

MADABA PLAINS PROJECT TALL AL-'UMAYRI, 1998

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Introduction

A seventh season of excavation by the Madaba Plains Project occurred between June 21 and August 5, 1998 at Tall al-'Umayri, located about 10 km south of Amman's Seventh Circle on the Queen Alia Airport Highway at the turnoff for Amman National Park (Figure 1). It was sponsored by Andrews University in consortium with Canadian University College, La Sierra University, and Walla Walla College.¹ This

¹Previous reports in *AUSS* include Lawrence T. Geraty, "The Andrews University Madaba Plains Project: A Preliminary Report on the First Season at Tell el-'Umeiri," *AUSS* 23 (1985): 85-110; Lawrence T. Geraty, Larry G. Herr, and Øystein S. LaBianca, "The Joint Madaba Plains Project: A Preliminary Report on the Second Season at Tell el-'Umeiri and Vicinity (June 18 to August 6, 1987)," *AUSS* 26 (1988): 217-252; Randall W. Younker, Lawrence T. Geraty, Larry G. Herr, and Øystein S. LaBianca, "The Joint Madaba Plains Project: A Preliminary Report of the 1989 Season, Including the Regional Survey and Excavations at El-Dreijat, Tell Jawa, and Tell el-'Umeiri (June 19 to August 8, 1989)," *AUSS* 28 (1990): 5-52; Randall W. Younker, Lawrence T. Geraty, Larry G. Herr, and Øystein S. LaBianca, "The Joint Madaba Plains Project: A Preliminary Report of the 1992 Season, Including the Regional Survey and Excavations at Tell Jalul and Tell El-'Umeiri (June 16 to July 31, 1992)," *AUSS* 31 (1993): 205-238; Randall W. Younker, Lawrence T. Geraty, Larry G. Herr, Øystein S. LaBianca, and Douglas R. Clark, "Preliminary Report of the 1994 Season of the Madaba Plains Project: Regional Survey, Tall al-'Umayri and Tall Jalul Excavations (June 15 to July 30, 1994)," *AUSS* 34 (1996): 65-92; Randall W. Younker, Lawrence T. Geraty, Larry G. Herr, Øystein S. LaBianca, and Douglas R. Clark, "Preliminary Report of the 1996 Season of the Madaba Plains Project: Regional Survey, Tall al-'Umayri and Tall Jalul Excavations," *AUSS* 35 (1997): 227-240.

season, a team of 87 persons took part in the interdisciplinary project.² A separate excavation team of about 45 people from the Andrews University School of Arts and Sciences shared living facilities at the Amman training College in southern Amman while they worked at Hisban; they will publish their own preliminary report.

This season we worked in five fields of excavation primarily at the western edge of the site, but also at the southern lip (Field L) and at the base of the southeastern slope (Field K). Fields A and B each deepened four squares into Iron I and Late Bronze Age remains; Field H expanded to the south, uncovering late Iron II, Persian, Hellenistic, and Byzantine remains; in Field K more of the surfaces around the Early Bronze Age I dolmen were found; and a new field, Field L, was opened on the southern lip of the site. The following report will examine our finds period by period. Discoveries from previous seasons will be only briefly summarized.

²The authors of this report are especially indebted to Dr. Ghazi Bisheh, Director General of the Department of Antiquities; Ahmed esh-Shami and Zuheir ez-Zoubi, Department of Antiquities representatives; and other members of the Department of Antiquities who facilitated our project at several junctures. The land owner of Tall al-'Umayri, Dr. Raouf Abujaber, was again generous in facilitating and encouraging our research. The American Center of Oriental Research in Amman, directed by Pierre Bikai and assisted by Patricia Bikai, provided invaluable assistance. The staff was housed in Muqabelein at the Amman Training College, an UNWRA vocational college for Palestinians. We give special thanks to its Principal, Dr. Fakhri Tumulieh, for making our stay a genuine pleasure. The scientific goals and procedures of the project were approved by the Committee on Archaeological Policy of the American Schools of Oriental Research.

