

Rural Life in Northern Jordan During the Roman and Byzantine Periods

Archaeological study of the classical periods in Jordan has mostly been concentrated on the large cities that later belonged to the Decapolis (Freeman 2008: 413-441; Watson 2008: 443-482). According to the results of various surveys, and as recently demonstrated by el-Khoury (2008; 2009: 41-47 and map), we now know that these cities were surrounded by a dense network of villages and smaller settlements. However, it is only in a few cases that the rural life that underpinned the wealth of these cities has been studied in more detail. Excavations at villages and small settlements are very rare.

This article reports on the excavation of Roman, Byzantine and Umayyad strata at Tall Zar'ā, undertaken as part of the Gadara Region Project, which has shed new light on the architectural appearance of rural sites during these periods in north-west Jordan.

The Gadara Region Project was initiated by Prof. Dieter Vieweger in 2001. After intensive survey it turned out that Tall Zar'ā, located at the confluence of Wādī al-'Arab and Wādī Zaḥar around 4.5 km south-west of Gadara, was the most promising site for excavation. Following a detailed survey at the site in 2001 and 2002, excavations started in 2003. Since then, seven more seasons have been carried out. Since 2004, the project has been a joint venture between the Biblical Archaeological Institute, Wuppertal and German Protestant Institute of Archaeology, Amman directed by Prof. Dieter Vieweger and the author (Vieweger and Häser 2009, 2010)¹.

Tall Zar'ā rises around 25m above the surrounding area (FIG. 1); its highest point is at an elevation of 17m below sea level. Settlements were built on top of the natural limestone hill, which has a diameter of around 240m at its base and 160m on the

plateau. The ancient cities and villages on top of the hill were protected by sheer rock faces on its eastern and northern sides. The southern flank offers the best opportunity for comfortable ascent via a 150m track climbing up from west to east. The cultural layers of these habitation activities are approximately 16m thick.

The importance of the *tall* stems from three facts: (1) there is an active artesian spring on the top, (2) the surrounding land is particularly suitable for agriculture and (3) it occupies a strategic position on a highly important pre- and proto-historic trade route.

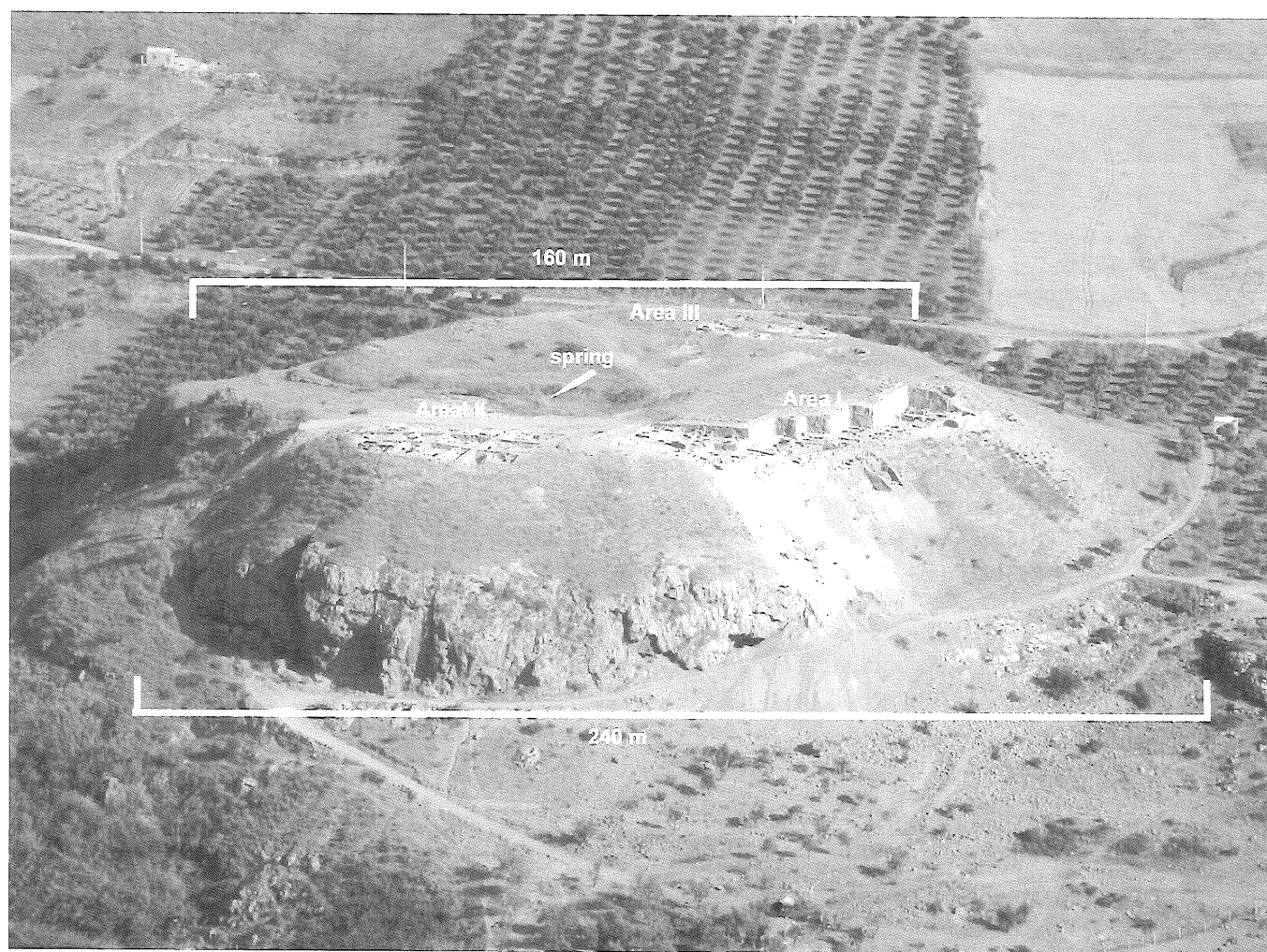
Excavations started on the north-western part of the *tall*, designated Area I. Preliminary geophysical investigations had shown that significant architectural remains could be expected in this area. After eight seasons it can be stated that the results exceeded all expectations, since an archaeological sequence dating from the Middle Bronze Age to the Umayyad period, with city walls, residential areas, rural installations and workshops, have been exposed.

