

**SECOND AND THIRD SEASONS OF EXCAVATIONS
AT TELL ABU SARBUṬ, JORDAN VALLEY
(PRELIMINARY REPORT)**

by
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Introduction

After a first preliminary season in 1988, excavations were carried out during six weeks in January and February 1989 and seven weeks in January and February 1990. Participants were H.E. LaGro (Netherlands Institute for the Near East), M.L. Steiner (Leiden University), H. de Haas, R. Wuettrich (1989), B. Mey (1990), E. van der Steen (1990) and H. Stoetman (1990). Sami Rabbadi from the district of Ajlun was the highly valued representative of the Department of Antiquities during both seasons. We thank both Dr. A. Hadidi, and Dr. G. Bisheh, former Director-Generals and the staff of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan for their continuous support and encouragement during these seasons. We also thank Dr. M. Ibrahim, Yarmouk University, and Dr. E. van Donzel, The Netherlands Institute for the Near East, for their support and logistic help. The excavation benefitted from the visits by Dr. H.J. Franken, Dr. M.-H. Wijnen and colleagues from Yarmouk University. The excavations were funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, ARCHON/NWO and sponsored by Royal Jordanian Airlines.

The Excavations

During the excavation in 1988, thick deposits from the Ayyubid-Mamluk periods were attested in two soundings on the western part of Tell Abu SarbuṬ¹. Therefore it was decided to start excavating in 1989 on that part of the tell. Two adjoining squares, K and L, of 10m. by 10m. each were opened directly next to these soundings. In 1990 two more

squares of 5m. by 10m. each were opened, Sq.M along the western side of Sq.L and Sq.P along the northern side of Sq. K (see Fig. 1). Under the top layer, which contained many small and some extensive disturbances, several phases with stone foundations and remnants of mudbrick walls, floors and courtyard layers were found.

The top layer contained parts of stone foundations, to which no occupational layers can be attributed anymore and neither can a top plan of a room or a building be reconstructed from these fragmented foundations. This phase is provisionally called A I². From a surface, which is not present anymore, a number of pits was dug. They have a regular circular form with straight wall and an average diameter of 1.30m. and might have been used for storage (Pl.I.1). In these pits large fragments of broken pottery were found, as well as parts of glass bracelets and several bronze spatulae. Although it is not possible to ascertain to what extent these pits are contemporaneous, they have been put provisionally together in Phase A II.

In Sq.M part of a building consisting of several rooms with floors and a tabun was discovered, Phase B (Pl.I,2). The walls are made of mudbricks on foundations of field stones. Walls and floors are covered with several layers of a yellowish plaster. During the construction of this building, the surface of the tell at that time was leveled, whereby a foundation of an earlier phase was found, which was then reused as the basis for the eastern wall of the building. In Sqs. K and L four different phases were found (C-F) under Phase A. They consist of courtyard layers and

1. For a short preliminary report on the 1988 season see *ADAJ* 33 (1989), 323-326.

2. The Phasing by letters in this article is preliminary because

we expect to find more phases, which will eventually be fitted into the phasing presented in this report. Therefore a final phasing will only be possible after the last season, which is planned for 1992.

