

Jericho. From the Neolithic to the Bronze and Iron Ages: The Urban Diversity

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Abstract

Sixteen seasons (1997-2022) of excavations and restorations at Tell es-Sultan/Jericho by Sapienza University of Rome and the Palestinian MoTA-DACH revealed new data on the history and archaeology of this renowned site of Palestine. A contextual approach reveals the basic contribution that such a long-lived settlement may provide for the interpretation and conceptualization of Levantine archaeology. Human community vs environment, social organization vs cognitive interpretation of life and afterlife, dynamics of exploitation and landscape modeling vs adaptation and cultural invention. All these fields of investigation are touched by the archaeological research at the site. When history makes its appearance, and sources support our historical reconstruction, the retrieval of Egyptian items as well as the possible identification of the Canaanite name of the city, Ruha, may help in disentangling its complex history passing through foreign influence in Palestinian Bronze Age. Last but not least, the joint Italian-Palestinian Expedition testifies to a cooperation which resisted since 1997, opposing the overall political trend which emphasizes differences and confrontation, claiming for a shared, autonomous and authoritative Cultural Heritage.

Pre-Pottery Neolithic (Sultan Ib-c, 8,500-6,000 BC): early steps of human domestication of nature

Since the Mesolithic Period (Sultan Ia, c. 10,500 BC), and from the Neolithic onwards, Tell es-Sultan/Jericho, 7 Km north of the Dead Sea, was the dominant site of the southern Jordan Valley on the western bank of the river. The site, laying 270 m below the sea level, graciously profited of the favorable environment of the oasis formed by the abundant freshwater gushing out from the Spring of Ain es-Sultan (Nigro 2014a: 26-7, figs. 1.1-1.2). The Pre-Pottery Neolithic community at Jericho was one of the most adaptive, innovative and successful of the entire ancient Near East. British (1955-1958) (Kenyon 1957: 51-76; 1981: 18-92, 122-136, 226-253, 275-308) and Italian-Palestinian (1997-2020) (Nigro *et al.* 2011: 577-578; Nigro 2017a) excavations brought to light portions of a 4 hectares-wide village, with communal buildings, including the Round Tower (Fig. 1), and a “town-wall” encircling the settlement. The PPN Jericho community developed a distinguished architectural tradition, with plastered floors and mud-bricks, which, in the course of time, evolved from loaf-to cigar-shaped type produced in rectangular moulds (Ben-Shlomo and Garfinkel 2009: 191-192, tab. 1). This, of course, facilitated the transformation of the original womb-shaped huts into rectangular domestic units, capable to be enlarged by juxtaposing new units and sharing walls (Nigro 2014b: 60-61, fig. 6; 2019b: 139-140).

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Canals were excavated in the oasis to involve stable agriculture, which was flanked by taming sheep and goats, bees, dogs, and felines. Intensive agriculture, as well as animal breeding and hunting are the primary resources for subsistence of the PPN Jericho (Twiss 2007: 27). The verdant environment of the oasis allowed a solid growth of the population and assured full success to plants and animals domestication practices.

Flint industry reached a high technological and functionally specialized level, forming a reference typological inventory for the period (Crowfoot Payne 1983: 639-706). The presence of obsidian witness exchange reaching Anatolia, and connecting Neolithic communities all around the Fertile Crescent (Marchetti and Nigro 1998: 87-88; Nigro 2019b: 140).

More than 500 people lived in Jericho already in the 9th millennium BC, which grew up to at least 2,000 individuals at the end of PPNA (7,500 BC). This community was characterized by an elaborated social organization, with an unequal distribution of power and wealth based on land ownership and water distribution (Kuijt 2001: 86; Naveh 2003; Benz 2010: 251, 269-70; Rollefson 1983: 30; 2004). The modified social organisation contributed to the birth of cult and rites connected with the nascent ideology of family (Goren *et al.* 2001; Kodus 2014; 2016; Fletcher 2015: 26; Nigro 2017a: 26). This is reflected in skull separation, with the transformation of crania into familiar idols through plastering, modeling, and painting (Nigro 2017a: 6-25) (Fig. 2).

