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Exploration

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Zahara to a range within the first century BCE and the first century CE. While the function of the various buildings remains unknown, as does the nature of the Roman settlement on the site, it is possible that the site might have functioned as a small agricultural village, most probably connected with the larger Roman city at Beth Shean (Scythopolis).

SUSAN L. COHEN

Ramat Raḥel, 2005

The first season of the renewed excavations at Ramat Raḥel was conducted during July–August 2005 (license nos. G-19/2004, G-17/2005). The expedition is directed by Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming under the auspices of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University, and the Theological Seminary (Wissenschaftlich-Theologisches Seminar) and the Faculty for Jewish Studies (Hochschule für jüdische Studien) at Heidelberg University. A total of 180 volunteers participated in our three-week-long season, including 20 students from Heidelberg University. Two students from Tunisia and a student from Indonesia also took part. A number of German and British volunteers were recruited by the German research team Arbeitsgruppe für Biblische Archäologie (Wort+Wissen). Other volunteers came from the U.S., Canada, Germany, England, France, Finland, the Czech Republic, Poland and Israel.

The excavation team included Y. Gadot (field director), B. Arubas (stratigraphical analysis and surveying), G. Cinamon (assistant field director), L. Freud (registration), D. Davis (assistance in registration), N. Shimon, V. Zlatkovski, L. Marom, G. Margalit, B. Babaiev and S. Zach (area supervisors), A. Achiman (administration), O. Sergey (team coordinator), P. van der Veen (academic program), Y. Pharhi (coins), I.

Taxel (pottery analysis) and S. Pavel (photography).

The Excavations (fig. 1)

Five main areas were chosen for excavation. The areas were selected on the basis of our research questions and goals (see details below). Remains dating from the Byzantine and Roman periods (strata III and II of Aharoni's excavation) were found in all five areas. We also found small remains dating from the Iron Age II, sherds and seal impressions dating from the Persian and Hellenistic periods, and coins dating from the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Abbasid periods.

Area A (fig. 2)

This area is located in the north-eastern part of the site, adjacent to the line of the outer wall, as reconstructed by Aharoni (fig. 1). The excavation area borders on areas previously excavated by Y. Aharoni in 1962 and by G. Barkay in 1984. Aharoni assumed that the eastern fortification wall of the outer court is to be found in this locality, where it approaches the casemate wall of the inner palace. These two features were dated by Aharoni to the later part of the Iron Age II (stratum VA). The aim of the re-excavation was to verify the existence of the presumed outer wall at that location, to re-examine the stratigraphic and chronological relationship between the outer court and the palace to the south, and to try to reach architectural remains of the early Iron II settlement, for which there has been little evidence until now.

In the western part of the area we dug through a modern fill, down to the flattened bedrock consisting of soft white chalk (fig. 3). The flattening of the rock seems to be artificial and the Nari coating was missing. Twelve quarried tombs were found, all but one aligned on a north-

