

The Jordan Valley during the Iron Age and the Evidence from Deir 'Alla

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***Abstract.** This paper addresses briefly the occupational history of the Jordan Valley during the Iron Age. The conclusions here are based on extensive archaeological work in the area, including a major survey (1975, 1976) conducted by the author with James Sauer and Khair Yassine, and the excavations at Deir 'Alla (1976 onwards) jointly with Henk Franken and later with Gerrit van der Kooij. The work in this area has shown that there was a smooth transition from the Late Bronze Age to the following period of the Iron Age without any ethnic change. The material culture shows that strong ties or some kind of integration existed with Ammonite Kingdom on the highland during the major stages of the Iron Age. This is also supported by the epigraphic evidence of the Bala'am text found in Phase IX at Tell Deir 'Alla.*

The archaeology of the Jordan Valley including its occupational history of the Iron Age is known through a number of previous surveys (Albright 1926; Glueck 1951; Contenson 1964; Ibrahim et al 1976; 1988), and through excavations which took place in the Rift Valley since the twenties. The work has been intensified with the excavations at Tell es-Sa'idiyyeh, Tabaqat Fahil (Pella), Tell Abu el-Kharaz, Tell el-Maqbarah, Tell al-Mazar, Tell Deir 'Alia, Tell Abu ez-Zeighan, Tell Umm Hammad esh-Sharqi (Tell et-Twal), Tell Nimrin.

Since the major survey of the East Jordan Valley in 1975, 1976 (Fig. 1), a number of Iron Age sites have been demolished or heavily destroyed. Many of those places were fortunate when, after the completion of 1975-76 survey, a number of colleagues responded positively to our lists of potential sites for excavations or salvage operations.

With the exception of a few sites (Jericho, Beisan, Tell es-Sa'idiyyeh and Tell Deir 'Alla)

no special attention was paid to Biblical identification of the Iron Age sites in the Jordan Valley, as was the case in Western Palestine. This fact contributed to a better understanding of the material culture and the stratigraphic evidence without being oriented by preconceived views.

Based on the archaeological evidence alone it is hard to determine a precise date for the Iron Age, although the period around 1200 B.C has been generally accepted by many scholars as the end of the late Bronze and the beginning of Iron I. The end of the Iron Age is associated with the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C. and the control of the region by the Persians .

There seems to have been a smooth transition from the Late Bronze Age into the Iron Age. Most major LB sites were reoccupied in the Iron I and the following phases of the Iron Age. This cultural continuity can be observed at several excavated sites including Jericho, Nimrin, Deir 'Alla, Sa'idiyyeh, Pella, Abu el-

- 1- Tell el-Meqbereh
- 2- Tell'Abu el-Kharaz
- 3- Tell'Abu Qamel
- 4- Tell es-Sikhneh
- 5- Khirbet Ma'adh
- 6- Tell er-Rayy
- 7- Tell Mudawwar
- 8- Tell el-Qeseibeh
- 9- Tell el-'Araba'in
- 10- Tell er-Refeif
- 11- Tell el-Mafajeh
- 12- Tell'Abu Habil
- 13- Tell Hejeieh
- 14- Tell'Abu el-Aqarib
- 15- Tell'Abu Dahnun
- 16- Tell es-Safidiyyeh
- 17- Tell el-Qel'ya
- 18- Tell el-Qos
- 19- Tell el-Mazir
- 20- Tell'Ammata
- 21- Khirbet Buweib
- 22- Tell el-Ghazaleh
- 23- Tell el-Kharabeh
- 24- Tell el-Hemneh East
- 25- Tell Deir'Ala
- 26- Deir'Ala Village
- 27- Tell er-Rabi'
- 28- Bsas el-Aqil
- 29- Tell'Umm Hammad esh-Sharqi
- 30- Tell Zakari
- 31- Tell er-Remeileh
- 32- Mhith
- 33- Tell el-Mafiq West
- 34- Tell Damiyah
- 35- 'Abu Zeighan
- 36- Tell esh-Shunah
- 37- Er-Rashidiyyeh
- 38- Tell esh-Sharab(el-Kufrein)
- 39- Esh-Sharab East
- 40- Tell et-Tahneh
- 41- Tell el-Hammam
- 42- Tell'Iktanū North
- 43- El-Mshayyadeh
- 44- Esh-Shaghūr
- 45- Tell Bleibel
- 46- Mwais
- 47- 'Azemeh South

