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A Late Byzantine–Early Islamic-Period Rural Settlement Along Naḥal 'Ashan, North of Be'er Sheva'

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Salvage excavations along Naḥal 'Ashan, to the north of Be'er Sheva', unearthed several farmhouses that formed part of the rural hinterland of the city. The farmhouses, dating from the late Byzantine to the Abbasid period, shared a uniform building technique that exploited the local loess soil for producing mud bricks and reused building materials from earlier Christian edifices. The finds included mainly locally made pottery, glass and stone vessels. This article offers a discussion of the settlement patterns, economy and demography of the region during the Byzantine–Early Islamic transition period.

Keywords: ancient agriculture, Byzantine period, Early Islamic period, Byzantine–Islamic transition, demographic changes, household economy, spolia

Introduction

Many isolated farmhouses spanning the Byzantine–Abbasid period were discovered in archaeological excavations to the north of Be'er Sheva', in the rural hinterland of the ancient city within the fertile Be'er Sheva' Valley, following the intensive development of the region (see, e.g., Seligman and Zur 2021:25*–26*; Michael 2022:108–133, 158–167). The farmhouses vary, ranging from small, single-room 'watchtowers' to large, complex domestic structures. This article presents a range of farmhouses excavated by the authors in the vicinity of Naḥal 'Ashan, north of Be'er Sheva', followed by a discussion of their architectural characteristics and settlement patterns in the region in the transition between the Byzantine and Islamic periods.

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The Farmhouse Complexes

Four excavation areas (Areas A–D) extending over 79 standard excavation squares, were opened in different places along the wadi, where architectural remains were apparent on the modern ground surface (Fig. 1). Ancient remains were exposed in all excavated areas and dated from the Chalcolithic (4500 BCE) to the Abbasid (ninth–tenth centuries CE) period (Tchekhanovets, Lahavi and Shaked 2021).[2]

Subsequent to the clearing of modern debris, the area was systematically surveyed and sample-trenched by Ilan Peretz, revealing accumulations of archaeological finds in numerous locales. These included pottery sherds dating from the Chalcolithic to the Ottoman period, with the majority of the finds associated with the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods. Previous excavations in the vicinity of Naḥal ʻAshan revealed the remains

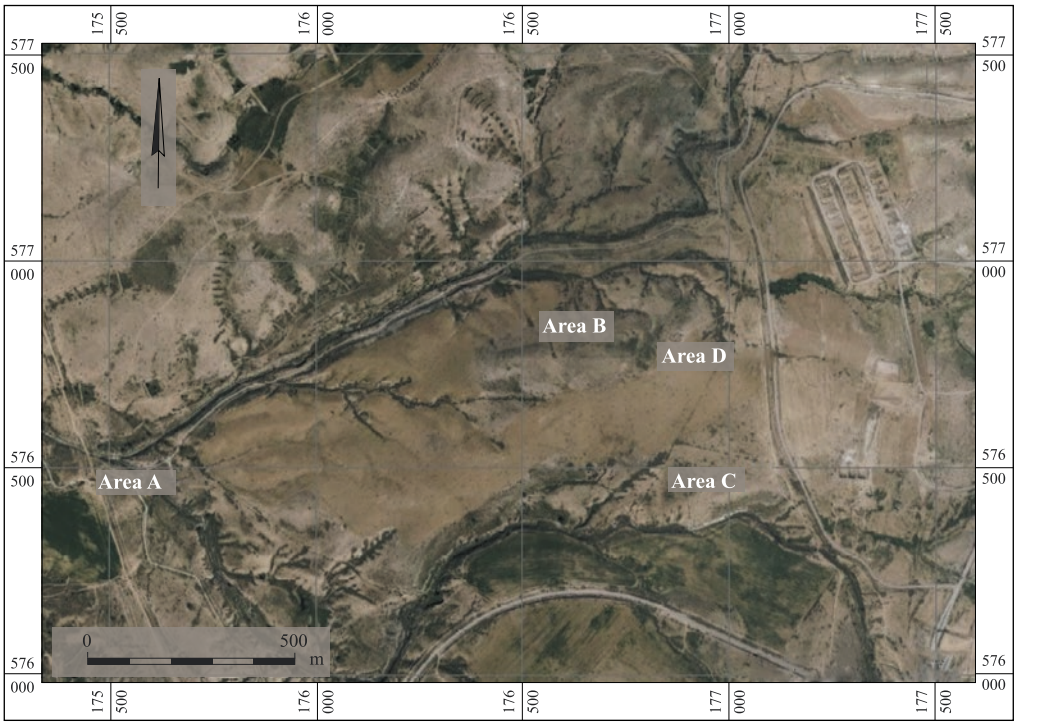

Fig. 1. Location map of the excavation areas.

[2] Work in the field was directed by the authors between December 2019 and February 2020, on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority (Permit Nos. A-8622, A-8646), with the assistance of Yaser Al-Amur (administration), Emil Aladjem (field surveying, photogrammetry, aerial photography), Assaf Peretz (field and aerial photography), Mendel Kahan (field surveying), Talia Abulafia and Alex Fraiberg (archaeological probes), Gregory Seriy (metal detection), Ilan Naor (coin cleaning), Davida Eisenberg-Degen (digitalization), Tamar Winter (glass finds), Helena Sokolov (numismatics) and Avshalom Karasik (digital drawings of the finds), all of the IAA. Pottery finds were processed with the assistance of Lee Einan (Ben Gurion University of the Negev). We also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

of Byzantine- and Early Islamic-period farmhouses (Eisenberg-Degen and Kobrin 2016; Eisenberg-Degen and Levi-Hevroni 2021).

The Late Byzantine Period

Area A

The remains of three buildings (154, 156, 206; Fig. 2) and one agricultural terrace were discovered, all dating to the later stages of the Byzantine period, i.e., the sixth–seventh centuries CE. Buildings 154 (Fig. 3), 156 (Fig. 4) and 206 (Fig. 5) displayed a similar, almost square plan. They were constructed from fieldstones and mud bricks founded atop moderate hillocks of loess soil. The buildings' foundations and parts of their superstructures were well-preserved, as well as their floors of beaten earth and installations within and outside the buildings. The best preserved of these is Building 206, with unusually deep and well-preserved stone foundation walls, and remains of a stone staircase, perhaps leading to the structure's garden (Fig. 5: Section 1–1).

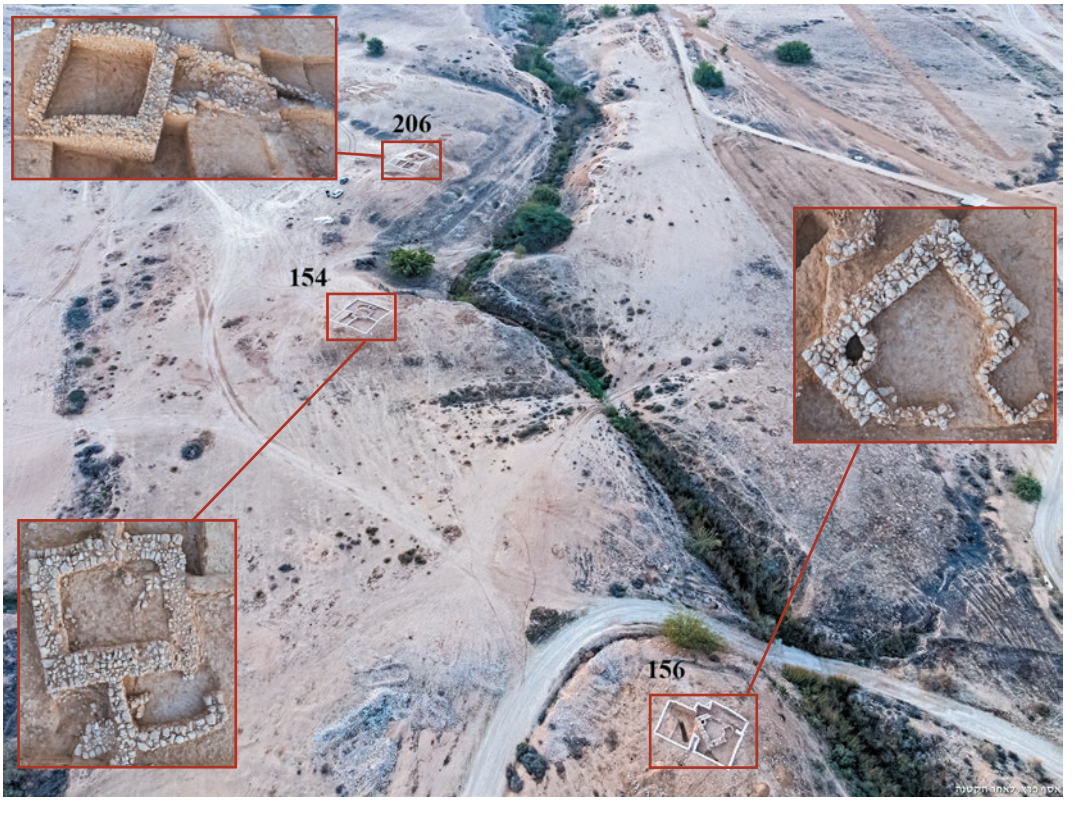

Fig. 2. Area A, Byzantine farmhouses along Naḥal ʻAshan, looking southeast (photography: A. Peretz).

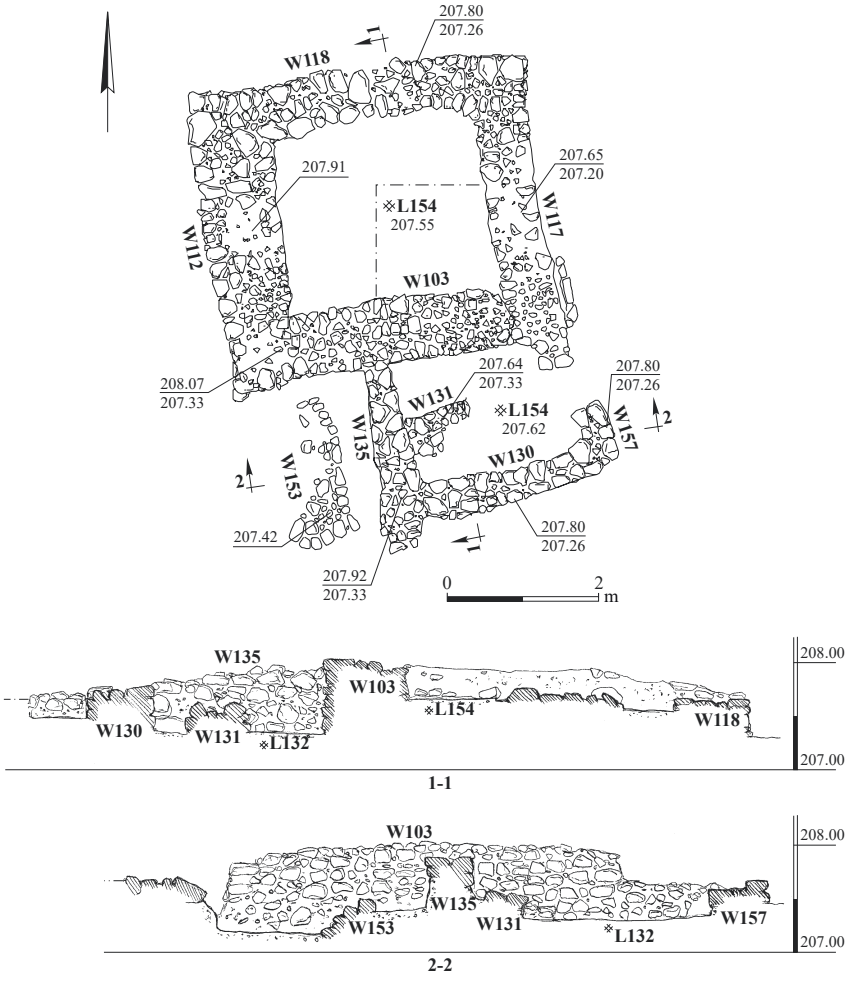

Fig. 3. Area A, Building 154, plan and sections (drafting: D. Porotsky).

