

BETHSAIDA EXCAVATIONS PROJECT REPORT ON THE 2019 EXCAVATION SEASON G-33/2019

Rami Arav

Dedicated to the late Michelle Byrnes (1959-2020)



Figure 1. Stratum VI moon-god stele



Figure 2. High place in the gate of Stratum VI



Figure 3. The plaza at the gate of Stratum VI. Notice the high place at left next to the southern tower and the northern tower to the upper right of the picture.



Figure 4. Area A West at the end of 2018 season. Notice the arrangement of the stones marked in black rectangular. In 2019 season it turned out to be a high place the Moon god stele.



Figure 5. A seal depicting a striding griffin in front of a plant, behind him an eagle above perhaps an eagle with open wings.



Figure 6. A light from a different angle shows some different details.



Figure 7. A female figurine with ankle bracelets.

THE EXPEDITION

The 2019 season was divided into two sessions. The first, May 15th to June 6th was attended by forty-one faculty, team members, students and volunteers. The second, December 17th to December 31 was attended by ten team members and volunteers.

Area supervisors for the two sessions were, Area B: Dr. Carl Savage; Area A: Ann Haverkost and Dr. Stefania Peluso. Other team members were Nic Birt, Architect and land surveyor, Hanan Shafir, Photographer, the late Michelle Byrnes, Field Administrator and Director Professor Rami Arav

Students headed by Professor Jeanette Mathews, a Senior Lecturer in Old Testament Studies at the Canberra campus of Charles Sturt University Australia, students headed by Sheila Gyllenberg from Israel College of the Bible and a dedicated body of volunteers, made this excavation sessions possible.

This season was conducted under the sponsorship of the Hebrew Union College, Jerusalem. We wish to thank Dr. David Ilan, Director of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology at the Jerusalem campus of the Hebrew Union College, for his efforts in sponsoring the excavation.

Special thanks to Koret Foundation of San Francisco and Justice Abraham David Sofaer for their generous support to the success of this excavation season.

The following Volunteers are recognized for participation at the Bethsaida Excavations for more than one time, Miriam Gottlieb, Barry Davis, and Wolf Eckhard Miethke.

THE EXCAVATION

A total of 21 loci were excavated in the two sessions of the season of 2019. Fourteen loci were excavated in Area A South (the Stratum VI city gate) and seven loci were excavated in Area A West, inside and in the vicinity of the Hellenistic/Roman temple.

Area A South, List of Loci

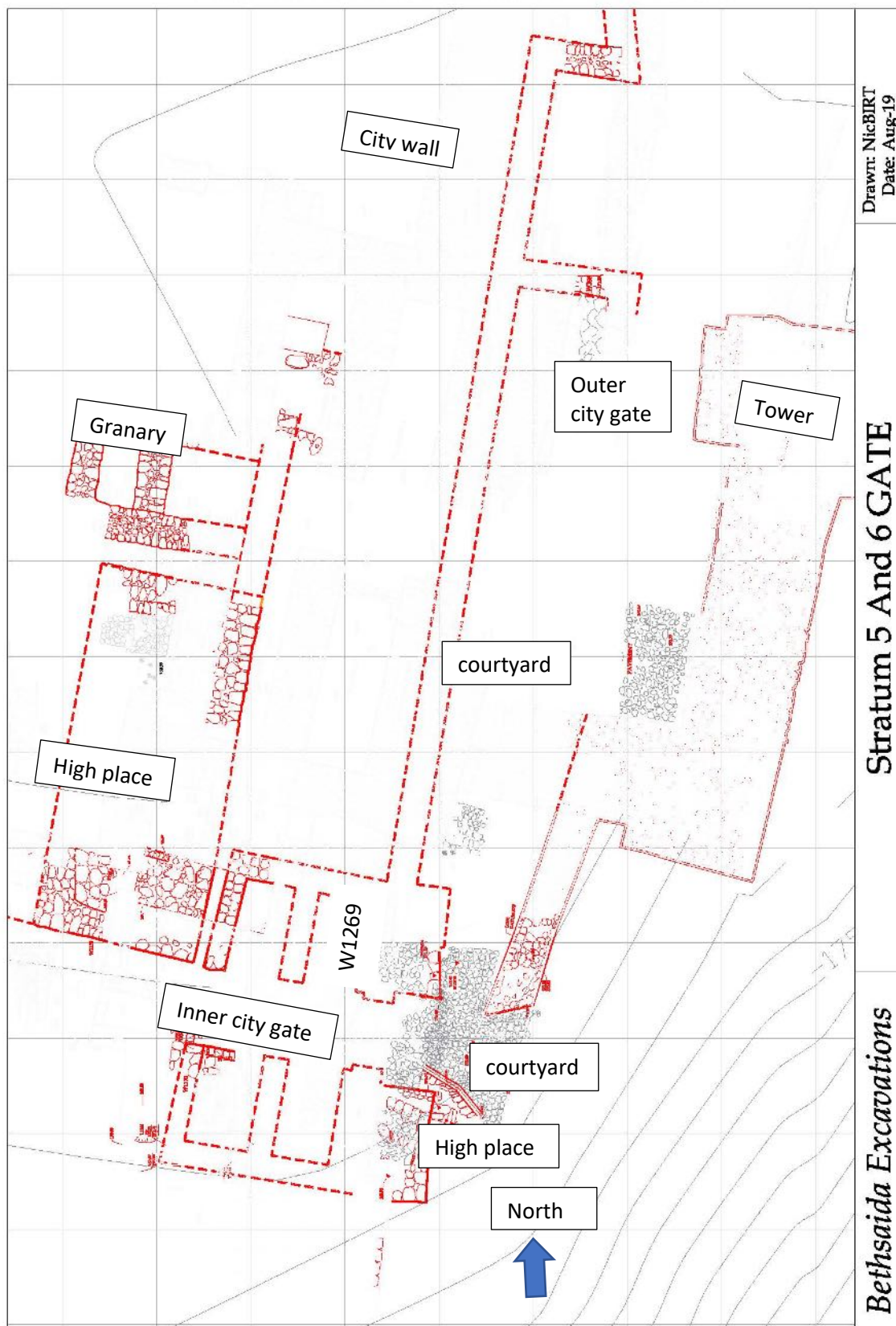
Locus	Grid	Stratum	Opening elevation	Closing elevation	Number of baskets	Architecture	Small finds
1269	L59	VI	172.47	172.50	4	near northern tower	IA IIa Cypro Phoe Bichrome
1270	M,59/M,60	VI	172.56	172.99	14	Courtyard	IA IIa Cypro Phoe, Bichrome