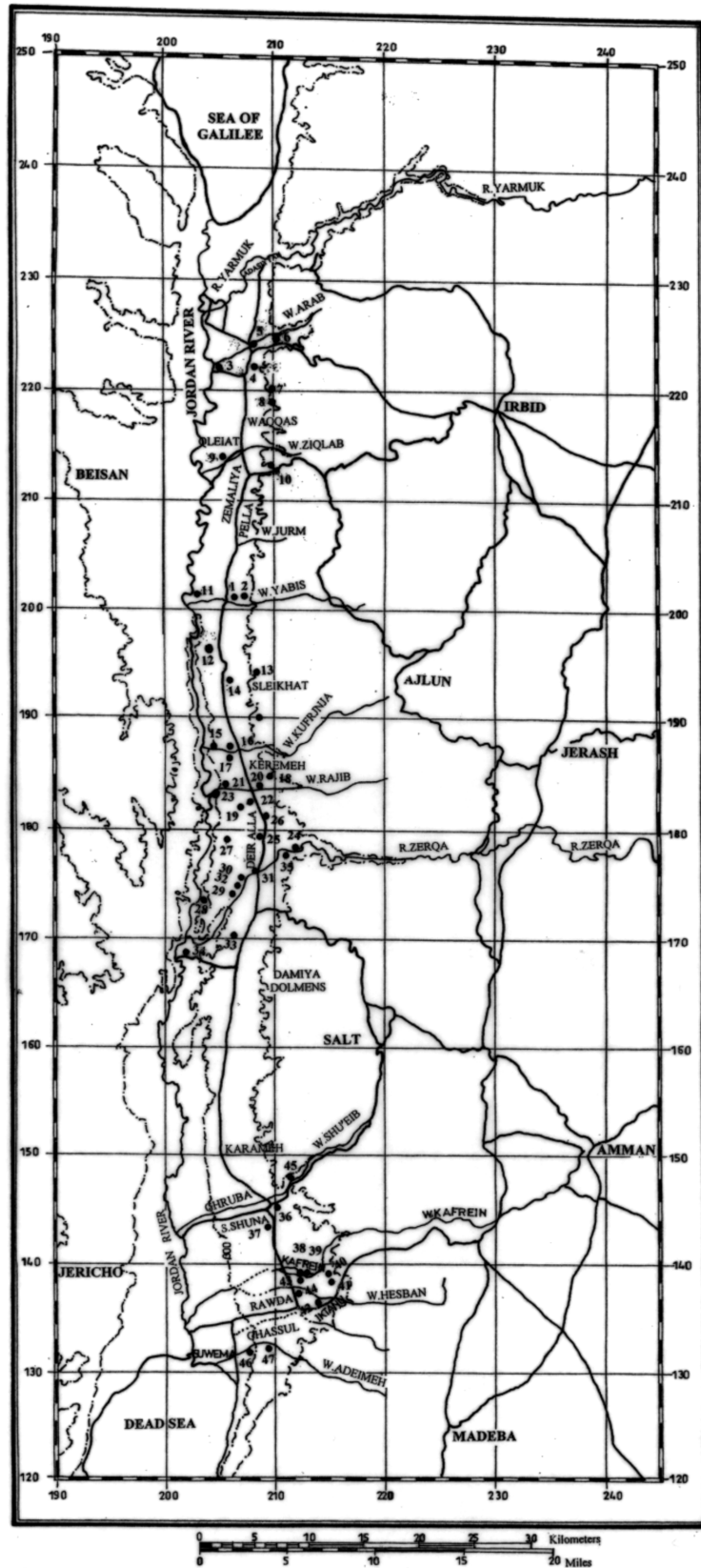


Fig. 1: The Jordan Valley in the Iron Age.

Kharaz and others. Sites with extensive excavations such as Pella, Sa'idiyyeh, and Deir 'Alla, show that the Iron I period witnessed a recession in the material culture and in international contacts. Major LB sites including Pella, Sa'idiyyeh and Deir 'Alla were surrounded by walls. These sites were extended during the Iron I beyond the enclosing walls. Urban sites of the LB became open settlements during the following period. Such observation was also made at similar sites on the highland. It should also be noted that several sites were founded during the Iron I. Such conclusions could be made from surface work, not from excavation sites. These would include sites located around the Zerqa river: Tell el-Hemmeh East, Tell er-Rabi', Tell Zakari, Tell er-Remalah, Tell Damiyah, Tell er-Rashidiyyah (Fig. 1).

From the evidence obtained so far, it seems that individual city-states as known in the Late Bronze Age were integrated in much larger territorial states or kingdoms of Moab and Ammon. The material culture obtained from excavation sites shows that, towards the end of the 2nd millennium B. C, the Egyptian influence was decreasing drastically and local traditions are more evident. The affiliation of the Jordan Valley sites with the main centres or capitals of Ammon and Moab cannot be drawn precisely. There are, however, strong ties between the central Jordan Valley and the Ammonite Kingdom.

Significant cultural material from Late Bronze and Iron Ages comes from Excavations at Tell Sa'idiyyeh and Tell Deir 'Alla. In fact extensive excavations at both sites show that they shared similar occupational history for at least one millennium, from the Late Bronze Age until the last major period of occupation during the Hellenistic period. This common history during these periods may also apply to other sites in the Jordan Valley such as Tell el-Mazar, Pella, Tell Abu el-Kharaz, and

Tell esh-Shunah South.

The transition between Late Bronze and Iron I periods is probably best attested at Sa'idiyyah and Deir 'Alla. The two sites flourished during the Late Bronze Age and may have served as administrative or religious centers. They also witnessed a major destruction in the twelfth century B. C. and seemed to have been resettled after a short period of abandonment. This was at least the case at Deir 'Alla. The new phase is also assigned to the twelfth century B.C and falls within the beginning of the Iron I period.

On both sides of the Jordan River there are ca. 40 Iron I sites. Most of these sites are located on the eastern side of the valley. On the surface of the sites there is little evidence from the first phase of the Iron I, while Iron I B. C periods are well represented (Ibrahim et al 1976). Almost all Iron I sites continued to be occupied during the following phases of the Iron II. From the surface, it is hard to describe the nature and size of the Iron I settlements, while evidence from excavations shows that such sites were not fortified, but were larger in size than the preceding LB and following Iron II periods.

Here I would like to discuss briefly the Iron Age evidence as seen at Tell Deir 'Alla in the central Jordan Valley. This is due to the substantial evidence found at the site in recent years and the involvement of the present author in these excavations. Earlier excavations of the sixties (Franken and Kalsbeck 1969) were concentrated on the northern slope (Figs. 2, 3). Occupation levels relating to these excavations were designated by Franken Phases A-L. A major public building or temple (Fig. 4) and other buildings of the LB excavated by Franken belong to the earlier Phases A-D. According to Franken, the sanctuary complex was destroyed at the beginning of the Iron Age, and after the destruction of the LB settle-