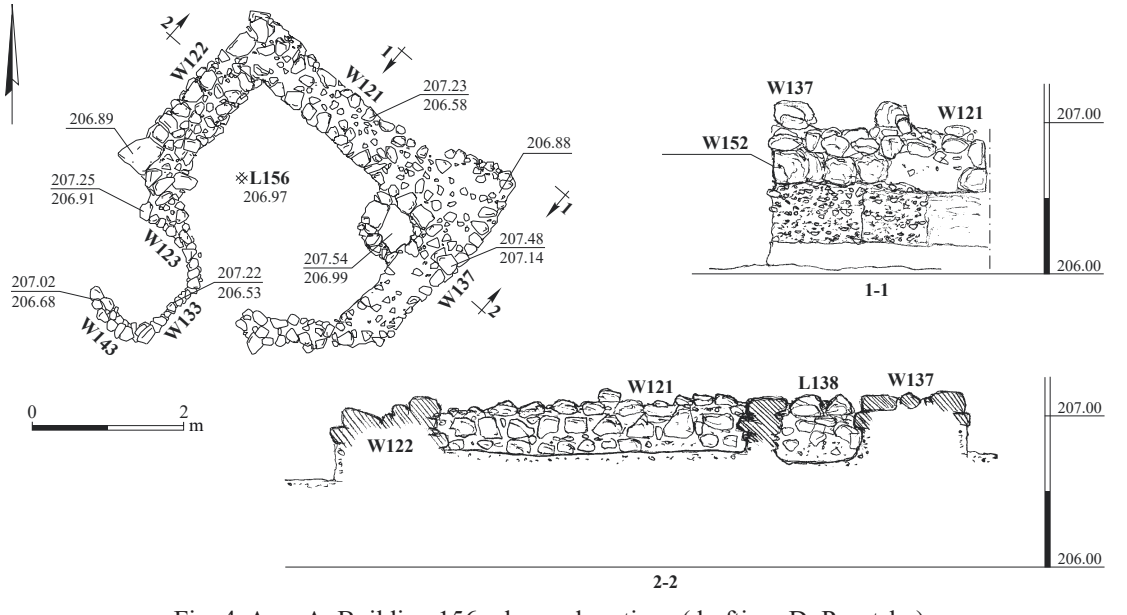

Fig. 4. Area A, Building 156, plan and sections (drafting: D. Porotsky).

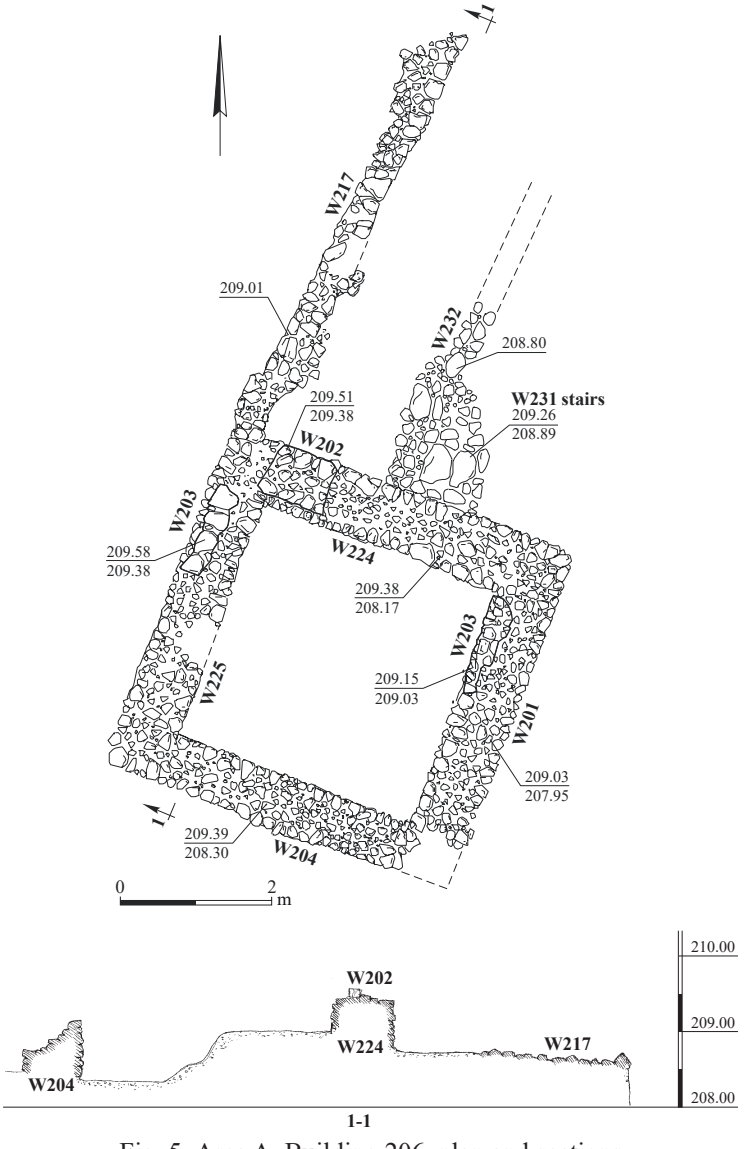

Fig. 5. Area A, Building 206, plan and sections
(drafting: D. Porotsky).

All three structures yielded similar finds: late Byzantine ceramic vessels, some of which were complete (Figs. 6–8), scattered glass finds and coins. According to the finds, all three structures were contemporary and should be interpreted as seasonal dwellings related to the agricultural hinterland of Be'er Sheva', similar to the complexes discovered in previous excavations in the region (Ustinova and Nahshoni 1994; Eisenberg-Degen and Levy-Hevroni 2020). The ceramic assemblages included a simple pottery repertoire, containing mainly local vessels, in the form of bowls, open casseroles and globular cooking pots, as well as storage jars of two prevailing types: Gaza (one complete example) and bag-shaped

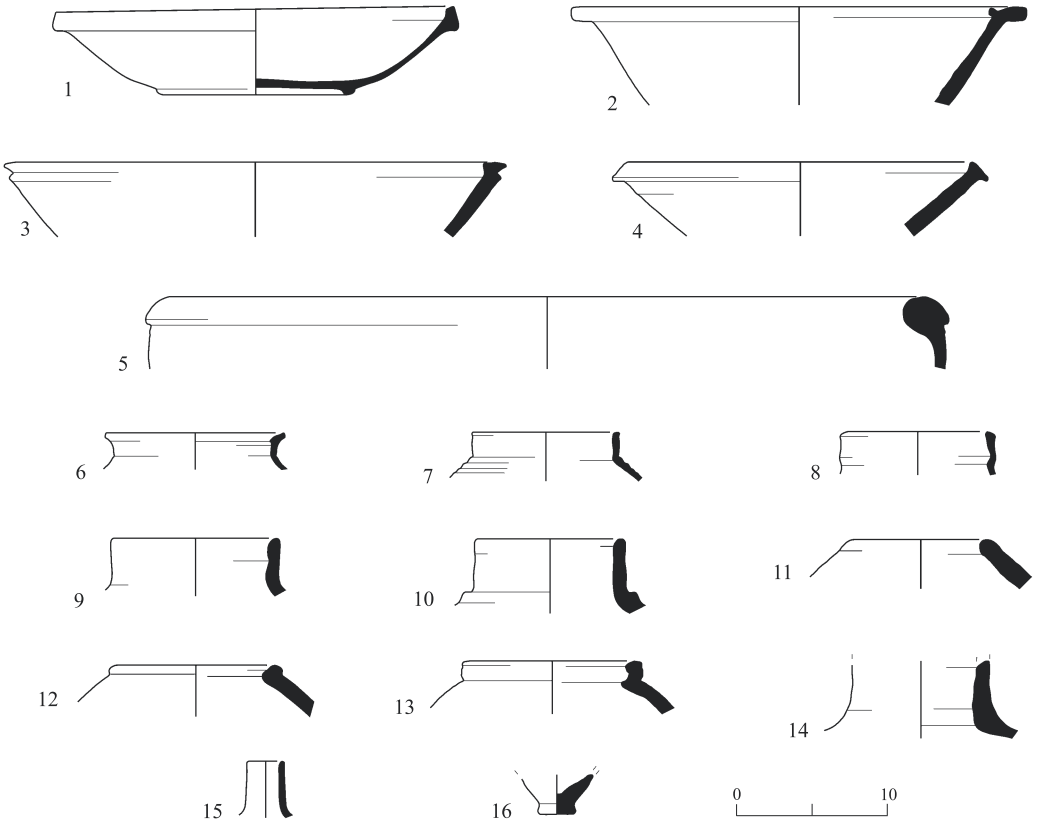

Fig. 6. Pottery finds from Area A, Building 154 (drawing: A. Gyerman-Levanon).

No	Vessel	Locus	Basket	Parallel	Date (CE)
1	LRC bowl	150	1094	Nikolsky and Figueras 2004: Fig. 30:2–5	6th c.
2	Arched-rim basin	114	1048/4	Magness 1993:204–205, Form 1	6th c.
3	Basin	132	1067/4	Cytryn-Silverman 2010: Pl. 9.14:5	7th–8th c.
4	Bowl	134	1062/9	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.23	7th–9th c.
5	Bowl	116	1023/2	Cytryn-Silverman 2010: Pl. 9.23:1	7th–9th c.
6	Cooking pot	136	1063/4	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 20:6	6th–7th c.
7	Cooking pot	115	1046/2	Vincenz 2020: Fig. 3.9:11	6th c.
8	Cooking pot	114	1048/3	Vincenz 2020: Fig. 3.25:3	6th c.
9	Bag-shaped jar	114	1019/1	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 23:22	6th–7th
10	Bag-shaped jar	127	1039/1	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.52:5	Late 6th–early 8th c.
11	Gaza jar	150	1092/2	Majcherek 1995: Pl. 8:1	5th–early 7th c.
12	Gaza jar	141	1068/1	Majcherek 1995: Pl. 5:2	4th–5th c.
13	Gaza jar	150	1092/4	Majcherek 1995: Pl. 5:1	4th–5th c.
14	Amphora LR 1	146	1080/2	Johnson 2008:105, Nos. 1257–1265	5th–7th c.
15	Juglet	115	1038/2	Ustinova and Nahshoni 1994: Fig.5:3	6th–7th c.
16	Juglet	115	1038/1	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 25:47	6th–7th c.