Pottery Neolithic (Sultan IIa-b, 6000-4500 BC) and Chalcolithic (Sultan IIc, 4500-3500 BC): periods of regression

During the PN Period the invention of pottery marks another major step in the technological development of the site (Nigro 2014a: 28-30), but this period showed a regression in architecture, technology and material culture.

In the following Chalcolithic Period the spring of 'Ain es-Sultan reduced its flow or even ceased to produce water (Nigro 2014b: 67-68). Tell es-Sultan was almost deserted and a reduced community settled on the eastern bank of Wadi Nueima, about 2 Km to the east, at Tell el-Mafjar (Nigro 2008; 2011: 78).

Early Bronze I (Sultan IIIa1, 3500-3000 BC): path to urbanization

As the spring recovered, Jericho was again inhabited by a group of farmers and breeders, bearing a distinctive material culture (Nigro 2005; Nigro *et al.* 2019). They re-set systematic cultivation of the oasis, keeping strict relationships with nomadic shepherds practicing transhumance from the highlands down into the Jordan Valley, running N-S along the Wadi 'Arabah and the Sinai Peninsula, trading raw materials, such as copper (Levy 2007: 27-46), salt, sulphur, bitumen, spices (Nigro 2005: 4-5), and Egyptian items (Sala 2012: 277-281).

The EB I community grew in complexity and the small hamlet progressively turned into a huge village, with inner architectural differentiation and communal buildings (Nigro 2005: 122-124, 200; Montanari 2012: 2-10), such as a long apsidal house excavated in Trench III (Kenyon 1981: 322-324, pls. 174, 313a, 314; Gallo 2019: 112-120). Tomb A testifies to the emergence of a leader, buried in primary deposition in a distinguished posture with raised arms and his mace in between the legs (Garstang 1932: 19-22, pl. VII:5).

Early Bronze II (Sultan IIIb, 3000-2700 BC): rise of a city

At the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC, Jericho underwent a major transformation with the erection of a solid city-wall made of yellowish bricks set upon a two courses-thick stone foundations (Nigro 2010a: 11-38; 2010b: 461-463; Gallo 2019: 119-124). The inhabited area was terraced, divided into quarters by a N-S main street, and, on the hill overlooking the spring and the oasis, a temple was built (Nigro 2010a: 51-61, 75, 109; 2010b: 464-466). The main gate was at the SE foot of the tell, introducing to the spring area which was included into the city-wall (Fig. 3). These transformations were accompanied by a development of the material culture, visible in pottery making and in the emergence of copper tools and weapons (Nigro 2014b: 71; 2014c).

The new-born city inaugurated a new model of economy, based on intensive agriculture, cattle breeding and use in cultivation, seasonal employment of large squads of workers, labour specialization including potters, smiths, merchants, warriors and city-administrators forming an urban élite.

The finding of five mother-of-pearl shells from the Nile, piled up into a cache in an EB IIA room with remains of eyes make-up (Fig. 4), is another indication that an emerging ruling class looked to Egypt having established and enduring exchange system with the Pharaonic Kingdom (Nigro *et al.* 2018). The flourishing EB II city came to a sudden end due to a violent earthquake struck, occurred towards 2700 BC (Nigro 2014b: 72).

Early Bronze III (Sultan IIIc, 2700-2300 BC): the transformation of Jericho

After the earthquake, Jericho was completely rebuilt: the fortification line was doubled adding an Outer Wall to the Main Inner Wall (Fig. 5), with a series of blind rooms in between them, and a ditch at the bottom (Sellin and Watzinger 1913: 20-33; Garstang 1930: 128-129; 1931: 191-192; Kenyon 1981: 161-163, 210-213; Marchetti and Nigro 1998: 81-94, 129-130; Nigro 2006a: 361-375; Nigro and Taha 2009: 738-739; Nigro *et al.* 2011: 580-581). A balcony allowed to walk all around on top of the main city-wall.

