

KHIRBAT ‘ATARUZ 2015: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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Abstract

The biblical site of Ataroth mentioned in the book of Numbers was built by the Gadites and destroyed in the mid-9th century BC by king Mesha of Moab. The site contained a temple complex with a sanctuary and several altars. In 2015, a joint team from La Sierra, Andrews, Averett, and Brigham Young Universities continued excavation at the site. Their primary goal was to explore the north, south, and east edges of the temple complex to determine its full extent, its fortifications, and any domestic living spaces in the area. An outer wall was discovered on the southern side of the temple complex near the dry moat, and a collapsed domestic building was found on the north side. On the east side an Iron Age expansion suggested a possible entrance to the temple complex continuing until the end of the site’s occupation.

Keywords: Iron Age Archaeology, Khirbet Ataruz, Biblical Archaeology, Archaeology of Transjordan, Ataruz Temple Complex

Introduction

Khirbat ‘Ataruz, located 24km south of the town of Madaba, 10km west of the village of Libb, and 3km east of the ancient site of Machaerus, in Jordan (**Fig. 1**), is one of the most important Iron Age sites in Transjordan because of the numerous cultic artifacts that were found there. The ancient site of *Ataroth* is mentioned in the book of Numbers as a town built by the Gadites and in the Mesha inscription as a fortified city that was destroyed by Mesha the king of Moab.¹ It was originally surveyed by Nelson Glueck in 1937 and later Chang-Ho Ji and Lawrence T. Geraty in 1998. Initial excavations began in 2000 and eight seasons of excavation have been completed (2000–01,

¹ Cf. Numbers 34:32; Mesha Inscription, lines 10–12.

2004, 2006, 2008, 2010–12),² exposing much of the acropolis, including an Iron Age temple, several altars, a courtyard, and their storage rooms. Numerous cultic objects were found within the temple and in nearby rooms. Early excavations focused on the acropolis and the temple area, while later seasons have extended the excavation from the acropolis to the north and eastern perimeters in order to determine the full extent of the temple complex.

In May of 2015, a small team of eight archaeologists and students, along with 18 Jordanian workers, returned for a 9th season of excavation at Khirbat 'Ataruz.³ Three fields (B, E, and F) were revisited and four new squares were opened under the direction of Chang-Ho Ji, La Sierra University (**Fig. 2**).⁴

Project Goals 2015

The primary goal of the 2015 excavations was to continue exploring the north, east, and south peripheries of the temple complex in order to determine if there had been domestic occupation associated with the cultic remains. Field B was opened to examine the southern periphery, where a large wall had been exposed in 2002. Field E was opened to push eastward in hopes of finding the outer boundary of the cultic area. Field F was opened to continue exploring several possible domestic buildings that had been exposed in 2012.

² Previous publications for the excavations at Khirbat 'Ataruz can be found in Chang-Ho Ji and Robert D. Bates, "Khirbat 'Ataruz 2011–2012: A Preliminary Report," *AUSS* 52.1 (2014): 47–91; Chang-Ho Ji, "Khirbat 'Ataruz: An Interim Overview of the 10 Years of Archaeological Architectural Findings," *Annual for the Department of Antiquities Jordan* 55 (2011): 561–579; idem, "The Early Iron Age II Temple at Hirbet 'Atarus and Its Architecture and Selected Cultic Objects," in *Temple Building and Temple Cult: Architecture and Cultic Paraphernalia of Temples in the Levant (2.–1. Mill. B.C.E.)*, ed. Jens Kamlah (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012), 203–221.

³ The authors would like to thank the volunteers and staff members who participated in the 2015 excavations at Khirbat 'Ataruz. The 2015 team included Director/Field E Supervisor Chang-Ho Ji; Field F Supervisor Robert D. Bates; Field F Square Supervisors Choong Ryeol Lee and John Harrison; Field B Supervisor Ralph K. Hawkins; Field B Square Supervisors Aaron Schade, Sarah Palmer, and Hannah Hawkins; photography and illustrations by Robert D. Bates, horse head photo by Ivan J. Ji.

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Field B: Western City Wall

Field B is located on the south side of temple complex and was originally opened by C. Ji in 2002 with one square, Square B1 (**Fig 3**). It encompasses part of the outer wall and borders the dry moat. During the 2015 season, Field B was reopened, adding two new squares: Square B2 supervised by A. Schade and Square B3 supervised by S. Palmer and H. Hawkins. The main purpose for reopening Field B was to explore the southern perimeter of the city and expose the fortifications in that area. In addition, it was hoped that further excavations could: (1) determine whether the city wall was defensive in nature; (2) establish a date for the wall in order to determine whether it was contemporaneous with the temple; and (3) determine whether there might be a gate at the entrance on the southern edge of the site.