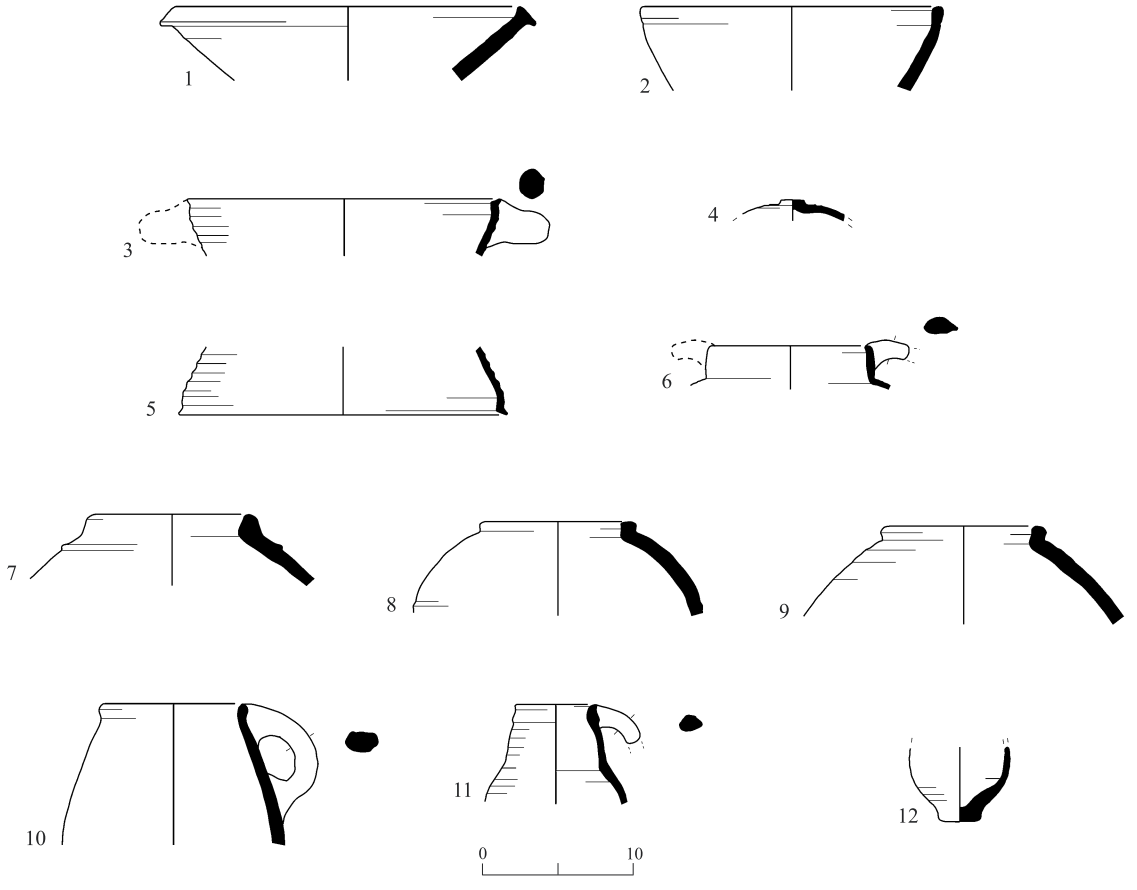

Fig. 7. Pottery finds from Area A, Building 156 (drawing: A. Gyerman-Levanon).

No	Vessel	Locus	Basket	Parallel	Date (CE)
1	Bowl	139	1065/5	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.21:3	7th–9th c.
2	Bowl	113	1027/4	Nikolsky and Figueras 2004: Fig. 32:26	7th c.
3	Casserole	113	1027/1	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 17:10	6th–7th c.
4	Casserole lid	129	1084/4	Magness 1993:215, Form 1:12	Early 4th–9th c.
5	Casserole lid	107	1007/4	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.46:5	6th–7th c.
6	Cooking pot	129	1052/3	Vincenz 2020: Fig. 3.11:7	6th c.
7	Gaza jar	126	1036/6	Majcherek 1995: Pl. 6:3	6th c.
8	Gaza jar	100	1004/3	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 23:29	5th–6th c.
9	Gaza jar	100	1004/4	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 23:29	5th–6th c.
10	Jug	126	1036/1	Mazar 2003: Pl. III.5:7	6th c.
11	Jug	113	1027/2	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 23:12	6th–7th c.
12	Juglet	123	1052/3	Ustinova and Nahshoni 1994:165, Fig. 5:5	6th–7th c.

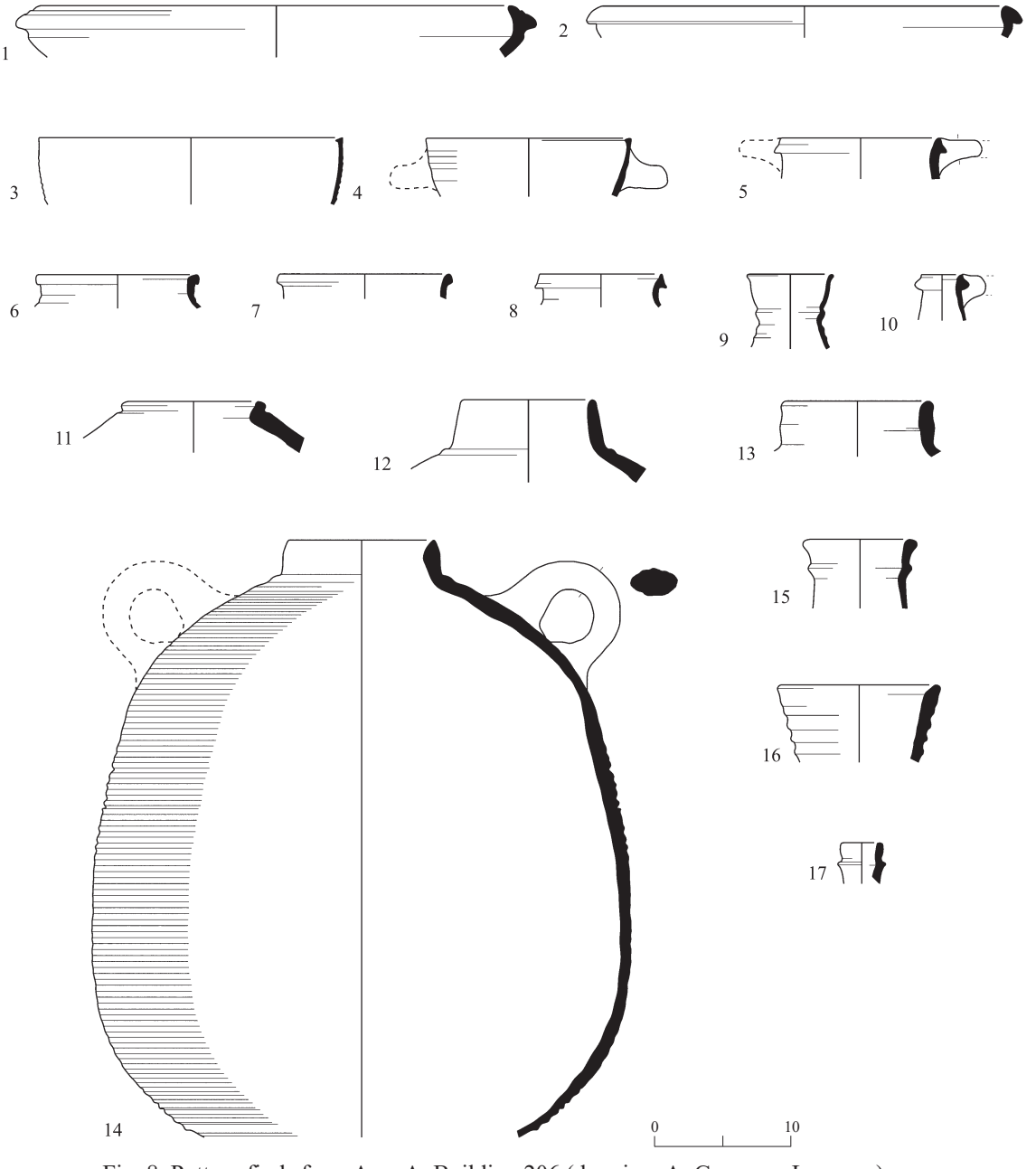

Fig. 8. Pottery finds from Area A, Building 206 (drawing: A. Gyerman-Levanon).

(one complete example was installed in the floor of Building 206; Fig. 8:14). Imported vessels are scarce but include a Late Roman 1 type amphora fragment (Fig. 6:14) and a complete LRC bowl (Fig. 6:1), both common in the region in the late Byzantine period. Despite the presence of some fifth-century CE vessels, the ceramic assemblages should be dated according to the critical mass of pottery types to the sixth–seventh centuries CE.

◂ **Fig. 8**

No	Vessel	Locus	Basket	Parallel	Date (CE)
1	Bowl	229	2080/1	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 12:17	4th–mid-6th c.
2	Bowl	229	2072/10	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.21:1	7th–8th c.
3	Casserole	229	2069/9	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 17:14	4th–8th c.
4	Casserole	229	2069/6	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.40:1	Early 7th–9th c.
5	Cooking pot	229	2072/15	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 20:8, 13	6th–8th c.
6	Cooking pot	205	2002/4	Magness 1993: Form 3A:3	Late 6th–7th c.
7	Cooking pot	205	2002/2	Magness 1993: Form 4B:4	7th c.
8	Cooking pot	229	2060/3	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 65:1	6th–7th c.
9	Cooking jug	229	2060/6	Magness 1993: Form 3A:2	6th c.
10	Cooking jug	218	2044/3	Vincenz 2020: Fig. 3.18:6	6th c.
11	Gaza jar	214	2015/1	Balouka 2013: Fig. 7.2:7	6th–7th c.
12	Bag-shaped jar	205	2002/1	Cytryn-Silverman 2010: Pl. 9.18:1	Late 7th–9th c.
13	Bag-shaped jar	226	2034	Magness 1993:225, Form 4C:1	Late 6th–7th c.
14	Bag-shaped jar	200	2001/3	Johnson 2008:105, Nos. 1257–1265	5th–7th c.
15	Jug	229	2080/3	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 25:1	6th–7th c.
16	Flask	214	2052/3	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 25:16	6th–7th c.
17	Juglet	229	2080/6	Magness 1993:246, Form 6A:3	6th–7th c.

Remarkably, all three assemblages lack oil lamps, possibly indicating that the structures were only used during daytime (Taxel 2018:32–34).

Area B

Remains of Byzantine–Early Islamic-period activity were also discovered around a large built well, historically known as Bir el-Muwelih (Figs. 9; 10). The well was not excavated due to safety restrictions, yet was found surrounded by several fencing walls, one built of ashlars and the rest, of small- to medium-sized fieldstones (Eisenberg-Degen 2018: Activity Area C2). Several stone-built installations were built against the walls, in the form of a row of stones facing a fragmentarily preserved stone pavement. A channel connecting to the well and continuing downslope may have directed water downhill, perhaps to the nearby fields. Here, a ceramic drainpipe (Fig. 11:26) was uncovered, attesting that the well and its installations were used by the nearby farmsteads.

Pottery finds found in this area dated to the late Byzantine period, or possibly slightly later in the Umayyad period, testifying to a prolonged use of the complex, from the sixth to the eighth century CE (Fig. 11). Interestingly, the deep well was preserved in good condition in modern times, although visits to it, perhaps short and sporadic, left no material markers in the field.

Fig. 9. Area B, Byzantine Bir el-Muwelih well complex, looking south (photography: E. Aladjem).

