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The Fortifications of Tel Burna: A Reappraisal after Twelve Seasons of Excavations (2010–2022)

Aharon Tavger, Chris McKinny, Deborah Cassuto, Jane Gaastra, Steven Ortiz and Itzhaq Shai[1]

Tel Burna's prominent summit, encompassed by a 70 × 70 m casemate fortification, has attracted attention since at least the nineteenth century CE. An analysis of the archaeological data collected during ongoing excavations at the tell indicates that these fortifications were built in the late tenth or early ninth century BCE. The fortification of this Judahite stronghold, located on the border with Philistia, remained in use for the next 200 years. Recently, evidence has come to light of a massive undertaking to reinforce and strengthen the western side of the casemate wall in the late eighth century BCE. The authors identify these activities as part of the preparations made to defend the city from Sennacherib's campaign in the region. The site was subsequently re-inhabited, but the fortifications seem to have gone out of use during the last stage of the occupation at the end of the Iron Age.

Keywords: Tel Burna, Shephelah, Kingdom of Judah, Iron Age, Casemate fortifications, glacis, Sennacherib campaign.

Introduction

Tel Burna is in the Judean Shephelah on the northern bank of Naḥal Guvrin, slightly north of Lakhish (Fig. 1). Archaeological surveys of the site (Uziel and Shai 2010; Shai and Uziel 2014) and a long-term excavation project (McKinny et al. 2020) have revealed a multi-period site that has been inhabited during the Bronze and Iron Ages, covering a total area of 16 hectares (160 dunam). The two main periods of occupation exposed at the site were the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age II. During the former period, the site was a Canaanite city, of

[1] Dr. Aharon Tavger, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Ariel University; Dr. Chris McKinny, Gesher Media; Dr. Deborah Cassuto, Bar-Ilan University and W.F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research; Dr. Jane S. Gaastra, Durham University; Prof. Steven M. Ortiz, Lipscomb University; Prof. Itzhaq Shai, Ariel University. This study was funded by the Israel Science Foundation Grants No. 257/19 (I.S.).

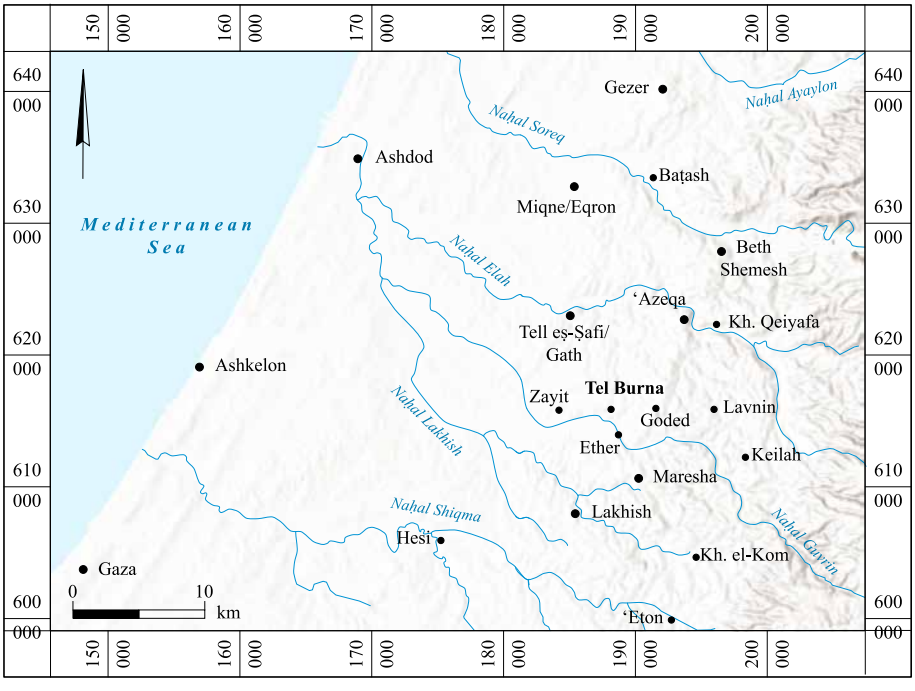

Fig. 1. Map of the southern Shephelah and coastal plain, showing the location of Tel Burna and neighboring sites (drafting: J. Rosenberg).

which some of its cultic activities have been unearthed on its western side (Shai, McKinny and Uziel 2015; Sharp, McKinny and Shai 2015; Shai, Tavger and McKinny 2020; Locatell, McKinny and Shai 2022). During the latter period, Burna was a Judahite town on the border with Philistia. A large structure from this period exposed in the center of the site contained evidence for both domestic activities and Judahite administration (Shai et al. 2014; Shai 2017).

The tell's clearly prominent summit, including a 70 × 70 m fortified enclosure, has attracted the attention of scholars from the mid-nineteenth century onward (McKinny and Dagan 2013). The first scholar to mention the fortifications at Tel Burna ("Tell Bournat") was the French geographer Victor Guérin (1869), who visited the site in 1863 and noted remains of an enclosure wall on the summit, which he interpreted as a military stronghold. A decade later, Lieutenant Claude Conder of the Palestine Exploration Fund visited the site and described the fortifications, but he mistakenly dated them to the Roman or Crusader period. Conder also mentioned a four-foot-high (1.2 m) wall that surrounded the summit, 50 yards (c. 46 m) long each side (Conder and Kitchener 1883:290).

The fortifications of Tel Burna served as a military outpost for the Israeli Army during the 1948 war (Ayalon 1963:368–369; Lash and Shai, forthcoming). Some years later, Yohanan Aharoni and Ruth Amiran conducted a limited survey of the tells in the Shephelah, including Tel Burna. They also mentioned the fortifications (Aharoni and Amiran 1955:224), which in some areas were exposed a few courses high (Fig. 2). They were the first to date the fortification to Iron II based on the pottery they collected within the enclosure.

Fig. 2. The northern fortification wall of Tel Burna documented by Aharoni and Amiran (1955: Pl. 12:2).

Almost 15 years ago, Itzhaq Shai and Joe Uziel initiated an archaeological project at Tel Burna. One of the first goals of the project was to explore the fortifications and attempt to determine the date of their construction and use. In 2009 and 2010, a high-resolution survey formed the first stage of the current project. Although dating an architectural element on the basis of survey data can often be inconclusive, the preponderance of Iron II sherds (77%) collected from the summit surface enclosed by these presumed fortifications, pointed to the dating of the fortifications. Following two seasons of excavation (2010–2011) in the eastern edge of the enclosure, a 5 m thick casemate wall was revealed, constructed of two parallel walls with a 2 m wide Iron II fill in between (Shai et al. 2012). It was concluded that this fortification system was in use during the ninth and eighth centuries BCE, and was destroyed in the Assyrian campaign of Sennacherib in the late eighth century BCE, when at least the inner part of the fortification fell out of use.

Since 2015, two new areas have been excavated at Tel Burna: Area B2, a section that exposed the western part of the fortified enclosure; and Area G, on the southern edge of the fortifications (Fig. 3). Here, the gate of the enclosure was unearthed and is still being investigated. In addition, excavations were renewed in Area A1 (Seasons 2019, 2022), on the eastern side of the summit, east of the previously exposed fortification walls. In this paper, we present an update of the archaeological data concerning the site's fortifications, and reassess their date and function, as well as the historical implications.

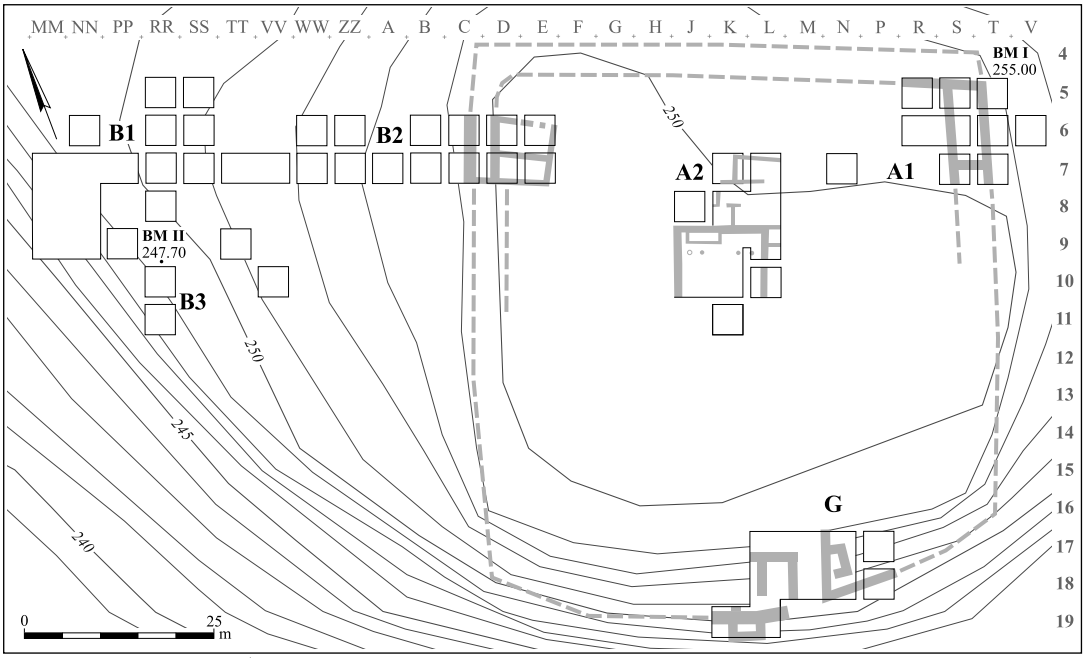

Fig. 3. A map of the excavated areas at Tel Burna (drafting: J. Rosenberg).