In 2006, the first excavations were undertaken in Area II on the northern edge of the *tall* (FIG. 1). This area is slightly higher than most other parts of the *tall*, except the southern part. It is the best protected place on the *tall* as there is a 40m cliff immediately to the north. A sequence of ten strata was detected which can be dated from the Late Hellenistic to Umayyad periods.

In summer 2008, Area III was opened on the southern part of the *tall* (FIG. 1) where a large building of Late Roman or more probably Byzantine date was uncovered, which remained in use until the Mamluk period.

This report presents the results of the excava-

¹ For a complete list of publications see www.tallziraa.de



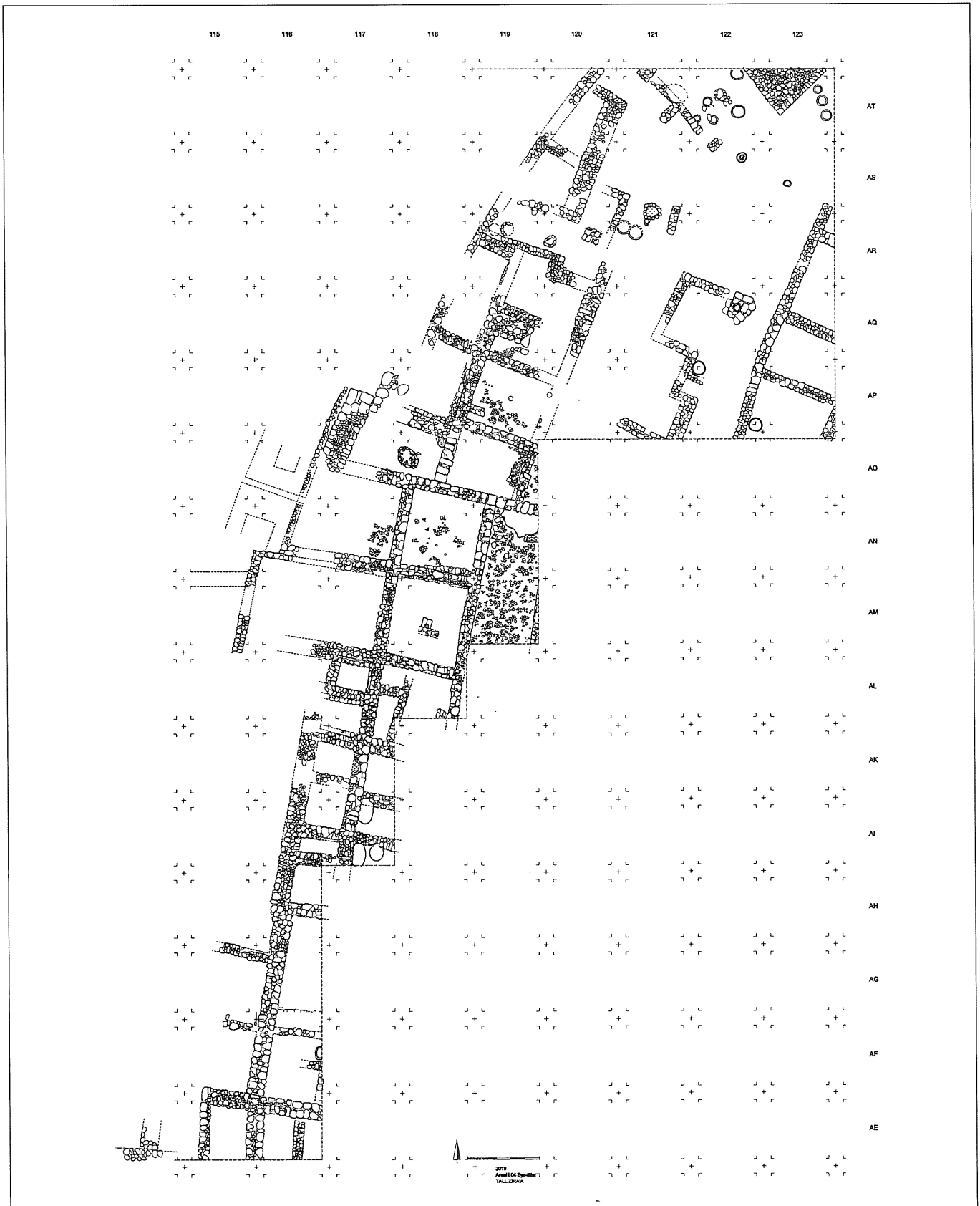
1. Tall Zar'a view from north west.

tions in these three areas. Since the excavations have not yet reached the lowest classical period occupation levels and the findings are still under study, numbering of the stratigraphic sequence is still preliminary. However, the general development of the settlement is clear.