Since the city wall is visible above ground on the west side of Square B1, Square B2 was laid out to include a portion of this wall protruding above the soil in its southwestern corner. Soon after cleaning the square, the team began to encounter small-, medium-, and large-sized boulders, which suggested that there might be architecture below the soil level. Unfortunately, after digging down about 1.0 m, the entire area was found to be devoid of architecture, except for a wall cutting through the southwest corner. A probe was dug along the city wall (B2:L11) in the southern part of the square, which exposed more of the inside of the city wall. An earth-beaten layer was found to include Iron Age IIA-IIB pottery dating from the 9th–8th centuries B.C. (**Fig. 4**)

In the initial soil layers of Square B2, a small terracotta figurine in the shape of a horse's head (Obj. # AB15-004, **Fig. 5**) was found while sifting through the soil. This object resembled the so-called "horse-and-rider" figurines that were common during the Iron Age. Although the body was missing, the neck, mane, and eyes were still intact and the artifact was dated to the Iron Age II. Many examples can be found throughout Cisjordan and Transjordan. Some Cisjordan examples lack the familiar rider, causing scholars to suggest that these riderless figurines were a unique pre-exilic Judahite cultic object. In Transjordan, numerous examples of horse and rider figurines have been found at sites such as Tall Jalul, Tall Jawa, Tall Hisban, and the tombs at 'Muqablayn.⁵ Two close parallels to the current example were found at Tall Jalul with similar head, neck, mane, and eyes.⁶ These artifacts are typically

⁵ For further examples from Transjordan, see Larry G. Herr, Lawrence T. Geraty, Øystein S. LaBianca, Randall W. Younker, and Douglas R. Clark, "Madaba Plains Project 1996: Excavations at Tall al-Umayri, Tall Jalul and Vicinity," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities Jordan* 41 (1997): 154; Robert D. Bates, Jeff Hudon, and Øystein S. LaBianca, "Tall Hisban 2011–12: A Preliminary Report," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities Jordan*, 58 (2017): 664–665.

⁶ See Jalul objects J0121 (A9, N. Balk) and J0660 (D4, E. Balk). Constance E. Gane, Randall W. Younker, and Paul J. Ray Jr. "Madaba Plains Project: Tall Jalul

identified as Ammonite and in later periods the eyes, mane, and bridle may be painted (**Fig. 6**).⁷

Square B3 was opened to the west of Square B2. The southern end of the city wall (B3:L2) was found transecting the square from its southeastern corner to its western side and continuing further west beyond the balk. The area immediately south of the wall seemed to be filled with fallen stones from wall collapse, but since this debris was so tightly packed and difficult to remove without machinery the excavation was moved to the north side of the wall. A smaller wall (B3:L9) was discovered, abutting the city wall and continuing into the north balk. The areas on the western and eastern sides of this wall were excavated down to what appeared to be a hard-packed floor (**Fig. 7**).

On the western side of Wall 9 (B3:L9), tabun fragments were found, along with krater, jar, bowl, and cooking pot fragments dating to the Iron Age II. In addition, a rectangular installation of stones (Locus 8) was found with a compacted surface inside. On the eastern side of Wall 9, tabun fragments were also found in the north- and southwestern corners of the locus, along with cooking pot, storage jar, jug, juglet, and bowl fragments dating to the Iron Age II. In addition, some animal bones were found, suggesting that this part of the square may have served as a type of kitchen or a place for food preparation. Another small wall (B3:L15) was discovered transecting the food preparation area, but it was determined that this wall was a later addition that was not contemporaneous with the city wall (B3:L2).

The 2015 season raised new questions and suggested possible explanations for the walls and living spaces in Field B. While previous excavation in Square B1 had revealed pottery from Iron Age II, we had not conclusively established a date and purpose for the walls (B1:L14, L25). The overall height and thickness, as well as their location on the outer edges of the site, suggest that the main walls found in Field B (B3:L2; B2:L11) were built primarily for defensive purposes. Ceramics from the deep probe that was carried out in Square B2 (**Fig. 4**) near the south balk may also suggest that the fill next to the south wall (B2:L11) might date it to Iron Age IIA, when the temple on the acropolis was built, although further excavation is needed. Unfortunately, excavations were unable to determine whether a city gate was part this section of the wall. Further excavations west of Square B3 may provide evidence of

2009," *AUSS* 48.2 (2010): 180, pl. 5.