The Archaeological Remains

Area A1

Excavations in the eastern section of the summit were conducted to establish the stratigraphic sequence and further reveal parts of the substantial fortification system (Fig. 4). Earlier work in this area had exposed a casemate fortification system composed of two parallel walls, 2 m apart (5 m wide), oriented north–south and linked internally by a perpendicular wall. Each of the parallel walls is 1.5 m thick, built of large fieldstones; to date, six courses of the outer wall have been exposed, and four of the inner one. Although no surface has been reached in the area between the two walls, the pottery from the excavated fill dates almost entirely to Iron II. No floors were preserved inside the casemate, and no strata discerned within the fill. Two superimposed surfaces, however, were exposed on the western side of the inner wall: the earlier one contained a small installation built of fieldstones, upon which several loomweights were uncovered alongside late Iron IIA pottery; the later surface may be dated to Iron IIB based on pottery finds (for a detailed description of the pottery and other finds, see Shai et al. 2012).

The inner wall was cut by a later silo lined with fieldstones, one of several such installations discovered thus far at the site, which yielded Iron IIC pottery. This intrusive silo indicates that the wall must pre-date it and would therefore have clearly been put out of use by the seventh or sixth century BCE. Thus, the silo provides a firm *terminus ante quem* for the fortifications.

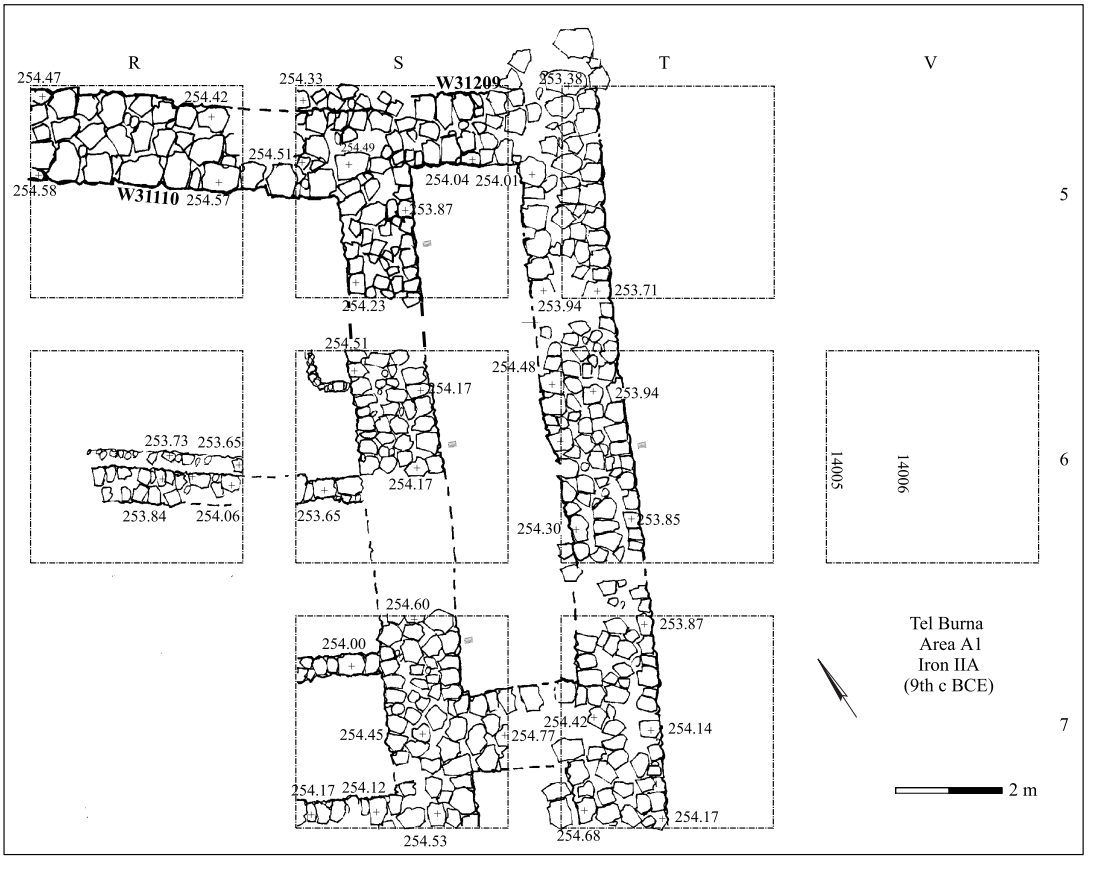

Fig. 4. Plan of Area A1 (drafting: J. Rosenberg).

During the 2019 and 2022 seasons, new squares were excavated east of the outer wall of the fortification (Fig. 5), revealing some fills containing a mixture of Late Bronze Age and Iron IIB sherds. While the possibility that this fill represents a poorly constructed glacis sloping eastward away from the fortification wall cannot be ruled out (and see below, Area B2), its exact nature has not been determined. A few habitation levels were identified beneath this fill, and while the stratigraphy is unclear, and only portions of walls were exposed, it seems that the area east of the fortification wall was inhabited during at least three periods. The earliest occupation dates to the Late Bronze Age and comprises at least one stone installation of indeterminate function and part of a phytolith surface. Above these remains was evidence of occupation inside what seems to be an early Iron IIA structure. This stratum is represented by the remains of a destruction sequence including charred roof beams on a degraded plastered floor, as well as a floor and sub-floor sequence c. 50 cm thick. The upper stratum, just below the fills, contains remains of floors with late Iron IIA potsherds lying on them.

Fig. 5. Area A1, aerial view to the north at the end of the 2022 season (photography: B. Yang).

Fig. 6. Area B2, aerial view to the northeast at the end of the 2022 season (photography: B. Yang).

Area B2

Area B2 is a 10 m wide, east–west step-trench or sondage that connects the lower Late Bronze Age platform (Area B1) to the upper summit and the Iron II fortifications (Fig. 6). The primary goal of this section was to better understand the stratigraphy of the tell, mainly the transition from the Late Bronze Age phase— represented by the public building on the western platform—to the Iron II fortification.

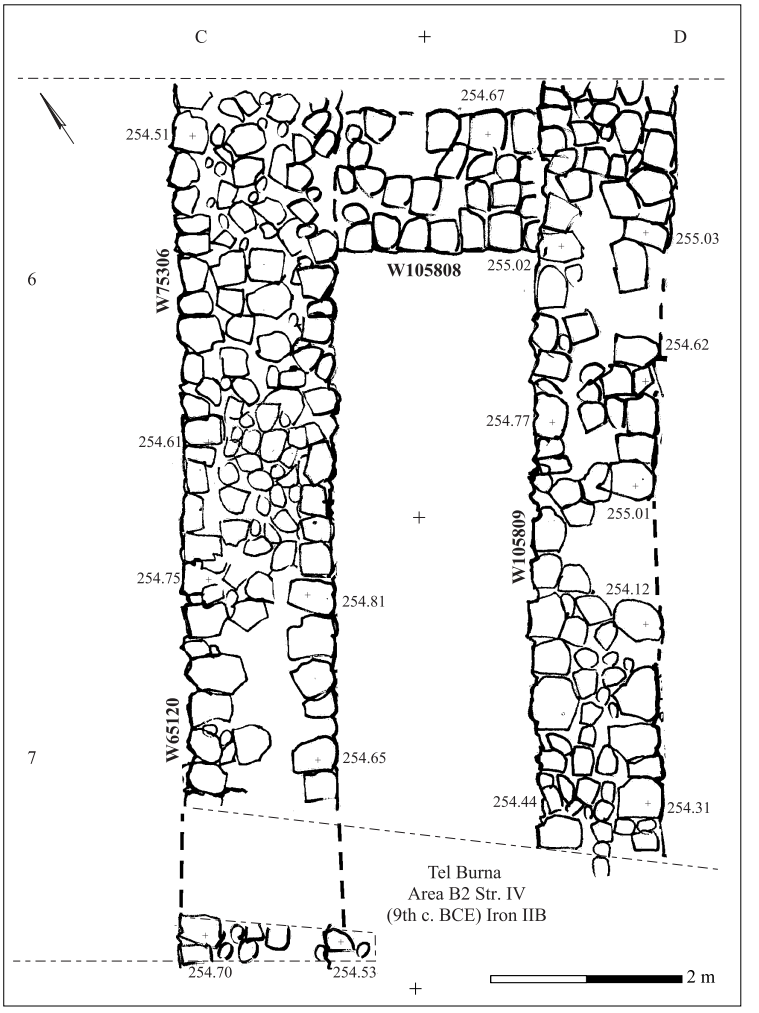

Fig. 7. Area B2, plan of Stratum IV (drafting: J. Rosenberg).