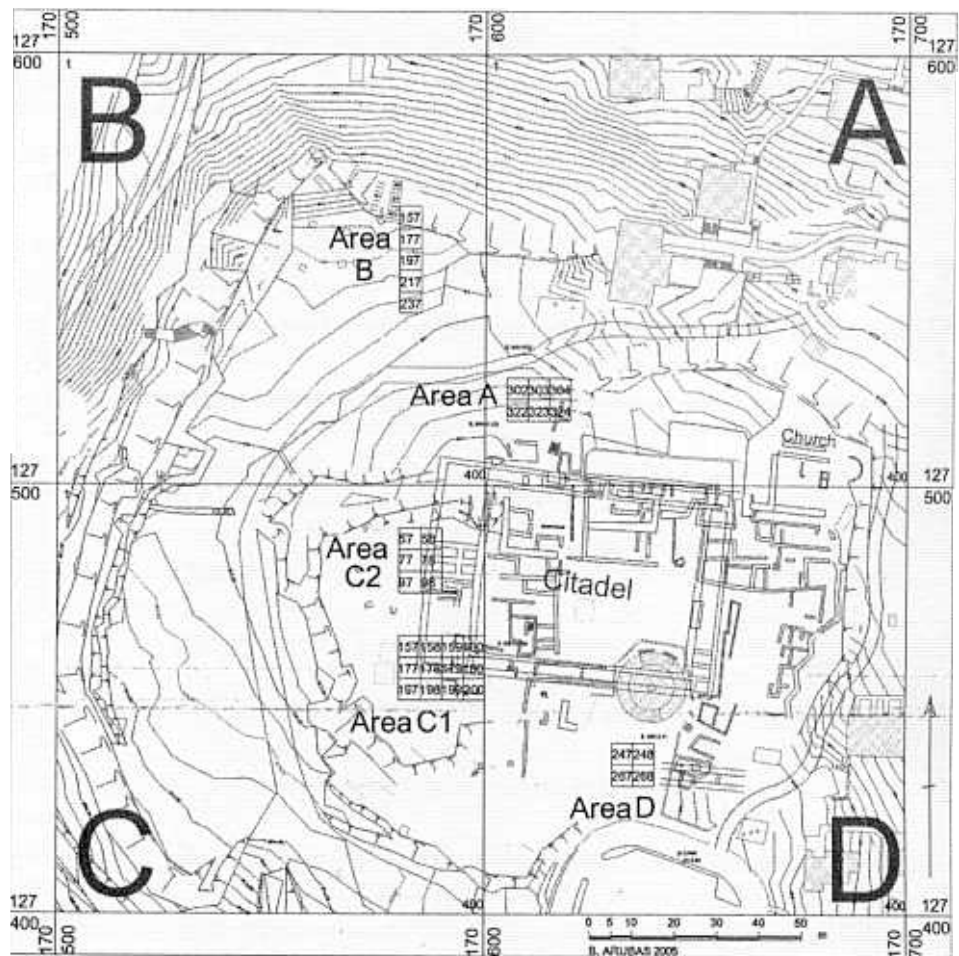


Fig. 1. Ramat Rahel, 2005: general plan

north-east to south-south-west axis. The tombs are rectangular (on average: 1.9×6 m.). Since they were not excavated, we cannot date them with any precision. It is possible that the cemetery formed part of the Byzantine complex in the sixth-seventh centuries CE (stratum II), but it is more likely that it was part of the earlier settlement, dating from the late Late Roman period fourth century, stratum III). The tombs were carved out of the rock after it was artificially flattened; hence, this work presumably pre-dated the cemetery.

In the eastern part of the area we uncovered wall segments and a plastered drainage canal incorporated in the bedrock. Since this area had previously been excavated by Aharoni and the results were unpublished, we were unable to date the re-exposed features. The plastered canal forms part of an installation that did not survive. The quality of the plaster suggests that the installation dates from earlier than the Hellenistic period. Byzantine pottery was found in the foundation trenches of the segmented walls, dating

