

MURḤAN: AN INTERMEDIATE BRONZE AGE SITE IN THE ḤAROD VALLEY

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INTRODUCTION

In September 2008, in association with infrastructure activity, a small-scale salvage excavation was carried out (Covello-Paran 2011b) along the outskirts of the ancient site of Murḥan in the Ḥarod Valley (map ref. 2383/7179; Fig. 1).¹ The site is located on the southeastern spur of Giv'at Qumi, above Naḥal Yosef (Figs. 2, 3) and extends across an area

of approximately 10 hectares, some of which are situated within the precincts of Kibbutz Tel Yosef. According to a local Arab oral tradition, there was a spring next to the riverbed of Naḥal Yosef that dried up during the first half of the twentieth century.²

For the most part, Murḥan is a single-period site dating to the Intermediate Bronze Age, with sporadic finds dating to the Iron Age. The site was discovered in 1932 by Nehemia

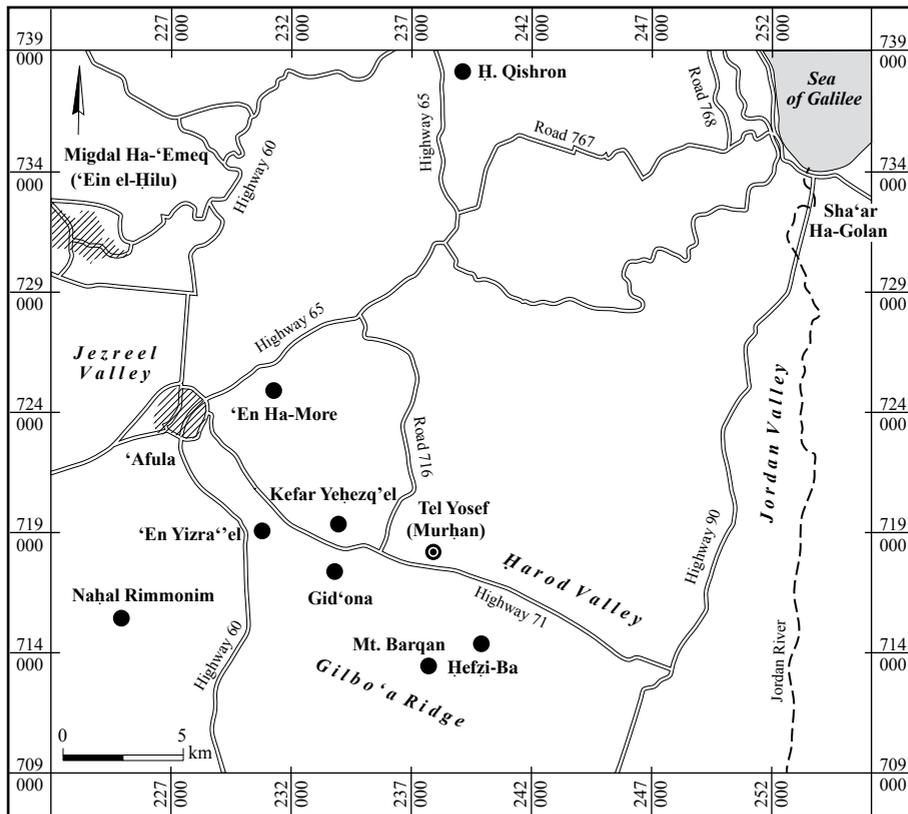


Fig. 1. Location map, including nearby Intermediate Bronze Age sites.

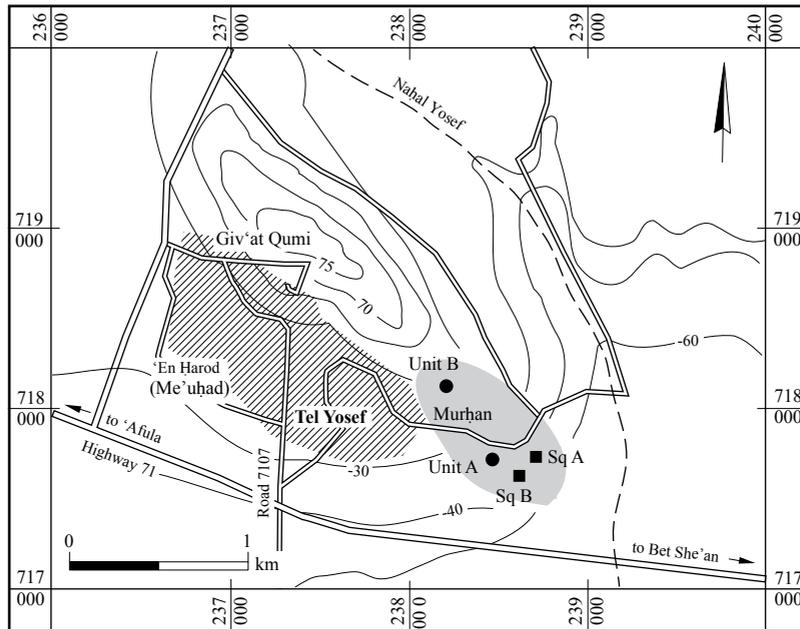


Fig. 2. Site map with excavation areas.

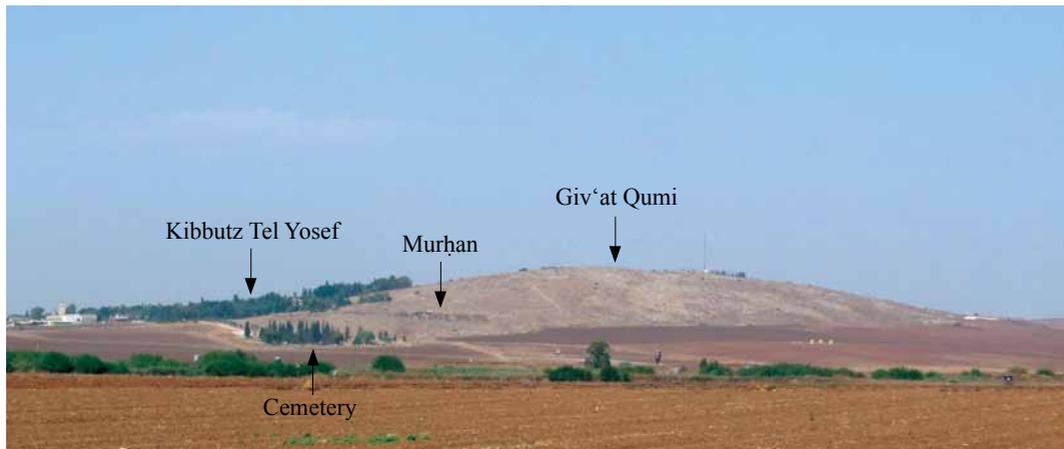


Fig. 3. General view of Giv'at Qumi and Murhan.

