

Khirbet Birzeit Research and Excavation Project 1998

Second Season Excavation

Khaled Nashef and Omar Abd Rabu

During the months of July - August 1998, a season of excavations was carried out at Khirbet Birzeit by the Palestinian Institute of Archaeology of Birzeit University¹. Khirbet Birzeit is situated on the summit of a hill 819.20 m above sea level overlooking the nearby villages of Birzeit, Jifna, and Atara. It is located about one km to the north of the new campus of Birzeit University and 500 m to the southwest of the village of Birzeit (Palestine Grid 1682/1525). The work concentrated on the remains of a building, which was the dominating upstanding architectural feature of the site. In previous studies the building was noted as being of medieval date². The excavation area was divided into three separate areas labeled A, B and C. Area A was located in the southern hall, Area B in the northern hall of the Original Building. Area C was on the northern terrace to the north of Area B. The three areas revealed archaeological remains, which may be attributed to four strata. These are presented below according to excavation areas and stratigraphic sequence.

Area A

Two squares were opened up in the southern hall. The first was opened adjacent to the middle of wall W1 to the north in order to expose a possible entrance to the building. The second was opened in the northwestern corner of the hall in order to examine the structural relationship between the walls of the original building (see Fig. 1).

Stratum 1, Phase A

A fill of large stones mixed with dark brown soil covered the entire part of the southern hall. This fill was approximately 0.70 m thick in the central square, and 0.50 m thick in the northwestern corner, and consisted of mixed material dating from Iron Age II through to Ottoman and more recent times.

The main architectural feature in this stratum is a semi-circular stone-built structure exposed in the northwestern corner, hearths of recent date and a small wall (W6) on top of W1. The semi-circular structure (L 1201) consists of four courses and two rows of stones. It was built inside the corner of W1-2 of the Original Building. A dark brown fill

covered the entire part of the structure and was mixed with dressed and undressed stones probably fallen from the Original Building. Pottery from the Ottoman period was found within the fill. Hearths also found within this stratum. It was built of dressed stones that were probably taken from razed walls of the Original Building. Cooking potsherds from the Ottoman period and recent times were found within the hearths. A small segment of a wall was also uncovered (W6). It was built on top of W1, and consisted of big stones in two courses (length: ca. 2.70, width: 0.40-0.60 m).

It should be pointed out that during the Ottoman and modern periods the people of the village used the hall for several purposes. The building had been divided up between the villagers which explains why the owner of the plot within the southern hall built the wall W6 to separate it from other parts of the complex (oral communication).

Stratum 1, Phase B

A fill of light brown soils (60 cm thick) and large stones were uncovered with the appearance of wall W7-8 in the central square (Fig. 2). Another layer of