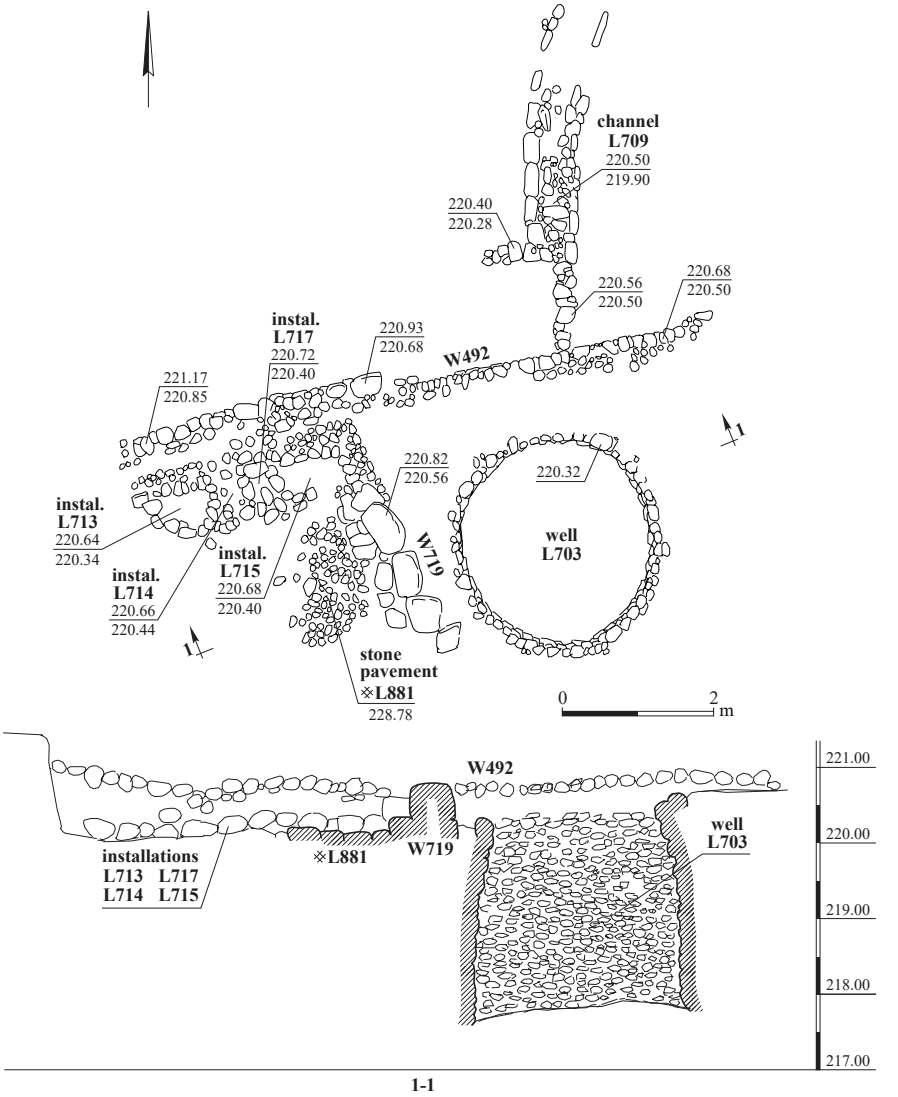

Fig. 10. Area B, Bir el-Muwelih well complex, plan and sections (drafting: D. Porotsky).

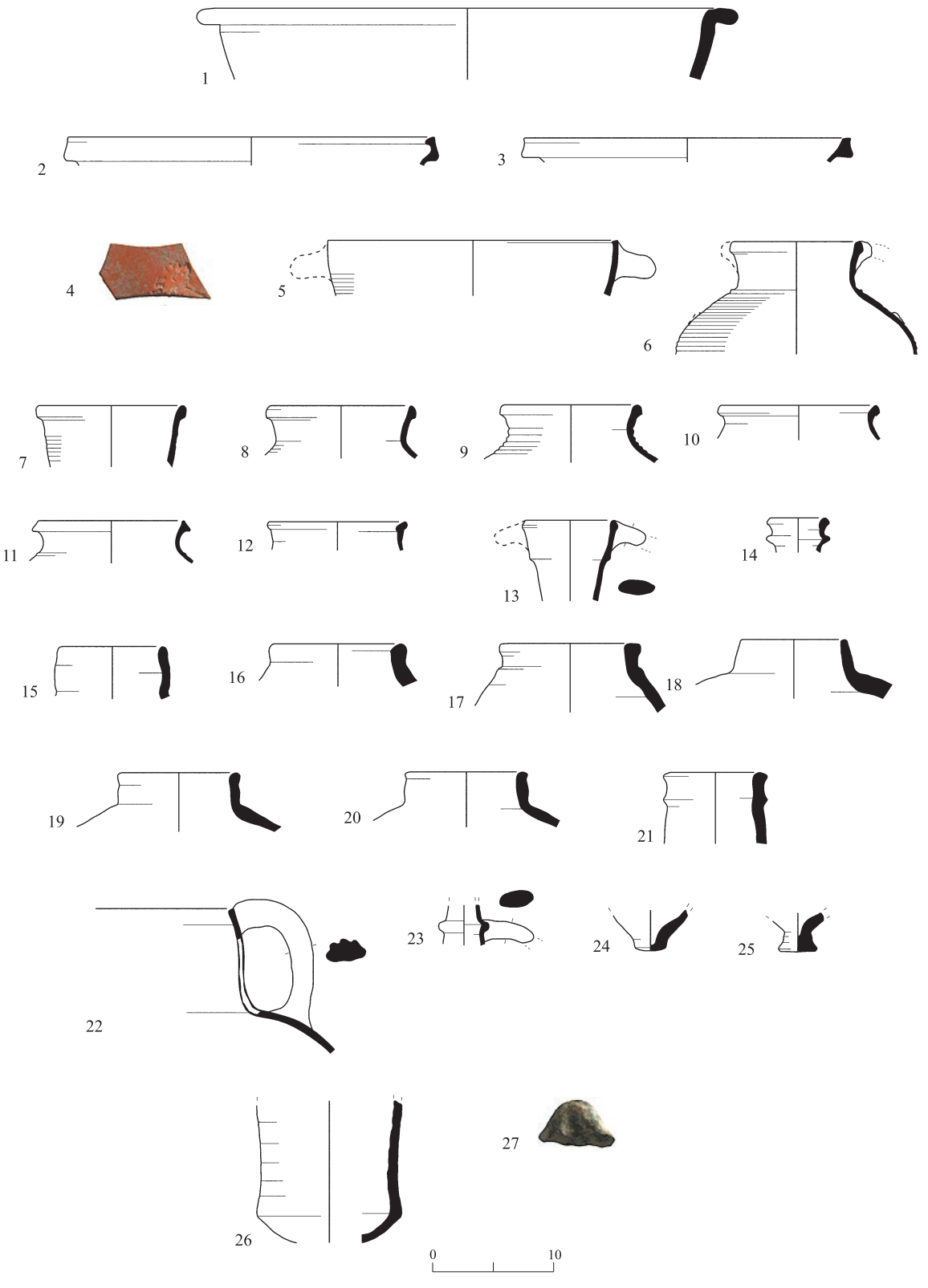

Fig. 11. Pottery finds from Area B, the Bir el-Muwelih well complex (drawing: A. Gyerman-Levanon).

◂ **Fig. 11**

No	Vessel	Locus	Basket	Parallel	Date (CE)
1	Arched-rim basin	706	4086/1	Cytryn-Silverman 2010:177, Pl. 9.16:3	6th–early 8th c.
2	LRC bowl	418	4059/4	Balouka 2013: Fig. 6.7:4	5th–6th c.
3	LRC bowl	706	4086/6	Balouka 2013: Fig. 6.7:4	5th–6th c.
4	LRC bowl	481	4053/4	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 69:5	6th–7th c.
5	Casserole	418	4035/3	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.40:1	6th–early 8th c.
6	Cooking pot	418	4065/1	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.47:1	5th/6th–late 7th–early 8th c.
7	Cooking pot	418	4011/6	Ustinova and Nahshoni 1994:166, Fig. 6:22	6th–7th c.
8	Cooking pot	418	4014/4	Reuven 2020:426, Fig. 13.47:1	5th/6th–late 7th/early 8th c.
9	Cooking pot	418	4036/2	Nikolsky and Figueras 2004:198, Fig. 46:9	6th–7th c.
10	Cooking pot	706	4086/5	Magness 1993:218, Form 3A:3	6th–7th c.
11	Cooking pot	418	4010/4	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 65:1, 3	6th–7th c.
12	Cooking pot	481	4053/3	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 20:4	3rd–5th c.
13	Cooking jug	418	4035/1	Ustinova and Nahshoni 1994:166, Fig. 6:22	6th–7th c.
14	Cooking jug	706	4086/7	Nikolsky and Figueras 2004:175, Fig. 35:31	7th–8th c.
15	Bag-shaped jar	418	4014/5	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.53:1	7th–9th c.
16	Gaza jar	484	4072/1	Peretz 2020: Fig. 13.50:1 Majcherek 1995:173, Pl. 4:1a	6th–7th c.
17	Gaza jar	494	4087/1	Majcherek 1995:175, Pl. 6:1	6th c.
18	Gaza jar	418	4035/2	Peretz 2020: Fig. 13.50:1 Majcherek 1995:173, Pl. 4:1a	2nd–4th c.
19	Bag-shaped jar	418	4036/1	Cytryn-Silverman 2010:161, Pl. 9.8:1	7th–9th c.
20	Bag-shaped jar	486	4048/1	Cytryn-Silverman 2010:181, Pl. 9.18:1	7th–9th c.
21	Amphora LR 1	418	4073/1	Johnson 2008:105, Nos. 1257–1265	5th–7th c.
22	Jug	418	4035/4	Cohen-Finkelstein 1997:25, Fig. 4:7	7th–9th c.
23	Jug	484	4072/5	Vincenz 2007:352, Pl. 25:46–48	6th–7th c.
24	Juglet	712	4084/1	Ustinova and Nahshoni 1994:165, Fig. 5:5	6th–7th c.
25	Juglet FBW	494	4087/6	Nikolsky and Figueras 2004:175, Fig. 35:18	6th–7th c.
26	Drain pipe	418	4035/5	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.93	7th–9th c.
27	Oil lamp	705	4071/5	Nikolsky and Figueras 2004:202, Fig. 47:12	6th–7th c.

Area C

Additional late Byzantine remains were found in this area, where the remains of an agricultural terrace were discovered. According to the scarce pottery finds, the terrace should be dated to the sixth–seventh centuries CE.

The Early Islamic Period

Area B

Some 50 m to the east of the well, a small farmhouse was discovered, dated by pottery to the Early Islamic period (Figs. 12; 13). The relatively small structure consists of four rooms built in a row, adjacent to an open courtyard. The walls of the complex were built of small- to medium-sized fieldstones, and the floors were made of beaten earth, with several *ṭabuns* and installations incorporated within them. The doorjambs of the main entrance to the complex were built of finely dressed, hard limestone ashlars that were clearly in secondary use. A few decorative architectural elements were found spoliated and incorporated in the walls and installations of the complex (Fig. 14:a). Among the architectural elements in secondary use were a complete marble paving slab, a fragment of a column and a lintel with an encircled cross in relief (Fig. 14:b), typical of Byzantine monastic institutions.

The complex was occupied during one phase before it was abandoned; only a few pottery finds were discovered on its floors, sealed beneath layers of collapse and dated to the seventh–ninth centuries (Fig. 15). A single Gray Gaza Ware cooking pot found on the topsoil dated to the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries (Fig. 15:5), attesting to a recent use of the site.

Fig. 12. Area B, Umayyad farmhouse, looking north (photography: A. Peretz).