The authors wish to thank each member of the staff. The Field Supervisor for Field A was John Lawlor; Square Supervisors included Betty Banks, Jürg Egger, Ahmed esh-Shami, and Maysoun Qatarnah; Assistant Supervisors were Roman Bouz, Emily Buck, Heather Chilson, Mary Decman, Dick Dorsett, Kate Dorsett, Fred Holcomb, Erich Huffaker, Farid Khoury, Julie Kuehn, Richard Murphy, and Joseph Rivers. The Field Supervisor for Field B was Douglas R. Clark; Square Supervisors included Kent Bramlett, Gary Huffaker, Ferdinand Regalado, and Carolyn Rivers; Assistant Supervisors were James Duer, Tom Eby, Dave Fischer, Jeremy Foss, Marcella Graham, Steven Huffaker, Terry Janzen, Mindy Rodenberg, Dave Schafer (Handyman), and Warren Trenchard. The Field Supervisor for Field H was David R. Berge; Square Supervisors included Don Mook, Jessica Williams, and Lloyd Willis; Assistant Supervisors were Theodore Carruth, Beverly Chilson, Ute Egger, Garrick Herr, Sally Holcomb, Danielle Huffaker, Bob McDaniel, Beth Ripley, and Duncan Stewart. The Field Supervisor for Field K was Elzbieta Dubis; Square Supervisors included Julio Juarez, Martin Klingbeil, Agnieszka Pienkowska, Justin Walsh, and Zuheir ez-Zoubi; Assistant Supervisors were Marcin Bando, Anna Billik, Szczepan Gnat, Mariusz Gorniak, Dorota Janowska, Katarzyna Lipinska, and James Parker. The Field Supervisor for Field L was David C. Hopkins; Square Supervisors included Kathy Boyd, Mary Boyd, Chang-ho Ji, and Sarah Knoll; Assistant Supervisors were Carole Brown, Dena Dudley, Eileen Guenther, Ariel Hopkins, Travis Knoll, Shirley Nestler, Christian Rosenberg, Tiernen Sykes, and Sarah Wheeler. Camp staff and specialists included Karen Borstad (computers), Kathy Boyd (seeds), Joan Chase (Bones), Jon Cole (Ground Penetrating Radar), Joan Hacko (cook), Denise Herr (Objects), Suha Huffaker (pottery registrar), Leyla Kirkpatrick (GPR), Erik LaBianca (Computers), Dana Langlois (Photography), Bradley Matson (GPR), Najeeb Nakhli (camp manager), Joris Peters (Palaeozoology), Rhonda Root (Artist), Gerald Sandness (GPR), and Edith Willis (Camp).

Early Bronze Age IB (ca. 3000-2800 B.C.)

A dolmen was uncovered in the 1994 season with 20 burials and copious objects inside,³ including complete pottery vessels and jewelry from EB IB. In 1996 it also produced multiple exterior plastered and semi-plastered surfaces which dated to the same period.⁴ This is the first time in the entire Mediterranean basin that patterns of use have been associated with the outside of a dolmen. We counted seven surfaces, one on top of the other. This season, three squares were laid out north and west of the dolmen to examine the extent of the surfaces and to see if any other architectural features could be associated with the use patterns around the dolmen.

Generally the farther we proceeded from the dolmen the weaker the surfaces became, but we have by no means reached their end either in the west or the north. Embedded in one of the surfaces to the west was a patch of cobbles tightly laid, perhaps forming the base of an unknown feature (**Figure 2**). Nearby was a large flat stone surrounded by cobbles at the same level as one of the surfaces; it looked very much like a small table. Could it have been used to receive votive or funerary gifts? Placed into one of the surfaces to the north of the dolmen was the lower third of a flat-based jar; no contents were found. Northeast of the dolmen was a small patch of a very well-made hard plaster floor; similar patches had been found between it and the dolmen in 1994. If a surface of this quality originally surrounded the dolmen when it was used, it was not simply the result of people walking in the area, but was carefully laid for a specific (ritual?) function.

