

A LATE BYZANTINE–EARLY ISLAMIC-PERIOD FARMHOUSE AT MESILLOT IN THE BET SHE'AN VALLEY

PINHAS PORAT¹

In 1973 a salvage excavation was carried out at Kibbutz Mesillot in the Bet She'an Valley. The site is situated c. 115 m below sea level, c. 3 km southwest of Tel Bet She'an and 2 km from the wall of the Byzantine city of Scythopolis (map ref. NIG 24460/71134, OIG 19460/21134; Arav 1974).² Today it is covered by modern houses of the kibbutz (Fig. 1).

Unfortunately, some of the finds were lost after the excavation. More damaging was the loss of a large portion of the registration lists of the dig, including locus and basket lists, as well as details of each locus and the stratigraphy. This makes presentation of a full report impossible.

THE EXCAVATION

Three strata (III–I) were identified during the excavation. The date of Stratum III is unknown. The main building phase is attributed to Stratum

II, probably dating to the Late Byzantine period. Stratum I represents additions to the earlier Stratum II building, possibly dating to the Early Islamic period.

Stratum III

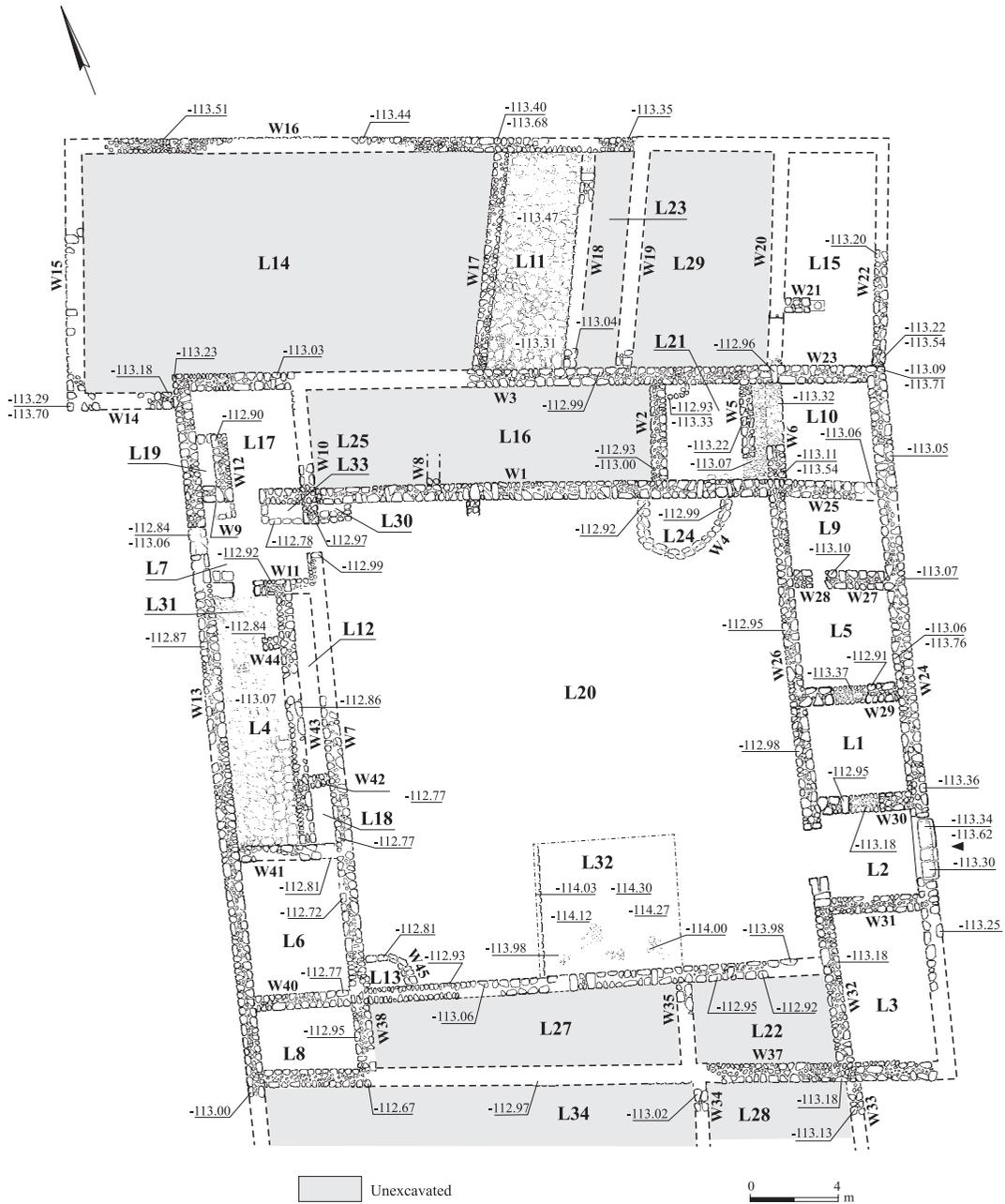
This is the earliest stratum, found in a small probe in L32 (Plan 1). About one meter below the surface, traces of a structure were encountered, comprising a wall and a gravel floor sloping northward. On this floor a few sherds were found, dated by the excavator to the second–fourth centuries CE.³ A layer of fallen bricks, c. 0.7 m in depth, separated this stratum from the one above.

