

## KHIRBET MAZIN

Of several small ruins in the Turaba, on the Western shore of the Dead Sea, the most prominent and the most Northerly is located in the delta of the Wadi Mazin, barely half a mile from the mouth of the Wadi-en-Nar<sup>1</sup>. This site is not at the present time readily accessible otherwise than by boat from the Northern end of the Dead Sea, or by wheeled vehicles of a versatile kind either to a point a little South of Ain Fashkha or across the Buqei'a to the practicable limit of the bed of the Wadi-en-Nar (Kidron), in each case about three miles distant. (Pl. XVIII Fig. 1).

Preliminary excavations carried out at Khirbet Mazin during December 1960 and January 1961 were therefore greatly assisted by the facilities afforded by assault craft and helicopters of the Jordan Armed Forces<sup>2</sup>; the work was generally supervised by Dr. Awni Dajani, Director of Antiquities, and was organized and directed by Mr. J. M. Allegro of Manchester University, and by Mr. Yusif Labadie, Antiquities officer assisted by Père Robert de Langhe of Louvain University, who had explored the site during the course of the Belgian excavations at Khirbet-al-Mird in 1953.

The ruin seems to have attracted little attention in modern times, and has apparently merited no mention by travellers or in topographical descriptions of the locality<sup>3</sup>; but it must in antiquity have been a prominent site, for the traditional track by the shore from Ain Turaba by way of the Buqei'a to Bethlehem or to Jericho passes nearby toward the steep ascent to the upper end of the Wadi Ruba'i.

The main form of the building in plan is fairly readily discernible. It consists of a rectangular courtyard 103 feet by 40 feet (internally) with a rectangular building 58 feet by 30 feet attached at the North-East corner. (Pl. XVIII Fig. 2). On the West and North sides of the main courtyard wall, there is evidence of an outer (and possibly earlier) structure. The building has clearly suffered severely from the effects of surface water in the Wadi passing around and through it, and on all sides the gravel deposited by this action has created a natural glacis. (Pl. XIX Fig. 3). The walls are constructed generally of dry rubble, though in Section 'A' (Western wall, outer face) there are traces of either decomposed mortar or wind-blown dust between the stones of the lower courses; and in Area 'G' (South-East corner, inner face) there are traces of both surviving and decomposed wall plaster. At no point is there any sign of straw-reinforced mortar of the kind noticable in Khirbet Qumran.

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<sup>1</sup> The map reference (Survey of Palestine Dec. 1944 revision is 1920.1211 (1:100,000 Sheet 10, Jerusalem; 1:25,000 Sheet 19-12, Ras Feshkha).

<sup>2</sup> These arrangements were effected through the good offices of Wing Cdr Erik Bennett, R.A.F.

<sup>3</sup> The description of "Kh. Massin" given in the Survey of Western Palestine (Sh. XI Km.), is clearly of another ruin.

The most distinctive feature of the ruin is a gateway 16 feet wide at the Eastern end of the courtyard. Both jambs of the opening are formed in quite carefully-worked freestone and stand several courses above the deposited gravel level. (Pl. XX Figs. 5 & 6) They are built in an orthodox 'megalithic' manner, rather than in 'long-and-short work' of the kind to be seen at 'Ain Fashkha and Qumran. Some stones in the East face of the Southern jamb of the opening, and several stones lying both inside the opening and on the gravel beyond have a readily-recognised but somewhat irregular chisel-drafted margin similar to that which is characteristic of much of the more pretentious work of Herodian times. The only fragment displaying any hint of architectural extravagance was found in this part of the site, and bears the eroded remains of a dentil course supported by a filletted torus and a bold apophyge; the remainder of the worked face is plain and suggests that this stone represents part of the remains of a frieze with cornice bed-mould. (Pl. XXI Fig. 7).

The threshold of the gateway was revealed by excavation at a level 16ft. 6ins. above that of the Dead Sea. (24th December, 1960). It is noticeable from vantage points on the higher ground to the West that the gravel and debris on the shore have been formed into storm-lines of which the highest approaches very closely the East wall of the ruin, (Pl. XXI Fig. 8), and that at some time in the past the building must have stood very near the water's edge, which at the time of excavations was, at the nearest point, 314ft from the centre of the gateway. It may therefore be possible that the building was primarily accessible through the great gate, which was used as a watergate in connection with traffic to and from the East side of the Dead Sea. The possibility of the existence of a roof to the main structure, which is too wide to have allowed a single-span construction, was investigated by excavation in area 'F', but no built substructure was found.