Early Bronze Age II-IV (ca. 2800-2000 B.C.)

Earlier reports have extensively described the remains that we found on the northern and southern slopes of the site and in small bedrock pockets on the western slope.⁵ No excavation occurred in these levels this season. However, we must publish a very significant find rediscovered long after it was first uncovered. It was a fragment of basalt found during the 1984 season and, at that time, called a stone platter. However, the fact that its top is completely flat and there are wear patterns on the stone, some of which are highly polished, make it clear, rather, that it functioned as an upper turntable, most likely for the manufacture of pottery (**Figure 3**). Although only about a sixth of the turntable is preserved, we have a complete radius; thus it can be completely reconstructed. There is no doubt about either the

³Yunker and others 1996: 67.

⁴Yunker and others 1997: 233.

⁵Geraty: 95-97; Geraty and others 1988: 238, 241-242; Yunker and others: 18-20; Yunker and others 1993: 218.

archaeological date or the find spot of the piece. It came from the destruction debris above a storeroom of an EB III house in Field D, the same room which produced almost 30 pottery vessels during the 1989 season.⁶ As such it is one of the earliest potter's wheels known.⁷

Middle Bronze Age IIA-B (ca. 2000-1650 B.C.)

No evidence for occupation at 'Umayri has ever been found for this time period.

Middle Bronze Age IIC (ca. 1700-1550 B.C.)

For the first time at 'Umayri excavations have produced coherent MB IIC architectural features at the top of the site. Fragmentary remains had been found on the north slope in 1987;⁸ a tomb was excavated in 1994;⁹ and the moat and rampart on the western side of the site had been exposed from 1989 to 1994.¹⁰ This season's work in Field B showed us that the MB IIC rampart rose originally to a high point at the northwest corner of the site. On top of and founded within the rampart was a wall, which crowned the crest of the rampart. There is debate about whether this wall was a city wall or a tower at the corner of the site. No certain remains of a Middle Bronze Age perimeter wall have been found at any other point on the site. Farther to the south, this wall was rebuilt as part of the early Iron I fortifications after an earthquake ca. 1200 B.C. caused the collapse of the MB IIC rampart. We had long noted the different masonry style (small boulders and large cobbles) in this MB IIC portion of the wall, but could not document the date. We had always assumed it was early Iron I, as was the southern portion of the wall. But the debris layers inside the northern part of the wall clearly dated it to MB IIC. Just where the MB IIC wall stops and the early Iron I addition starts has not yet been clearly determined. A wall line, or skirt, discovered beneath the later early Iron I perimeter wall to the south may be part of this wall, but there is no clear ceramic indication for its date.

Two other walls (**Figure 4**), both oriented east-west, were found inside

⁶Yunker and others 1990: 19.

⁷Three similar turntables were discovered in EB III contexts at Megiddo; see G. Loud, *Megiddo II* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1939), Pl. 268: 1-3.

⁸Geraty and others 1988: 238.

⁹Yunker and others 1996: 68.

¹⁰Yunker and others 1990: 20-21; Yunker and others 1993: 218-219; Yunker and others 1996: 73.

the perimeter wall and were founded on top of the rampart, which was just beginning to descend inside the site at this point. One of the walls was founded with several courses of neatly laid cobbles and had a superstructure of bricks. This wall turned south and after only about .25 m went beneath an early Iron I wall to the south; on the other side of the wall we could excavate only about .15 m of the earth deposits before it went under a Late Bronze Age wall. On the south side of a westward extension of this wall was part of a finely plastered pool (**Figure 5**) whose east-west dimension was about 2 m. Because it extended beneath the early Iron I building to the south, its north-south dimension could not be determined.