A major intervention of this second urban stage was the erection of a palace on the eastern flank of the “Spring Hill” overlooking the oasis (Sellin and Watzinger 1913: 39-42, figs. 18-20; Garstang 1932: 17-18; Kenyon 1981: 344-346; Nigro *et al.* 2011: 586-592, figs. 16, 20; 2017b: 159-162). The palace was subdivided into three wings each on a different terrace downgrading to the spring (Fig. 6). The main entrance was on the southern side and opened towards a square in the main street climbing the “Spring Hill” and turning northwards. It led to the middle terrace, where a porch introduced to a hall with a raised podium, and a reception suite flanked by a small subsidiary room. The upper terrace was accessible directly from the main street, through a door on the palace western perimeter wall. It hosted productive installations for food preparation and other ateliers. A third entrance was in the eastern lower terrace, directly connected with the spring area and the market just inside the citygate. This door gave access to the administrative and storage wing, and to a corner tower.

Remarkable finds from the palace, such as a copper axe and a dagger, a potter’s wheel, the bull-shaped spout of a cultic vessel, two fragmentary Egyptian palettes and a marble mace-head (Holland 1983: 804-805, fig. 365.5), testify to the role played by the palatial institution for the accumulation and distribution of wealth, and the control of trade routes and exchange of luxury goods (Nigro 2017b: fig. 8.12; 2020a: 192-194).

The dwelling quarter on the northern plateau revealed a number of domestic units distributed on both sides of the main street (Marchetti and Nigro 2000: 15-120; Nigro and Taha 2009: 740-741, fig. 17; Gallo 2019). Finds from the houses show a vivid picture of early urban Jericho. Salt, sulfur and bitumen from the Dead Sea, sea-shells from the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, copper from Wadi Feynan and Sinai, precious or imported items or wares testify to the existence of different trade routes. Tokens, calculi, sealings and seals, balance weights for precious metals or rare spices, illustrate the life of the urban community. All these finds, in absence of writing, mark the step towards a complex and stratified society, and witness the existence of a central institution ruling over the city, the oasis and controlling the territory and road network.

Intermediate Bronze Age/Early Bronze IV (Sultan IIIId, 2300-2000 BC): urban fragility, crisis, and new arrivals

Towards the mid of the 24th century BC the fragile urban experiment collapsed due to an enemy attack, and only some sparse squatters re-occupied the ruins on the tell for a certain while, then the site was deserted (Nigro 2009a: 187-188; 2014b: 77-80; 2020b; Montanari 2019: 135-142). After some decades, new settlers - nomad shepherds which basically inhabited the oasis during summer - occupied the tell summit and the Spring Hill (Nigro 2003: 131-132; 2020a: fig. 17). They first lived in tents and then in rectangular dwellings with flimsy walls made of a single row of bricks. Along with livestock rearing, nomads used to merchandise from fringe regions where numerous raw materials were extracted. For this reason, some of them became expert metalworkers and played a major role in the development of metallurgy leading to the introduction of copper alloys, including bronze, in the last century of the 3rd millennium BC (D'Andrea 2014: 156-157; Montanari 2014: 106; 2020).

The tribal organization of this new community and its semi-nomadic origins are well illustrated by a huge necropolis of individual burials extended on the limestone plateau NW of the tell (Kenyon 1960: 180-262; 1965: 33-166). The rural village developed in the second stage of the EBA (EB IVB), extending over the terraced tell flanks, as the community became fully stable and agriculture spread again over the oasis (Nigro 2003: 132, fig. 13).

Middle Bronze Age (Sultan IV, 2000-1500 BC): the urban rebirth

The re-urbanization of Tell es-Sultan occurred during the 20th century BC and was due to a further new population, the Amorites of Mesopotamian and Biblical sources (Kenyon 1963). The city was re-built to be the capital of a city-state extended over the southern Jordan Valley.