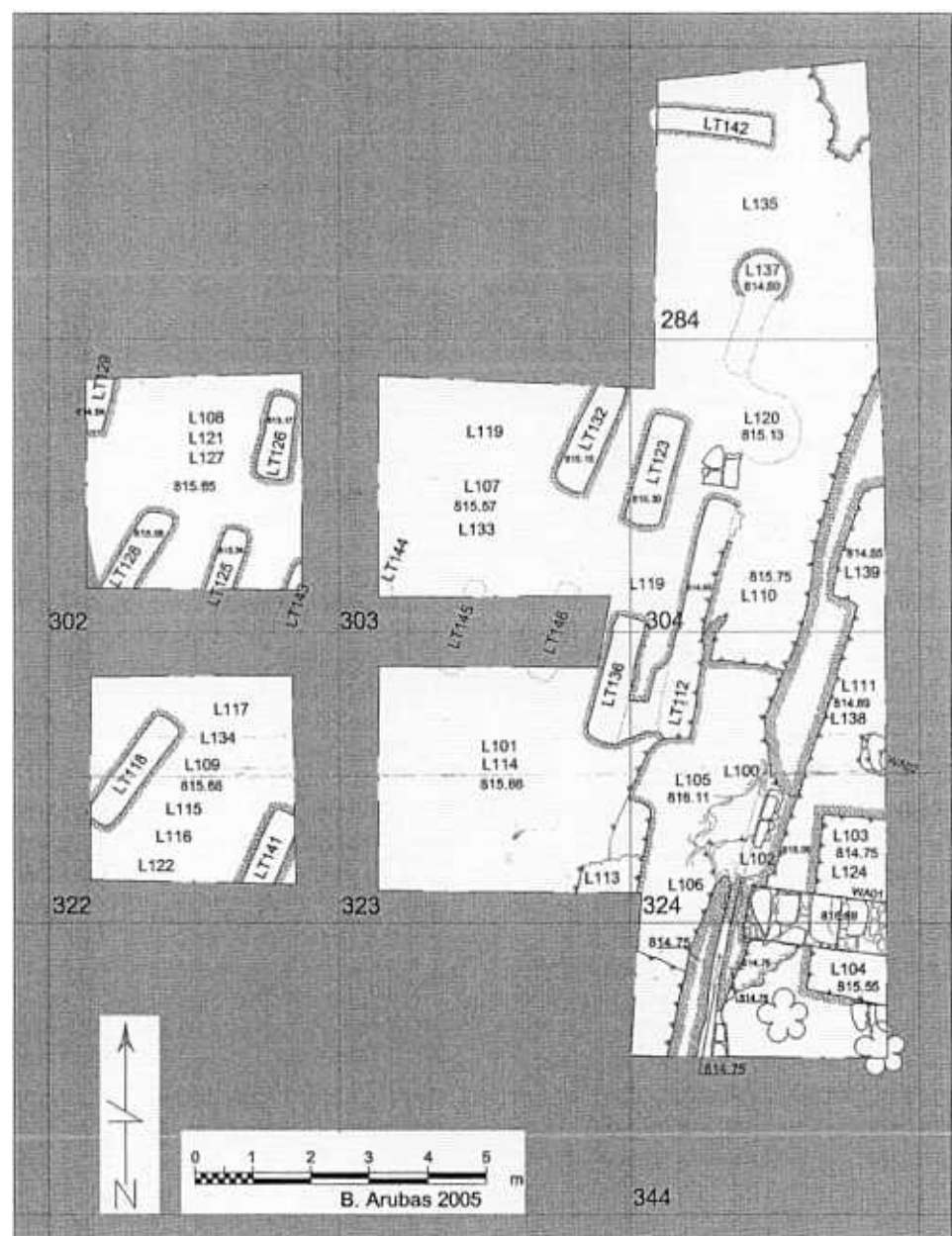


Fig. 2. Plan of area A

the walls to the Byzantine period or later.

The presumed eastern fortification wall, dating from the seventh century

BCE, has not been found. Neither did we find remains of an early Iron Age settlement. This runs counter to Aharoni's interpretation, although it is still too early to



Fig. 3. Area A: flattened bedrock and quarried tombs

present firm conclusions. Broadening the area next season to the west and north will help us conclude if this area formed part of a built outer court, if it was indeed fortified, and whether an earlier Iron Age settlement existed here.

