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Tall Hisban

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CROSSING JORDAN

North American Contributions to
the Archaeology of Jordan

Edited by
Thomas E. Levy, P.M. Michèle Daviau
Randall W. Younker and May Shaer



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12 Tall Hisban

Palimpsest of Great and Little Traditions of Transjordan and the Ancient Near East

Ø.S. LaBianca and B. Walker

Tall Hisban is one of Jordan's best known and most thoroughly investigated and published archaeological sites. Located 895 m above sea level on a rise along the western edge of the Transjordanian highland plateau, the site is about 11 km north of the town of Madaba and 26 km southwest of downtown 'Amman. Its greatest claim to fame is as the presumed location of biblical Heshbon (Heb. *Hešbôn*). As such, it is mentioned thirty-seven times in the Bible—most notably as the capital city of Sihon, king of the Amorites, which was conquered by the Israelites under Moses (Num 21:21-31; Deut 2:24; Josh 12:2; Judg 11:19-26). This association with biblical Heshbon made it a popular destination of 19th- and early 20th-century travelers and explorers, including Seetzen (1813), Tristram (1873), Condor (1889, 1892) and many others.

As will be discussed further below, archaeological fieldwork at Tall Hisban was started by Andrews University archaeologists in 1967/68 and has proceeded in two phases. The first, carried out under the banner of the Heshbon Expedition between 1968 and 1976, was focused initially on the site's biblical connections, but evolved gradually under the influence of the 'new archaeology' to incorporate anthropological concerns (LaBianca 1994). The second, begun in 1996 and continuing through to the present, has concentrated primarily on anthropological and historical concerns as well as on efforts to restore and preserve Tall Hisban as an international cultural heritage site.¹

* Tall Hisban is here likened to what epigraphers refer to as a palimpsest—a parchment with layered traces of many partially or fully erased texts. Tall Hisban's archaeological record—which spans over three millennia—resembles a palimpsest in that it is made up of layered traces of partially erased, and at times magnificently glimpsed, archaeological 'texts', which, when 'read' by the archaeologist, tell the story of the great and little traditions that have helped shape domestic life and public affairs at Tall Hisban.

1. While cultural heritage preservation has been a commitment of both Phase I and Phase II, the latter has had the most success in actually making something happen. Since 1996 the site has been gradually improved and a parking lot, ramps and paths, viewing platforms, and signage have all been added. This work has benefited greatly from outstanding cooperation and support from the Department of Antiquities headquarters in Amman and the district office in Madaba, the Mayor and Municipality of Hisban, and the Youth and Friends of Hisban. More recently, this work received a boost from the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation of the United States Department of State. This grant has enabled Architectural Conservator Maria Elena Ronza to undertake partial restoration of important components of the tall, including part of the Roman plaza at the base of the tall, the Roman stairway and Mamluk entrance at the southern approach to the citadel, the southwest corner tower, the sally gate on the north side of the enclosure wall, the columns of the Byzantine basilica on the summit, and the medieval bathhouse in the Mamluk 'Governor's residence'. These efforts are ongoing, and future plans include the construction of a visitor's center. Also see n. 6 below.

Central to the second phase have been efforts to explore the tall's potential as a window through which to view and examine over three millennia of imperial engagement with local communities of the Levant and Transjordan. To this end, its rich Islamic history has been pursued as an especially fruitful line of inquiry. Not only have the Islamic centuries proved to be advantageous for studying the various 'great traditions' imported into Transjordan by various Muslim empires; they have also offered a most useful entrée for investigating the 'little traditions' by means of which the region's indigenous populace adapted to the diverse and often conflicting social orders promoted and often forcefully imposed on them by these foreign powers.²

Phase I: The Heshbon Expedition (1967/68–1976/77)

The Heshbon Expedition was an undertaking of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, the American Schools of Oriental Research, the American Center for Oriental Research, and the Ajarmeh families of the village of Hisban. Its directors were Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Archaeology, Siegfried S. Horn, who led out for the first three seasons (1968, 1971, 1973) and Lawrence T. Geraty—Horn's successor at the Seminary—who led the last two seasons (1964, 1976). Chief archaeologist during all five field seasons was Roger S. Boraas, Professor of Religious Studies at Upsala College in New Jersey. Muhammad Morshed of the Department of Antiquities served as foreman for all five seasons. Highlights of what was accomplished by the original Heshbon Expedition include the following:³

