



NGSBA Excavation Reports

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Salvage Excavation at Azor - 2000 Final report

Excavation Permit: B – 221/2000
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Figure 1: The excavation's location (Block 146 Share 6042: 131730-159238 / 131730-159281)

Introduction

This Tel Azor excavation was preceded by two Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) archaeological testing projects. The first of these was conducted by Merrick Molokndov on 27 September 1999, during which ten test sections were dug. The second testing phase was carried out by Larissa Zack on 27 March 2000, including four more test sections. This was the first phase in the archaeological investigation of a small portion of the site – what might be termed a sample investigation. It was carried out in order to expose the archaeological strata of this area down to the virgin soil with the purpose of obtaining ‘cover for generations’, a long-term IAA-issued permit that would free up the area for construction.

On 18 September 2000 a manual excavation ordered by the site owners was conducted. The excavation was directed by Ido Ginton and Yossi Bordovic on behalf of the Department of Land of Israel Studies of Bar-Ilan University, in conjunction with the IAA. The area of excavation was determined jointly by the IAA and the excavators. One area was marked for excavation (Area A) and in it were laid out four squares (S1, S2, S3 and S4). This area was subsequently excavated, with a preliminary report of the excavation being given to the IAA on 27 November 2000.

In the excavation area severe disturbances were encountered in the form of construction material and recent ‘absorption holes’ which were partially made of metal barrels that in places penetrated to a depth of 2m below ground level.

The excavation of these four squares reached a depth of approximately 5m. However, work was then cancelled due to severe safety problems that arose as a result of a combination of the squares’ depth, the instability of the surface and sections, and rain which further destabilized the ground and caused the collapse of soil into the deep squares.

On 4 December 2000, excavation was renewed after it was decided to graduate square depths by using stepped rather than straight vertical sections. This terracing was carried out by machine, under the direction of safety engineer Zlio Diamandy who coordinated with engineer Jacob Shefer, the director of the IAA’s Conservation Department, and other IAA inspectors. In order to reduce the risk of section collapse, the excavation was confined to a single 5 × 5m square that would be excavated down to pre-archaeological levels. The square chosen was S5. Excavation reached to a depth of 7.5m, beneath which lay virgin *hamra* soil. Within the 7.5m of occupation, three broad archaeological phases were identified:

- I. Modern (Ottoman and later): surface until approximately 2m.
- II. Mamluk – Late Islamic: 2m until approximately 5m.
- III. Early Bronze Age (EBA): 5m until approximately 7.5m (virgin soil).

The Excavation

Stratum I: Ottoman Period – recent (16th-20th centuries):

The main evidence from this stratum are the remains of a structure (L3) that was discovered about 20cm below the surface in square S3. From this structure there remained one course of a row of ashlar stones which belonged to an external wall (W1) measuring 5.5m long and 0.6m wide. Perpendicular to this were two narrower parallel walls (0.3m wide, surviving to one course) which probably indicate the existence of a room that was 1.2m wide and at least 2m long. In the three other squares only mixed debris was found. Most worthy of mention from amongst the

small finds are the ‘Ottoman’ pipes and an as-yet unidentified coin with an Arabic inscription. Immediately above this structure was the thin concrete floor of a modern building. In S3 this stratum was up to 2m deep.

In S1 the remains of walls indicate the existence of a courtyard or building (L11), oriented north-south (Fig.2; plan, p.8). It should be noted that we exposed only one of L11’s corners, which impedes conclusive interpretation. In the northwest corner of L11, at a depth of 1.1m, was found a near-complete *tabun* (clay oven, 0.8m diameter), mixed with ash on a leveled surface. This perhaps suggests that L11 was a courtyard associated with a building of which we could uncover only a corner (northeast corner of S1), but which continued east of the excavation area. The *tabun* was found adjacent to a wall (W2) built of fieldstones that was 4.5m long, 0.4m wide, 0.8m high, and found at a depth of 0.3m. The corner of the structure that extended beyond the excavation limit also included wall W6, the top of which was found at a depth of 0.3m and extended down another 0.8m. Like W2 it was built of fieldstones. W6 appears to have been perpendicular to W2. We have inferred that they connect to one another but W6’s continuation beyond the excavation area was only partly exposed. Along W6 another wall connects to it at right angles by means of a doorpost built of large ashlar blocks. This intersection forms the building/courtyard’s corner and possible entrance (perhaps an entrance to the L11 yard containing the *tabun*, which was in turn perhaps associated with the building continuing east from the excavation area). The W6 building/courtyard's floor was exposed at a depth of 1.4m.

Two ‘rubbish pits’ found 2m below the surface in square S3 also belong to this stratum. These pits' excavation was not completed. In square S4 stones that might have been part of a floor are probably also from this stratum but due to bad preservation it was not possible to be sure.



Figure 2: A recent wall (W2) close to the surface, L11.