Stratum II

In this stratum a large building was uncovered (Plan 1), roughly square (33 × 33 m), although the corners were not at exact right angles,



Fig. 1. The excavation area.



Plan 1. The building.

giving it a slightly rhomboid shape (Fig. 2). It had a large central courtyard, 22×22 m, surrounded by at least 16 rooms. According to the excavator, the walls (0.75–0.9 m thick) were made of mud bricks set on stone foundations, although in general only one course of stones survived. Two entrances to the building were

found. The main entrance was apparently from the east, leading through Room 2 into the central courtyard. It was 3 m wide with a large stone threshold set in W24. A second entrance, c. 2 m wide, was found in Room 7 on the western side of the building (Plan 1; Fig. 3). Most of the rooms had packed earth floors. Entrances



Fig. 2. Corner of the buiding.



Fig. 3. Room 7.

in W30, W29 and W27 indicate that Rooms 1, 5 and 9 were interconnected, and not entered from the courtyard. The entrances to most of the rooms on the other sides of the building were not preserved.

Based on the plan and the finds, the large structure is interpreted as a farmhouse. Walls 33, 34 and 13 continue southward (Rooms 34 and 28). This area was not excavated, thus its layout and chronological phase are not clear. The building was probably part of a larger site, as additional buildings are known c. 100 m to the south. In addition, a mausoleum of the fourth century CE was found c. 900 m to the southwest (Arav 1990).

Stratum I

This stratum represents repairs and additions to the original Stratum II building. The floors of the rooms were raised about 30 cm, and some of the openings in the walls were blocked, as was the western entrance. In the north, a row of



Fig. 4. Locus 13, looking south.

rooms (10 × 40 m; Loci 15, 29, 23, 11 and 14) was added, but only a small part of this addition was excavated. In the central courtyard, rounded installations were built adjoining the walls (Loci 13 and 24; Fig. 4). Some rooms were paved with large stones and sarcophagi fragments (Rooms 4, 11, 31).

There were numerous finds on the floors of this level, including iron objects and some complete pottery vessels (see below). Thus, it appears that the building was abandoned in haste, and not reoccupied. Unfortunately the circumstances of its abandonment are unclear.

THE FINDS

Nothing remains from the finds of Stratum III. The finds of Strata II and I cannot be separated due to the loss of the registration records. Therefore, the building's assemblage will be presented as a single unit, assuming that most of the finds belong to the later phase (Stratum I). Many of the finds were uncovered in Rooms 5 and 10 on the eastern side of the building. Most of the pottery is domestic, exhibiting cooking wares and jars. Fine wares are lacking.

Pottery

Cooking Bowls (Fig. 5:1, 2).— Two Galilean cooking bowls are among the early wares in the assemblage, dating from the mid-third to fifth centuries CE. They belong to Types 1c and 1e of Adan-Bayewitz (1993:87, Pls. 1c:6; 1e:9).