Farther inside the site, about 18 m east of the crest of the rampart and much lower (because of the dipping interior slope of the rampart), was the bottom course of a MB IIC structure made of large boulders, the closest masonry style to Cyclopean we have discovered so far. Because the wall seems to corner to the west, the semiplastered surface, made up of plaster patches and/or a thin layer of chalk on top, found on the east side of the wall was probably an exterior surface. No objects were found there.

Late Bronze Age I (ca. 1550-1400 B.C.)

Another hiatus seems to have existed at the site from the early parts of the Late Bronze Age.

Late Bronze Age II (ca. 1400-1225 B.C.)

Previously only a single earth layer could be certainly isolated to the Late Bronze Age.¹¹ This season, two rooms of a single building on an east-west axis were found at the northernmost extent of our excavations in Field B (**Figure 6**). A doorway led from the western room to the north in a space as yet unexcavated. We hope that work next season will be able to make it clear whether this was an external door or whether it led into another room. The western room contained a very hard, but irregular beaten-earth surface, which was very easy to trace throughout the room but could not be followed through the door into the eastern room where no corresponding surface was found. Perhaps this room was used much less intensively and the surface was so weak it was not preserved. No objects were found in either room to suggest a function for the building. A probe beneath the surface of the western room shows that the walls of the building keep descending and an earlier phase may still be found. The south wall of the building has so far been exposed to a height of approximately 3 m. The brick-like masonry style of the stones in all the walls is unique at the site.

¹¹Yunker and others 1990: 21.

Southeast of this building were the remains of another LB building immediately above the MB IIC structure with large stones. Another beaten-earth surface was found running up to a wall constructed of large boulders. This wall runs west beneath an early Iron I house and was cut by a large early Iron I garbage pit to the east. General archaeological consensus suggests that LB sedentary remains represent the pre-Israelite (or pre-Ammonite) inhabitants of the land who are called "Amorites" in the Bible. Because this is a well-known term for the inhabitants of Syria and Palestine at this time, we have no reason not to apply it here. But it is used so generally by both the Bible and the Mesopotamian texts that it cannot be understood to designate a technical ethnic term.

Early Iron I (ca. 1225-1150 B.C.)

It is from this period that the most spectacular finds from 'Umayri have come.¹² Following an earthquake near the beginning of the period a new fortification system was constructed along the same lines as that from the Middle Bronze Age, including the reuse of the moat, a new rampart above the destroyed old one, and a new fortification wall preserved two meters high in places. Inside the fortifications we discovered two houses typical of highland settlements in Cisjordan. These were very well preserved with walls approaching 2.5 m in height. Between 60 and 70 collared pithoi (large storejars, which contained large quantities of food supplies) were uncovered in the two houses; some were stored on the main floor, others on an upper floor from whence they crashed down onto the lower floor when the houses were destroyed. One of the houses contained a cultic center with a standing stone and an informal altar reminding one of a similar installation in the biblical story of Micah in Judg 17. The destruction debris contained many finds suggesting that the site was destroyed in a quick and violent military attack. Because there are strong similarities of the material culture with finds from the highlands of Cisjordan north of Jerusalem, we are presently working under the hypothesis that members of the tribe of Reuben in confederation with Proto-Israelite groups (tribes) west of the Jordan may have occupied the site at this time. So far the parallels with sites in Transjordan, most of which seem to be later than 'Umayri, are not strong.

During previous seasons we uncovered a stretch of the fortification wall about 30 m in length.¹³ This year's work uncovered much more of the wall so

¹²Geraty et al. 1988: 236; Younker and others 1990: 21-22; Younker and others 1993: 219-220; Younker and others 1996: 74-77; Younker and others 1997: 233-234.