Stratum II: Mamluk – Late Islamic (12th – 16th centuries):

No architectural remains from these periods were found. Most of the information came from stratified occupation levels, interposed with ash and sand layers. A finely-decorated Mamluk pipe was recovered (Fig.4). Present also was the glazed pottery which is characteristic of the Late Islamic period. The stratigraphy was cut by a number of rubbish pits of different sizes.

In the western side of square S5 a bell-shaped pit was discovered (L20) (Fig.3). Its width was 2.5m and its preserved height 2m. The pit was filled with thin layers of ash and sand mixed with animal bones and potsherds. At the bottom of the

pit was a concentration of stones. It is possible that L20 was used as a rubbish pit or as a sump for drainage.

Stratum III: Early Bronze Age (EBA) (ca.3600-2200 BCE):

To this stratum a single wall belongs (W4). This was first discovered in locus L15, against the southeastern section of square S1, and it was found to continue in S5. W4 had a total extant length of 3m, was 0.6m wide and was discovered at a depth of 5m below the surface. From this wall only one course was preserved, constructed of small and medium-sized *kurkar* stones. It is possible that this wall was the foundation of a sun-dried mud brick wall, fragments of which were seen in the square.



Figure 3: The western section of S5. At the top the L20 pit filled with ash, pottery and bones from the Late Islamic Period is seen penetrating the thin occupation level of the Mamluk Period. Under the scale we can see the natural *hamra* soil sloping down from south to north.



Figure 4: A decorated ceramic pipe from the Mamluk Period.

Close to this wall were found a number of shelf handles and a diagnostic Early Bronze Age sickle blade. Above the wall, in S5's southern section, a 2m-thick black layer sparsely mixed with potsherds was revealed. Some of the ceramics date to the Mamluk Period, most likely penetrating to this stratum by means of rodents and man-made pits, such as those in L21 and L22. Evidence of these layers was also found in the rest of the square's sides and in the sections of the other four squares.



Figure 5: The southern section of square S5. The upper pit is from the Late Islamic Period and the lower pit is probably of Mamluk date (the latter cuts the EBA occupation level). On the left (under the scale) are the remains of the base of the only wall found from the EBA (W4).

Between W4, discovered at a depth of approximately 5m and the natural *hamra* soil at 7.5m, it was possible to distinguish between a number of EBA occupation levels.

- At ca.5.7m down an archaeological context was exposed, comprised mainly of a flattened area measuring approximately 1 x 2m, which was rich in fired mud-brick fragments, ash and pottery.
- An additional living surface, rich in potsherds and ash, was exposed at ca.6.3m in the center of S5. In this context a large pithos (1m tall) with a rope decoration around its body was found (Fig.6). This lay on its side, fragments of the rim scattered nearby. Close to the rim a near-complete deer's antler was found (Figs.6, 8). Among other artifacts discovered in this level were a number of Canaanite sickle blades, an arrow head, a juglet and a large number of characteristic sherds, including holemouth jars and ledge handles. This occupation level also contained concentrations of *kurkar* stone combined with soil and potsherds which created compact layers probably reflecting floor surfaces.
- The lowest archaeological context was discovered at a depth of 6.9-7.5m. This directly overlay the natural *hamra* soil that was discovered throughout the entire

square, sloping from south to north very much in accordance with the area's topography.

- A number of pits of varying sizes were dug into the natural *hamra* (Fig.7). In these pits were found sherds, ash, bones and a few flint tools from the EBA.



Figure 6: Pithos on the left and a deer antler on the right, on an Early Bronze Age surface.



Figure 7: The level of natural *hamra* soil (7m below surface), into which were cut pits that we found filled with ash and Early Bronze Age potsherds.