- The Expedition established that Tall Hisban's archaeological record spans over three millennia and is dividable, based on stratigraphy and pottery finds, into twenty-one separate strata. The earliest excavated stratum dates to the Late Bronze Age/Iron Age I transition and the latest dates to the Hashemite or Modern Period.
- It determined that intensive reuse of the tall by later generations of occupants resulted in the vast majority of remains from the Late Bronze and Iron Ages being concentrated in secondary deposits (dumps and fills). Despite the large quantity of Iron Age pottery uncovered, therefore, the expedition found very few undisturbed walls or other *in situ* ruins from these periods.⁴
- It uncovered a 7 m deep (23 ft) water reservoir dated to the late 10th/early 9th century BC—possibly one of the 'pools of Heshbon' mentioned in Cant. 7:4. This reservoir—along with a large quantity of Iron I pottery recovered from inside it—suggests the existence of a town at the site during this early Iron Age period.
- It found that throughout the latter 9th and 8th centuries, this Iron I town appears to have declined as its residents gradually abandoned their sedentary ways in favor of transhumance. In other words, the local population adopted more migratory food production strategies which required seasonal movement of families and their herds of sheep and goats between their semi-settled cave village in Hisban and distant production areas.

2. This theoretical framework has been developed in close cooperation with colleagues connected with the University of Bergen's Global Moments in the Levant Project (GML), which has been generously funded by the Research Council of Norway. For further elaboration of this theoretical framework see *Nomads, Empires and Civilizations: Great and Little Traditions and the Historical Landscape of the Southern Levant*, available at <http://www.globalmoments.uib.no/index>.

3. A series of final publications reporting on the discoveries from Tall Hisban is still in the process of being published. So far 8 volumes out of a total of 14 planned have been published by Andrews University Press. See <http://www.andrews.edu/universitypress> for purchase information.

4. Regarding evidence for the existence of the 'capital city of the Amorites', or proof of a battle over this city between the forces of Sihon and those of Moses, the archaeological data uncovered by the Heshbon Expedition are silent.

- It determined that in the 7th–5th centuries BC a large town re-emerged on the hill, this time apparently rebuilt by the Ammonites. Their presence is evidenced by a range of finds, including several ostraca with Ammonite script, pottery typical of their ceramic traditions, and a booming economy based on production and export of vine products. This town came to an end, however, and its ruins and caves again became the makeshift dwellings of transhumant agriculturalists.
- It discovered that Tall Hisban's most impressive monumental remains were located on its summit. Notable are a perimeter wall with four towers dating to the Late Hellenistic period (possibly even earlier to the Ammonite periods); a monumental stairway and acropolis area that included a public building, possibly a temple, from the Roman period; the apse, column bases and mosaic floors of a Byzantine basilica; and a residential complex that included a hot-and-cold bathing facility from the time of the Mamluks. Also discovered on or near the summit were fragments of walls and floors of buildings from other periods—including the Persian, Umayyad, Abbasid, Ayyubid and Ottoman.
- It undertook, under the leadership of Douglas Waterhouse, exploration of a Roman/Byzantine cemetery nearby Tall Hisban which resulted in the discovery of a wide range of tomb types from this period, including two rolling stone tombs.
- It initiated, under the leadership of Robert Ibach, a regional survey of the hinterlands surrounding Tall Hisban that led to the discovery of several sections of paved Roman roads with accompanying milestones; dozens of smaller farmsteads and villages; numerous cemeteries and burial grounds; a large number of agricultural cisterns, reservoirs, and related water catchments; and, most important, to the discovery of Tall Jalul and Tall al-'Umayri—to which veterans of the Heshbon Expedition returned in 1984 to continue their research under the banner of the Madaba Plains Project.
- The work of ceramicist James Sauer—which was made possible to a significant degree by the high standard for stratigraphic accuracy insisted upon throughout all five field seasons by chief archaeologist Roger Boraas—established Tall Hisban as a type-site for the study of pottery from the Islamic centuries in Jordan.
- Finally, by adapting what has become known as 'archaeological food systems theory' the expedition became a pioneer in introducing the so-called 'new archaeology' into Jordanian archaeology (Dever 1993; Joffe 1997). The advantage of this approach was that it provided a unified frame of reference for studying cultural changes at Hisban throughout its entire multi-millennial history (LaBianca 1990).

