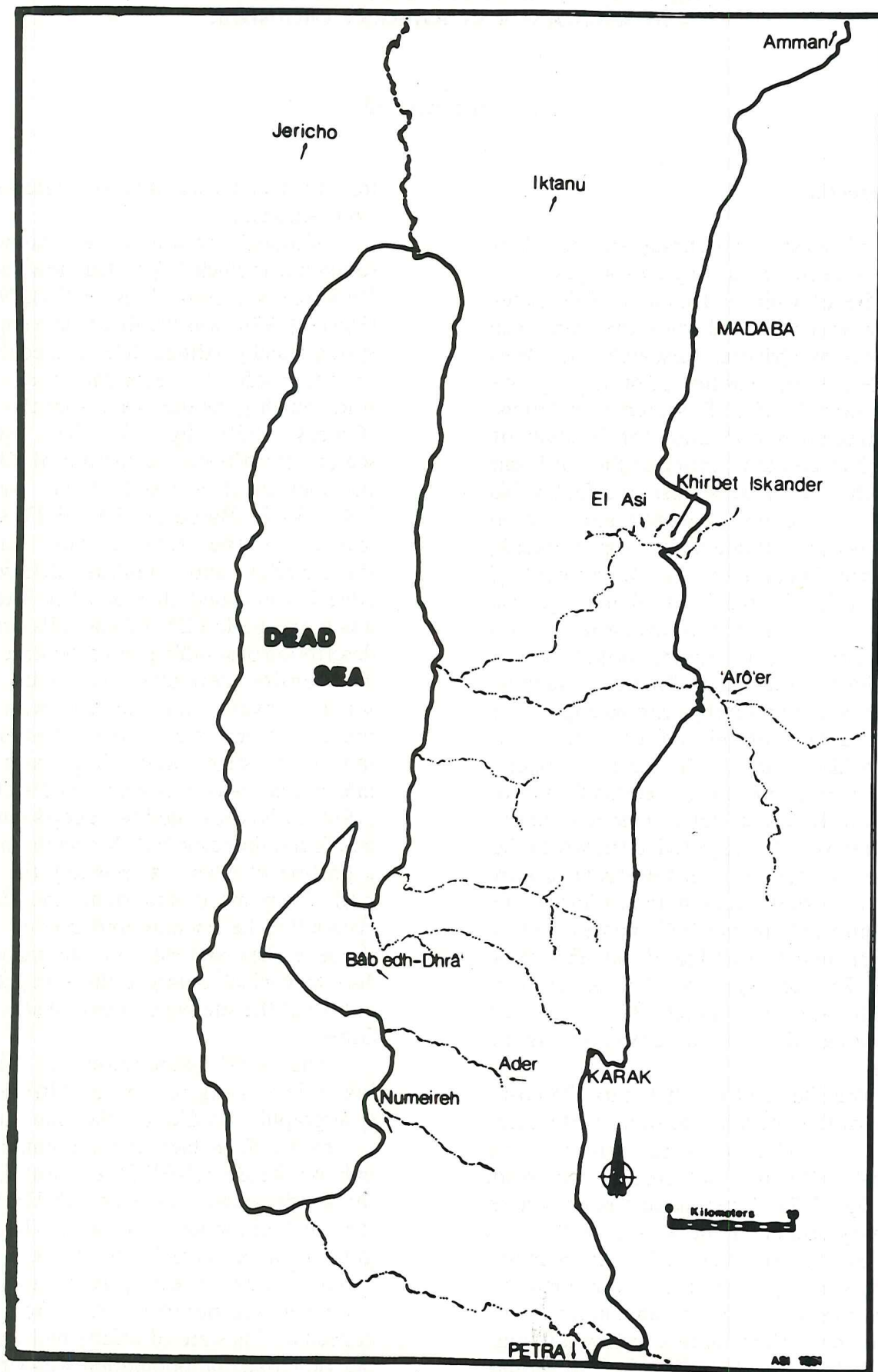


Fig. 1. Map of Jordan with EB IV settlement sites.