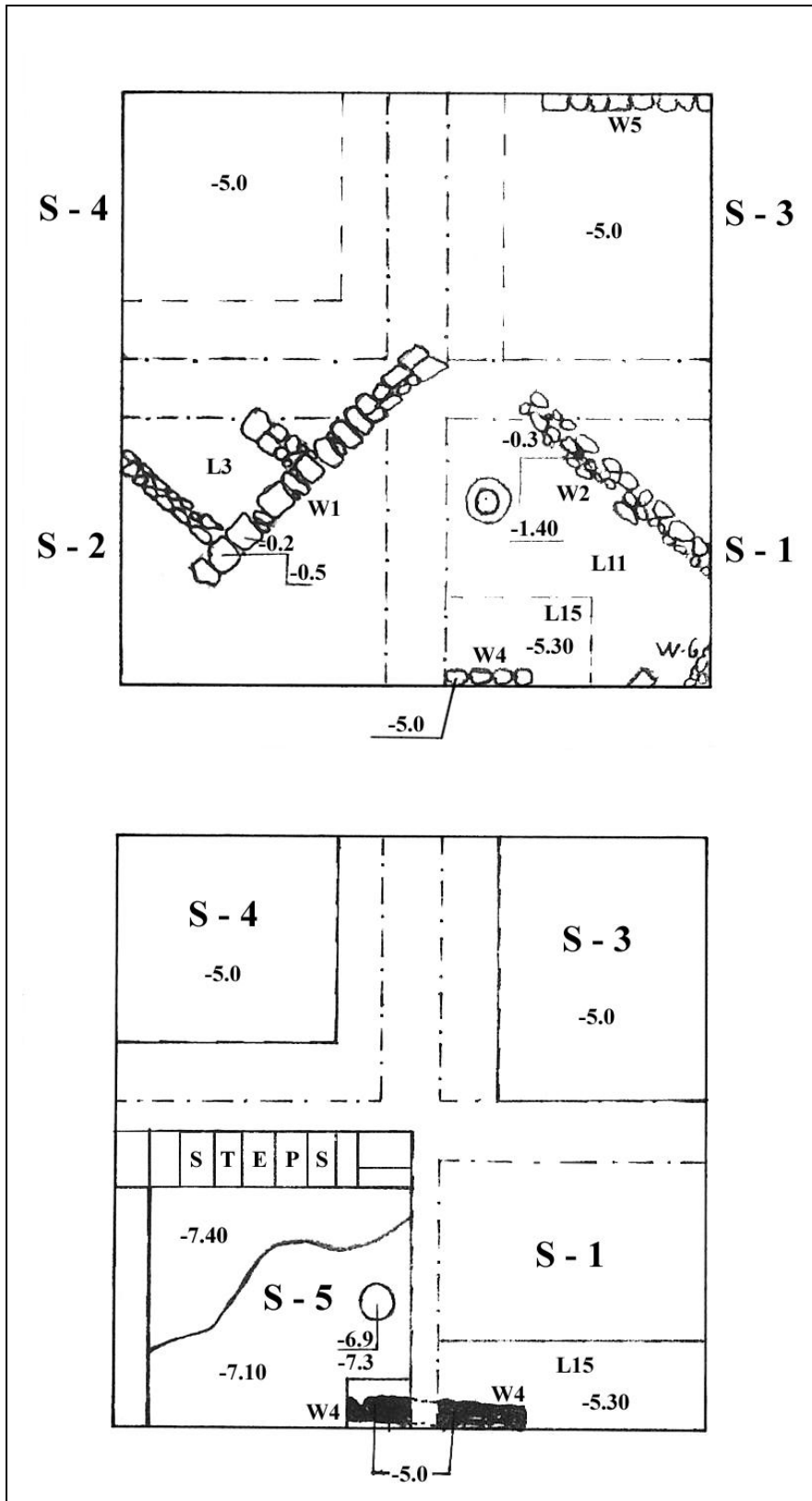
Figure 8: The deer antler that was discovered on an Early Bronze Age occupational surface.



Figure 9: Arrow head, sickle blades and basalt weights from the Early Bronze Age occupation level.

Plans

Stage – 1 (upper): excavation of squares S1-4.



Stage – 2 (lower): excavation only in square S5.

Summary

Tel Azor, which is situated on the road between Jaffa and Jerusalem, was hardly excavated prior to this project. At the top of the mound are the remains of Crusader fortress *Casal de Plains*, the ruins of which cover large areas of the *tel*. The current test pits and salvage excavations were concentrated mainly around the edges of the mound, so the full stratigraphic sequence of the *tel* has not yet been revealed. The excavation was conducted at the northern edge of the *tel*, where no archaeological investigations had taken place to date. Probably for this reason remains from other periods known to have existed at the site thanks to surveys and other salvage excavations (see references) were not exposed. On the other hand, the finds from our excavation support a picture of intensive occupation in the area during certain periods.

To recap, the excavation revealed a building or courtyard, and other constructions and rubbish pits that most likely dated to recent centuries. Pits and living surfaces, without any architecture, were also found that date to the Mamluk through Late Islamic periods.

An Early Bronze Age archaeological level was found, 2.5m thick and incorporating occupation surfaces and architectural elements. Due to the limited extent of the excavation it is hard to assess the nature of the site's earliest settlement, but we have inferred that the EB settlers based their economy on agriculture. Evidence for this we find in the many sickle blades and the large pithos, which was probably used in order to store grain. The subsistence pattern also included hunting, as evidenced by the flint arrow head and the deer antler that was found next to the pithos.

The EBA is the first archaeological period on the site, its remains being found directly on the virgin *hamra* soil. No finds from the Chalcolithic period were recovered despite the many graves from this period in the adjacent area of Tel Azor (Perrot 1961). However, there is a possibility that the remains of the EB settlement found by our excavation were in fact associated with graves discovered south and west of the *tel* (Ben-Tor 1975), although these graves were from the transitional period between the Chalcolithic and EBA and were assigned by the excavator to the end of the fourth millennium BCE.

From the EBA to the Mamluk period there appears to have been no settlement in the immediate area (although it should be reiterated that surveys and other salvage excavations around the Tel have revealed finds from other periods (see references), including the Middle and Late Bronze Ages, as well as the Iron Age). From the Ottoman period onward, our excavation site was probably settled continually by the Arab village Yazur, up until 1948. The most recent phase of this settlement severely damaged earlier levels, as a result of intensive digging for rubbish pits and drainage facilities.

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