

## REMAINS OF THE LATE ROMAN TO LATE OTTOMAN PERIODS AT MISKA IN THE SOUTHERN SHARON

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### INTRODUCTION

In April 2008, a trial excavation was carried out in the vicinity of the former Arab village of Miska (Miskeh; Fig. 1; map ref. 192781–3090/680466–70), prior to the construction of a new road (Road 551).<sup>1</sup> An examination of test trenches prior to the excavation<sup>2</sup> revealed architectural remains under the ruins of the Arab village. As it was determined that the road

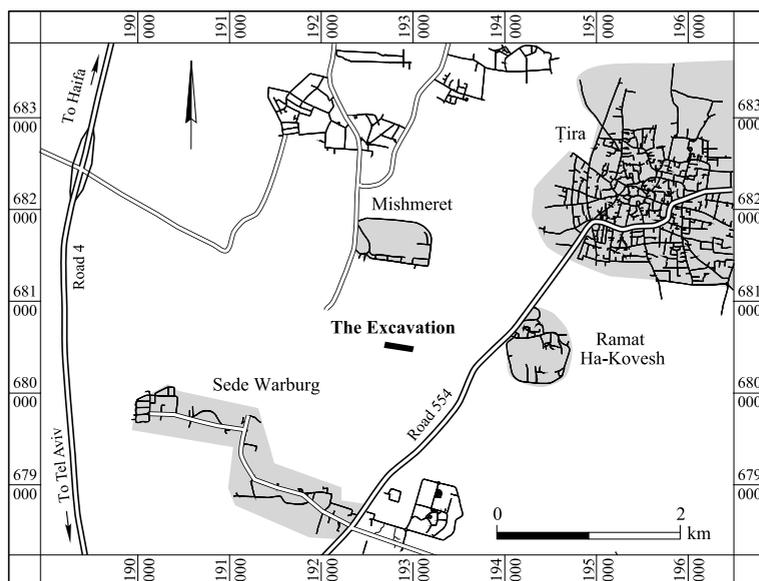


Fig. 1. Location map.

<sup>1</sup> The excavation (Permit No. A-5398), on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority, was directed by the author. The author wishes to thank Uzi 'Ad (area supervision), Yosef Laban (administration), Avi Hajian and Tania Kornfeld (surveying), Einav Drimer (drafting), Elena Ilana Delerzon (location map) and Assaf Peretz (field photography).

<sup>2</sup> The trench examination and the preparation of the excavation area were carried out by Royce Assis.

construction would not compromise the archaeological layers, the aim of the excavation focused on assessing the extent of the site and its chronology. Ten squares were excavated in four areas (A–D): Area A comprising five squares, and Areas B–D, located along a north–south transect of the planned route of the road, to the east of Area A (Plan 1).