What the Heshbon Expedition bequeathed to the Madaba Plains Project include a core staff made up of Heshbon Expedition veterans; a high regard for accuracy in stratigraphy and ceramic typology; a standardized system for describing and recording all manner of archaeological data using a computer; a commitment to hinterland investigations as a complement to tall excavations; a readiness to partner with specialists from a wide range of disciplines; a continuing quest for theories and methods by means of which to grasp long-term cultural dynamics; a commitment to prompt dissemination of findings among both fellow scholars and the general public; a tradition of mentoring and facilitating younger generations of scholars; and a consortium of core institutional sponsors with Andrews University's Institute of Archaeology at its core.⁵

5. The primary financial sponsor of both phases of the work at Tall Hisban has been Andrews University. Over the years, the Tall Hisban leadership team has partnered with a number of other institutions as a means to recruit faculty and students as paying participants. Among such have been Calvin College, Valpariso University, Oklahoma State University, and the University of Bergen. Other financial sponsors include the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Geographic Society, the American Center for Oriental Research in Amman, the American Schools of Oriental Research, the

Phase II: The Islamic Hisban Project (1996–present)

Renewed excavations at Tall Hisban were begun 1996 as a joint endeavor between Andrews University's College of Arts and Sciences, its Institute of Archaeology, the Madaba Plains Project, the Municipality of Hisban, and the Department of Antiquities headquarters in 'Amman and district office in Madaba.⁶ The primary goal of this initial season was to clean, restore, and make accessible to the public the most prominent standing ruins at Tall Hisban. In the process of doing this, however, it became clear that many stratigraphic, ceramic, and historical issues remained unresolved from previous fieldwork, particularly with regard to the Islamic remains.

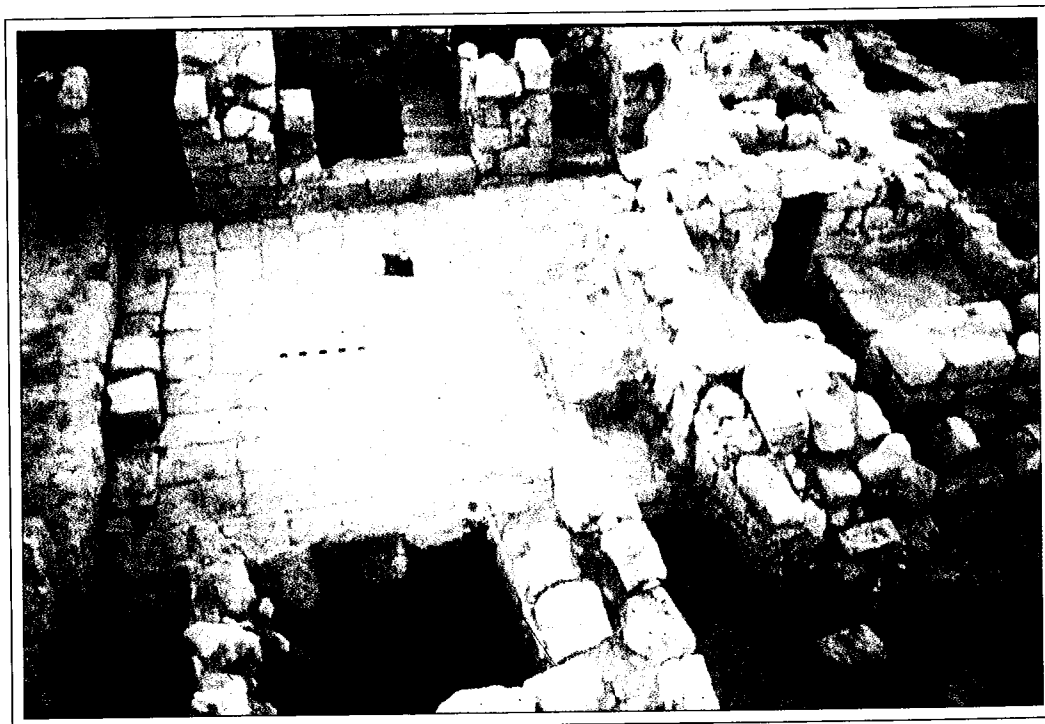


Figure 1. The Mamluk 'Governor's Residence' on the summit of Tall Hisban was built around an open air courtyard