The considerable length of the main structure, the central position of the great gateway and the position of the highest level of gravel and débris, together with the considerable thickness of the compound West wall suggested that there might be evidence of a tower or a suite of rooms at the Western end of the ruin. In order to investigate this possibility, an excavation was made on the inner face of the West wall (Section E.).

Primarily to establish the depths of the main foundations, the outer walls were exposed in Sections A, B, and C, and these preliminary investigations were concluded with the clearing of a considerable area within the Eastern gateway and in the South-East corner of the main courtyard. (Area 'G'). The following description (4) of the results of this work is intended as an interim report upon the evidence which it has provided.

#### **Section A.**

The Western wall has been severely damaged at its Northern end, where all the masonry above the present ground level has been removed, presumably by storm water



from the Wadi Mazin. After loose stones had been removed from the top of the wall it was seen to be of compound construction consisting apparently of an inner wall, rather less than five feet thick, built of large roughly-faced boulders on both sides, with a core of smaller stones packed between them, and an outer wall of which only the external face, of undressed small stones, was visible. The maximum thickness of the compound wall is about ten feet.

A section was cut against the outer face of the wall, to a level about one foot below the lowest course of built work. (Pl. XXII Fig. 9). The wall was found to have been founded upon a firm brown gravel. There was no sign of a construction trench, and the bed level of the lowest of the work appeared to be only a few inches below the level of the firm gravel. The superimposed gravel layers visible in the section were probably washed against the wall by the waters of the Wadi, but it is not inconceivable that they were put in place deliberately.

The outer face of this wall is of smaller stones than most of the work in the other main walls, especially the opposing internal face of the Western wall, and shows few signs of the lacing courses of small stones in work consisting mostly of large boulders, such as occur elsewhere in the ruin. The lower stonework was bedded in mud mortar which has disintegrated and is now very soft. At a level about four feet above the base course the stonework appeared to have been stained dark brown, and the mortar-like material was very loose.

No pottery was found in this Section.

#### **Section B.**

The Northern wall is of compound construction like that on the West side of the ruin. It consists of an inner wall, faced on both sides with boulders, the total thickness being about six feet at the Western end, tapering uniformly to about four feet at the junction with the West wall of the subsidiary building. The outer wall consists only of an external face, between which and the inner wall is a space of about eight feet filled with rubble, forming the most substantial construction in the whole of the visible parts of the ruin. At one point the whole construction of this wall was exposed to a shallow depth. Section 'B' was cut against the outer face at a point where the upper stonework of the inner structure stands about one foot above the existing gravel surface. (Pl. XXII Fig. 10). Excavation was here continued through loose gravel to a level about 10' 6" below the surface when it proved impracticable safely to retain the trench sides. It appeared that the wall foundations at this point and at the North-West corner (and, apparently, elsewhere) are at a considerable depth below the existing gravel surface; in Section 'B', at about 9' 8" below the surface, the nature of the wall construction changed, for the stones of the wall below this level were considerably smaller than those above.

Pottery was found in this section at two distinct levels. The lower of these was between 7' 6" and 5' 6" below the top of the wall, and the sherds were of mixed types, apparently of Roman date. At a level 3 feet from the top of the wall were large stones clearly representing the collapse or destruction of the upper wall.

### Section C.

The disposition of the stones exposed above the gravel surface on the North side of the gateway, identifying the plan of the rectangular building at the North-East corner of the ruin were initially presumed to represent the foundations of a tower built to protect the gateway itself. In order to investigate this possibility, a section was cut on the Eastern side of the wall, on the flank of the building nearer to the shore. It was found that the stones originally exposed represented not the foundations but the wall itself. The excavation was continued to a depth of 14 feet below the existing ground level, exposing the face of the wall. At this depth, difficulty was experienced in retaining the loose gravel of the excavation on the seaward side, and a further hurried clearance to a depth of about 17 feet below ground level failed to expose any wall footings. (Pl. XX Fig. 11).

The wall itself consisted of large boulders laid roughly in courses, with lacings of smaller stones. The larger stones presented the appearance of having been roughly faced, but may have been selected for a natural face from those available in the vicinity. It was evident that at a level about 7 feet from the surface, the condition of the wall changed; below this level, the face of the stonework was in clearly better condition than above it. The evidence of the layers of gravel suggested a weathering of the upper parts of the wall at an earlier time. A small offset in the face of the wall, at a slightly higher level, suggested, however, that the possibility that the wall was built in two stages may not be discounted. No inner face of the wall was identified among the rubble exposed on this side of the ruin.