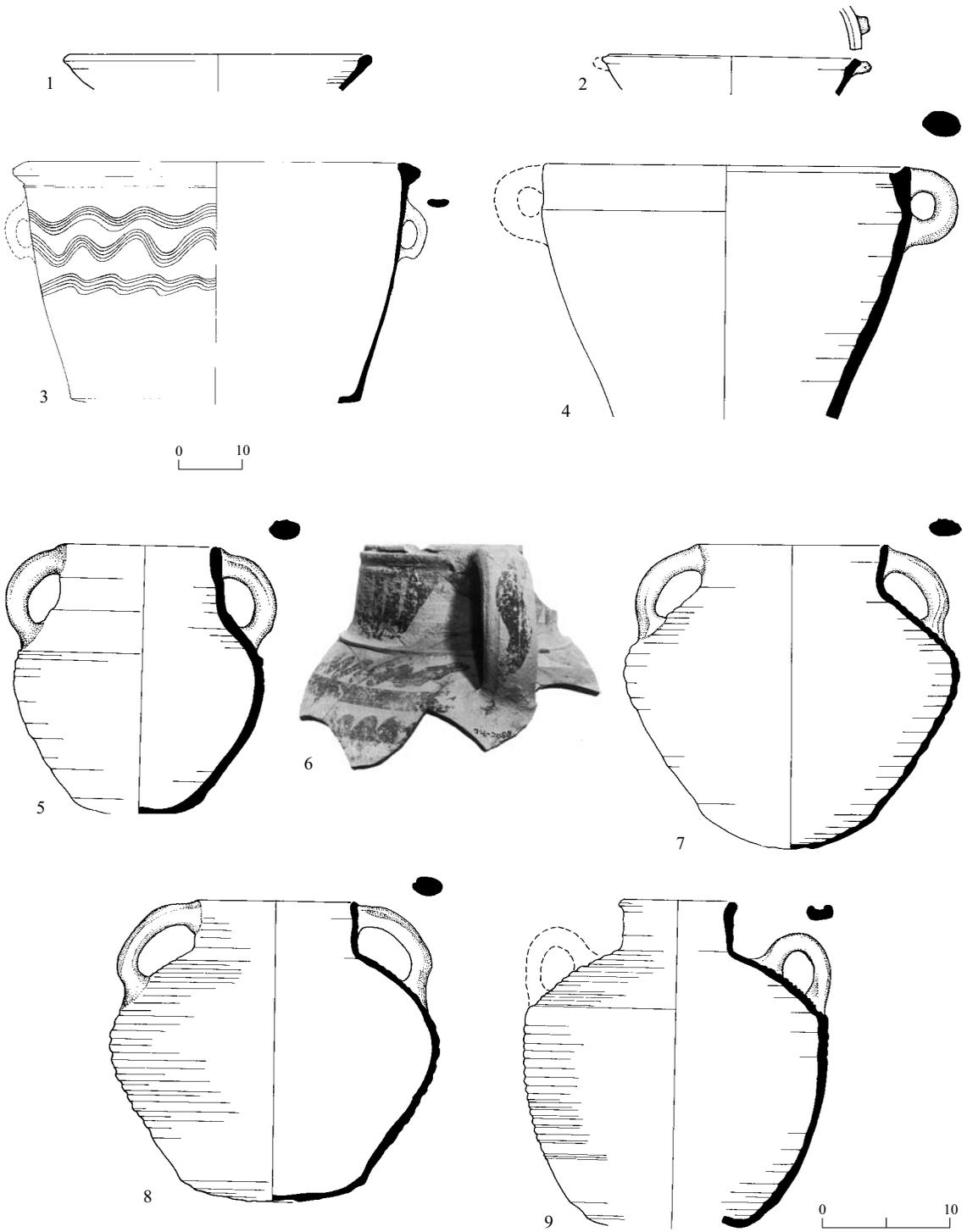


Fig. 5. Pottery from Strata I-II.

◀ Fig. 5

No.	Object	IAA/Reg. No.	Room	Description
1	Cooking bowl	376/3 395/9	16?	Reddish-brown ware, thickened rim, groove
2	Cooking bowl	395/8	?	Reddish-brown ware
3	Basin	74-2087	5	Gray-black ware, combed
4	Krater	172/200	21	Reddish-brown ware, lime encrusted, grooved rim
5	Krater	74-1656	10	Light orange ware
6	Painted krater	172/1	10	Pink-brown ware, painted decoration
7	Cooking pot	74-2072	10	Dark brown ware, traces of soot
8	Cooking pot	74-2077	?	Reddish-brown ware, signs of soot
9	Cooking pot	74-2079	10	Dark orange to gray ware, bright orange core, signs of burning

Basins and Kraters (Fig. 5:3–5).— One large complete basin was found on the floor of Room 5, Stratum I (Fig. 5:3). It is made of gray-black fabric and decorated with groups of wavy, combed lines. The base is flat and handmade, and only the upper part is wheel-made. Two other examples of this type were found. It is common at Byzantine and Early Islamic sites (Smith 1973: Pl. 33:504; Tzaferis 1983:32; Peleg 1989: Fig. 47:1–3; 1994: Fig. 13:11). The krater (Fig. 5:4) is made of soft, brittle ware with many grits (Tzaferis 1983:32, Fig. 5:10, Pl. XIII:4). Another krater, smaller with a thickened rim and a wide ridged neck (Fig. 5:5), was found in Room 10. This type occurs at Kursi in Stratum II, dated from 614 to the eighth century CE (Tzaferis 1983:34, Fig. 8:5, Pl. XV:5).

Painted Krater (Fig. 5:6).— Sherds of a painted krater were found in the courtyard of the building, made of pink-brown ware with ridges below the rim. Tzaferis (1983:30) associates this ware at Kursi to Stratum II, dated from 614 to the eighth century CE (see also Bet She'an: Delougaz and Haines 1960: Pl. 37:2, 6).

Cooking Pots and Casseroles (Figs. 5:7–9; 6:2–4).— Two closed cooking pots (Fig. 5:7, 8) with a high, upright neck, sharp shoulders and an ovoid body, represent yet another type of cooking ware. These vessels date to the late

seventh–early eighth centuries CE (Tzaferis 1983:4, 33, Fig. 6:7, Pl. XIII:5; Peleg 1989: Fig. 52:6). The closed cooking pot with a high, jar-like neck (Fig. 5:9) seems to be a variant of the former pots, although its handles are similar to jar handles, and its shoulder is more pronounced. The final type of cooking ware comprises open casseroles or cooking bowls (Fig. 6:2–4). They are similar in ware to the closed pots, but have inverted, flattened rims (to enable the placement of lids) and horizontal handles, raised above the rims. This is a common Late Byzantine form, first appearing in the sixth century CE and continuing into the Early Islamic period (McNicol 1982: Pl. 140:7; Tzaferis 1983: Fig. 6:9, 11, Pl. XIII:8).