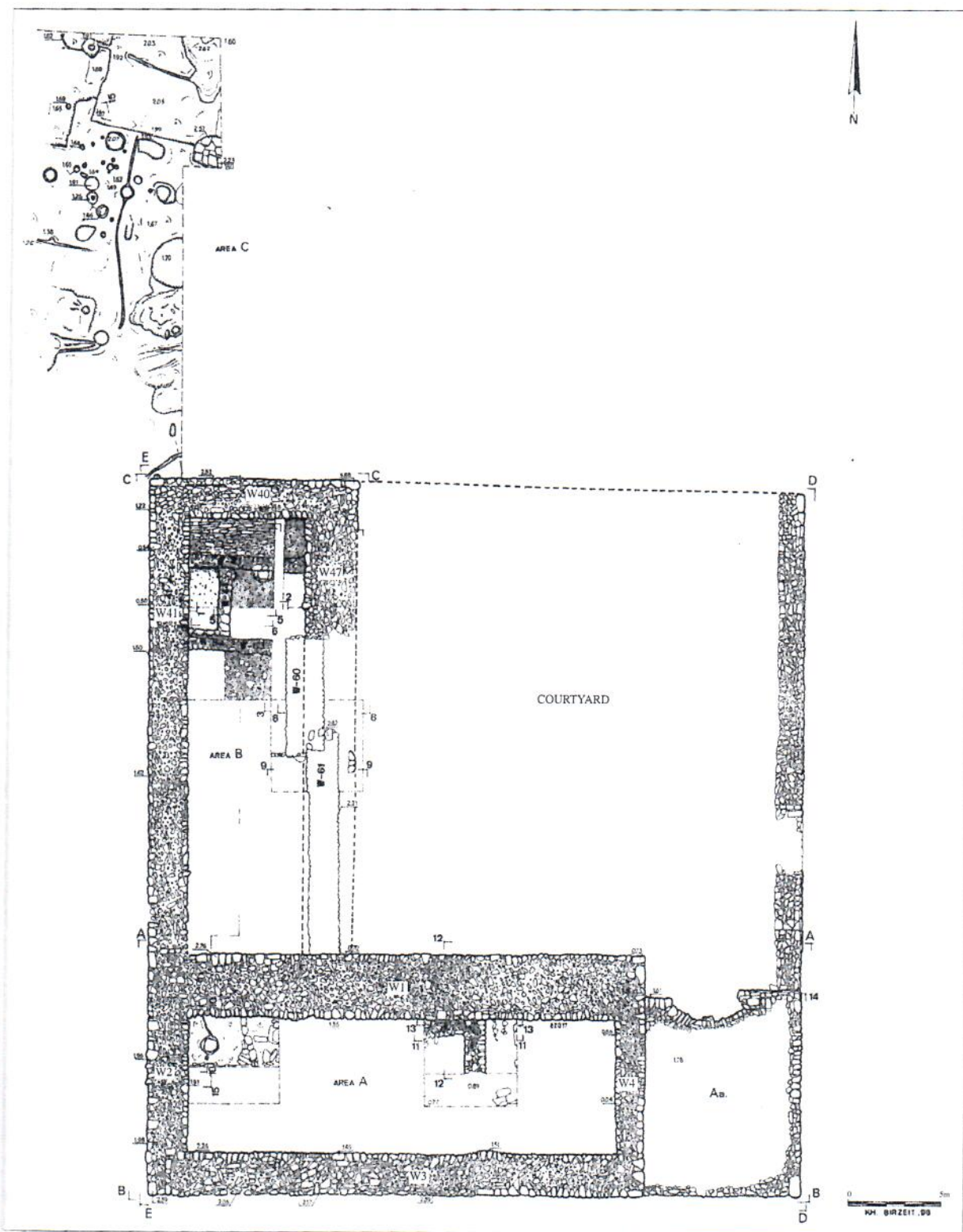


Fig. 1. Site Plan and Excavation Areas

light brown soil appeared, associated with wall W9 in the northwest corner.

Pottery from the Ottoman period was found in these fills. Wall W7-8 in the central square and wall W9 in the northwest corner are the main features belonging to this phase. Wall W7 was aligned along a north-south

axis and it was built of two rows of stones preserved to a height of six to eight courses of dressed stones. The wall was only partly exposed this season and so we do not know its full length. In the higher section of the wall were two square alcoves. Wall W7 was founded on bedrock and its foundation trench was also exposed.



Fig. 2. Southern Hall: Central Square

The foundations of this wall also destroyed part of the original floor attached to Wall W1, which was the original northern wall of the building. Wall W8 abutted wall W1 and had an east to west alignment. It consisted of large and medium-dressed stones in two rows and preserved to a height of six to seven courses. The wall was exposed down to bedrock. It seems that walls W7 and 8 were constructed in the same period since both were bonded at the northeast corner. Wall W9, which was located in the northwestern corner, was built out of reused stones. These included a large coffin lid and a marble column. The wall, which was founded on bedrock, was only partly exposed.

The construction of walls W7 and W9 indicates that during a later stage of the Mamluk and an earlier stage of the Ottoman period the interior of the southern hall must have been divided into at least four parts. In view of the architectural evidence exposed this season, it would appear that the southern hall was used as a storage area during this period.

Stratum 2

A small portion of a beaten earthen floor (L 1025) was uncovered in the central square. This floor underwent various phases of replastering; four separate surfaces were visible. The floors (6 cm thick) were contemporary with wall W1 but does not bond with the lower courses. Hence the floors do not represent an original feature of the Original Building. The makeup of the floor consisted of small stones, clay, and well-painted pottery from the Mamluk period. As mentioned above, the floors were partly destroyed by the foundation trench of wall W8 leading to the conclusion that the floors were probably constructed during an earlier use of the Original Building.