### *The Site and Its History*

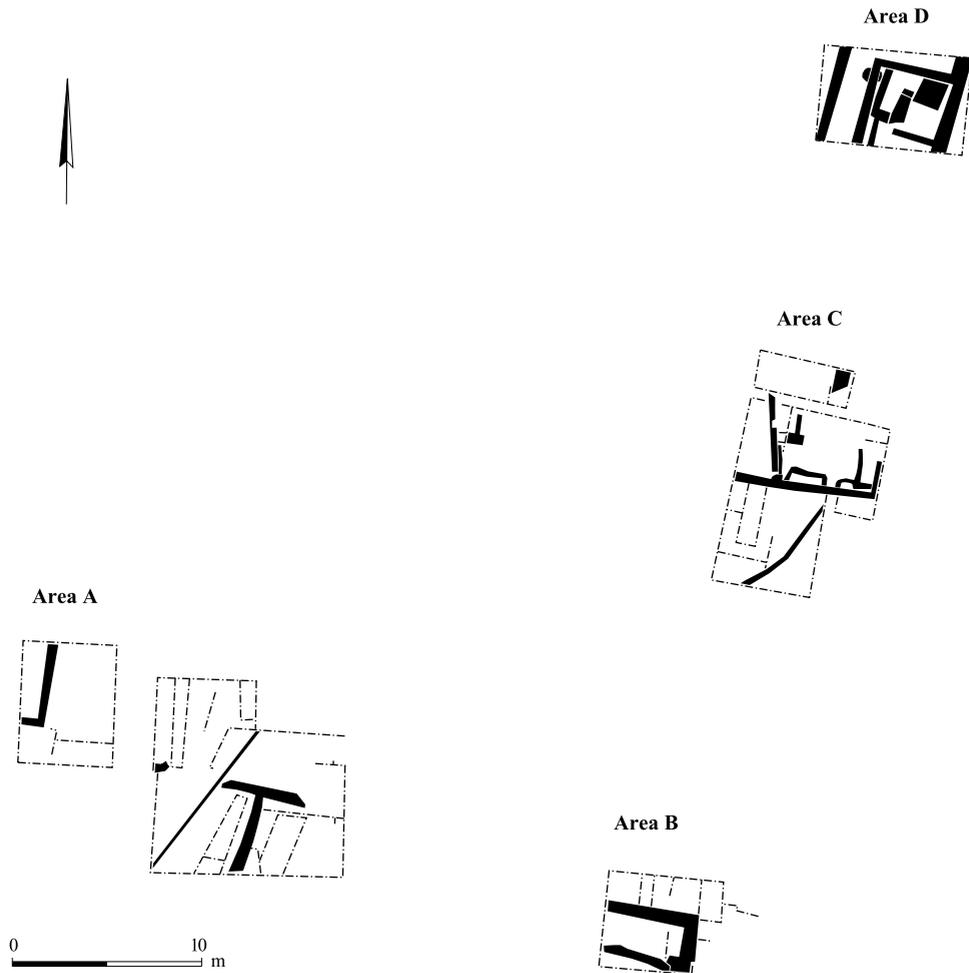
No previous archaeological excavations were conducted at the site. However, the site was mentioned in relation to the production of glass and ceramics during the Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods. In a detailed study of the rural surroundings of Apollonia (Roll and Ayalon 1989), it was noted that the site was located near the ancient east–west road connecting the coastal site of Apollonia with Samaria-Sebaste. The medieval Arab geographer Yâqût mentioned Miska as a village that was known for its cultivation of fruit, especially a particular variety of apple—misk (Khalidi 1992:558), from which the name of the historical village might have derived.

In the 1800s, the village of Miska was reconnoitered by Guérin (1875:414), who estimated its population at around 300 and described it as a place of fig-tree gardens and palms. He also noted the presence of Byzantine architectural elements in the local guesthouse: “In the court of the medhafeh I saw a column and a marble chapter, apparently of Byzantine work” (for the English translation, see Conder and Kitchener 1882:135). In the map of the Survey of Western Palestine, the village was depicted as a settlement of comparable size to that of the nearby villages of Kafr Saba and eṭ-Ṭira (Conder and Kitchener 1882: Sheet X), and was described as including two clusters of mud houses divided by a road (Conder and Kitchener 1882:135).

During the Ottoman period, the south Sharon region had a low population density and few permanent settlements—it was mostly occupied by Bedouins and peasants (see Grossman 1994:148–152; 2004:160–165, 204–205), and much of the region was used for pasture (Hütteroth and Abdulfattah 1977:139–140). In 1922, Miska was noted as the only permanent Arab village in the south Sharon (Grossman 2004:163). By 1931, the village was settled by 635 Muslim residents, occupying 123 houses (Vilnay 1977:4451).