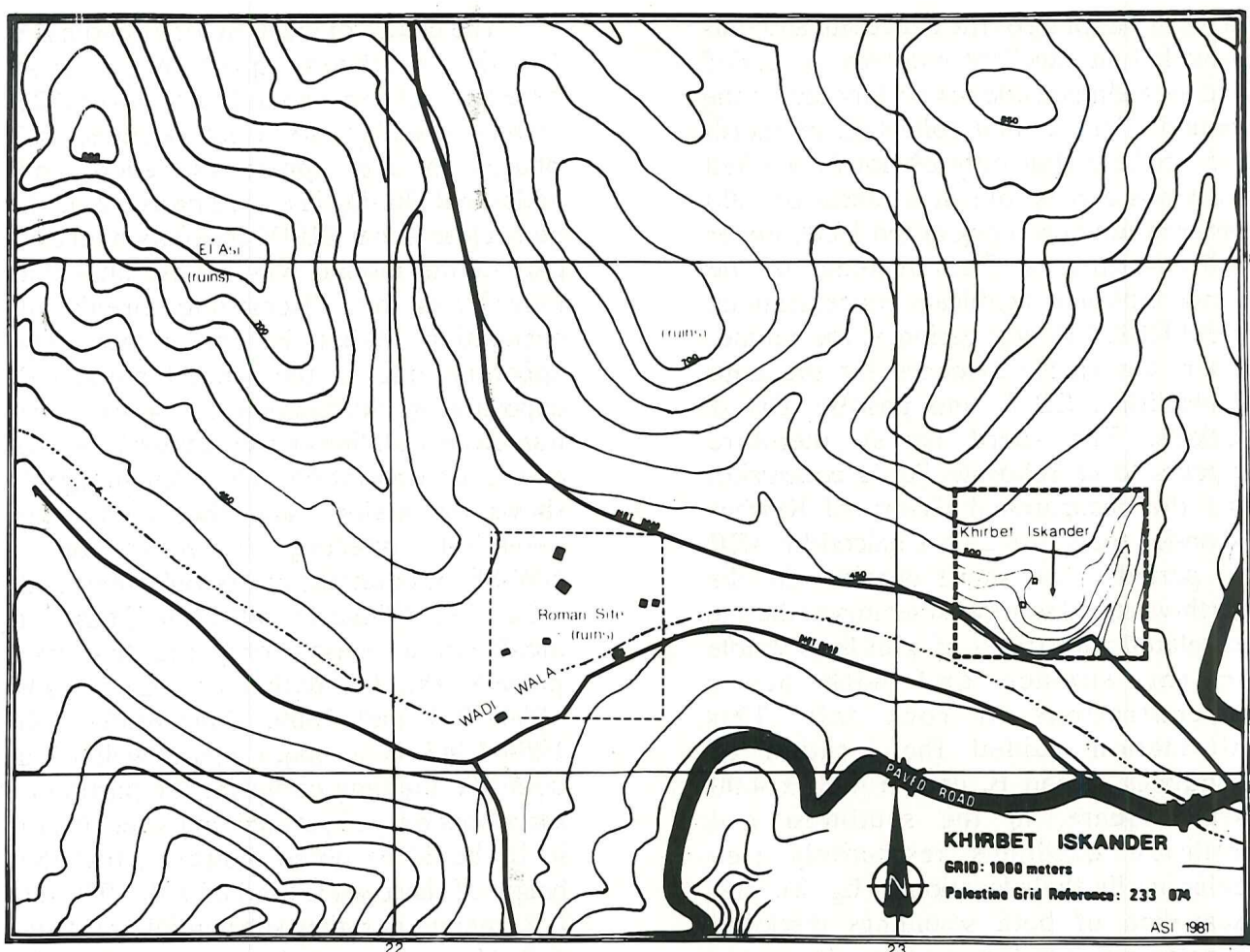


Fig. 2. Topographic map of Khirbet Iskander and vicinity with location of Soundings indicated.

society in Palestine. The excavation of settlement sites such as Ikhtanu (Prag 1974), Ader (Cleveland 1960), Bâb edh Dhr'a (Rast and Schaub 1978, 1979), 'Aro'er (Olavarri 1969), Har Yaruham (Kochavi 1963), Beer Resisim (Cohen and Dever 1979, 1980), as well as Khirbet Iskander, has offered a glimpse of a more substantive level of agrarian subsistence than was heretofore suspected. Renewed interest in this period has sparked a number of recent syntheses on the state of late third millennium B.C. studies (Dever 1970, 1971, 1973; Oren 1973; Prag 1974; Dever 1980; Richard 1980). There is, however, still no clear evidence as to why the seemingly abrupt cultural break occurred at the EB III-EB IV horizon. The major

goal of the Khirbet Iskander Expedition is to seek an explanation to this phenomenon.