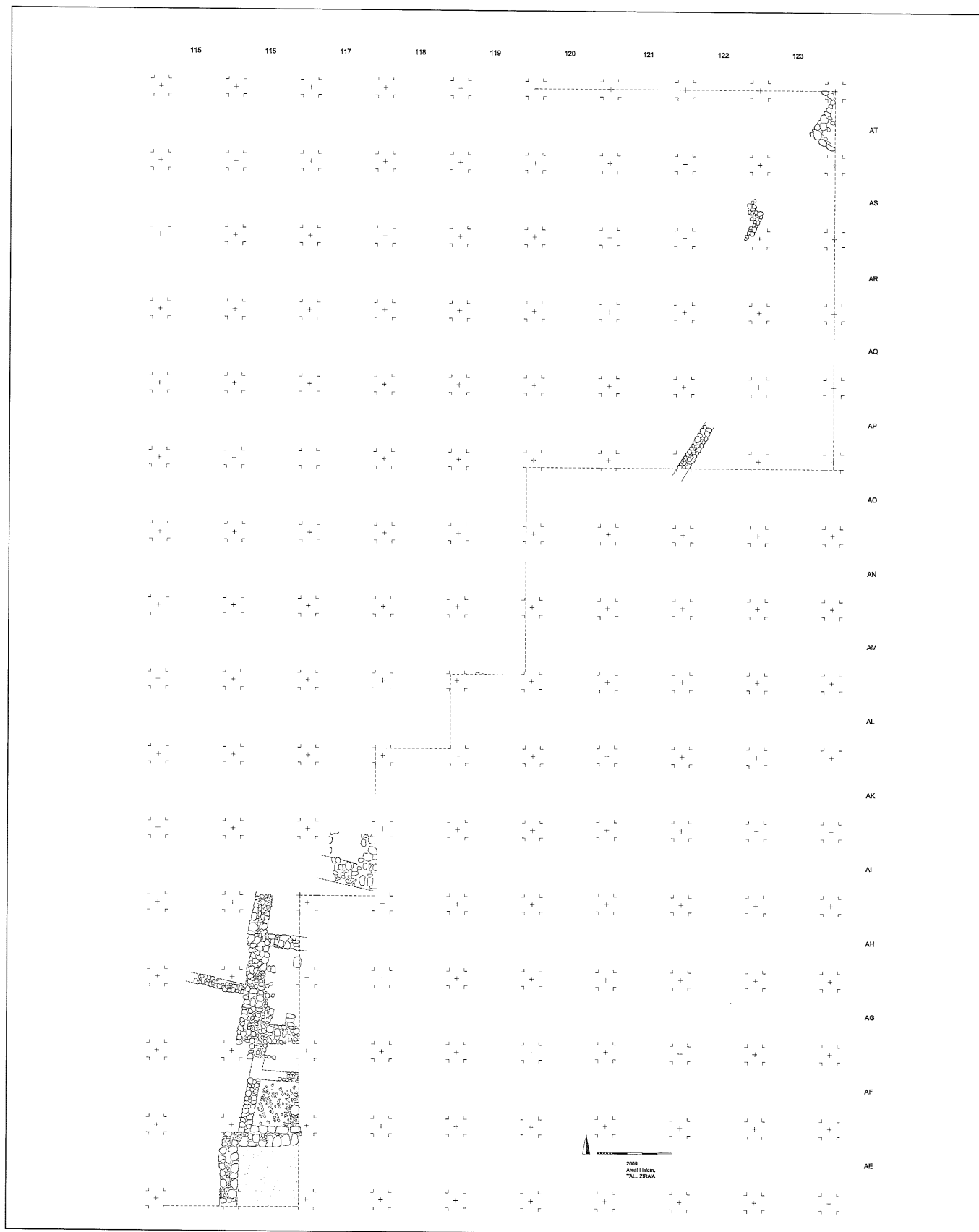
The Roman and Byzantine buildings in Area I follow the contours of the *tall* (FIG. 2). The layout of the houses in the southern part of Area I is difficult to determine owing to the limited area of excavation. In the middle part, however, rows of rooms and / or courtyards are recognizable which were bordered by a paved pathway or vestibule to the east. In one case, an entrance to a house is recognizable, which lies at the south-east corner of the room. The room was furnished with a pillar base and bench in front of it. A clear separation between it and the next house is apparent at the northern end of this building complex. This next house likewise

consists of rows of rooms and / or courtyards to the west and east, separated by a large courtyard with some walls and installations. At the northern edge of the excavation area, a corner of a tower is visible. To date, it has not been linked with any walls of Roman or Byzantine date, nor has its base been reached. It is therefore not clear if the tower actually belongs to this stratum; it might be earlier. The walls of buildings belonging to this stratum were built with dressed and undressed stones; the former were *spolia* from other buildings. The floors were of *pisé* or plastered incorporating small stones. Finds from the rooms were household items such as pottery and glass vessels, grinding stones, bronze spatulas and loom weights.

Very few architectural features remained from the subsequent late Byzantine or Umayyad periods in Area I (FIG. 3). To the north, only a few unrelated walls are visible. In the southern part of



2. Byzantine stratum (earlier phase) in Area I.



3. Umayyad stratum in Area I.

this excavation area, walls of at least four rooms or courtyards were visible; these probably belong to different houses. Orientation changed only slightly in relation to the Roman / Byzantine structures. The southernmost part of the buildings in Area I consists of a courtyard which was originally paved with stones and later filled and plastered with a thick layer of lime; at least two occupation phases can therefore be identified. Very few Umayyad sherds were found in this stratum.

Looking at the north of Tall Zar'ā, a slightly elevated area is visible at the edge of a steep drop (FIG. 1). Area II was opened here and yielded the longest stratigraphic sequence on the *tall* of classical and Islamic strata, which date from the Hellenistic to Umayyad periods.

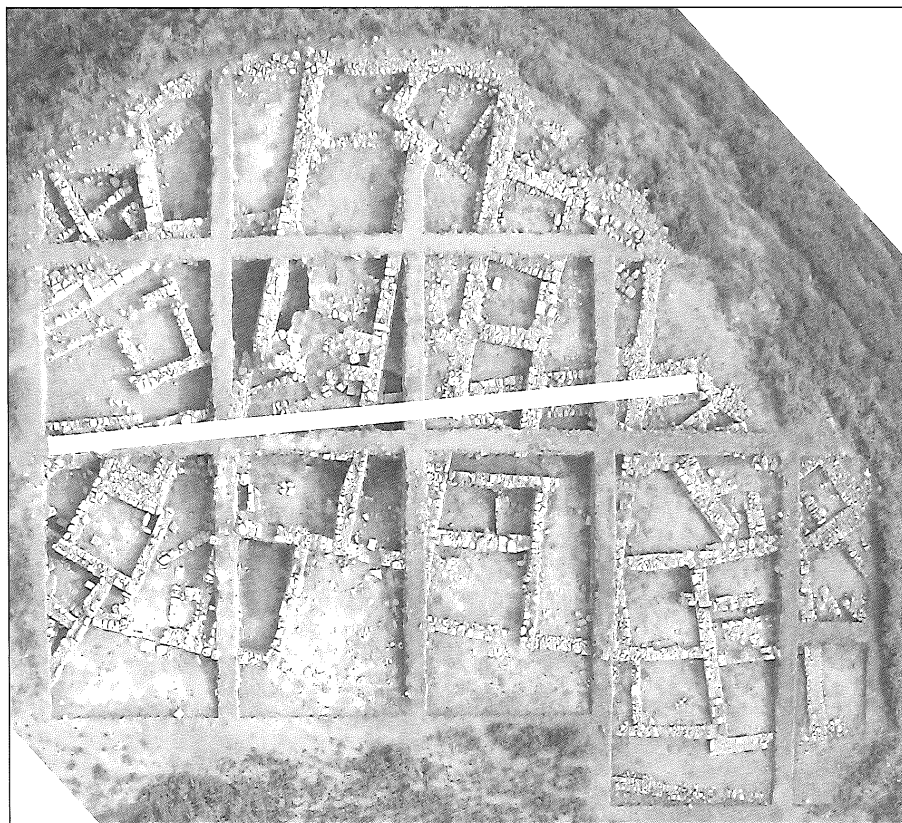
The lowest level which has been reached to date is marked by a 2.2m wide wall running 35m east - west through the whole excavation area (FIG. 4). In the east, it was damaged owing to the steepness of the slope; the western end has not yet been reached. So far, only the upper stones of this wall have been exposed and it is not yet clear if it belongs to the Hellenistic or the early Roman periods. The length and thickness of the wall suggest it belonged to some sort of fortification. However, it is too early

