

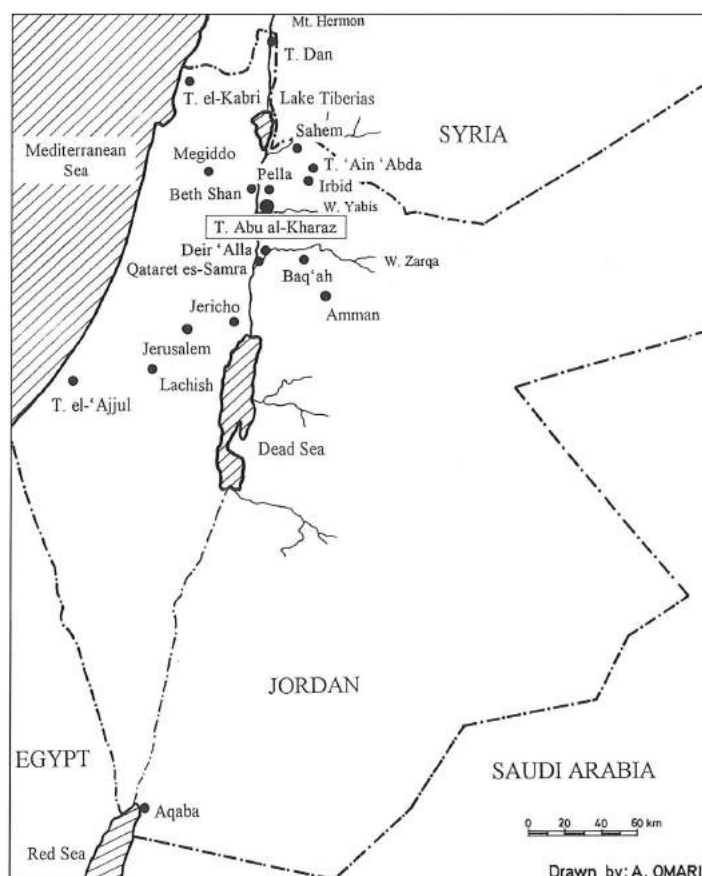
The Iron Age at Tall Abū al-Kharaz, Jordan Valley: The Third Major Period of Occupation. A Preliminary Synthesis

Introduction

Tall Abū al-Kharaz is located in Gilead in the Jordan Valley north of the perennial stream of Wādī al-Yābis and approximately 4 km east of the Jordan River (E206.197 and N200.623 according to the Palestine Coordinate System; FIG. 1). A Swedish team headed by the author from the University of Göteborg, has after ten seasons of excavations and a survey uncovered substantial urban remains from three major occupational periods: the Early Bronze Age IB-II/III, the late Middle Bronze Age IIB - Late Bronze Age II and the Iron Age (Fischer 1991-1997; in press a-c).

The present paper should be considered as a brief synthesis of Iron Age finds which were uncovered at Tall Abū al-Kharaz, i.e. the finds from a period which covers a time span of approximately 1200-550 BC. It is, however, a very preliminary synopsis taking into account the large amount of finds from the Iron Age in general and particularly those from the period after 1000 BC. which are generally known as the Iron Age II finds: further processing including a refined chronological division based on changes in the material culture is in progress. Therefore the conclusions concerning the social, commercial, political and territorial situation are provisional.

The presentation of archaeological material from an excavation needs a chronological framework. The problem in presenting not only Transjordanian but also Cisjordanian Iron Age material within a chronological framework lies in the fact that there are a number of periodizations rather than a single generally accepted one (see the synthesis of the different prevailing chronologies in Herr 1997: 116). Most of these are based on political/historical events which affected certain areas within Palestine (the archaeological designation "Palestine" includes here roughly Cis- and Transjordan, and the southern parts of Lebanon and Syria) and may therefore justify some of the proposed Iron Age I (A-B) and II (A-C) divisions in certain areas, but are hardly applicable to the whole of Palestine. A solution to this problem would be to present



1. The position of Tall Abū al-Kharaz.

the material according to a chronological framework, which is based on absolute dates alone. However, the present state of scientific absolute dating of artifacts from an excavation—with the exception of dendrochronology—does not provide such a precision, as is, for example, demonstrated in the lengthy time span of the absolute radiocarbon dates from our site (see below). In order to avoid confusion by presenting wide-spread absolute dates, i.e. a rough periodization by centuries, the author will use a loose periodization of the Iron Age (TABLE 1), which is in fair agreement with that suggested by Stern (1992:

1529) and Herr (1997: 116). It has been pointed out above that the comprehensive material from the Iron Age at Tall Abū al-Kharaz needs further processing in order to refine the interior archaeological framework of the Iron Age. Therefore the finds from the Iron Age at the site are presented in two parts: Iron I - IIA and Iron IIB - IIC.

TABLE 1. Iron Age periodization

Iron I	1200 - 1000 B.C.
Iron IIA	1000 - 900 B.C.
Iron IIB	900 - 700 B.C.
Iron IIC	700 - 550 B.C.

It has been a common practise in the past to discuss the Biblical identity of sites in the "Holy Land" which have been surveyed or which are under excavation. It has, for example, been suggested that Tall Abū al-Kharaz is identical with the Biblical town of Jabesh Gilead and that it may be the burial place of King Saul (Glueck 1951: 261-75; 476-7). Jabesh Gilead is mentioned frequently in the Old Testament (Judges 21:8-10, 12 and 14; 1 Sam. 11:1,9, 0, 31,11-13; 2 Sam. 2:4,5; 21:12; 2 Ki. 15:10,13,14; 1 Chron. 10:11,12) amongst other events in connection with King Saul's and King David's battles against the Philistines and Ammonites (e.g. King Nahash), which may correspond to the period around 1000 BC. The current excavations at Tall Abū al-Kharaz may possibly throw light on the Biblical identity of this town, even if the primary goal of the expedition is not to prove or to disprove Glueck's positive identification of Tall Abū al-Kharaz with Jabesh Gilead. Additional manifest archaeological evidence during future excavations may also perhaps disclose the site's possible Biblical identity. In the author's opinion, however, the present state of research does not allow any definite conclusions.