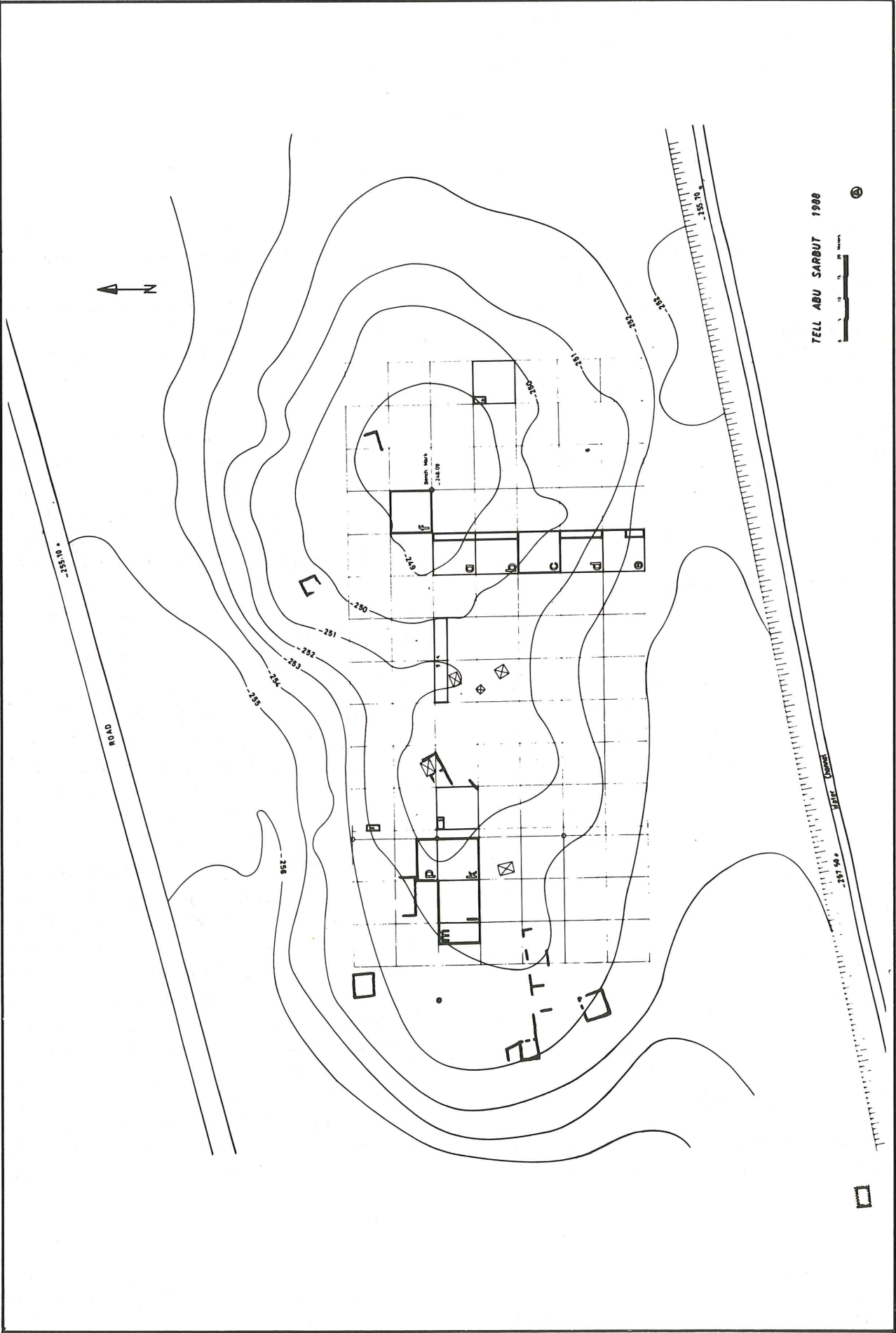


Fig. 1. Plan of Tell Abu Sarbut showing the squares in 1990.

traces of walls, which are made of field stones with mudbricks on top. Walls have usually been plastered with yellowish clay.

Under these phases in Sq. L, remnants of mudbrick walls were found which were put directly on a hard surface of clay and show a rebuilding (Phase G I-II). In Sq. L the western side of the building was probably dug away in order to level the area for Phase B.

Phase G I was probably built directly on occupational layers related to a relatively large building, which was excavated in 1990 in Sq. K (Phase H) (Pl.II,1;2). The foundations are made of several courses of well dressed stones, which are topped by mudbricks. The entrance is nearly two metres wide and consists of two pillars with a row of stones between them, which formed a threshold. In front of the entrance a pavement was found, made of sherds of sugar pots. In the south-eastern corner a room is located. The foundation of the building continues in a northerly direction into Sq. P, which has not yet been excavated to that level. In the western part of Sq. K and in Sq. L, no traces of this foundation were found. Here it might have been dug away to recover the stones. Part of this foundation, however, may be found in the western part of Sq. L, where it might have been reused for the eastern wall of the building of Phase B. Until now only part of the building is excavated, but it is clear from the dimensions of the entrance and the walls, that the building might have had a non-habitational function. The debris layers, which pertain to these foundations mainly contain sherds from sugar pots, and some nearly complete examples of this pottery were found there. This suggests that the building played a role in the sugar industry, which was a main economical activity in the Jordan Valley in the Ayyubid-Mamluk periods. Because no thickly packed deposits of sugar pot sherds have been found, which is usually the case in the direct vicinity of sugar refineries, it was probably not a refinery but might have been used as a storage place for sugar products before they were sent to the city.

In Sq. L a small trench was made, which showed that under Phase H another phase can be expected, located on a wash layer 1.00 m. thick which hardly contains any sherds.

Underneath this layer, a deposit containing some aligned stones and thin red sherds was found. This deposit in turn rests on solid clay, which can be considered to be the virgin soil.

Based on the pottery found, Phases A-H could be dated to the Ayyubid-Mamluk periods, of which Phases B-D could be dated more specifically to the 14th and 15th centuries according to C-14 samples.