Ten squares were opened east and west of the expected fortification line. Excavation in Sqs C6 and C7 in the middle of the area exposed the outer part of the western fortification wall, which was constructed in Stratum IV (Fig. 7). The outer, north–south fortification wall is 1.6 m wide with nine courses (c. 3 m high) of large fieldstones that were fully exposed along a 9 m long segment (W65120/W75306). This wall has two faces, with some small- and medium-sized stones in between. A 9 m segment of a parallel, 1.2 m wide inner wall (W105809) of the casemate was also exposed and found to be built of two faces of medium-sized fieldstones. An east–west, 1.5 m wide perpendicular wall that created the casemate was exposed in the northern part of this area for a length of 1.7 m (W105808). Together, the entire fortification system is c. 4.5 m wide, a little less than the eastern wall in Area A1.

Stratum V is the earliest stratum revealed thus far in Area B2. It was exposed west of the fortification line in Sqs B6, B7, and part of C7 (Fig. 8). This stratum comprises a large,

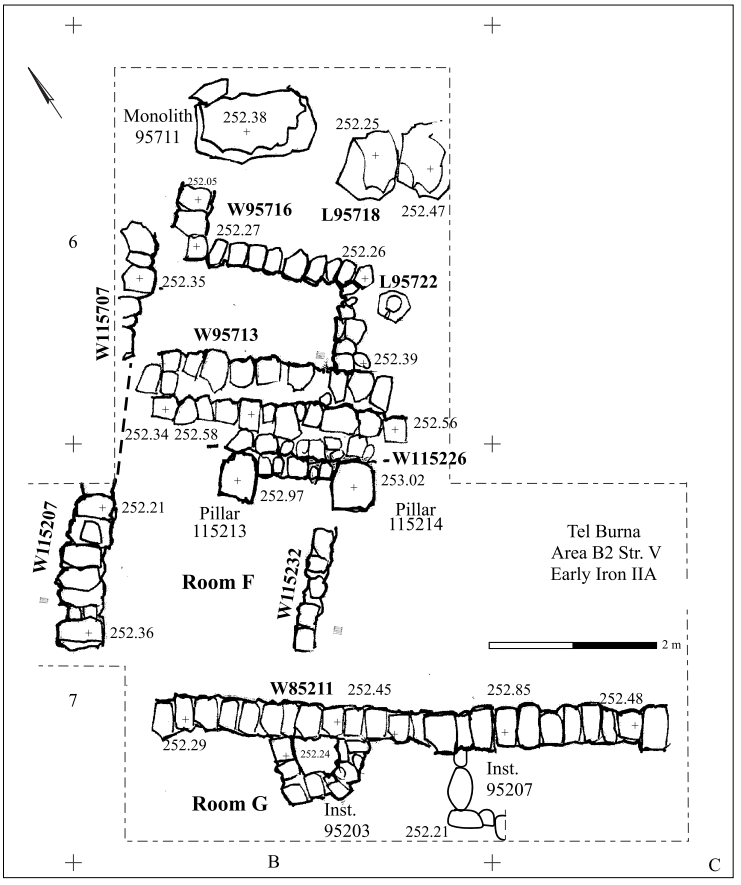

Fig. 8. Area B2, plan of Stratum V (drafting: J. Rosenberg).

two-story structure that suffered massive destruction in early Iron IIA. The complete plan of this structure is still unclear, as the excavation of Sq C6 has not yet reached the full depth of Stratum V.

An east–west wall (W95713) seems to constitute the northern wall of this structure. It is constructed of two faces of medium-sized stones (0.7 m wide) preserved to at least two courses. While its western end has not yet been exposed, it terminates in the east, where an opening appears to have existed that connects the interior of the structure in the south to a courtyard in the north. Two large pillars (L115213, L115214) were placed south of this wall, in the same east–west orientation, with a gap of 1.3 m in between. A wide wall (W115226) of unclear purpose was built between the pillars and W95713. Room F, located southwest of these pillars, contained a large assemblage of restorable smashed vessels, mainly storage jars, in a thick ash layer. A careful investigation of the remains revealed patches of a plastered ceiling that also served as the upper story's floor. A north–south line of stones (L115232) divided the room into two spaces. The eastern part, south of the exit to the courtyard, contained remains of several plates, bowls and chalices, next to what seemed to be fragments of a *ṭabun*. Another *ṭabun*, some installations and thin walls (W95714,

Fig. 9. Section in Room G, looking south (photography: A. Tavger); note the charred beam at the bottom of the yellowish plaster roof, the dark brown layer below it, the white plaster floor at the bottom of the section, and more dark debris below.

W95716, W95717) were exposed in the courtyard to the north, but only a few vessels were found here. Room F was delineated by two single-row walls, which were preserved for at least three courses, in the west (W115207) and in the south (W85211).

Wall 85211 also served as the northern border of Room G, which contained a large assemblage of smashed vessels, mainly storage jars and cooking pots, within a massive ash layer that produced thousands of charred linseeds (Cassuto, Orendi and Shai 2022). Two installations abutted the northern wall of Room G (L95203, L95207), but their function remains unknown. Fragments of charred beams and plastered roof segments found next to these installations attest to the existence of a second story above this room as well (Fig. 9).

The date of Stratum V was established through two different methods: (1) the large ceramic assemblage containing dozens of pre-*LMLK* storage jars, cooking pots, chalices and bowls, which can be dated securely by close parallels to other early Iron IIA strata (Fig. 10; Epelbaum, forthcoming); (2) the many short-lived organic samples collected within these vessels, which have given an estimated date in the second half of the tenth century BCE.[2]

[2] The study of the absolute chronology of the different strata of Tel Burna is still underway and will be published elsewhere. The preliminary results of the ^{14}C dates of Strata V and III, and from within the glacis, were provided by Prof. Elisabetta Boaretto of the D-REAMS Radiocarbon Laboratory in Weitzman Institute, Reḥovot.

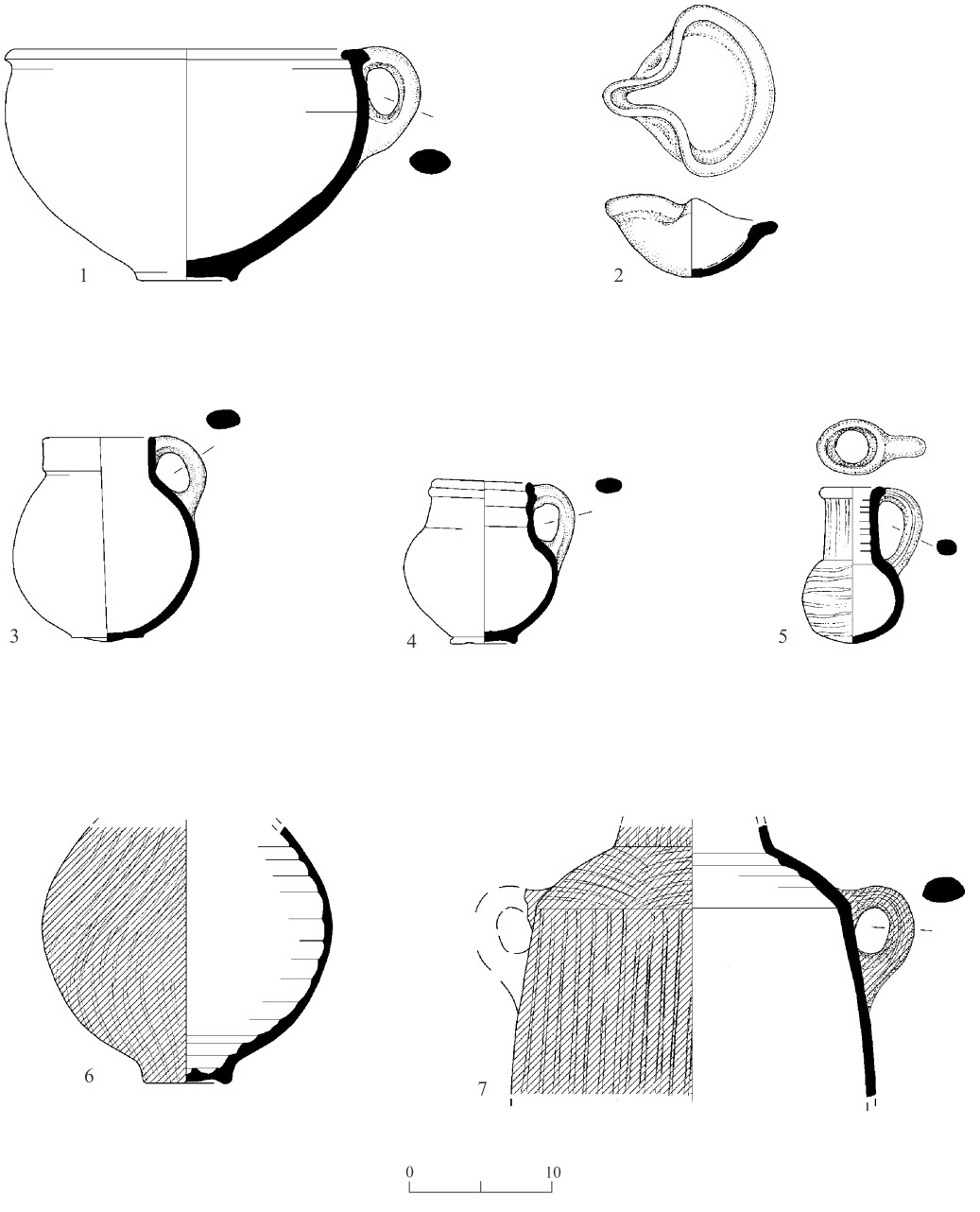

Fig. 10. Area B2, a selection of pottery types from Stratum V (drawing: Y. Rodman).