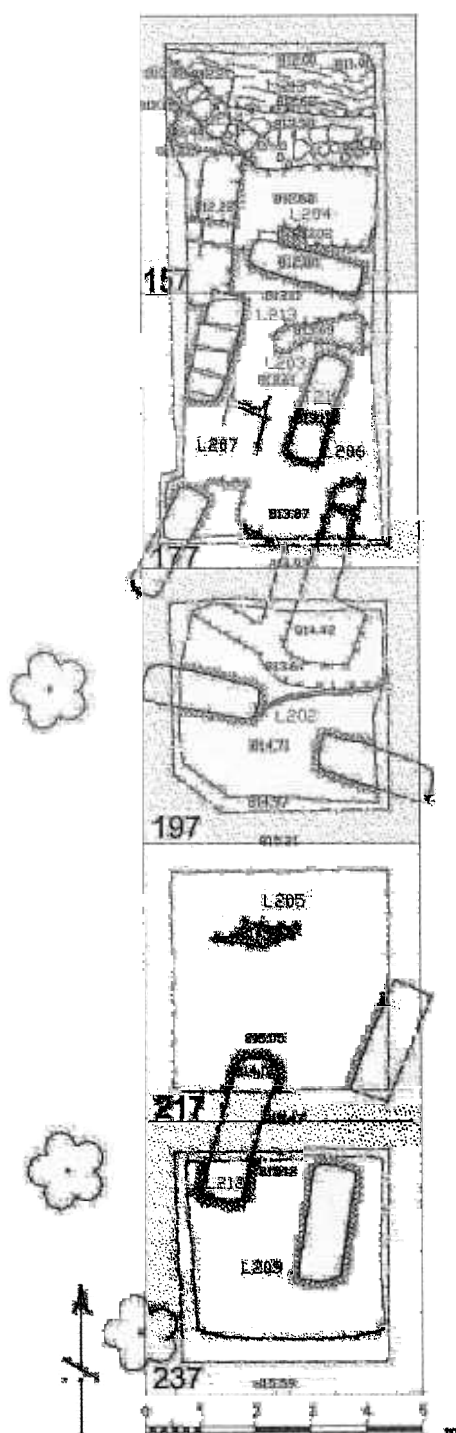
Area B (fig. 4)

Area B serves as a section of the lower court, oriented north-south. The area (one square wide and seven squares long) is located in the northern part of Aharoni's Stratum VA 'outer court' (fig. 1). Area B was chosen in order to re-examine Aharoni's reconstruction of a northern outer wall supporting an inner fill, which in turn was designed to create the flattened court. Here, as in the case of Area A, we hoped to locate remains of the earlier Iron Age II (stratum VB) settlement, and to reconstruct the natural topography of the site prior to the first construction.

Immediately below the surface we reached natural bedrock; hence, all the ev-

idence we found of human activity is connected to rock cutting. The most recent feature in the area is a long military trench, dating from Israel's 1948 War of Independence, which damaged earlier remains. The trench was backfilled with thousands of pottery sherds and stone objects that had been discarded there by Aharoni.

In the northern part of the section, at the base of the natural slope, we revealed a small part of an Iron Age quarry, similar to the ones located on the western slopes, which were published by Aharoni (1964: 52). Our finds confirm Aharoni's and show that quarrying had been conducted along the northern slope as well. A small assemblage of complete pottery vessels was found inside the quarry, helping to date it to the late eighth or seventh century BCE. A stamped jar handle from an unstratified locus, bearing the names אהרונה / אהרונה, may also date from this period. Identical stamp impressions were



found at Mizpa, Lachish and Beth Shemesh. Another identical stamp impression was published after being purchased on the antiquities market (Avigad and Sass 1997: 244–245, no. 665).

In the southern part of the section, inside Aharoni's 'flattened court', we uncovered the face of the bedrock just below the modern surface. Here, too, as in area A, the surface of the rock was artificially flattened and the Nari coating was missing. It seems that the practice of flattening the natural terrain was carried out in much of the site.

Nine rock-cut tombs (c. 0.6×1.80 m.; fig. 4) have been found, all dating from the Late Roman and Byzantine periods. Six of the tombs are aligned north to south, and the other three on a north-north-west to south-south-east axis. This group of tombs should be seen as part of the burial field in area A. The tombs were cut into the rock after it was flattened and the Nari coating was removed.