The Absolute Chronological Limits

Chronology is beyond any doubt the backbone of archaeology. It is essential to be able to define the chronological limits of a certain archaeological period in relative and/or absolute terms. Relative dating is based on the internal sequence, i.e. the stratigraphical sequence within the site, together with the external evidence, i.e. parallels from other stratified sites. In many cases, which include Tall Abū al-Kharaz, relative dating must be utilized in order to achieve a site-related chronological sequence. There are serious drawbacks in this relative method, which is so common in comparative archaeology, where authors, sometimes uncertain of the date of a specific context, refer to other publications suffering from the same problem, mentioned or not mentioned (cf. the discussion in Fischer 1997: 84). The true age of a certain layer or object is certainly not defined by an abundance of

references to "fitting" parallels and the datings—"the more parallels the more reliable the date"—chosen in a publication to support the "absolute" chronology of another site. We know very little about the life span of, for example, certain Iron Age pottery shapes in different areas: the dating of a certain shape/ware may be true for one area but not valid for another. A consequence of a chronological framework which is based solely on secondary evidence, i.e. parallels which are not supported by firm absolute dates, may be the creation of a *circulus vitiosus*, with authors referring to each other without the support of absolute dates based on scientific methods. This is why the cultural material from Tall Abū al-Kharaz is for the time being presented here within such a loose periodization.

The chronological limits of the Iron Age at Tall Abū al-Kharaz are suggested by two of a total of 18 radiocarbon dates from Tall Abū al-Kharaz, namely OxA-4337 and OxA-5088. One sample (OxA-4337) was taken from a very early Iron Age context and the other (OxA-5088) from the latest occupational phase within the Iron Age:

OxA-4337:

1 σ (68.2% confidence) = 1166-998 BC with 91% probability

2 σ (95.4% confidence) = 1267-911 B.C. with 99% probability

OxA-5088:

1 σ (68.2% confidence) = 698-536 BC with 88 % probability.

2 σ (95.4% confidence) = 796-481 BC with 96% probability.

From these two dates it seems very possible that Tall Abū al-Kharaz was occupied throughout the Iron Age.

Iron Age I and IIA

Architecture

The upper part of the tall was intensively occupied during the Iron Age. The architectural remains from the first half of the Iron Age are scarce because of the intensive building activities during the second half of the Iron Age: building materials or parts of buildings from the older periods were reused for the construction of new buildings. The principal building technique during the entire Iron Age is unchanged compared with that of the previous Late, Middle and Early Bronze Ages: all buildings, including domestic and defensive constructions, consist of stone foundations of different heights with superstructures of sun-dried mudbrick which were reinforced with wooden elements. Roofs were constructed of parallel laid wooden beams which were covered with straw and sometimes with straw carpets or wattle, and clay. The foundations of the successive city walls from the Early to the Late Bronze Ages were used for defensive constructions.

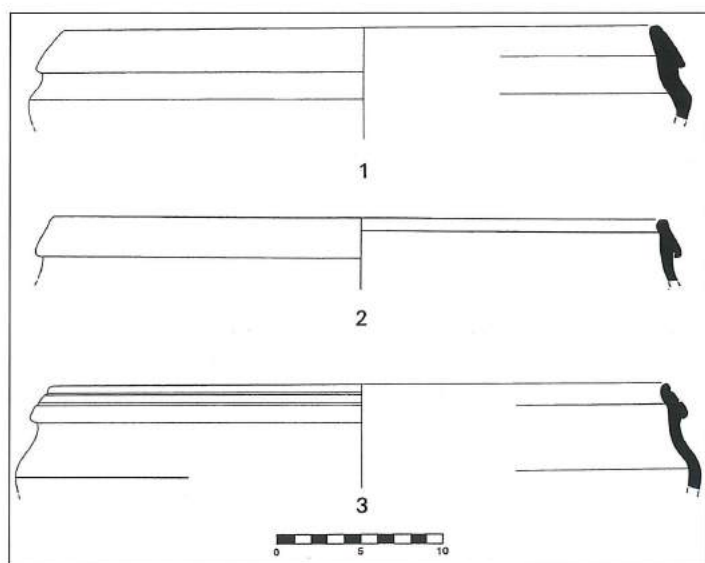
Pottery

There are just a few pottery shapes from Tall Abū al-Kharaz, which can be considered typical of Iron I and IIA. Amongst them are cooking pots with folded over rims of roughly triangular sections of different shapes (FIG. 2:1-3). These types occur in Iron I contexts (cf. e.g. Taanach, Rast 1978: 67, fig. 2:8; or Dayr 'Allā, Franken 1969: 120, fig. 27, 123: fig. 28), but may have had a long life span, i.e. that they may have been produced during Iron IIA as well (see the suggested 10th-9th century date for similar shapes from Tel Jezreel, Zimhoni 1997: 20, fig. 1.5:1-5; 26, or from Taanach, Rast 1978: 169, fig. 49:1). However, this type is absent from Phase M at Dayr 'Allā, which is tentatively dated between 850-700 BC (Vilders 1992: 195-198). Examples of the "collared-rim jar", which is considered one of the most typical early Iron Age ceramic shapes (e.g. Weippert 1988: 396-397) have not yet been found, nor has Philistine pottery. In general, the unpretentious pottery repertoire of the early Iron Age reflects the decline in the people's economic status compared with the Late Bronze Age: coarser wares with rarely applied decoration and, so far, an absence of imported material from outside Palestine are typical of the period. This may point to the fact that the people of this period were mainly concerned to survive and had little margin for aesthetic items and luxury.

Iron Age IIB and IIC

Architecture

There are at least three principal architectural phases from the second half of the Iron Age. The majority of the buildings are aligned on a north-west/south-east axis; however, variations in the alignment are more frequent than during earlier periods. Domestic buildings from these periods were found in remarkably good condition considering the



