

INTRODUCTION

Tel Achziv is situated on the northern coast of Israel, 15 km north of Acre and 25 km south of Tyre, in what was once southern Phoenicia.

The cemeteries of Achziv, dated to the Iron Age II period (10th-7th centuries BCE), were located in three major sites that surrounded the tel from the north, east, and south. While the Southern and Eastern Cemeteries were used primarily for multiple inhumation burials inside family tombs, the Northern Cemetery seems to have been used primarily for cremation burials (Photos 15–17, Plan 3-4).

THE NORTHERN CEMETERY OF ACHZIV: THE SITE OF THE TOPHET

Since it is customary in Phoenician/Punic studies to identify sites that contained numerous cremation burials as *Tophet* sites—in this way utilizing the biblical term for the burial ground in Jerusalem where cremations were practiced (see below)—this term has also been applied to the case of the Northern Cemetery of Achziv.



PHOTO 15. The Northern Cemetery (at front) located on the sea shore about 50 meters to the north of Tel Achziv. The outlet of Chziv River is seen between the tel and the cemetery. Looking south.

F



Stella



Urn



Red Slipped Jug

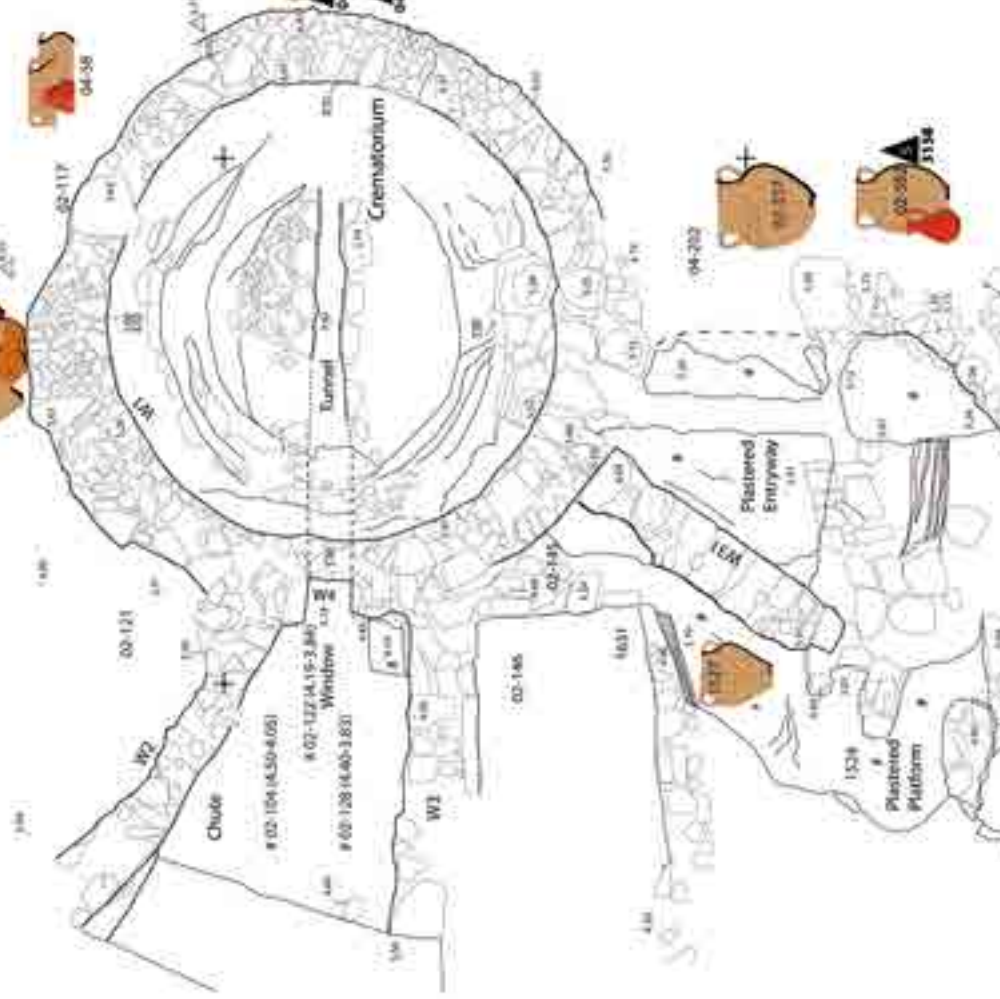


Other Jugs

G

H

I



16

15

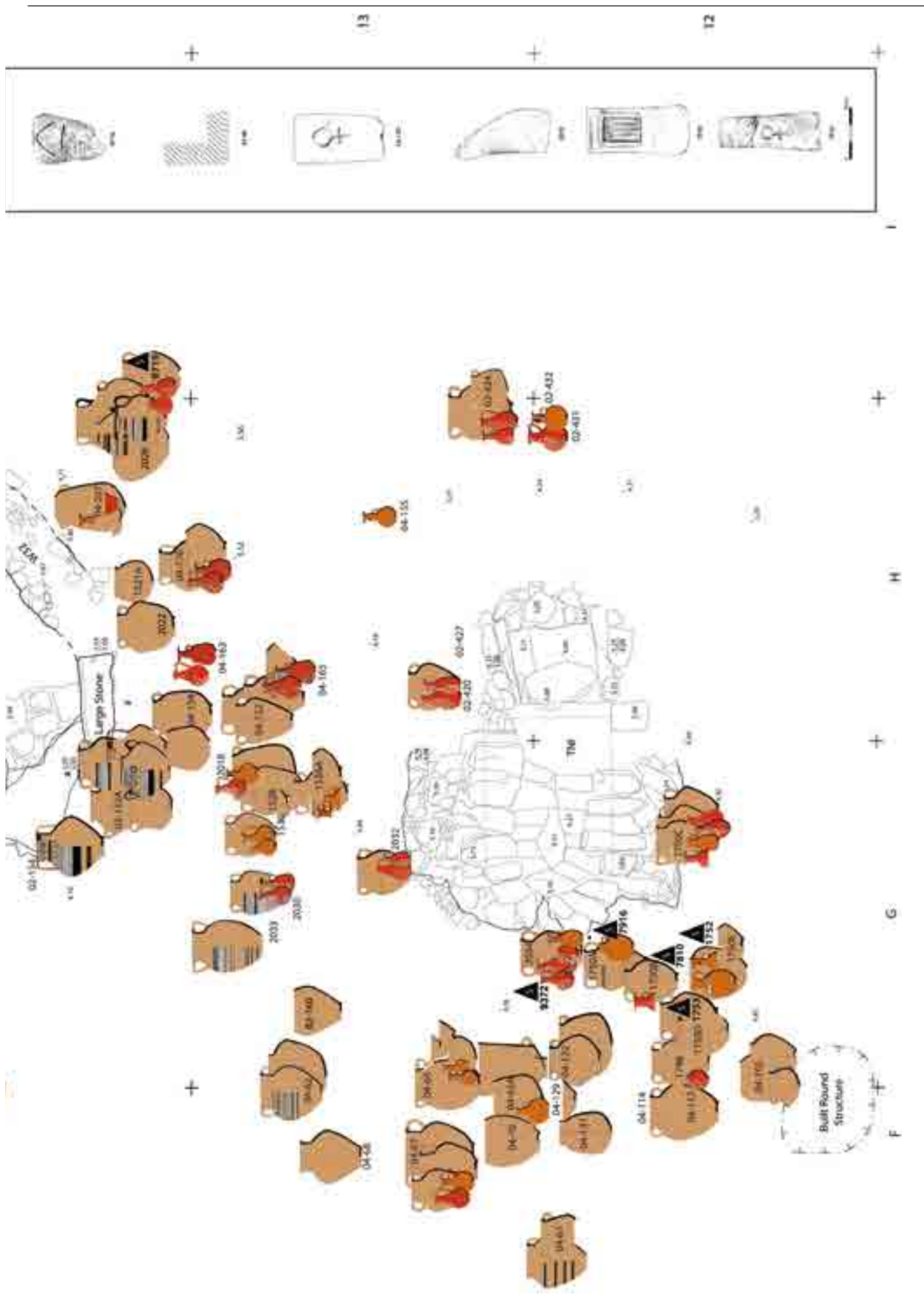
