THE HISTORY OF TEL 'ETON FOLLOWING THE RESULTS OF THE FIRST SEVEN SEASONS OF EXCAVATIONS (2006-2012)[1]

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ABSTRACT

Tel 'Eton is a 6-hectare site in southeastern Shephelah, Israel. Since 2006, Bar-Ilan University has been carrying out a large-scale exploration project at the site and in its surroundings. Survey results show that the site was settled in the Early Bronze Age, and again in the Middle Bronze Age. The earliest remains unearthed so far from the excavations are from the Late Bronze Age. Settlement continued into Iron Age I and Iron Age IIA before reaching a peak in Iron Age IIB. This large city was destroyed by the Assyrians, and was not resettled until the 4th century BCE when a fort and a village were erected on the mound. The site was abandoned in the 3rd century BCE and was not resettled.

BACKGROUND

Tel 'Eton is a large site (about 6 hectares) located in the trough valley, in the south-eastern part of the Judean Shephalah, some 11 km east-southeast of Tel Lachish and about 4 km northeast of Tell Beit Mirsim (Fig. 1). The ancient city is situated near an important junction on the north-south road that meandered along the trough valley, connecting the Beersheba and the Ayalon Valleys, and the east-west road that joined the coastal plain and the Shephelah with Hebron, and which passed along Wadi Adoraim. The site's location near large valleys also secured its proximity to fertile soils, increasing its economic importance.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE SITE

The site is identified by most scholars with Biblical 'Eglon, which is mentioned in the Bible in Judah's list of cities (Joshua 15: 39), and in the story of the Conquest. In the story (regardless of its historicity), the city is mentioned as the home of one of the kings of the south (Joshua 10), and in the description of the war Eglon is placed between Lachish and Hebron. Consequently, most scholars identify it at Tel 'Eton, which

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is located on the road between these cities. This identification was first suggested by Noth (1953: 95), and is accepted today by most scholars (e.g. Rainey 1980; Dagan 1996; but see Galil 1985). The finds unearthed at the site do not contribute to its identification, but we hope that future finds will allow us to support or refute it.

Past Research

Surrounding the mound is a very large necropolis (some of the tombs are very nicely finished, and include gables, etc.), which has been robbed over the last several decades. The wide-scale robberies led, some 40 years ago, to a few salvage excavations that were carried out at the cemetery by T. Dothan, D. Ussishkin, G. Edelstein, S. Aurant, V. Tzaferis, and O. Hass (Edelstein 1968; Edelstein and Aurant 1992; Edelstein *et al.* 1971; Kloner 1985; Tzaferis 1982a, 1982b; Tzaferis and Hess 1992; Ussishkin 1974; see also Arensburg and Belfer-Cohen 1992; Brewer 1992). The excavated tombs date from the Late Bronze Age to the Roman period. It is worth mentioning a unique Iron Age I tomb which contained beautiful bichrome Philistine pottery (Edelstein and Aurant 1992), an exceptional Iron Age IIA tomb with hundreds of artifacts (excavated by Trude Dothan and prepared for publication by the Tel 'Eton expedition), and an Iron II tomb whose walls contained lion-like engravings (Ussishkin 1974).

Small-scale salvage excavations were conducted at the site itself in 1977 by the Lachish Archaeological Expedition, headed by D. Ussishkin. The excavations in the field, directed by E. Ayalon and R. Bar-Natan, lasted a short time and covered four squares, not far from the top of the *tel*, where a robbery trench had been cut into the mound. Despite the shallowness and the limited extent of the excavations, two well-preserved Iron II levels were identified (Ayalon 1985; Zimhoni 1985).

The Bar-Ilan University (BIU) Expedition

In 2006, the BIU expedition initiated a large-scale excavation project at the mound and a survey of its surroundings.[2] A meticulous survey on the mound preceded the excavations, and this was followed by shovel tests (for those, see Faust 2011; Faust and Katz 2012).