¹³See the references in the previous footnote.

that we have a very good idea of how it ran for about 85 m (Figure 7), but not all stretches of the wall can be securely connected and we must surmise two connections across interruptions. From the northwest corner of the site the wall angles slightly west of south for approximately 30 m and then curves almost straight east for another 12 m where it was cut by the large administrative complex dating to the end of the Iron II period in the sixth century B.C. This east-west stretch still stands over 3.0 m high and the spaces between the stones were plastered (Figure 8). The wall may have turned south again because south of the administrative complex and 7 m away from where it was cut, we were able to trace a very similar wall (same masonry style, dimensions, and date) still at the western edge of the site for 11 m where it ran into a balk. About 8 m to the southeast a similar wall was discovered running east-west for another 6 m near the southern edge of the site. If all these walls belong to the same perimeter wall, it must have jogged around the western side of the site in several turns. So far no indication of a gate has appeared.

Work inside the wall this season produced finds from this and at least two later phases which, nonetheless, still belong to this period. The tops of the walls of houses inside the wall were uncovered at the northwestern corner of Field A. In a later phase a small room with two stone pillars contained a very thick layer (or layers) of ash over 1 m deep (Figure 9). Fragmentary walls to the north of this room also suggest other rooms, which were probably part of an intermittent occupation that did not fill the site. After the initial settlement with the fortification wall and its subsequent destruction, the site seems to have been only sporadically occupied in terms of both time and space.

During excavations this season we finally reached the bottom of a large garbage pit that contained almost 15,000 bones from food animals. Our palaeozoologist, Joris Peters of the Institut für Palaeoanatomie, Munich, observed that the bones were all from meat-producing parts of the animals and were mostly from sheep and goats with much smaller percentages of cattle, gazelle, and pig. This pit probably served at least the two houses to its west.

Late Iron I (ca. 1100-1000 B.C.)

In 1996 we found a storeroom on top of the destruction of the final early Iron I phase; it contained 18 collared pithoi of a type later in style than those found beneath the destruction (above).¹⁴ The other pottery is also very different than what we found below the destruction; we must posit at least a brief hiatus between the end of our early Iron I phases (ca.

¹⁴Younker and others 1997: 234.

1150 B.C.) and this one which may have begun somewhere in the eleventh century. It is possible that the population was, by this time, Ammonite.

Early Iron II (ca. Late Ninth to Eighth Centuries B.C.)

A few fragments of walls discovered in previous seasons suggest there was a small settlement at 'Umayri after a hiatus during the tenth century and perhaps some of the ninth century.¹⁵ Although our site was only weakly inhabited, the settlement at Jawa about 3 km to the east saw a much more active settlement. By this time, the inhabitants were most certainly Ammonites.

Late Iron II/Early Persian (ca. Early Sixth to Late Fifth or Early Fourth Century B.C.)

This period contained several phases, as the Ammonite monarchy apparently attempted to reopen our region to intensive agriculture following the defeat of Ammon by the Babylonians in 582 B.C.¹⁶ Previous excavation on the western rim of the site has produced a significant Ammonite administrative complex dating to the end of the Iron Age and extending into the early Persian period.¹⁷ The most interesting find was a small seal impression from the 1984 season that mentioned an Ammonite king named Ba'alyasha', or Baalis as it is spelled in Jer 40:14.¹⁸ Indeed it was in response to this king's complicity with a Judean prince named Ishmael that the Babylonians conquered Ammon in 582 B.C., according to Josephus.

Substantial walls and basement rooms were discovered in all previous seasons. The walls were much thicker than normal domestic house walls and contained many seals and seal impressions dating from the end of the Ammonite monarchy and the Persian provincial system. Domestic dwellings may have existed north of the large buildings where the officials administering the complex could have lived. Domestic finds were found on the surfaces of these northern rooms, but not in the south. Generally, the farther south one goes in the complex the larger the rooms. In 1996 the largest and finest room was excavated. It contained a very fine

¹⁵Yunker and others 1997: 220.