1271	L 59/M60	VI	172.55	172.82	5	Drainage channel	IA IIa
1272	L 59,60	VI	171.4	172.71	13	Courtyard	IA IIa
1273	M 60	VI	172.78	173.44	3	Drainage channel	IA IIa Painted ware
1274	L 59, 60	V	172.8	172.9	1	Removing W1185	IA IIa
1275	M 60/M 61	VI	172.15	173.37	12	Courtyard	IA IIa
1276	M60	VI	172.91	173.25	5	courtyard	IA IIa
1277	L 60	VI	172.79	172.85	1	Courtyard, near the drainage channel	IA IIa
1278	M 60/M61	VI	173.06	173.34	2	Courtyard, east of the high place	
1279	L, M, 58	VI	170.68	170.95	2	courtyard	IA IIa
1280	L, M, 58	VI	170.80	170.8	1	Courtyard, removing pavement	IA IIa
1281	M, N, 61	VI	172.79	173.52	4	Probe in front of the high place	IA IIa
1282	L, M, 58	VI	171.31	171.35	2	Probe in front of the high place	IA IIa

Area A West, List of loci

Locus	Grid	Stratum	Opening Elevation	Closing elevation	Number Of Baskets	Architecture	Small finds
2326	H 52	V	168.00	168.71	13.	Within the temple	Iron Age IIB, figurine of a women with ankle bracelets
2328	H 52	II	168.20	169.08	11	pit	Bones, Hell. Roman pottery, small votive bowl, black

							figure style pottery
2331	H 52	II	167.82	168.09	10	Within the temple	Hellenistic pottery, bones
2332	H 53	V	167.33	168.10	7	Within the temple	Limestone layers, IA IIB, Cypro-Phoenician bones
2333	H 52	II	167.94	168.10	1	An oven within the temple	Hellenistic pottery, bones
2334	H 52	II	167.84	167.84	1	Removing basalt bowl	
2336	H 53	V	168.16	168.20	2	South of the temple, limestone floor, small piece of marble	IA IIB



Drawn: NicBIRT
Date: Aug-19

Stratum 5 And 6 GATE

Bethsaida Excavations

Figure 8. Stratum VI

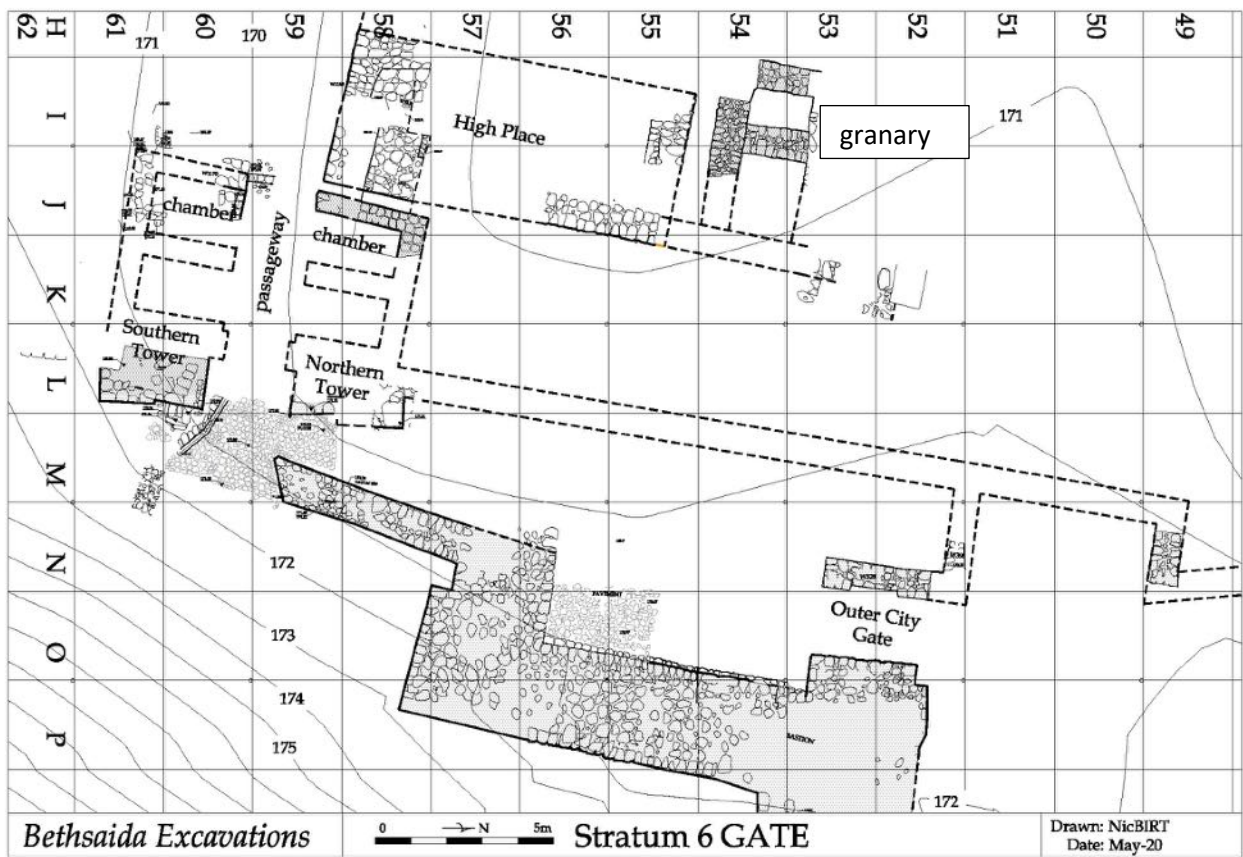


Figure 9. Stratum VI



Figure 10. Aerial photo of the gates of stratum V and VI. Notice city gate Stratum V is about 25 m. north of Stratum VI gate. The arrows mark the axis to the city. Notice that both strata have an L shaped axis.