In order to succeed with renewed excavations focusing on the Islamic period, an archaeologist with a suitable academic background and promise as a scholar had to be found who could head up this work. Larry Herr recommended Bethany Walker and LaBianca followed up immediately with

United States Department of State Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, and the Research Council of Norway. There have been many generous individual donors to this project as well.

6. The return to Tall Hisban for purposes of cleaning and restoration was welcomed by Ghazi Bisheh, then the director of the Department of Antiquities, and has continued to be enthusiastically supported by the current director, Fawwaz al-Kraysheh. They not only have offered their full support of the concept, but have also provided funds to pay for workmen and use of departmental equipment and machinery to help with this work. The work was also greatly facilitated by the various Department of Antiquities representatives assigned to the project, especially Rula Qusous, Adeb Abu Shmeis, and Sabah Abu Houdeib. The project has also benefited greatly from the many kindnesses of the past and current mayors of Hisban and their staff, especially Madiha Barrari.

an invitation for her to join his team. Her background suited the project perfectly. She was a recent graduate of the University of Toronto in Islamic art and archaeology and had recently joined the history department at Oklahoma State University as an assistant professor of Islamic history and archaeology. Dr. Walker began her career with the project as field supervisor 1978 and thereafter was invited to assume the role of co-director and chief archaeologist for the Islamic Hisban Project and lead author for the Hisban Final Publication volume dealing with the Islamic period.

Phase II operations follow the excavation and recording methods of the Madaba Plains Project and build on the ceramic typologies established for the Islamic centuries by the late James Sauer. While the archaeological food systems model of LaBianca continues to be utilized as a means to reconstruct cycles of environment exploitation and settlement history, the new excavations also draw upon historical methods and theory, particularly in contextualizing trends in the dynamics of state-periphery relations during the Ayyubid, Mamluk, Ottoman, and Mandate periods.

Walker's intensive work on contemporary textual sources—largely medieval Arabic documents stored in archives in Cairo and other major cities of the region—has been an important innovation of the new project and has produced new studies on land use, tribal-state relations, and imperial decline. The project's concern with sustainable agriculture, climate change, political ecology, and food systems has necessitated a multi-disciplinary approach to fieldwork. Building on the wide-ranging methods used in Phase I, current fieldwork combines excavation, hinterland survey, soil and paleobotanical analyses, studies of vernacular architecture, ethnographic research and oral interviews, and archival research.



Figure 2. The restored Citadel at Tall Hisban

The occupational history of Islamic Hisban reflects the cycles of imperial engagement with local societies and indigenous autonomy suggested for other regions of Jordan. The former Byzantine bishopric was incorporated peacefully into the newly emerging Islamic Empire following the Battle

of Yarmouk in 636 CE. While the separation of Byzantine from early Islamic material culture is notoriously difficult, during the late Umayyad period the pottery and architecture of the site is noticeably different from preceding periods, reflecting some degree of cultural change that can be identified on the summit of the tall.

The continued domestic and defensive use of the summit in the Umayyad and Abbasid periods is documented archaeologically and historically. The Umayyad-period residents of the citadel continued to use earlier structures, while building many new domestic structures and tabuns. The Abbasid-period site, which can best be described as a fortified residence (early Islamic *qasr*), continued the character of the Umayyad occupation.