Zori, who collected and documented artifacts that had been discovered over the years, with the development and growth of the kibbutz (see Zori 1971:4–11; 1977:77–81). Zori conducted an intensive surface survey and recorded a large quantity of material dating to the Intermediate Bronze Age, including 1200 folded ledge handles and other potsherds, and more than 1000 flint blades and sickle blades

(Zori 1971:4). Also notable is the surface retrieval of clay spindle whorls with biconical perforation. In addition, as the site underwent repeated damage through construction, laying of infrastructure and plowing, Zori carefully documented the extraction of large numbers of basalt grinding stones that were removed from the site with heavy machinery (Zori 1977:79). Among the Intermediate Bronze Age

artifacts collected during subsequent building activities at Kibbutz Tel Yosef are four bronze weapons (Zori 1971: Fig. 6). In addition to the Intermediate Bronze Age finds, several potsherds and a stone cosmetic palette dating to the Iron Age were found during construction near the kibbutz swimming pool.

Zori directed the first systematic excavations at Murḥan in 1954, preliminary to the digging of Water Reservoir No. 5 (= Unit A in Fig. 2). Architectural remains, exposed below a 1.5 m overburden of colluvial soil, revealed a five-room dwelling, a circular structure³ and three tombs, all dated by the excavator to the Intermediate Bronze Age. Murḥan was one of the first Intermediate Bronze Age settlements discovered in Israel, hence the importance of Zori's work toward the investigation of sedentary population during this period.

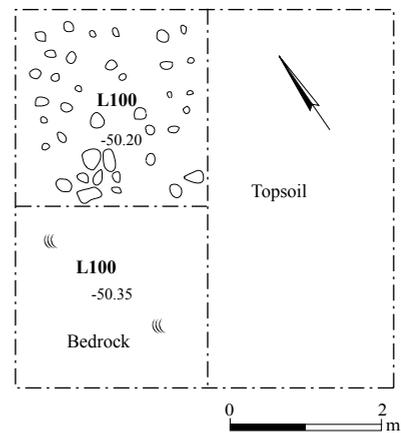
The present archaeological excavation at the site was conducted in 2008 on the periphery of the ancient site. The final report of this excavation is presented here, together with some finds that were illicitly excavated and turned over to the Israel Antiquities Authority (see Post-Excavation Unit B, below).

THE EXCAVATION

Two 5 × 5 m squares (A, B), approximately 200 m apart, were excavated alongside a trench, dug to accommodate a pipe.

Square A (Plan 1; Fig. 4)

After removal of the topsoil layer in Sq A (map ref. 238728/717725), the excavation was

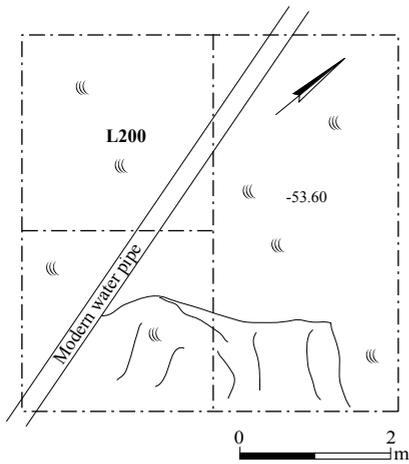


Plan 1. Square A.



Fig. 4. Square A, stone layer L100 overlaying limestone and basalt bedrock, looking northwest.

confined to the western half of the square. A stone layer (L100) founded on weathered limestone and basalt bedrock was exposed. Extensive modern plowing of the field most likely disturbed the architectural remains in this area of the site. Fragments of pottery vessels and basalt grinding tools that date to the Intermediate Bronze Age were discovered between the stones and in their vicinity.



Plan 2. Square B.

Square B (Plan 2; Fig. 5)

The excavation of Sq B (map ref. 238623/717618) revealed an older modern drainage pipe, the laying of which no doubt destroyed archaeological layers. Smoothed limestone bedrock surfaces (L200) were exposed below an 85 cm thick colluvial overburden. These poorly preserved surfaces are probably indicative of agricultural activities along the outskirts of the site, above the rocky outcrops. Directly above the bedrock surfaces, in an accumulation layer, were potsherds dating exclusively to the Intermediate Bronze Age.

POST EXCAVATION UNIT B

North of the road encircling Kibbutz Tel Yosef is a horseshoe-shaped area damaged by years of modern quarrying and soil extraction (Figs. 2, 6). On the surface, above and surrounding this almost crater-like depression, architectural features protrude above the topsoil; it is possible to discern the walls and rooms of various architectural units (Fig. 7). Moreover, visible in the sides of the damaged areas are walls, floors and piles of fallen debris containing large



Fig. 5. Square B, smoothed rocky outcrop cut by modern water pipe, looking south.



Fig. 6. Damaged area directly north of the road encircling Kibbutz Tel Yosef, general view to west.



Fig. 7. Architectural Unit B protruding above modern surface directly east of the section where pottery vessels were found *in situ*, looking northwest.

quantities of potsherds, flint and basalt tools. In 2010, a number of restorable pottery vessels and flint blades were illicitly extracted from the sections and submitted to the IAA inspector. These artifacts, originating from one of the architectural units, here designated Unit B, are included in the present publication (Figs. 9–11).