⁷Currently, there are twenty-six examples of "horse head" figurines that have been found at Tall Jalul, with some having painted decoration (J0647), and ten published from Tall Hisban; see Bates, Hudon, and LaBianca, "Tall Hisban 2011–12," 664–665. See also Amman Citadel Museum Horse-Rider-Figurines: Figure 6, left J.880, middle J.879, right J.1835; J.879 and J.1835 published in G. Lankester Harding, "An Iron-Age Tomb at Meqabelein," *Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine* 14 (1950): 44–48 pl. 13:2 and pl. 14:12.

an entrance. Like other Iron Age cities, domestic activity was found in rooms near the city. The tabun fragments, ceramic vessels, and discarded animal bones suggest that there were domestic living spaces possibly used as a kitchen or food preparation area built up against the city wall (**Fig. 7**).

Field E: The Eastern Side of the Acropolis

The 2011–12 seasons focused on the eastern side of the acropolis in Field E, where several cultic objects had been found in Square E1, including an offering column with an inscription. As questions still remained at that time regarding the broader architectural context of the Moabite sanctuary (formerly the Inscription Column Courtyard)⁸ in Square E1 and its overall plan, an additional square was opened on its south side (Square E2). Initially, Square E2 was opened to explore the eastern extent of the temple complex and find the southeast corner of the courtyard found in Square E1. A narrow room with a doorway was discovered on the south side of the courtyard and the stone pounders and loaf grinder along with the small cup and juglet suggest that the space was occupied during Iron Age IIA.

In 2015, Square E2 was reopened and a new square (E4) was opened to expand the excavation southward (**Fig. 8**). In Square E2, the earlier excavations revealed two wall lines (E2:L18 and E2:L19). The goal of the 2015 season was to continue excavation of these walls in order to date them and explore their relation to the temple complex in Field A (acropolis) and the Moabite sanctuary (formerly known as the Inscription Column Courtyard) in Square E1. Both walls were found to be made of boulder and chink construction. Five beaten-earth floors dating to the early to mid-Iron Age II were found east of Wall 19 (E2:L19), the area corresponding to the southern section of the square. The presence of similar floor/hard surface sequence was noted in the northern section of the square, as well as in the area between Walls 18 (E2:L18) and 20 (E2:L20) on the eastern side of the Moabite sanctuary.

Wall 18 (E2:L18) is 3.0m long and 0.70m wide and extends into the balk of Square E1. Four to five courses of medium-sized boulders of hard limestone survive, and its foundation is made of large boulders placed directly on bedrock. Wall 19 (E2:L19) appears to have been a continuation of the eastern wall of the Moabite sanctuary (E2:L20), separated by a doorway. The wall is 0.40-0.60m wide and stands approximately 1.2m high. It stretches 3.0m from the 1.0m wide doorway to the south balk at an orientation of 20 degrees north. The wall was built on bedrock, using medium-large semi-hewn-limestone boulders. In the southeastern corner of the square, another

⁸Recently the Inscription Column Courtyard has been reclassified as the Moabite sanctuary, based on the material culture and stratigraphy found there. See Chang-Ho Ji, "A Moabite Sanctuary at Khirbat Ataruz, Jordan: Stratigraphy, Findings, and Archaeological Implications," *Levant* 50 (2018): 173–210.

wall consisting of a large stack of semi-hewn limestone blocks (E2:35) also extends southward into Square E4. Its purpose is yet unknown (**Fig. 8, 9**).

The excavations in Square E4 revealed three wall lines. First, Wall 5 (E4:L5) was exposed in the northern part of the square and measured 2.5m long, 0.80m wide, with approximately 0.50m of the wall exposed. Beginning midway through Square E4, the wall extends into Square E2 oriented at 20 degrees north/south. It (E4:L5) continues into Square E2 and connects to the stacked stone blocks that form Wall 35 (E2:L35) in the southeast corner of the square (E4:L5=E2:L35). The second wall line (E4:L10) extends from the west balk at 68 degrees north/south and bonds with the south end of Wall 5 (E4:L5). Then Wall 10 (E4:L10) extends an additional 1.75m beyond, for a total length of 4.6m. Six courses were exposed on its south side and Iron Age II pottery was found near the wall and in earth layers associated with the wall, but excavations ended before a floor could be clearly identified. There is also evidence of a third wall line (E4:L4) found in the northeast corner of Square E4. Two rows and three courses of Wall 4 were exposed. It is oriented at 20 degrees north/south and appears to be the continuation of Wall 19 (E2:L19=E4:L4; see **Fig. 8, 10**).