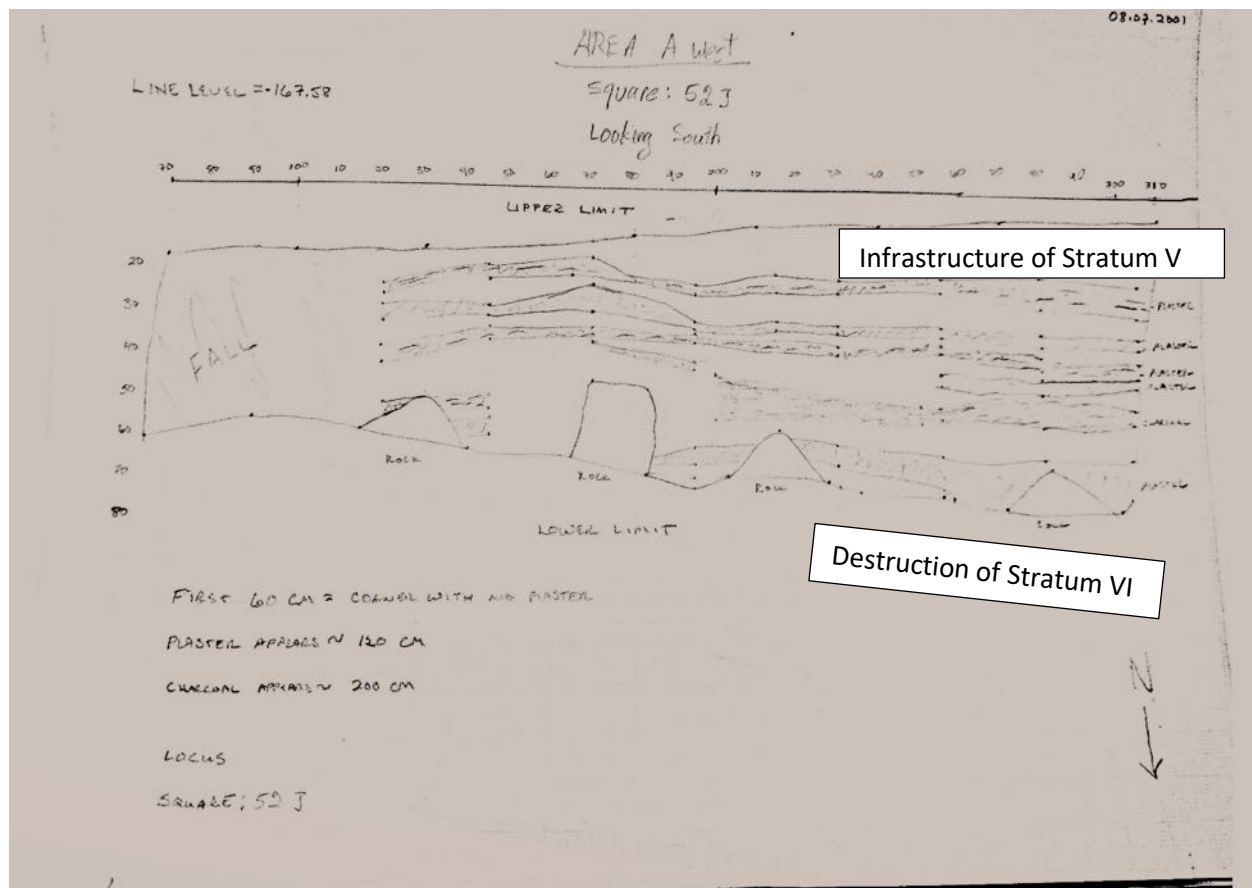


Figure 11. A section in Area A West. Lines of deposits of crushed bricks and dirt above the destruction of Stratum VI, indicate the infrastructure of Stratum V.

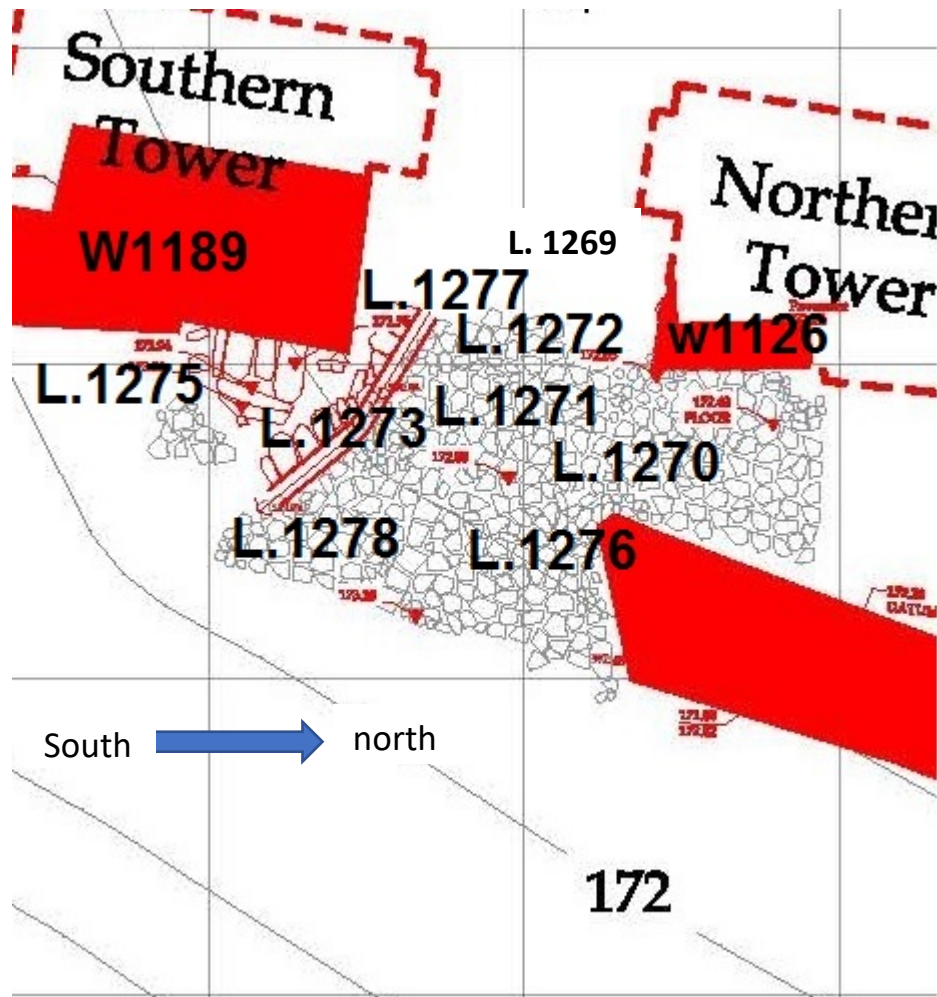


Figure 12. Loci numbers, Area A South

Loci report

Area A South

Further excavations and finds in this season confirmed earlier clues indicating that the location of the city gate of Stratum VI is 25 meters south of the city gate of Stratum V. Thus far, it is obvious that Stratum VI city gate is smaller than Stratum V city gate. In this stage of research, it is difficult to excavate the entire extent of the gate. The deposits on the city gate are too massive to remove in the short time available for the excavation. The deposits included six meters thick solid city wall of stratum V, and on top of it, two meters thick city wall of Roman Stratum II. The Roman city wall is perhaps the fortifications built by Philip the son of Herod, as described by Josephus. These deposits cover about a third of Stratum VI city gate.