to determine the exact function of this structure.

The next four strata demonstrate a complete change of architecture (FIG. 5), being characterised by the remains of several houses orientated north-west-southeast. Owing to significant construction activities in the following periods, the remains are very disturbed and only bits and pieces of walls and floors could be identified. The architectural layout of the buildings, as well as that of the settlement itself, is therefore hard to determine. In several cases, the remains of up to four houses lay one on top of the other. The walls were not built directly on top of each other, but were constructed above the older ones with a slight change in direction (FIG. 6).

Three separate houses with more than two rooms can be recognized (FIG. 5). However, it is not yet clear if they belong to one stratum or different strata of the same period. In general, these four strata can be assigned to the Roman and / or early Byzantine periods on the basis of the pottery.

Another complete change of building orientation occurred in the following stratum (FIG. 7). A new building was constructed on an almost perfect north-south orientation above a house belonging to an earlier stratum. Two rooms remained, with an entrance in the south-east marked by a threshold of



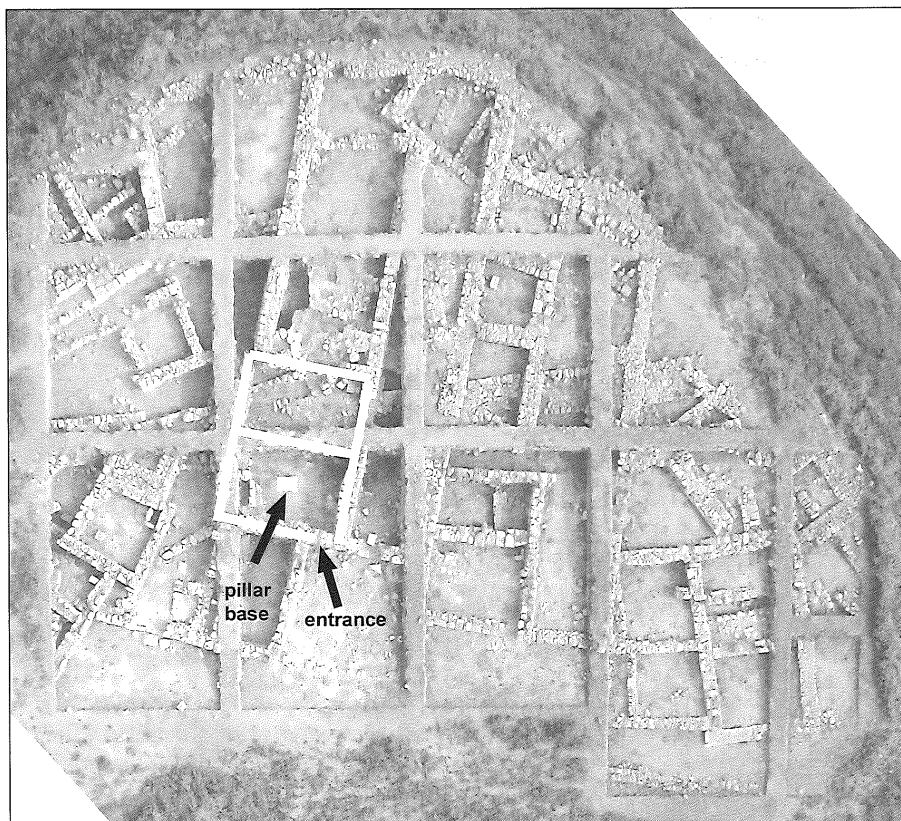
4. Hellenistic stratum in Area II (the Hellenistic wall is marked in white).



5. Roman stratum in Area II (the house remains are marked in white).



6. House remains of the Roman period in Area II built one upon the other with slight change in direction.



7. House remains of the late Roman/early Byzantine period in Area II.

stone slabs. A pillar base was set in the middle of the room. The orientation, location of the entrance, pillar base and layout of the building is very similar to what we have seen in the middle part of Area I. Since there was significant construction activity in later strata and the excavation has not reached this level in all parts of Area II, it cannot be stated whether or not there were more rooms or courtyards north and east of this building.

In the following stratum this building was enlarged to the north and east (FIG. 8). To the north a large courtyard was built and behind that a broad room. To the east a long vestibule was added which ends in front of the broad room. East of this complex, another one was added with a row of four rooms and again a long rectangular room which was likewise most probably a vestibule. To the south, a rectangular room was added and the entrance was changed from the south-east corner to the middle of the south wall. Now the room could only be entered through the room to the south. The walls were built of field stones and dressed stones, of which the latter were *spolia* from other buildings. In the debris small fragments of wall-paintings were found.