The MB I city-walls consisted of a solid wall of mud-bricks on stone foundations with rectangular towers (Fig. 7) (Marchetti and Nigro 2000: 167-171; Nigro *et al.* 2011: 573- 577, figs. 3-5; Nigro 2020a: 196). They were re-built twice in MB II by adding a rampart made of intermingled strata of earth and crushed limestone, and a stone retaining wall (CSS) at the bottom of the latter (Nigro *et al.* 2011: 581-584, figs. 13-14; Nigro 2020a: 196-199). In the latest reconstruction about 1650 BC, a Cyclopean wall was built to support the rubble rampart, also including the spring (Nigro 2006b: 34-35; Fiaccavento and Gallo 2020: 240-242).

The MB II-III temple was identified on the SW summit of the central hill (Nigro 2016: 15). Temple P was a typical "Migdol"/long-room temple, with an elongated cella, characterized by very high and thick walls (2.2 m). A very close comparison is offered by the MB temples in Tell Balata/Shechem (Sellin 1928; Stager 1999) or Tabaqat Fahl/Pella in Jordan

(Bourke 2012). In the vicinity of the temple, a turtle-dove shaped rhyton was found by J. Gartang (1934: 127, pl. XXVI.8.) suggesting that the worshipped deity was the Canaanite goddess Ishtar (Nigro 2019a).

A new palace was built over the regularized remains of the EB II-III one. It was entered from the south through a porch and had a rectangular plan (Garstang 1933: 41; 1934: 100-101, pl. XV, no. 80-81; Garstang and Garstang 1948: 99-101, fig. 4; Marchetti 2003: 306; Nigro *et al.* 2011: 585-586). It rested upon a perimeter wall, which supported the palace on the northern and eastern sides. The plan of the building was organized on two rectangular courtyards, with rooms and halls all around them. A staircase led to the upper storeys, where the residential apartments were presumably located (Fig. 8). South of the palace a huge area was occupied by the storerooms (Garstang 1934: 118-130, pls. XV-XXVI, XL.a, XLI-XLII), where the precious agricultural products of the oasis were gathered together with precious stuffs and raw materials. Aside from the palace to the east, there was another subsidiary building serving as stable. A cobble-paved street connected it through a postern with the underlying area of the spring.

In between the foundation walls of the palace, some lined-up mud-bricks tombs were built to host the members of the ruling élite (Nigro 2009b). Within one of these tombs, a young lady and her adult maid were buried together. The lady had a distinguished personal ornament (Nigro 2020a: fig. 23), and especially a scarab (TS.99.G.500) stands out. It belongs to a signet ring, with a hieroglyphic inscription mentioning the “Administrator of Jericho” (*Adjmer Ruha*), the latter was the ancient Canaanite name of the city.

The largest number of MB tombs, however, was uncovered in the necropolis NW of the tell (Garstang 1933: 4-38; Kenyon 1960: 263-518; 1965: 167-478, fig. 91), where shaft tombs were occupied by extended families. Some individuals show a special treatment and wear weapons typical of the MB warriors’ class (Cohen 2012): fenestrated, duck-bill or chisel bronze axes, triple veined bronze daggers with marble or fine limestone pommels, studded waist belt. In the tomb of one of these officials, a scarab bearing the prenomen of Pharaoh Hotep-ib-*ra* was found (Nigro 2018), who ruled over the “Hyksos” capital in the Delta, Avaris/Tell ed-Dab’a, about 1770-1760 BC (Bietak 1984: 74; 1991: 49; 1996: 30). This discovery suggests that during the reign of this pharaoh a strong political connection existed between Jericho and Egypt. Moreover, the scarab found in the tomb of the Princess underneath the palace, confirms that Jericho and Tell ed-Dab’a established a strong and mutual relationship with the 13th Dynasty onwards. In the second half of the 16th century BC, Ruha was completely destroyed by an enemy attack (Garstang and Garstang 1948: 103-104; Massafra 2014: 196-197). It is possible that such a dramatic event has to be attributed either to Ahmose or to Amenhotep I during their campaign assuring Egypt control on Asia. Radiocarbon dates fix the event between 1550 and 1520 cal BC (Bruins and van der Plicht 1995: 213-220), and after that, the Canaanite city-state decayed, and from about 1500 BC became a town with reduced influence and international relations.