THE FINDS

Numerous artifacts were found scattered in and near the excavated squares together with occupational debris and plowed fieldstones, most likely the remnants of disturbed building remains.⁴

POTTERY (Figs. 8–10)

The pottery assemblage shares traits with the known regional repertoire of the Intermediate Bronze Age at settlement sites, such as ‘Ein el-Ḥilu in Migdal Ha-‘Emeq (Covello-Paran 1999), Naḥal Rimmonim (Covello-Paran 2008) and Tel Yizra‘el (Smithline 2017), all in the Jezreel Valley, and Sha‘ar Ha-Golan (Eisenberg 2012) in the central Jordan Valley. In keeping with the location of Murḥan in the Ḥarod Valley—the corridor connecting the Jezreel Valley and the Jordan Valley—the parallels for the pottery types provided here are primarily from these sites (see Fig. 1). Additional reference is made to the assemblage from the excavated settlement at Ḥorbat Qishron in the Lower Galilee (Smithline 2002).

The poorly preserved architectural remains did not provide any clean loci; therefore, the pottery of Sqs A and B are presented typologically as a single assemblage (Fig. 8). The illicitly extracted pottery from post-

excavation Unit B, although illustrated separately (Figs. 9, 10), is also included in the typological discussion.

Bowls

Large Shallow Bowl.— This bowl type has straight sloping sides that turn in at the rim and a flat base. Our example (Fig. 8:1) has a thickened flat rim and exhibits wheel smoothing on the upper three centimeters of the bowl. The base was not preserved. Parallels can be found at ‘Ein el-Ḥilu (Covello-Paran 2009: Fig. 7:5, 6); Naḥal Rimmonim (Covello-Paran 2008: Fig. 6:2) and Ḥ. Qishron (Smithline 2002: Fig. 10:1–8).

Small Deep Bowl.— The upright sides of this bowl type (Fig. 8:2) curve slightly inward at the rim; at mid body are two thumb-indented ledge handles. The surface of this bowl was not well-preserved. Parallels are known from Sha‘ar Ha-Golan (Eisenberg 2012: Fig. 42:9) and Ḥ. Qishron (Smithline 2002: Fig. 10:15).

Fig. 8 ▶

No.	Type	Reg. No.	Petrographic Group ⁱ
1	Bowl	3000/25	
2	Bowl	3000/27	
3	Holemouth	3014/50	2
4	Holemouth	3014/53	
5	Holemouth	3014/22	2
6	Storage jar	3000/26	
7	Storage jar	3014/26	
8	Storage jar	3014/2	
9	Storage jar	3014/52	
10	Storage jar	3000	1
11	Storage jar	3014/24	1
12	Storage jar base	3014/5	
13	Storage jar base	3000/55	
14	Storage jar handle	3014/20	
15	Storage jar handle	3014/16	1
16	Amphoriskos handle	3000/54	

ⁱ See Shapiro, this volume.

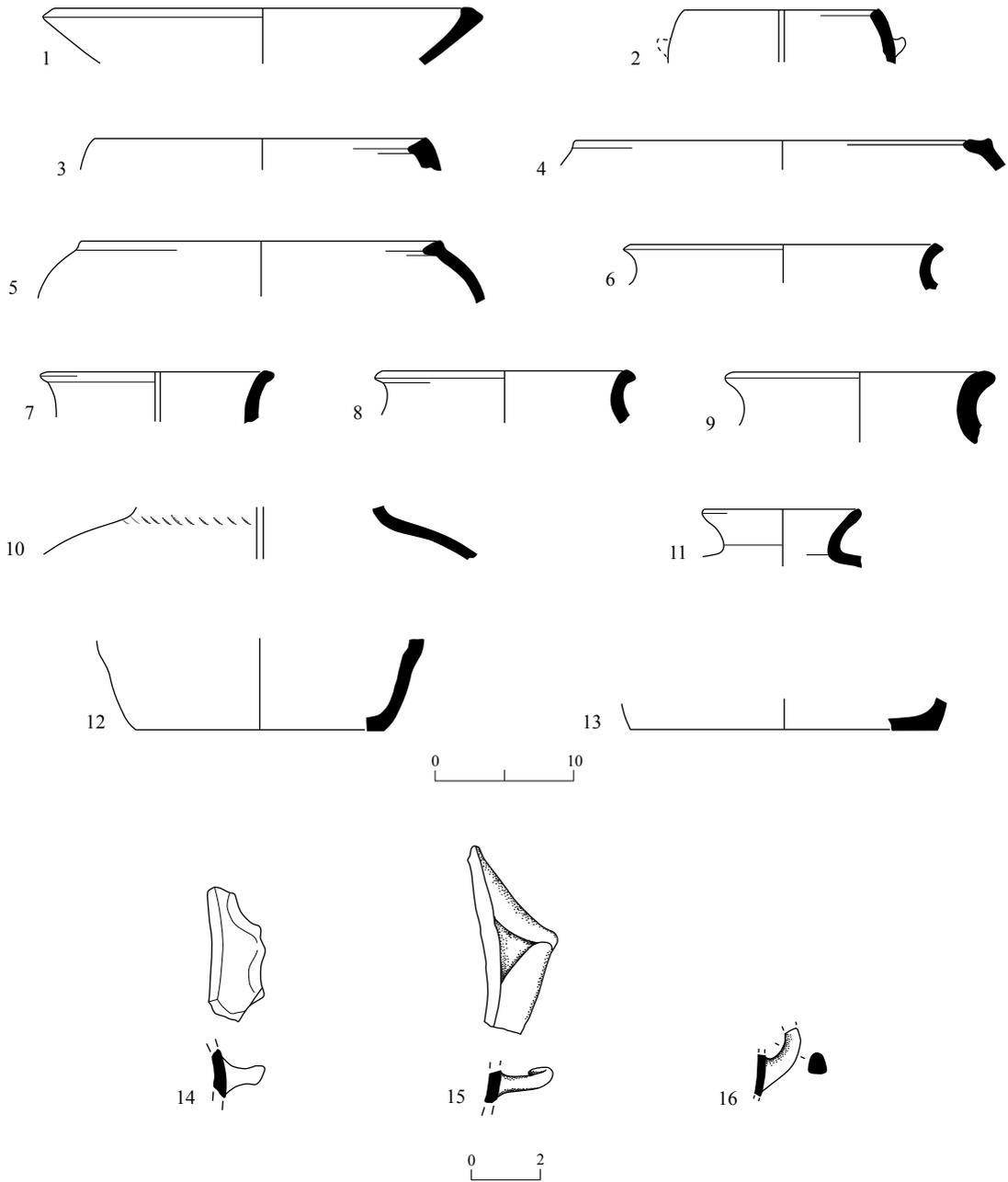


Fig. 8. Squares A and B, L300: pottery.