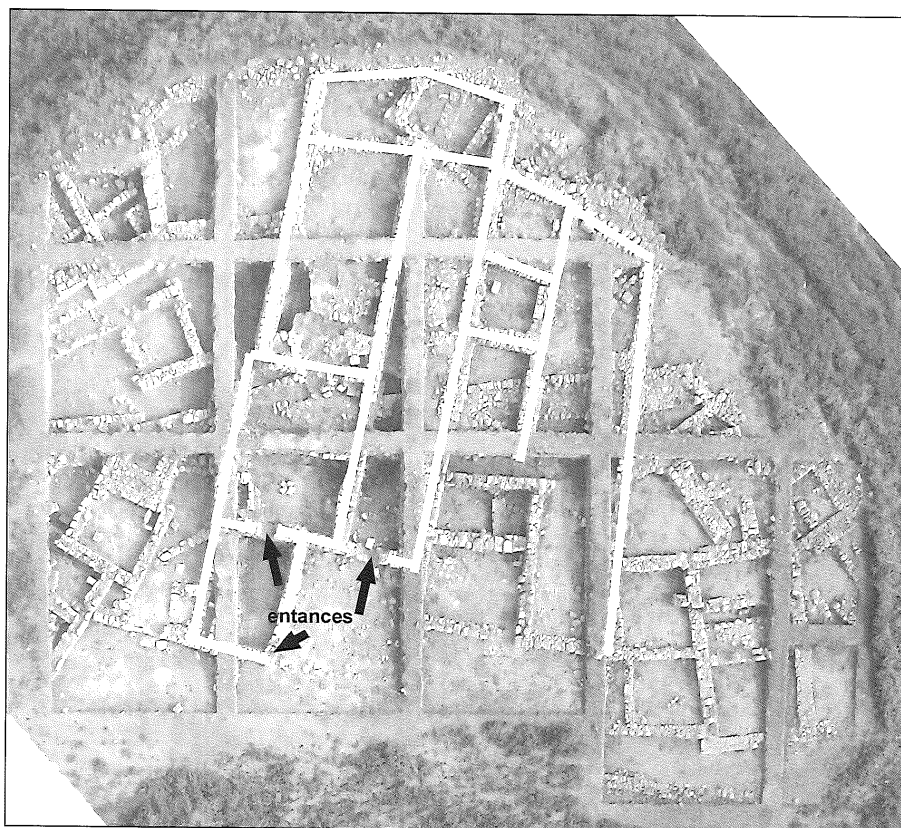
In the following stratum, the building was en-

larged again (FIG. 9). New rooms were constructed against the older walls and a large courtyard with a well-built entrance abutted to the west (FIG. 10). Interestingly, the strict wall alignments were given up whilst retaining a north - south orientation. The older rooms collapsed and filled up with sand, stones and roof material. According to several coin finds, we can assume that these rooms were filled after the early 6th century AD.

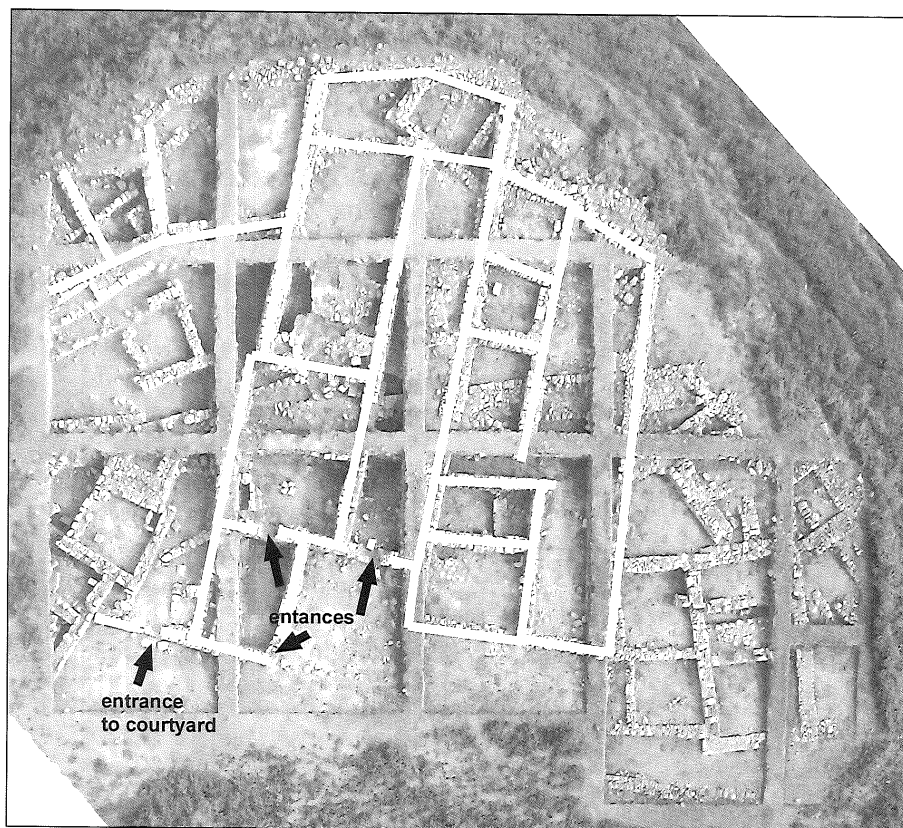
In the following stratum, the strict north - south orientation was abandoned and a new northwest-southeast orientated house was built (FIG. 11). It was constructed within the large courtyard to the west. One room was completely excavated and two others partly excavated; other parts of the building complex continued in use. Several Umayyad sherds were found in this stratum, suggesting a very late Byzantine or Umayyad date.

We identified some subsequent reconstruction work on the buildings of this stratum but no substantial changes of layout. As there were almost no post-Umayyad sherds on the surface, it can be assumed that the building was abandoned in the Umayyad period.