2. Early Iron Age cooking pots.

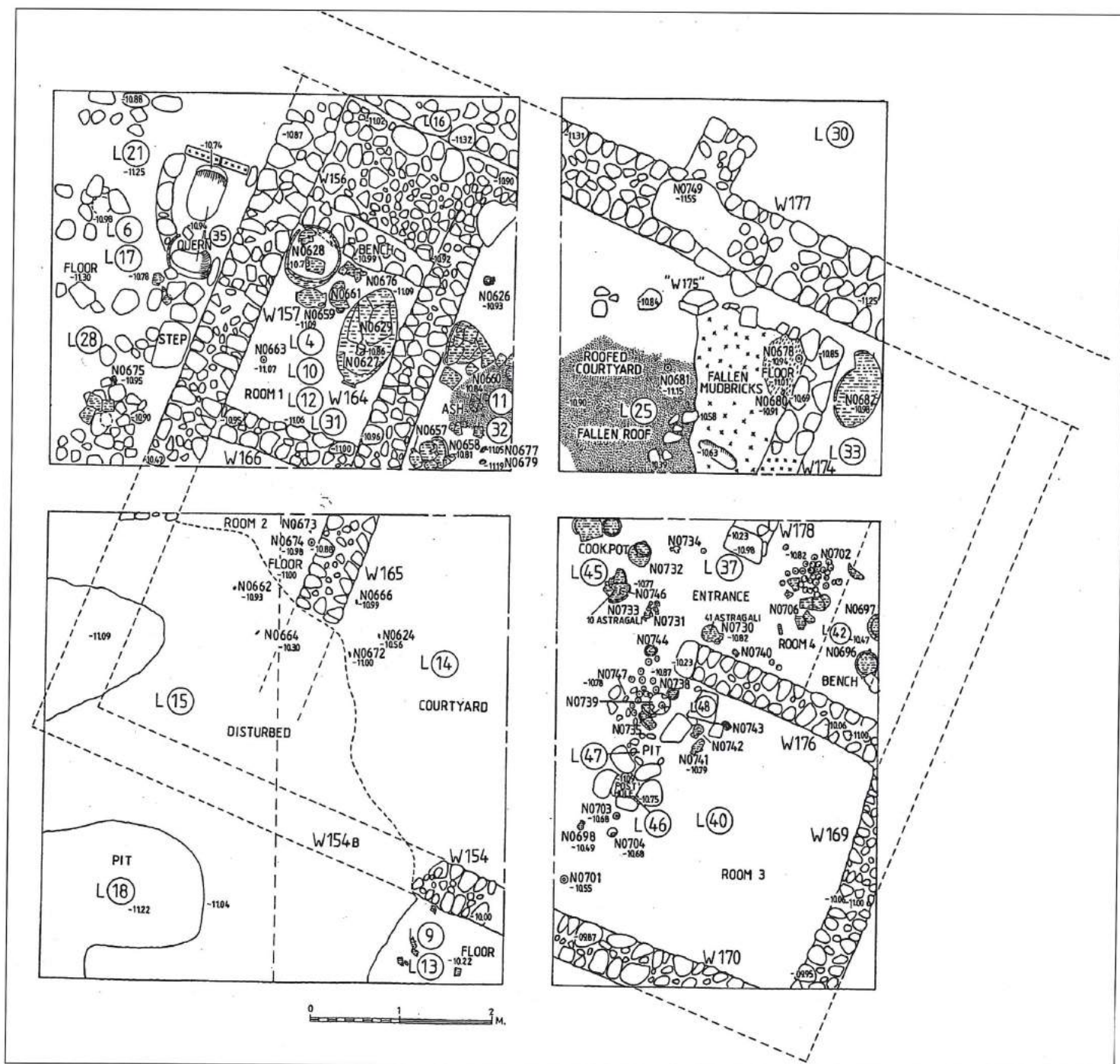
fact that they were on or just below the surface. A typical domestic building from this period of occupation is a house approximately 9 x 9 m in area (FIG. 3). A centrally placed rectangular courtyard is usually bordered by two rooms on each side. Remains of roof constructions suggest that the courtyard was partly covered (see e.g. Fischer 1995: 100-102). It is likely that there was a second storey. Clay-built sewers were found attached to the outer walls of the houses.

A number of square and rectangular constructions are interpreted as watch towers. A monumental building, named the "White Building", which measures approximately 12 m x 11 m, was exposed on the summit of the tall (FIG. 4). The axes of the building are oriented strictly north-south and east-west. It is constructed of ashlar masonry and of rubble stone directly on bedrock, i.e. all earlier remains were removed. Mortar was not used. The walls are approximately 1.50-2 m wide and neatly constructed with relatively flat surfaces. Well preserved white plaster of lime and sand, which gave the building its name, covers the walls on the outside. The building contained four small rooms within walls approximately 2 m thick. An ostrakon was found in the north-western room (Fischer 1997: 136-137, Fig. 11:1). It has not yet been deciphered satisfactorily, but it may represent a writing exercise of letters resembling those of different origins, such as Moabite, Hebrew, Ammonite and Aramaic (Al-Ghul and El-Khoury 1998: 155-161). A preliminary date according to similar letters from other areas is the ninth - sixth century BC. The function of this building is debatable; however, it may represent the foundation of a tower, which was possibly integrated within a larger complex, not so far exposed. The latest Iron Age occupation was ended by a general conflagration.

A well-constructed cistern, over 4 m deep, was exposed on the western outer limits of the Iron Age settlement which faces the Jordan Valley. It is oval, approx. 4 m x 3 m, stone-built, sealed with clay between the stones, and carefully plastered. It could hold 30 cubic metres of water as preserved. An estimate of the original water capacity is 50 cubic metres. The cistern was approached from the north-west via a stone- and mudbrick-paved road, which ended with a 1 m wide step of hard clay leading up to the cistern. The cistern is surrounded by a stone pavement, which obviously represents part of a glacis. The position of the cistern on the lower western part of the tall suggests that rain water was collected which came from sewers (see above) and channels from the settlement higher up the tall.