Large Deep Bowl.— A small sherd from a deep bowl (Fig. 9:1) with straight sides has a pinched rim that is the beginning of an indented handle forming a “piecrust” edge at the rim. For parallels, see MurĦan (Zori 1971:6) and Ħ. Qishron (Smithline 2002: Fig. 11:6).

Holemouth Vessels

Holemouth jars are defined as closed vessels without a neck; they are either globular or straight-sided, with a slight curve at the rim. The opening is not constricted and varies in diameter from 20 to 30 cm. These vessels

Fig. 9 ▶

No.	Type	Reg. No.	Petrographic Group ⁱ
1	Bowl	10/5	
2	Storage jar	10/6-1	
3	Storage jar	10/6-2	
4	Storage jar	10/4	2
5	Jug	10/2	2
6	Amphoriskos handle	10/3	

ⁱ See Shapiro, this volume.

usually bear surface treatment such as painted, incised or applied decoration. Among the examples illustrated from Murḥan, one has an inverted flat rim (Fig. 8:3) and the other two have inverted recessed rims (Fig. 8:4, 5). A thickening of the walls of the vessel near the rim, with or without an internal overhang, often emphasizes this gutter, which apparently allows for a more secure placement of a lid. The surface of these holemouth vessels was not well-preserved, and therefore we cannot be certain whether they have slipped or painted exteriors.

Two holemouth samples (Fig. 8:3, 5) were included in the provenance study; both are from petrographic Group 2, originating in the Jezreel Valley (see Shapiro, this volume).

The lack of rim standardization that has been noted in the limited Murḥan assemblages, both from the present excavation and from Zori's excavation (1971: Fig. 2:11, 12; 1977: Fig. 34:14, 15), is reflected in contemporaneous assemblages, such as those at 'Ein el-Ḥilu (Covello-Paran 2009: Fig. 7:8–13), Naḥal Rimmonim (Covello-Paran 2008:58, Figs. 5:6, 7; 6:13–15), Sha'ar Ha-Golan (Eisenberg 2012: Fig. 43) and Ḥ. Qishron (Smithline 2002: Fig. 14).

Storage Vessels

As is the case at most excavated settlement sites, storage jars are the most common vessel type at Murḥan. The typology of the jars is based on the rim/neck morphology. In

addition to rim/neck sherds, the assemblage includes two restored vessels, one of which is complete.

The petrographic analysis performed on five of the storage jars shows that all the jars originated in the central Jordan Valley (see Shapiro, this volume).

Storage Jar with a Short Flaring Neck and a Tapered Rim.— This fragment (Fig. 9:2) has a simple, tapered rim. It is of a very common storage jar type that is well-known from the Jezreel Valley, and is found on both flat- and round-based vessel forms. Examples of this type have been found at 'Ein el-Ḥilu (Covello-Paran 1999: Fig. 44:1–3; 2009: Fig. 9:6) and Naḥal Rimmonim (Covello-Paran 2008: Fig. 7:7, 8).

Storage Jars with an Upright Neck and a Pinched Everted Rim.— This storage jar is typified by a straighter neck than the above-mentioned examples, often with a slight flare at the rim (Figs. 8:6–9; 9:3, 4; 10). Each of the two restorable vessels (Figs. 9:4; 10) has a flat base and two envelope-folded ledge handles. Both exhibit fine combing over the entire body of the vessel below the neck. For parallels see 'Ein el-Ḥilu (Covello-Paran 1999: Fig. 45:6–8), Murḥan (Zori 1971: Fig. 2:9), Naḥal Rimmonim (Covello-Paran 2008: Figs. 5:8, 9; 7:9–11) and Sha'ar Ha-Golan (Eisenberg 2012: Figs. 45–47).