Lid (Fig. 6:1).— One intact lid was found, perforated in the center, corresponding to Type 1B lids of Adan-Bayewitz (1986:109, Fig. 4:10, Photo 117). It probably dates to the Late Byzantine period, though similar lids are also found in the Early Islamic period (Peleg 1989:71, Pl. 52:35).

Jars (Figs. 6:5, 6; 7:1–3).— Large bag-shaped jars were common in the assemblage (Figs. 6:5, 6; 7:1). They vary in color of ware from light red to dark gray, often with an orange-colored core. The ware is metallic and well fired. The jars are decorated with white lines applied freely by brush. They were probably constructed from

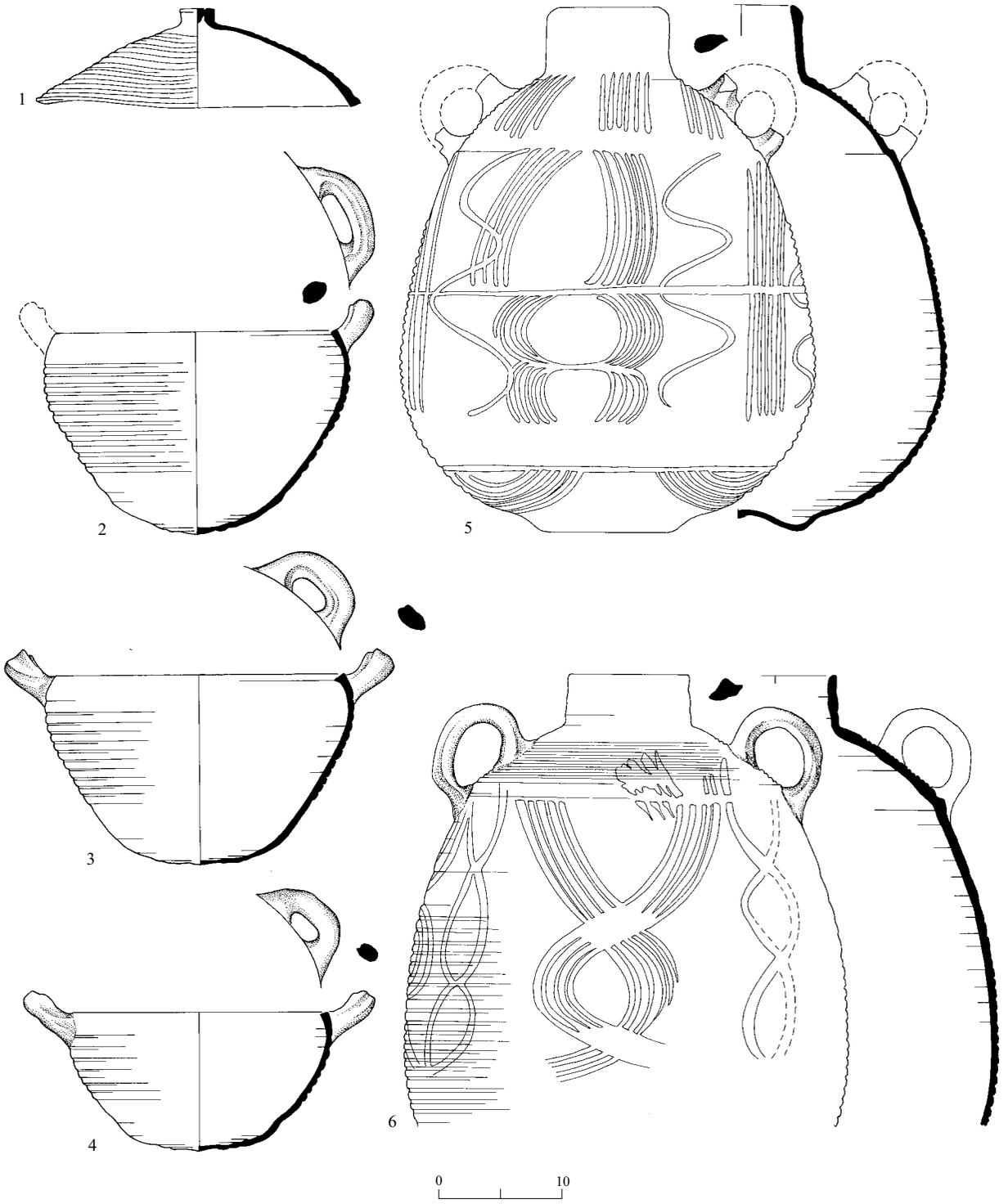


Fig. 6. Pottery from Strata I-II.