Pottery and other Finds

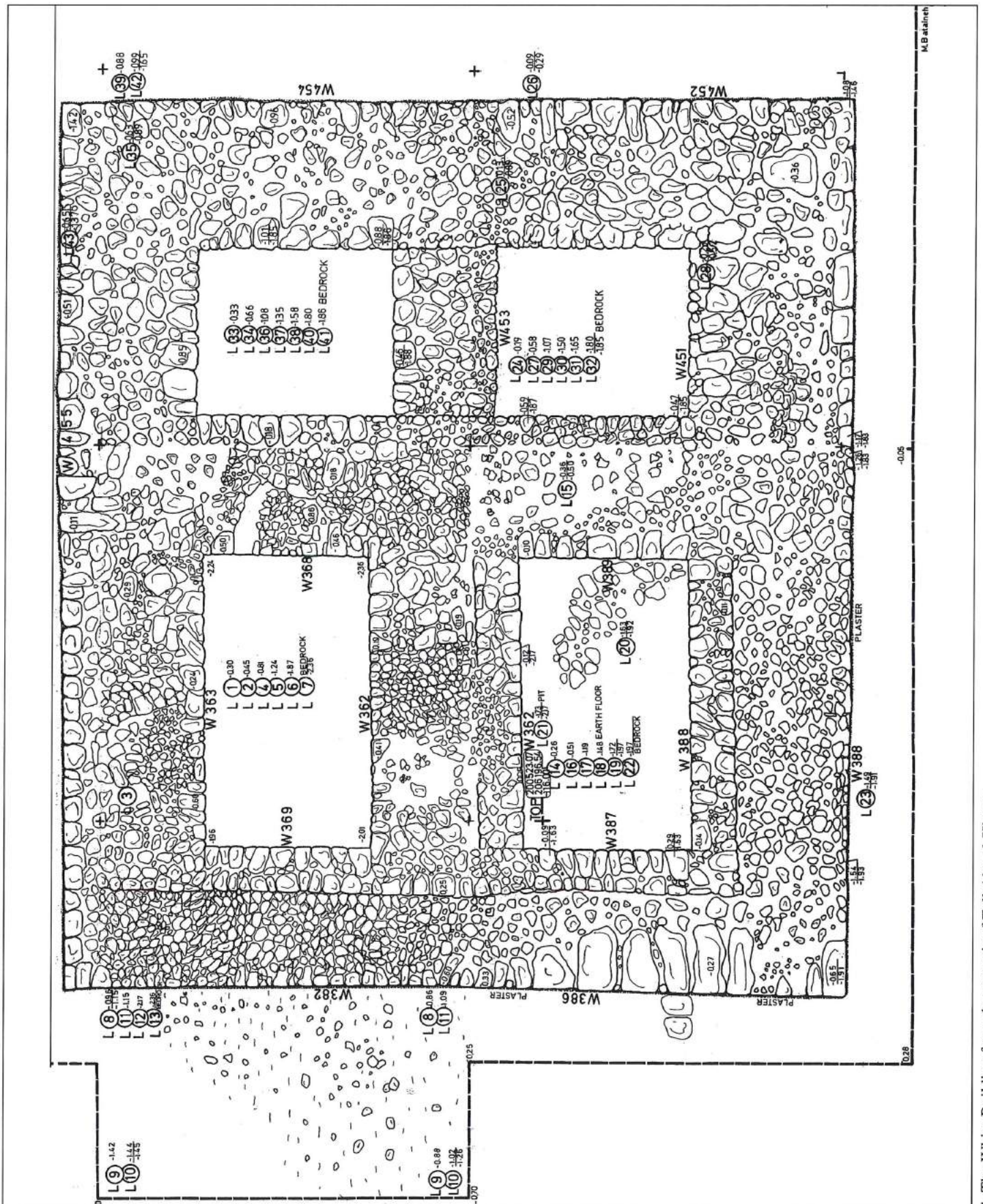
A variety of Cisjordanian and locally produced pottery, exemplified by jugs and juglets, is shown in FIG. 5: a-b. Imports are again attested by finds from the second part of



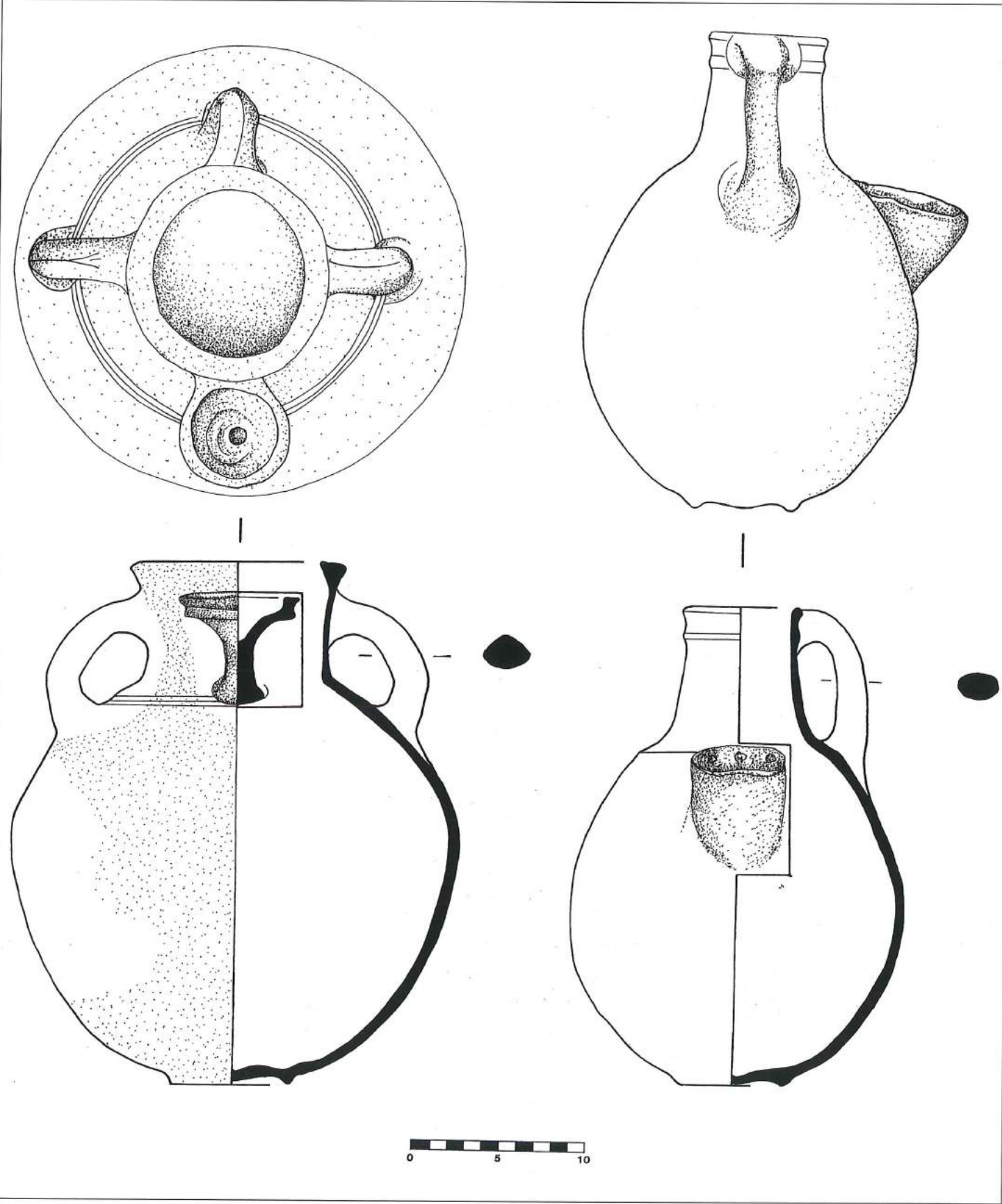
3. Iron Age II house.