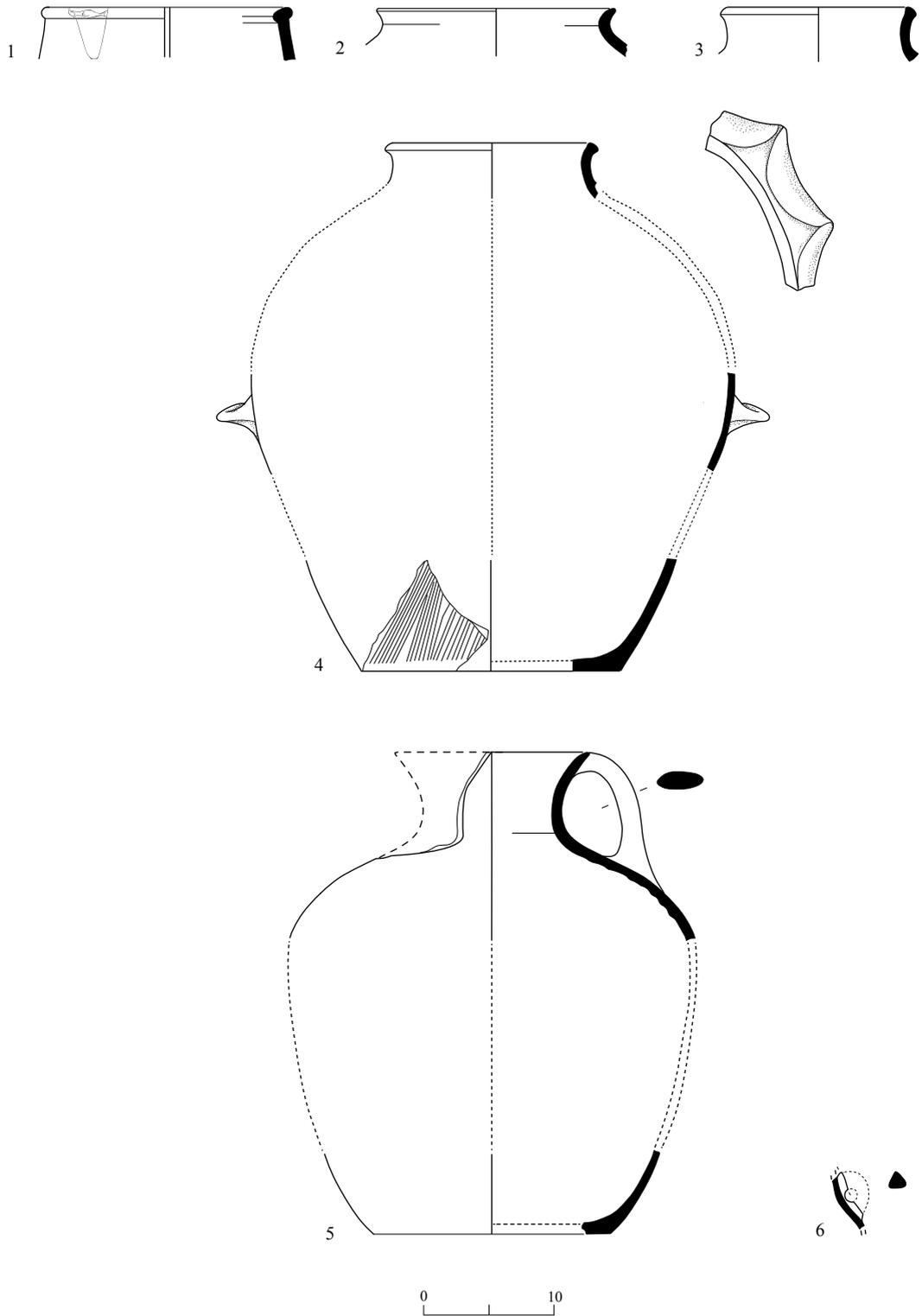


Fig. 9. Unit B, L1000: storage vessels.

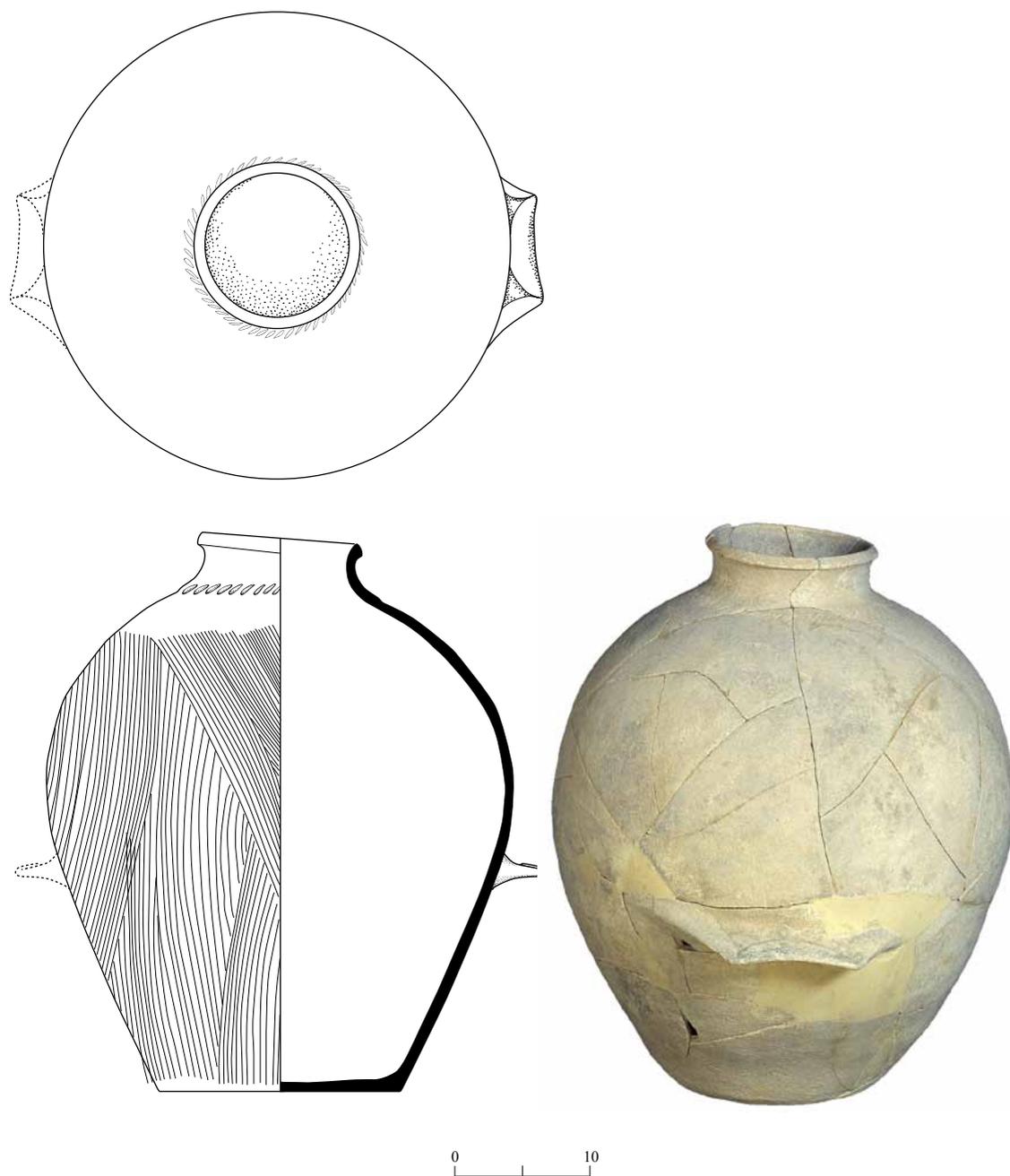


Fig. 10. Unit B: storage vessel (L1000, Reg. No. 10/1, Petrographic Group 1).

Where preserved, the juncture of the neck and the shoulder is often marked with oblique incisions (Figs. 8:10; 10). Two of the jars (Fig. 8:6, 10) have very thin walls and were fired at a high temperature, resulting in a metallic ring (for a discussion of the Intermediate

Bronze Age metallic ware, see Covello-Paran 2008:61; 2009:17). Numerous flat storage jar bases, thumb-indented ledge handles and envelope-folded ledge handles retrieved at the site are similar to those illustrated in Fig. 8:12–15.