Trenches 4 and 5

In order to establish the relation between the eastern side of the tell, where deposits from the Islamic periods are relatively thin ($\pm 0.75\text{m}$) and are found on top of layers from the Roman-Byzantine era, and the western side, where the deposits dating to Islamic times are thick ($\pm 3.00\text{m}$.) two trenches in line of 3m. by 10m. each were excavated (see Fig. 1). The stratigraphy and pottery finds show that the number of phases dated to the Islamic periods and their thickness increases in a westerly direction. In Trench 5 part of a building was uncovered. It had been destroyed by fire, causing the collapse of the roof and walls. Underneath this debris, several pieces of mendable pottery were found (Pl.III). After the destruction of the building, that part of the tell remained deserted. A layer of dark earth indicates that during a period of time plants grew there. The courtyard layers on top of this layer contain sherds from the Ayyubid-Mamluk periods, which implies that at least this part of the tell was resettled only then. This, in combination with the results from the 1988 season, shows that the Roman-Byzantine occupation is concentrated on the eastern part of the tell, whereas the western part was built up mainly during the Ayyubid-Mamluk periods.

Botanical Remains

Although most samples are still being processed, preliminary results from the 1989 season show traces of *Triticum aestivum*/durum and *Hordeum vulgare*. The finds of *Sesamum orientale* and *Prunus insititia* are considered exceptional.

Objects

The number of objects from the Islamic periods recovered during the excavation is

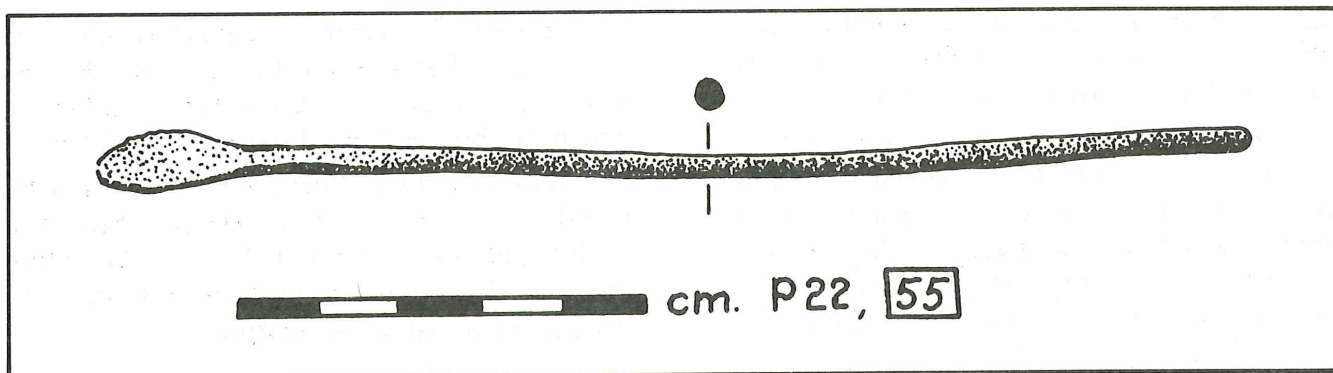


Fig. 2. Bronze spatula.

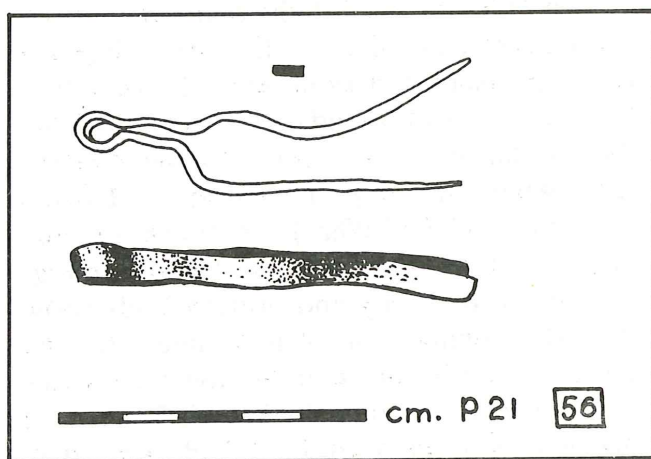


Fig. 3. Bronze pair of pincers.

rather limited, due to the fact that Tell Abu Sarbut was a village, whose inhabitants were probably not rich. Also there are no deposits from that era caused by a sudden destruction, e.g. a fire or an earthquake.

Metal

From the "storage pits" a number of bronze spatulae was recovered, as well as a pair of pincers (Figs. 2 and 3). From these pits and the other deposits a number of corroded iron nails, arrow heads and fragments of knives were found. Only a few bronze coins were found in the squares and on the surface of the tell. These were invariably very corroded and as yet not decipherable.