Jericho in the Late Bronze Age (Sultan V, 1500-1300 BC)

During the Late Bronze Age the city gradually recovered (Bienkowski 1986), becoming again a town, with weaker fortifications consisting of a mud-brick wall erected on top of the Cyclopean Wall (Fig. 9). The ruins of the MB Palace were re-adapted into a residence, the “Middle Building”, possibly for a vassal lord of the Egyptians (Garstang 1934: 100-

102, 108-116, pls. XIII-XIV, XXXI-XXXVII; Bienkowski 1986: 71, 90, 101-102, 112-122, figs. 55-56, 59-60; Nigro 1996: 52-55, fig. 8:2; Marchetti 2003: 316-317). A cuneiform tablet (Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem, no. RM1485) testifies to the existence of a chancellery and an administration of the town and the oasis (Garstang 1934: 116; Horowitz *et al.* 2006: 96-97, 231). In the last century of the Late Bronze Age, Jericho shows a dramatic draught of archaeological evidence, which has been interpreted in a definitive abandonment of the city (Kenyon 1951: 113). This coincides with an epochal crisis in the Levant and the Near East, followed by a new era, the Iron Age.

Jericho in the Iron Age (Sultan VI, 1200-586 BC)

At the beginning of the 12th century, new tribes arrived in the Judean Desert and in the Jordan Valley, belonging to a new wave of nomadic pastoralists entering Syria-Palestine from Arabia taking advantage by the dissolution of pre-existing polities (Nigro 2014d: 263; 2020a: 204-206). In the Jericho area, they used to live in the wilderness around the oasis that had lost its flourishing aspect, being largely abandoned. In early Iron IB, in the highlands of Palestine and Transjordan, more complex social organizations were growing up and rapidly coagulated into new nations, which extended their territorial control over the southern Jordan Valley. New long distance trade had started with the diffusion of the dromedary (Grigson 2012) and fortresses, outposts and garrisons were built along the main overland routes of southern Levant. Tell es-Sultan, overlooking one of the richest springs of the region, was again settled and possibly hosted one of these strongholds (Nigro 2011: 15).

By the 9th century BC, Jericho was again a city surrounded by a wall, built exploiting the massive MBA ramparts and supporting works. The eastern flank of the Spring Hill hosted a tripartite public building, the “Hilani” (Sellin and Watzinger 1913: 67-70, fig. 42, pls. 15-16, I, IV; Garstang 1934: 102-104, pl. XIII; Marchetti 2003: 317), like the reception buildings of the Neo-Hittite and Neo-Syrian cities of the North. The rest of the city was intensively inhabited and extended (Fig. 10), with large houses, productive installations (Nigro *et al.* 2011: 578-580), and slab-paved stairs climbing the 15 m high site. A double-winged royal stamp on a jar handle (Bartlett 1982: 537, fig. 220:1) may indicate that Jericho was included in the administration of the Kingdom of Judah in the 7th-6th centuries BC. It surely supplied the capital with oasis products, including newly introduced cultivar from the East, such as sandalwood for perfumes.

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Fig. 1: Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (8500-7500 BC) Round Tower at Tell es-Sultan, view from the east