¹⁶ Larry G. Herr, "Wine Production in the Hills of Southern Ammon and the Founding of Tall al-'Umayri in the Sixth Century B.C. *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 39: 121-125.

¹⁷ Geraty 1985: 90-92; Geraty and others 1988: 230-235; Yunker and others 1990: 22-23; Yunker and others 1993: 220-221; Yunker and others 1996: 77-79; Yunker and others 1997: 234.

¹⁸Geraty 1985: 98.

plastered floor laid in two phases (Figure 10).

This season the southern edge of this complex was found where it apparently reused an east-west section of the possible early Iron I perimeter wall as its boundary. A series of small rooms with plaster floors separated the large plastered audience room from the edge of the complex. The plans of the rooms altered over several phases with doorways blocked and new ones opened. One of the floors produced several domestic finds, such as a juglet and grindstones.

In a debris layer above one of the surfaces were several fragments of one or more ceramic statues or anthropomorphic cult stands. None of the pieces could be mended. The fragmentary nature of the finds match similar pieces found in earlier seasons. The pieces this season, however, were the most interesting yet found and included a larger-than-life-size eye dramatically painted; a life-size chin and mouth with painted beard or tattoo; a slightly smaller-than-life-size ear; two possible fragments of a life-size heel; parts of arms or legs smaller than life-size; and a possible shoulder, much smaller than life-size. The ceramic ware was generally the same for all the pieces, except for the eye, which was also painted with a different color scheme than the other pieces. Whether these finds were in secondary deposit or not is unclear at present. That they were not directly on the surface might suggest secondary deposition, but they were clumped together into a corner of the room; perhaps they were intentionally placed there. The finds from this phase were so close to the surface that it is possible other pieces of the statue(s) could have been taken away with the significant aeolian erosion of topsoil which our site has experienced over the centuries. Stone statues (mostly busts) of gods or kings are well known in Ammonite art, but most are not considered to be as late as these fragments seem to be.¹⁹

From an earth layer just west of the administrative complex came an Athenian tetradrachma (Object No. 6530), the first such coin found at the site. It is a further indication that the complex extended well into the Persian period. Other walls and plaster surfaces were found in Field L, but not enough has yet been exposed to suggest functions. The site seems to have gone out of existence toward the end of the Persian period.

Hellenistic (ca. 330-60 B.C.)

During the Hellenistic period pits were found on the western edge of the site in previous seasons where they cut through the plaster floor of the large room in the administrative complex (Figure 10). This season walled

¹⁹Piotr Bienkowski, *The Art of Jordan* (Liverpool: National Museums & Galleries on Merseyside, 1991), 40-45.

structures were found at the southern lip of the site in Field L. A small circular wall made of a single line of stones surrounded a small rectangular room or bin. The walls are weakly constructed and represent only the most ephemeral of settlements. The general lack of Hellenistic pottery and other finds from other areas of the site also suggests this conclusion.

Roman (ca. 60 B.C.-A.D.330)

Previous seasons have discovered a *miqveh* or ritual bath usually connected with Jewish concerns for ritual cleanliness, especially during the first century A.D.²⁰ Elsewhere, coins and a few pieces of pottery have been found. But nothing beyond these signs of an isolated villa or farmhouse has been found.

Byzantine (ca. A.D. 330-650)

A few fragmentary walls and several debris layers containing scores of ceramic basins were found on the eastern side of the site during the 1987 season.²¹ We suggested this was from an isolated farm. This summer, however, more walls and surfaces were found near the southwestern corner of the site in Field H. Not enough walls were found to be able to suggest a coherent plan for the building.

Islamic Age (ca. 650-1918)

Previous seasons have produced signs of agricultural activity at the site from the Early Islamic through the Late Islamic periods.²² No signs of houses have been found. The primary activity seems to have been the removal of rocks from fields as aeolian erosion slowly removed topsoil and brought to light the tops of the more ancient walls. A burial with an infant's skeleton was found in Field H.