When we look at the architectural sequences of Areas I and II, it is clear that the Byzantine archi-



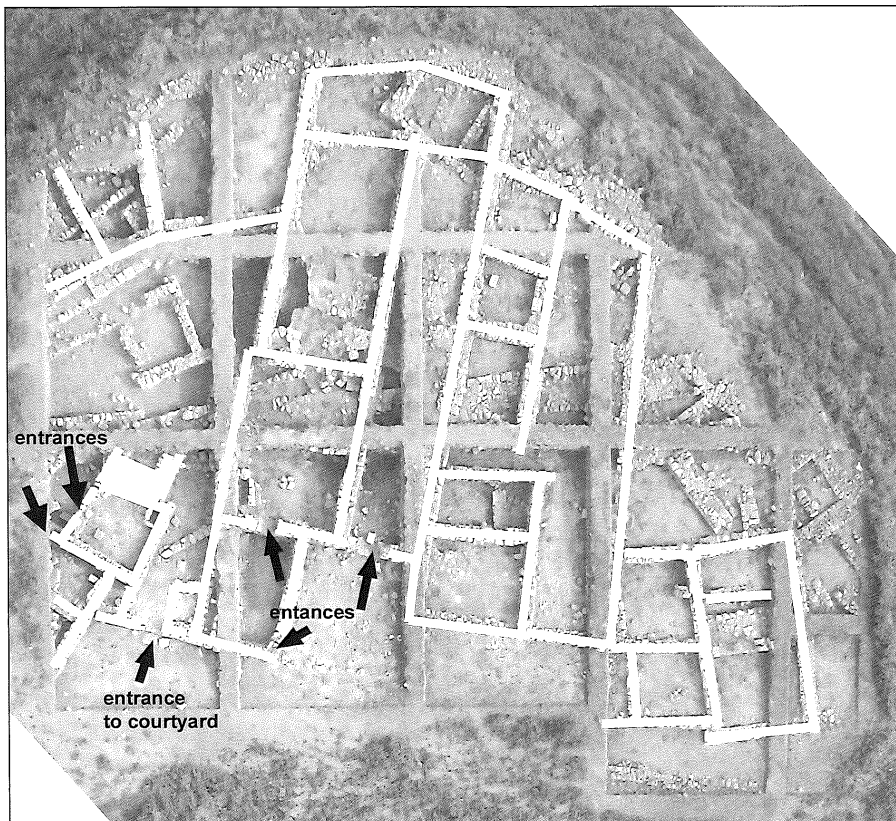
8. Extension of the house to a larger building complex with rows of rooms and a vestibule in Area II in the Byzantine period.



9. Re-organisation of ground-plan and extension to the west of the large building in Area II in the Byzantine period.



10. View into the large courtyard with entrance to the west of the large building complex and on the building of the following Umayyad period.



11. Umayyad stratum in Area II with the large building complex still in use and a new building in the western courtyard.

texture displays a degree of uniformity with regard to layout, size of rooms and building material. It seems that the buildings were constructed according to a rough plan based on rows of rooms and courtyards, with attached vestibules or pathways

on the eastern side. The original layout appears to have been changed after sustaining heavy damage in the following stratum in Area II.

The architectural layout in Area III is completely different;² the structures discovered can be as-

² The field director of excavations in Area III was Dr Ursula Rothe, University of Edinburgh. The following report is based on her documentation and interpretation of the different strata. We are very

grateful to Dr Rothe for her commitment to the project during this and subsequent seasons.

sociated with three main strata:

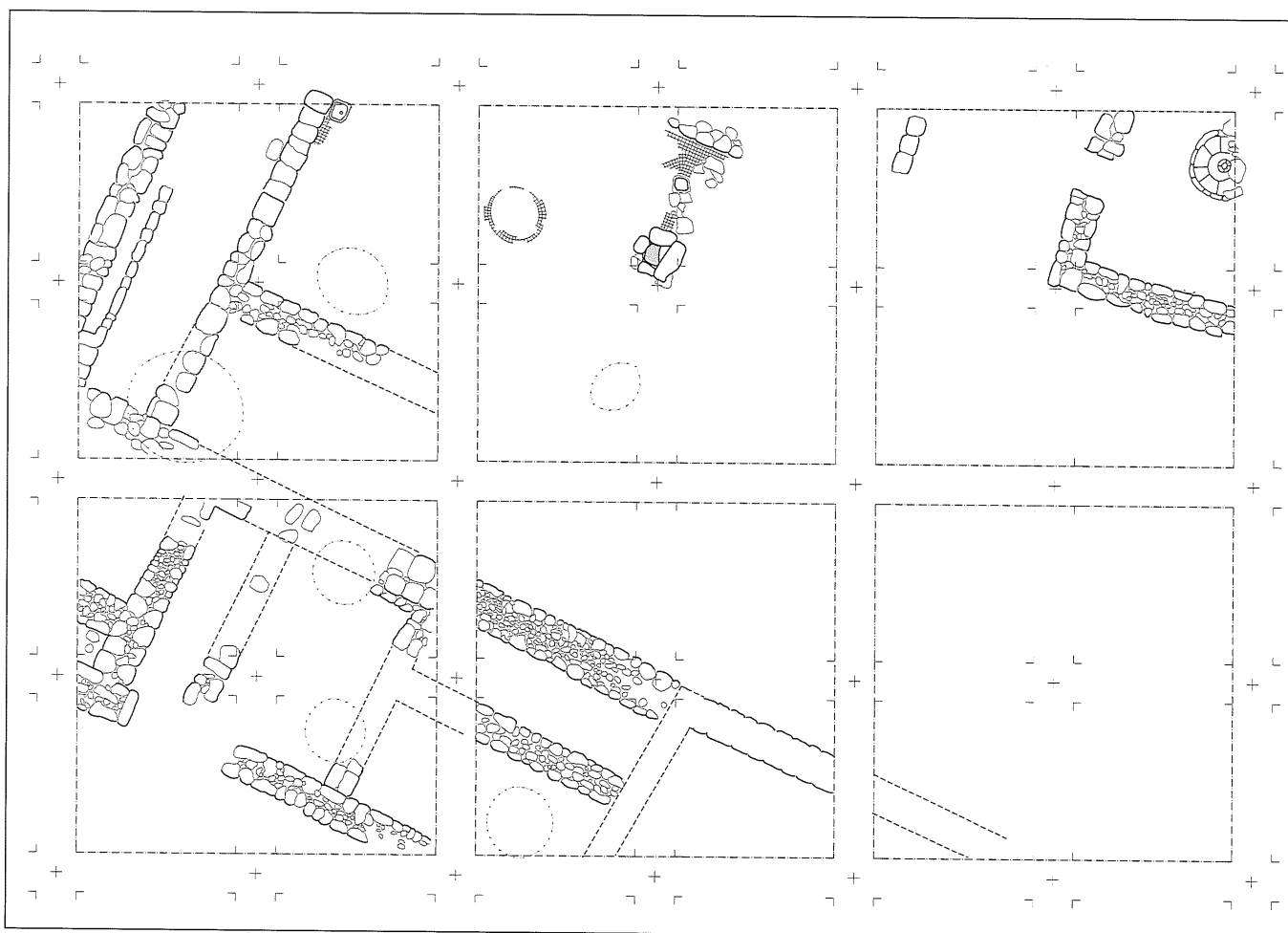
The lowest stratum reached in the 2008 season is characterized by a large courtyard with a gateway of finely dressed stones, which had a hole in the threshold for locking a gate (FIG. 12). Opposite the gate and across an alleyway, a large wall was revealed with a low, long bench attached to the south which may have been used to place containers or troughs on. Towards the middle of the courtyard was what remained of a mosaic floor, consisting of a large roundel of mosaic stones embedded in a thick, white plaster floor. To the east is the opening of a large underground barrel-vaulted cistern. A basin and drain leading into the cistern to the north were revealed where the mosaic floor was broken away in this area.