The northern outer wall was not located in this section. We have found no evidence of pre-enclosure activities.

Area C1 (fig. 5)

Located in the south-western part of the site (fig. 1), area C1 had already been excavated twice: first by Aharoni, in 1963, and then again by Barkay, in 1984. Since neither published the results of these excavations, we have no information relating to architectural features exposed or removed. Aharoni assumed that the south-western corner of the Iron Age palace (stratum VA) was located here. A modern statue, by Ran Morin, reconstructing this presumed corner, was erected there, which prevented us from investigating under it.

Our excavations have made it clear

◀ Fig. 4. Plan of area B

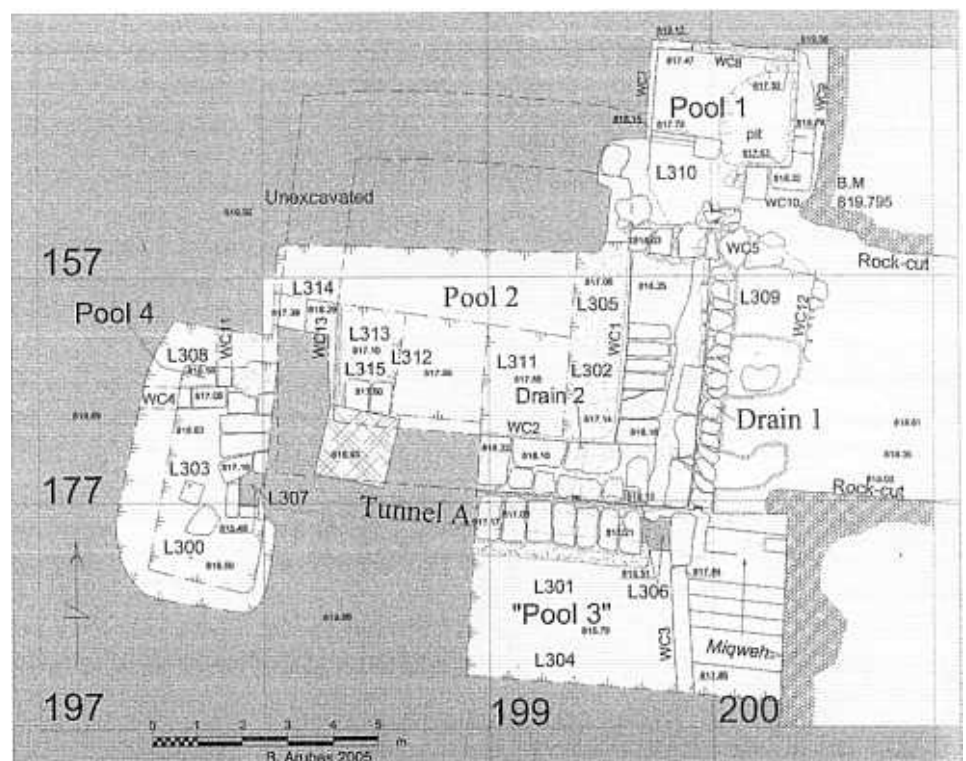


Fig. 5. Plan of area C1

that most of this area was devoted in antiquity to storing and transporting water. We have uncovered the remains of four plastered reservoirs, three plastered drains and a roofed tunnel conducting water. It appears so far that the water system had two stages.

The entire zone was hewn out of rock and was lower than the Iron II fort palace to the north. The reservoir's walls were of natural rock, except for a few built walls. The walls were covered with many layers of plaster. Pools 1 and 2 were higher than the other two pools, and plastered channels were used to drain the water from the higher pools into the lower ones. The pools form part of a larger complex, which will only be understood when the excavation is extended in coming years.