Based on the current excavation date, it may be possible to suggest the order in which the walls were built in Squares E2 and E4. The earliest walls built in these squares appear to be Wall 18 (E2:L18) and possibly Walls 5 and 35 (E2:L35=E4:L5) that formed part of the outer perimeter wall of the temple complex. Then, Wall 19 (E2:L19) was added, creating Room A (in Square E2) that included an entrance approximately 1.0m wide. It (E2:L19) was built on bedrock, cutting through the surface layer on which Wall 18 (E2:L18) was constructed. Thus, it seems that Wall 18 (E2:L18) predates Wall 19 (E2:L19). Later, Wall 10 (E4:L10) was added, extending Wall 5 (E4:L5) in a southwesterly direction. It was founded on the earth layers that sealed against Wall 5 (E4:L5) that was contemporaneous with Wall 19 (E2:L19) and probably Wall 4 (E4:L4). This sequence suggests that original perimeter walls surrounded the temple complex and then additional structures were added later, possibly to provide storage and work spaces associated with the cultic place.

Field F: The Northern Edge of the Temple Complex 2015

In 2012, Field F was opened on the north side of the temple complex in order to determine the northern extent of the cultic area and explore possible domestic spaces. Square F3 revealed three distinct rooms (A, B, and C), with the north wall of Rooms A and B in Square F4. Room C was very small (1.0 x 1.1m), but contained a large storage jar where the top had been broken off. The jar rims were placed at the bottom of the vessel, backfilled and covered

with flat stones that lined the upper part of the jar.⁹ It was surrounded by soil and cobblestones that were probably used to support the vessel. However, several questions still remained regarding the purpose of these rooms and when they were constructed (**Fig. 11**).

Three squares were opened in 2015, including Squares F3–F5. The main goal in this field for this season was to continue excavating the three rooms found in Square F3 during the 2012 excavation, locate the entrance for Rooms B and C, determine the purpose of the of the rooms, and find the foundations for each wall. Room A in Square F3 was excavated to bedrock and the foundations of the earliest occupation were revealed. The 2.9 x 5.67m rectangular-shaped room consisted of Walls 5–7, 10 and 12 (F3:L5, L6, L7; F4:L10, L12), however, the eastern wall (F3:L6) did not extend the full length of the room and may have been an entrance. The east, west, and south walls for Room A were founded on bedrock with large semi-hewn boulders 0.50–0.60m x 0.30–0.40m. One irregularly shaped stone in Wall 6 measured 0.65m high. The remainder of the stones range from 0.30–0.50m x 0.20–0.40m, with approximately five courses preserved to a height of 1.7m (**Fig. 12**).

Several occupational phases were identified in Room A. The earliest occupation surface contained numerous installations, with large storage jars that had been broken due to a roof collapse. The installations consisted of flat stones, buried into the soil, end up, to form a circular-shaped bin that supported several storage jars. When the roof or upper story collapsed into the storage room, it crushed the jars (**Fig. 13, 14**), laying them flat. Within the debris were two basalt grinding stones, two pounding bowls, and two other flat stones, lying on top of the broken jars (**Fig. 15, 16**). These artifacts probably came from the roof or possibly an upper story, which were areas often used for domestic food preparation. An animal horn, possibly bovine, was also found on the floor. Later, the room was cleaned and most of the broken jars, including the rims and bases, were removed. A second or later occupational surface was found directly above the broken jars. A soil layer covered the debris, including the stones that likely fell from the roof or upper story. This area was reused until another collapse resulted in a period of abandonment. A lined pit consisting of 11 stones was found among the large stone collapse and fill. This pit was probably used as a bin or grain storage area, as there did not appear to be any large storage jars associated with this installation.

Although Room B, in Square F3, was not excavated to bedrock, two floors were found. Each surface was indicated by flat-lying pottery and a beaten-earth surface. Square F4 was also opened to follow along with the excavation of Room B in Square F3, since its north wall is in Square F4 (**Fig. 12**).

⁹Ji and Bates, "Khirbat 'Ataruz 2011–12," 47–91.