Survey and Soundings

The goals of the 1981 season were: 1) to conduct a systematic random survey of the site 2) to map and grid the site 3) to excavate two soundings to bedrock, and 4) to initiate a regional survey with a reconnaissance of the immediate vicinity. Despite a small staff¹ and a short season, the project was able to meet all of its goals except to reach bedrock in the two soundings.

Given the relatively small size of the mound (150 x 150 meters), the sampling strategy chosen was one which allowed a

1. The supervisory staff consisted of Suzanne Richard, Director of Architect; James D'Angelo, Surveyor and Photographer; Gail D'Angelo, Pottery Registrar; Donald H. Wimmer and

Suzanne V. Kane, Soundings Supervisors; Ghazi Bisheh and Brian Bloom, Staff Members; Omar Unis, Representative, Department of Antiquities. Eight local laborers completed the work-force.

random sampling of the entire site and thus provided an excellent overview of period and location densities of pottery across the mound. Thus a total collection of sherds and artifacts (but only obviously worked flint) was carried out in a radius of 1.00 meter around each peg at the 10.00 meter grid co-ordinates. Field readings of the sherds indicated significant concentrations of EB III-EB IV occupation on the mound, lesser, but visible evidence for the Late Chalcolithic, EB I, and possibly EB II periods. The sherd survey therefore appears to corroborate Parr's conclusion that the occupational history of Khirbet Iskander spans the Late Chalcolithic -EB IV periods. The sherd densities in the north-west and southwest sectors of the site correlated with traces of wall lines visible on the surface and with heavy concentrations of rock fall. This information guided the location of Soundings A and B, each a 4.00 x 4.00 meter square, in the southwest and northwest quadrants respectively (see preliminarily their location in fig. 2). The excavation of both soundings disclosed significant evidence for domestic occupation in the EB IV period and a glimpse at the EB III occupation which, on the basis of the sherd survey and fortification lines traced on the surface, should be substantial. An investigative survey of the immediate vicinity revealed important cultural remains from the Roman Period, in particular a second site named Khirbet Iskander several kilometers down the Wadi to the west (see fig. 2). The small sampling of pottery collected was all of Roman-Byzantine date. It is apparently this site to which Glueck referred as Khirbet Tahunet el-Wala (1939: 129). Examination of the site of El Asi, (see fig. 2) classified by Glueck as EB IV, will have to await the systematic regional survey to begin in 1982. The following report is a brief summary and provisional interpretation of the stratification uncovered in two soundings. The precise nature of the architectural remains will, of course, only become manifest in future seasons when greater lateral exposure is realized.

The choice of location for Sounding A (in the southwest quadrant) proved excellent, for excavation to a depth of 3.25 meters revealed six clear architectural phases in the uppermost levels and additional phasing in a deep probe. What is quite clear is that EB IV occupation on this part of the mound was intense and that there was no discernible break in occupation. What is not immediately apparent, due to the limited horizontal exposure, are the function and nature of the numerous wall lines which appeared in the course of excavation. The plan in fig. 3 shows the major walls discovered: wall 1004-1047 bisecting the square on a NW-SE orientation; cross-wall 1009; and the earliest (Phase 1) wall 1039. Of the six architectural phases, only the first two precede the foundation of major walls 1004-1047 and 1009. Conceivably wall 1004-1047 is a major spine wall of a domestic building complex, for partitions for rooms were excavated on either side of it. It should be noted, however, that the height of these walls (and of wall 1009) at 1.30 meters is rather substantial and that wall 1047 forms a square "tower-like" structure which clearly extends beyond the confines of the north and west balks. Such a structure recalls Glueck's description of "large towers" at intervals in the wall system and indeed fragmentary remains of Glueck's "eastwest" wall seem to align with wall 1004-1047. Plans for the 1982 season include the excavation of squares contiguous to Sounding A in order to trace the extent and nature of these important but as yet enigmatic architectural remains.