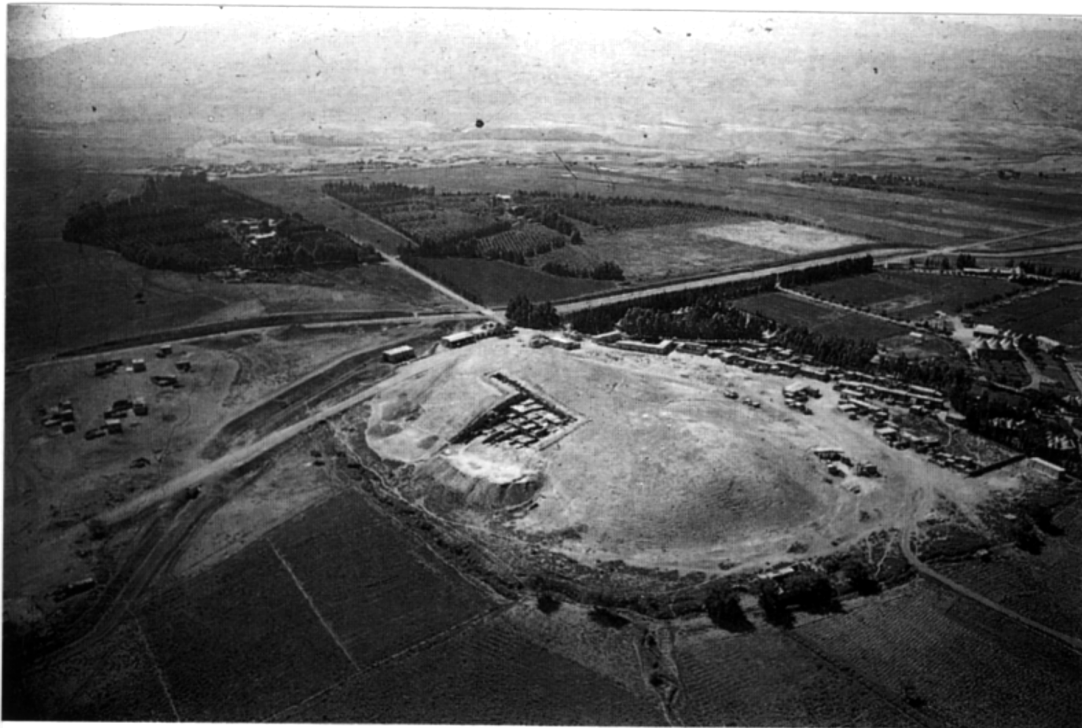


Fig. 2: Aerial View of Tell Deir 'Alla in the Central Jordan Valley.

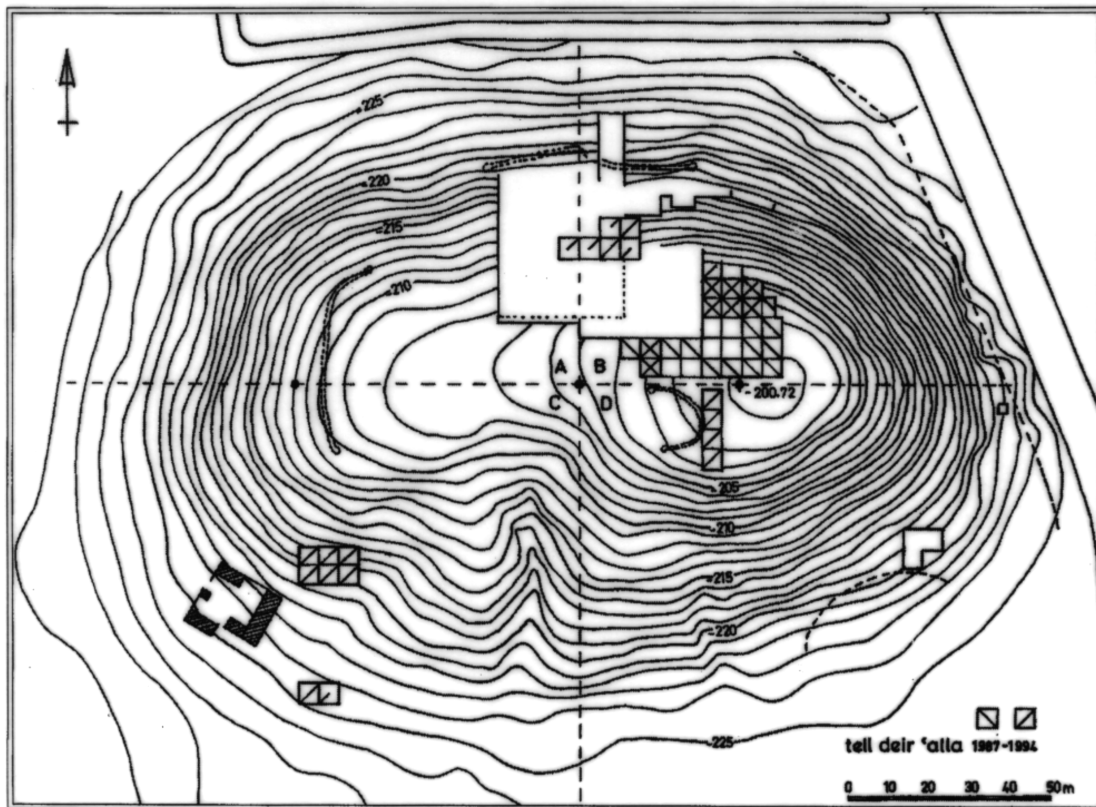


Fig. 3: Tell Deir 'Alla site plan showing excavated areas.