the Iron Age, for example, Cypro-Phoenician Black-on-Red pottery (Fischer 1996: 103, fig. 2:4; de Crée 1991). A thin-walled, hard fired, monochrome or bichrome decorated and burnished ware came likely from Phoenicia (FIG. 6: 1-3). Among the finds from the second part of the Iron Age period is an exquisitely decorated bone handle with a motif of two sphinxes (FIG. 7). It has provisionally been dated within Iron Age IIB period, or around 800 BC (Fischer 1994: 135, fig. 4; 1999: 56; Fischer and Herrmann 1995: 145-163). Parallels with this object have come from

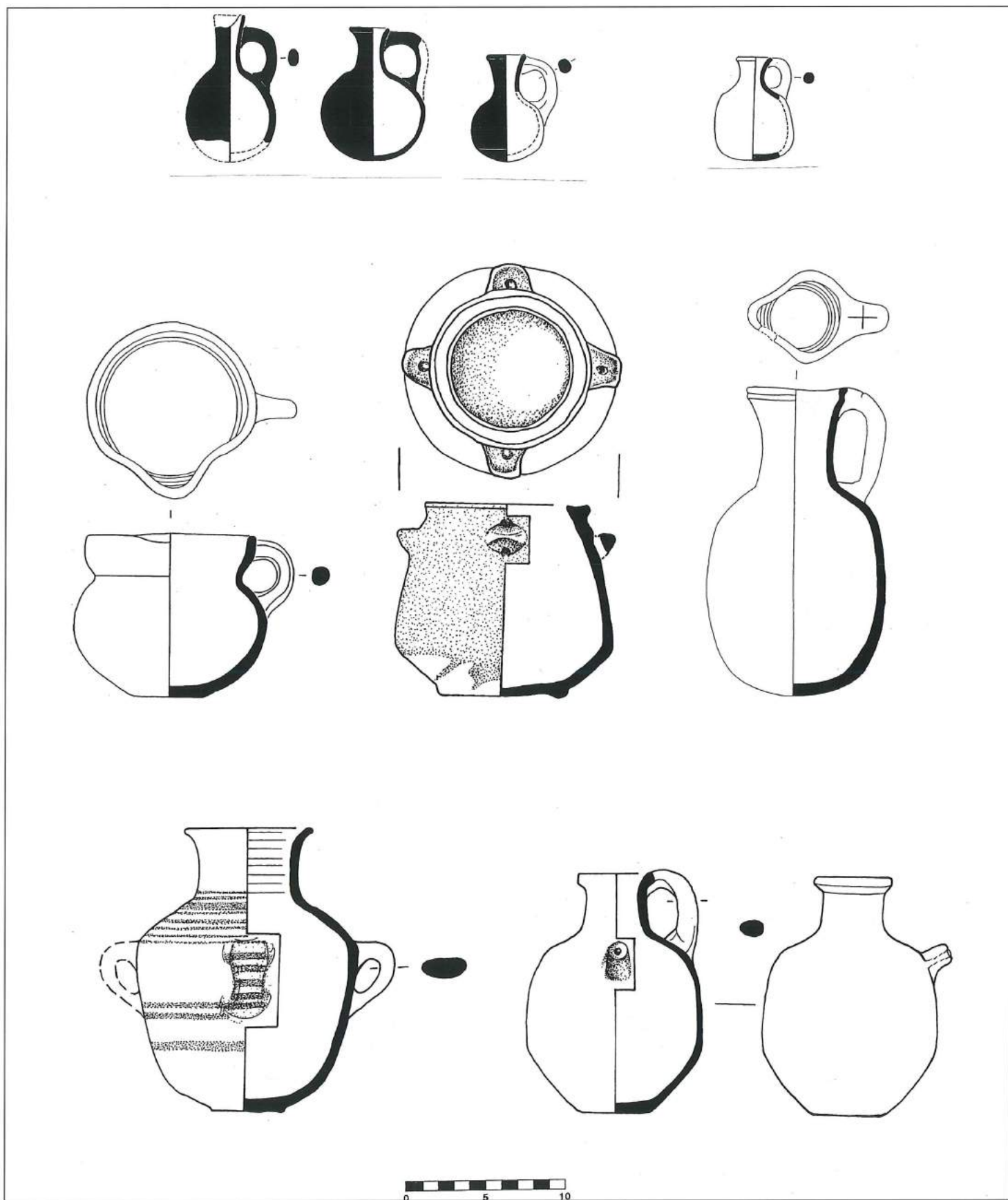
Hazor in northern Palestine and Nimrud in Assyria, but it is very likely the product of a Palestinian workshop. Other interesting finds include an earthenware head of a smiling young male painted in red, attached originally as a decorative element to an earthenware vessel (FIG. 8; Fischer 1994: 137, fig. 6:1), and an almost complete earthenware rhyton of a donkey(?) with two attached vessels (FIG. 9; Fischer 1998: 587, fig. 15) and a bridled horse (FIG. 10). Other clay figurines of females include a tambourine player (FIG. 11). Two decorated stone cosmetic plates,