◀ Fig. 6

No.	Object	IAA/Reg. No.	Room	Description
1	Lid	74-2076	10	Dark gray to brown ware, perforated
2	Casserole	74-2074	10	Dark red ware, signs of soot
3	Casserole	74-2080	10	Dark red ware, signs of soot
4	Casserole	74-2075	10	Reddish-brown ware, signs of soot
5	Jar	74-2083	?	Orange-gray ware, orange core, white-painted decoration
6	Jar	74-2085	10	Gray ware, dark orange core, white-painted decoration

Fig. 7 ▶

No.	Object	IAA/Reg. No.	Room	Description
1	Jar	74-2082	5	Gray ware, dark orange core, white-painted decoration
2	Jar	74-2086	10	Yellow ware
3	Jar	74-2115	10	Cream ware
4	Jug	74-2078	10	Light red ware, thin walled
5	Molded jug	172/1	10	Buff ware
6	Molded jug	172/2	10	Buff ware
7	Flask	395/101	21	Yellow-buff ware

two parts, their juncture visible between the shoulder and the neck, often ridged. These jars are common in the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods (Tzaferis 1983: Fig. 7:2, Pl. XIV:1, 2; Adan-Bayewitz 1986:91, Fig. 1:4, Type 1b).

Large jars of cream or yellowish buff ware (Fig. 7:2, 3) were also common. They too are bag shaped, with a deep omphalus base (Fig. 7:2), but have a narrower, elongated body. The neck of jar Fig. 7:2 was cut off in antiquity. At Bet She'an a number of pottery kilns, destroyed in the earthquake of 749 CE, were found with vessels of this ware *in situ* (Tsafrir and Foerster 1994:110; cf. Pella: McNicoll 1982: Pl. 146:3).

Jug (Fig. 7:4).— This spouted jug originally had a handle. The rim is broken, and the jug is lime encrusted on the outside (cf. Pella: McNicoll 1982: Pl. 142:1).

Molded Jugs (Fig. 7:5, 6).— These two sherds of Early Islamic buff ware, common from the eighth to the tenth centuries CE, were found in

Room 10 (cf. Bet She'an: Delougaz and Haines 1960: Pl. 39:11; Capernaum: Peleg 1989: Fig. 62:22).

Flask (Fig. 7:7).— The neck of a flask was found, of a type dated at Kursi (Stratum III) to the eighth century CE (Tzaferis 1983:34; cf. Pella: McNicoll 1982: Pl. 142:1).

Lamps (Fig. 8:1, 2).— A lamp from Room 5, now lost, bore an inscription on its base (Fig. 8:1; cf. Rosenthal and Sivan 1978: Type 574, dated from 614 to the eighth century CE; Bet She'an: Hadad 1997: Nos. 38, 39). Similar lamps are common in Transjordan (Smith 1989: Pl. 55:6). Another lamp fragment (Fig. 8:2) is similar to Type 538 of Rosenthal and Sivan (1978:132, 139), dated from the Late Byzantine period up to the eighth century CE.

Clay Stands (Fig. 8:3–5).— Two intact clay stands and one fragment were found. Remains of plaster on the two intact stands suggest that