Stratum 3 (Original Building), Southern Hall

The southern hall represents the Original Building in Area A (Fig. 3). Built of massive well-dressed stones, the hall had a rectangular form (23,5x7,5 m). The hall has an east to west alignment and its walls were founded on bedrock, which had been cut in order to serve as an efficient foundation for the lower courses of the walls.

The walls were preserved to a height of 3 meters above bedrock, especially near the corners of the hall. The walls have a width of 2.20 m and were built of blocks in courses bonded with a thick whitish-grey mortar. The lower courses of the walls were not plastered but a thick whitish-grey plaster coat (3-5 cm thick) was visible at the level where the vaulting began. Small rectangular "loop holes" (20x40 cm) were also visible in the upper part of walls W1-3 (one course below the level of the vaulting). These holes served to hold large wooden beams for the foundations of the vault above. Six holes were observed in the inner face of W3, with a distance of 3 m between each one. Each wall was built of two faces of well-dressed stones with a core a fill of small and medium sized field stones mixed with a brown-grey fill. There was no evidence for entrances or doorways in the western, eastern and southern walls of this southern hall. Hence an entrance may conceivably have existed in the northern wall (W1). A later fill contemporary with Stratum 1-phase 1 (W6) was observed to have replaced the upper course of W1 which no longer exists in this section. Here loose material was excavated. There was evidence of an arch probably above a main doorway of the southern hall, which was probably blocked up later. There are indications of several stages of construction in the walls of the southern hall. In the middle of the outer face of wall W3 there was a small rectangular window (size of the window: 0.45x0.65 m) sealed by stones. The mortar used in the sealing is more whitish than the mortar between the original courses of the walls.

Stratum 4

Only few features were uncovered in the southern hall, which is attributed to stratum 4 (Figs. 3, 4). This is a rounded rock-cut silo (L 1221) and two-cup marks hewn in the northwestern part of the southern hall.



Fig. 3. Southern Hall: Northwestern Square

The silo (0.80 m in diameter and 2 m deep) has a circular opening (1 m in diameter) with a margin around its edge to receive a lid. The silo was carved into the chalky layer of bedrock. The cup marks (first: 0.30 m in diameter and 0.22 m in depth; second: 0.10 and 0.5 m) were carved to the south of the opening of the silo. A section of a narrow channel was uncovered to the north of the silo, and it was covered with two paving stones. A light brown fill was uncovered within the interior of the silo, mixed with small and medium stones and pottery dating to the Ottoman period. A complete hand-made oil lamp of Ottoman date was also found. This material indicates that the bedrock in the southern hall must have been exposed during an earlier stage of the Ottoman period. The existence of this cover indicates that the silo went out of use and it was sealed to form a continuous floor level with the bedrock.

Area B

Area B was located in the northern hall of the building and four squares (5x5 m) were opened up on the northern side of the hall. The preserved architectural remains in the northern hall differ from those of southern hall. Two floors were uncovered but the chronological sequence remained the same.

Stratum 1 Phase A

This stratum equals Stratum 1, Phase A in the southern hall. It consisted of a dark brown fill (about 30-50 cm thick) mixed with small field stones and a mixture of potsherds from the Middle Bronze Period until recent times. This layer did not contain any additional architectural remains to those of the original northern hall. However this fill extended parallel to a new terrace wall (W60, 61) built on top of the original eastern wall of the northern hall. It should be pointed out that this fill was dumped into the northern hall in order to use the upper part of the hall as an area of an agricultural terrace. The new terrace walls (W60, 61) separated this part of the building from another part and belonged to two different owners.

The present owners of the northern hall have indicated that the hall was used to grow seasonal vegetables. It would appear that similar agricultural activities also existed during the late Ottoman period.

Stratum 1, Phase B

A layer of fallen stones covered the excavation area. With this layer the tops of Walls 42, 44, and 64 became visible. There are no architectural features, which may be attributed to this stratum. Pottery was found within this fill from the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. A complete hand-made oil lamp was also found between the fallen stones. This phase is contemporary with Phase B in Stratum 1 in the southern hall.

Stratum 2, Phase A

The removal of the fallen stones of stratum 1 resulted in the discovery of four rooms. A layer of light brown-grey fill, about 10 cm thick was excavated down to the level of the floors of the rooms. This fill was loose and contained pottery sherds from the Mamluk and from the earlier part of the Ottoman period. The main architectural features attributed to this stratum are the walls of the four rooms A1, B1, C1 and D1 (Fig. 5).