Glass

Many small and tiny fragments of glass vessels were found in all phases. Glass bracelets were mainly recovered from the

"storage pits" and phases A-D, which might be connected with the fact that these occupational phases are of a different kind from those pertaining to the "sugar storage."

Pottery

Roman-Byzantine Periods

During the excavation only a limited number of sections and some nearly complete pieces were recovered. From Trench 5 some fourth century pottery was recovered, which was found on the floor of a room belonging to the destroyed building (Figs. 4-6).

Ayyubid-Mamluk Periods

During the excavation of Sqs. K,L,M and P, all rims, bottoms, handles, decorated sherds and diagnostic sherds were kept, accounting for approximately 25% of a total of nearly 85,000 sherds. The remainder, mainly body sherds of sugar pottery and unidentifiable body sherds were counted, weighed and dumped in the wadi north of the tell. The selected sherds were shipped to Leiden, with the kind permission of the Director-General of the Department of Antiquities, for further study. They are preliminarily divided into directly recognisable groups, which are in order of quantity found: sugar pots, Arab Geometrical ware, glazed ware, undecorated red, undecorated white, cooking pots, and fritware³. These groups represent the normal repertoire found on sites dated to the Ayyubid-Mamluk periods. The main purpose of the excavations is to collect stratified sherds in order to make a

3. See also: E. LaGro and H. de Haas, 'Announcing a study of Islamic Pottery from Tell Abu Sarbut (Jordan). *Newsletter*

of the Department of Pottery Technology, Leiden University, The Netherlands, Vol. 6 (1988), p. 89-96.

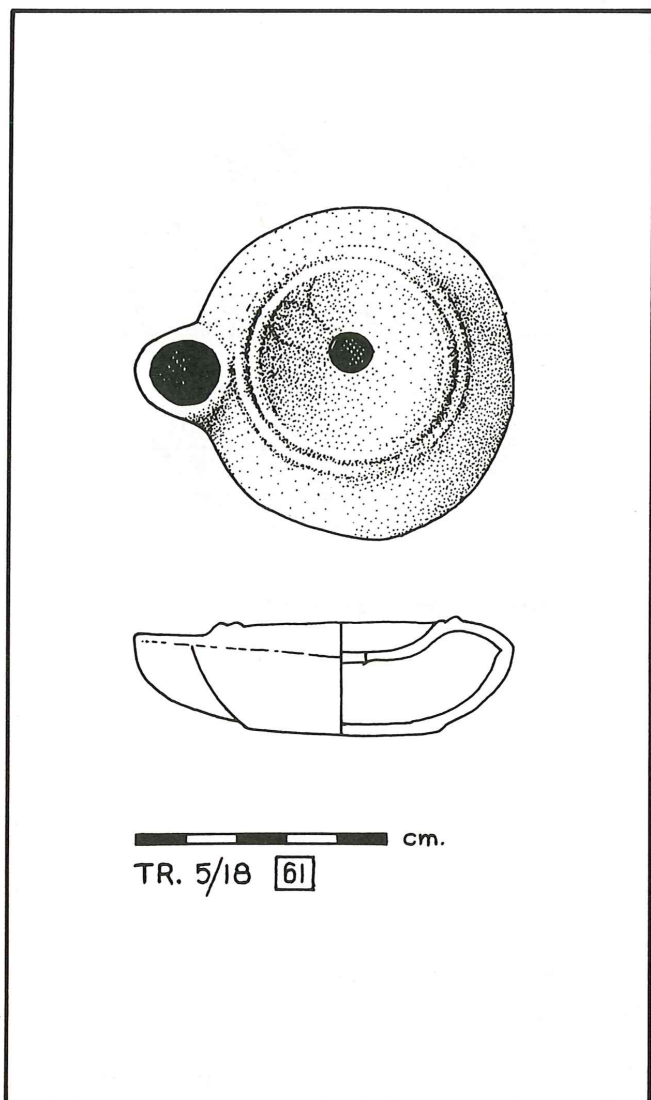


Fig. 4. Oil lamp.

typochronology of the pottery from the Islamic periods on the site. Therefore a quantitative study based on technological analysis is being made of the pottery.