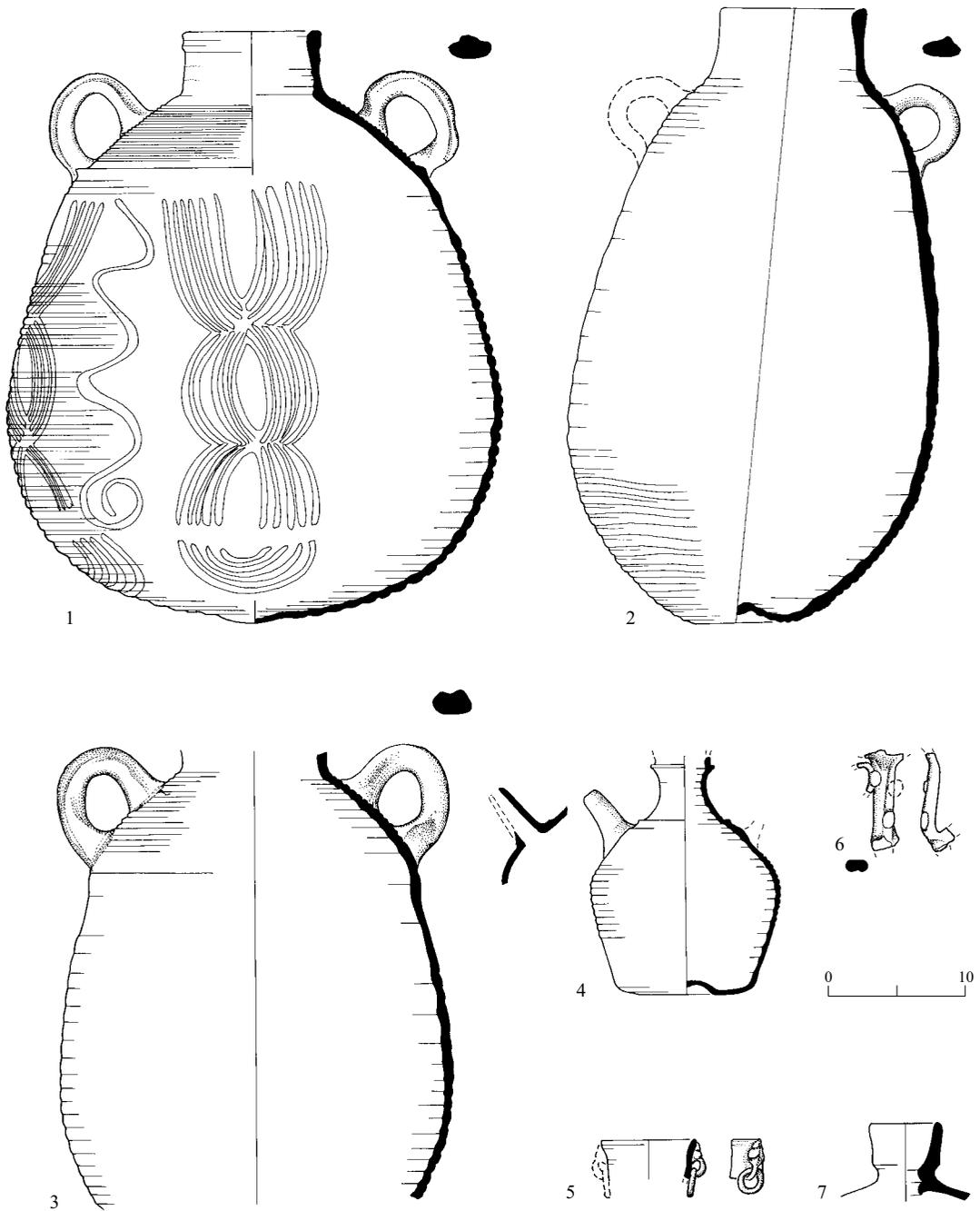


Fig. 7. Pottery from Strata I-II.