Fig. 2: Plastered and decorated skulls from Jericho, PPNB

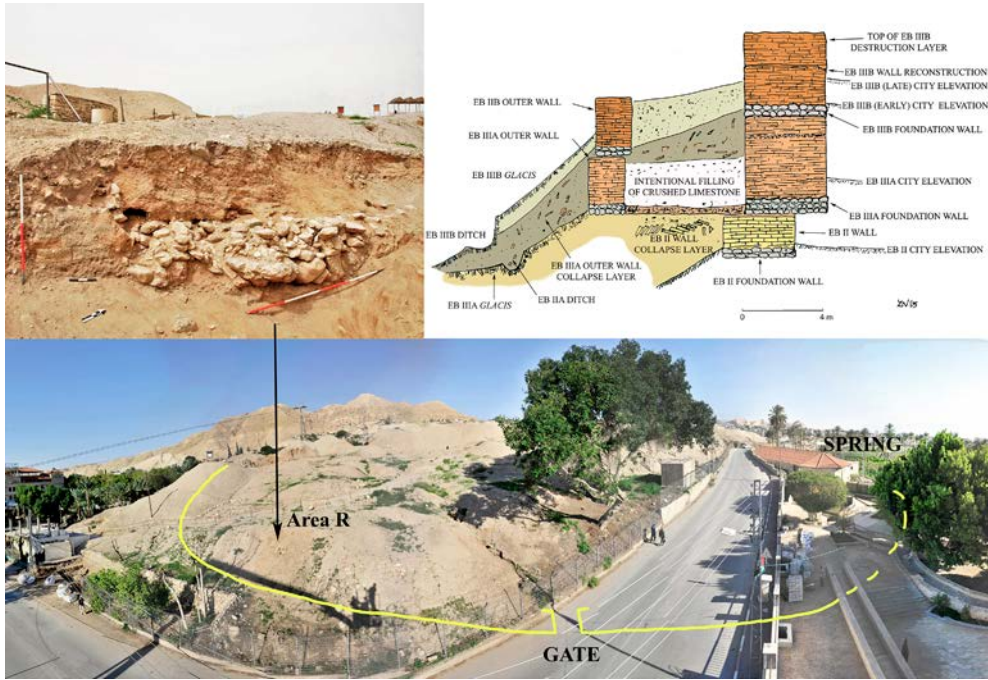


Fig. 3: View of the SW corner of the EB II (3000-2700 BC) city-wall excavated in Area R (upper left), including the spring within the city

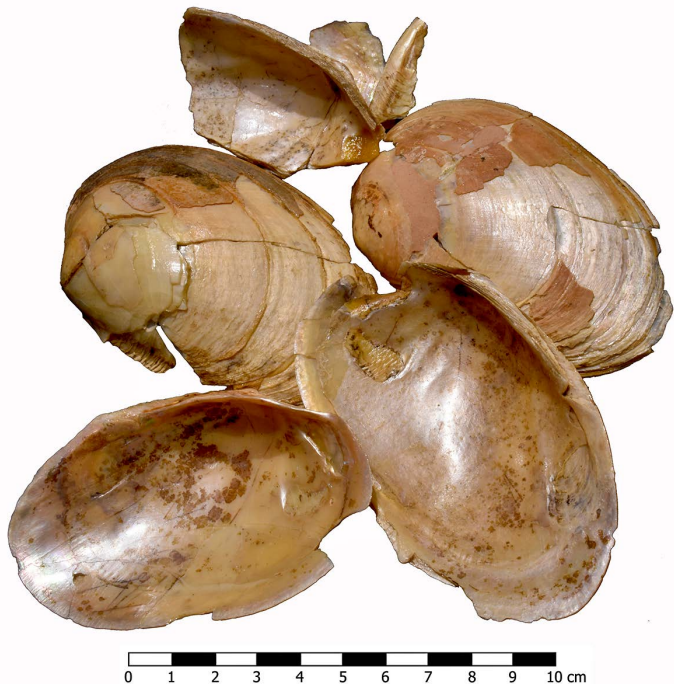


Fig. 4: The five *Chambaridia rubens* shells with eyes makeup remains found in a Sultan IIA layer (EB IIA c. 2850 BC)



Fig. 5: View of the EB IIIA (2700-2500 BC) defenses excavated in Areas B and B South, from north



Fig. 6: View from the west of the EB III (2700-2300 BC) Palace G on the eastern flank of the Spring Hill at Tell es-Sultan/Jericho



Fig. 7: View of the MB I-III (2000-1500 BC) defenses on the southern flank (Areas A and E) of Tell es-Sultan/Jericho, from south-east