2 The excavations (permit nos. G45/2006, G69/2007, G47/2008, G47/2009, G53/2010, G51/2011 and G59/2012) and the survey (G46/2006, G15/2007, S28/2008, S130/2009, S197/2010, S286/2011 and S363/2012) were directed by Avraham Faust, and the expedition staff included Haya Katz (associate director and ceramic analysis), Ortal Chalaf (assisting in supervising area B, 2007; surveying, 2008; supervising area D, 2009-2012), Pirchia Eyall (registrar, 2007, 2009-2011, supervising area C, 2011-2012, and laboratory coordinator, 2007-2011), Daniel Master (assistance in directing the dig and survey, 2006), Tehila Atkins (supervising area C, 2006-2007), George Pierce (surveying, 2006), Josh Walton (supervising area A, 2006), Aharon Greener (supervising area A, 2007, 2010-2011), Garth Gilmour (supervising area A, 2008), Yonatan Adler (Supervising area A, 2009) Einat Ambar-Armon (assistance in supervising area A, 2006), Naveh Yogev (assisting in supervising area A, 2007), Holly Aller (assisting in supervising

The Excavations

Over the course of the first seven seasons of excavation, we have excavated five areas (Fig. 2). The first (area A) is at the highest point of the mound (near its southern edge); the second (area B) is also located in the upper part of the site (although it is lower topographically and more to the north) and is adjacent to the Lachish expedition excavation trench; the third (area C) is on the northeastern slope of the site; the fourth (area D) is in the western part of the upper mound, where fortifications were unearthed, and the fifth (area E) was opened in the last week of the seventh excavation season, in an attempt to verify the results of a remote sensing survey we conducted at the site.[3]

The History of Tel 'Eton

On the basis of the survey (Faust and Katz 2012), it appears that the first significant settlement at the site was during the Early Bronze Age. A few sherds from the Middle Bronze Age indicate some settlement during that time (no Intermediate Bronze Age sherds were identified in the survey). In the present article, however, we would like to concentrate on the more reliable results of the excavations. We must note, however, that in most places we did not penetrate below the 8th-century destruction layer, and hence our information on earlier periods of occupation is somewhat limited.

3 In the future, we will expand this field into a 'regular' excavation area of course, but the reason for choosing the exact spot was the attempt to verify the results of the remote sensing survey.

Late Bronze Age

The earliest remains uncovered in the excavations were from the second half of the Late Bronze Age. Although in most cases we did not penetrate below the destruction layer of the 8th century BCE, remains from this period were unearthed where the 8th-century remains were removed by later activities (e.g. terracing, see more below), as well as in the few places we cut through the Iron II destruction layer. Thus, in area B Late Bronze remains were unearthed in practically every square in the section in which we dug deep enough, and *in-situ* vessels were discovered even in square BB46 (Fig. 3), the most western square in our section (and lowermost down the slope). Furthermore, in square V46, which is our deepest probe so far, the Late Bronze Age remains are about 3 m. thick (and we did not even reach the beginning of this era). Toward the end of the 7th season, there were even hints for Late Bronze occupation in area C, toward the northernmost edge of the mound. All this seems to indicate that the Late Bronze age settlement was large and dense.

The evidence regarding the end of the Late Bronze Age hints that the settlement was destroyed (based on the *in-situ* vessels discovered in sq. BB46 (Fig. 3), and perhaps on the massive layer of burnt mudbricks in sq. V46), but we must wait for more data before any definite conclusion can be reached.

When examined within the broader settlement system of the southern Shephelah and the southern Hebron Hill-Country (Faust *et al*. *forthcoming*) it is clear that Tel 'Eton was part of the settlement system of the Shephelah, and not of that of the Hebron Highlands. The examination of the various finds, including petrographic analysis, seems to indicate that the city did not have much interregional connections, and that it interacted only with its immediate neighbors in the southern trough valley, i.e. sites like the nearby Tel Halif in the northern Negev and Lachish in the southern Shephelah. As for the status of Tel 'Eton within the Late Bronze Age political system, the situation is quite complex. The issue is discussed at length elsewhere (Faust *et al*. *forthcoming*), but in the present context we can note that it appears as if the site was either subordinated to Lachish or was independent during part of this era.

Iron Age I

Remains from Iron Age I were unearthed on top of the Late Bronze Age layer. The assemblage exhibits clear continuities with Late Bronze Age ceramic forms in the region, but includes also some bichrome Philistine pottery. This suggests some connection with the coastal plain. However, these finds were uncovered mainly in a limited area (two squares only; V46 and W46), and therefore any conclusions should await further excavations (one should remember that in the large necropolis to the west of the mound a large tomb was excavated in 1968, in which more Philistine bichrome vessels were uncovered; Edelstein and Aurant 1992).

The Shephelah was quite empty during the Iron Age I, and the settlement at Tel 'Eton is part of a small group of sites which existed in the Iron I in the trough valley. The evidence (pottery analysis, petrography, etc.) suggest that Tel 'Eton had only limited interaction with its vicinity (Faust *et al. forthcoming*), and given the above background it appears that the site interacted mainly with sites like Tell Beit Mirsim and Tel Halif.