The chronological sequence of the major walls is apparent even though their function is not. It is evident that wall 1047, which abuts wall 1004 and for which a possible foundation trench was discovered in Phase 4, is later in date than wall 1004 and cross-wall 1009. The non-alignment of wall 1004-1047 is quite noticeable (fig. 3). What is likewise clear is that approximately contemporaneous with the founding of wall 1047, walls 1004 and 1009 underwent a rebuild, for in their upper three courses, these latter two walls bond together. During this rebuild a boulder-sized rock

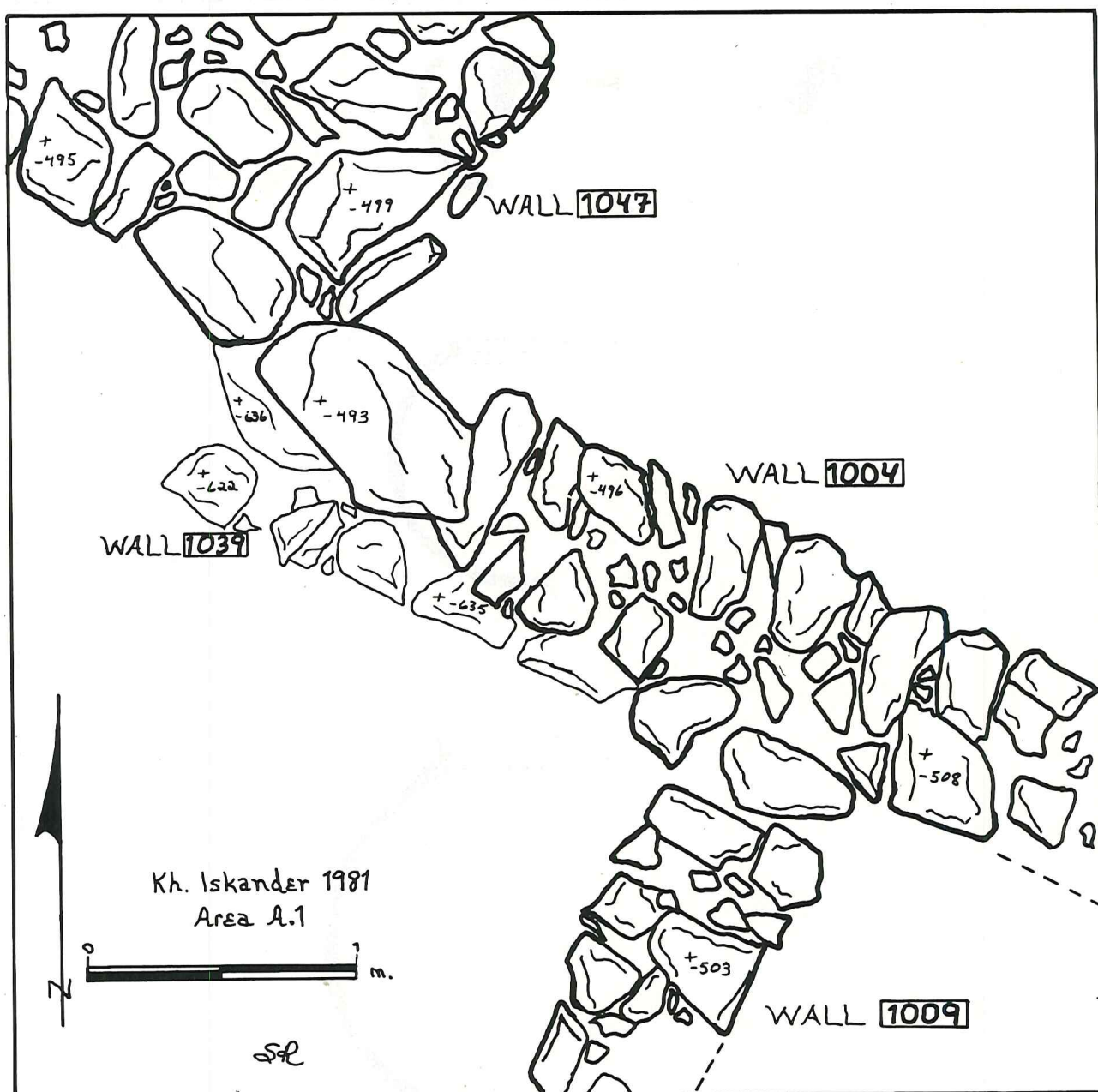


Fig. 3. Plan of Sounding A with major wall lines.

was laid at the westernmost extension of wall 1004. A gap between this boulder and the course below creates a curious window-like aperture.