## THE EXCAVATION

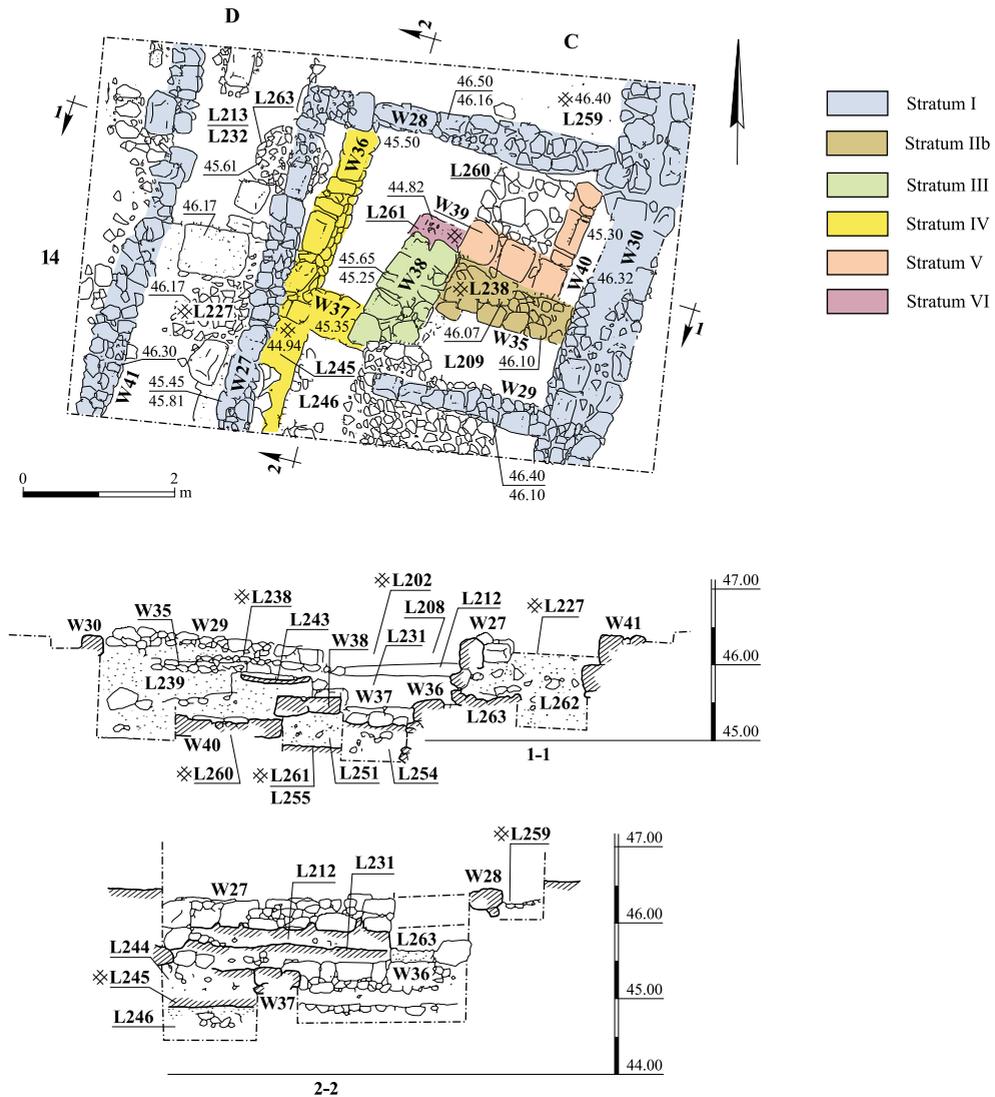
The excavation revealed six strata that were variably distributed in the four excavation areas (Plan 1). These include strata dated to the late Byzantine (Stratum V), Early Islamic (Stratum IV), early Ottoman (Stratum II) and late Ottoman (Stratum I) periods. The longest stratigraphic sequence (Strata VI–I) was revealed in Area D, while only two of the strata (IV, II) were present in all areas. The dates of two of the strata (VI, III) could not be determined. In Area C, two construction phases of the early Ottoman period were identified (Strata IIb and IIa). As the excavation areas were not contiguous, assessing the relationship between features of the same stratum in different areas was difficult and relied on information gleaned from the stratigraphy, the dating of small finds and the orientation of walls.



Plan 1. The excavation areas.

In Area A, two main features were revealed: a refuse pit with three distinct layers of accumulation, containing finds of the Late Roman–Byzantine periods (Sqs J/6–7, I6), and a massive deposit of the Early Islamic period (Sqs I–H/5), both of which may have been associated with nearby industries for the manufacture of glass and/or ceramics. Both the refuse pit and the adjacent industrial deposit were overlain by Ottoman remains.

Area B (Sqs D/4–5) contained architectural remains of the Early Islamic period found below an Ottoman stratum. Area C (Sqs D/9–11, C/9–10) yielded Byzantine and Early Islamic architectural remains underlying Ottoman strata. In Area D (Sqs D–C/14), six strata were exposed, ranging from the late Byzantine to the late Ottoman period. A description of each of the strata is presented below, arranged from the earliest to the latest. The refuse pit (Area A) will be presented separately.