The exact historical situation in the region is discussed at length elsewhere (Faust 2012; Faust and Katz 2011; Faust *et al. forthcoming*) and suffice it here to say that various lines of evidence suggest that Tel 'Eton and the other sites in the southern trough valley formed a small Canaanite enclave between the Israelites in the highlands and the Philistines in the coastal plain.

Iron Age IIA

Finds (mainly pottery) from Iron Age IIA (including the transitional period from Iron I) were unearthed in a limited area in area B (U47, W46, AA46), as well as in areas C (sq. X86) and D (Z33).

The data on this era is still limited, and we will therefore not attempt to divide it between its various phases. The data, however, suggests that the settlement was quite large, covering most of the mound.

Tel 'Eton seems to have been part of a larger process in which the Shephelah gradually became Judahite. Many new sites were established, and the existing sites, like Tel 'Eton, were 'swallowed' by Judah, and its inhabitants gradually assimilated into Judahite society.

Iron Age IIB

Most of the remains in the excavations and in the survey are from Iron Age IIB (8th century BCE). So far we have uncovered about 900 sq. m. from this era (after the seventh season), and remains were uncovered in practically every excavation area (and in most squares).

Among the finds, one should mention parts of a number of dwellings in area A, including what we call the governor's residency. This is a large long house (Fig. 4 and 5), probably built following the four room plan which is typical of this era, and whose ground floor covers some 250 sq. m. Most of the structure was excavated, including a large yard and a system of rooms to its north, west and south. The building was very nicely built, including ashlar stones in the corners and openings. Hundreds of artifacts were unearthed within the debris, including a wide range of pottery vessels, loom weights, parts of many metal objects, botanical remains (many still in the vessels), as well as many arrowheads, evidence of the battle which accompanied the conquest of the site by the Assyrians. It is noteworthy to mention a small collection of bullae/

sealings (Faust and Eshel 2012) that were unearthed within the building, indicating its significance.

A part of another residential neighborhood was discovered in the upper part of area B, where parts of at least four structures were unearthed, along with many finds including dozens of artifacts.

A fortification system, along with a street and parts of additional structures were exposed in area D (Fig. 6), and some installations were excavated in area C.

It appears that violent destruction (Fig. 7) occurred when the town was conquered by the Assyrians in the late 8th century. The excellent preservation of the structures and their content, which includes dozens of complete and intact vessels along with many additional finds, opens many venues for research. First and foremost, it allows for a detailed chronological analysis. The exact dating within the late 8th century of the Assyrian destruction in the Shephelah is currently debated, with some scholars suggesting that the major destruction took place earlier than Sennacherib's campaign (Blakely and Hardin 2002). Others support the traditional date of 701 BCE (Finkelstein and Naaman 2004). The detailed evidence from Tel 'Eton (Fig. 8) enables a thorough examination of this question, which is discussed at great length elsewhere (Katz and Faust 2012). Suffice it here to state that although there are some features which suggest an earlier date for the destruction of Tel 'Eton (e.g. the high percentage of hand burnish and the lack of the *lmlk* seal impressions), the weight of evidence still supports a date at the very end of the 8th century, i.e. Sennacherib's campaign is still the most likely agent for the destruction.

We should also note that the finds will allow for a detailed study of the use of space in Iron Age dwellings, but this is beyond the scope of the present article.

The importance of Tel 'Eton at the time is also evidenced by the find of a small collection of bullae/sealings within the large building (governor's residency) in area A. Although bullae are common in the 7th century, they are, surprisingly, quite rare in the 8th-century destruction levels in Judah. The finding of the small collection is therefore an indication that the site was a relatively important center (see also Faust and Eshel 2012). The small collection from Tel 'Eton is also important for understanding the development of administration in Judah, as it presents us with a relatively unknown phase within this developmental scale (Faust 2010).

The size of the site (some 60 dunams), the relatively high percentage of non-local pottery (as compared with the finds in other sites, above), along with additional finds such as the only 8th-century collection of bullae and seal impressions discovered in Judah, and the unique characteristics of the governor's residency (where the bullae were unearthed) seem to indicate that the site had a central role within the Judahite settlement system and administration (Faust *et al. forthcoming*). Elsewhere we suggested that perhaps the highlands were the center of administration, and the Shephelah was only the periphery, and that as a result of Tel 'Eton's location in the trough valley, it was more central than most other sites in the Shephelah, as well as playing a prominent role within the administrative structure of Judah (Faust 2010; also Faust 2011: 221).