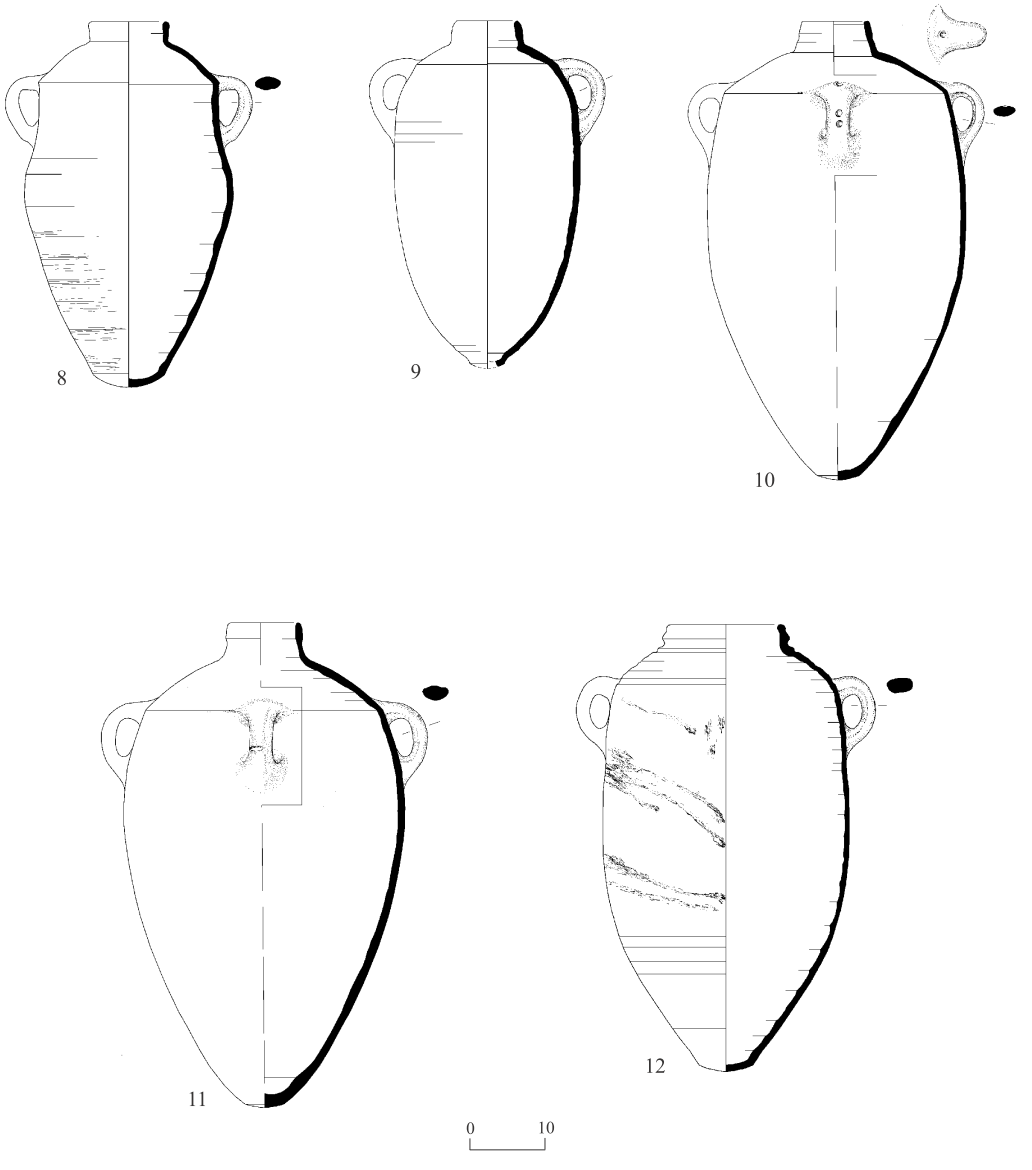

Fig. 10. (cont.).

While W85211 seems to continue to the east in Sq C7, the eastern parts of Rooms F and G have not yet been exposed. Only a small probe in Sq C7, north of W85211, reached this stratum. Below a thick fragment of the roof, more smashed vessels and an ashy layer were exposed, belonging definitively to Stratum V. This observation is of primary importance, as the layer's eastern edge continues underneath the lowest course of the Stratum IV western fortification wall (Fig. 11), providing a firm *terminus post quem* for the construction of the wall no earlier than the late tenth century BCE.

Fig. 11. The fortification wall (W65120) built on the remains of the Stratum IV destruction layer, looking northeast (photography: B. Yang).

The initial Stratum IV use of this fortification wall has yet to be revealed in the most recent excavations inside and east of the casemate system, as only later strata have been exposed. Here, there, Iron IIB Stratum III was destroyed by fire (Fig. 12). In this stratum, the inner casemate wall (W105809) served as the western wall of a structure, which was delineated in the north by a wall with two faces built of medium-sized stones and preserved at least three courses high (W95820/W125621). The extent of this wall was exposed from W105809 eastward to a length of 4 m. The eastern and southern edges of this structure have not been exposed and only two rooms were uncovered. Room D is an elongated rectangular room, oriented east–west, delimited in the south by W115512, a single-row wall that was exposed for 2 m and preserved at least three courses high. At least two sets of numerous loomweights were unearthed adjacent to smashed storage jars and charred beams on the surface of Room D, together with a variety of stone objects (Fig. 13). Room E, to the south, was covered with an ash layer, containing an installation with a circular stone inside. North of the installation, a large mud brick of unclear function was set on the surface. Although only a small part of this stratum was exposed, the types of ceramic vessels, a single Carbon-14 sample and a paleo-magnetic analysis of the mud brick (Yoav Vaknin, pers. comm.), point to the conclusion that these two rooms were destroyed during the second half of the eighth century BCE.

Additional evidence for the termination of this stratum at that time comes from both inside the casemate wall and outside. Over the course of the past few seasons, a 2 m thick

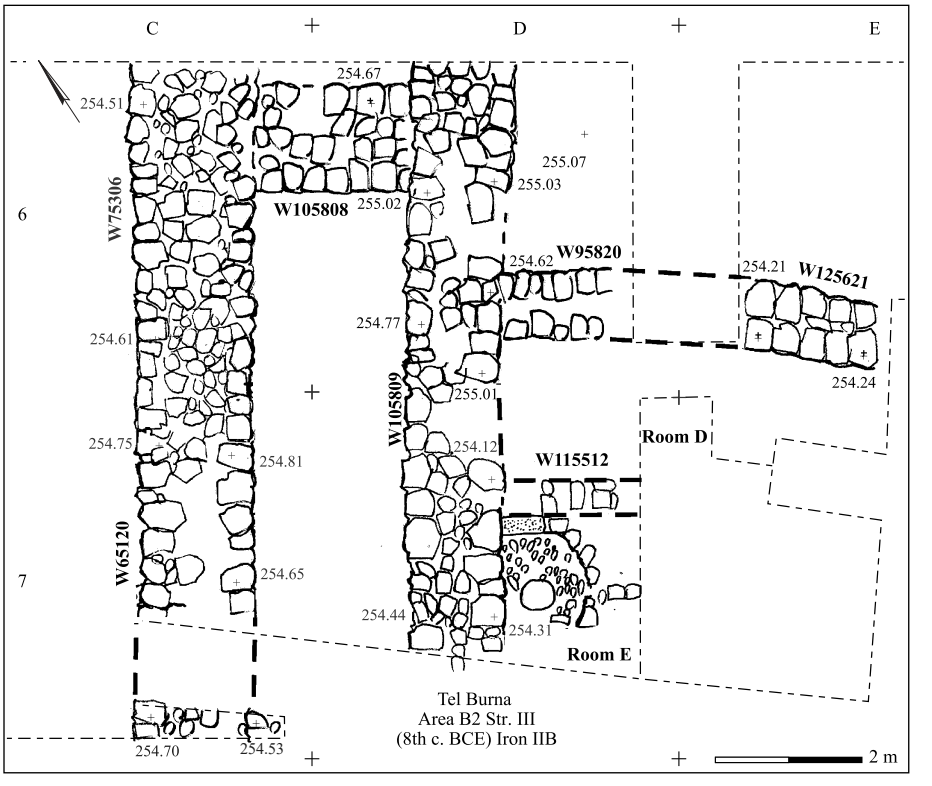

Fig. 12. Area B2, plan of Stratum III (drafting: J. Rosenberg).

Fig. 13. Pottery and loomweights on the floor of Room D, looking east; note W125621 on left (photography: B. Yang).