The earliest wall uncovered was wall 1039, a one course structure consisting of at least two rows of flat-lying stones (see fig. 3). Presumably wall 1039 extended farther to the northwest but was cut in Phase 4 by a trench discovered alongside the southern face of wall 1047. As mentioned above, this trench was probably dug for the foundation of the latter wall. In association with this Phase I wall, but to the north of wall 1004 where just the edges of wall 1039 were

visible, was a partially intact EB IV cooking pot (fig. 4:3, pl. XC), to be discussed below. The extent and nature of wall 1039 must await further excavation but provisionally one may conclude that it was not a platform or foundation for wall 1004 since the two walls are not in alignment. A number of wall stubs, usually with two rows and two courses, appeared on either side of wall 1004-1047 in the course of excavation. Associated surfaces made it possible to phase in these wall stubs with the major wall system. The sequence of architectural plans in Sounding A appears to reflect a continuous development and adaptation of

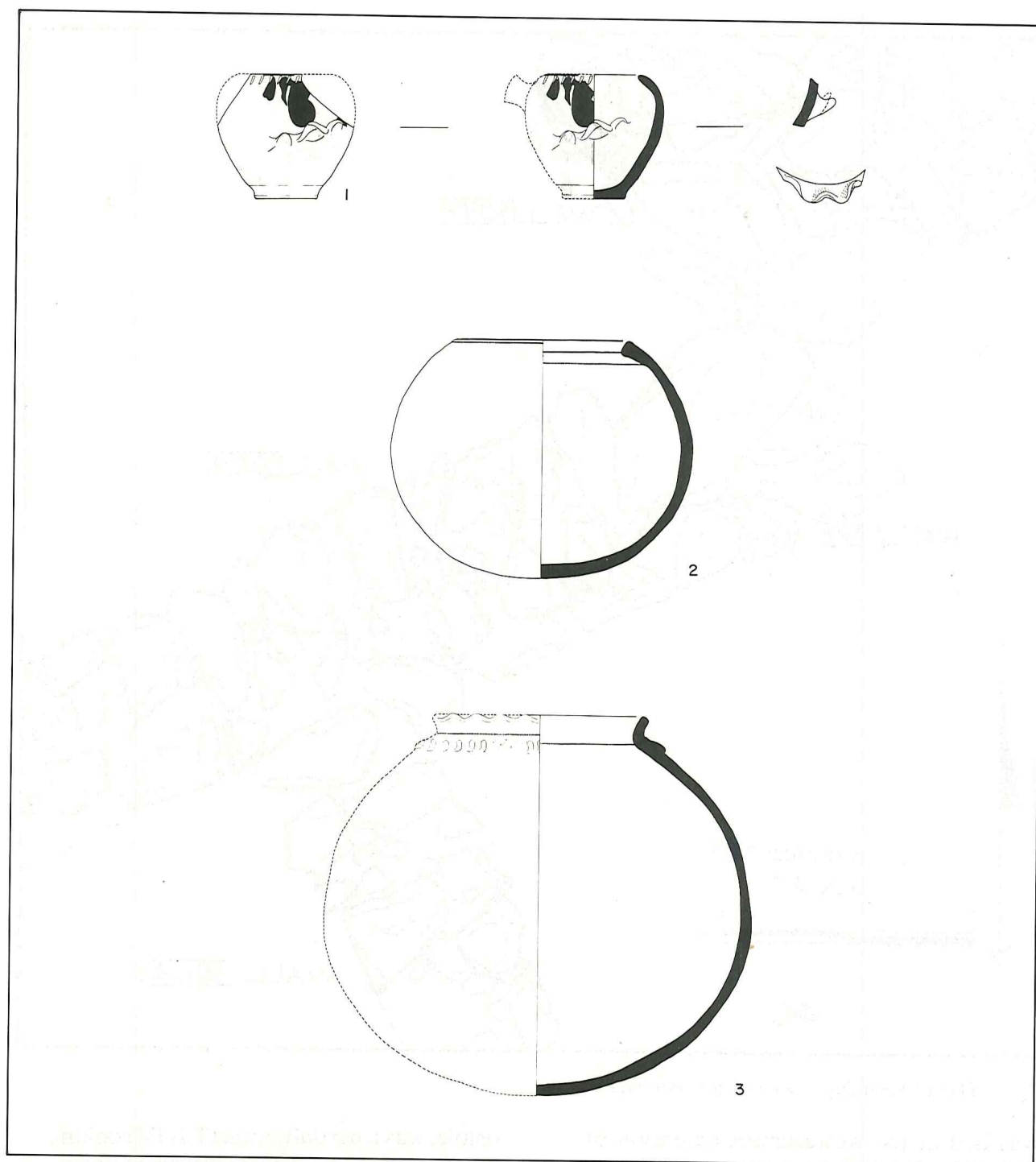


Fig. 4. Pottery from Khirbet Iskander: EB III "teapot" and to EB IV cooking pots. Scale 1:5.