Room A1

This room is located at the northern end of the northern hall. The builders made use of the original northern wall W40 and the western wall W41 of the northern hall as the northern limit of room A1 and the western limits of the small rooms. Wall W42 was built as the southern wall of the small rectangular



Fig. 4. Southern Hall: Northwestern Square; silo with lid; channel

room. The room is 6.7 m length and 2 m in width. The floor of this room (L 1314) was partly destroyed probably at the time when W42 and the upper part of the vaulted walls of the Original Building collapsed. This is because small pieces of plaster were found in a lower level and resembles the colour and matrix of the plaster of the original walls. W42 was constructed out of a small and medium sized dressed stones (c. 0.20x0.20 m) and was preserved to a height of two courses with two rows of stones. A white grey mortar was clearly observed between the stones of the wall. A blocked doorway was clearly observed in the western end of the wall. It was probably blocked during a later stage in the use of this room but still within the Mamluk period. W42 and the other walls were founded on top of the vaulted arch of the lower floor (see below).

Room B1

This room was also of rectangular form. It consisted of W44 on the east; W42 on the north; W64 on the south and W41 on the west was the original western wall of the northern hall. The room has length of 3.5 m and a width of 2.10 m. An entrance was uncovered in the northeast corner of the room (between W42 and W44) and linked Room B1 with Room C1. The excavation of this room began at elevation 820.42 m from the upper level of Walls 44, 42, and 64. Within this room there was a light brown-grey fill, about 20 cm thick. The fill contained painted hand-made potsherds from the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. At elevation 820.20 m elevation small pieces of plaster began appearing which indicated that beneath this fill there had to be a floor. L 1305 represented the fill on the floor; this locus consisted of a loose light brown fill mixed with potsherds from the Mamluk period. The floor (L 1306) was exposed in the northeast corner of the room. Here also potsherds

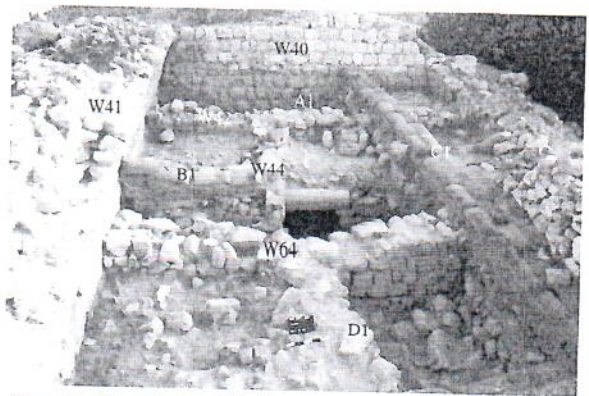


Fig. 5. Northern Hall: Rooms in Upper Floor; rooms A1, B1, C1, D1

from the Mamluk period were uncovered above the floor. W44 was built of medium stones (about 0.50x0.55 m). The wall was preserved to a height of two courses and was built of one row of stones. It has a length of 3.5 m. W44 was founded on a collapsed layer of massive stones probably derived from the lower vaulted corridor of the first floor. This indicates that this wall must have been built in a later stage in the Mamluk period. Hence it is conceivable that the room was longer and that W44 divided it into the two rooms B1 and C1. W64 represented the southern wall of the room and was built from medium and small dressed stones. The wall also preserved for two courses and was built of two rows of stones. The wall was founded on top of the vaulted arch of the first floor room.

Room C1

The room was about 3.80 m in length and 3.80 m in width. It consisted of W42 on the north and W64 on the south and W44 on the west. The eastern wall of the room was probably the eastern wall of the original northern hall. The entrance to this room was not exposed during this season of excavations. A light brown fill covered the entire room and contained pottery from the Mamluk and Ottoman periods.

A small squared stone-built installation was uncovered at the north-eastern end of the room. This installation (L 1307) was about 0.40x0.60 m. No artefacts or potsherds were found within the light brown fill covering the installation. It appears that the installation was founded on top of the vaulted arch of the first floor northern room. The floor uncovered in this room (L 1308) appears to have been a continuation of floor (L 1306) in Room B1. On this floor were potsherds from the Mamluk period. The walls of Room C1 were founded on top of the

vaulted northern room and the vaulted corridor of the first floor, which linked the northern first floor room with another southern room in the lower floor. The floor of Room C1 was preserved above the top of the vaulted arch of the northern lower room while in the southern part the floor was founded on top of the collapsed vaulted corridor.