Fig. 14. A section of the glacis in Sq C7, looking northeast; note the fortification wall on the right, and the ashy layer of Stratum V at the bottom (photography: B. Yang).

fill that was found to have been deposited adjacent to the outer part, to the west of the casemate fortifications in Area B2, served as a sloping glacis (Fig. 14). This glacis contained some large stones and pottery, dating mostly to the Late Bronze Age, but also to Iron IIA and IIB. Based on this assemblage, the fill seems to have been taken from some unknown location lower down the slopes of the tell and deposited upslope at some point during Iron IIB to strengthen the city's western fortifications. In addition to the pottery, large amounts of crucibles, tuyeres and copper slag were found within this fill, suggesting that it originated in some sort of Late Bronze Age metallurgical production area. To help stabilize the fill of the glacis, two poorly built walls (W65110, W95307) were placed against the western face of the fortification extending westward (Fig. 15), built of one row of small- and medium-sized stones extant for up to 10 courses (2 m high). Optically-stimulated luminescence (OSL) analysis of the fill inside the glacis demonstrated that it was deposited in a single event (Janovský et al. 2022). This glacis was laid just above the Stratum V destruction layer. However, due to the existence of Iron IIB sherds in the fill, it must be dated no earlier than the eighth century BCE. On the other hand, no Iron IIC or Persian-period pottery sherds were found within this fill. Therefore, we assign the glacis to Stratum III, probably in the final years of the eighth century BCE (see more below).[3]

[3] Four ^{14}C samples collected from different levels inside the fill of the glacis (three olive pits and one piece of an intact charcoal from inside a Philistine Iron I handle) were dated to the twelfth century BCE; however, these dates clearly represent the period from which the material originated and not of its final deposition.

Fig. 15. Wall 65110 in the middle of the glacis, abutting W65120, looking southeast (photography: B. Yang).

Further excavation revealed that not only the external part of the fortification was filled with an earlier deposit, but also the inner casemate room. Excavation in Sqs D6 and D7 have exposed a 1.5 m thick intentional fill that entirely covered the casemate's interior, between W65120/W75306 and W105809 (Fig. 16). Here, too, the fill comprised large stones and included crucibles and tuyeres, as well as a large amount of pottery dated primarily from the Late Bronze Age, but some Iron IIA and IIB sherds were also present. The lowest courses of both the interior and exterior casemate walls have yet to be exposed, nor has the bottom of the fill inside the casemate room been reached. The similarity between the material within the casemate and that which makes up the glacis indicates that they were contemporaneous, in Iron IIB. Indeed, the material was clearly brought from the same original location, evidently a former industrial complex of copper manufacturing. Both fills can presumably be dated to the same time that ended with the destruction observed in the interior squares (see below).

Above the destruction of Stratum III, two strata were found dating to Iron IIC. The plan of Stratum II is extremely fragmentary (Fig. 17), apparently the Stratum III structure, containing the loomweights (Room D), had gone out of use by Stratum II. Two walls were unearthed above that room: a north–south wall (W105816) composed of two faces of medium-sized stones, which were preserved for only one course above the western part of Room D; and a one-stone-thick wall extending from its northern edge eastward, which was also preserved for only one course (W125622). A small segment of a parallel east–west wall was found above Stratum III Room E (W115114), which was also a one-stone-wide wall,

Fig. 16. Section of the fill inside the casemate, looking south (photography: B. Yang).

preserved three courses high. The western edge of W115114 seems to have abutted the inner fortification wall from the earlier strata (W105809), but as it appears, the casemate itself went out of use after the destruction of Stratum III. A clear sign of its lack of use in Stratum II was the discovery of a child's skull just atop the stones of W105809. The cause of the child's death is unclear, but it is safe to conclude that his body was left in this spot only after the Iron IIB structure was already in ruins; apparently, he was lying on an unpreserved Stratum II floor (Cassuto et al., forthcoming).

A few more architectural elements can be assigned to Stratum II. Inside the casemate, above the Stratum III intentional fill, a double-faced, one-meter-wide north–south wall (W85704) served as a retaining wall for the outer fortification wall (W65120), which was still used in Stratum II (Fig. 17). Two courses of this wall were preserved to a length of at least 2.5 m, but its function is uncertain. A thick, white, crushed chalk floor (L125609; Fig. 18) and a square stone that probably served as a pillar base (L125618) were discovered in Sq

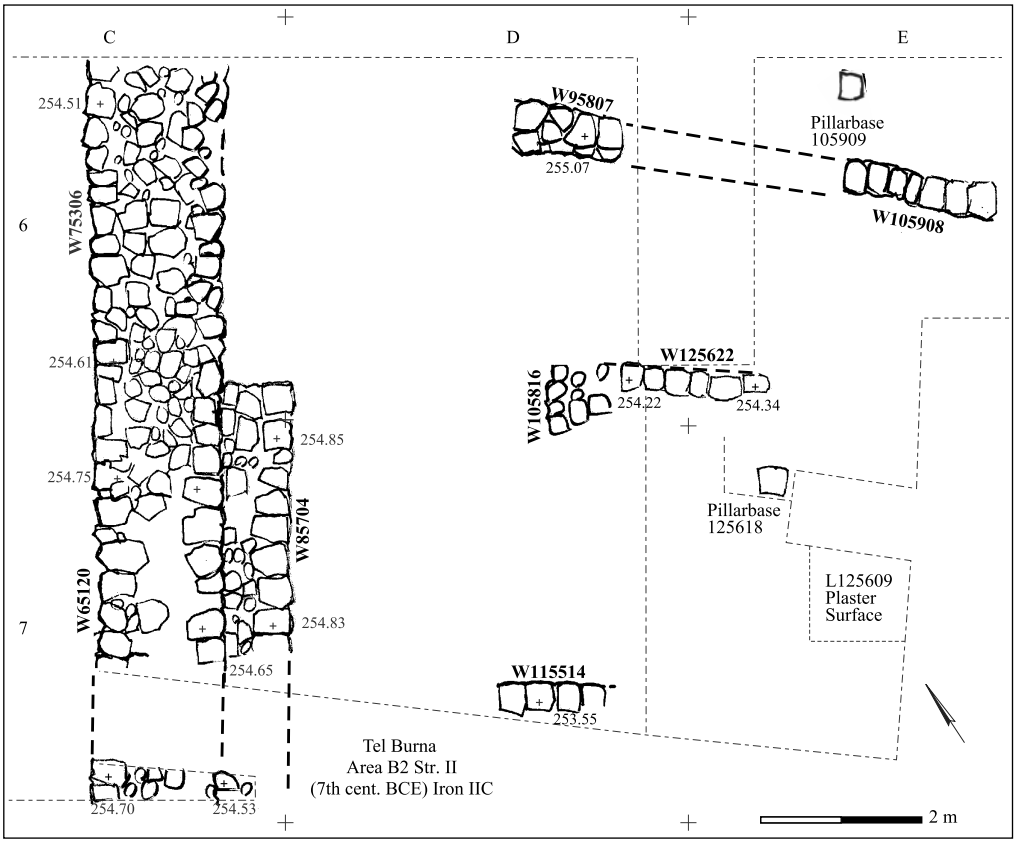

Fig. 17. Area B2, plan of Stratum II (drafting: J. Rosenberg).

Fig. 18. A thick, chalky floor (L125609) in Sq E7, below W85606 of Stratum I, looking east (photography: J. Ross).

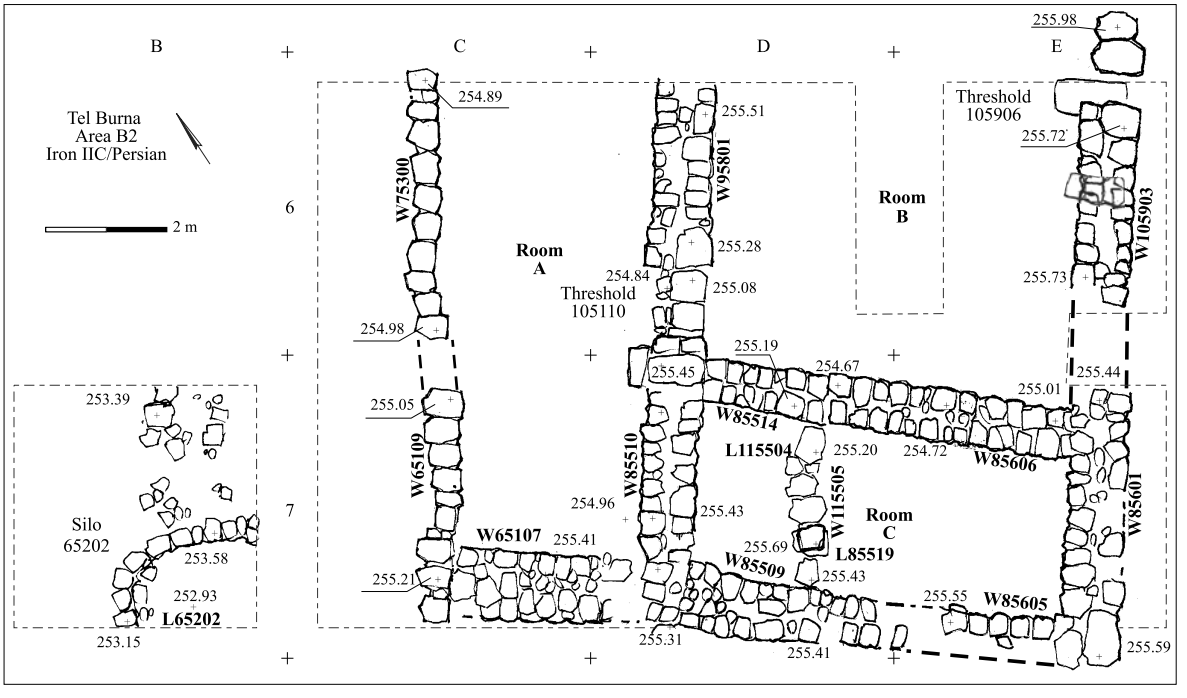

Fig. 19. Area B2, plan of Stratum I (drafting: J. Rosenberg).