Successive layers of gravel had been formed against the outer face of the wall. Of these, the lowest was fairly hard and compacted but no sign of a construction trench was revealed; this layer and those above it may be presumed to have been deposited after the construction of at least the lower parts of the wall were completed. At a level of some 7 feet from the surface, where the division in the nature of the wall face occurs, a gravel layer was recognised as containing smaller walling stones, and was taken to represent the level from which the upper part of the wall was built, or, more probably, the level above which the weathering of the exposed structure took place. Between this level and the existing surface, several distinct gravel layers were apparent, and in the uppermost of these, about one foot below the surface, was a distinct band of small walling stones.

One small and unidentifiable sherd was found 4 feet below the surface. Some severely corroded iron objects were found embedded in the interstices of the wall-stones and overlying the offset of small stones at a level 6' 6" below the surface. About one foot below this level, a group of sherds was found, including the rim and handle of a cooking pot or flagon and sherds of other thin red vessels. These were associated with the stones supposed to represent the collapse of the upper parts of the wall.

It may therefore be deduced that this wall was single-faced, and in the absence of any considerable quantity of rubble in the vicinity, may not have stood very much higher than the stonework at present exposed upon the surface. The gravel layers appear



all to have been deposited since the construction of the wall, and were presumably laid by the action of the sea. The upper 7 feet of that part of the wall exposed in the excavation was almost certainly exposed in antiquity, and much of the weathering may have been due also to the waters of the sea.

#### Section D.

A shallow excavation was made at the North-West corner, at the intersection of the lines of the inner walls on the West and North sides, in order to locate this quoin of the structure. Nothing was found to confirm the presumed position of this quoin, and it therefore appears that the surface water in the Wadi has completely destroyed both inner and outer walls in this vicinity.

#### Section E.

In order to test the possibility of the survival of the substructure of a suite of rooms or of a tower at the Western end of the main courtyard, an excavation was made at the inner face of the compound West wall. Five feet of rubble, consisting of large boulders from the upper parts of the wall, had to be removed before significant levels were reached. It was found that, especially in the South-East corner, the rubble contained a considerable quantity of very fine sand which was taken to be decayed mortar or plaster from the wall.

An offset nearly one foot wide was found about 5 feet below the highest point of the existing wall. Upon this offset lay some coarse pottery (including a distinctive handle) and some charcoal. A few inches below this level a dark layer sloped continuously away from the wall, and below this again was a dark band containing hearth debris and more pottery, probably of Byzantine date. About 4 feet below the offset a heavy stone pestle was found.

To a depth of about 6 feet below this offset the wall was constructed of large boulders, possibly roughly faced, as in Section 'C', bedded on lacing courses of smaller stones in mortar which is now decayed. Below this level the wall is of cruder construction, in stones of generally smaller size. A band of dark staining was found about 8 feet below the offset. The excavation was continued to a level 11 feet below the offset without exposing the footings of the wall.

Firm gravel was found about 6 feet below the offset, but within 3 feet of this level, the gravel up to 2 feet away from the wall face became extremely loose and, eventually, in the absence of means of supporting the gravel, digging had to be abandoned in this section in the interests of safety. The loose gravel in the lowest levels appeared to represent the back-filling of a construction trench sealed by the later deposit of water-borne

gravel; alternatively, it could be the result of the percolation of subsoil water which carried away the finer building material, and which stained the wall stones in the adjacent work.

Above the firm gravel layer the deposited material was again more loose; between these upper layers and the stones of the wall a distinct vertical band of fine sand continued upward, separating the dark band of hearth débris from the masonry. This might represent the remains of wall plaster which has decomposed on account of the action of penetrating water. In these upper layers a band of coarse gravel was discerned, sloping toward the wall, and terminating in a small channel marked by brown silt, which crossed the excavation close to, and parallel with the face of the wall.

The evidence produced in this section is interpreted as showing the upper parts of the wall foundation, probably trench-built, up to a level 6 feet below the offset; this level represents the original floor level with a plastered wall rising from it to the offset, which either marks a second stage in the construction of the inner wall or provided a bearing for longitudinal beams. In spite, however, of excavations specifically intended to reveal (in the inner end of Section 'E' and in Area 'F') internal walls or piers carrying the inner ends of such beams, no such structure was found. The inner face of the wall was subsequently covered by gravel washed into the building by storm-water, and upon this, in the shelter of the wall, 'squatters' in the Byzantine period made the fires of which traces remain. The later main destruction of the wall is marked by the mass of rubble first encountered.

#### Area 'F'.

An area of the gravel in the centre of the courtyard was cleared to a depth of about two feet, and both longitudinal and transverse sections were excavated to a maximum of a further 3 feet, to investigate the possibility of the existence of a supporting substructure in this part of the ruin. No such evidence was uncovered.