The entrance to the gate was from a cobblestone courtyard at the east side of the mound and close to the ravine. The cobblestone courtyard slopes moderately towards the deep ravine. At

the western end of it and close to the towers flanking the entrance, the elevation of the cobblestone courtyard is 172.43 meters below sea level (MBSL). Five meters to the east the slope descends about a meter and a half, to an elevation of 173.15 MBSL. This is a moderate grade of about 14.4%. This elevation is similar to the segment of Stratum VI courtyard discovered near the outer city wall in about 25 m north, in squares O 55, 56. The elevation at the western end is 172.67 MBSL and 2.5 m east, it is 172.77 MBSL. The grade is almost the same.

The excavation this season concentrated on a thick baulk of debris and infrastructure left in front of the gate in the previous excavation season. The following loci were designated to this area 1269-1270, 1272, 1275 – 1280. Since the loci were part of the courtyard of Stratum VI, they are reported as one space.



Figure 13. Area A West before the 2019 excavation sessions. Notice the baulk of debris and infrastructure on the left side of the picture. Notice the diagonal line at the end of the outer city wall.

The courtyard was covered with two layers of cobblestone. Perhaps the later was longer in use. This maybe deduced from the elevation of the steps of the high place in relation to the two layers of the pavement. The lower step of the high place (173.24 MBSL) is slightly higher than

the lower layer of the cobblestones, but about 25 cm lower than the upper layer of pavement. (172.99 MBSL).

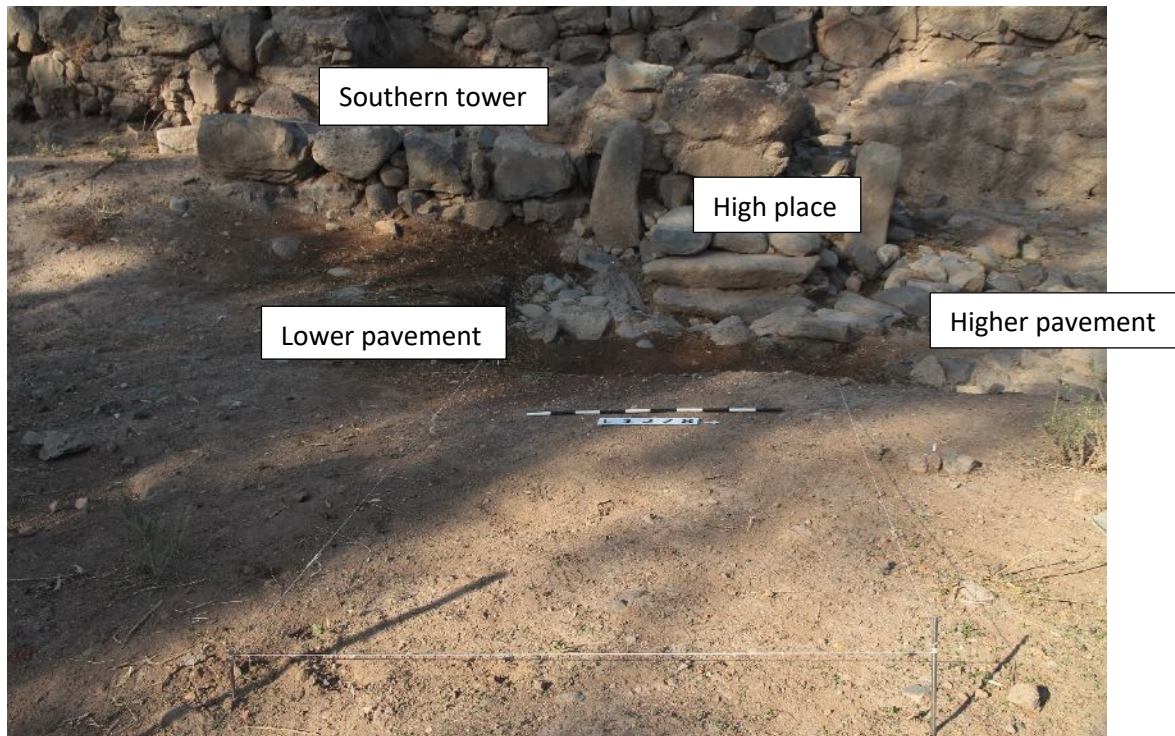


Figure 14. Area A South



Figure 15. The corner of the north tower of the city gate stratum VI.



Figure 16. The north tower of Stratum VI city gate

Very few pottery shards were discovered in these loci. This supports the observation that it is debris and infrastructure from the upper level, Stratum V. The shards have a wide horizon of Iron I to Iron IIB. The carinated bowl (fig. 21) has parallels in Megiddo VIB (Meg. II pl. 74:6). The cooking pot (fig. 22) has parallels in Hazor IX and X (Amiran Pl. 75:12, 13,14). Jar (Fig. 20) has parallels to Megiddo V (Amiran, Pl. 79:4).

Bichrome and monochrome shards indicate late Iron Age I and Iron Age IIA.