Square F5 was opened west of Square F3 to determine how far Walls 20 and 22 (F3:L7=F3:L22; F3:L20) continued eastward. In addition, since a modern access road had been built near the west end of the square, it was possible that an ancient gate might have been built in the same area due to the ease of terrain. It was hoped that remnants of an Iron Age gate west of Field F might remain. Much of the square was covered with rock tumble, but two walls (F5:L7, L8) were found. Wall 7 (F5:L7) was 2.85m x 0.80m, and extended west from the east balk in the same general direction as Wall 22 (F3:L22), in Square F3. It was made of irregularly shaped medium-sized hard limestone boulders, with intermittent chink stones. Three courses were exposed and the south side of the wall was faced. Wall 8 (F5:L8) was 1.8m x 0.4m and extended northward from the south balk abutting Wall 7 (F5:L7). Three courses of the wall were exposed and it was made of a single row of small- to medium-sized hard limestone boulders with small chink stones. Two pounding stones and a small juglet were found *in situ* next to the east face of Wall 8 (F5:L8) and a 0.10cm x 0.07m piece of carbonized wood was found lodged in its second course. A carbon sample was collected for testing (**Fig. 17**).

The juglet (or small decanter?) measured 0.14m tall with a broken top and 0.065m at its widest point. The string-cut base was 0.035m and the sides flared outward from the base at 50 degrees for approximately 0.02m and then tapered inward at 84 degrees until it reached the base of the shoulder. The handle attached to the shoulder and the neck of the juglet, and was approximately 1.0cm thick, with flattened finger ridges. The top of the handle was flattened and did not loop upward. Only 3.5cm of the neck survives and there is no pronounced ridge or carination where the top of the handle attaches to it. Although the top of the vessel is broken, it is likely that the neck continued at least another 1.0–1.5cm before forming the rim, due to the height of the break. The shape of the vessel suggests that it dates to Iron IIB–IIC (**Fig. 18, 19**). The room appears to have been a later addition to the building found in Square F3.

Conclusions and Future Expansion

The excavations at Khirbet Ataruz, ancient city of Ataroth, continues to expand north, south, and east in order to explore the extent of the Iron Age IIA temple complex. Field B revealed part of the city wall that formed its main fortifications. While the excavation of Square B1 suggests that the city wall was built in the ninth-eighth centuries BCE, it did not conclusively establish the date of its construction. Square B2 demonstrated that this area was used for food preparation purposes by later Iron Age II inhabitants. In order to further elucidate the nature of the city wall, establish its date, and determine whether there may have been a gate on the southern end of the site, future excavation must be carried out north and west of Square B3. In Field E, the

ceramic analysis suggested that the temple complex and Moabite sanctuary date to the ninth and late ninth–early eighth centuries BCE, respectively, and that the temple possibly included the inner and outer courtyards. In particular, walls on the north end of Square E2 now appear to have been part of the Iron Age temple complex. However, the purpose of the walls in Square E4 are inconclusive so far, and, although they may be an extension of the walls that were found in Square E2, further excavations are needed to determine their relationship to the Moabite sanctuary. The excavations in Field F revealed the foundations of Room A and the destruction that likely came as a result of a collapsed roof. It is uncertain what caused the destruction of the storage jars in the room, but the space was later re-purposed and continued to be reoccupied for at least another century. An additional room was found in the southeastern corner of Square F5, but it is uncertain as to what its relationship may be to the rooms in Square F3. Further excavations in Squares F3 and F5 should help clarify whether the walls to these rooms were contemporary. Additional excavation north and west of the walls in Square F5 may reveal evidence of a gate, and further expansion north and east of Squares F3 may uncover additional domestic living spaces on the northern edge of the Iron Age temple complex.