#### Area 'G'.

The great Eastern water-gate affords the only convincing evidence of an entrance to the building. Elsewhere, the only possible site for an entrance is near the centre of the South wall.

The area of the water-gate had been carefully examined by the Belgian party working principally at Khirbet al-Mird in 1953, and some of the rubble immediately adjacent to the gateway jambs had been cleared by them at that time. It appeared that the area of excavation within the gateway had been somewhat irresponsibly extended by others since 1953, and this activity had removed some of the stratification essential to the interpretation of the evidence available in this area.



A considerable area of rubble nearly 10 feet deep was cleared on the inner side of the gateway, including the internal space defined by the South-East corner of the courtyard. The upper stratified material was examined, without at any point reaching undisturbed soil. No excavation was made outside the gateway, except to clear the loose rubble from the apparent lines of the outer walls, in order to establish the alignment of the built work. The masonry of the gateway jambs is fully bonded into the adjoining walling, and on both sides is carefully worked to provide an accurate 11 inch rebate for the gates. Though it was not conclusively established that the threshold of the gateway exposed by this work represents the original level to be associated with this part of the building, the lowest construction uncovered was a double course of large stones placed across the opening on the line of the inner face of the main wall ; and only 9 inches above the level of this threshold, both rebated jambs are furnished with offsets at the outer corners. The lowest level in the excavation, at a point 3 feet inside the line of the inner face of the main wall, was reached in a hard compacted gravel with pockets of sand ; this material lay also at the bed level of the stones of the threshold, and may be presumed therefore to have been deposited after the time of the built work exposed at this point.

Inside the gateway a dark band of soil containing large quantities of pottery and nails lay consistently at about the same level as the offsets, and extended across the gateway and into the South-East corner. A thin band of brown soil lay above the lower gravel extending from the North gate pier about 5 feet across the width of the opening, and appeared to represent an old surface. Above this lay a clean fine gravel at some points covering the stones of the lower parts of the wall. Between this gravel and the upper occupation level marked by the band of dark soil, was a layer of clean gravel and sand ; this produced pottery and represents, presumably, a lower occupation. The dark band of soil of the upper occupation lay at the level of the offset to the South jamb of the gateway, but was somewhat higher on the North side beyond the opening ; at both sides it was seen to about the lower parts of the main wall. There were indications of shallow construction trenches cut into the fine clean gravel for the building of the main wall, so that the lower occupation is probably contemporary with, or a little later than the period of the main building at this point.

The upper occupation layer contained pottery and nails, especially on the South side of the gate. The nails are likely to have been part of gates made of timber ; they did not lie above the dark soil, but generally appeared to be embedded in it. The stones above threshold level filling the gateway did not appear to be tumbled rubble, but showed a certain regularity, as though the opening had been deliberately blocked. Perhaps associated with this, a number of roughly- stacked rectangular stones occur a few feet within the building, in line with the North jamb of the gateway. The dark soil ran clearly below these stones, a little more thinly than elsewhere ; it may reasonably be supposed that these stones were placed after the beginning of the upper occupation, and probably before its completion. This rough work in the vicinity of the gateway seems to indicate a 'squatter' occupation of a building which had lost its original purpose.

Both occupation layers were interrupted by a channel running to a point near the centre of the gateway. This channel was filled with gravel, but probably represents a natural watercourse formed by surface water draining from the centre of the building outward through the gateway (presumably before it was blocked).

In the South-East corner, the main wall appears to have been laid directly upon the gravel, the lowest stones being on the level of the offsets at the jambs of the gateway. This is somewhat above the level of the threshold, and some 8' 4" above the lowest point excavated in Section 'C'. The inner face of the wall has traces of hydraulic plaster in good condition, still in situ, which appears originally to have extended from the level of the offset on the pier, below the dark occupation layer, up to a height of at least 5 feet.

Definite conclusions as to the original purpose, the identity and the history of Khirbet Mazin must necessarily await the final evaluation of the pottery, and of other objects found particularly in the vicinity of the water-gate; these include some distinctive moulded ware, coins, a ring, and a large lump of lead. In order to establish more clearly and completely the form of the building further excavation has yet to be carried out on the South side, and at the North-East corner; the walling at both re-entrant angles appears to be continuous, and it is likely that the gateway and the subsidiary building will prove to be of one build, but the relation of the outer North wall with the main structure and the possibility of internal walls at the North-East corner have yet to be investigated.

It is to be hoped that these further excavations will not be long delayed.

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