In the following stratum, the late Roman or early Byzantine building was still in use but the layout of the structure was changed with the construction of a number of partition walls (FIG. 13). Previous

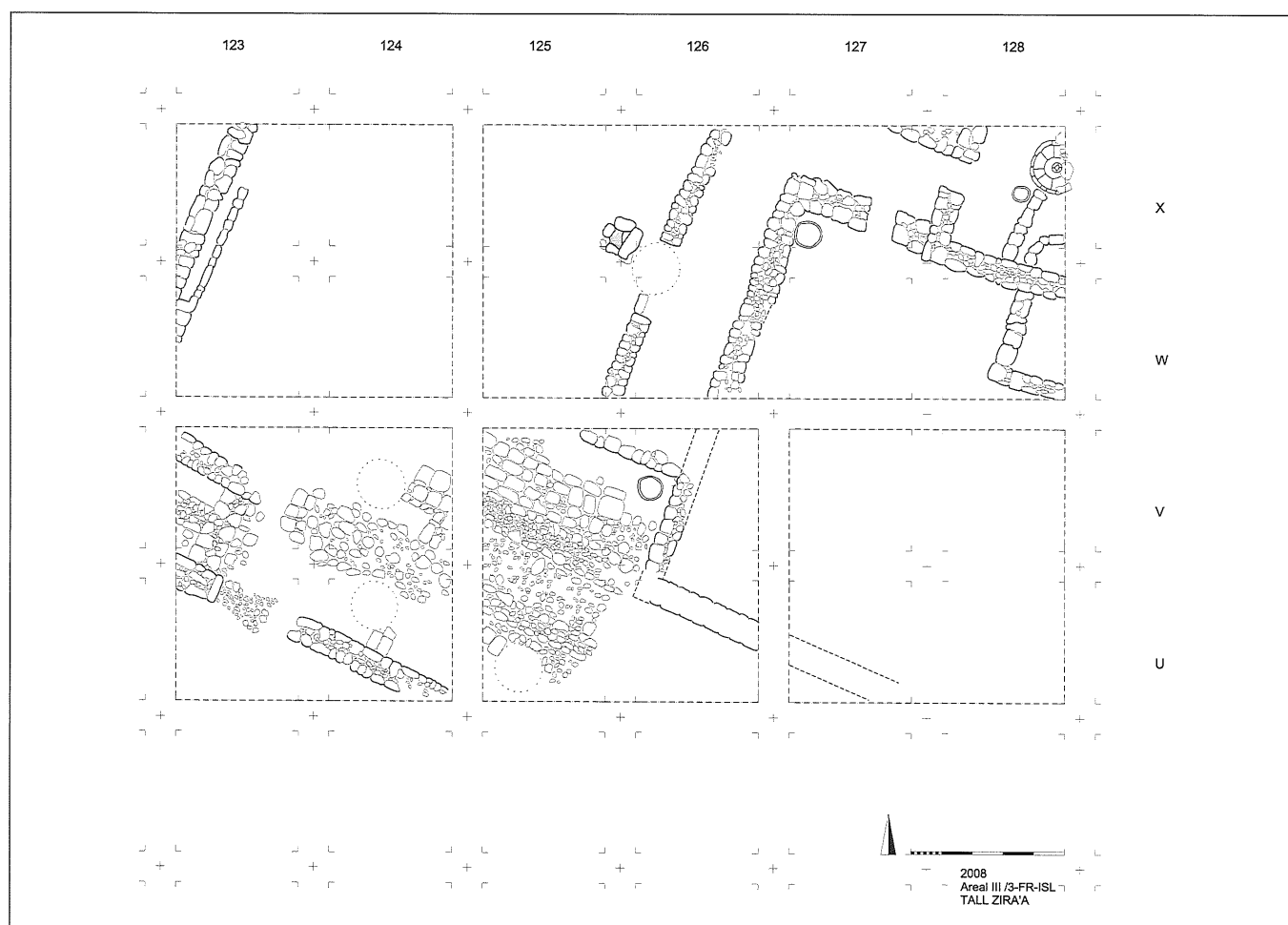
walls were leveled and built into the flagstones of a large, well-built courtyard. The structures of this stratum may belong to the Umayyad period. After further examination of the pottery we should be able to establish its precise date. In the uppermost stratum, the stone structures that had been visible on the ground surface revealed themselves to be extremely shallow, dating to the Mamluk period or later (FIG. 14). Very few wall-bases or foundations were found for this period. The dating is based on the large number of Mamluk pottery sherds which have been found there, in contrast to Areas I and II.

The structures exposed in summer 2008 appear to have a large-scale ground plan for the lowest stratum. However, the area excavated so far is too limited for a precise determination of the function of this building complex.