the size and position of domestic rooms on either side of the major east-west wall. All stratigraphic and related ceramic evidence suggests an EB IV date for these remains. The term EB III/EB IV transitional could, however, characterize well the pottery found in the lowest levels of a deep probe in Sounding A.

Sounding B was located at the northwestern crest of the mound where wall lines on the surface seemed to define a

complex situated immediately inside the northern exterior wall. Glueck, in fact, mentioned that the remains of buildings immediately within the city wall on the north were the most clearly discernible. Excavation of this square, however, exposed quite a different type of occupational debris than that recovered in Sounding A. No continuous build-up of surfaces in association with rebuilds of major walls or changing house walls was

evident here. Below a Phase 5 modern layer, excavation exposed three EB IV phases and, in the lowest levels reached in a deep probe, one EB III (or at the latest EB III/EB IV transitional) phase. The depth reached in this sounding was also ca. 3.25 meters.

Again, owing to the limited horizontal exposure, it is not possible to interpret some of the evidence with any degree of certainty. The latest EB IV phases (4 and 3) clearly represent the remains of an outdoor, open courtyard area. Phase 4 consisted of a three course, two row wall running north-south into both balks. Built against this wall and resting upon a hard-packed earthen surface was a fairly intact tabun. This tabun had been relined and rebuilt several times. Associated with it were ashy patches and numerous tabun fragments in a fairly thick layer of occupational debris, thus pointing to an extended period of time when the tabun was in use. In Phase 3, below the wall and tabun, an unusual structure came to light. It contained three wall segments arranged in such a way so as to resemble an enclosure or U-shaped installation varying from one to two courses and rows, and divided the area roughly in the middle on an east-west axis. There were no associated surfaces, but rather a series of fill layers containing much EB IV pottery, many fragments of mudbrick and chert chips.

Whatever the function of this odd structure, it seems evident that the layer of fill material immediately below it had been laid down in order to level off the mudbrick debris and ashy remains of Phase 2. Phase 2 consisted primarily of a thick layer of mudbrick debris, although within the square there was no evidence of the wall from which this mudbrick may have fallen. Possibly this mudbrick debris represents the fallen superstructure of an east-west wall found in the north balk in a deep probe, a six-course (Phase 1) wall which is the earliest architectural element in this sounding. The east and west balks exhibited the slump of mudbrick from north to south. Evidence of burning, in the form of ash lenses and patches, suggests perhaps a destruction of some sort. The

whole EB IV cooking pot seen in fig. 4:2 and pl. XC was found *in situ* alongside the north balk, covered by the mudbrick detritus. Plans for the 1982 season likewise include the excavation of several contiguous squares in order to investigate further the character of occupation in this section of the mound. Notwithstanding the somewhat enigmatic nature of the archaeological record in Sounding B, it appears that excavation has exposed in the lowest levels of the probe an EB III or transitional phase based on the ceramic remains, of which a fragmentary EB III "teapot" is displayed on fig. 4:1 and Pl. LXXXIX.

Pottery

In the full preliminary report, a representative selection of pottery will be presented. It is a well-stratified sequence of EB III/EB IV pottery which is needed to clarify the relationship between the two repertoires, and to elucidate the interrelationships among several distinct EB IV assemblages. The stratified sequence at Khirbet Iskander should cast some light on the typological and chronological development within the period. Suggested frameworks for the period include 1) several regional ceramic families that overlap and are essentially contemporaneous (Amiran 1974); 2) a two-phase chronology, EB IV A-B (Oren 1973); and 3) a three-phase chronology EB IV-A-B-C (Dever 1973; Richard 1980). The purpose of the following brief ceramic study is merely to illustrate the three whole or partially complete vessels discovered this past season, vessels of great intrinsic as well as chronological value.