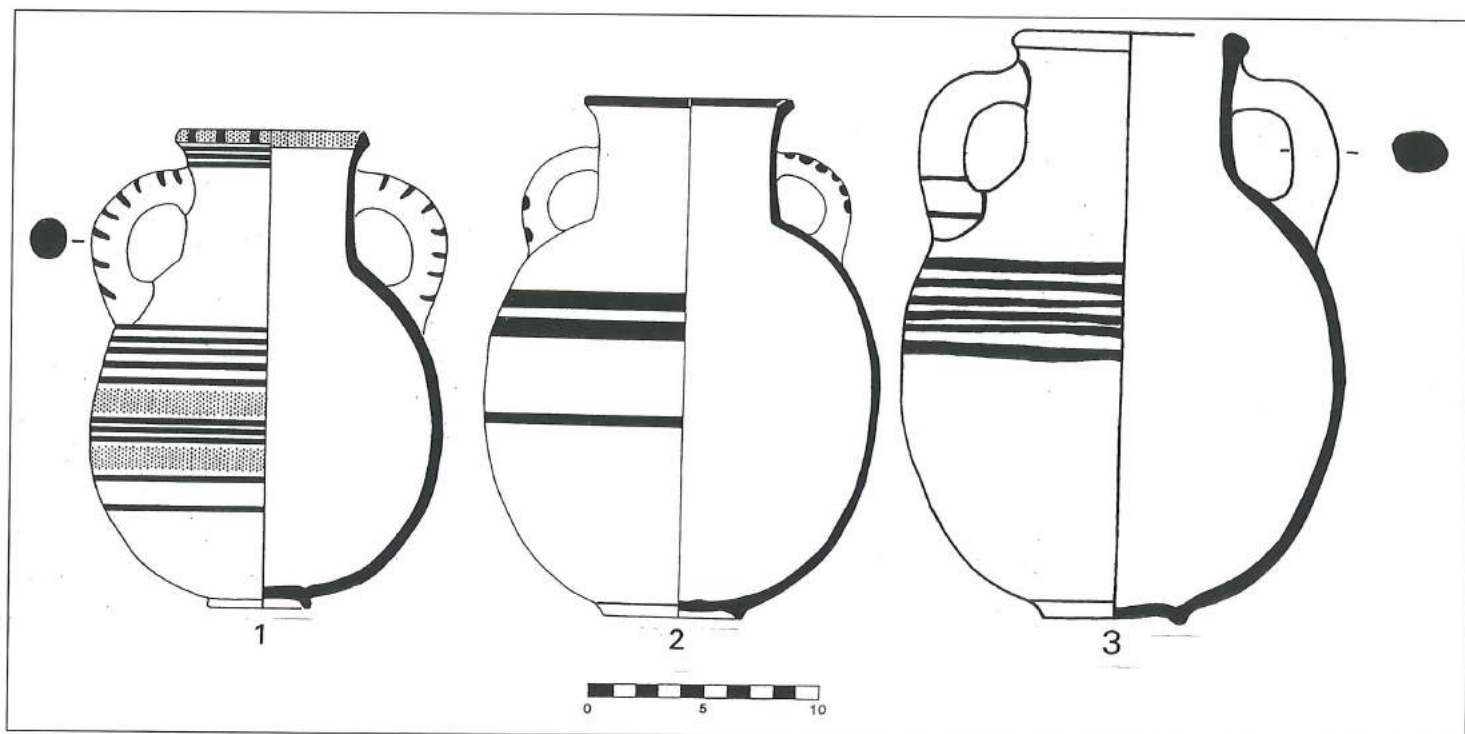
4. The White Building from the summit of Tall Abū al-Kharaz.



5a. A variety of Iron Age II jugs.



5b. A variety of Iron Age II juglets.



6. Phoenician (?) imported jugs, burnished. 6:1 is bichrome (red and black), 6:2 is reddish-brown and 6:3 is black decorated.

one of which has inlays of blue paste, should also be mentioned (one in FIG. 12). An Egyptian-blue faience scarab is dated at 620/600 - ca. 550 BC. Amongst the metal objects those of iron dominate, especially different types of arrow heads, but objects were also found in which iron and bronze was used, e.g. a fibula. Finds of stone include basalt bowls on three legs.

A well preserved bronze figurine of a male warrior-god comes from an obviously religious context, an offering pit outside a house (FIG. 13). The cat-faced or lion-faced god is dressed in a thin kilt. He has a cobra on his forehead and his head is covered by ostrich feathers. The raised right hand holds a scourge-like weapon behind the head and the left hand a papyrus scroll (?). One leg is leonine, the other human. The whole appearance and all the attributes resemble the Egyptian goddess Sechmet. However, the figurine seems to be a local male copy of the Egyptian female original. Although it was found in a context from the first half of the Iron Age, it almost certainly dates originally from the Late Bronze Age, judging by its style (cf. Negbi 1976: 29 - 33; cf. also the female figurines in Seeden 1980: Pl. 102, 1722 - 1724).