E7. These could be associated with W125622, but no remains of this floor were preserved next to it. Another east–west wall, somewhat to the north in Sq D6 (W95807), could be assigned to Stratum II. This wall is constructed of medium-to-large stones and preserved to three courses high. The eastern segment of this wall might exist in Sq E6 (W105908). North of this segment, another square stone that looks like a pillar base (L105909) was found, which probably belongs to the same structure.

There is still insufficient data to establish an absolute date for Stratum II in Area B2; nevertheless, its relative date is clear, as it postdates Stratum III (Iron IIB) and predates Stratum I. The latter marks a significant change in the architectural plan in Area B2 and is dated to Iron IIC (Fig. 19). Apparently, the casemate fortification went completely out of use and a domestic building was built on top of it. This complex was enclosed by a long north–south line of large stones, which was exposed to a length of 9 m (W65109/W75300). An east–west wall was built over the southern part of the outer fortification and above the fill of the casemate (W65107). It is a one-meter-wide wall constructed of two faces of large stones with small stones in between them, and was preserved for a length of 2.5 m. A north–south wall, built over the inner casemate intersects its eastern edge in the same line, but its structure and dimensions were smaller (W85510/W95801). This wall (0.8 m wide) is also composed of two faces, which are preserved to three courses high and for a length of at least 9 m. In the center of this wall, a threshold was cut (L105110), which enabled access between Rooms A and B. Fragments of a white surface floor were found in Room A, which

is an elongated rectangular room, whose long side is oriented north–south on the western side of the structure.

Room B appears to be nearly square (5.0 × 5.6 m), even though its northern wall has not yet been exposed. In the east, it was enclosed by a double-faced wall (W105903; 4.2 m long, 0.9 m wide), preserved for only two courses. North of its northern edge, a large, reused pillar stone (L105906) was placed horizontally at its bottom edge, where it served as a threshold between Room B and whatever existed to its east. Room C was located south of Room B and was separated from it by an east–west double-faced wall (W85514/W85606; 5.6 m long, 0.7 m wide), constructed of medium and large fieldstones and preserved three courses high on its eastern and western edges. In the middle of this wall, only one course was preserved, presumably serving as a threshold between the two rooms. Room C was enclosed by walls that reflect the continuations of W105903 southward (W85601) and that of W65107 eastward (W85509/W85605), creating a 3.18 × 5.60 m space. The western part of Room C was separated from the main hall by a north–south line of stones (W115505), and two standing stones (L85519, L115504) that rested on top of it. Some fragments of a yellowish-white plaster floor were exposed east of this line.

No chronologically uniform or well-preserved assemblage of vessels was found inside this structure, but the mixed Iron II–Persian-period pottery sherds indicate that this complex was in use for a long period of time. Since only Iron IIB and IIC sherds were found in its foundations and inside its walls, its use can be assigned from the later of those two periods until the mid-Persian period. A silo (L65202) that cut into the glacis, west of this structure, can also be attributed to this stratum. This kind of silo is one of several that were found all over the summit of Tel Burna, including the one that cuts the eastern inner fortification wall in Area A1, all of which are dated to Iron IIC (Shai et al. 2014:121–129; and see above).

Area G

This area was opened on the southern edge of the summit (Fig. 3) to locate the presumed gate complex of the Iron II fortifications. As Area G is the only location on the upper summit that has a visible topographical depression and as it faces in the general direction of the Kingdom of Judah, particularly Lakhish, it was thought to be a promising location for a gate. Also, Area G is closest to Naḥal Guvrin, which apparently was the main water source of Tel Burna. Thus far, 14 excavation squares have been opened in three excavation seasons (2018, 2019, 2022; Fig. 20). As our understanding of the area's stratigraphy is still evolving, the presentation below is provisional.

There appear to be two successive gate systems in Strata IV and III. The most prominent feature in Stratum IV is the large fortification wall that cuts diagonally east–west across the entire area and is made up of medium-to-large stones (Fig. 21). Traces of the outer wall of the casemate fortification (1.35 m wide) are visible in the southwestern corner of the area (W107907). The outer wall of the fortification (W107902) is preserved to a height of 2 m, of which an 8 m long segment was exposed, but its character changes from west to east. The outer wall of the gate (W1071004) becomes much thicker (2.2 m wide), turning

Fig. 20. Area G at the end of the 2022 season, aerial view to the north (photography: B. Yang).

to the northeast toward what appears to be a gate entrance in the vicinity of Sqs M18 and M19. The gate system includes a massive solid tower (1071012) built of large stones that buttresses the southern city wall in the southeastern part of the area and marks the transition between the casemate fortification system and the gate. The 5–6 courses of the tower were preserved to a maximum height of 1.86 m; it was a rectangular fortification, 3.65 m long (east–west) and 2.5 m wide (north–south).

On the eastern side, a similar architectural picture can be seen, as a 7.5 m section of the outer fortification wall was exposed here. The eastern side of the gate walls is 2.3 m wide, and it also turns toward the southwest in the probable direction of the gate entrance. This wall terminates in the west in what appears to be the eastern edge of the Stratum IV gate entrance, as indicated by the presence of both a gate socket stone and a drainage channel (107603), both of which seem to be part of the original gate construction. In addition, traces of a stone pavement were found around the drainage channel, especially on its western side. Further excavation is required to reveal the complete plan of the Stratum IV gate and determine whether it was a two-chamber gate or a simple gate without any chambers.

In several locations around the Stratum IV gate, evidence of a conflagration was found, including burned mud bricks and late Iron IIA pottery. It seems that at some point in this period, the gate was burned, although its walls were only partially destroyed. Large sections of the outer fortification wall were reused in Stratum III, which rests atop the Stratum IV gate. In general, Stratum III represents both a departure from the Stratum IV architectural plan and a slight change in orientation, but still demonstrates a clear recognition of the large outer fortification wall and the earlier gate's drainage channel. The Stratum IV gate

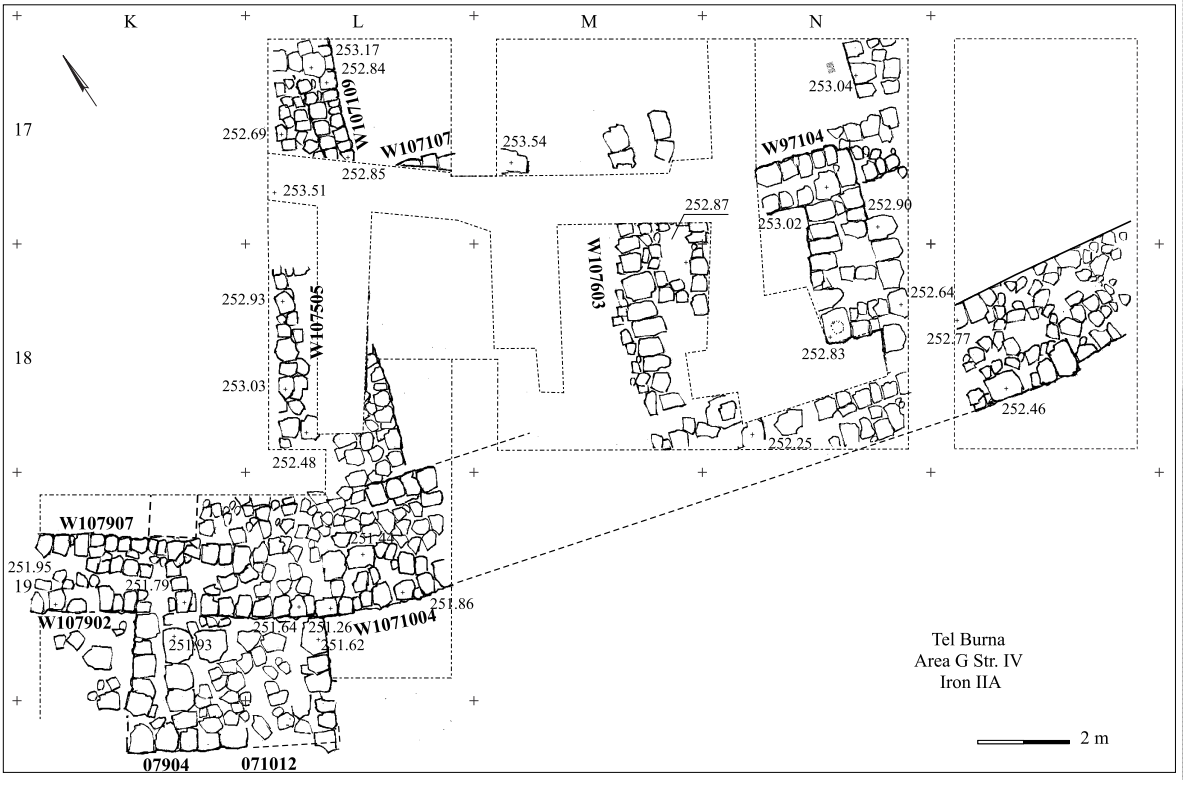

Fig. 21. Area G, plan of Stratum IV (drafting: J. Rosenberg).

entrance has a bend in what is otherwise a straight-sided, square-shaped casemate fortress. The Stratum III gate entrance largely eliminates this bend by providing straight access into the fortified town (Fig. 21). It is worth noting that Stratum III, as well as later strata, suffered from heavy erosion.