Storage Jar with a High Flaring Neck.— This jar (Fig. 8:11) has a narrow neck and a slightly pinched rim. It is probable that it had a globular body and a round base. Parallels are known from ‘Ein el-Ḥilu (Covello-Paran 1999: Fig. 43:1–4) and Naḥal Rimmonim (Covello-Paran 2008: Fig. 5:9).

Jug

A unique vessel at the site is a large jug (Fig. 9:5) with a flaring neck, a simple rounded, tapered rim, a flat loop handle connecting from rim to shoulder and a flat base. This oversized jug is not typical of the domestic repertoire, but is found in mortuary contexts such as the Bet She’an Northern Cemetery (Oren 1973: Figs. 18:4; 22:7). According to the petrographic analysis, the Murḥan jug was fabricated at a workshop in the central Jordan Valley (see Shapiro, this volume).

Amphoriskoi

No preserved profiles of amphoriskoi were retrieved in the current excavation. However, two triangular-sectioned lug handles (Fig. 8:16; 9:6) are evidence for this vessel type in the present assemblage. It is probable they are of the narrow-neck amphoriskos type, similar to the vessels found in Zori’s excavation (Zori 1971: Fig. 2:16; 1977: Fig. 34:17, 21).

Pottery Provenance

A total of eight pottery vessels—six storage and two holemouth jars—were chosen for petrographic analysis (see Shapiro, this volume) to determine their provenance and to increase the Jezreel Valley petrographic database. The results of the study show that the storage vessels were made in workshops from the central Jordan Valley, whereas the two holemouth vessels, used for serving, are from the Jezreel Valley. Although these petrofabric groups are actually both to be found in the immediate vicinity of Murḥan, there is no evidence for on-site pottery production. Zori identified a pottery kiln (L10) at the site (1977:79), but I proposed

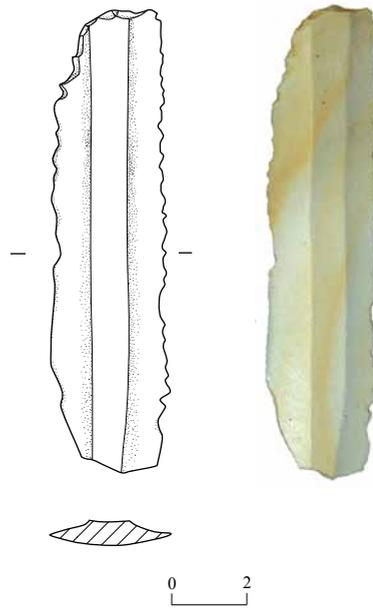


Fig. 11. Canaanite flint sickle blade (Unit B, B4000).

that the feature was actually an open-air cult installation (Covello-Paran 2015).

STONE OBJECTS

Flint Sickle Blade (Fig. 11)

A single, complete flint sickle blade was retrieved from Unit B. The blade has a trapezoidal cross section, lustrous edges, retouching at both ends and single truncation. This blade is long enough to be considered a reaping knife and not a sickle segment. Numerous almost identical blades were collected by Zori at the site (1971: Fig. 1).

Groundstone Assemblage (Figs. 12, 13)

Perforated Stones.— Three circular, perforated basalt objects (diam. 10–14 cm), flattened at both ends were retrieved from the site (Fig. 12:1–3). All three feature biconical holes in the center, indicating that they were drilled bifacially; the surface diameter of the perforations ranges from 3.5 to 4.5 cm. These stones, often termed ‘rings,’ were most

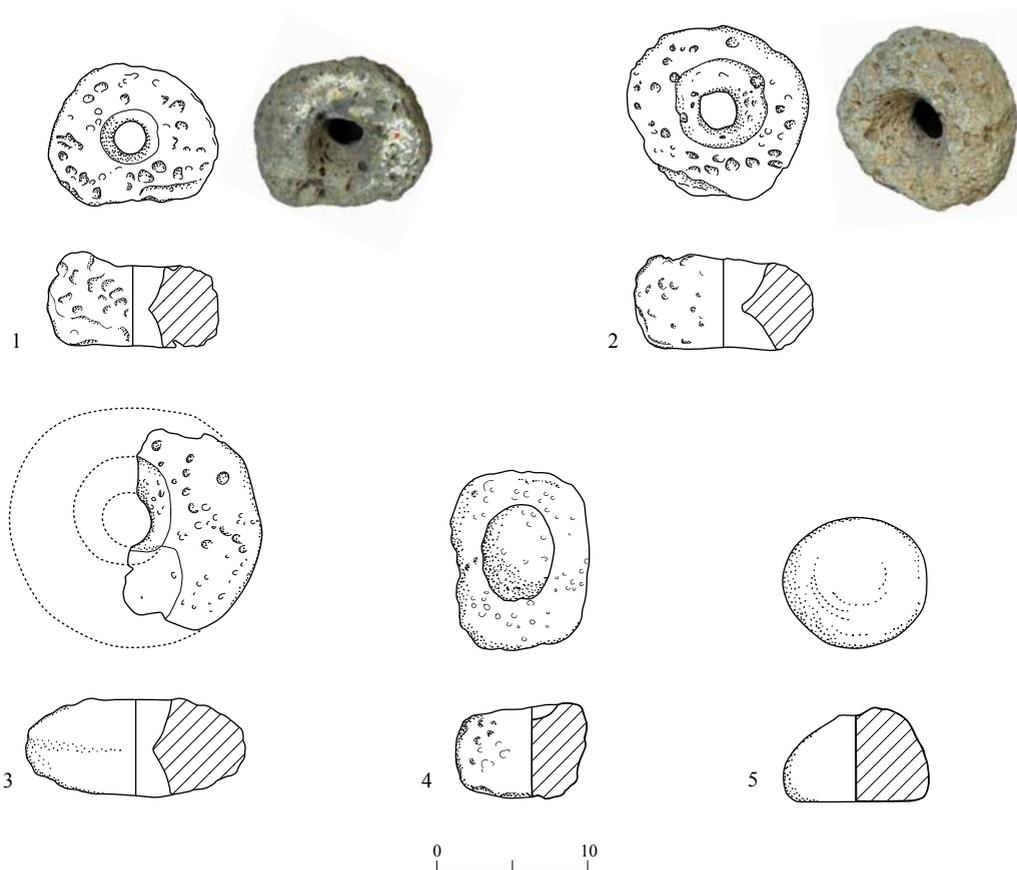


Fig. 12. Groundstones.