The early Muslim historian al-Baladhuri describes the revolt of one Sa'īd ibn Khalid al-Fudayni, a descendent of the Umayyad family, who early in the ninth century CE led a rebellion against the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun. He fled from the family stronghold at al-Fudayni (in present day Mafraq) to Hisban, where he, for a time, took refuge from the Abbasid forces sent to subdue him. Architectural and ceramic remains of this period on the summit reflect the fortunes of the site in this regard. The tall's enclosure wall was certainly strengthened at this time, and there is evidence of further domestic construction in this period. In Field N there is evidence of a house built during Roman times being repaired by the Abbasid-period residents—including repair of earlier earthquake damage, reinforcing of walls, and adding ovens and a vaulted stone superstructure. By the mid-9th century, the summit appears to have been abandoned for a while by its year-around residents, arguably the result of the political turmoil of the time. No doubt squatters continued to find shelter in its abandoned buildings.

There is scant archaeological evidence for occupation at Hisban between the 9th and 13th centuries, outside of occasional sherds of Crusader and Ayyubid glazed wares. Arabic chronicles mention the construction of a mosque at Hisban by an Ayyubid prince, the remains of which have not yet been identified. It is probable that a village existed here in the Ayyubid period, but the later building activities on the tall, which largely obliterated earlier phases of occupation, make reconstructing the pre-Mamluk history of the summit difficult.

The growth of the village, and the reuse of the tall by officialdom, was a product of the investments by the Mamluk state in the infrastructure of its imperial periphery in the 13th and 14th centuries. Sultan Baybars, who was responsible for numerous refortification efforts in Jordan (including those at Salt, 'Ajlun, and al-Karak), may have also been the driving force behind the reinforcements of the Hisban citadel walls and the reconstruction of the large southwest corner tower in the mid-13th century.

The site became an important agricultural and administrative center in the early 14th century, under the personal watch of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad, during whose reign Hisban served as the capital (*wilaya*) of the Balqa, a status it retained from roughly 1309 until 1356. During this time a small domestic/administrative complex (the 'Governor's Residence' of Field L) was built in the western half of the summit, incorporating a bathhouse that may originally date to the early Islamic period. The complex, built around an open-air courtyard, was a local variant of the contemporary *qa'a* palatial form and reflects many elements characteristic of Jordanian architecture of the Mamluk period: low-sprung vaults, a combination of long barrel vaults and cross vaults, plastered walls, two-face rubble-filled walls, and quickly-built masonry reusing building blocks from ancient structures. The complex storeroom, fully excavated during the 1998, 2001, and 2004 seasons, was one of the most important components of the citadel, as an earthquake of the mid-fourteenth century preserved its rich contents: shelves of locally produced and imported wares (many with historical inscriptions), weaponry, and many large sugar storejars. Citadels of the period regularly served as store depots for agricultural surplus, and it appears that Hisban was a key storage and redistribution point for processed sugar cane grown in the Jordan Valley and its tributaries. With a

mid-century earthquake, and the historically documented decision by the state to move the rural capital to 'Amman, the Hisban citadel was abandoned.

The surrounding village, however, continued to be occupied well into the next century. The 14th-century 'city' (*madinah*) is often described in contemporary Arabic sources, who mention its schools (*madrāsas*), mosque, marketplace (which served over 300 local villages), local court, and local intelligentsia who made careers as legal scholars in Damascus and Jerusalem. The extensive remains of courtyard complexes on the western slopes of the tall and at its base (Field C), as well as evidence for intensive use of grain fields and orchards within a 2–3 km radius of the tall, document the vitality of Hisban in this period.

Outside of squatter (or seasonal) occupation in the citadel ruins and in the farmhouses of Field C, as well as domestic use of caves in the region, there is little evidence for full-year settlement at Hisban between the 16th and 19th centuries. Tax registers of the early Ottoman period (16th century) describe the site as *khali* (with no permanent residents), and only in the late 19th century does the Ottoman state document the residence of tax-paying farmers at Hisban in formal land registers.



Figure 3. Glazed relief ware the Mamluk Governor's residence

European travelers describe a site largely in ruins for much of the 19th century, with sporadic, and possibly seasonal, occupation in ancient buildings. The Land Law of 1858, the most important application of the Ottoman reforms (*Tanzimat*) in Jordan, transformed the relationship between local people and the state, as well as rejuvenated the countryside through the registration of farmland with individual tax payers and revival of regional markets. This era of reform finds physical expression at Hisban in the construction of the Nabulsi *qasr*, the domestic structures of Field O, and the 'Bedouin' cemetery of Field L (early nineteenth-century use of the Mamluk storeroom on the summit for burials), which together are informative about the modern history of the village of Hisban.