The roofed tunnel A was carved into the floor of pool 3, thus preventing its use. Carved into the bedrock, the tunnel was roofed with large rectangular stone slabs. It had been cleaned in the previous excavations, and we only re-cleaned it. It runs on an east-west axis for c. 9.20 m., and then continues to the north for almost 4 m., until it is blocked by a large stone slab. The tunnel is large enough to allow a person to walk through quite comfortably. A square opening in the roof of the tunnel, c. 7.5 m. from the eastern end, must have been used for the tunnel's maintenance.

It is impossible to date the water system as of yet. If it is established that the water system formed part of the Iron Age inner citadel, the walls believed by Aharoni to serve as casemate walls would

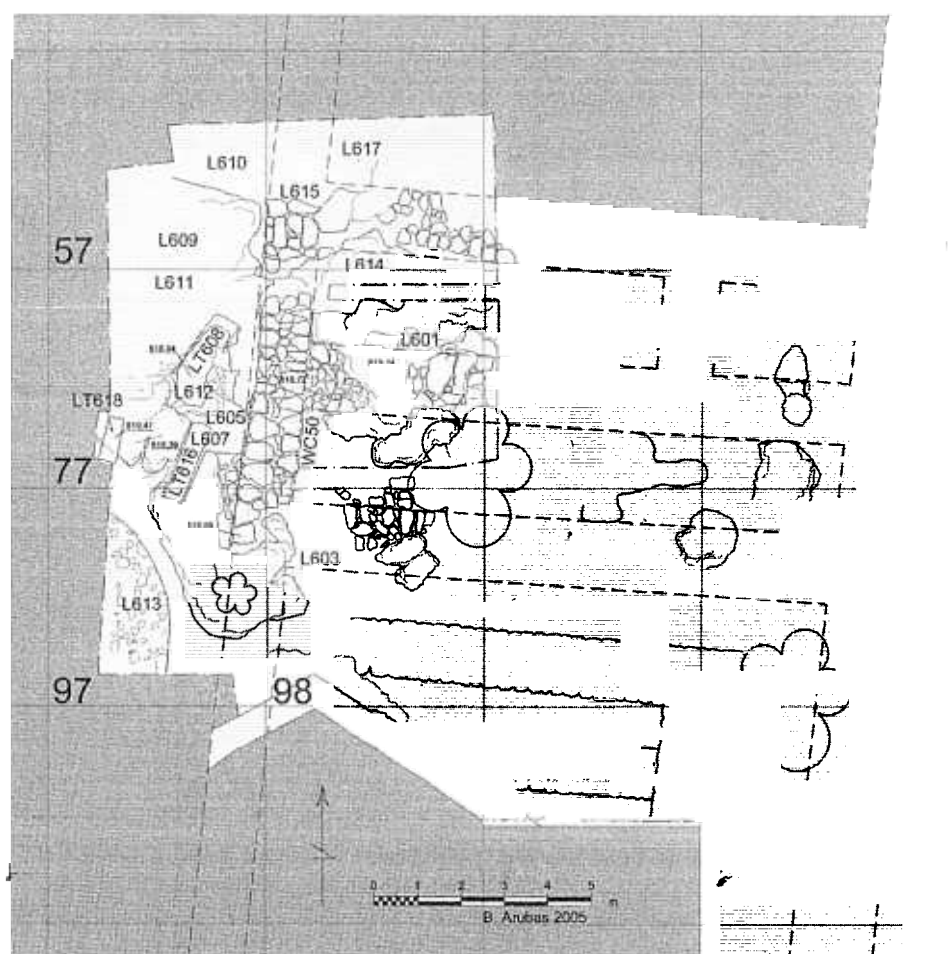


Fig. 6. Plan of area C2

in fact belong to pool 2. On top of that, the water system occupies an area that spreads inside and outside the reconstructed citadel. Thus, the reconstruction of the inner citadel's corner at this spot, as Aharoni believed, would be called into question.

Area C2 (fig. 6)

Area C2 is located at the highest part of the site, on the edge of the spur overlooking north, west and south. The spur has a commanding view over Naḥal Rephaim,

which connected Jerusalem historically with the urban centres in the Shephelah and the coastal plain, and over the road leading to Bethlehem in the south. During Israel's 1948 War of Independence, army trenches and a large bunker were cut into the bedrock, destroying early remains.