Figure 17. L. 1270, jar

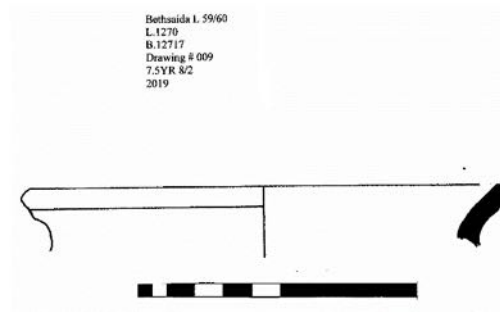


Figure 18. L. 1270, jar

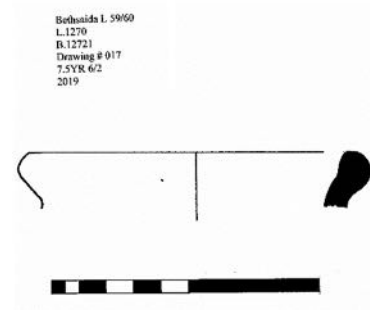


Figure 19. L. 1270, jar

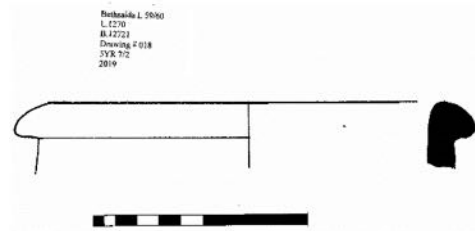


Figure 20. L. 1270, jar

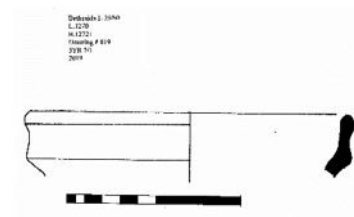


Figure 21. L. 1270, carinated bowl



Figure 22. L. 1270, cooking pot,



Figure 23. L. 1272 cooking pot

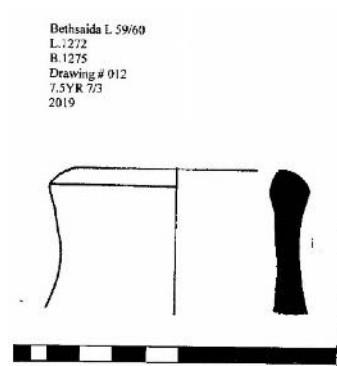


Figure 24. L. 1272 jar

Similar to finds of Stratum VI, a few monochrome and bichrome shards have been found.



Figure 25. L. 1270, bichrome shard.

Most of these pottery shards have parallels in Iron Age I pottery finds. The carinated bowl (fig. 19) has parallels at Taanach IA, (Taanach I, fig. 8.1). The cooking pot with pronounced flange is typical to Iron Age I (Dor Area D, Phase 8c; Gilboa 2001a, Pl. 5.60.18; Masos II*; Masos, Pl. 150:3). Fig. 21 is a shard of a cooking pot. Parallel are at Shiloh V (Shiloh 1963, Fig. 6.46:6).

A jar with a vertical neck and profiled rim (fig. 20) is very typical jar in Iron Age I in the north of the country. A high vertical neck in locus 1272 (fig. 24) continues the LB IIB tradition. This jar appears at the end of Iron Age I and perhaps continues to Iron Age IIB.

Monochrome and bichrome pottery are common in Iron Age I Coastal Plain, the Jezreel and Beth-She'an valleys. In these areas painted red, black, or red and black decoration continue the Late Bronze Canaanite traditions. The reason for this is explained on ground of socioeconomic and ethnic diversities of the period¹. A few shards of this style were discovered in past seasons and also in 2019 at Bethsaida (fig. 25).

Drainage Channel, Locus 1273

A drainage Channel leads from the town through the city gate to the ravine at the east. The channel 22 cm wide and about 30 to 40 cm deep, slopes slightly to the east. The elevation at the bottom of the channel at the west part, closer to the inner city is 173.06 MBSL. Four meters along the channel to the ravine at the east, the elevation was measured at 173.44 MBSL. The channel was covered by a line of stones.

The cover stones of the channel are in the same elevation of the upper layer of the cobblestone courtyard. It indicates that the channel was built together with the last phase of the higher floor.

Very few and non-diagnostic shards of pottery were discovered in the channel.

¹ A. Mazar, Iron Age I, in: Seymour Gitin, *The Ancient Pottery of Israel and its Neighbors from the Iron Age through the Hellenistic Period*. Israel Exploration Society, W.F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research, Israel Antiquities Authority, American Schools of Oriental Research, Jerusalem 2015. 21, 22.



Figure 26. The drainage channel, Locus 1273



Figure 27. Drainage channel, Locus 1273. On the left the high place and above the southeastern gate tower.

High place, Locus 1275

The southeastern tower of the gate was excavated in the season of 2018. The façade of the tower was the only side of the tower that was completely discovered and measures 5.25 m. Only about 2.5 m of the width of the tower has been excavated, the rest lays under the city walls of Stratum V.

The southern half of the façade of the tower lays in a different angle than its northern half and a high place flanks the northern half. Two layers of cobblestone pavement cover the courtyard, indicating long use and renovation. The lower pavement reaches the northern half of the tower and the high place and indicates the northern part of the tower was built in an earlier phase.



Figure 28. South tower. Notice the change in the outer face line of the tower.



Figure 29. Stratum VI high place. Notice two steps leading to a podium of three horizontal stones. Two non-iconic fieldstone steles abutting the high place. Notice the floor reading the lower step of the high place and the higher elevation of the drainage channel located north of the high place.

In the season of 2018 we discovered the southern tower of the city gate (figs. 4, 28, 30). Near the northern part of this tower, there were a few stones that looked like they were deliberately and carefully laid down on the ground. It certainly did not look like debris collapsed randomly from an elevated area. Therefore, were not removed from their site during this season.



Figure 30. The façade of the tower and the high place as were discovered in the end of 2018 season. Notice the iconic stele laying upside down and the non-iconic stele placed flat on the remains of the high place disclosing it. The three stones in one line on the southern end seems to be deliberately placed there and not random debris.

Despite their deliberate, though, unusual arrangement, we decided in the 2019 season to remove the stones and excavated the area. When a porous basalt stone was turned upside down, an icon bearing the moon-god was revealed (fig. 1).

The high place is built of two horizontal large basalt slabs leading to the podium built of three horizontal stones laying across the high place. The two non-iconic field stone steles seen in the picture, were placed on both sides of the high place where they most probably belonged. The original place of the iconic stele most plausibly was on the high place.

Pottery finds from this locus:



Figure 31. Cooking Crater Age IIA. Parallels: Keisan 9b-a (Keisan Pl. 64:2) Yokne'am XVII (Cave 2252) Zarzecki-Peleg 1997a, Fig. 4:8.