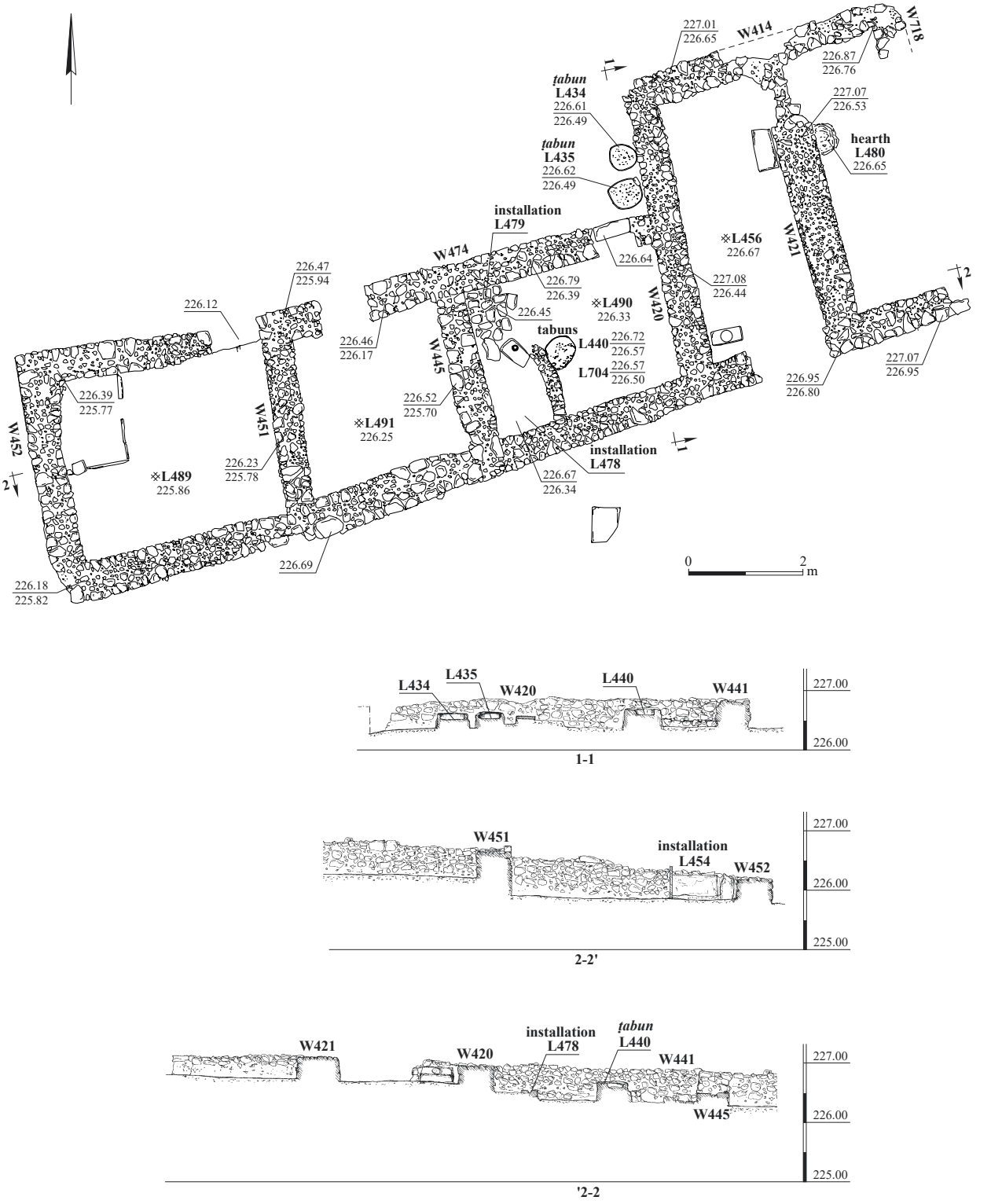

Fig. 13. Area B, Umayyad farmhouse, plan and sections (drafting: D. Porotsky).

Fig. 14. Area B, *spolia* within Umayyad farmhouse: (a) ashlar stones in collapse; (b) lintel adorned with a cross in relief (photography: A. Peretz).

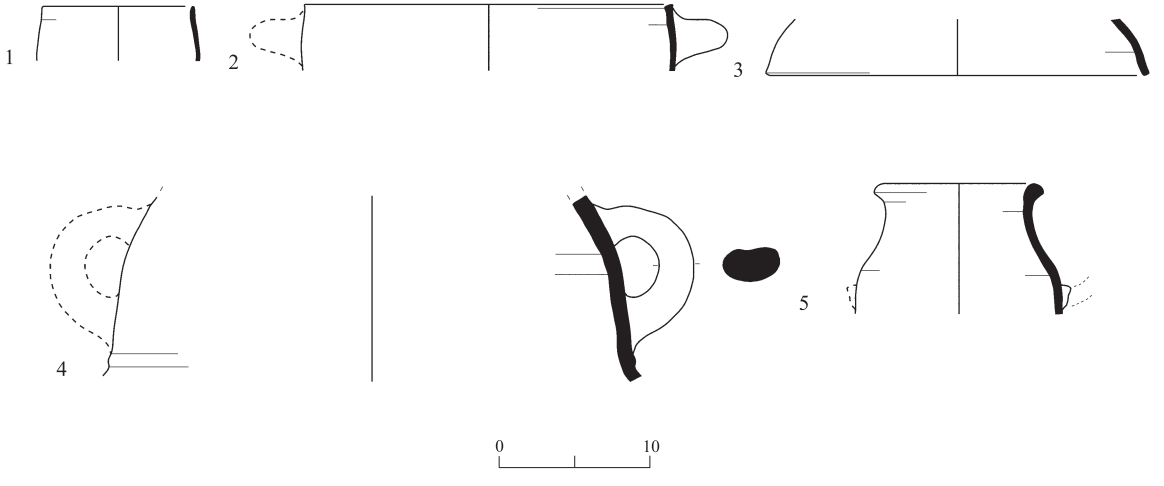

Fig. 15. Pottery finds from Area B, the Umayyad farmhouse (drawing: A. Gyerman-Levanon).

No	Vessel	Locus	Basket	Parallel	Date (CE)
1	Bowl, FBW	476	4031/1	Cytryn-Silverman 2013: Fig. 7.5:1	Early 8th–9th c.
2	Casserole	457	4030/3	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.42:1	7th–9th c.
3	Casserole lid	457	4030/4	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.46:5–9	8th–9th c.
4	Bag-shaped jar	457	4030/8	Cytryn-Silverman 2010: Pl. 9.1:10	8th–9th c.
5	Cooking pot	431	4023/1+2	Eisenberg-Degen and Levi Hevroni 2021: Fig. 17:10	19th–20th c.

Fig. 16. Area B, Abbasid farmhouse, looking west (photography: E. Aladjem).

Nearly 100 m to the south of the well, the remains of a large Abbasid farmhouse complex were unearthed (Figs. 16; 17). The complex was only partially excavated, with 18–20 rooms exposed by the end of the excavation, all arranged around a central courtyard.[3] Most of the building materials consisted of local fieldstones, with a few fragmentary architectural elements from an earlier monumental structure integrated in secondary use, including a large lintel and several threshold stones, a stone columbarium window and a few marble fragments. All the exposed remains can be broadly dated to the Abbasid period, indicating a relatively long occupation that included only a few changes, such as the addition of new installations, hearth and ovens, and partition walls, similar to other farmhouses of the period exposed in the region (Eisenberg-Dagan and Kobrin 2016). In one of the rooms, a refuse pit was discovered under the floor (Fig. 18). Such refuse pits are common in the Abbasid period in the region, both in urban contexts, such as Fustat (Egypt), Jerusalem and Tiberias (for further discussion on the use of such pits, see Ben-Ami and Tchekhanovets 2020:703–704), and in rural settlements (Ustinova and Nahshoni 1994:160; Taxel 2018:135–146).

The excavation of the complex produced a large amount of pottery (Fig. 19), mainly of eight–tenth-century CE forms. Among the pottery finds are several metallic well-burnished deep bowls, later developments of Fine Byzantine Ware, generally known in the south as “Fine Islamic Ware” (FIW; Fig. 19:7–10), including a painted exemplar (Fig. 19:9), a

[3] The excavation of the complex was completed in 2023, under the direction of Ari Levi, on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority (Permit No. A-9597).

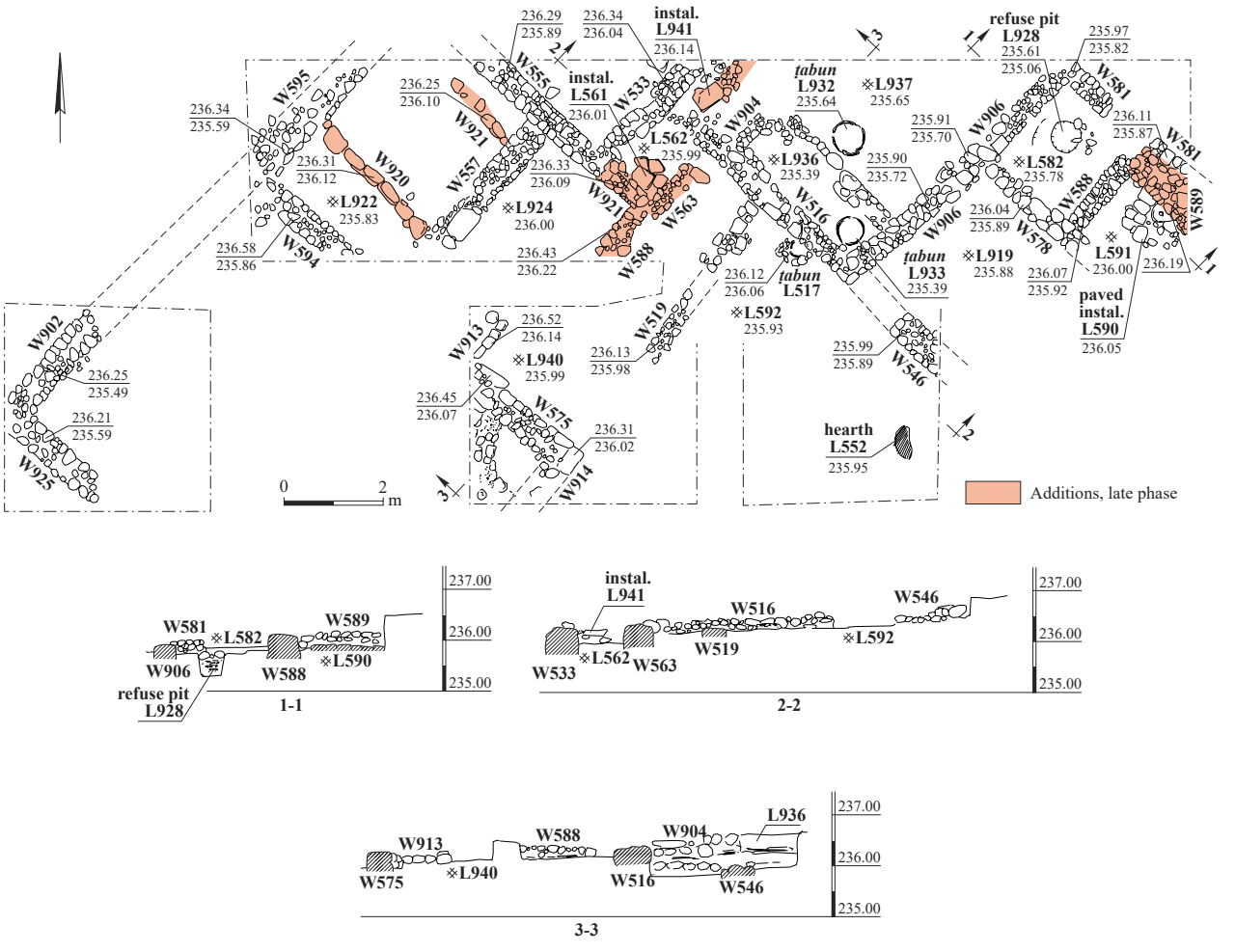

Fig. 17. Area B, Abbasid farmhouse, plan and sections (drafting: D. Porotsky).