Architectural and ethnographic surveys conducted in 2001 and 2004 are the basis of preliminary conclusions about the history of the Nabulsi family farmhouse complex located south of the tall.

Occupation at Hisban was seasonal by the 'Ajarmeh and 'Adwan tribes until 1881, when the Ottoman authorities formally registered the land of Hisban to the 'Ajarmeh. The family residence of this grand stone complex was likely constructed at this point, on the ruins of earlier structures, and physically developed for the next ten years. Through money lending, the land eventually passed to Hajj Muhammad al-Nabulsi of Salt, who rented the land and further developed the farmhouse complex, adding storage facilities and stables.

During the second half of the 19th century, the center of the village shifted to south of the tall and to its southern slopes, where complexes of heavily built courtyard houses were constructed (Field O); these have been a focus of excavation since 2004. Agricultural and soil surveys of the Wadis Majar and Hisban since 2004 have contributed important data on the history of land use during this period, particularly in terms of Hisban's role in regional grain production and the organization of this industry in the late Ottoman and Mandate periods. Archival research on land registers from these periods, conducted since 2005, is also tracing the development of Hisban's agricultural and community history at the turn of the 20th century.

The Islamic-era remains of Tall Hisban are among the most historically important and best preserved in Jordan. Since 1998, the project has attracted attention for its contributions to Islamic archaeology, in general, and for raising the awareness of the medieval Islamic and Ottoman heritage of the country, specifically. Among some of the most important results of the post-1997 seasons are the development of a typology and chronology of Ottoman pottery, the writing of a cultural history of Ottoman Jordan (based on ethnographic work and the study of vernacular architecture) and its tribal societies, the project's environmental and ecological research, and the successful combination of written and archaeological sources in the writing of a new provincial history for the Mamluk and Ottoman periods.

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13 Tall al-'Umayri through the Ages

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This small, but densely occupied, multi-period site is located on a natural ridge 15 km south of Amman's Seventh Circle on the airport freeway next to Amman National Park. A natural spring at the northern foot of the site was the probable reason for settlement. The same spring was probably instrumental in the establishment of three other sites located on hills nearby: (1) shallow remains from the classical periods were on a hill to the east; (2) structures from the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods covered a hill to the northeast; and (3) 'Ajarmeh Bedouin settled at the village of Bunayat to the NNE during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Using an itinerary of Thutmose III, some tentatively identify the site with Abel-keramim of Judg 11:33, but there is no certainty. Large-scale excavations began in 1984 by the Madaba Plains Project (MPP) sponsored by Andrews University in cooperation with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and the American Center of Oriental Research. They have continued for eleven seasons, though the dig is now sponsored by La Sierra University in consortium with Andrews University Division of Architecture, Canadian University College, Mount Royal College, Pacific Union College, and Walla Walla College. The excavations show that the site was occupied by 22 separate settlements (strata) stretching from the Chalcolithic period to the Islamic Age, but the primary periods of occupation were the Bronze and Iron Ages. The best preserved remains come from the Late Bronze Age and the Iron I period (Fig. 1).

Stratum 22

Chalcolithic remains were found by a survey team led by H.J. Franken of the University of Leiden at the eastern foot of the site currently under the modern freeway (MPP 1: 407-36). They are no longer available for excavation.

Stratum 21 (Early Bronze Age IB)

At the southeastern foot of the hill in Field K a dolmen without its capstone produced mostly disarticulated bone fragments of 20 secondary burials accompanied by beads, flint tools, mace heads, and 20 complete pottery vessels from the EB IB period (MPP 5: 171-77). This is the first time a dolmen from anywhere in the Mediterranean basin has produced so many finds and such solid dating and functional evidence. Moreover, a series of beaten-earth, plaster, and pebbled surfaces surrounded the dolmen. Embedded into the surfaces were a few features such as a ceramic jar and a stone table or platform. The surfaces faded out about 8-10 m from the dolmen. No other structures were found nearby. It is probable that funerary activities took place at the structure, though the precise nature of the rituals is not known. Although no other remains from the EB IB period have been found at the site, it is possible that the top of the site was inhabited at this time.