Thus far, Stratum III (Fig. 22) can be characterized by its four parallel north–south walls (W107501, W97605, W97102, W97112), bonded to an 11.5 m long section of an east–west wall (W107102, W97104) that includes a gate threshold (W107205) above the reused drainage channel. These walls were built in a mostly uniform manner consisting of two rows of medium-sized stones and ranging 1.00–1.15 m in width. The plan of the eastern half of the complex is easier to understand than the western one. In the east, W97104, W97112, W97102 and W97301 form a small room that may be interpreted as a tower. Significantly, this tower seems to have been incorporated into the Stratum IV fortification wall (W97304), which seems to have continued to be used in Stratum III. It is also worth noting that this tower likely conceals the eastern chamber of the Stratum IV gate as lower courses of W97112 and W97104 seem to be bonded with the outer fortification wall (W97304). As noted, the construction of the Stratum III gate reused the existing drainage channel, but

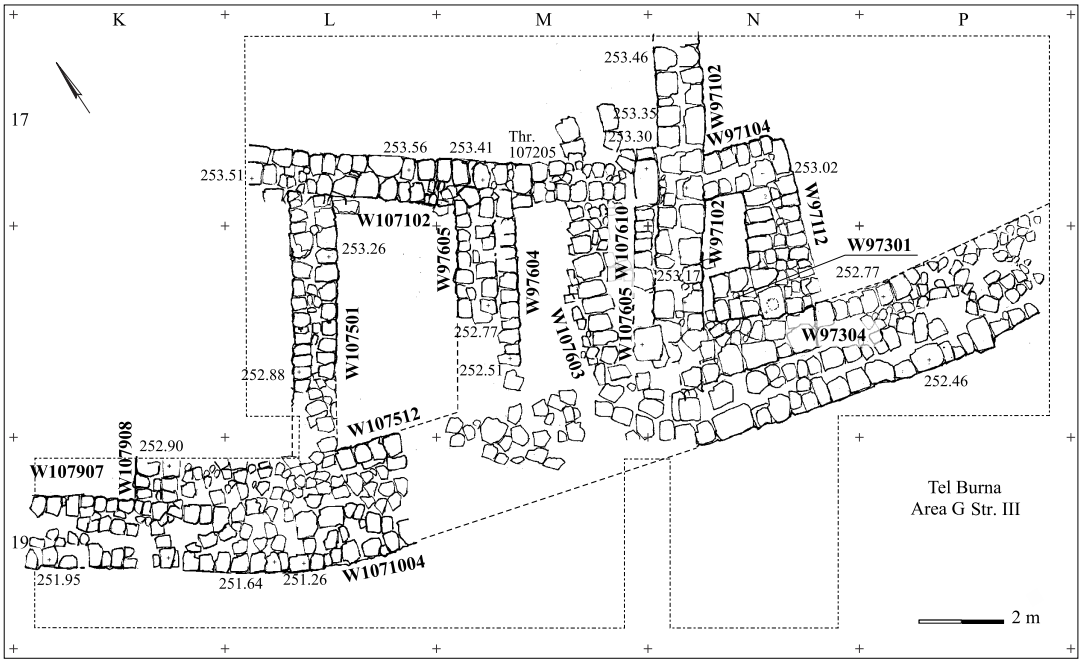

Fig. 22. Area G, plan of Stratum III (drafting: J. Rosenberg).

added several elements to form the gate, including a stone threshold (W107205), two large stones that can be understood as gate piers on the west and east, and two stone benches on the west (W97604) and east (W97610).

The plan of the western section of the Stratum III gate is much more complicated. While W107102, W107501 and W97605 clearly formed a large room, the southern wall of this room was lost due to erosion. Therefore, it is uncertain how this room is related to the Stratum IV fortifications (W1071004). At this stage, it can only be suggested that it should be understood as a kind of gate tower that served as a counterpart to the eastern tower. If so, this tower's southern wall might be identified as W1071004.

Three final notes are worth mentioning regarding this area:

1) The Stratum III gate complex was built directly over the destruction debris of Stratum IV. This sequence is particularly clear in the area north of the Stratum III gate where late Iron IIA pottery and burned mud-brick materials were found. As there does not seem to be any hiatus in settlement between Stratum IV and III, it would suggest that the Stratum III complex was constructed in early Iron IIB.

2) The threshold of the Stratum III gate (W107205) was filled in during Stratum I, as indicated by the presence of both Iron IIC and Persian-period pottery within the stone fill. Accordingly, it seems that the Stratum III complex functioned as a gate during both Stratum III and Stratum II, but was blocked in Stratum I.

3) Remains were found in Sq M20 of walls and a destruction layer that date to Iron IIA. This area is south of the presumed entrance of the gate. However, it is premature to consider whether this destruction belonged to Stratum IV or is the same destruction layer from early Iron IIA (Stratum V) that was exposed in Area B2. In any event, these remains provide additional evidence for occupation outside the fortified enclosure during Iron IIA.

Discussion

Given the data presented from all three excavation areas (A1, B2 and G), it is now possible to reconstruct a comprehensive history of the fortification system at Tel Burna.

The destruction layer of Stratum V, which was exposed in the lower parts of Area B2 is the *terminus post quem* for the construction of the fortifications. The pottery assemblage retrieved from the vast conflagration of the two-story building comprises types that parallel vessels from nearby sites, such as Kh. Qeiyafa, Lakhish Level V and Bet Shemesh Level IV—all dated to early Iron IIA (Epelbaum, forthcoming). This layer also yielded a large amount of organic remains, such as olive pits and linseeds (Cassuto, Orendi and Shai 2022), some of which were sampled for ^{14}C analysis that resulted in absolute dates for this stratum in the second half of the tenth century BCE. Apparently, Stratum V was destroyed in a violent attack, for which the roughly contemporary campaign of Pharaoh Sheshonq I may be suggested (c. 925 BCE; e.g., Wilson 2005; Chapman 2009; Ben-Dor Evian 2011; Krauss 2015; Vaknin et al. 2022).

The evidence presented above indicates that the construction of the wall must postdate this early Iron IIA destruction, as the wall lies directly above this layer, sealing the destruction remains of the building in Sq C7. The material culture associated with the Iron II remains at Tel Burna clearly indicates that this site was under the influence of the Kingdom of Judah (Shai 2017). Therefore, its location just between Gath, the vast Iron IIA Philistine city (e.g., Maeir 2012), and Lakhish, the main Judahite administrative center in this region (Ussishkin 2004), explains the need for the construction of the casemate wall. The small summit enclosed by the wall was most probably used as a fortified stronghold. It offered a clear view to the north (i.e., toward Philistine Gath), and it controlled the road running east–west through the Guvrin Valley and the adjoining diagonal route that connected the Soreq, Ha-Ella, Guvrin and Lakhish Valleys.

However, a few questions remain unanswered: How long after the destruction of Stratum V was the fortification wall built? Were the builders of the wall the same residents of the former destroyed city? Was the fortification a reaction to the preceding destruction? Although not all of these questions can be answered, the archaeological remains provide some clues that might offer possible solutions. The earliest pottery assemblage exposed in relation to the use of the fortification walls comes from Stratum IV in Area A1. This assemblage, found on the floor and in the installation, dates to late Iron IIA and includes the most common vessels of that time, with parallels at Tell es-Safi/Gath Stratum A3, Lakhish Levels V–IV, Tel Baṭash Stratum IV, Gezer Stratum VII and Ashdod Stratum IX (for a

description and discussion of the pottery types, see Shai et al. 2012:147–148). The same types were also found inside the fortification in Area G, next to the gate. At Tell es-Safi/Gath the end of Stratum A3 is dated to the destruction by Hazael in the second half of the ninth century BCE, and the first appearance of these ceramic types is usually dated to the first half of this century (the exact date is still debated; see, e.g., Mazar 2005; Herzog and Singer-Avitz 2006; 2011; Ortiz 2006; Garfinkel et al. 2019; Finkelstein 2020). It is also worth mentioning that the lowest courses of the fortifications at Tel Burna have yet to be reached from the inside; therefore, an earlier date for its construction, prior to the ninth century BCE, but not before the destruction of Stratum V in the second half of the tenth century BCE, cannot be ruled out.[4]

The material unearthed on the various floors inside the fortifications in Areas A1, B2 and G (and also Area A2; see Shai 2017) indicates that the fortification system was in use for c. 200 years. In the first phase, during the ninth century BCE, the casemate fortification enclosed the summit, but the settlement was not limited by this perimeter and extended outside the walls, at least in the east and possibly, in the south in Area G. This indicates that the site served not only as a stronghold but also as a regular Judahite town, and the fortified summit might have served as an administrative center connected to Lakhish. The lack of Iron IIB living spaces outside the fortification may suggest that during this period the size of the site was reduced, and it was concentrated only within the fortified enclosure. In addition, the architecture of the gate was changed during the transition between late Iron IIA and IIB, when a more modest entrance was erected. While still speculative, it can be suggested that these changes occurred following the destruction of nearby Gath by the forces of Hazael, an event that probably influenced all the sites in the immediate surroundings (for archaeological evidence of the destruction of Gath by Hazael, see e.g., Maeir 2004).