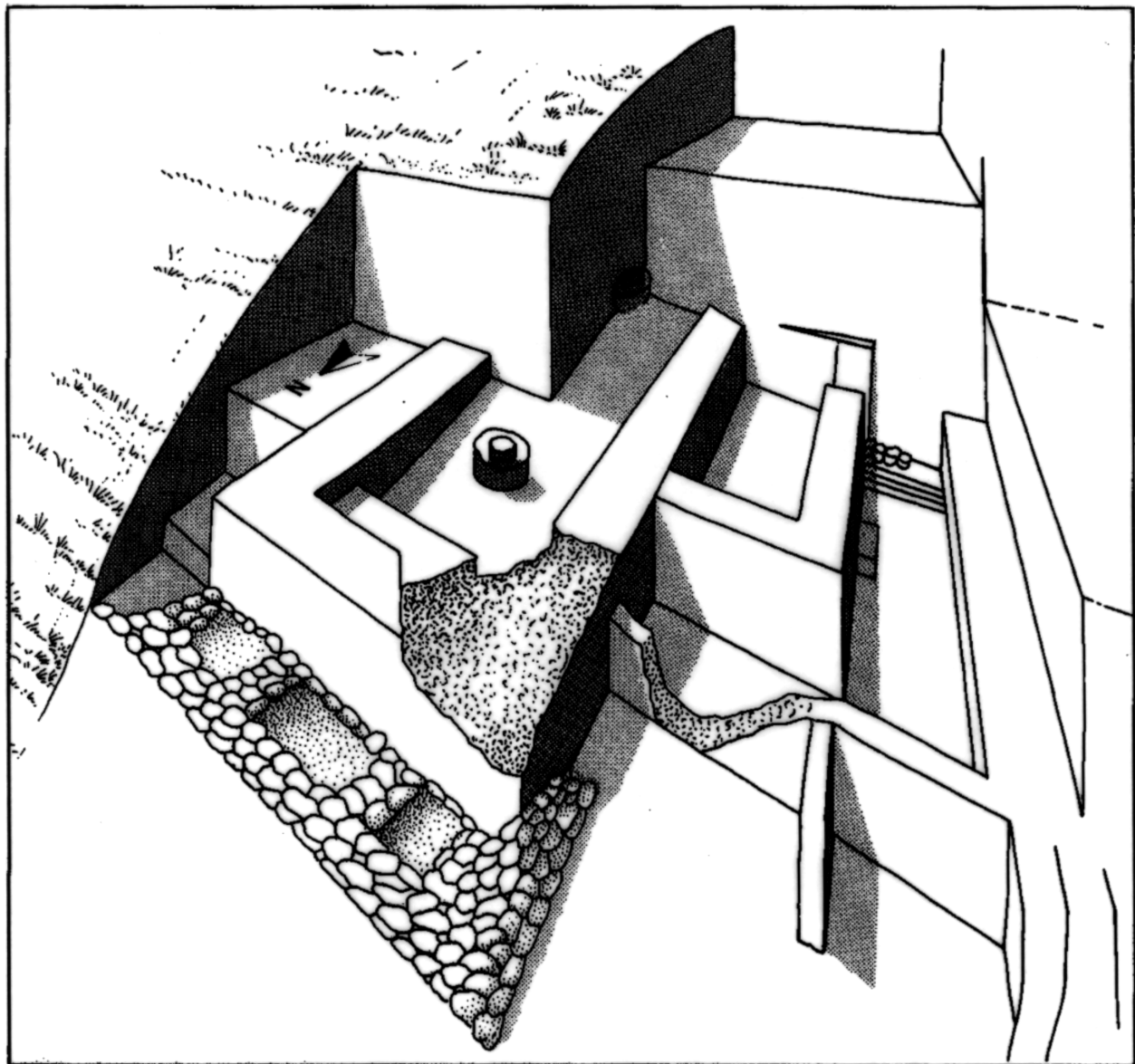


Fig. 4: Reconstruction of Late Bronze temple at Tell Deir 'Alla.

ment Deir 'Alla might have served as a camp-like site. The following find is related to three furnaces from Phase B (Franken). Franken believes that these furnaces were used for casting bronze objects. Excavations at a small scale were resumed in this area during the season of 1994. These excavations failed to throw more light on melting activities. The only possible indication of bronze casting is related to a fragment of crucible without an obvious connection with the ovens identified by Frank-

en. Among special objects in this trench are two sherds of cylindrical fenestrated stands, one of them representing a dancing lyre player (Fig. 6: 1).

Major excavations in 1994 were undertaken on the southwestern slope where interesting LB/Iron I (13th-12th century B.C) materials have been uncovered (Ibrahim & Van der Kooij 1994). The main results obtained in this area correspond to the last stages of the Late

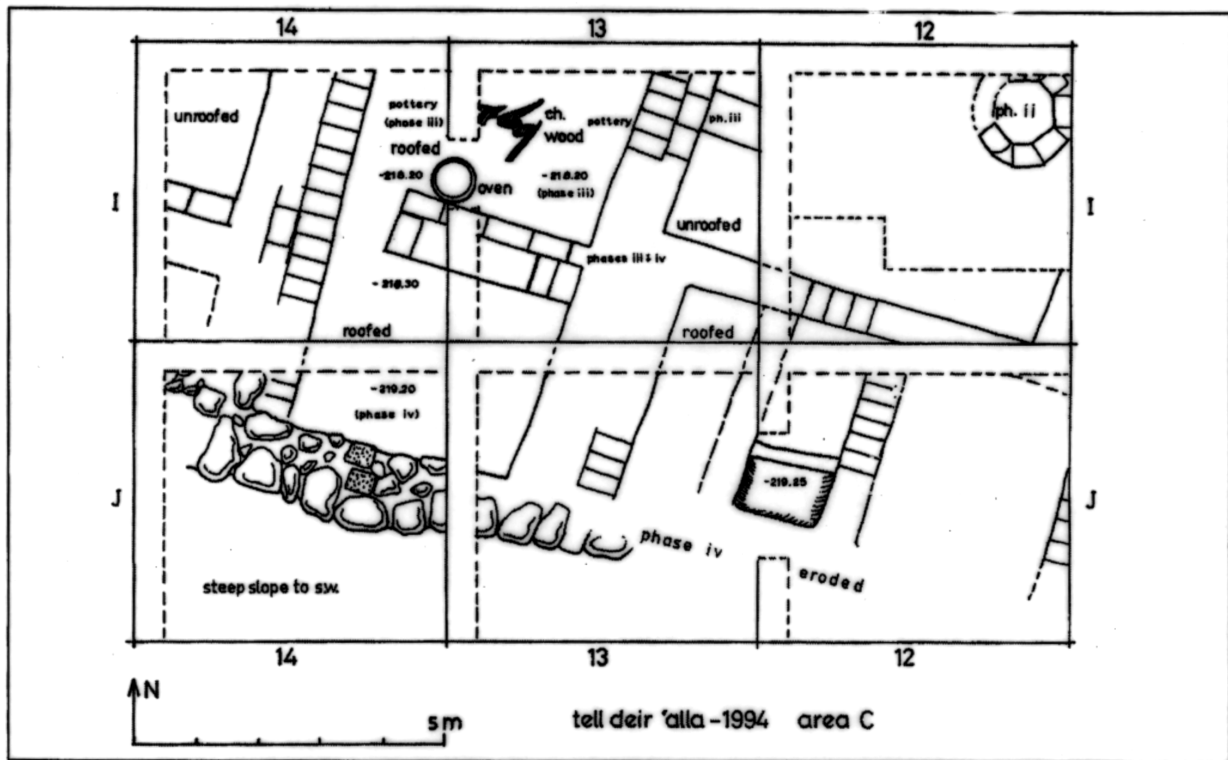


Fig. 5: Late Bronze excavations at SW slope of Tell Deir 'Alla.

Bronze and the beginning of the Iron Ages (13th/12th century B.C).

The main Late Bronze structures consist of a massive enclosure mud-brick wall built on heavy stone foundations connected to other thick, mud-brick walls; the latter are perpendicular to the main wall (Fig. 5). The enclosure wall curves to follow the contours of the site. Some of the walls are preserved to a height of over 1 m and some are ca. 1.5 m wide. So far, floors have been identified in small areas only. The enclosure wall may indicate an urban character of the settlement at this stage. Taken together with evidence found in earlier excavations, these finds indicate that the site must have been a town of considerable size towards the end of the Late Bronze period. In this area another major phase of occupation was identified, during which the walls of the earlier phase were reused, additional walls were constructed, and floors and courtyard

pavements were laid down. The settlement apparently extended far beyond the city wall, which seems to have been reused as part of the domestic quarters of this later phase. As indicated by the excavations of the 1994 season and earlier seasons, the site was no longer surrounded by a city wall during the 13th-12th centuries B.C, when it must have reached its maximum extent. It should also be noted that no gap in occupation is visible between this period and the earlier one. The dating of this phase is based on collared-rim jars and other objects. At the end of this phase the site must have witnessed a major destruction, accompanied by intense burning of most of the parts excavated, including the walls and floors.