No.	Type	Locus	Reg. No.
1	Perforated stone	300	3019
2	Perforated stone	300	3018
3	Perforated stone	300	3001
4	Cupmark	300	3004
5	Rubbing stone	200	2001

likely weights; their function, however, is still enigmatic. Previously documented at Murḥan (Zori 1971: Fig. 7a), their frequent presence is noted at contemporaneous sites such as ‘Ein el-Ḥilu (Covello-Paran 1999: Fig. 47:14), Sha‘ar Ha-Golan (Eisenberg 2012: Fig. 49) and Ḥ. Qishron (Smithline 2002: Fig. 18:4).

Cupmark.— A rectangular vesicular basalt stone (Fig. 12:4) has a shallow, oval-shaped hewn depression in the center.

Rubbing Stone.— A dome-shaped, hand-held rubbing stone (Fig. 12:5) was probably used for grinding small quantities of grains or pulses.

Grinding Stones.— In keeping with Zori’s mention of numerous grinding stones that came to light at Murḥan, a number of upper and lower grinding stones were found in and around our excavation. Four upper grinding stones—three fragmentary (Fig. 13:1–3) and one complete (Fig. 13:4)—were retrieved. These elliptical

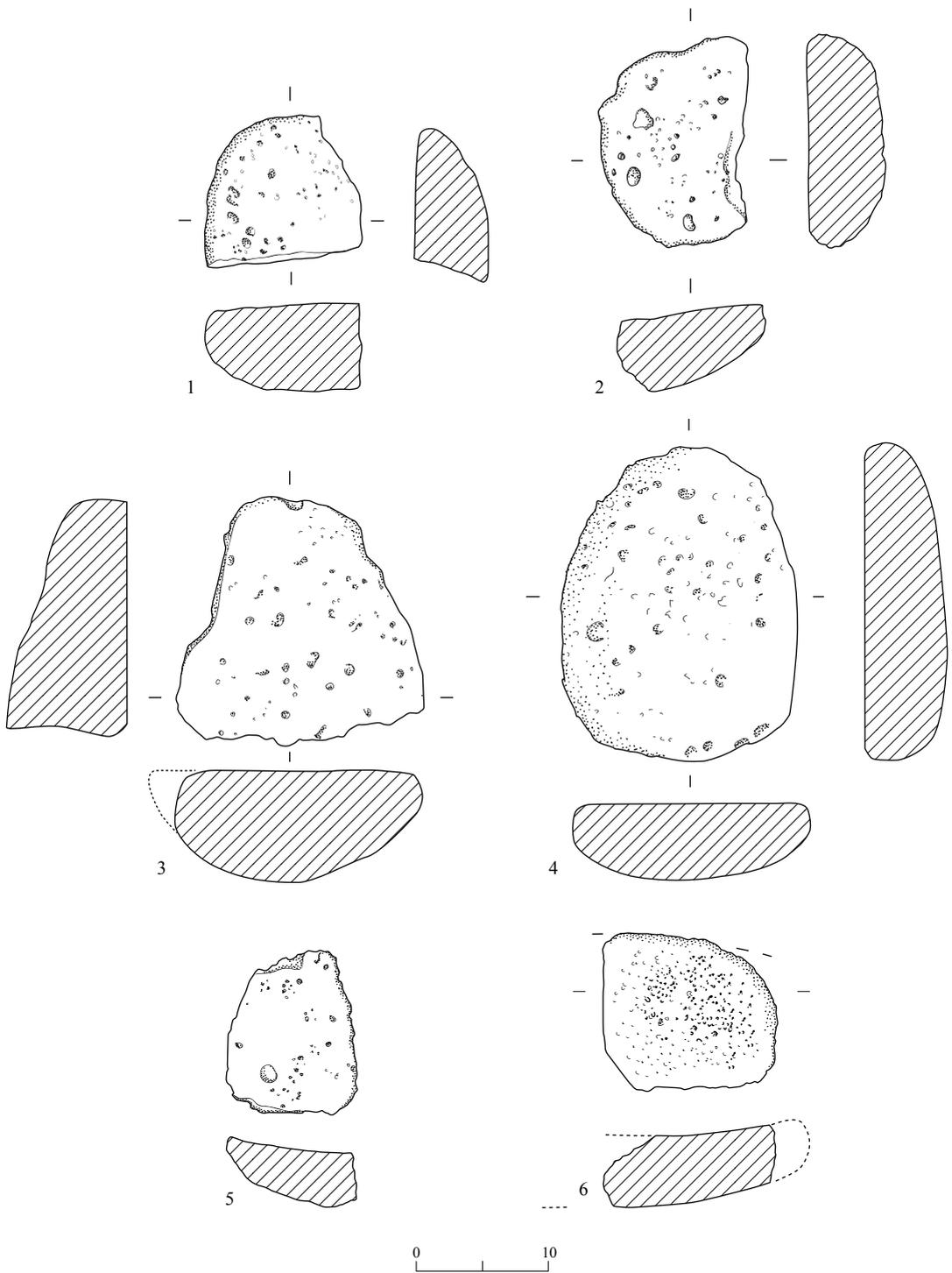


Fig. 13. Groundstones.

No.	Type	Locus	Reg. No.
1	Upper grinding stone	300	3005
2	Upper grinding stone	300	3006
3	Upper grinding stone	300	3023

No.	Type	Locus	Reg. No.
4	Upper grinding stone	314	3020
5	Lower grinding stone	300	3000
6	Lower grinding stone	300	3012



Fig. 14. Basalt mortar in the Tel Yosef cemetery.



Fig. 15. Limestone mortar in the Tel Yosef cemetery.

stones are vesicular basalt and have a plano-convex section. The complete stone exhibits a well-worn work surface resulting from extensive use.