Room D1

The room was located at the southern end of the excavation area in the northern hall. A small square (2x2 m) was excavated up to Wall 64. A light brown to grey fills mixed with a small quantity of pebbles and potsherds from the Mamluk period was found here. The excavation in this room was stopped because a layer of collapsed massive stones was reached which probably represents the fallen stone layer from the vaulted corridor of the lower floor. Consequently the floor of D1 had been destroyed. However in the section a line of plaster (L 1405) was observed which is probably the floor of this room.

Stratum 2, Phase 2

Below the floors of the rooms: A very smooth layer of grey plaster characterised floors L 1306, 1320, and 1308. The removal of these floors resulted in the discovery of the vaulted arch belonging to the lower floor. A very hard layer of compact small stones and plaster was exposed. This layer was the makeup of the upper floors and of the fill of the upper part of the vaulted northern lower room. Beneath L 1314 and on top of the vaulted arch of the lower room was a fragment

of an oil lamp and a single coin. Beneath L 1036 was a small painted potsherd from the Mamluk period.

Following the removal of the floors the upper part of the vaulted arch of the northern lower room was uncovered (L 1316). The vaulted arch was constructed out of large and medium semi-dressed stones, with a core of small stones filled with a heavy mortar layer. The arch bonded on the north with the original northern wall (W40) and also on the west with the original western wall (W41) of the main northern hall. The appearance of the vaulted arch is an indication that there was a complete room located on the lower floor. As a result of this evidence our aim is to expose the entrance of the lower room floor. Hence the area that needs to be reached is the area with the collapsed vaulted corridor (L 1415). Therefore the collapsed stones in this area were removed and this revealed a doorway lintel, which was a column shaft in secondary use. A blocked doorway leading to the lower part of the first floor and another facing it in the southern room were uncovered (Figs. 6, 11). Having exposed the blocked doorway leading to the northern room (Fig. 7), it became clear that the vaulted arch of the northern room was founded from the south on top of the two walls (W50, 51) which were only partly exposed during this season of excavations. The walls were built of large dressed stones with mortar in between the stones and were preserved to a height of five courses.