Plan 2. Area D, plan and sections.

## Stratum VI

### Area D (Plan 2)

The earliest stratum was exposed in a small probe in Area D, where the only recognized architectural feature was a white plaster floor (L261; 44.80 m asl; thickness 1.5 cm), below which was the virgin *hamra* soil (44.93 m asl). The exposure of this floor in the deepest part of Sq C14 was limited, as it continued below architectural remains (W40, W39 and L260) that were not dismantled. No dateable material was recovered.

## Stratum V

### *Area C* (Plan 3)

A leveled surface (L229, L257; Sq D9) made of crushed plaster sheets, which was most likely part of a demolished installation, was exposed in two sections (43.26 m asl). This surface covered the entire excavated part of Sq D9, and was overlain evenly—up to an elevation of 43.40 m asl—by a black layer (L219, L241). Since both the surface and the black layer above it, as well as the underlying *hamra* soil (L235), contained ceramics of the Byzantine period (see Vincenz, this volume: Fig. 1), it is most likely that the plastered installation was originally used and demolished at this time.

### *Area D* (Plan 2)

Part of a structure, composed of two walls forming a corner (W39 and W40), was uncovered. The walls were constructed of large hewn limestones, abutted by a pavement (L260) of dressed limestone slabs. Wall 40 and Floor 260 probably extend to the north, beyond the excavated area. In the west, Floor 260 and W39 end in a clean straight line. It appears that a later intrusion, related to the installation of an outdoor baking stove in Stratum II (L243; Plan 2: Section 1–1), cut through the Stratum V remains, as well as through Stratum III W38 and the underlying Stratum VI floor (L261).

The date of Stratum V in Area D is difficult to ascertain due to the limited exposure and the lack of dateable material. However, since the subsequent stratum in the sequence of Area D comprises Early Islamic remains (Stratum IV, see below), it is possible to suggest a late Byzantine date for Stratum V. This is also indicated by the dating and stratigraphic position of Stratum V in Area C (Plan 3)—the nearest to Area D—where the late Byzantine remains of Stratum V are directly overlain by the Early Islamic remains of Stratum IV.

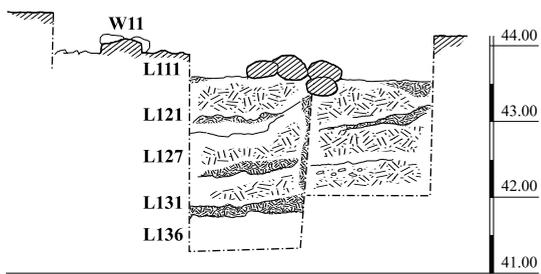
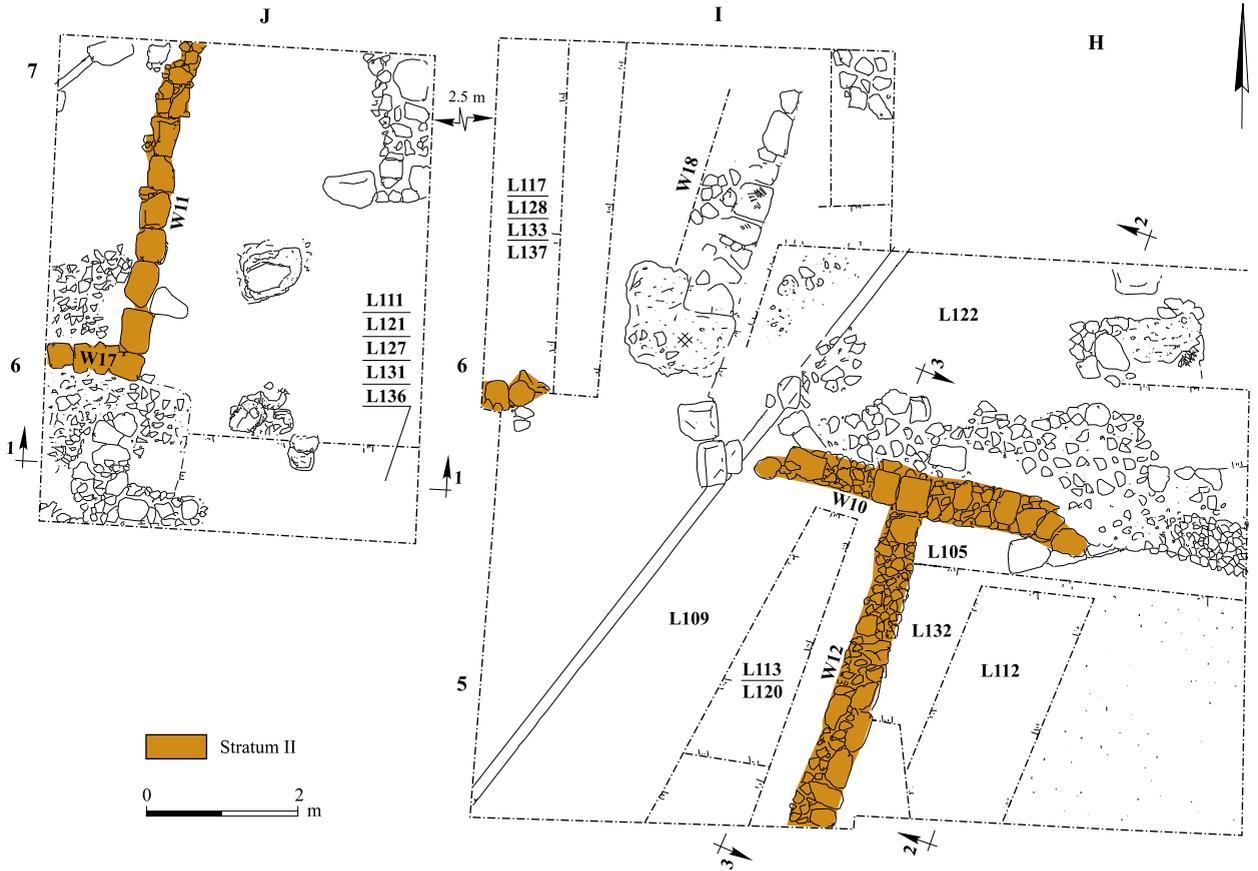
## Stratum IV