The two other squares (C/B 13-14), located at the foot of the Tell, correspond in chronology, orientation of architecture, and building material as well (at least in part) to the last phases in the squares mentioned above, which

lie at a distance of 30 m to the north. Two architectural phases were recognized. The walls of the later phase were preserved to a height of ca. 1.5 m and consist of baked and unbaked bricks. Neither a uniform architectural plan nor any definite function for the room that was uncovered can be established in the small area so far exposed. Two uses for the room can be suggested, however. Large fragments of crucibles, found at the west side of square C/B 14 surrounded by heavily burnt materials, indicate bronze work activities. Secondly, large storage vessels of the collared-rim jar type, as well as a fragment of a jar stopper impressed with a scarab seal (Fig. 6:2), indicate trade and storage. So far the seal impression has not been attributed to the reign of any particular pharaoh, nor has it been given a precise date,

although its size and some of its iconographic details indicate the 14th -13th centuries B. C. Another interesting object is an inscribed clay tablet of the same type as those found in the debris of the Late Bronze Age phase E (ca. 1200 B.C) in buildings associated with the temple at the north side of the mound (Fig. 7). This tablet was found at the edge of a high standing wall, close to the floor of the second phase. Its inscription is not yet understood.

The following phases of the Iron I (11th - 10th century B. C) are represented at the northern slope and on top of the Tell. These are phases E-L as designed by Franken, and phases X-XI as designated by Ibrahim and Van der Kooij. The character of the settlement differs fully from the previous stages. It is distinguished by a heavy mud-brick construction

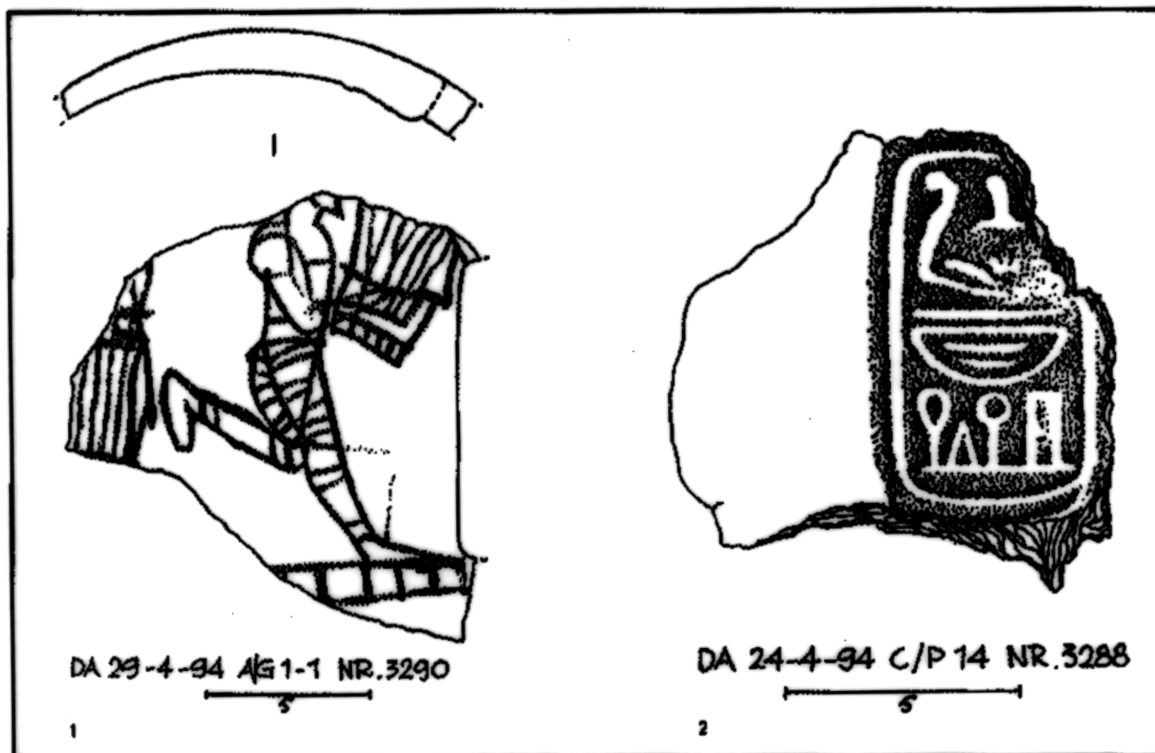


Fig. 6: Painted sherd with lyre player (Early Iron Age) and an Egyptian seal impression (End of Late Bronze Age).Both from Tell Deir 'Alla.