Study is concentrated first on the sugar pottery, because this kind represents the bulk of the pottery and is available in quantities large enough to make a typology before the next season. In his study of the pottery found at Tell Abu Gurdan, Dr. H.J. Franken identified this particular kind of pottery, which was used in the sugar industry⁴. It basically consists of two types. The first has a sphero-conical form and was used to let the boiled juice of the sugar cane solidify (Fig. 7). The second is an ovoid-form jar, which probably contained the syrup, that dripped out of

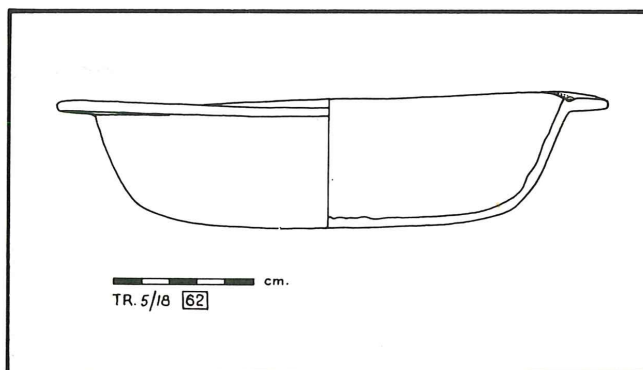


Fig. 5. Dish.

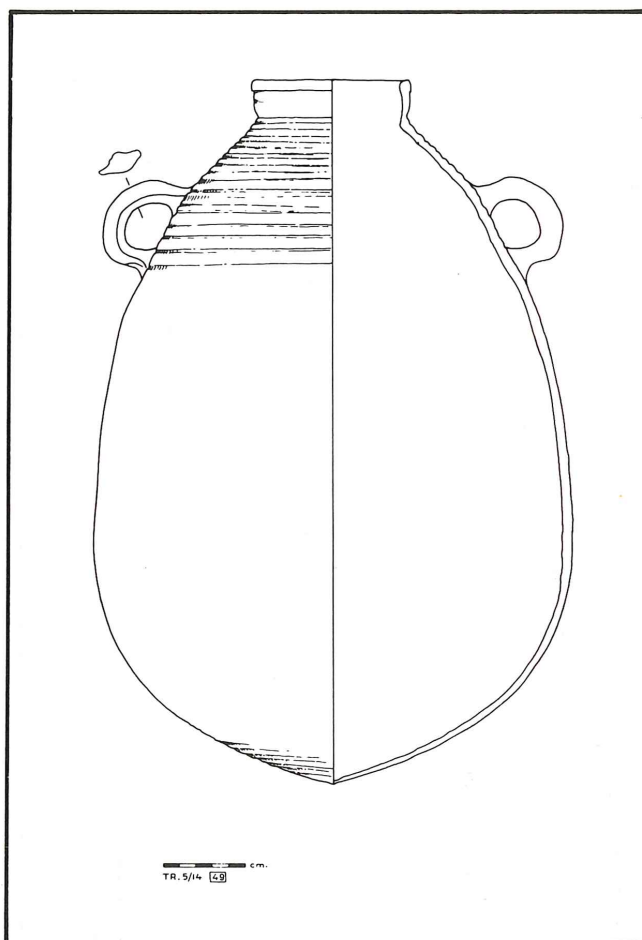


Fig. 6. Jar.

the first during the solidification process (Fig. 8). According to the study of this pottery from Abu Gurdan, both types were thought to be built up in coils. A preliminary study of the sphero-conical type revealed, however, that this kind of pottery from Tell Abu Sarbut could have been made in two different ways. Like at Tell Abu Gurdan, the first kind was built up in coils, but the second kind displays

4. H.J. Franken and J. Kalsbeek: *Potters of a Medieval Village in the Jordan Valley*. Amsterdam, 1975, p. 143-154.

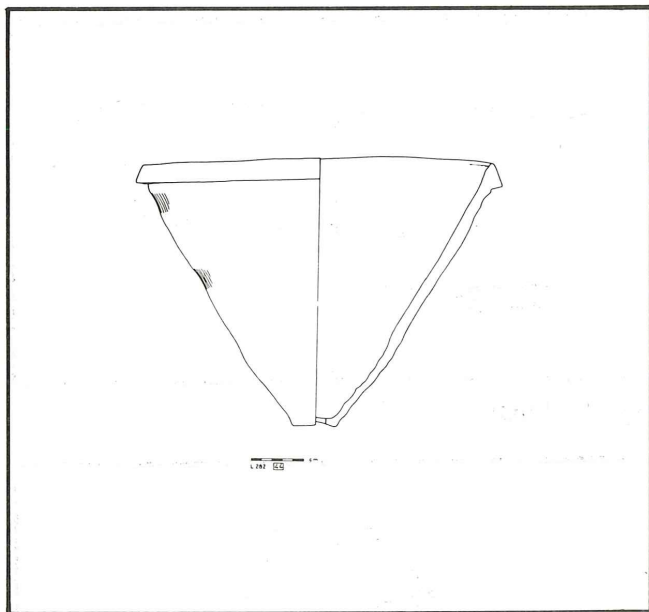


Fig. 7. Sugar pot of the sphero-conical type.