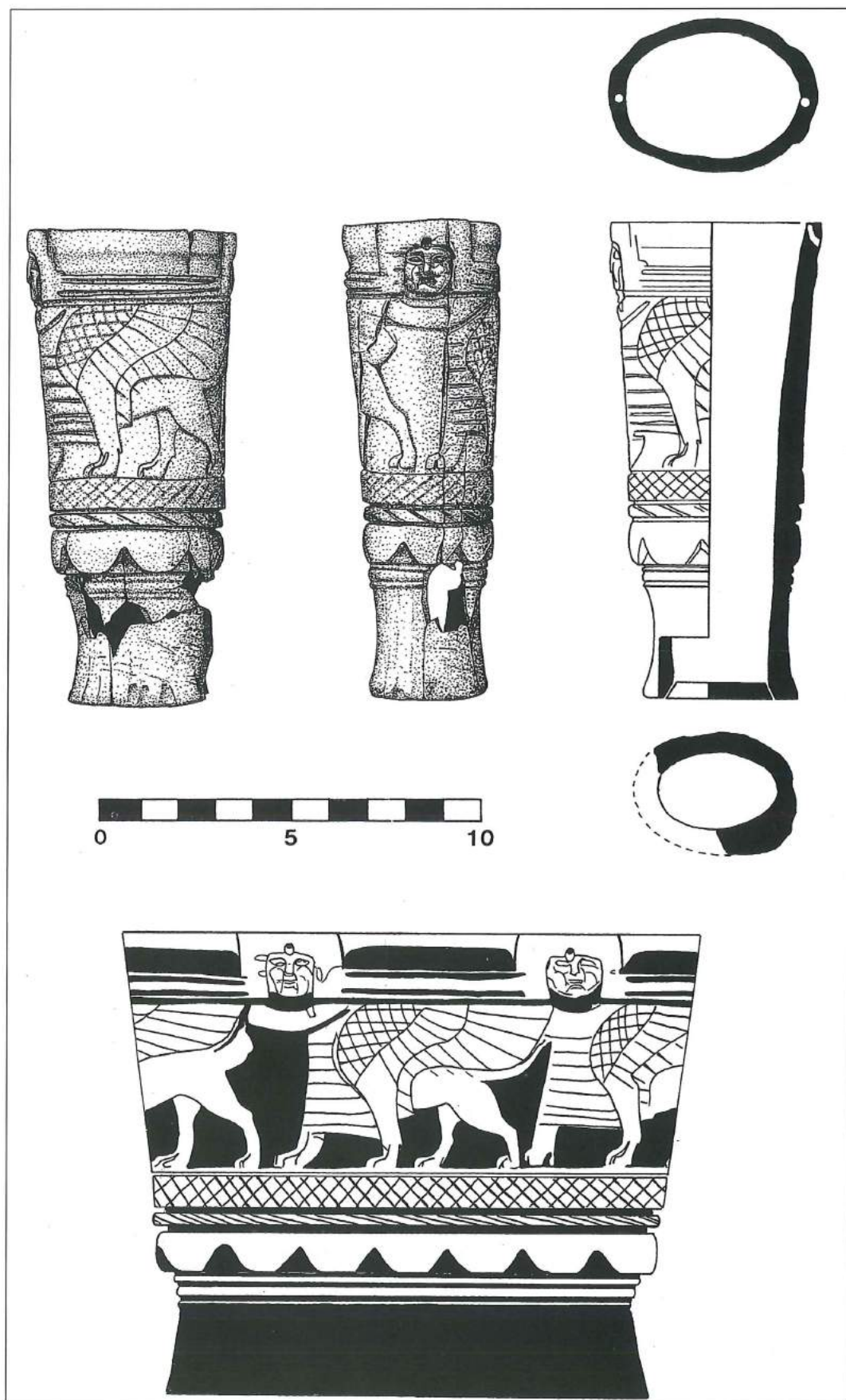
Preliminary Conclusions

One may be inclined to conclude that Tall Abū al-Kharaz was occupied throughout the Iron Age on the strength of the radiocarbon dates with their outer chronological limits 1267-481 BC (2σ with >95% probability) and 1166-536 BC (1σ with >87% probability). However, these dates merely define, and only to a certain extent, the outer

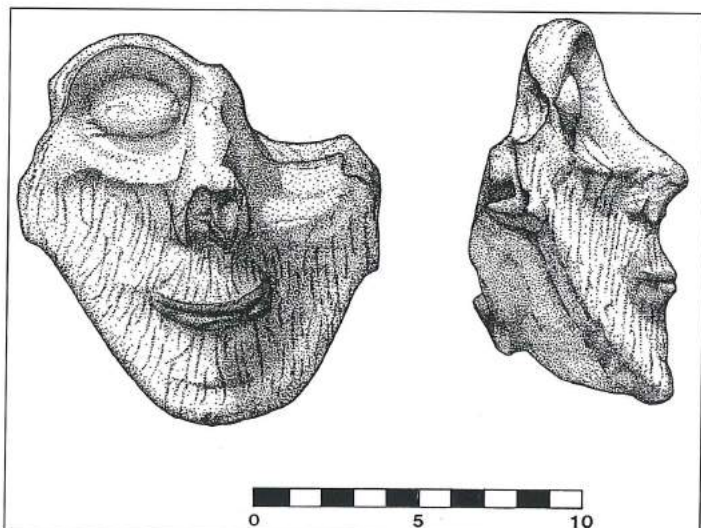
chronological limits of the Iron Age occupation. The radiocarbon dates from the site do not provide any information about possible breaks in occupation.

It has been suggested that one of the differences between the Late Bronze Age and the first part of the Iron Age is in the occupational pattern, i.e. the transition from large urbanized centres to minor, often unfortified villages in many parts of Palestine and that a renewed urbanization process took place again during the Iron Age II period, although the average size of settlement never reached the dimensions of the Late Bronze Age cities (Weippert 1988: 352). This proposition to some extent fits Tall Abū al-Kharaz. The ten seasons of excavation of the site have given quite reliable evidence that the city of the Early Bronze Age was the largest settlement, the Late Bronze Age town being the next in size, and the Iron Age settlement the smallest (Fischer 1997c: 159-160).

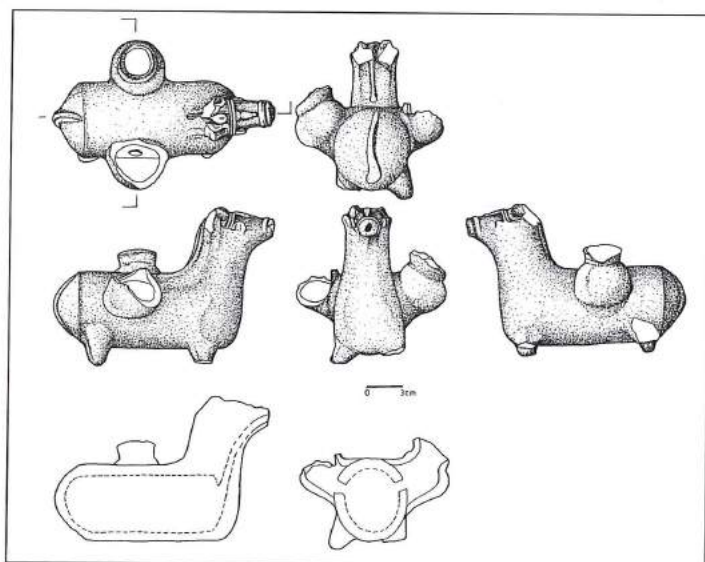
The economy of the Iron Age societies of Tall Abū al-Kharaz was almost certainly based on agriculture, cattle breeding and trade with the surplus from farming. Imported goods are, however, only attested in the second half of the Iron Age. The charred plant remains from Tall Abū al-Kharaz include different types of grain, among which are emmer, einkorn and barley (Fischer 1997b: 161-165). Other cultivated species are broad bean, lentil, flax, olive, grape including dried fruit, fig and pistachio. The osteological remains are mainly of caprines, i.e. sheep and goats, and cattle. Pigs were found but they are of subordinate economic value. Other animal remains include fallow deer, gazelle, dog, equid, rodent, cat, fox,



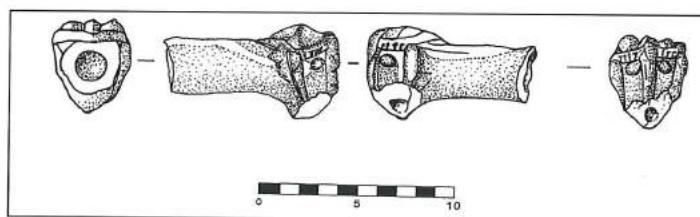
7. Carved bone handle with two sphinxes.