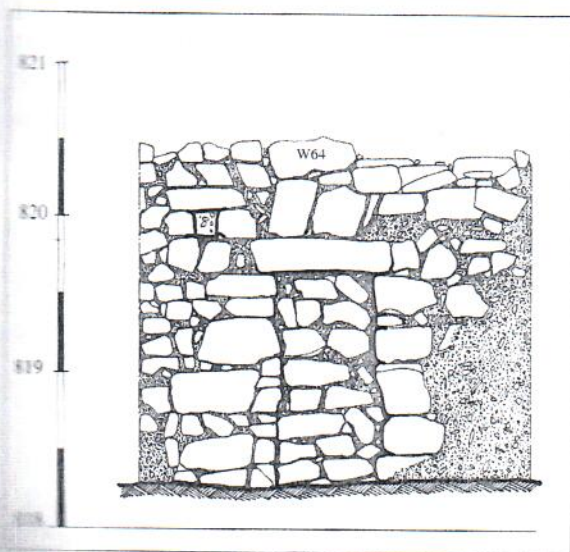


Fig. 6. Northern Hall: Southern Lower Room with Blocked Doorway

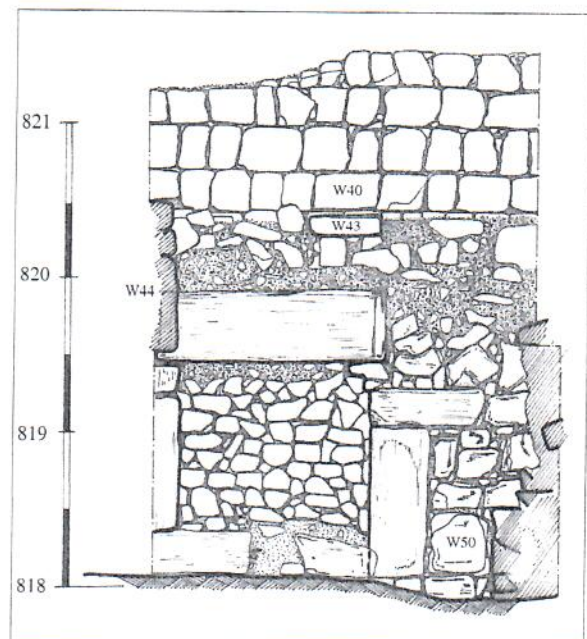


Fig. 7. Northern Lower Room with Blocked Doorway



Fig. 8. Northern Hall: Northern Lower Room, Western Part

The doorway of this room was found blocked with small stones. The removal of the blocked parts of the doorway gave access to the northern room (Fig. 8). The blocked fill contained pottery sherds from the Mamluk to Ottoman periods. This means that the lower room went out of use during a later stage of the Mamluk period and early in the Ottoman period. The northern lower room has a length of 7 m and a width of 3.70 m. In the western part of the room was a small arched niche and within its fill were three complete jars (Fig. 8). At the eastern end of the room were a rectangular bench "Mastaba" 4.30 m in length and 2.60 m in width (Fig. 9). A dark brown fill was found covering the eastern end of the room. The fill was similar to the terrace fill excavated in the upper loci attributed to Stratum 1, Phase A. This fill probably reached this area as a result of the destruction of the eastern upper part of the vaulted arch. The ceiling of the vaulted arch was plastered with a heavy layer of grey plaster. Having cleaned the later fill two installations similar to the one uncovered in the southern hall (L 1221) was uncovered (L 1334 and L 1336). In the southeastern part another installation (L 1338) was uncovered and W50 sealed it. The walls of the northern lower room, especially the southern walls were founded on bedrock which had been cut in to serve this propose. It is conceivable that the rock

cut installations in the bedrock served as part of a wine press complex.

Stratum 3 (Original Building), Northern Hall

The Northern Hall represents the Original Building in Area B. It is built of dressed stones in rectangular form. The northern and western walls (W40-41) were preserved to a height of 2.50-3.00 m above remains of rock-cut installations (see below). Wall 47, which was not exposed completely this season, has a width of 2.70 m, and probably was also founded on bedrock. The western wall (W41) and the eastern wall (W47) were attached to wall 1 (W1) of the southern hall, thus, the latter serving as the southern wall of the northern hall. This also indicates that the northern hall was constructed later that the southern one.

There are no remains of windows or doorways in the northern (W40), western (W41) and southern walls. Doorways and windows must have been in the eastern wall (W47) opening to the courtyard area. Wall 47 (W47) was not exposed completely this season.

Stratum 4

Three features were uncovered in the northern area: L 1334, L 1336, L 1338 (Fig. 9). L 1334 was sealed by W40 and W41. L 1336 was sealed by W40, the rectangular bench, and thin paved stones. L 1338 was