Illustrated on fig. 4 and pls. LXXXIX - XCI are an EB III "teapots" and two EB IV cooking pots. One of the nicest vessels recovered, though in fragmentary form, is the EB III "teapot" exhibited on fig. 4:1 and pl. LXXXIX. The numerous parallels with EB III teapots that one could cite suggest that in fact this "holemouth" vessel with incurved rim and wavy ledge handle did include a spout originally. In typical EB III fashion it has stab marks circling the rim

and displays the common red paint in the broad-banded design often found in the EB III period. Note especially good parallels in form and design in Tomb A at Jericho (Garstang 1932, pl. VIII). For the relationship between EB III and EB IV teapots, see Dever 1973: 47-48 and Richard 1980: 17-18 and references and parallels cited there. The context for this vessel was the lowest levels of the probe in Sounding B.

Fig. 4: 2-3 demonstrates that two cooking pot traditions coexisted at Khirbet Iskander. Although these are the only two to be restored, numerous sherds of each type show that both traditions were popular at the site. These are the first published examples from Jordan complete enough to prove beyond doubt that the typical EB IV cooking pot there was round-based. In light of whole vessels published from Na saneh (Dever 1974, pls. 1-4: *passim*) and many published examples of "holemouth" rims with beveled edge, it is certain that fig. 4:2 (pl. XC) represents the classic EB IV cooking pot in the unequivocal Early Bronze Age tradition. This fire-blackened vessel was discovered in Sounding B.

To my knowledge, the cooking pot illustrated in fig. 4:3 and pl. XCI is the first published specimen of the everted-rim variety found in Jordan, except for the somewhat similar jar form from el-Husn (Harding and Isserlin 1953, fig. 4: 48-50). Other examples of the type have appeared at Qadesh (Tadmor 1978, fig. 5), Hanita (Negbi 1969, figs. 1-2), Ma'ayan Barukh (Amiran, fig. 6:5), and Beth Shan (Oren 1973, fig. 24:2), all early EB IV sites in the northern sector of Western Palestine. On the basis of its globularity and plastic decoration, fig. 4:3 compares most favourably with Oren's Type M1 jars at Beth Shan (1973: figs. 18:16, 22: 2-4, 24: 5-6), although they are not described as cooking pots. Parallels drawn between this particular form and globular, necked Syrian jars are apropos, e.g., at Hama (Fugmann 1958, figs. 64, 85, 103). Fig. 4:3 is of reddish-brown clay blackened by fire and was found in a Phase I layer in Sounding A.

Conclusion

The preliminary season of excavations at the site of Khirbet Iskander has revealed a site rich in Early Bronze Age remains, particularly, thus far, in stratified materials from the enigmatic EB IV period. Sounding A yielded the most significant stratification: six clear architectural phases showing continuous occupation without a discernible break in the archaeological record. Such evidence for intensive domestic occupation would appear to attest a permanent sedentary population. Further excavation is necessary to interpret the findings in Sounding B; nonetheless, by the end of the season evidence for the EB III period revealed itself in the lowest levels. The painted "teapot" is a promising sign that important EB III stratified occupation is present on the site. Likewise, vestiges of once substantial fortifications on the perimeter of the mound must a priori belong to an EB III (or EB II/III) settlement.

Having determined as a result of survey and soundings that important cultural remains from the EB III-EB IV periods are present on the mound, the project proposes over the course of three seasons to test the validity of certain models formulated to explain the archaeological data associated with this transition. Though the expedition is concerned to uncover the complete sequence of cultures on the mound, the design of the proposed project is oriented toward the problematic EB III-EB IV cultural transition. The project intends to test the applicability of the model of pastoral nomadism -- a model which embraces both pastoral and semi-sedentary elements -- to an EB IV settlement site such as Khirbet Iskander. Both the evidence gathered from this site thus far as well as data retrieved from various surveys reflecting intensive EB IV occupation in Jordan suggest that the model of pastoral nomadism does not comprehend the totality of the EB IV archaeological remains. The subsistence patterns and the socio-economic organization of the EB IV peoples may, in fact, be far more complex than hitherto suspected. The project will

likewise address the perplexing EB III-EB IV transition by testing the alternate models of cultural continuity/cultural discontinuity. Assuming some relationship, the project will seek to explain the degree and extent of both the continuities and the discontinuities in the archaeological record. To this end the objective of the three planned season (1982, 1984, 1986) is

to achieve maximum exposure of the EB IV and EB III settlements for the purposes of comparison. As a complement to the excavation of this site, a regional survey is planned to uncover information regarding the extent of sedentary EB IV occupation in the area.

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