8. Red painted young male with beard, originally attached to an earthenware vessel.

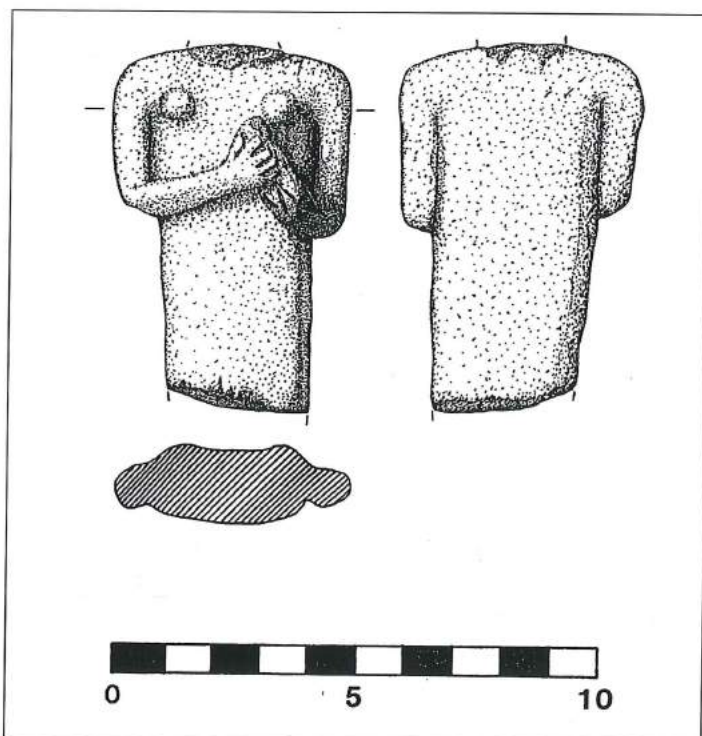


9. Earthen ware rhyton of donkey (?) with attached vessels.

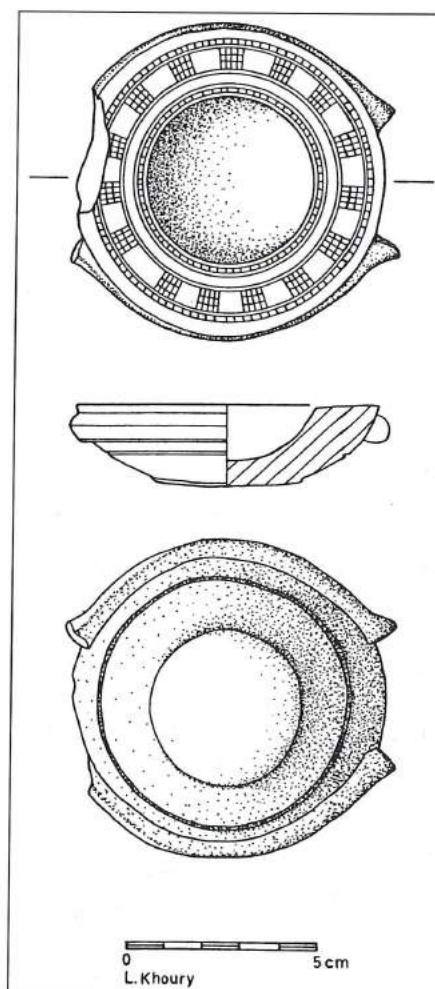


10. Earthen ware figurine of a bridled horse.

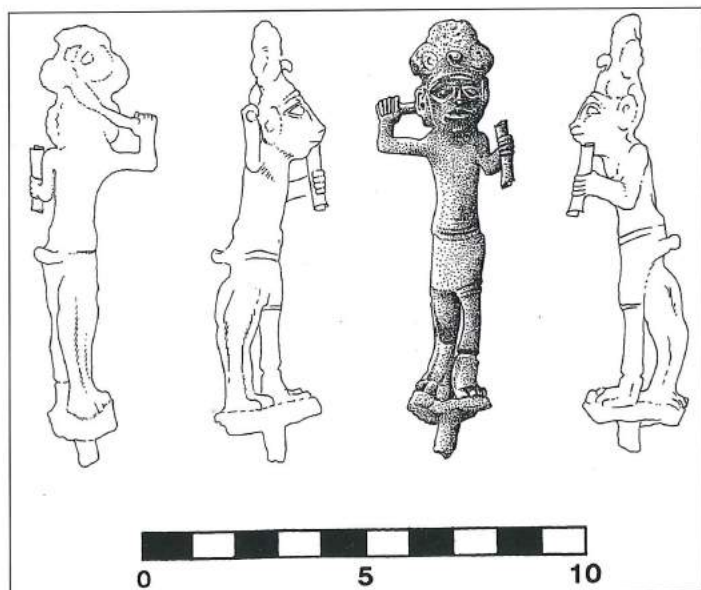
brown bear, various birds and hippo (ivory). A total of three worked objects of hippopotamus ivory (bones were not found) have so far been excavated at the site (cf. Fischer 1997b: 160-161). The ivory was certainly traded inland from not too remote coastal sites rather than imported from Egypt or the Orontes basin (Horwitz and Tchernov 1990:67-76). A small amount of fish remains were also found, deriving very likely from the Jordan



11. Earthen ware figurine of a female tambourine player.



12. Cosmetic palette of limestone.



13. Bronze figurine of a warrior-god.

River, and possibly also from the Nile, the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.

It has been mentioned above that surplus from agriculture and cattle breeding was of importance as regards trading for coveted goods. An additional source of income may have been the trade in incense. Tall Abū al-Kharaz lies strategically near the crossing point between two important trading routes: the north-south Transjordanian main road and the route running north-west through the Jezreel Valley. The former connects the site with the Sea of Galilee, 35 km north of the site, and further to the north with Lebanon and Syria, and with the Dead Sea some 70 km south of the site. The latter connects Tall Abū al-Kharaz with Beth Shan, Megiddo and the Mediterranean Sea in the Mount Carmel area, a distance of approximately 80 km or a journey of 2-3 days for traders. The Mount Carmel area contained important harbours from where goods from, for example, Cyprus and Lebanon were imported: imported "Cypro-Phoenician" wares demonstrates this. Imports from Egypt are extremely rare and only attested at the end of the Iron Age. One of these rare examples is a Naukratis scarab of Egyptian Blue which is dated between 620/600-550 BC (personal communication G. Hölbl). Another sort of income may have been tribute: the rulers of the site who could take advantage of the site's strategic position, from which all movements through the Jordan Valley could be controlled, may also have claimed tributes from caravans passing the Jordan Valley on the eastern road.

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