Following this short description of the three excavated areas at Tall Zar'ā, some general statements can be made. Like most Roman sites in northern



12. Byzantine stratum in Area III consisting of a large courtyard with a large cistern below it.



13. Umayyad stratum in Area III with re-organisation of the courtyard and the adjacent rooms.

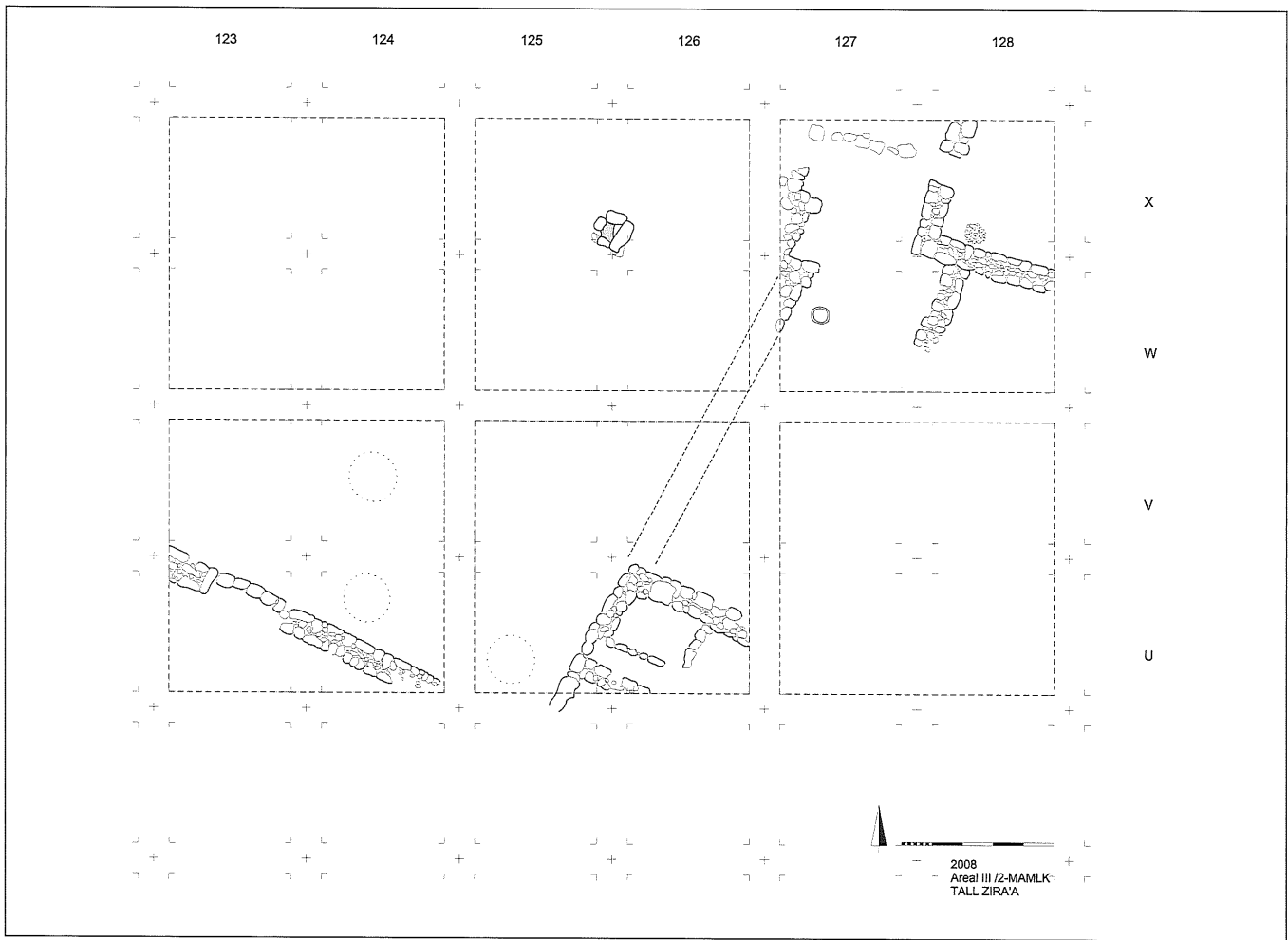
Jordan, occupation at Tall Zar‘ā continued into the Byzantine and Islamic periods, but differently in each of the three excavated areas. When looking at the distribution of architectural remains of the classical and Islamic periods at Tall Zar‘ā, it seems that the early Roman and perhaps Hellenistic settlements were situated at the northern edge of the *tall* — in Area II — as only a few walls and several storage pits of the Hellenistic period were found in Area I. The earliest excavated remains in Area III are suggestive of a very late Roman or more likely Byzantine date. It is still not clear whether or not this area was occupied by an earlier classical settlement; earlier pottery sherds are very scarce. In Area III, a lengthy Islamic occupation lasted until the Mamluk period, which is not the case in Areas I and II.

El-Khouri (2009: 35-37) divides rural sites of the Roman period in this region into two main types: villages and smaller settlements. She identifies villages either on the basis of their substan-

tial architectural remains, or on the large amount of Roman pottery sherds. The smaller settlements can be recognized either through a small amount of surface pottery, visible features such as tombs, caves or cisterns, or by individual or insubstantial building remains. These building remains could be farm houses, watchtowers or guard-posts, tower tombs or *mausolea*. According to this classification, Tall Zar‘ā was clearly a village.

It was inhabited year round and not just seasonally. The architectural remains show that there were substantial buildings with some luxurious decoration, such as painted walls, mosaic floors and marble. The finds also demonstrate some luxury in the great number of glass and some *terra sigillata* vessels. Nevertheless, the actual character of the site was rural.

As el-Khouri has stated (2009: 38), the importance of Roman sites was based not only on their agricultural hinterland but also on trade passing



14. Building remains in Area III of the Mamluk period.

through the region on the important main roads. These settlements were established and developed in the Roman and Byzantine periods and were usually larger and well populated. In the case of Tall Zar'ā we can state that its prehistoric importance, when the inhabitants guarded one of the main routes from the Jordan Valley to the Jordanian highlands, had been lost with the move of the main road to the highlands. This road eventually became the *Via Nova Traiana* in the early 2nd century AD.

The classical villages of Tall Zar'ā have many special features that are unusual for rural settlements in north-west Jordan. Therefore, the aim of future research will be to examine these distinctive characteristics, as well as to investigate the relationship between the village at Tall Zar'ā and the Decapolis cities of Gadara and Capitolias on the one hand, and nearby rural sites and installations on the other.

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