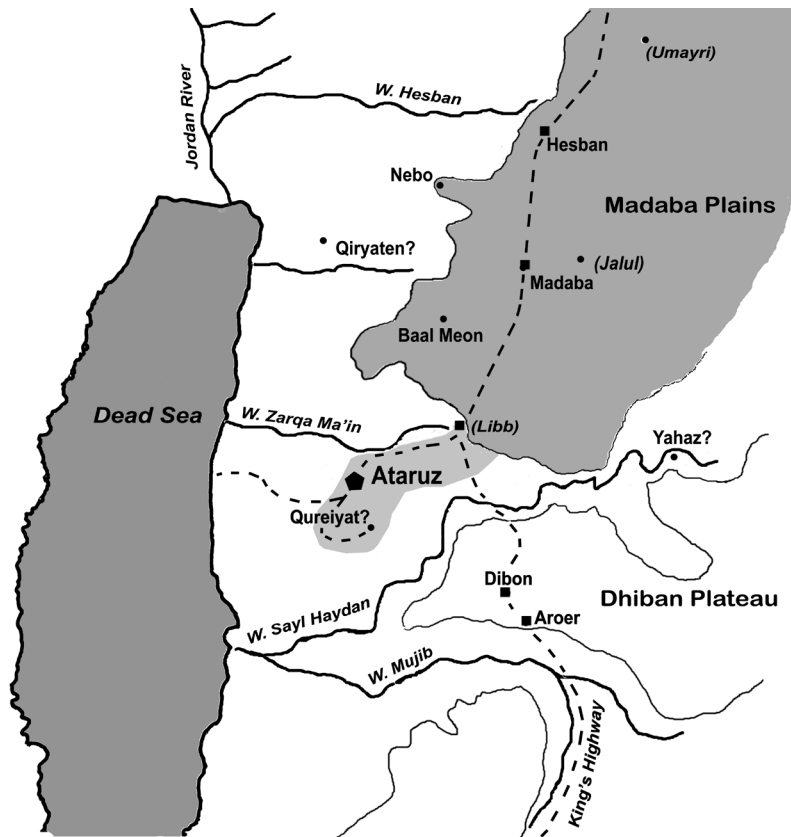
Figures

Figure 1. Map of the region surrounding Khirbet 'Ataruz.

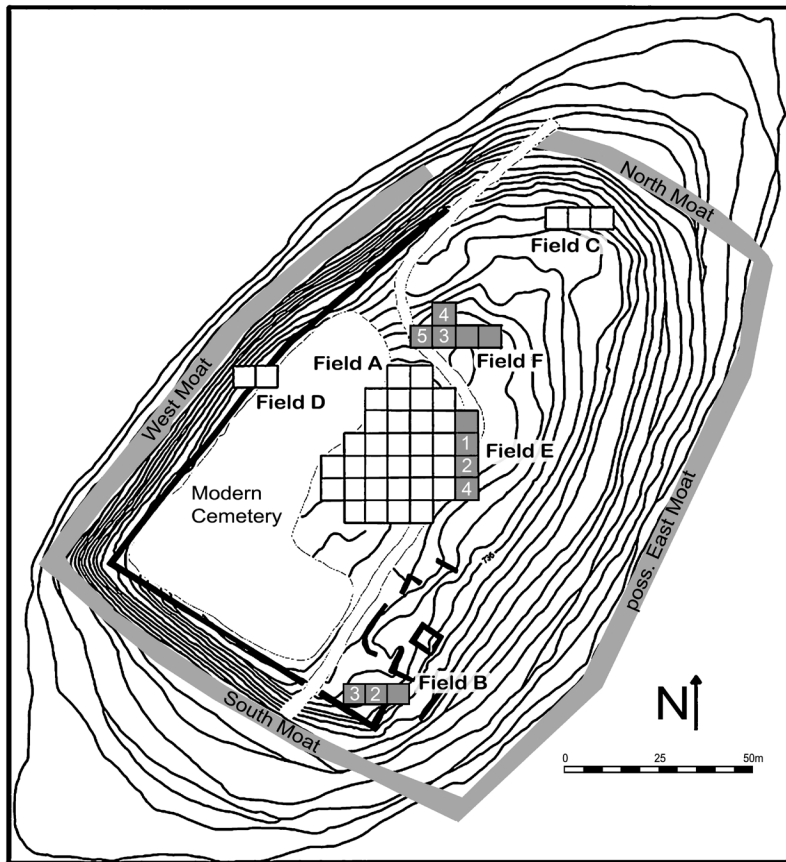


Figure 2. Topographical map of Khirbat 'Ataruz showing the location of Fields B, E, and F.

Field B

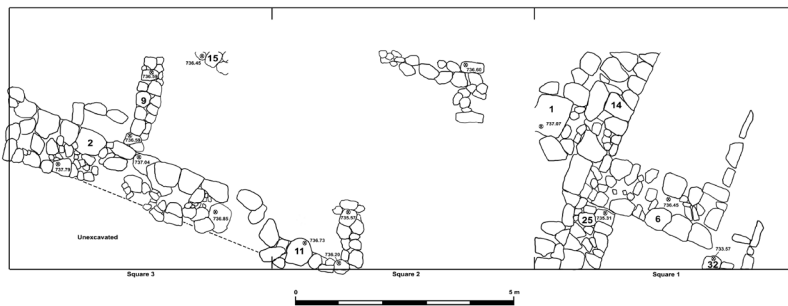


Figure 3. Field B Diagram.



Figure 4. Facing west: Square E2 showing the deep probe.

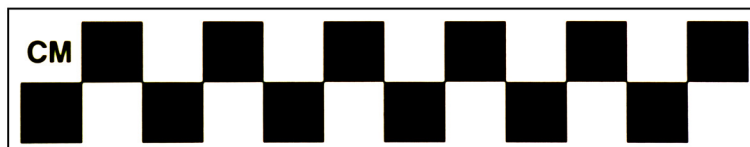


Photo by Ivan J. Ji

Figure 5. Fragment of the partial head and mane of horse figurine.