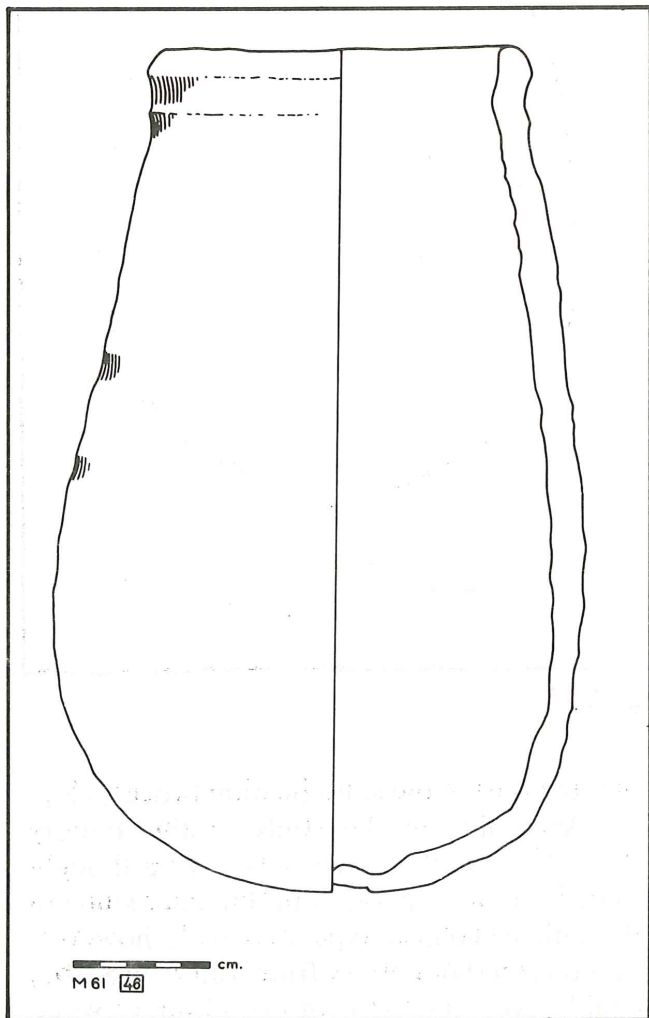


Fig. 8. Sugar jar.

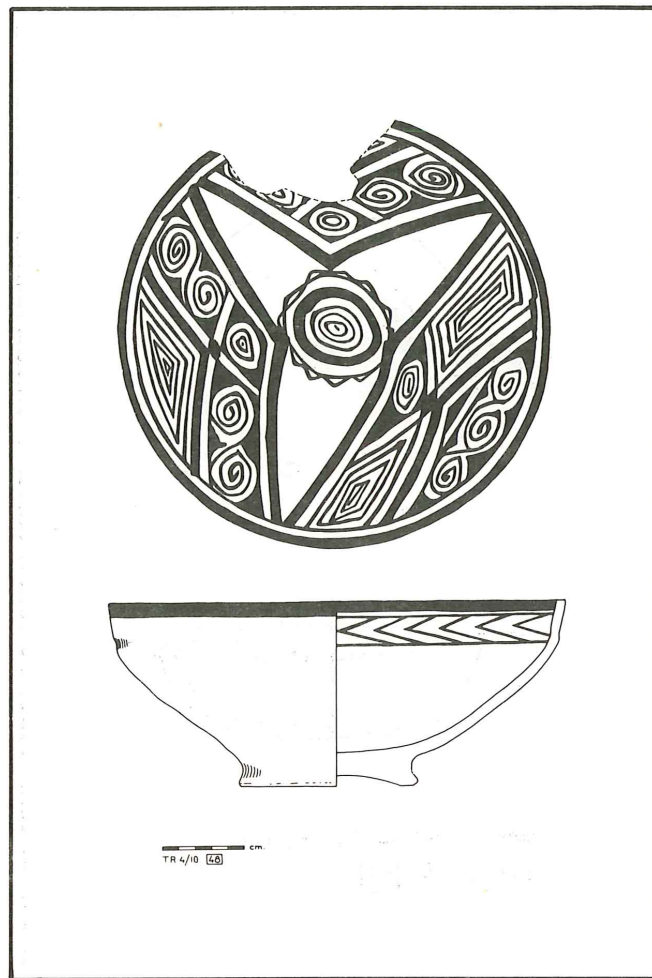


Fig. 9. Dish of Arab Geometrical ware.