### *Area A* (Plan 4)

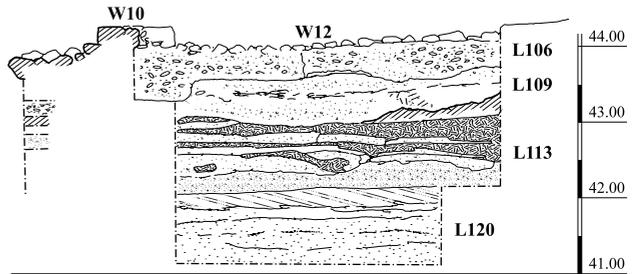
A massive accumulation of two ash layers was revealed in Sqs H–I/5: a 1 m thick black layer (L112, L113; c. 1 m thick) covered by a yellowish red layer (L132, L105, L109; 0.5 m thick; Plan 4: Sections 2–2, 3–3). Below this accumulation was a deep virgin layer of sand (L120; for a more detailed discussion, see Ackermann, this volume). Judging from the inclination of the black burned layer (Plan 4: Section 3–3) sloping upward to the east and south, it seems that the accumulation continues for another few meters in these directions and was exposed only in its northwestern part.

All loci associated with these accumulations contained glass-production waste (see Gorin-Rosen, this volume: Fig. 10:4, 5) and were dated by ceramic material (see Vincenz, this volume: Figs. 2:2; 3:2, 4) to the Early Islamic period.

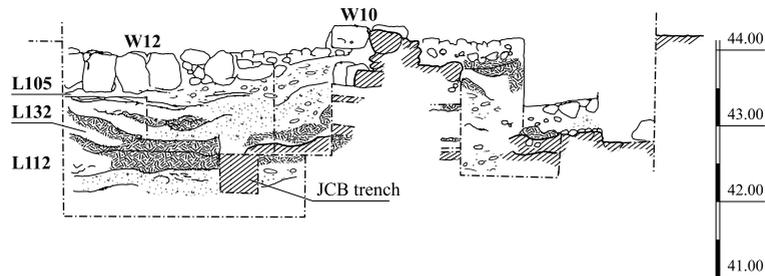




1-1



2-2



3-3

Plan 4. Area A, plan and sections.