Modern (1918-Present)

Modern activity, such as agricultural activities and silt deposits from previous seasons of our excavation, was detected in many places on the surface of the site.

²⁰Geraty and others 1988: 234.

²¹Geraty and others 1988: 246.

²²Geraty and others 1988: 246; Younker and others 1990: 24.

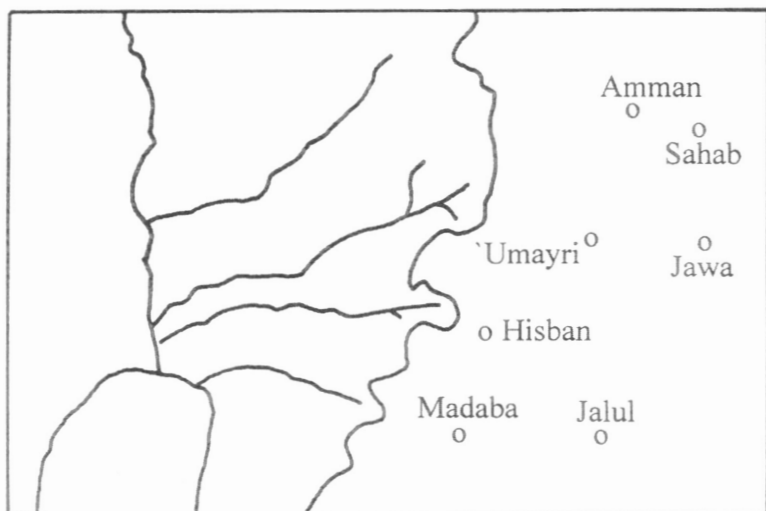


Figure 1. Map of the Madaba Plains region.



Figure 2. Tall al-'Umayri, Field K: Cobbled and stone installations in EB IB surface near the dolmen.

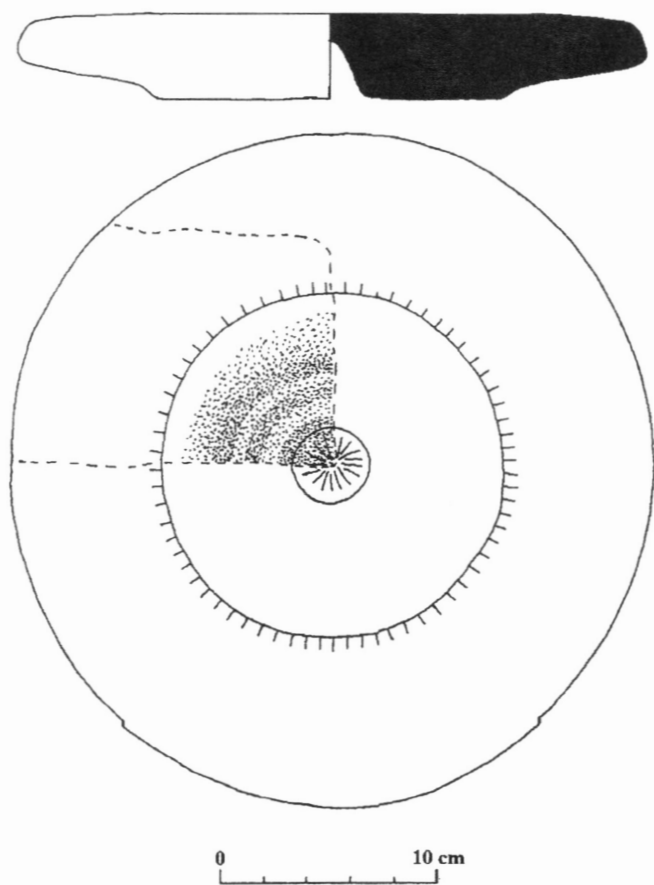


Figure 3. Tall al-'Umayri, Field D: Upper potter's turntable fragment made of basalt.



Figure 4. Tall al-'Umayri, Field B (Phase 14): Two wall fragments.