Fig. 18. Area B, Abbasid farmhouse, refuse pit, looking northeast (photography: E. Aladjem).

glazed bowl (Fig. 19:12) and a *Kerbschnitt* bowl (Fig. 19:13); also found were Buff Ware jugs (Fig. 19:25–27), a flask (Fig. 19:28), a channel-nozzle oil lamp (Fig. 19:30) and a zoomorphic vessel (Fig. 19:31). The complex witnessed a violent end, as attested by ash layers discovered upon its floors, under layers of collapse.

Fig. 19 ▸

No	Vessel	Locus	Basket	Parallel	Date (CE)
1	LRC bowl	515	5016/1	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.15:3	6th–7th c.
2	ARC bowl	518	5008/6	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 7:12	5th–6th c.
3	FBW bowl	524	5025/11	Cytryn-Silverman 2010: Pl. 9.5:7	9th–10th c.
4	FBW bowl	518	5008/3	Magness 1993:200, Form 2C:2, 4	8th c.
5	FBW bowl	593	5074/7	Nikolsky and Figueras 2004: Fig. 32:27	7th–9th c.
6	FBW bowl	567	5031/8	Nikolsky and Figueras 2004: Fig. 32:26	7th–9th c.
7	FIW bowl	570	5034/5	Cytryn-Silverman 2010: Pl. 9.23:5	Late 8th–early 10th c.
8	FIW bowl	593	5071/2	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.3:2	8th–9th c.
9	FIW painted bowl	524	5030/4	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.3:7	8th c.
10	FIW bowl	515	5038/5	Magness 1993:199, Form 2B:1	8th c.
11	Basin	585	5059/5	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.19	8th–9th c.
12	Glazed bowl	524	5025/16	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.30:1, 2	8th–10th c.
13	Bowl, *Kerbschnitt*	534	5023/2	Avisar 2014: Fig. 20:3, 4	7th–9th c.
14	Casserole	518	5008/1	Peretz 2020:421, Fig. 13.42:1	7th–9th c.
15	Cooking pot	924	5081/1	Nikolsky and Figueras 2004:198, Fig. 46:8	6th–7th c.
16	Cooking pot	916	5086/1	Magness 1993:218, Form 3B:4	7th c.
17	Gaza jar	583	5078/1	Majcherek 1995: Pl. 4:7	2nd–4th c.
18	Bag-shaped jar	538	5087/4	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13:54:1	8th–9th c.
19	Bag-shaped jar	524	5030/1	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.53:4	8th–9th c.
20	Bag-shaped jar	570	5034/1	Magness 1993:225, Form 4B:1–3	5th–6th c.
21	Bag-shaped jar	515	5038/2	Ustinova and Nahshoni 1994: Fig. 6:22	6th–7th c.
22	Amphora	567	5035/7		
23	Jug	532	5017/5	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.58:1, 4	7th–8th c.
24	Jug	524	5009/1	Avisar 2014: Fig. 31:7	7th–8th c.
25	Jug	584	5072/3	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.62:1	9th–10th c.
26	Jug	524	5009/6	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.61:10	9th–10th c.
27	Jug	567	5031/2	Cytryn-Silverman 2010: Pl. 9.12:6	9th–10th c.
28	Flask	547	5020/1	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.77:5	8th–9th c.
29	Drain pipe	515	5038/3	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.93	8th–9th c.
30	Oil lamp	577	5056/3	Cytryn-Silverman 2010: Pl. 9.12:1, 2	8th–early 10th c.
31	Zoomorphic vessel	924	5089	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.79:2	8th–early 10th c.

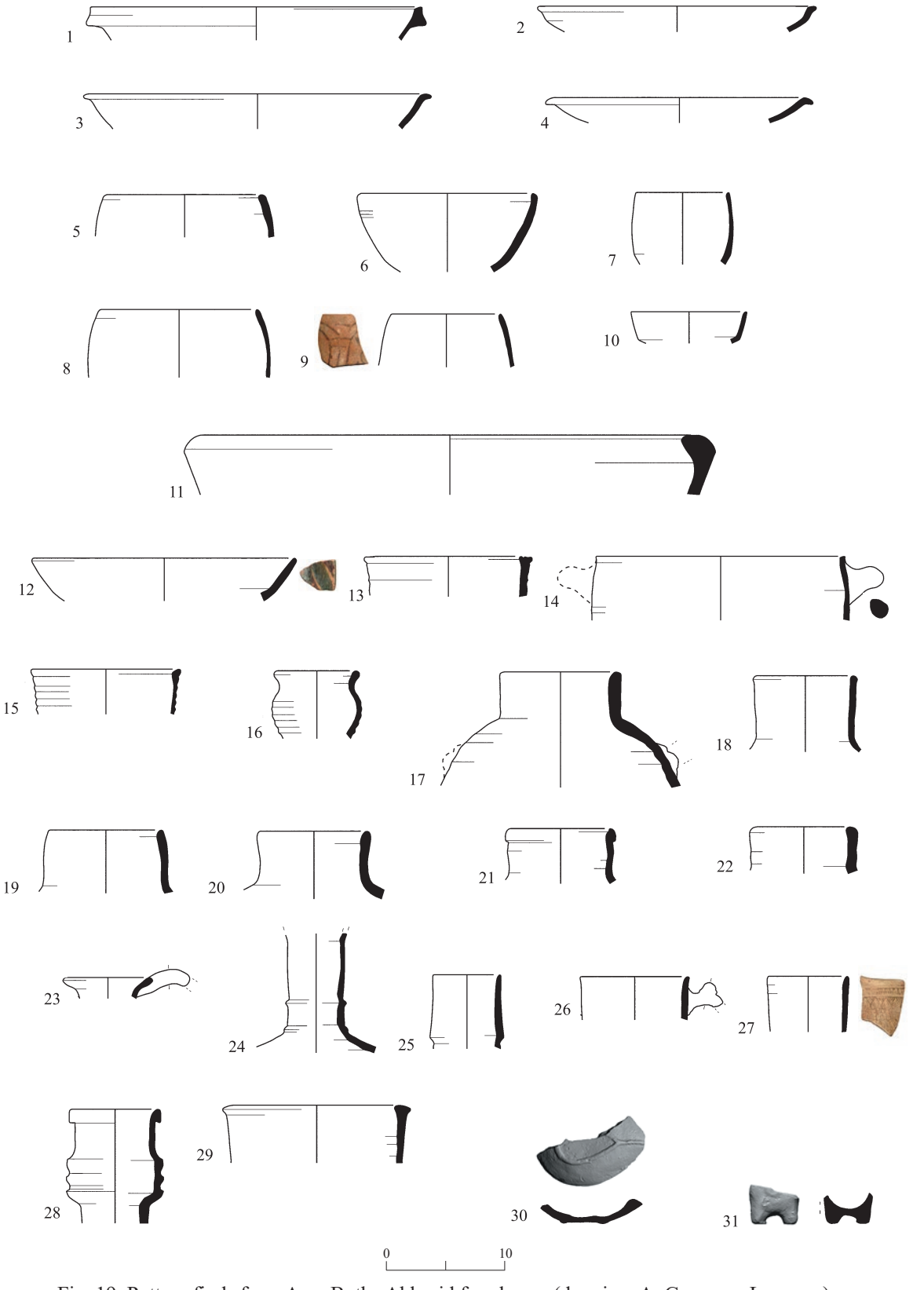

Fig. 19. Pottery finds from Area B, the Abbasid farmhouse (drawing: A. Gyerman-Levanon).

Area D

The remains of one or two large structures were exposed in this area, with two clear occupation phases. This is the only instance where there is evidence for more than a single occupation phase. During the earlier stage, a large complex was built on a north–south axis (Fig. 20). The walls were built of small- to medium-sized fieldstones and the floors were carefully paved with irregularly shaped slabs. Based on the ceramics' analysis, the earlier phase may be dated to the late Byzantine period. The large structure of this phase may represent a monumental building with a tiled roof, as indicated by several ceramic rooftiles discovered. It seems that this early structure served as the source of high-quality building materials during the later stage of occupation.

In the later phase, dated to the Early Islamic period, the pavers were partially removed or covered by beaten-earth floors, and various installations and *ṭabuns* were installed (Fig. 21). Numerous ashlar stones, clearly in secondary use, were incorporated in the walls and installations of the later phase (Fig. 22), including elements showing elaborate architectural décor, characteristic of Byzantine monumental buildings (Golan 2018).

Fig. 21. Area D, *ṭabuns* and installations of the later phase, looking northwest (photography: E. Aladjem).

Fig. 22. Area D, ashlar stones in secondary use in the later phase installation, looking west (photography: E. Aladjem).

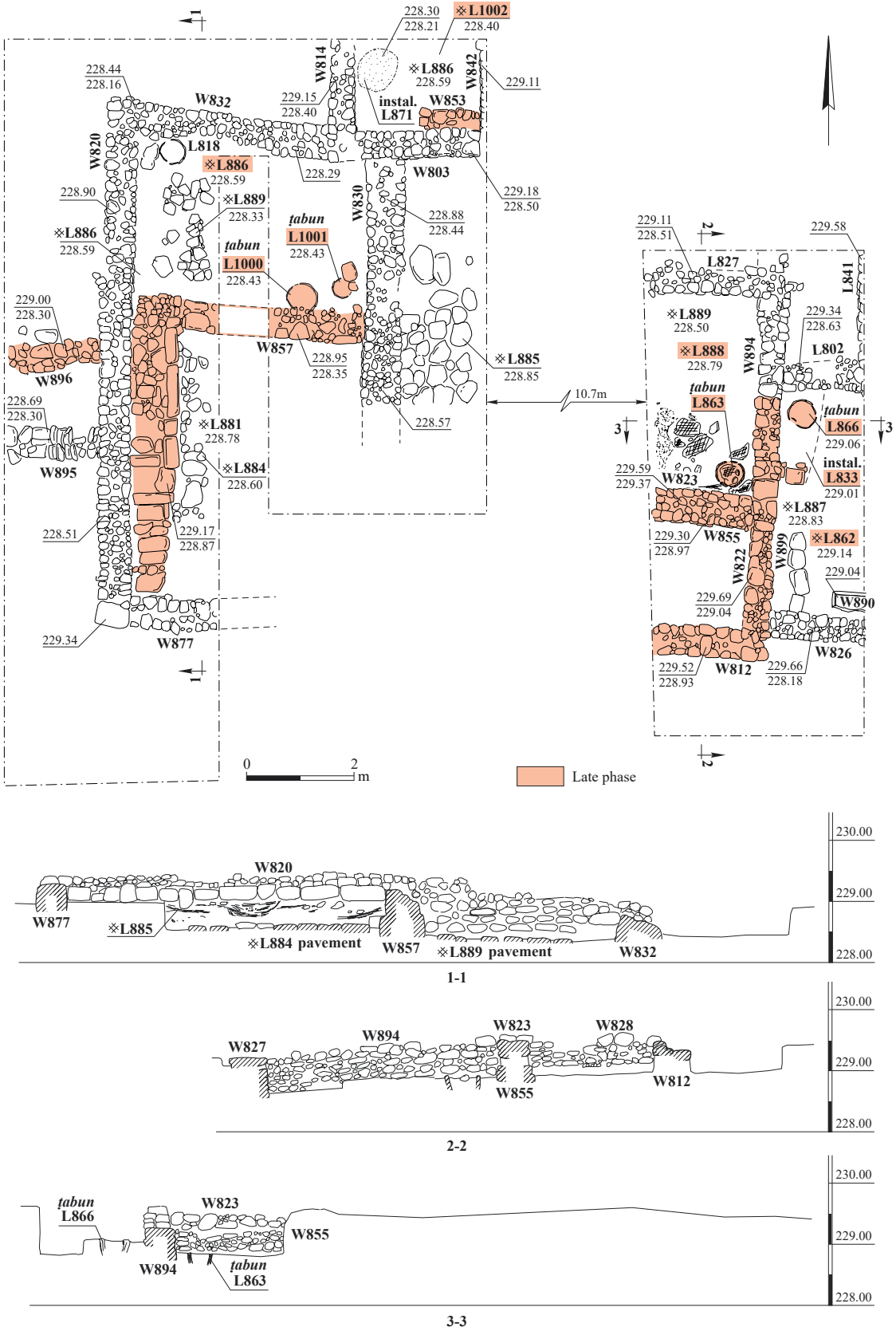

Fig. 20. Area D, structure, plan and sections (drafting: D. Porotsky).