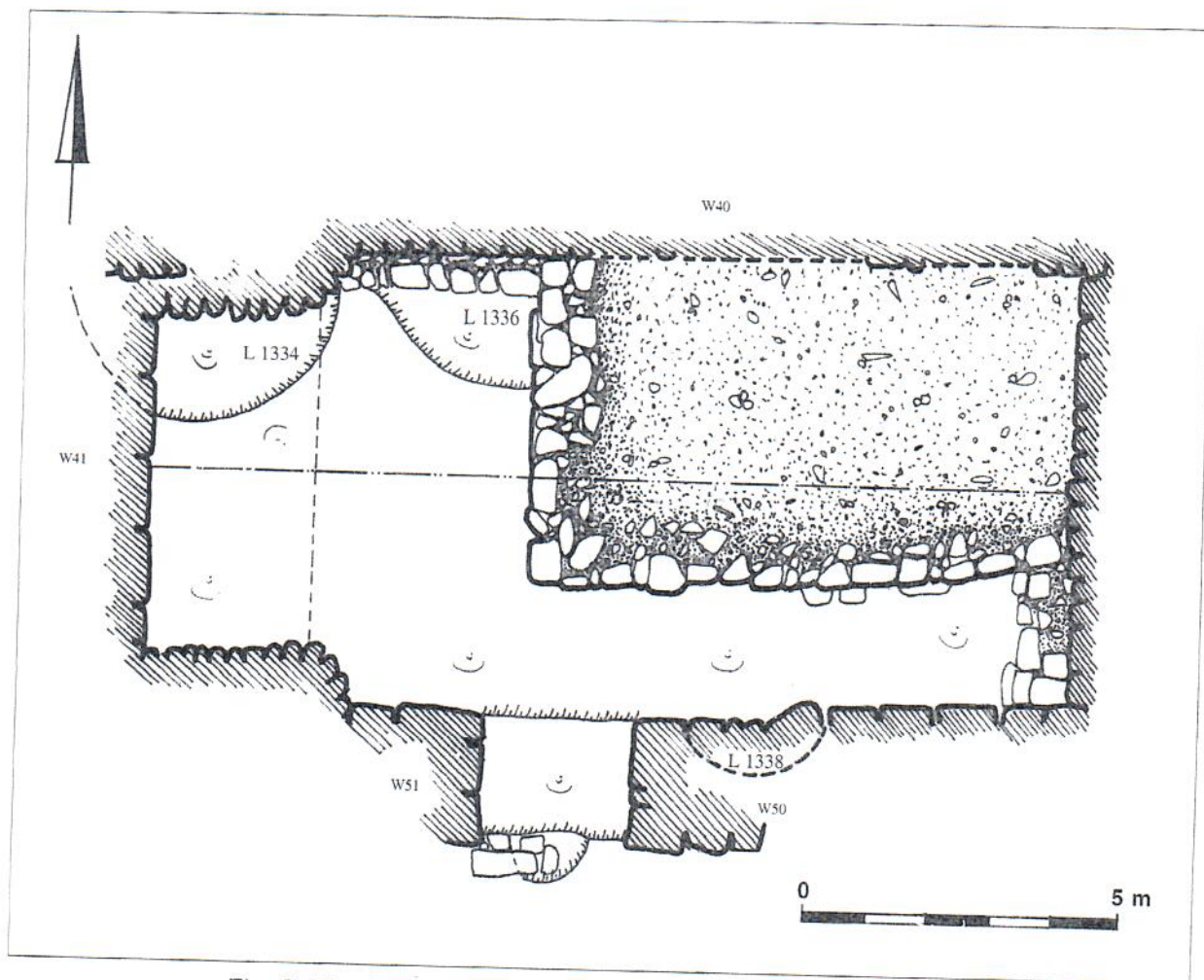


Fig. 9. Northern Hall: Ground Plan of Northern Lower Room

sealed by W50. The features are a rock-cut installations, which may be linked to the wine press uncovered in Area C.

Area C

Located in the northern part of the excavation area (Fig. 10), is a large wine press, four rock cut installations similar to those found inside the room of the northern hall L 1334-1336 and to that found in



Fig. 10. Area C

southern hall L 1221 and, in addition, small cup marks and rock-cut circular and rectangular vats. This wine press was partly excavated at this season and clearly extends in all directions. A large quantity of pottery from the Byzantine period was found within the fill of the installations. In the northern part of the area was a small rectangular treading floor. The floor was plastered and scattered white tesserae were found within the fill of the treading floor. Hence the wine press must have been in use during the Byzantine period. This wine press indicates that the area of Birzeit served as one of the regional centres for the production of wine and possibly also the oil. The rock-cut installations cover an area reaching 100x100 in the excavation area.

Discussion and Conclusions

It is difficult to provide a precise date of the Original Building. It seems, however, that Hall A and B were constructed during the medieval period. They were built immediately on the top of an extensive

agricultural installation (wine presses among others). This implies that agricultural installations already existed when the Original Building was founded.

These installations covering a large area underneath the building were sealed (see Fig. 9), whereas those around the building seem to continue functioning till a later part of the Ottoman period. A indication of the date of at least Hall B is provided by its fill containing pot sherds typical of the Mamluk period. If the Original Building is dated to the Frankish period, as some scholars postulated, one should point out to the fact that there is no ceramic evidence from this period.

Notes

1 Research and Excavation at Khirbet Birzeit has been launched by PIA in 1996. In the summer of that year a season of excavation has been carried out in area located southeast of the Original Building in the road leading to the Water Tank. The results of that season are given in the present volume (Arabic section, pp. 17-19). During 1998-1999, "Research and Excavation at Khirbet Birzeit" was integrated within "The Lower Jordan River Basin Program", which is a joint Palestinian-Norwegian project. It involves PIA and the Department of Geography of Birzeit University on the one hand, and the Departments of Archaeology and Anthropology of Bergen University, on the other. It is supported by "Norwegian Council of Universities' Committee for Development Research and Education (NUFU)". The present text represents a preliminary report of the excavation season.