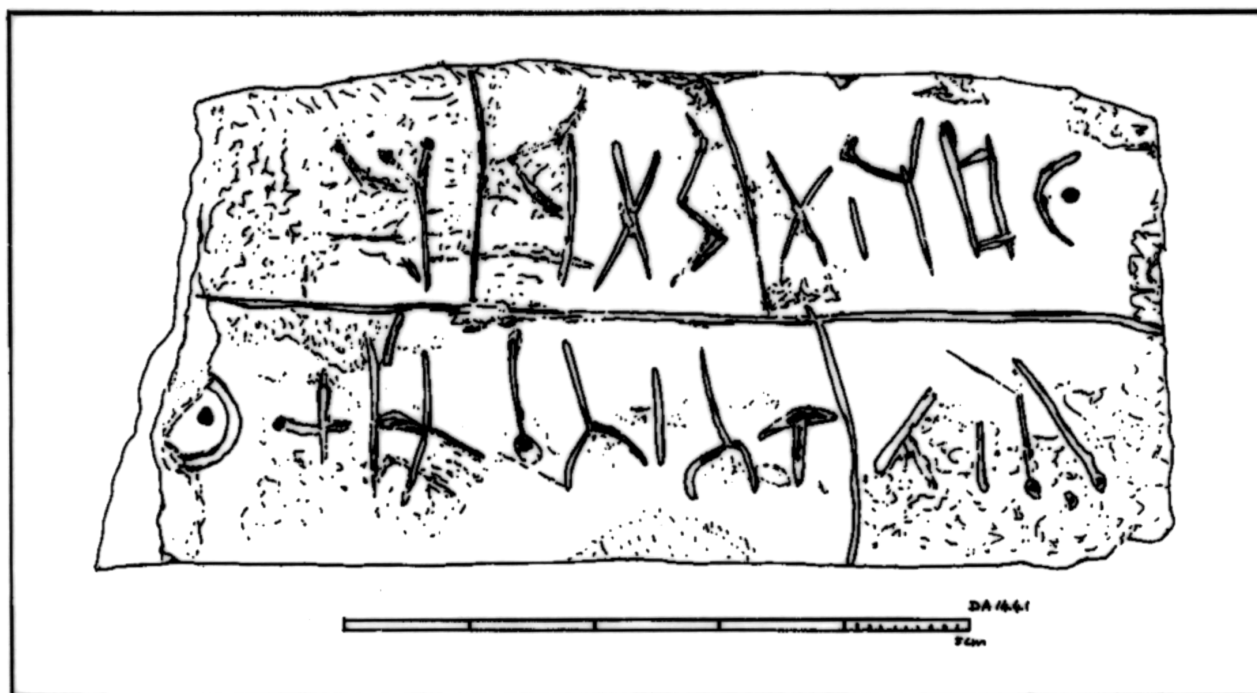


Fig. 7: Clay tablet with early Canaanite letters from Tell Deir 'Alla.

which shows continuity throughout four successive phases. And a massive mud-brick tower ca. 1 m. in diameter connecting a major wall might have served as a tower wall. Further excavations of 1984-1994 have revealed limited evidence of phase X in two separate locations towards the eastern summit of the mound. Two exceptional finds belong to this phase. The first is a sizeable room with fourteen large storage jars which were originally filled with unknown liquid and sealed with clay stoppers. The second was a sequence of rubbish deposits and the remains of two children's skeletons.

Most of the Iron I sites in the Jordan Valley were reoccupied in the Iron II. Sites became smaller in size but better planned and their number doubled. Many of these sites show defensive features and they are located on foothills or on high rises on the floor of the valley or on qatar hills bordering the Jordan River.

The following major occupation at Deir

'Alla is related to Phase IX. A large area with substantial evidence of this phase was explored on top of the Tell. The material, belonging to Phase IX, were preserved to a large extent. This is due to the destruction of the settlement as a result of an earthquake. The debris of this phase was less affected by erosion or later disturbances; the exception is leveling work of Phase VI on the eastern edge.

Phase IX (Figs. 8&9) was attested in an area of ca. 1000 m², where major architectural units were uncovered. These units do not follow any symmetrical order and there are no signs of any definite pre-planning. There are no indications of an enclosing town wall. Over 45 rooms of this phase have been excavated, most of which were roofed over. Courtyards were opened to the sky and some large rooms were partially roofed. The main access to the site was probably from the south.

The finds inside the rooms show that the settlement was used mainly for domestic activ-

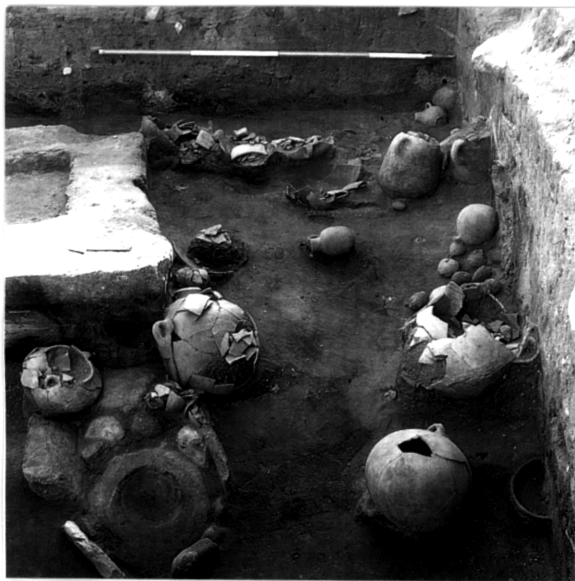


Fig. 8: Destruction of Phase IX at Tell Deir 'Alla.

ities including living quarters in the northern side, and more evident cooking, storage, and weaving activities. The function of the settlement can be concluded from the finds left in sites as a result of an earthquake. Although it was difficult to determine the function of some of the rooms, some units may have had communal use. This is in addition to specialized ones.

The most popular room in Phase IX is the one which housed the unique Balaam text (Fig. 10). Although the text itself together with some other objects indicate a religious function of the room and its surroundings, there are no clear indications of a suitable Temple. The possibility of this unit serving as a small shrine cannot be excluded.