The pottery finds do not indicate a clear chronological gap between the two phases. While the ceramic assemblage of the earlier phase (Fig. 23) is mainly dated to the sixth–seventh centuries CE, several later fragments are also present although they are likely intrusive, for example, a shallow bowl decorated with concentric circles—an imitation of stone Chlorite vessels (Fig. 23:2). The pottery from the later phase (Fig. 24), roughly dated to the seventh–eighth centuries CE, includes certain types that may continue to the ninth and even tenth centuries CE, among them an Abbasid glazed bowl (Fig. 24:2). Similar to the Abbasid farmhouse in Area B, the later phase of the complex came to a violent end, with its floors covered with thick layers of ash and collapse.

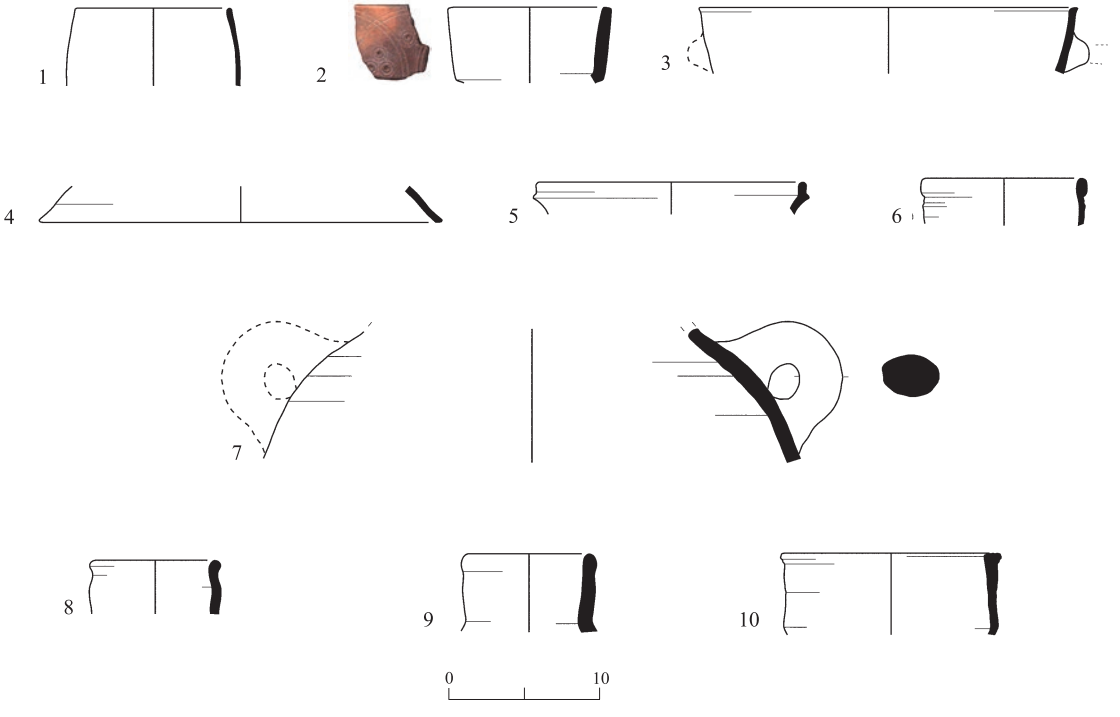

Fig. 23. Pottery finds from Area D, the early phase of the complex (drawing: A. Gyerman-Levanon).

No	Vessel	Locus	Basket	Parallel	Date (CE)
1	FBW bowl	861	8064/8	Magness 1993:296, Form 1E:3	8th c.
2	Bowl	871	80135/1	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.24	750–980 c.
3	Casserole	878	8112/4	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 17:14	6th–8th c.
4	Casserole lid	878	8112/3	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 19:4	4th–10th c.
5	Cooking pot	878	8112/5	Magness 1993:218, Form 4A:1, 2	6th–7th c.
6	Cooking pot	878	8112/2	Magness 1993:220, Form 4C:3	6th–7th c.
7	Bag-shaped jar	891	8136/1	Cytryn-Silverman 2010: Pl. 9.18:1	5th/6th–late 7th/ early 8th c.
8	Bag-shaped jar	867	8098/4	Cytryn-Silverman 2010: Pl. 9.4:5	9th–10th c.
9	Bag-shaped jar	897	8141/1	Ustinova and Nahshoni 1994: Fig. 4:1	6th–7th c.
10	Jug	867	8098/3	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 25:30	6th–7th c.

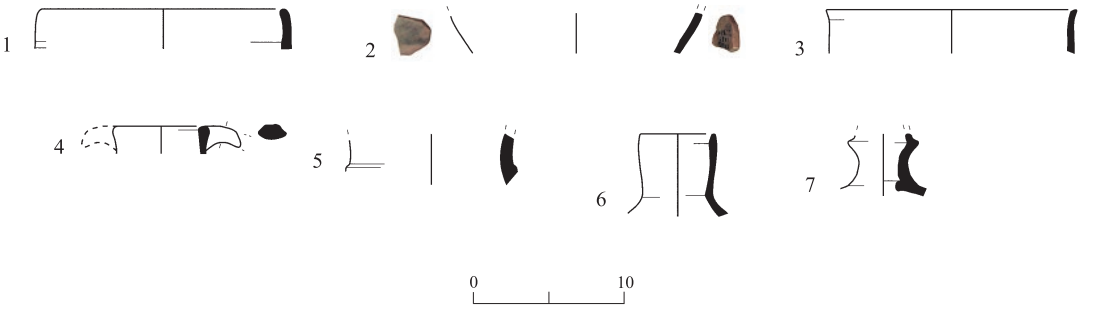

Fig. 24. Pottery finds from Area D, the late phase of the complex (drawing: A. Gyerman-Levanon).

No	Vessel	Locus	Basket	Parallel	Date (CE)
1	Deep bowl	839	8076/4	Nikolsky and Figueras 2004: Fig. 32:24	7th–9th c.
2	Glazed bowl	883	8015/4	Cytryn-Silverman 2010: Pl. 9.10:9	Late 8th–early 9th c.
3	Casserole	808	8027/3	Reuven 2020: Fig. 13.42:8	7th/early 8th–9th/10th c.
4	Cooking pot	839	8076/6	Magness 1993:219, Form 4A	5th/6th–7th/early 8th c.
5	Bag-shaped jar	813	8015/2	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 23:20	5th–7th c.
6	Juglet	808	8008/1		8th c.
7	Flask	852	8094/3	Vincenz 2007: Pl. 29	7th–8th c.

Discussion: Settlement Patterns, Building Techniques and Economy

The farmstead structures uncovered in the Naḥal ‘Ashan area were first established in the late Byzantine period, continuing in use well into the Early Islamic period, up to the Abbasid period (sixth/seventh–tenth century CE). These structures contribute significantly to the study of the rural hinterland of Be’er Sheva‘ in Late Antique and early medieval times, particularly in terms of its material culture, settlement patterns, building and agricultural techniques and social changes.

Settlement Patterns and Architecture

As the excavations covered a very large area, certain conclusions may be reached regarding the settlement patterns in the fertile valley north of Be’er Sheva‘. All the excavated remains pertain to small agricultural settlements, with all but one (the complex in Area D) being one-layered sites, exhibiting minimal, if any, structural changes over time. The small, single-spaced farmhouses, or possibly ‘field watchtowers,’ date to the terminal stages of the Byzantine period, with no signs of earlier settlements discovered along Naḥal ‘Ashan. This parallels the data assembled from other excavations conducted in the past decade to the north of Be’er Sheva‘, which pointed to a significant agricultural boom beginning in the late Byzantine period and increasing in the Early Islamic period (for a recent summary of the data, see Michael 2022; for recent interdisciplinary surveys, see Haiman, Argaman and Stavi 2020).

The early structures discovered in the area supplied agricultural produce to nearby Be'er Sheva'. Although not a city *per ce*, lacking its own bishop, Byzantine Be'er Sheva' was a large settlement and an important administrative center, deserving a detailed visual description on the sixth-century Madaba Map (Figueras 1980). According to the epigraphic finds from the region, it appears likely that Be'er Sheva' was a residence for *Dux Palaestinae* (Di Segni 2004), supported by the exposure of a large military camp (Fabian 1995) and numerous churches (Ustinova and Fabian 2020). To date, the plan of Byzantine Be'er Sheva' is still unclear, but recent salvage excavations significantly expanded its territory, revealing numerous private dwellings and various installations and burials on its outskirts (Varga and Talis 2021). Be'er Sheva' reached its zenith in the sixth century CE, with a growing population that demanded an increase of agricultural produce, likely the reason for the establishment of numerous farmsteads in its hinterlands. In the Early Islamic period, the urban center continued to exist, although experiencing significant decline. The main, monumental church in the city went out of use during the seventh century and was finally abandoned during the eighth century (Fabian and Ustinova 2020:241); the latest pottery finds from private dwellings date no later than the mid-eighth century (Varga and Talis 2021:215).

The onset of decline in urban settlement occurred in the Negev Highlands as early as the seventh (Haiman 1995), or even the sixth century CE (Avni 2023:249). It seems that similar processes may be observed in the northern Negev based on the excavation results in this region. While the large agricultural enterprises of Gaza, the Ascalon region (Israel and Erickson-Gini 2013; Huster 2015) and the Negev Highlands, which were based on wine production (Fuks, Avni and Bar-Oz 2021; Avni, Bar-Oz and Gambash 2023), experienced significant decline at the end of the Byzantine period, the northern Negev enters a period of true prosperity. It has been argued that this phenomenon is related to a certain decline in urban life in the large Negev settlements, first and foremost Be'er Sheva' (Fabian and Goldfus 2004:13*), and to the new ruling class's willingness to develop agricultural estates (Whitcomb 1995:491; see also Seligman and Zur 2021). It seems that the finds from Naḥal 'Ashan support this point of view. With the decline of Be'er Sheva', the local farms received an additional boost and expanded during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods.