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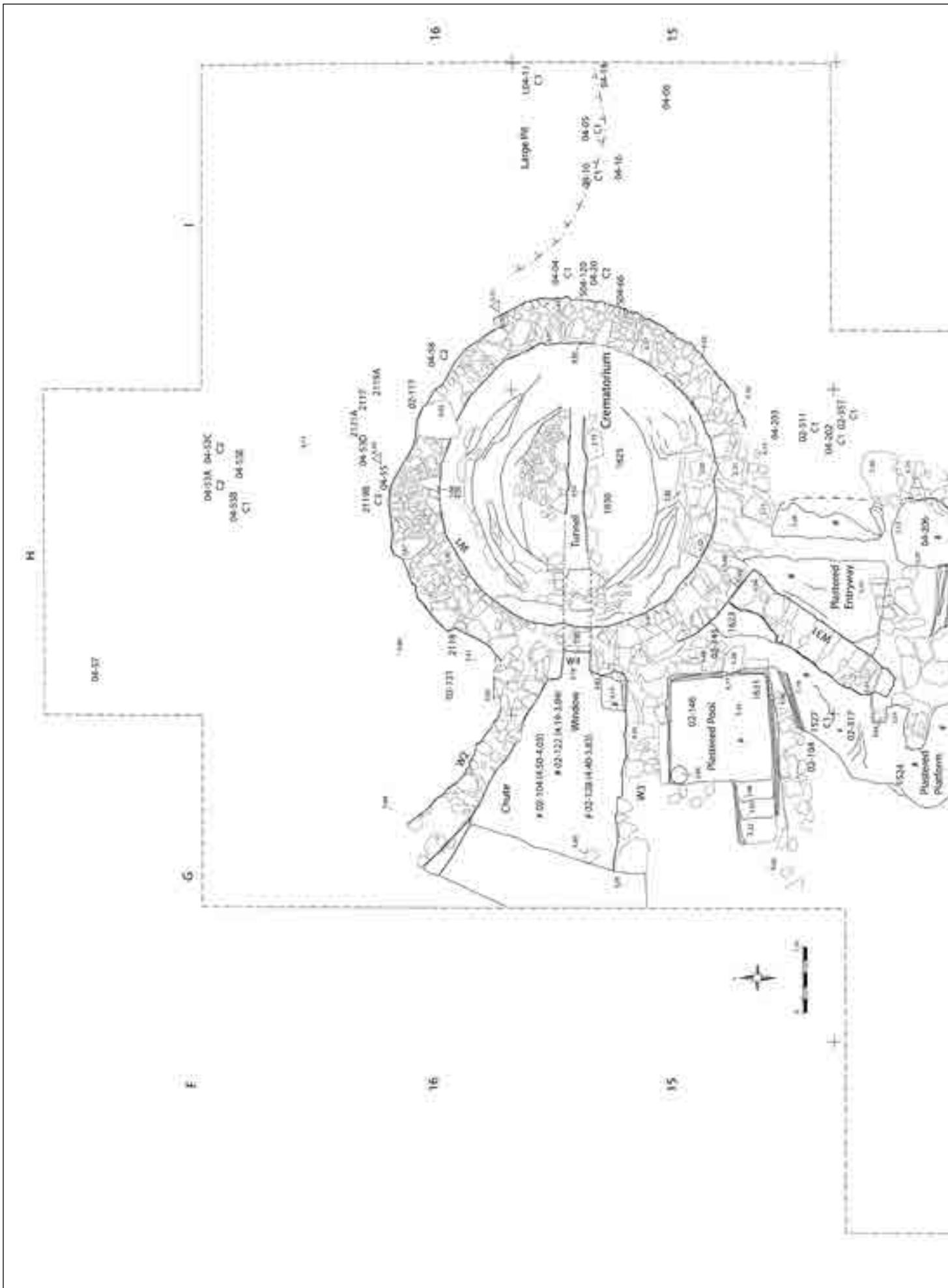
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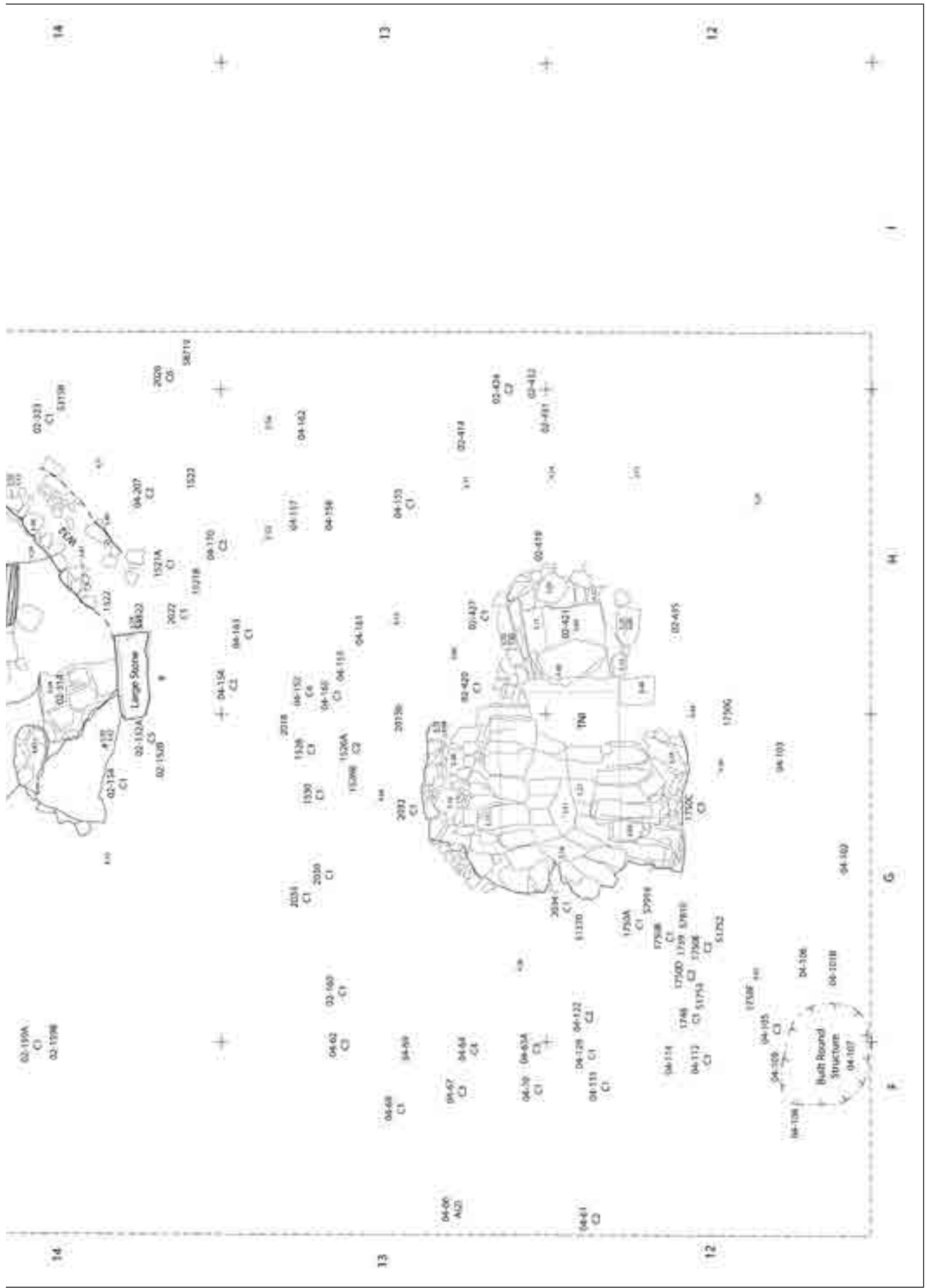
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PLAN 3-4. The Tophet site at the Northern Cemetery of Achziv with dozens of crematoriums surrounding the crematorium structure and the built family tomb, TN1.