Figure 32. Locus 1275, basket 12741 pottery finds

Basket 1275 contains, from left to right, cooking pot, crater, a jar and bowl. The cooking pot with pronounced ridge under the rim is common to Iron Age I and IIA.

The crater is perhaps of the neckless type. This type has no regional boundaries and continues Late Bronze traditions and continues into the Iron Age IIA. Parallels are Masos II, (Masos, Pl. 154:2) and Keisan 9c (Keisan Pl. 78:1).



Figure 33. L. 1275, Monochrome shard of a jar.

A large part of a bichrome jug was discovered at the storage house of Stratum V at Bethsaida and presumably it belongs with the Stratum VI to a large high place inside the city².



Figure 34. L. 1275, finds include a monochrome shard and a Cypro-Phoenician red slip shard of a jug with black slip on the rim.

²(<https://bethsaidaarchaeologyorg.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/bethsaida-2011-field-report.pdf>. P.8

Black on Red shards of pottery (Cypro-Phoenician) are not uncommon at Bethsaida VI. fig. 34 presents a rim fragment of a jug or an amphora with black line decoration on the rim. Parallels are in Rosh Zayit stratum IIA. The excavators of Rosh Zayit date this stratum to 920-880 BCE. However, radiocarbon dating places this stratum to the end of 9th early 8th centuries BCE³.

The periodization used here is slightly different from the conventional Iron Age system. Since Stratum VI at Bethsaida is urban, and dates from the 11th century BCE to 920 BCE, we prefer to dub it Iron Age IIA and not Iron Age I. Traditionally periodization was based on the Bible. Iron Age I was considered the Age of Joshua and Judges, Iron Age IIA the period of the United Monarchy, and Iron Age IIB was considered the period of the divided monarchies. In the past 30 years, scholars shifted from Bible based arguments to archaeology and material culture. Moreover, it is doubtful if people in the Iron Age knew that they live in the “Iron Age” let alone in what phase of the Iron Age they were. Periodization should follow what most people experienced. In the Iron Age I, very little iron was known to the people, but in the urban phases, they certainly experienced life in the city. Thus, despite the fact that most pottery from Bethsaida Stratum VI is similar to Iron Age I, these reports proposed to view Iron Age I as largely pre-urban and Iron Age IIA as urban. Consequently, Bethsaida Stratum VI is, Iron Age IIA.

* * * *

During December 2019 we conducted two more weeks of excavation aiming to discover the size of the northern tower of Stratum VI city gate, on the assumption that the inner-city wall connects to the northern tower and in the east side of the courtyard. We attempted to see how the courtyard ends. Heavy rainfall during this season prevented us from coming to conclusive results. However, we managed to find the northeastern corner of the northern tower. The façade of the tower is 5.83 m. and is similar in size to the southern tower.

Locus 1281

The locus is a probe measuring 1.5 x 4 m, located in front of the high place, at square MN 61 and was excavated for four days. As expected from top soil, modern finds were found mixed with pottery shards from the Iron Age to Hellenistic and Roman period, no clear remains of cobblestone pavement were discovered either. Large stones were found at the eastern end of the probe and close to the slope. The function of these large stones sitting in one straight line along the slope have not yet been determined.

³ Zvi Gal and Yardenna Alexandre, *Horbat Rosh Zayit, An Iron Age Storage Fort and Village*, 2000, 8; Boaretto & Ali. Dating the Iron Age I/II. *Radiocarbon* 47, 1, 2005, 39-55.



Figure 35. Locus 1281, a probe towards the end of the slope. Large stones appear at the eastern end of the probe but whether they are part of a retaining wall or otherwise it is still unknown.



Figure 36. When the probe was extended further to the east, some more stones appeared. This probe needs more excavations.



Figure 37. Mixed pottery was found in Locus 1281. On top there is a Cypro-Phoenician red slip and burnished pottery jug handle dating from the 11th-10 century BCE and at the bottom there is a Galilean bowl dating from the second century CE.



Figure 38. On top a section of the handle of the Cypro-Phoenician handle of a jug. At the bottom the back of the Galilean bowl.

Locus 1279

Prior to the probe looking for the northeastern corner of the northern city gate tower, we excavated the floor of Stratum V.