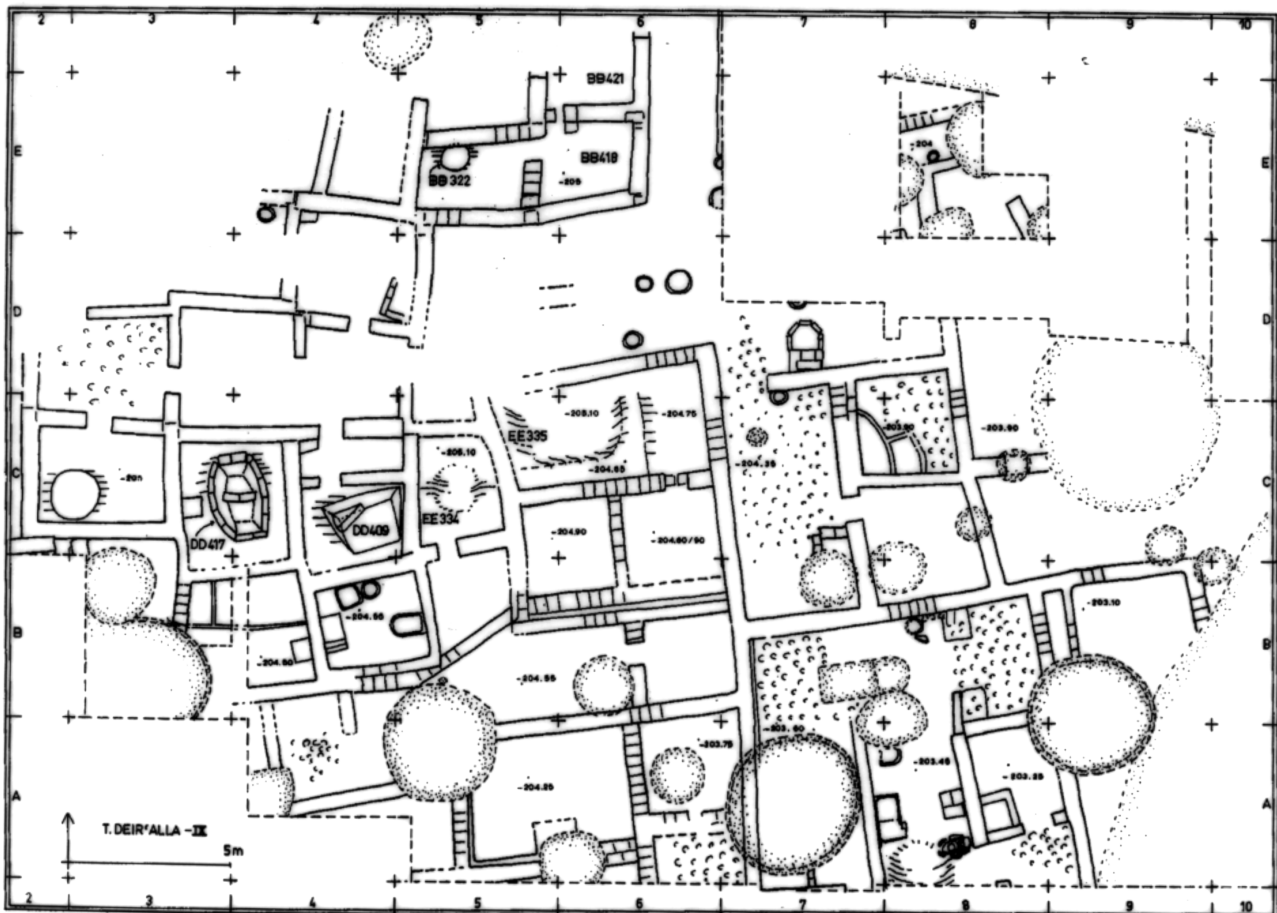


Fig. 9: Plan of excavated rooms of Phase IX at Tell Deir 'Alla.

Phases VIII and VII at Deir 'Alla were heavily destroyed, mainly as a result of leveling off for the constructions of Phase VI. The excavations of 1994 have revealed a massive mud-brick wall (1.5m thick) on the northeastern part (squares BIB 7-8), running east-west. This seems to be part of a much larger enclosing wall of Phase VII.

Phase VI (ca. 750 - 650 B.C) is characterized by a major building complex in an excavated area of ca. 1000 m². It seems to be surrounded by series of rooms with a large open space or courtyard. The building was defended by a heavy wall (1.4m thick) built of large

mud-bricks (60x30x15 cm) on stone foundations. The pottery and other objects from this phase show a strong Assyrian influence. A golden earring, a 2-shekel weight, several terracotta figurines and some ostraca (Fig. 11) are assigned to this phase. This complex of Phase VI was destroyed by fire after which some of its walls were restored and litter of them have survived.

Phase VI corresponds to Phases IV-V at Tell es-Sa'idiyyah (Pritchard 1985, Tubb & Dorrell 1991) where the settlement indicates a considerable planning and an organized community. This is probably equivalent to Tell