Figure 6. Horse and Rider figurines from the Citadel Museum, Amman, Jordan.



Figure 7. Facing south: Square B3 showing the storage installation.

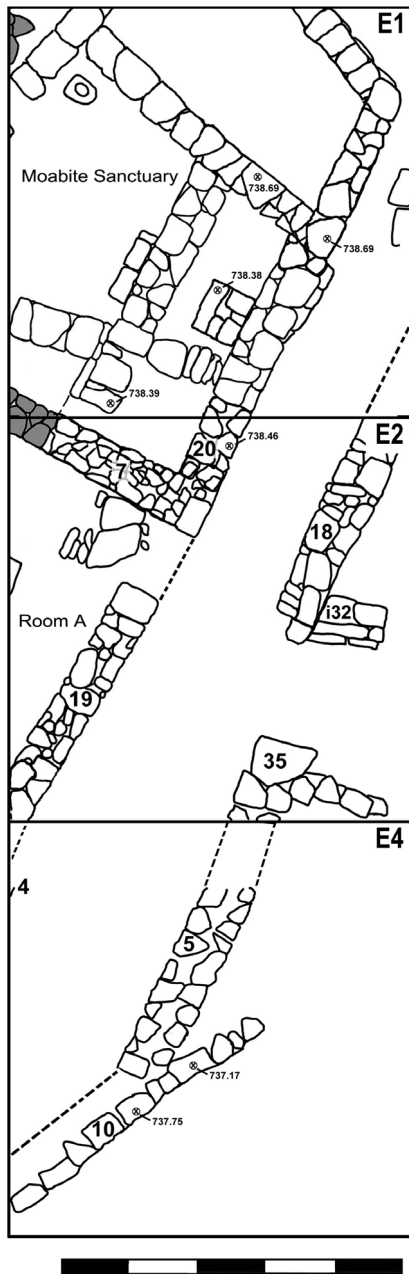


Figure 8. Field E diagram on the eastern side of the temple complex.



Figure 9. Facing north: Square E2 showing the Moabite Sanctuary in E1.

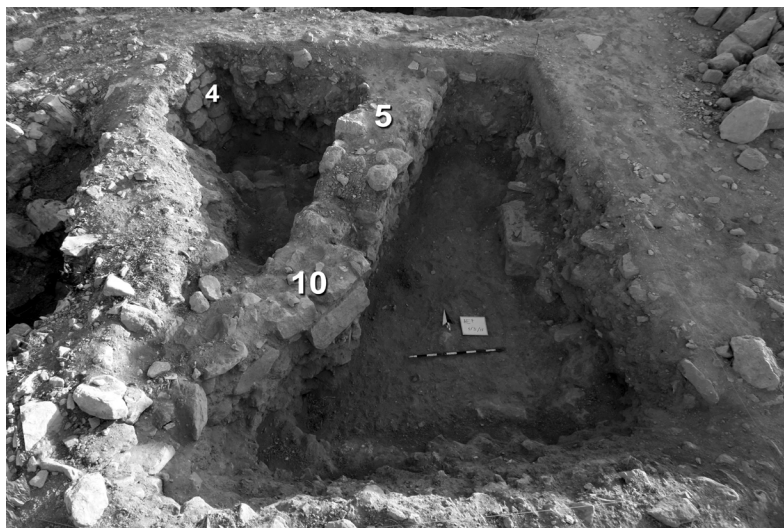


Figure 10. Facing north: Square E4 showing Wall 5 bonded to Wall 10.