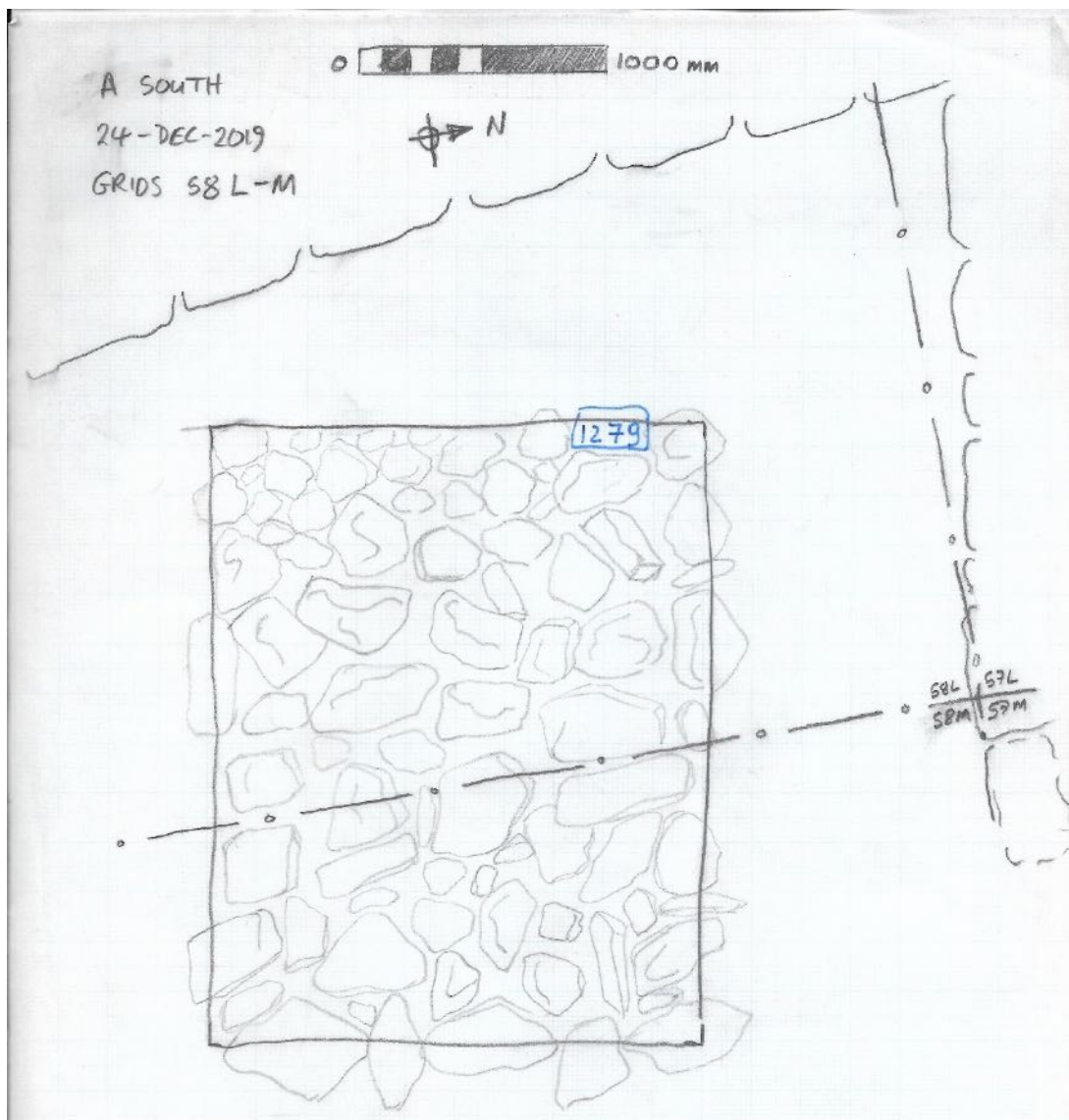


Figure 39. Locus 1279, the cobblestone floor of Stratum V.

Locus 1280

The cobblestones pavement was removed from the probe in square 58/57 L/M. The elevation under the pavement is 170.95 MBSL. The infrastructure of the pavement included brown soil mixed with broken bricks.

Pottery shards from this locus included Iron Age II jars, cooking pots bones, flint stone, basalt round stone, could have been a sling stone, grinding stone or a weight or all of these together. In addition, there was an Early Bronze Age II shard of a platter.



Figure 40. Locus 1280



Figure 41. Locus 1280, finds under the cobblestone pavement of Stratum V. Shards include: top right, Iron Age IIB Cooking pot, crater, jug, jars and bones.

Locus 1282

Another probe was to locate the northeastern corner of the northern tower of the city gate (W1215). The corner was discovered at a distance of 5.82 m from the southeast corner of the tower. It seems, therefore that the façades of the northern and southern towers are similar in size.

Thus far, only a large slab of basalt stone was discovered at elevation of 171.31 MBSL, about 30 cm below the cobblestone pavement of Stratum V. The corner stone is very massive, it measures 110 by 80 cm, the thickness of this stone was not reached at the end of this season.

The distance between the two towers is 4.86 m. It means that in Geshurite module a cubit is 0.54 m. Therefore, the distance between the towers is exactly 9 cubits. The façade of the towers in this module is 10 cubits.

It is not clear yet whether the inner-city wall abuts the northern tower where it is projected on the map below. Further excavations are needed to determine this assumption.

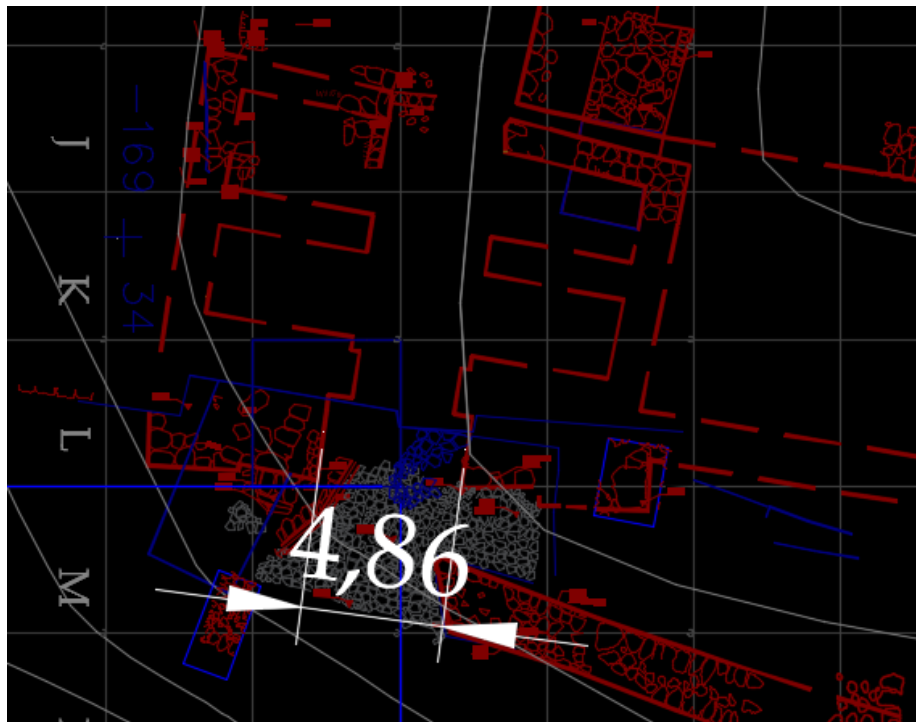


Figure 42. The distance between the towers of Stratum VI is 4.86 m, or 9 cubits.



Figure 43. The northeastern corner stone of the northern tower of Stratum VI. It lays on the same line of the segment discovered in earlier seasons. The tower is 5.82 m long, similar to the southern tower.



Figure 44. The northeast corner stone of the northern tower. Notice the debris of white plaster which originally covered the walls and a broken brick at the left side of the picture. It may have been part of the superstructure.



Figure 45. The northeastern corner of the northern tower of the city gate in Stratum VI.

Area B

Probes in Area B were conducted inside the temple. Excavations inside the temple were done in the past and revealed the infrastructure and the remains of the floor. Among the finds there was a rectangular piece of marble, presumably remains of the marble floor. Near the temple there were a few remains associated with the temple paraphernalia, such as a complete incense shovel, a handle of an incense shovel, favisa with pottery vessels, figurines, votive anchors and dressed basalt and limestone construction blocks and a segment of a basalt slab with margins resemble tabula ansata.