features, which indicate that it might have been built up in coils in combination with turning. First the upper half of the pot was constructed, after which the pot was turned upside down, then the lower half was made. Stratigraphically this last kind mainly occurs in deposits connected with the "sugar storage," while the former is mainly found in the more recent phases. Due to the fact that this kind of pottery is an industrial ware, not much attention was paid by the potters to the finishing of the pot, nor did it obviously matter that the rims of pots are not perfectly circular, but may have an egg-like shape. This results in a large number of different looking rims, the typology of which will have to be based not only on shape but on technological differences as well⁵

Some nearly complete pieces of Arab

5. E. LaGro and H. de Haas, 'Sugarpots, a Preliminary Study of Technological Aspects of a Class of Medieval Pottery from Tell Abu Šarbut, Jordan'. *Newsletter of the Depart-*

ment of Pottery Technology, Leiden University, The Netherlands, vol. 7-8 (1989-1990).

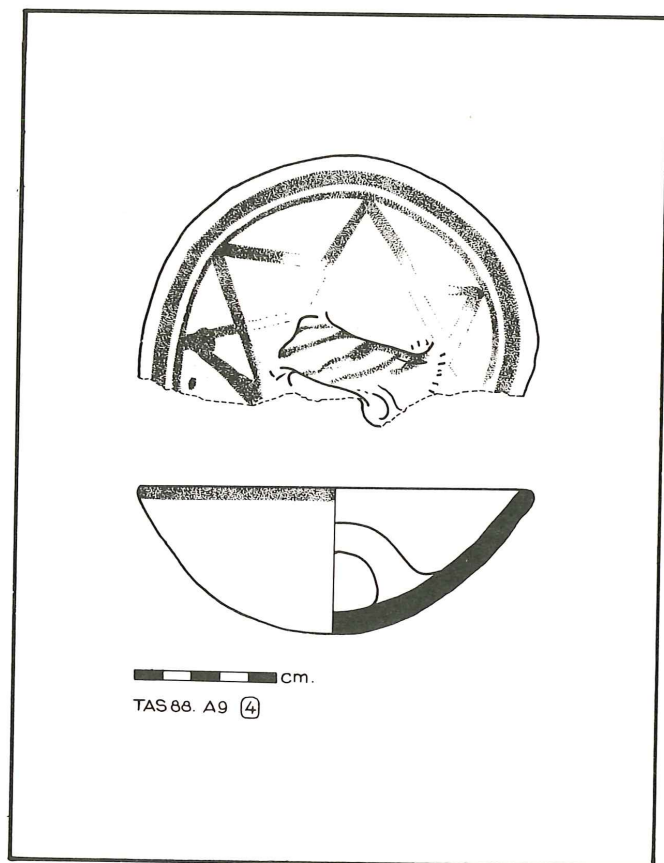


Fig.10. Lid.

Geometrical ware found. All sherds of this ware have been kept in order to study the motives which have been used as decoration (Figs. 9-10). A number of usually small sherds of glazed ware were found, but no complete pieces.

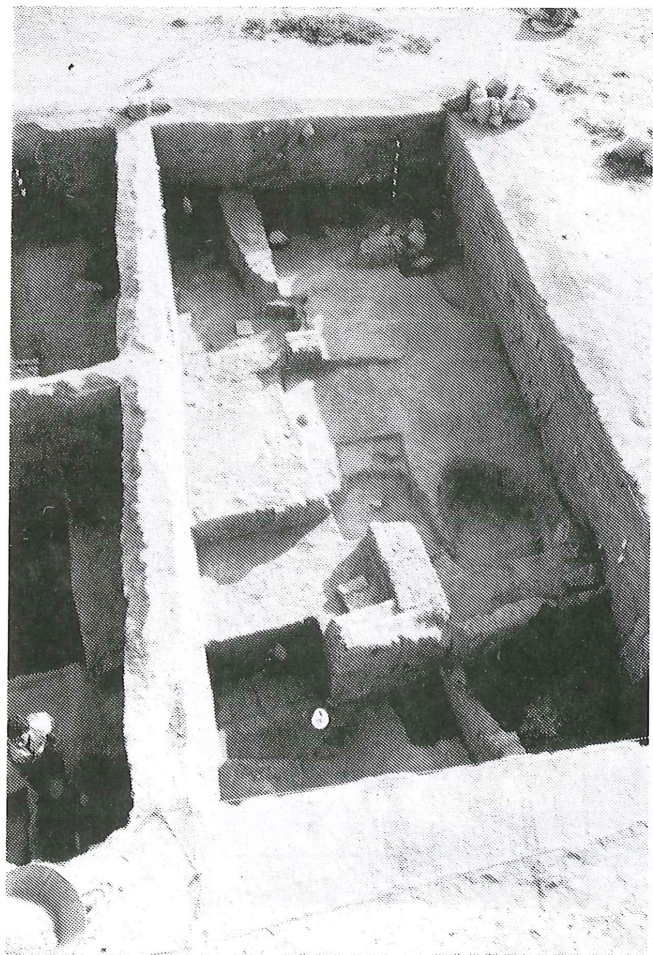
Ostraca

In Sq. K, loc. 23, fragments of ostraca were found of which only part could be deciphered. No definite reading could be agreed upon as yet. It is clear, however, that the messages written on the sherds refer to contracts or deals about quantities of unknown goods which had been or had to be delivered or paid on a certain date.