Plan 5. Area B, plan and sections.

*Area B (Plan 5)*

Two walls (W15, W16) forming the corner of a structure were uncovered. Both walls were constructed of large and medium-sized limestones, dressed on their outer face. An associated floor (L115; 43.57 m asl) was paved with undressed limestone slabs and pebbles. It was damaged by two modern agricultural pits (L134, L135). The base of W15 was found within a foundation trench (L130), containing ceramic sherds of the late Byzantine and Early Islamic periods (see Vincenz, this volume: Fig. 3:3).

*Area C (Plan 3)*

A pebble-constructed floor (L215; Sq D9) of the Early Islamic period (see Vincenz, this volume: Figs. 2:1, 14; 3:6) was uncovered (44.02 m asl). It was bordered on the southeast by W34, constructed of large and medium-sized unhewn limestones. The western part of the floor is disturbed by an irregularly-shaped intrusion (L211; 1 × 2 m) that penetrates Floor 215 and the upper part of an underlying dark layer (L219) of Stratum V.

Most of the pottery from L211 dates from the Early Islamic period (see Vincenz, this volume: Fig. 2:4, 7, 8, 10, 13). Both L211 and L215 are sealed by a c. 0.5 m thick fill (L207; Plan 3: Sections 1–1, 2–2), containing mostly Early Islamic pottery (see Vincenz, this volume: Fig. 2:9, 12, 14), separating them from Stratum II.

Skeletal remains of an Arabian, single-humped camel (*Camelus dromedarius*)<sup>3</sup> were found in both L211 and L215. A double-stamped jar handle, possibly originating from the Umayyad pottery kilns of Nebi Samwil (see Amitai-Preiss, this volume), was found in association with the camel remains in L215. These unique finds may indicate the past role of the settlement at Miska in long-distance trade.

#### *Area D (Plan 2)*

An Early Islamic stratum was identified in Sqs C–D/14, represented by fragmentary remains of a rectangular building, including two walls (W36, W37) forming a corner. A floor (L245; 44.94 m asl) of beaten earth and gravel is adjacent to W37 on the south. Two fills, one above Floor 245 (L244; Plan 2: Section 2–2) and another below it (L246), date from the Early Islamic period (see Vincenz, this volume: Fig. 2:11). No additional parts of the building were exposed as the remains of the overlying strata were not dismantled.

### **Stratum III**

#### *Area D (Plan 2)*

A small northeast–southwest wall segment (W38) constructed of large dressed limestones was exposed. The wall may have been truncated by the deep intrusion of the outdoor baking stove (L243), installed during the occupation of Stratum II or I. The date of the stratum could not be established because of this intrusion and the very limited exposure of W38.

### **Stratum II**

Architectural remains of this stratum were revealed in all excavated areas.

#### *Areas A and B (Plans 4, 5)*

Segments of long straight walls (W10–13, W17) in a bad state of preservation were revealed just below the ground surface in Sqs J/6–7 and H–I/5–6 of Area A (Plan 4), and Sq D4 of Area B (Plan 5). All of these walls are constructed of large to medium-sized unhewn limestones and have only one preserved course. In each of two pairs of these walls in Area A (W11, W17 in Sqs J/6–7 and W10, W12 in Sqs H–I/5–6), the walls meet at a 90° angle. No adjoining floors or other architectural elements were exposed in association with these walls.

<sup>3</sup> The zooarchaeological report was prepared by Moshe Sade (not included).

As all the above-mentioned walls, including the isolated W13 in Area B, share the same orientation, height (44.30–44.40 m asl), structure and state of preservation, they may be interrelated in some way, possibly part of a single structure. In both Areas A and B, these walls are separated from the underlying Early Islamic layer (Stratum IV) by an accumulation, 0.4–0.7 m thick (Plan 4: Sections 1–1 [L111], 2–2 [L106]; Plan 5: Section 2–2 [L108]). This is also the case in Areas C and D (see below), where the stratigraphic sequence is longer and the features of Stratum II occur below the walls of Stratum I, rather than near the surface (Plan 2). There is a clear match in the orientation of the Stratum II walls of Areas A and B and those of Areas C and D.