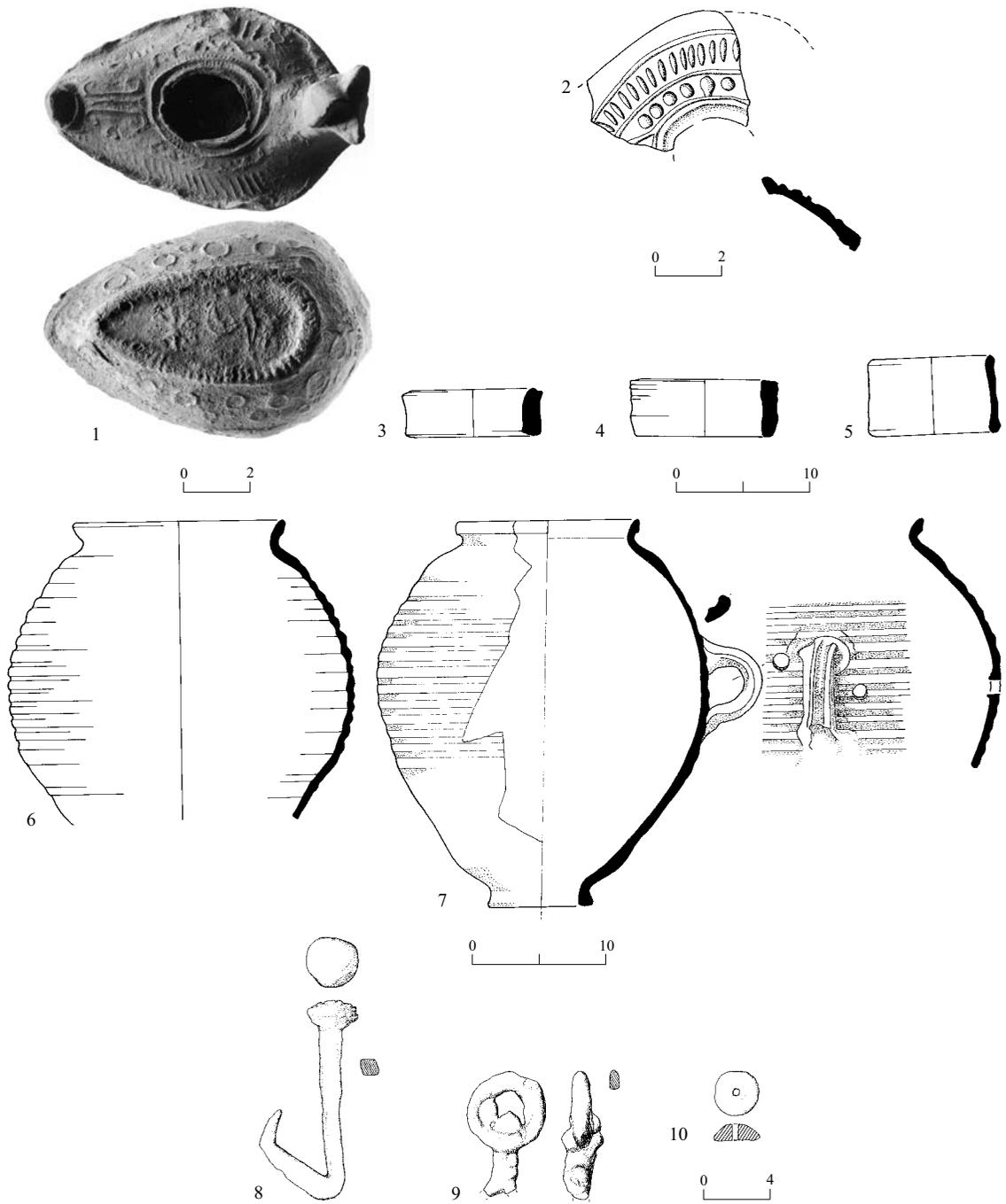


Fig. 8. Pottery, iron and stone objects from Strata I-II.

◀ Fig. 8

No.	Object	IAA/Reg. No.	Room	Description
1	Lamp	74-1658	5	
2	Lamp	395/102	22	Reddish-brown ware
3	Stand	74-2071	10?	Yellow-brown ware, plastered all over
4	Stand	172/3	?	Yellow ware, no plaster
5	Stand	74-2070	10	Yellow-pink ware, plastered all over
6	Unidentified vessel	395/3	?	
7	Unidentified vessel	74-2073	5	Yellow ware, gray core, white slip
8	Iron nail	74-2091/1	17	
9	Iron nail	395/100	?	
10	Spindle whorl	74-2090	4	Serpentine

they were attached to a surface or used in an installation. The closest analogy to these stands could be found in extension hoops, used in ancient times in beehives to extend the area of a hive to produce a higher quality honey (Jones 1976).

Unidentified Vessels (Fig. 8:6, 7).— Sherds of some 15 large vessels were found in various parts of the building, mainly in Room 5, perhaps all attributable to Stratum I. These large vessels are unusual and their function is unclear. The most complete example has one handle with two small holes on either side. They are open at the base, and were perhaps used as planting pots or drums. The sherds are made of yellow ware typical of the Early Islamic period (cf. Gleason 1977).

Miscellaneous Finds

Iron Objects.— A number of metal finds were recovered from the building. One complete iron nail (Fig. 8:8) and a few broken ones were found, including an eyelet nail with a ring (Fig. 8:9; cf. Smith 1989: Pl. 57:3). A metal ring from Room 16 (B391/1) was perhaps an earring. Also found was a fragment of a curved agricultural tool, perhaps a pruning hook (B172/110). The remains of its wooden handle and the beginning of the curved blade have survived. A similar tool can be seen in the 'great harvest' mosaic of

the sixth-century CE monastery of Lady Mary in Bet She'an (Fitzgerald 1938: Pl. XVI, Room L, Panels 6, 7). Two other fragments of iron blades were found.

Stone Objects.— A conical spindle whorl (Fig. 8:10) made of serpentine was found in Room 4. Two Roman funerary statues were found at Messilot—a head and a bust—of types known from nearby Bet She'an. They were published separately by Skupinska-Løvset (1983: Nos. 133–134, IDAM 87319–21, 95874–7; Pls. LXXXVIII, XXXIX). These statues are of much earlier date than the other finds published here. They probably originated in the nearby mausoleum or in Bet She'an and were put to secondary use at the site.

A stone window(?) with five openings, one in the center and one in each corner (Fig. 9:1), was found in Room 16. The stone measures 36.5 × 39.5 cm and is decorated with incisions. Near the openings there are also marks which seem to have been made by cords. A similar stone, with three openings, three perforations and remains of two decorative incisions (Reg. No. 117/114), was found in secondary use in the floor of Room 4. Finally, one stone oil-press bed was found (Fig. 9:2).

Clay Tile (Fig. 9:3).— This is a large floor tile made of orange-gray ware, with traces of