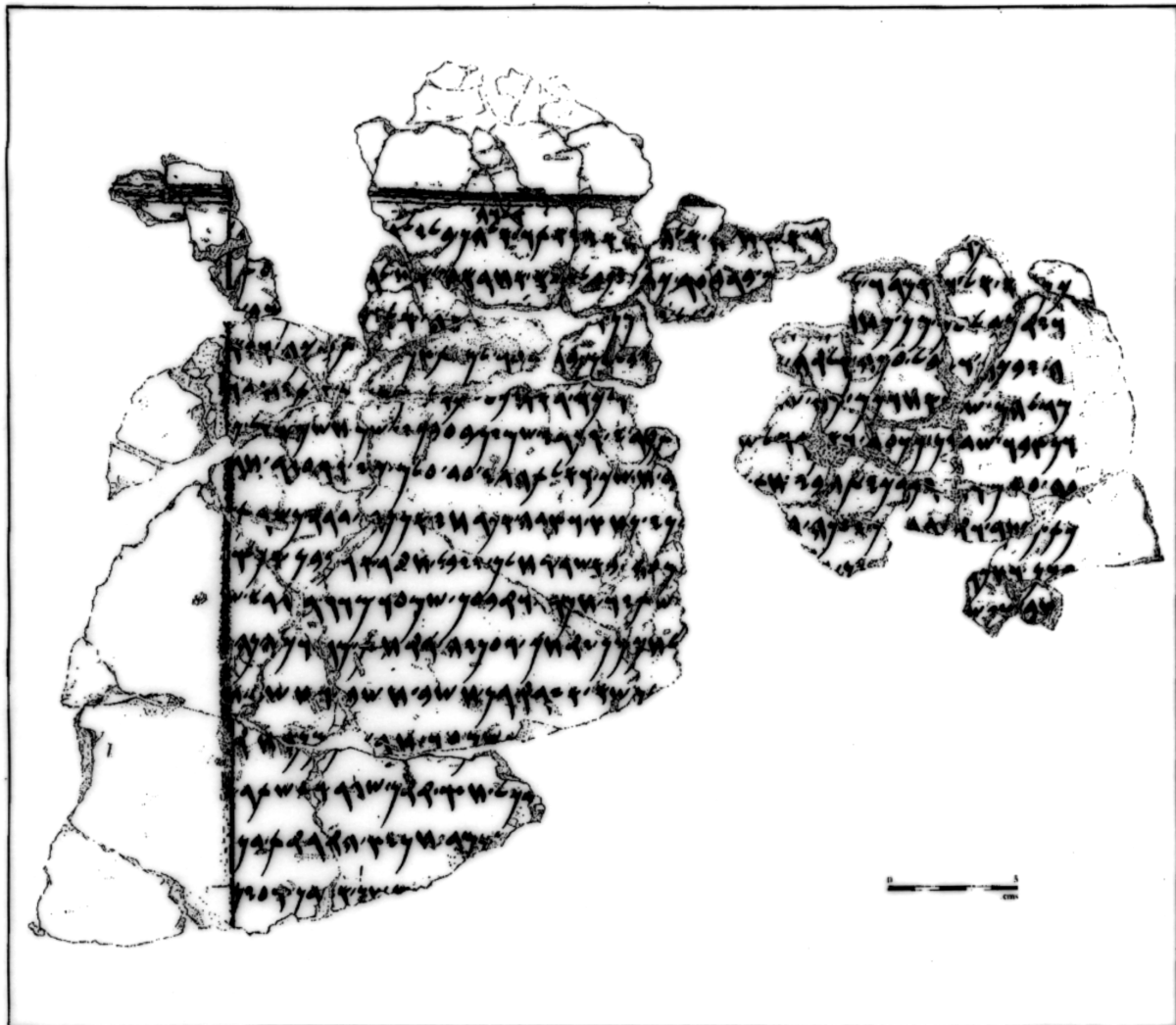


Fig. 10: Bal'am text of Phase IX at Tell Deir 'Alla.

Abu Al-Kharaz-- Sub-phases G-C found in Trench VII and other Trenches (Fischer 1993, 281-282; 1994, 129-130).

A major mud-brick building from the seventh century B. C was excavated by K. Yassine at Tell el-Mazar-- Strata IV-III (Yassine 1988, 75 -113). The plan and defensive character of the building led the excavator to describe it as a "Palace Fort". An earlier mud-brick building with a central courtyard of Phase V at Tell el-Mazar has similarities with that of Phase VI at Tell Deir 'Alla and might be assigned to the same period of the second half of the eighth-early seventh century B. C. Yassine likes to attribute the destruction of these buildings to the military campaign of Sennacherib in 701 B. C (Yassine 1988, 92). Another Iron II building of el-Murabba' was identified during the East Jordan Valley Survey of 1976 (site # 148). The building is square in shape which justifies its name el-Murabba', i.e., the square. This stone structure, is located south of Deir 'Alla on a high qatar hill dominating the Zerqa River, and it includes a large open courtyard and two projecting towers.

According to the excavators of Tell Nimrin along Wadi Shu'eib, the site seemed to be abandoned from the eighth-sixth centuries B.C (Flanagan et al 1994, 216). Iron II sherds were collected from the site during the East Jordan Valley Survey of 1976 (Ibrahim et al 1988, 198). It is possible that Tell Bleibel to the east of Tell Nimrin became more important during this period.

The last occupational Phases V-II at Deir 'Alla date from 600 to 350 B.C, and settled life at the site ends with very little evidence of the early Hellenistic period. These later phases were represented on the Tell by fragmentary

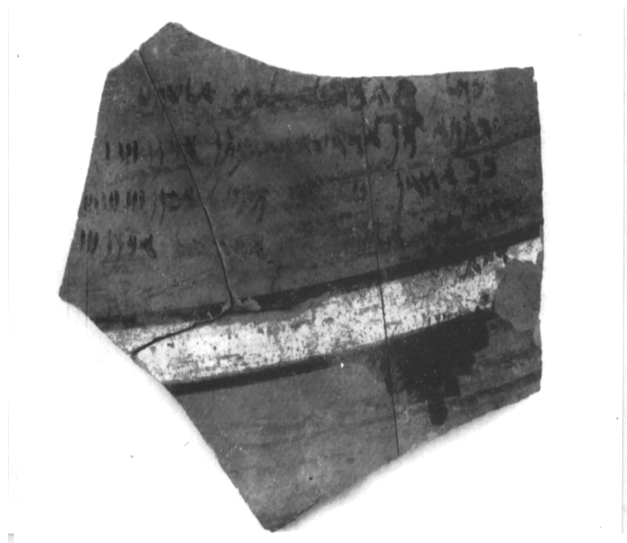


Fig. 11: Ostracon with Aramic Script of the Persian period from a pit at Tell Deir 'Alla.

walls and a large number of pits dug into open courtyards. During this time, Deir 'Alla along with its surroundings was part of the Babylonian empire and then under the Persian control. In the second half of the first millennium B. C the site simply lost its importance as a religious and economic center.

As can be seen at some of the major excavation sites, the end of the Iron Age or the Persian period (5th-4th century B.C) is marked by fragmentary evidence and less substantial architectural remains. The number of sites from this period and the following Hellenistic period is considerably less than the preceding Iron II or the following Roman periods. Sites in the central Jordan Valley such as Deir 'Alla, Mazar, and Sa'idiyyah witnessed several destructions and reoccupations. Occupational phases of this period at these sites are characterized by a large number of storage pits and silos dug into earlier deposits (Yassine 1988, 79-85; Ibrahim and van der Kooij 1989, 89-90).

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ملخص: يسعى هذا البحث إلى معالجة الأحوال السكنية في وادي الأردن، خلال العصر الحديدي (حوالي ١٢٠٠ - ٤٠٠ ق.م.)، وذلك على ضوء المسوحات والحفريات الأثرية التي أجريت في المنطقة. ويخص الباحث النتائج، التي تمخضت عنها أعمال التنقيب في موقع تل ديرعلا، خلال العصر الحديدي. نظراً لكثافة العمل في هذا الموقع عبر العقود الأربعة الأخيرة. ولعل إشراف الباحث على بعثة ديرعلا الأثرية، وكذلك مشاركته في أعمال المسح الأثرية في الضفة الشرقية لوادي الأردن، قاده إلى إعداد هذا البحث. يتناول البحث الكثافة السكانية لوادي الأردن خلال الفترة المشار إليها، وكذلك المراحل، التي مرت على المنطقة خلال ثمانية قرون، منذ نهاية العصر البرونزي الحديث وحتى العهد الفارسي. ويتبين من الشواهد، التي حصلنا عليها في تل ديرعلا، انتقال سهل من العصر البرونزي الأخير إلى العصر الحديدي، وعدم وجود تغيير في بنية السكان الأثنية، وان المنطقة المشار إليها كانت على تبعية أو ارتباط سياسي بالمملكة العمونية، التي اتخذت من عمان عاصمة لها. ويشير الباحث أيضاً إلى أهمية موقع تل ديرعلا خلال المرحلة الثانية للعصر الحديدي من خلال الموقع السكني ومكتشفاته، وخاصة النص الآرامي/ العموني الذي كشف عنه في الطبقة التاسعة.

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