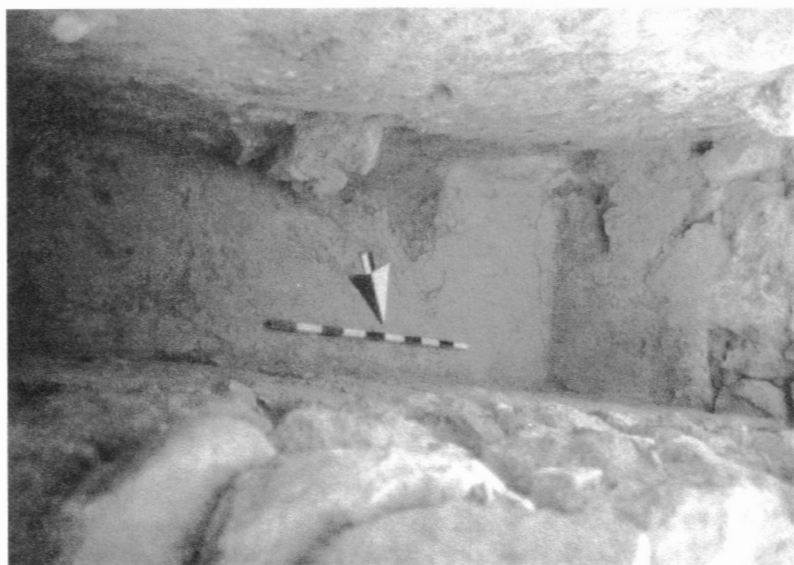


Figure 5. Tall al-'Umayri, Field B (Phase 14): Plastered pool.

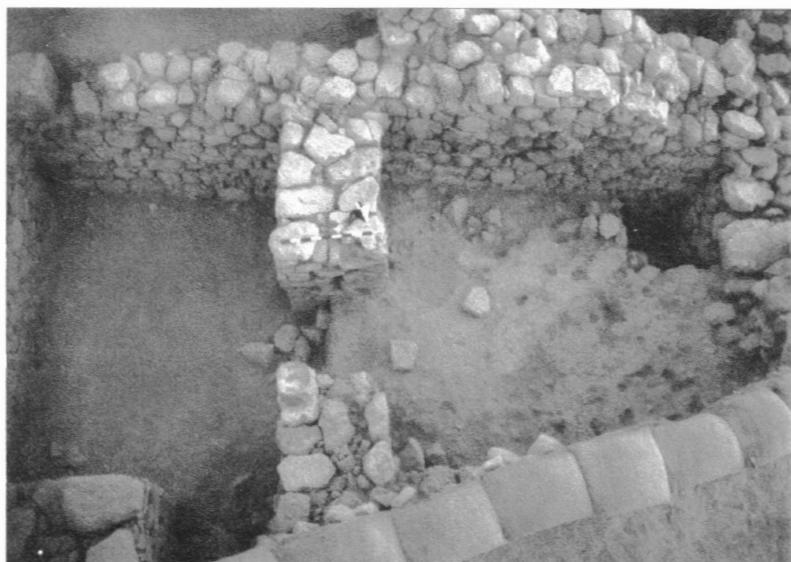


Figure 6. Tall al-'Umayri, Field B (Phase 13): Building with two rooms and brick-like stones.



Figure 7. Tall al-'Umayri, Field A (Phase 13): Elevation of the early Iron I perimeter wall; note plaster remnants in cracks.



Figure 8. Tall al-'Umayri, Fields A (Phase 13), B (Phase 11), and H (Phase 9): Plan of the early Iron I perimeter wall as we reconstruct its plan at the western edge of the site.



Figure 9. Tall al-'Umayri, Field A (Phase 12): Early Iron I pillared room and surface.



Figure 10. Tall al-'Umayri, Field H (Phase 5): Large room of the administrative center with plastered floor discovered in 1996.