At Naḥal 'Ashan, the modest field watchtowers excavated in Area A, and the poorly constructed elements near the water well in Area B, clearly relate to agricultural and pastoralist activities, most probably seasonal (Fabian and Goldfus 2004). It is possible that these field structures belonged to wealthy landlords from Be'er Sheva', perhaps the "private land-tax payers of the land" mentioned in a sixth-century tax edict from Be'er Sheva' (Di Segni 2004). Another possibility, proposed by Haiman, Argaman and Stavi (2020), considers that the uniformity of agricultural systems in the Be'er Sheva' Valley and the Negev Highlands, and the Judean Shephelah and Hebron Mountains regions, points to an imperial initiative of settlement around monasteries. The structures are nearly square in plan, with simple installations, located inside or outside the building. One of these square structures, Building 206, had unusually massive and deep foundations,

Fig. 25. Area D, the Abbasid farmhouse, various installations, looking southwest (photography: E. Aladjem).

presuming the existence of a second story, or perhaps a basement, although neither were discovered in the excavations.

The Umayyad farmhouses are somewhat more complex. The Umayyad farmhouse of Area B was planned as a row of four rectangular rooms delimiting a courtyard. It seems that from the Umayyad period on, the structures were not seasonal but rather used year-round. During the Abbasid period, even more complex farmhouses were built, such as the example exposed in Area B, with a labyrinth of rooms arranged around a central courtyard. Numerous hearths, *ṭabuns* and installations were found throughout the courtyard, as well as within the rooms (Fig. 25).

Building Techniques

All the farmhouse complexes, regardless of their date, shared common building techniques. They were built on the summits or slopes of loess hills, facing the wadis of Naḥal ʻAshan's tributaries; in one case (Building 206 of the Byzantine period), stone stairs were built to overcome the steep slope of the hill. This so-called "modular architectural" building style (Magness 2003) formed "nucleus units," almost identical to those described by Haiman (1995:35) in the Negev Highlands.

The wall foundations of the buildings (0.6–0.7 m wide) were constructed of small- and medium-sized fieldstone preserved to a height of two to five courses; only Building 206 exhibited deep foundations (Fig. 26). In most of the complexes, scarce remains of the mud-brick superstructure were spotted; in one case (Building 156), the stone walls were built atop

a mud-brick foundation (Fig. 27). In all the buildings, stones were consolidated with mud, and the inner surfaces of the walls were also coated with mud-plaster. The loess soils of the Negev provided high-quality raw material for mud-brick production, a building technique

Fig. 26. Deep foundation walls of Building 206, looking west (photography: A. Peretz).

Fig. 27. Stone walls of Building 156 built upon a mud-brick foundation, looking west (photography: A. Peretz).

widely used since ancient times. Although no mud-brick construction was reported in Late Antique contexts in the Negev Highlands, it has been proposed that most of the structures of Byzantine Be'er Sheva' were built of mud bricks (Fabian and Ustinova 2020:221), and mud-brick walls were also observed in the rural settlements north of the city and in nearby Rahat (Kogan-Zehavi 2021:120). That said, mud bricks are still quite rare in Byzantine and Early Islamic contexts, being much more common in the coastal area (see, e.g., the Byzantine funerary chapel at Ascalon, which was built almost completely with mud bricks on a stone foundation; Ustinova and Seriy 2018). The large amounts of ash recorded on the floors of the Abbasid-period buildings, beneath the destruction layers, may indicate the use of tree beams for roofing.

The phenomenon of stone *spolia* deserves special attention. In all the Early Islamic complexes, numerous earlier stone and marble fragments were discovered in secondary use, including limestone ashlar blocks, lintels and doorjambs, a perforated stone window, decorated fragments and marble elements. The spoliation of precious marble fragments and other building materials is well-known in the Negev region (for recent discoveries, see, e.g., Kogan-Zehavi 2021; Shmueli, Kogan-Zehavi and Michael 2023; for the Negev Highlands, see Haiman 1995:30). All spoliated fragments from the current excavation seem to have originated from a monumental ecclesiastical structure, possibly a church or monastery that served as the core of the sixth-century satellite agricultural structures. Some of the fragments—such as marble columns and slabs, and a lintel with a cross decoration—can be clearly attributed to a Christian structure. Such a structure may have been associated with the early phase of the building discovered in Area D, although with the evidence at hand, this remains hypothetical.

The spoliation of the church décor seems to point toward a non-Christian origin of the sites' inhabitants (see Seligman and Zur 2021). This, however, cannot be confirmed as no other material was discovered to serve as evidence of the religious affinity of the people who lived in these farmhouses. The same is true regarding their linguistic preferences, as no inscriptions were found.

Patterns of Continuity and Discontinuity

It is worth nothing that the structures do not continue from the late Byzantine to the Umayyad period, or from the Umayyad to the Abbasid period. They rather display the well-known pattern of abandonment, followed by the establishment of a new farmhouse a few hundred meters from the earlier one (for a similar phenomenon at nearby Rahat, see Kogan Zahavi 2021). It is quite possible that the explanation for this is the different origins of the inhabitants, or in other words, the settlers of the late Byzantine, Umayyad and Abbasid farmhouses did not belong to the same social or ethnic groups, clans, etc.

The material culture on the other hand shows clear, uninterrupted continuity of local, Palestinian traditions in ceramic and stone vessels. Most finds are simple, presenting the usual modest repertoire of vessels and tools, common in all regions of the country during the late Byzantine and Early Islamic periods, with no 'exotic' finds. Similar assemblages

were found, for example, in the excavations of the Umayyad–Abbasid farmhouse of Naḥal Gerar (Peretz 2015). Local service vessels, mainly of Fine Byzantine Ware, were found, which served as a local alternative to rare imports.

The scant glass finds are mostly plain, characteristic of the late Byzantine–Umayyad periods (Fig. 28:1) and of the Umayyad–Abbasid periods (Fig. 28:2–6). One specimen, adorned with a mold-blown pattern (Fig. 28:7), is of high quality, characteristic of the

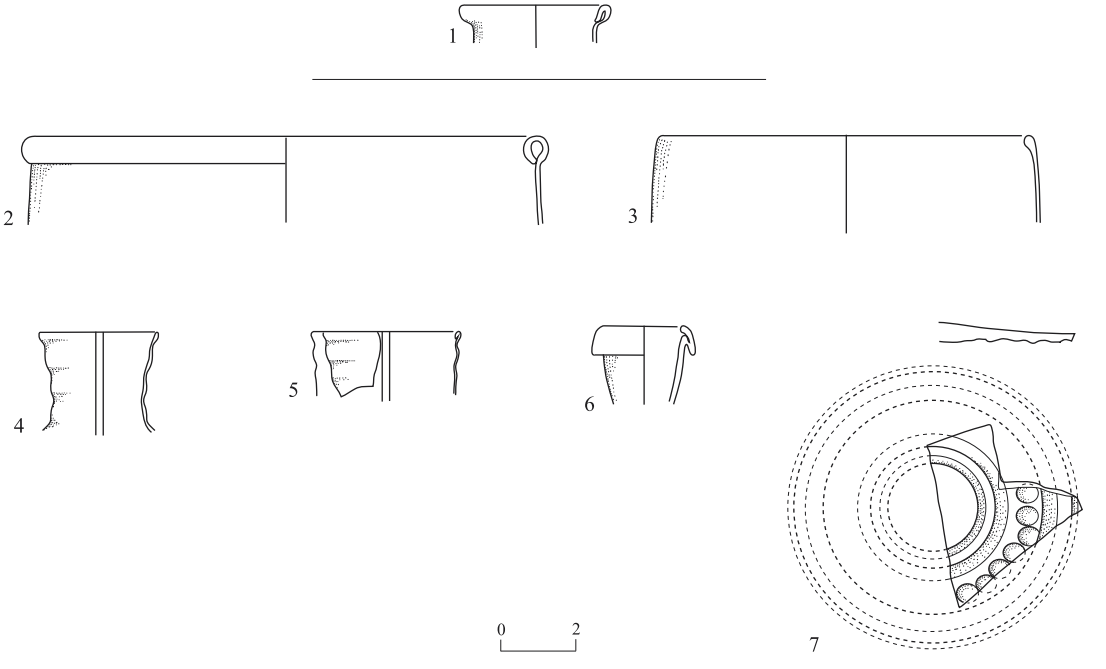

Fig. 28. Glass vessels (drawing: C. Hersch).

No.	Vessel	Area	Locus	Basket	Description
1	Bottle	B2	484	4068	Infolded rim (D 40 mm); greenish blue; weathering; iridescence
2	Bowl/beaker	D	878	8117	Infolded rim (D 135 mm) and vertical walls; light green; weathering; iridescence
3	Bowl/beaker	B3	524	5042	Rounded, thickened, slightly in-curved rim (D 100 mm) and vertical walls; brownish yellow; weathering; iridescence; pitting
4	Bottle	B3	541	5051	Rounded rim (D 30–40 mm), thin walls and a slightly conical, ridged neck; greenish blue
5	Bottle	D	861	8145	Infolded rim (D 35 mm), thin walls and a cylindrical, ridged neck; color indiscernible; severe whitish weathering
6	Bottle	D	861	8060	Infolded, flattened slanting rim (D 20 mm) and conical neck; greenish blue; weathering; iridescence
7	Bowl	D	856	8146	Bottom (D c. 80 mm) adorned on its underside with a mold-blown pattern depicting concentric circles and a circle of round dimples; greenish blue; weathering; iridescence

Abbasid–Fatimid periods (e.g., Hadad 2005:36–37, Pls. 30:599; 31:601; Lledó 2009a:119, Fig. 10-2:CB43; 2009b:149, Fig. 12-9:FL222); no analogous examples from the Be'er Sheva' area have been documented so far for this vessel.[4]

Economy

The economy of the Early Islamic settlements was clearly based on the exchange of goods, evidenced by the discovery of only two Byzantine coins, both dating to the end of the fourth–early fifth centuries CE, which were found in Area A in a late-Byzantine context. No coins were found in Umayyad and Abbasid contexts, indicating the rare use of coins (for the scarcity of numismatic finds in rural contexts, see Michael 2022:39–42).[5]

Our understanding of agricultural activities in the Naḥal ʻAshan region is limited, with only a few terrace walls relating to such activity. However, the small finds show that the farms focused on agricultural activities. No clear signs of animal husbandry were revealed, except for scarce architectural remains found in the proximity of the water well, among them channels and other water installations, which probably served as livestock drinking troughs. Various stone vessels, mainly mills and grinders made of hard basalt and beachrock, are common. It seems that the diet of the dwellers was based on cereals and vegetables, as the faunal remains discovered in the excavations were extremely scarce. Sediment samples were collected from *ṭabuns*, ash layers and a waste pit. It is expected that further archaeobotanical analyses of the remains will contribute to our understanding of the ancient environment, household habits and dietary preferences of the population.

Summary

No clear signs of nomadic or seminomadic settlements were discovered in the excavated area, and to the best of our knowledge, neither in the whole region north of Be'er Sheva'. Such temporal sites were more common in the arid lands of the Negev Highlands (Haiman 1995:32–34, 42–44).

The Abbasid farmhouses discovered in the area were violently destroyed sometime during the ninth–tenth centuries. Both structures found in Areas B and D were covered by collapsed layers of the ruined walls, with layers of ash on their floors. It seems that the buildings were roofed with organic materials (timber or tree branches), and their burning created thick ash layers on the floors. Following the fire, the buildings collapsed and the area remained unoccupied until the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries.

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[4] The glass vessels were studied by Tamar Winter of the Israel Antiquities Authority, to whom we are grateful for providing us with information regarding the vessel types, parallels and dates.

[5] The coins were studied by Helena Sokolov of the Israel Antiquities Authority, to whom we are grateful for providing us with their identification and dates.

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