#### *Area C (Plan 3)*

In Sqs C–D/10 and D11, remains of a large, leveled floor, belonging to an early phase of occupation (L221; Stratum IIb; 44.40 m asl) and made of medium-sized pebbles, were revealed. It appears to have been enclosed by long walls, two of which (W20, W33) were partially uncovered. In a later phase of use of this space (Stratum IIa), several short walls (W22, W24, W25, W31 and W32) were added. These walls might be the remains of installations built over the floor of a courtyard. The entire complex was damaged by modern agricultural pits.

Gaza Ware vessels (see Vincenz, this volume: Fig. 4:6, 9; 11) were found in Sq D11 (L216; Plan 3: Section 1–1), in an accumulation covering Floor 221 and separating it from a Stratum I floor (L223), and in an adjacent accumulation (L206; Plan 3: Section 1–1) covering the same floor in Sqs C–D/10 (see Vincenz, this volume: Fig. 4:7, 10).

#### *Area D (Plan 2)*

In squares C–D/14, the same kind of pebble-made floor (L238; Plan 2: Section 1–1) as the one in Stratum IIb of Area C (L221) was uncovered in association with a wall (W35). Floor 238 extends to the east, beyond W35, for another 0.5 m, where it is interrupted by a dark burned layer (L212, L231, L239; Plan 2: Sections 1–1, 2–2), containing Gaza Ware vessels—dated to the early Ottoman period, a fragment of a smoking pipe (see Vincenz, this volume: Fig. 5:3) and an outdoor baking stove (L243; Plan 2: Section 1–1).

A round cesspit (L263) made of a metal barrel filled with medium-sized limestones was discovered at a depth of 45.60 m asl, below Stratum I W27. The cesspit is associated with a fill (L232) of the early Ottoman period (see Vincenz, this volume: Fig. 4:2, 5, 8).

### **Stratum I**

The ruins of the Arab village of Miska were scattered on the surface in Area D, surrounding this topographically elevated part of the site (46.53 m asl). Additional remains of the late Ottoman period, which were badly preserved, were found in Area C.

### *Area D (Plan 2)*

In Sqs C–D/14, the remains of a rectangular building were uncovered, of which a single square room was fully exposed. All the walls (W27, W28, W29, W30 and W41) of this structure were constructed of a combination of large to small-sized, partially dressed limestones. Three of the walls (W27, W30 and W41) were only partially uncovered: Walls 30 and 41 continued to the north and south, and W27 continued to the south, beyond the excavated area. Wall 30 is wider (0.8 m) than the rest of the walls (0.5 m).

The room enclosed by W27, W28, W29 and W30 was entered from the south. It was associated with a poorly preserved white plaster floor (L202; Plan 2: Section 1–1). Fragments of Marseille roof tiles were found on Floor 202 (46.23 m asl). Similar remains of a white plaster floor (L259; 46.41 m asl) were visible outside the room, north of W28 and west of W30, and in the 1.5 m wide corridor between W41 and W27 (L227; 46.17 m asl).

### *Area C (Plan 3)*

Architectural remains, including the segments of a wall (W23) with associated patches of a white plaster floor (L201, L223), in a bad state of preservation, were revealed in Sqs D/10–11. Extremely fragmented remains of a *tabun* (L222) were found in Sq D11.

### *The Refuse Pit in Area A (Plan 4)*

In Sqs I–J/6, a refuse pit containing three depositional layers was excavated. The original shape of the pit could not be ascertained in the excavation. Two trenches were excavated within the pit: one in Sq I6 (L117, L128, L133, L137; Fig. 2) and another in Sq J6 (L121, L127, L131, L136; Plan 4: Section 1–1). The pit's depth reaches more than 2 m (41.67 m asl). Both trenches reveal analogous sequences of deposition. Each layer, excavated separately, was sealed by a thin ash deposit.

The pit was originally dug into the virgin sand layer (L136, L137), exposed in both trenches below a depth of 41.60 m asl. The lowest layer in both trenches (0.5 m thick; L131, L133) was composed of a reddish brown soil with pottery and glass fragments dated to the fourth–fifth centuries CE (for a comprehensive discussion of the pottery, see Vincenz, this volume; and for the glass finds, see Gorin-Rosen, this volume).