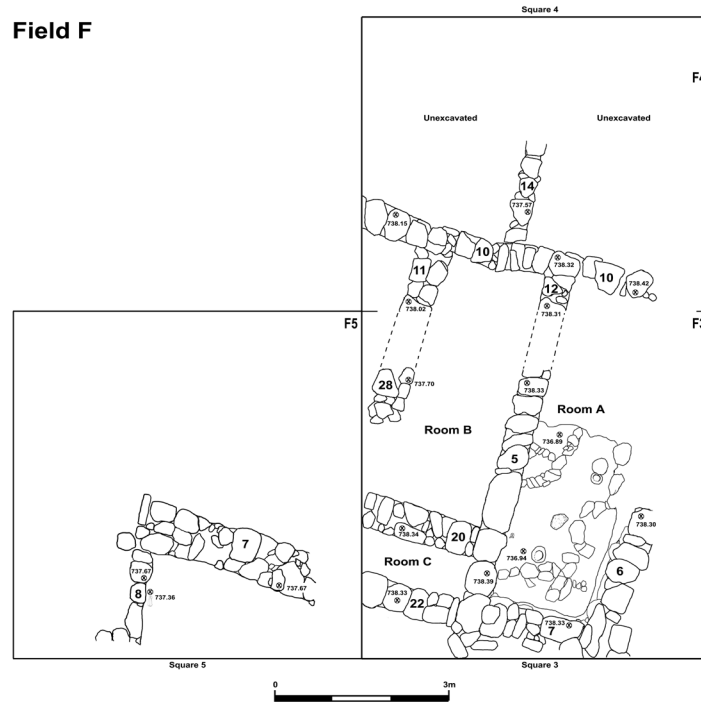


Figure 11. Diagram: Field F.

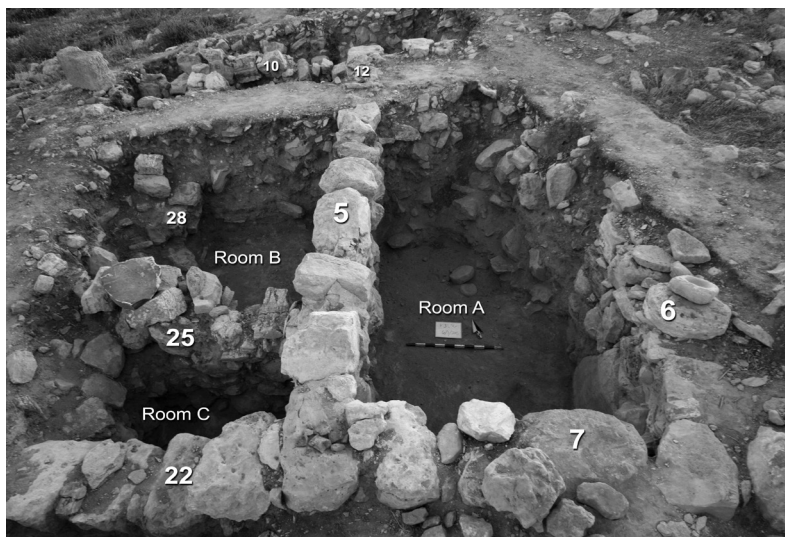


Figure 12. Facing north: Square F3 showing Rooms A, B, and C.



Figure 13. Facing north: Square F3, Room A showing the roof collapse and destruction.



Figure 14. Facing south: Square F3, Room A showing Choong Ryeol Lee excavating the destruction debris.



Figure 15. Stone bowl found in the destruction debris of Square F3, Room A.

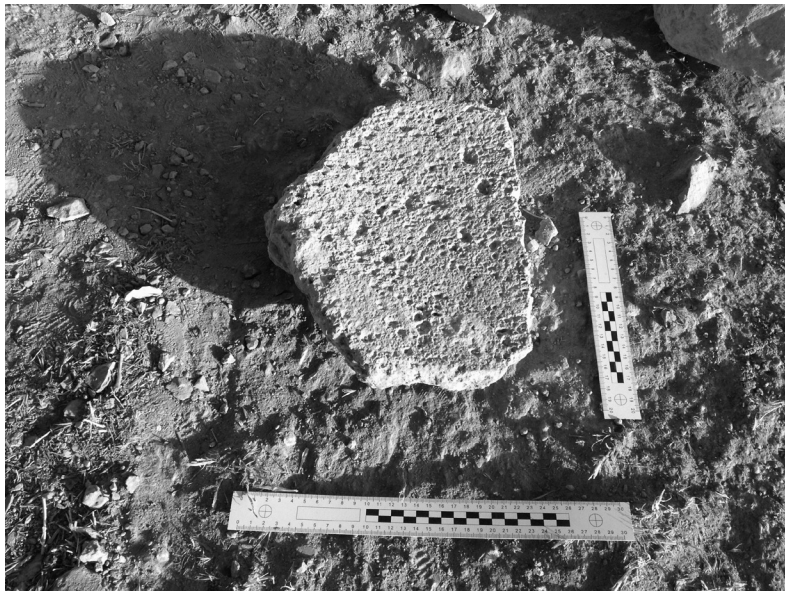


Figure 16. Mill stone found in the destruction debris of Square F3, Room A.



Figure 17. Facing north: Square F5.



Figure 18. Diagram showing Juglet found in Square F5.



Figure 19. Juglet found in Square F5 *in situ*.