The director of the 1998 season was Khaled Nashef, field director Omar

Abd Rabu. Firas Aqil was representative of the Palestinian Department of Antiquities (Ramallah), Ashraf Abu Dhiab draftsman and surveyor. The excavation was combined with Arch 367, a PIA's course designed to train students in excavation techniques.

PIA wishes to thank Dr. Hamdan Taha for granting permission to conduct the excavation and for his continuous support of the project. The Institute is also grateful for Mr. Antone Sa'ad, head of Birzeit Municipality, for his support and interest in the excavation.

2 Already Guérin 1869:33-34. Kallai 1972:173-4 identified the building as a "Khan" from the Mamluk period, Pringle 1986:19-20 as a "manor house" from the Frankish period. For a full review of former archaeological research on the building and the Khirbet see Nashef in the present volume, Arabic Section, pp. 14-17, and Bibliography, pp 26-27. Throughout this article the building will be designated as Original Building.

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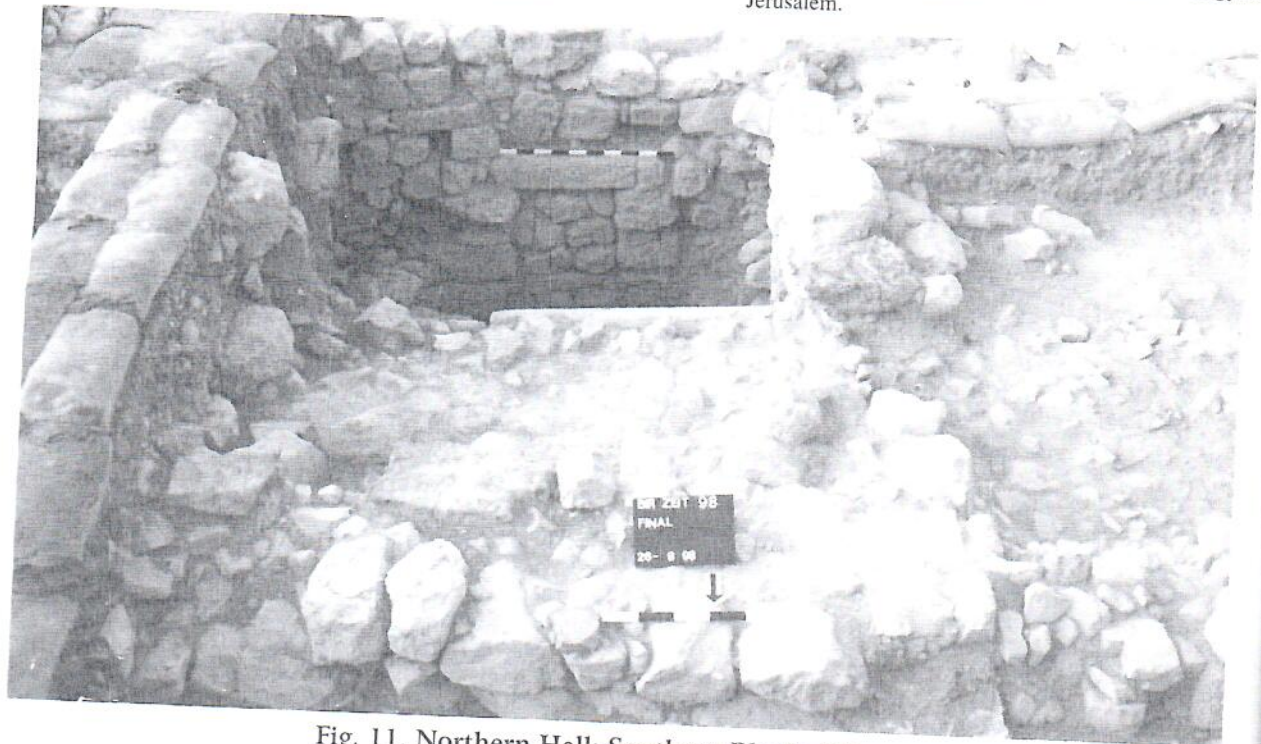


Fig. 11. Northern Hall: Southern Blocked Room