The subsequent and thickest layer (L127, L128) was light brown and sandwiched between the thin gray ash deposits at its bottom (42.33 m asl) and top (43.26 m asl). It contained a great amount of pottery, including numerous complete bag-shaped storage jars and lamps (see Vincenz, this volume: Figs. 9; 11) and glass fragments (see Gorin-Rosen, this volume), mainly from the fourth–fifth centuries CE.

The uppermost, dark brown layer (L117, L121) also contained a large amount of complete ceramic vessels and glass fragments. But, unlike the lower layers, some ceramic sherds of a late Byzantine–Early Islamic date were also found (see Vincenz, this volume: Figs. 7; 8).



Fig. 2. Section of the refuse pit with three depositional layers (Loci 117, 128, 133) in Sq I6, looking west.

Numerous Samaritan oil lamps (see Vincenz, this volume: Figs. 11:8–12; 12) together with three coins (see Kool, this volume) were retrieved from different layers (Loci 121, 127, 131) of the refuse pit, also pointing to a date in the fourth–fifth centuries CE.

The sequence was covered by an extremely disturbed fill (L111). No deposits of the refuse pit were exposed east of W18; and, hence, this wall was possibly its eastern limit. The estimated size of the pit is more than 5 sq m.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The excavation exposed an occupation sequence from the Late Roman, Byzantine and Early Islamic periods at the site of Miska. The site may have been abandoned at some time in the mid-tenth century CE and resettled during the early Ottoman period, as no pottery from the time span between the Early Islamic and Ottoman periods was discovered (see Vincenz, this volume).

Accumulations and finds that could be related to local large-scale glass production were unearthed in all of the contexts of the Late Roman, Byzantine and Early Islamic periods (see Gorin-Rosen, this volume). The large refuse pit in Area A, containing a considerable amount of glass shards and other debris from a glass furnace (see Gorin-Rosen, this

volume), indicates intensive use during those periods. A large accumulation with two thick ashy layers found in Stratum IV of Area A (see Ackermann, this volume), adjacent to the refuse pit, also supports the presence of a nearby furnace.

Previous research suggests that glass production was an important activity in the region of Miska, likely related to the local availability of sand and fuel. Glass production, evidenced by the finding of industrial debris, was recorded at nearby sites of the Late Roman–Early Islamic periods, such as Kefar Sava (Ayalon 1998:116), Khirbat Sabiya (Ayalon 1979) and about a dozen more examples (Roll and Ayalon 1989:218).

Roll and Ayalon (1989:222–230), in their study of the economic connections between the southern Sharon and Apollonia, pointed out that most of the roads crossing this region from west to east were constructed during the Late Roman period. The location of Miska is likely to have been advantageous as a station in the Roman road system. This system was subsequently greatly expanded during the Byzantine period, as a result of Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and was eventually inherited by the Muslim authorities of the region. The existence of a good road system connecting the coastal and the inland settlements would have been an important prerequisite for the local development of a glass industry, as for the transportation of other goods.

The possibility that the ancient settlement at Miska was a site of industrial activity and trade is further reinforced by the finding of large quantities of complete bag-shaped storage jars, retrieved from the refuse pit, and a double-stamped handle of a jar, probably manufactured at Nebi Samwil (see Amitai-Preiss, this volume)—found together with several camel bones.

Architectural remains ascribed to the early Ottoman period (Stratum II) occurred in all excavation areas. For a number of reasons, these remains may represent a single complex. All Stratum II walls had an identical orientation and were revealed in the same elevation (44.30–44.40 m asl), except in the topographically elevated Area D. All walls were made of unhewn limestones, some found in association with similarly made pebble floorings.

Previous research does not report on an early Ottoman settlement at Miska (Hütteroth and Abdulfattah 1977; Grossman 1994; 2004). Yet, the clear association of this stratum with Gaza Ware vessels indicates a continuous habitation for some time during the two and a half centuries of the early Ottoman period.

Architectural remains of the late phase of Ottoman occupation (Stratum I) is of a completely different orientation and nature. Its late Ottoman date is indicated mainly by the presence of Marseille roof tiles above the floors of this phase, in contrast to their absence below these floors.

Despite the limited extent of the excavation, a long and detailed stratigraphic sequence was documented, providing new information on the importance of a settlement that was hitherto little known and a foundation for future studies of the site and its surroundings.

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