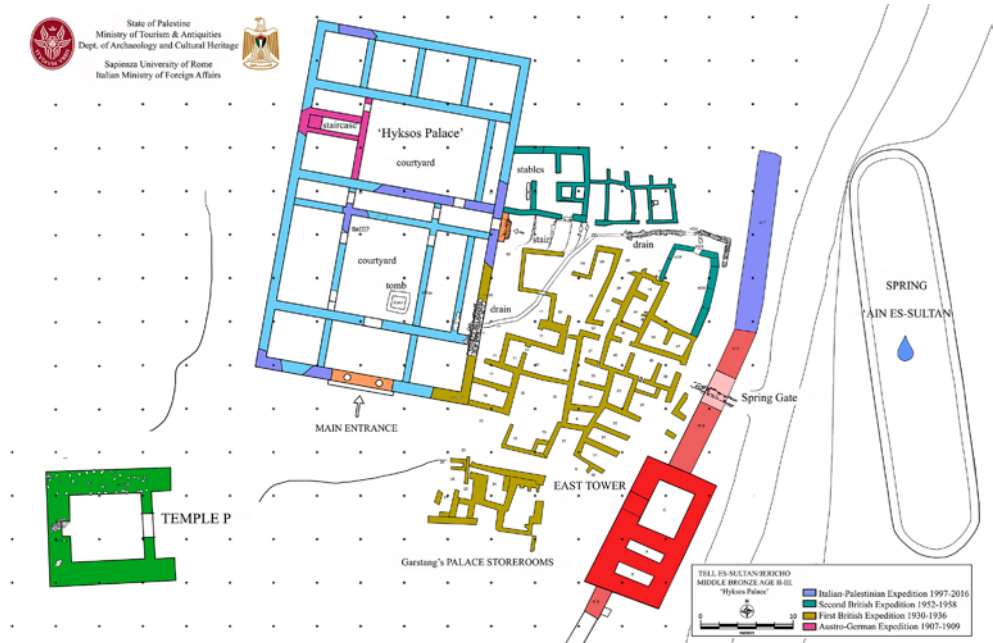


Fig. 8: Reconstructed plan of the MB II-III “Hyksos Palace” on the eastern flank of the Spring Hill, and the nearby Temple P

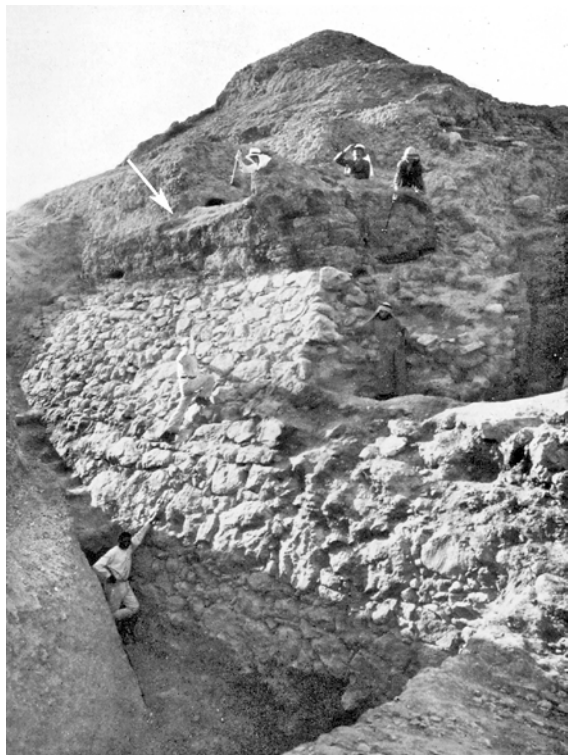


Fig. 9: LB I-II (1500-1300 BC) mud-brick wall on top of Cyclopean Wall 4 (after Garstang 1931: pl. II), view from the north-west



Fig. 10: Iron Age II domestic unit and installations brought to light in Area A, from south-west

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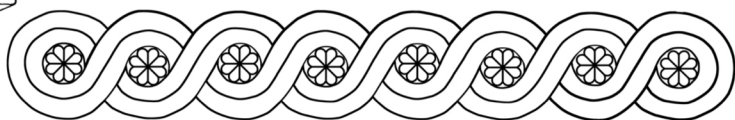
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