PLAN 5. A general plan of the Northern Cemetery of Achziv referring to all loci excavated.

THE NORTHERN CEMETERY OF ACHZIV (10TH-6TH CENTURIES BCE)



PHOTO 16. Photographs taken by Eilat Mazar from the top of the puller, which stands on the earth road just to the west of the Northern Cemetery. Looking north.



PHOTO 17. A general view of the Northern Cemetery as seen at the end of the 2002 excavation season (before covering TN1). The round structure of the Crematorium is on the left, the Plastered Platform and Plastered Entryway in the center and TN1 (the family ashlar built tomb) is on the right. Looking west.

As different as the inhumation and cremation burial customs were, they existed in Achziv side by side throughout almost all of the Iron Age II period (beginning at some time toward the end of the 10th century BCE). Still, while the existence of cremation burials in Phoenicia are well known, the only other *Tophet* site known to us besides Achziv, in which an organized cult of cremation burials was conducted, is the Tyre Al-Bass site in Lebanon (Aubet 2004). Though the latter greatly contributes to our knowledge of Phoenician *Tophet* sites, it lacks the actual crematorium structure itself. Luckily, this structure was discovered at Achziv, and to this day is the only such structure known in the Phoenician/Punic world.

The crematorium structure has a round shape and a built entryway which leads to its entrance. It was constructed sometime in the late 10th century BCE. The bodies were burnt in the crematorium and then, it seems, a representative selection of the burnt bones were placed in pottery vessels (sometimes in cloth bags) that were used as burial containers (urns). It would, therefore, not have been enough to build a structure simply to hold a fire; rather, what was needed was a structure that would also allow space for entry with the deceased's body, would be able to harness the sea-winds power for its high temperature pyre, and that would allow for relatively easy collection of the burnt bones.

The fact that the crematorium stood surrounded by dozens of cremation burials illustrates just what a focal point it must have been. It was discovered essentially on the seashore, very close to the coastline, a location that likely possessed both practical and cultic importance. Not only would the sea winds have fueled the cremation pyre, but the sea itself, located to the west, seemed to have held its own significance, as is evidenced by the westward-facing stelae found alongside the cremations. It should be noted that its very existence testifies to the institutionalization of the cremation burial cult at the site and its major status in Phoenician burial culture, hinting also at the general organizational nature of Phoenician religion and society.

While there is nothing to indicate that the crematorium structure is to be considered sacred in and of itself, it seems that over time it did gain significance as a holy place. This is made obvious by the fact that although inhumation burials were placed around the crematorium, immediately after it ceased to be in use, more than three hundred years since it was erected, the crematorium itself was left untouched for another seven hundred years as though no one dared to violate it.

In light of this, we should assume that such a structure existed in every Phoenician *Tophet* site and, more so, that every major Phoenician city had such a site. It seems therefore only a matter of time until a similar structure will be uncovered also at the *Tophet* of Tyre Al-Bass.

Having appeared as suddenly as it disappeared, the origins of the Phoenician cremation cult remain a major unsolved question. There are no signs of any foreign cultural influence that would indicate that it was an imported practice of some kind. Rather, accompanying the cremations are the same objects found together with «regular» Phoe-

nician burials from the same time, which indicates that the cremation burial cult, including the Achziv *Tophet*, comprised an integral part of the Phoenician culture and must be understood and studied as such.