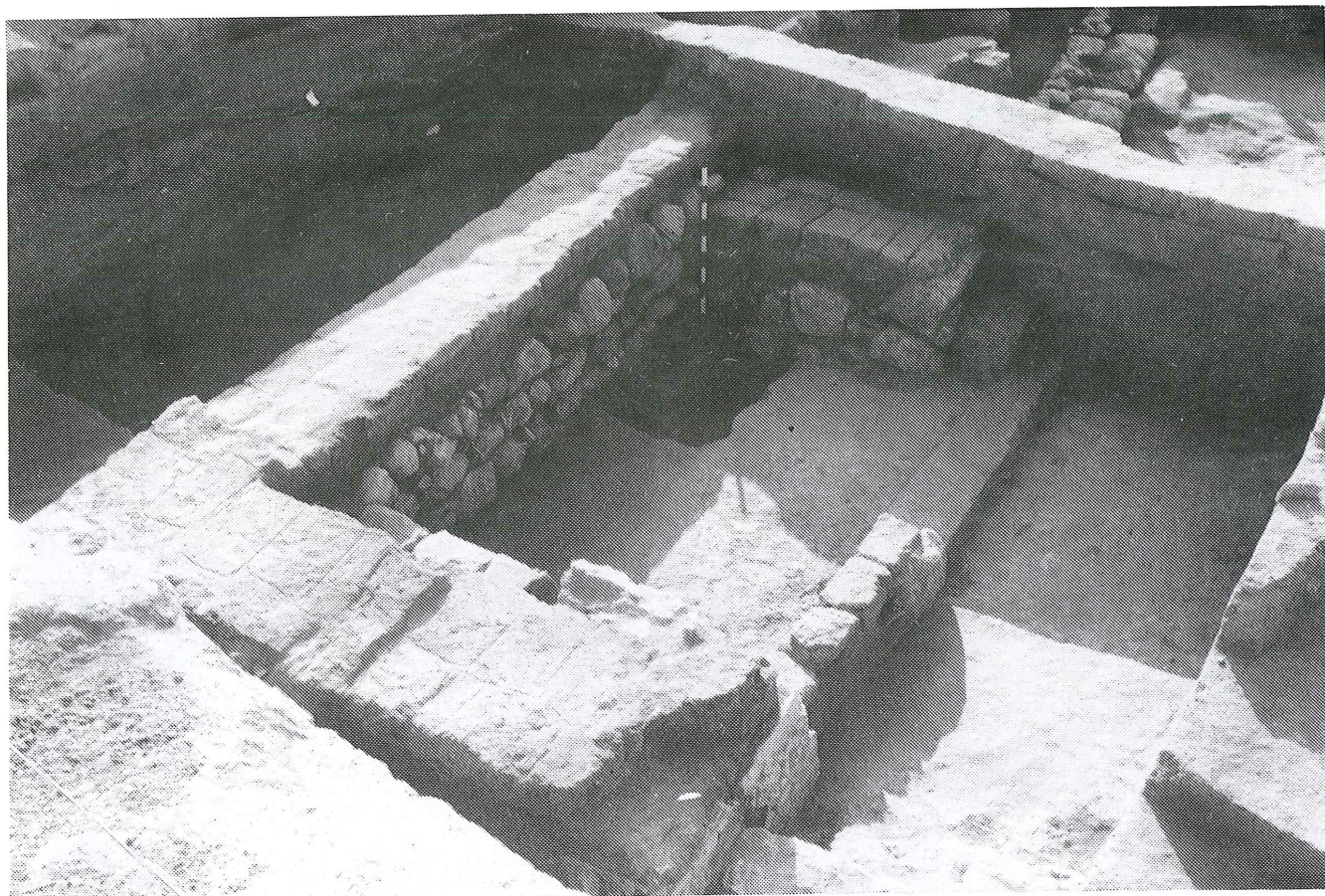
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1. View of the locations of regular pits in Sqs. K and L.



2. Sq. M, Phase B.



1. Sq. K, Looking west. Phase H, with room in foreground.



2. Sq. K. looking north. Phase H, showing entrance.



3. Trench 5, broken pottery *in situ*.