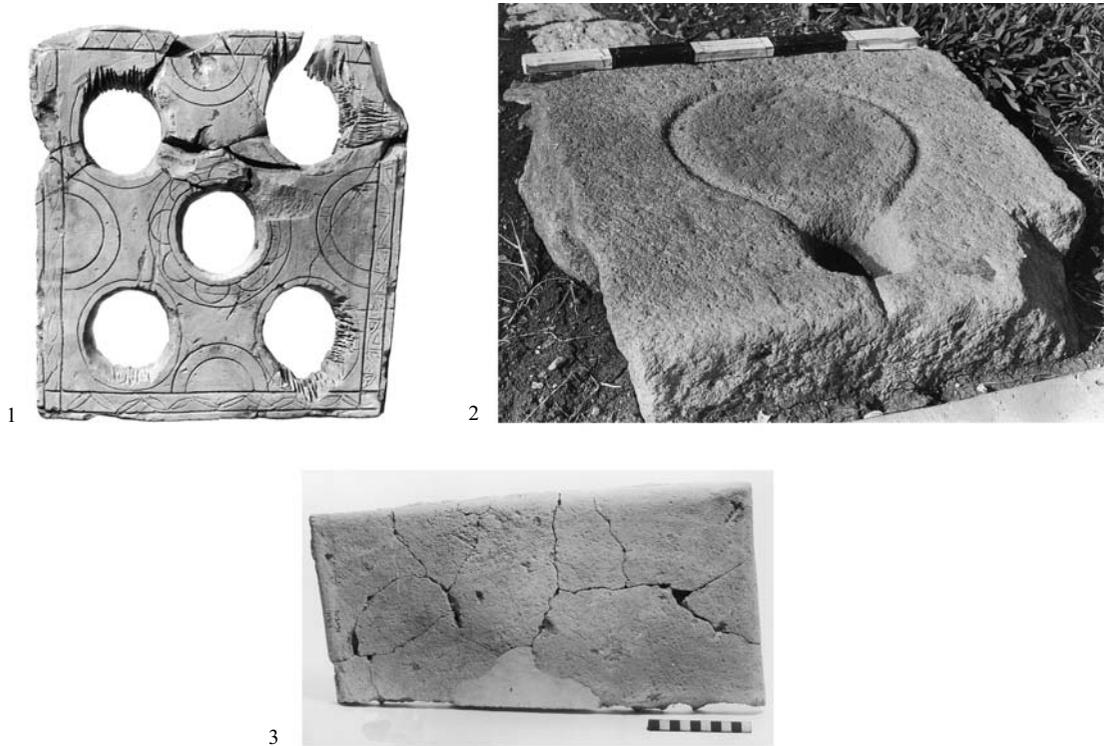


Fig. 9. Various objects.

No.	Object	IAA/Reg. No.	Room	Description
1	Stone window	74-2092	16	Limestone, incised decoration
2	Oil-press bed	172/116	?	Limestone
3	Tile	74-2093	10?	Orange-gray ware, traces of plaster

plaster and ashes attached to it. It measures 43 cm long, 19–22 cm wide and 3 cm thick.

CONCLUSIONS

The building at Mesillot was a large farmstead, probably built in the Byzantine period (Stratum II), following an earlier occupation (Stratum III) of unknown nature. The earliest recovered finds at the site comprise Galilean bowls dated from the third to fifth centuries CE, and a group of coins dated to the fourth century CE (see Ariel, this volume). Two Roman-period busts date to the first century CE, along with a cooking pot and numerous sherds mentioned from L32. However, since all the finds lack stratigraphic context in relation to the building, the date

of the erection of the building (beginning of Stratum II) cannot be determined.

The building underwent one major phase of changes (Stratum I). Since it is impossible to separate the finds of Strata II–I, the assemblage presented above indicates only a general range for both strata. We can, however, assume that most of the finds represent the later days of Stratum I rather than the entire range of Strata II–I. The finds include at least two Early Islamic buff ware sherds (Fig. 7:6, 7), of types common in the Abbasid period (ninth–tenth centuries CE). As the exact date of the beginning of manufacture of this ware is unknown, a date in the eighth century CE cannot be ruled out. Other finds support a date within the eighth century CE for the end of the building:

(1) there are no glazed Early Islamic wares (the hallmark of the ninth–tenth centuries CE); (2) the many unidentified vessels are also made of buff ware, and cannot be dated to the Byzantine period (Fig. 7:1, 2); (3) five Umayyad coins were found at the site (see Ariel, this volume); (4) the pottery assemblage presented here seems to point toward the Umayyad period. Perhaps Stratum I came to an end in the

earthquake of 749 CE (see Tsafirir and Foerster 1994:112), since the latest coin dates from 739/740 (albeit a surface find, see Ariel, this volume: No. 5). However, no direct evidence of an earthquake was recorded, apart from a line of stones to the west of the building, which may be interpreted as a fallen wall. Hence, the date of 749 CE remains a tentative suggestion.

NOTES

¹ The author, Pinhas Porat, passed away before completion of the article, and the manuscript was re-arranged by Raz Kletter based on the available data.

² The 1973 excavation was conducted by Rami Arav and the author on behalf of the Department of Antiquities (Permit No. A-395), assisted by L. Pesach (surveying); Donald T. Ariel (numismatics) and Irena Lidski (drawings). Members of Kibbutz Mesillot and youth groups from the USA helped during the excavation. The author wishes to thank R.

Arav for entrusting him with the publication of this excavation, as well as Vassilios Tzaferis and Shimon Gibson. The present report does not deal with a previous excavation at this site conducted by Adam Druks in 1968 (Permit No. A-172).

³ The sherds from Stratum III did not survive. A Roman-period cooking pot was mentioned in the original report in relation to Stratum III, but its provenance is unknown and it was not illustrated.

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