Seven loci were excavated inside the hall of the Hellenistic-Roman temple.

Locus 2326

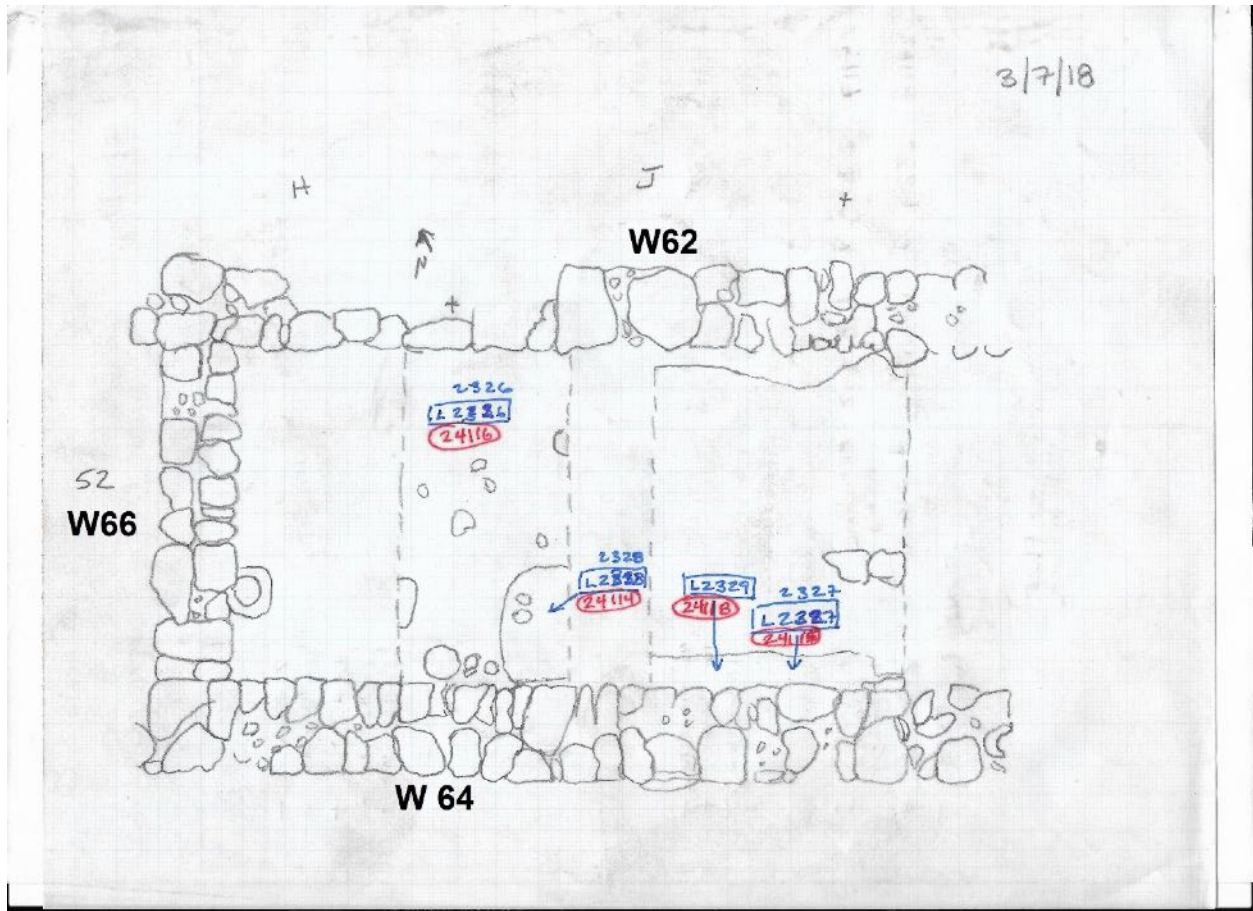


Figure 46. Locus 2326 is a section in the western half of the temple, near the northern Hellenistic entrance to the temple.

This locus was excavated in the western half of the temple, and below the floors of the Roman and the Hellenistic structure.



Figure 47. Locus 2326 in Area B. The opening in the wall at the north, the upper part of the picture is removal of the Roman blocking of the Hellenistic entrance to the temple. The picture shows that the probe is under the foundations of the structure.



Figure 48. The probe uncovered layers of light gray dirt, dark gray dirt, broken bricks and scattered stones.



Figure 49. At a depth of about 90 cm below the Hellenistic Roman structure there were no more scattered stones. Notice the horizontal layers of light gray and dark brown material, resulting from deposits of infrastructure. The purpose of these repetitious actions is unknown.

Finds

Finds from these layers are thoroughly Iron Age II B. No single large and complete vessel was discovered. Large number of animal bones were discovered testifying perhaps to the rituals taken place at the sacrificial high place in this area. No large complete bones were discovered, all were broken and scattered in the locus. The reason for this is unknown.



Figure 50. Bones from Locus 2326. Notice that all bones are broken.



Figure 51. Bones from Locus 2326. Notice that all the bones are broken and burnt, probably coming from the sacrificial high place.



Figure 52. Shard of pottery from Locus 2326. Upper left, a deep bowl, lower left, a jug and lower right a jar.



Figure 53. Pottery from Locus 2326, jar handle, and two bowls.



Figure 54. Locus 2326, a small votive bowl.



Figure 55. locus 2326, a small votive bowl.



Figure 56. Locus 2336, feet of a female figurine with anklets.



Figure 57. Locus 2326, a figurine with anklets.



Figure 58. Locus 2326, side view of the figurine with anklets. The context of this find is clearly Iron Age IIB.

A lower part of a mold fashioned figurine was discovered in locus 2326. The figurine is presumably a female. She is barefoot, standing with her feet close to each other and wearing anklets. Figurines with anklets are not rare in the art of the ancient world and are found from Egypt, Greece and India. However, in the southern Levant these figurines are quite rare.

One of the most interesting finds in the season of 2019 was a stone seal showing a griffin striding facing left, his wings, emerge from the area of his front legs, are stretched above his head and are rendered in cross line pattern. Behind the griffin there is a falcon looking to the left. In front of the griffin there is a plant that the griffin seems to eat. An oval etching surrounds the seal.

The seal was found on the ground next to the sacrificial high place.



Figure 59. A stone seal with a griffin facing left, behind him a falcon and in front a plant.