This type of grinding stone was used in two ways: sometimes it served as an upper stone together with a massive lower stone, and at other times it was embedded in the floor for use as a lower grinding stone. The pairing of a large, elliptical upper grinding stone with a large, basin-like lower grinding slab is known from Zori's excavations at the site (Zori 1971: Fig. 7b) and at 'Ein el-Ḥilu (Covello-Paran 1999: Fig. 29). At 'Ein el-Ḥilu, the latter usage is also documented, with the stones serving as lower grinding stones paired with handheld rubbing stones (Covello-Paran 1999: Fig. 32, left). The characteristic elliptical shape of this grinding stone also has parallels at Sha'ar Ha-Golan (Eisenberg 2012: Fig. 51:3) and H. Qishron (Smithline 2002: Fig. 18:11, 12). In the Jezreel Valley (for example at 'Ein el-Ḥilu), this shape does not appear to continue into Middle Bronze Age contexts.

Two small stone fragments (Fig. 13:5, 6) of lower grinding stones or slabs were also retrieved from the site. Their small size does not permit the identification of their subtype, yet it is probable that they are not the massive grinding basin type discussed above.

Mortars.— Although no stone mortars were found in the current excavation, they are ubiquitous at Murḥan, and therefore deserve special mention among the ground stones. They were collected from the fields by Kibbutz members over many years, and are to be seen in the yards and gardens of Kibbutz Tel Yosef and next to graves in the local cemetery (Figs. 14, 15), and on display at the Beit Shturman Museum in Kibbutz 'En Ḥarod. Such mortars, are well-known from contemporaneous sites, such as 'Ein el-Ḥilu (Covello-Paran 1999: 48:4), Sha'ar Ha-Golan (Eisenberg 2012:53, Figs. 26; 39; 51:4; see also discussion pp. 60–63) and H. Qishron (Smithline 2002: Fig. 18:9, 10). At 'Ein el-Ḥilu, each domestic unit had at least one mortar, in addition to a concentration of mortars adjacent to a stone paved area used for processing agricultural produce. In light of the large numbers of these mortars in evidence at Kibbutz Tel Yosef, it is probable that a similar distribution pattern was present at Murḥan.

DISCUSSION

The current excavations have exposed sparse, poorly preserved archaeological features on the outskirts of the large Intermediate Bronze Age settlement site of Murḥan. These finds seem to be connected to the various activities usually

conducted on the periphery of settlements. It is likely that the stone layer in Sq A had a function similar to that of stone surfaces found *in situ* on the edge of the contemporaneous sites of ‘En Ha-More (Covello-Paran 2011a) and ‘Ein el-Ḥilu (Covello-Paran 2009). The *in situ* accumulation above the smoothed bedrock surfaces in Sq B suggests that the inhabitants of Murḥan exploited the bedrock outcrops at the southern boundaries of the site, as well.

The partial documentation of the relatively well-preserved architectural remains of Unit B, although not excavated, provides additional evidence of multi-room units dispersed over a large area at Murḥan. The plan of Unit B resembles that of Unit A, excavated by Zori in 1954 (Zori 1977:4–11), and both are similar in construction method and layout to the architecture of other Intermediate Bronze Age settlements in the Jezreel and Jordan Valleys. Moreover, on the hill and slopes of Giv‘at Qumi are traces of scattered architectural remains, evidence of multi-room units located at some distance from one another, suggesting separate farmsteads.⁵

The ceramic repertoire of domestic utilitarian types bears a significant resemblance to the assemblages from extensively excavated sites such as ‘Ein el-Ḥilu in the Jezreel Valley and Sha‘ar Ha-Golan in the Jordan Valley. Petrographic analysis indicates that the storage jars were made in workshops in the central Jordan Valley, and the holmouth vessels, in the Jezreel Valley.

The large number of basalt grinding and crushing tools, including the many mortars, suggests an agriculture-based economy.

CONCLUSION

The ancient site of Murḥan is situated in the Ḥarod Valley, a narrow corridor connecting the Jezreel Valley on the west and the central Jordan Valley on the east (see Fig. 1). The valley is bordered by the Gilbo‘a ridge in the south and the Issachar Heights in the north. Where these ridges connect with the valley floor are numerous springs that no doubt gave rise to the new settlements of the Intermediate Bronze Age. Murḥan, extending over 10 hectares, is the largest of the single-period sites established along the edges of the Ḥarod Valley. Small contemporaneous settlements, c. 0.5 hectares in size, within a distance of 7 km from our site, have been surveyed at Kefar Yeḥezq‘el (Zori 1977: Site 106; 69, 72) and Gid‘ona (Zori 1977: Site 38; 24) and excavated at Tel Yosef (Tell esh-Sheikh Ḥasan) (Covello-Paran 2001:155, Fig. 16; Zori 1971:19) and at ‘En Yizra‘el (Smithline 2017).

The Intermediate Bronze Age settlement sites are distributed along the Ḥarod Valley margins, while their respective rock hewn burial grounds are located above, in the limestone ridges overlooking the habitation sites, e.g., on Mt. Barqan (Ḥefzi-Ba) (Zori 1977: Site 44; 33). This pattern of settlements dispersed along the valley margins is paralleled in the Jezreel Valley. Together with the closely related material culture of the two regions, it firmly establishes the inclusion of Murḥan and other sites in the Ḥarod Valley into the cultural milieu of the Jezreel Valley during the latter part of the third millennium BCE.

NOTES

¹ The excavation (IAA No. A-5524), conducted on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority, was directed by the author, with the assistance of Uri Lavan (administration), Howard Smithline (field photography), Anastasia Shapiro (GPS,

petrography), Hagit Tahan-Rosen (drawing of finds) and Natalia Zak (plans).

² According to Nehemia Zori’s item, “Murḥan” in Me-Hayenu, the Kibbutz Tel Yosef newsletter of 14.12.1948.

³ The author has proposed that this circular architectural feature is an open air cultic installation (Covello-Paran 2015).

⁴ Surface artifacts retrieved beyond the excavated squares' boundaries were registered as L300.

⁵ Extensive measuring of the site and plotting of these units was undertaken by the author with the assistance of Yaaqov Harel and Anastasia Shapiro (GPS). The results are being prepared for publication.

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