A more influential event for the history of Tel Burna is probably Sennacherib's campaign at the end of Iron IIB (701 BCE). Tel Burna has long been identified as biblical Libnah (Suriano, Shai and Uziel 2021). According to biblical records, Sennacherib marched toward Libnah following the capture of Lakhish (2 Kings 19:8). There is no description of the battle, the preparations for it, or any hint of Libnah's fate; thus, the archaeological remains might fill in these missing details.

The first issue that can be gleaned from the archaeological remains pertains to the preparations made by the people of Tel Burna against the approaching Assyrian forces. The preparation in Judah for this campaign is well-attested both in the biblical and archaeological records. Many biblical references describe the activities of King Hezekiah concerning the inclusion of the waters of the Giḥon Spring within the fortifications of Jerusalem, as is also evident in the creation of the Siloam tunnel (see, e.g., Ussishkin 2014:89–94). The

[4] The potential association between the fortifying of Tel Burna and the biblical references for fortifying cities in Judah by Kings Rehoboam (2 Chronicles 11:5) and Asa (2 Chronicles 14:5) is beyond the scope of the present paper and will be discussed elsewhere.

construction of the fortifications of the Western Hill in Jerusalem has also been viewed as part of the preparation for the Assyrian troops (Geva 2003).

The glacis exposed in Area B2 provides evidence for similar activities at Tel Burna. Although most of the material inside the glacis is dated to the Late Bronze Age, the few Iron IIB sherds indicate that the date of the deposition against the fortification wall should be assigned to sometime during the latter period. Although not conclusive, it seems reasonable to attribute the deposition date to the last days of the eighth century BCE, prior to Sennacherib's campaign. It is, therefore, suggested here that the construction of the glacis against the western part of the fortification at Tel Burna was also one part of the preparations by the Judahites for Sennacherib's campaign. It is apparent that the residents of Tel Burna dug up earth and rocks from the neglected lower strata, mainly the Late Bronze Age compound in the western part of the tell, and poured it against the wall, to prepare for the onslaught of the Assyrian battering rams. In accordance with this defensive tactic, they used the same material to fill the gaps between the two parallel walls of the casemate, to create a more formidable wall. It has already been suggested that Iron II casemate walls were a symbol of power for highland political entities (Whitelam 1986). The typical use of casemate walls in times of peace would have been as storage rooms for the equipment of the city guards. In a time of political tension, it would be filled with earth and stone, as has now been found at Tel Burna. Another example of the filling of a casemate wall was discovered at Ḥaẓor (Yadin 1972:140–142), although the debate over its chronology limits any definitive assignment of these activities to any historical event (see, e.g., Finkelstein 1999; Ben-Tor 2000; Ben-Ami and Wazana 2013; Sandhaus 2013).

Interestingly, both the construction of the glacis and the filling of the casemate wall were documented in the western part of the fortification, facing enemy routes from the west, while in the southern and eastern parts, which were facing the other Judahite cities, the evidence is not so clear. It seems that great effort was made on the side of the borders of Judah. In this regard, it should be noted that fortifications were intended not only to guard the border but also to project a political entity's strength to its neighbors. The massive fortification wall with its defensive glacis would have served as a warning to any potential enemy to refrain from attacking the site. There is no doubt that the building of fortifications was not only a symbol of power for the Judahites but a display of power intended for the opposing Philistine or Assyrian forces. In this sense, the structures would have possessed both functional and symbolic importance.

The second element connected to Sennacherib's campaign is the Stratum III destruction layer in Area B2, which was also identified in the main structure on the summit of the tell in Area A2 (Shai 2017:50). The smashed vessels that were uncovered in these locations consist of wheel-burnished and folded-rim bowls, closed cooking pots with a ridge around the rim, kraters, holemouth jars with ledge rim and *lmlk*-type jars, all paralleled by types from Lakhish Level III, Tel Baṭash Stratum III and Tell es-Safi/Gath Stratum A2. Although we cannot provide absolute dates for this stratum as the ^{14}C calibration curve reached a plateau (Baillie and Pilcher 1983), it seems highly likely that this destruction should be attributed

to the Sennacherib campaign. Evidence of destruction caused by this campaign is common in almost all sites excavated in the Shephelah (see, e.g., Borowski 2018). In this regard, the archaeological record fits well with the historical sources that speak of 46 cities destroyed by Sennacherib, but only mention two by name: Lakhish and Libnah (see Ussishkin 2014).

As previously mentioned, the excavations have revealed two strata following the destruction of Stratum III, both of which are dated to Iron IIC, and yielded pottery forms that can be compared with vessels from other sites in the region, such as Lakhish Level II and Tel Baṭash Stratum II. The plan of Stratum II is not completely clear, but the few remains from Areas A1, B2 and G hint that at this stage the inner part of the casemate was no longer used as part of the fortification system and only the outer wall enclosed the summit. The inner layout of the site inside the enclosed summit also changed, and it seems that the resettlement of Tel Burna following the Sennacherib campaign had a different character than the Iron IIA–B fortified town. The existence of rosette-stamped handles and a private stamped seal impression from this stratum (Shai et al. 2014) indicate that the site was still connected to the administration of the Kingdom of Judah. Nevertheless, it seems that the nature of the site changed dramatically after it was damaged and destroyed by the Assyrian attack.

Resettlement of the site, albeit with major changes, seems to be part of a broad phenomenon in the Shephelah following the Sennacherib campaign. For example, recent excavations discovered that Bet Shemesh, which was destroyed or abandoned during that campaign (Bunimovitz and Lederman 2016:419–469), was resettled following this destruction, but concentrating in a slightly different location on the eastern part of the mound (Haddad, Ben-Ari and De Groot 2020; Govrin and Singer-Avitz 2022), and in a significantly different manner (Bunimovitz and Lederman 2003; 2016:150–153; cf. also Fantalkin 2004). This Iron IIC phenomenon can be found at sites like Tel ʻAzeqa (Azekah), Lakhish and others, where the nature of the sites changed dramatically (see, e.g., Ussishkin 2004:90–93; for recent discussions, see, e.g., Faust 2008; Lipschits 2019).

In the last period of occupation, Tel Burna Stratum I, it seems that the site underwent another change, and the fortification was no longer in use at all. The structural complex from Area B2 certainly sealed both walls of the casemate fortification, and the gate in Area G was no longer in use; therefore, it must be viewed as an unwalled settlement. This stratum was constructed sometime in a later phase of Iron IIC and lasted into the Persian period, as evident from the pottery that survived inside its structures. If this massive fortification system was still remembered and used during the decades that followed the Assyrian destructions, it did not last long. By the end of the Iron Age, the beret-like shape of the site must have been observed by passersby through time, yet its defensive function had already been long forgotten. No evidence for Babylonian destruction has been found in this stratum. It seems that the Babylonian campaign against Jerusalem and Lakhish in 586 BCE was concentrated at the large urban centers and therefore skipped Tel Burna. This may explain the existence of Persian-period pottery inside the architecture of Stratum I, hinting at a continued occupation during the sixth century BCE, until its abandonment sometime during that period.

Summary

Based on the visible topography and the archaeological investigations at the site, the fortifications of Tel Burna enclosed a square area (c. 70 × 70 m) and the entire length of the wall was c. 280 m; while excavations have exposed it standing to a height of approximately 3 m, it would have certainly been considerably higher in antiquity. From the aforementioned data it is clear that the fortifications were erected following Shishak's destruction of the site, probably during the late tenth century BCE or the early ninth century BCE, and it continued to be in use during the ninth and eighth centuries BCE. During the preparations to defend against the Sennacherib campaign in the late eighth century BCE, the casemate was filled in, and a glacis was deposited against the outer side of the western, and maybe also the eastern, walls. Following the destruction of the site by Sennacherib and a resettlement of the site in the seventh century BCE, while the outer wall may have continued to function in some areas, the inner wall clearly went out of use. The fortification walls were never rebuilt, and at the last stage of the occupation at the end of the Iron Age and the beginning of the Persian period the site was unwalled.

This fortified site along the western border of Judah appears to have been a strategic location along the conflict zone with one of its primary adversaries—the Philistines. The location of Tel Burna—midway between Gath and Lakhish, monitoring the road along Naḥal Guvrin, with visibility all the way to the coastal plain, would account for the investment of the central authority of Judah in such a large walled city so close to the city of Lakhish. In addition to Lakhish, it adjoined other Judahite settlements along the western border of Judah, also fortified during Iron IIA–B (e.g., Kh. Qeiyafa, Bet Shemesh) and share the same objective: to protect the main roads to the central hill country and to demonstrate to the people of the region, on both sides of the border, the power of the central administration of the Judahite kingdom.[5]

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[5] The strategic location of Tel Burna was also a dominant component in the 1948 war; see Lash and Shai, forthcoming.

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