Area C2 is located on the western edge of Aharoni's excavation (fig. 1). Here Aharoni had exposed a wall that, according to his reconstruction, was the western boundary wall of the seventh-century palace fort. By renewing the excavation here

we aimed to uncover the Iron Age II walls that had been exposed by Aharoni, in an effort to reevaluate their stratigraphic affiliation and architectural nature. We also expanded the area to the west, in order to determine the existence of any Iron Age remains west of the presumed closing wall. In the forthcoming seasons, the area will be expanded further to the east and south, in order to clarify the stratigraphic and architectural relationship between the Iron Age fort located here, the palace and court located to the east, and the water system to the south (area C1).

Three rectangular burials were found in the western part of the area, cut into the bedrock. Interestingly, the burials are oriented similarly to the burials in areas A and B. One of them contained a lead case, with two gold earrings and four iron pins. The case was probably used for a child burial.

Earlier remains included the western closing wall, partially excavated by Aharoni. The wall (WC50), oriented south-north, was built of small to medium fieldstones laid on the bedrock in such a way as to create a level surface: where natural rock projected, it was incorporated into the wall, and in other places up to three courses of stones were laid. We did not find a floor that can be associated with the walls. As the bedrock was just below the surface, it is reasonable to assume that the floors were on a higher level and did not survive. If so, the walls visible today would in fact be the subterranean foundations. White patches of what seems to be crushed chalk were found smeared on the bedrock — perhaps the foundation of a floor that existed above.

So far, we have not found any Iron II architectural remains west of Aharoni's closing wall, and thus have no evidence that the palace fort continued further to the west.

Area D

Located in the south-eastern part of the site and immediately to the south of the modern water pool (fig. 1), area D was not previously excavated. Our aim in excavating this area, which is close to Aharoni's early Iron casement wall (stratum VB) and his Persian period main wall, is two-fold: 1) to reexamine the entire stratigraphy of the site, as presented by Aharoni, and 2) to uncover Persian and Iron II remains, which form a continuation of what Aharoni found to the east, so that we can better understand the site in these periods. The numerous Yehud stamp-seals reported by Aharoni to have been found just east of area D make it plausible that the area was home to an administrative centre during the Persian and Hellenistic periods, from which no architectural remains have been found to date.

Four squares were excavated this season. We were able to discern three building periods, all characterised by impressive public architecture.

In the northern part of the area we uncovered a stone pavement made of large stone slabs, as well as a number of segmented walls. These remains should be dated to the Late Roman period (Aharoni's stratum III) and the Byzantine period (stratum II). An Abbasid coin, found above the pavement, is, as far as we can tell, the latest coin found at the site, and represents the last phase of human settlement at the site before its abandonment.

In the southern part of the area we uncovered the walls of a large public building (fig. 7). It was found buried under a large stone collapse, and only part of the floor was exposed. A large screen stone was found resting upon the floor. Next to it we revealed the top of a plastered installation that was covered by impressive stone slabs and incorporated into the floor.



Fig. 7. Area D: walls of large public building

The limited exposure of the building makes it difficult to date it or to understand its nature and plan. We hope to improve our understanding of the building in the forthcoming season(s), when we expand the excavation area.

Our return to Ramat Raḥel is followed by a need to clarify and reexamine Y. Aharoni's reconstruction of the site and many of his archaeological and historical conclusions. So far, our reexamination of the outer court (areas A and B) had led us

to cast doubt on the existence of an outer fortification wall and on the function of this court. Finding the water system at the location of the presumed south-eastern corner of the inner citadel (area C1) leads us to suggest that this is not the location of the corner and that an alternative reconstruction is necessary. The 2005 season is the first of many, and we are confident that much more information regarding the questions presented will surface as our work progresses.

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