In the beginning of the Iron Age II period, sometime in the early 10th century BCE, the Northern Cemetery began to be used for regular family tombs. The cremation cult appeared not long thereafter, towards the end of that century, seemingly taking over the cemetery. No new family tombs were constructed once the crematorium structure was erected. On the contrary, there is a good chance that several such tombs were moved to the Southern Cemetery to accommodate its construction (Mazar 2001: 157). At the same time, at least one family tomb (TN1; see Mazar 2004), was left untouched. It is very interesting to see how the burial customs of this tomb continued uninterrupted throughout the Iron Age II period, and even into the Babylonian Period (6th century BCE), while the *Tophet* developed around it.

A more precise date can be given to the construction of the crematorium structure thanks to the pottery assemblage found in the Plastered Pool of the late 10th century BCE (L1631). This assemblage contains finds that were filled into the Plastered Pool when the crematorium was built, thus canceling out the pool. The same pottery was found together with a Cypro-Geometric III urn/krater at Tyre Al-Bass (Aubet 2004:Fig.93; Aubet & Núñez 2008:Fig.83; Mazar. 2000:Fig.14:2), thus indicating some slightly earlier date for the *Tophet* there.

No cremation burials dated later than the 7th century BCE were found at the Achziv *Tophet* site. That practice seemed to end abruptly sometime around 600 BCE and was immediately followed by the practice of regular inhumation burials (Mazar 2008).

THE BIBLICAL TOPHET

The strong connection between Israel and the Phoenician culture is rooted as far back as the 10th century BCE, at the time of King David and King Solomon, and later on in the 9th century BCE, when the Phoenician princess Jezebel married Ahab, the Israelite king. The Phoenician influence continued throughout the Iron Age II period until the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. As regards to burial practices, it should be noted that the term «*tophet*» comes from the biblical description of the First Temple-period (late 7th and early 6th century BCE) cremation site in Jerusalem's Valley of Hinnom—a cult that served as a very active expression of this influence. Although its details, especially as related in the Book of Jeremiah (7:31–32; 19:6, 11–14), are vague, it is obvious that it featured the cremation of bodies. This act was strongly condemned by the Prophet Jeremiah since it destroyed the body of the deceased, going against the most significant order of bringing the body to the family tomb for burial. Also noted in the Book of Jeremiah is the cremation of «sons and daughters» as part of that cult of Ba'al in the Valley of Hinnom (7:31). In the scholarly studies of the Phoenicians it is generally accepted that «sons and daughters» referred to children. It is this statement that seemed to connect the burial cult of Ba'al in Jerusalem with other cremation sites known from the Punic world.

These sites, located mainly in Tunisia (Carthage), Sicily and Sardinia, were found to contain cremation burials of infants and very young children. The dedicatory inscriptions written on the stelae found alongside the burials reveal that they were part of the Phoenician/Punic burial cult of Ba'al and of his consort, Tanit, Face of Ba'al. They were thus dubbed «*tophet*» sites due their similarity to the burial site of «sons and daughters» in Jerusalem.

A problem, however, arises upon closer examination of the biblical phrase «sons and daughters»; does it indeed refer only to infants and young children? In fact, this term commonly appears throughout the Bible when referring to future generations in general, and, while no exact age is specified, it seems more logical to assume that the intent is not solely to children. One such example comes from a discussion of marriage in the Book of Ezra (10, 12), noting to whom «sons and daughters» should not marry. It is therefore clear that «sons and daughters» refers to a future generation and not literally to the newborn or very young. The biblical references to the burial cult in Jerusalem should be viewed in the same light: it included the cremation of adults, most probably already deceased. In this same light, assuming that the existence of the Ba'al cult in Jerusalem was the result of strong Phoenician influence, we maintain that the cremation sites at Tyre Al-Bass and Achziv were also of adults—a fact supported by the archaeological evidence.

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