Iron Age IIC and the Persian Period

After the massive Assyrian destruction of the city in the late 8th century, it was not rebuilt as a city (sharing the fate of most sites in the Shephelah; Faust 2008). We do have limited evidence of reoccupation in some parts of the city, on top of the ruins, but this is not only limited in scope but also represents a short episode that occurred immediately after the destruction. We must note that no pottery dated with any certainty to the 7th century was uncovered at the site. Clearly, Tel 'Eton suffered greatly as a result of Sennacherib's campaign. The gap in the occupation of the site continued through the 6th and probably also the 5th centuries BCE.

Late Persian and Early Hellenistic Settlement

Although settlement in the late Persian and early Hellenistic periods was much more limited than that of Iron Age II, it appears that it was extensive and covered large parts of the site, including some of the lower terraces, where many of the finds were found *in-situ*. The architectural finds include a large fort in area A (Fig. 9), reuse of buildings in area B, pits (areas B and C; Fig. 10) and more.

On the basis of the pottery and a few carbon 14 dates, as well as a few ostraca (dated on the basis of paleography), we tentatively date this settlement to the 4th century BCE, and it might have existed also into the 3rd century BCE.

The southern trough valley was at the time part of Idumaea, and although we know very little about the formation and history of this political unit, it appears that Tel 'Eton was a central site in this region, with a fort surrounded by a large village.

Later Activity at Tel 'Eton

The findings in the topsoil also include a few later sherds, but these do not seem to indicate real settlement. We cannot rule out, of course, that there was a farmstead or something of the like on the mound, but it appears that there was no real settlement after the 3rd century B.C.E. It appears that during the Byzantine period much of the site was used for agriculture, and it seems to us that much of the current form of the mound is a result of agricultural terracing activity conducted at the time. The available evidence from the various parts of the mound suggests that the people who built the terraces changed the shape of the site, moving earth around to create their desired pattern (Faust 2011; Faust and Katz 2012).

Summary

The available evidence suggests that Tel 'Eton was a central site in the area between the highlands and the Shephelah. The site was relatively central during the Late Bronze Age, and continued to be an important Canaanite center during Iron Age I. During Iron Age II, the site became Judahite, and in the 8th century BCE served as an administrative center, until its destruction by the Assyrians (probably by Sennacherib). Despite some limited attempts at resettlement, the site was abandoned until the 4th century BCE when a fort was erected on the top of the site, surrounded by a large village. The settlement existed for a number of decades, after which the site was abandoned and not resettled.

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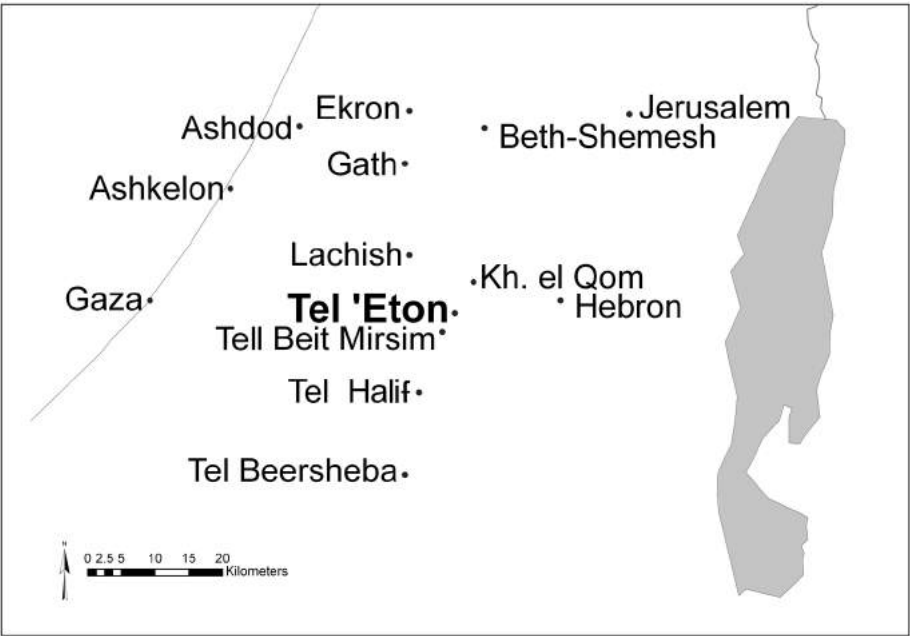   Mirsim and Arad assemblages: in *Tel Aviv* 12, pp. 63-90.

Fig. 1: A schematic map showing the location of Tel 'Eton.

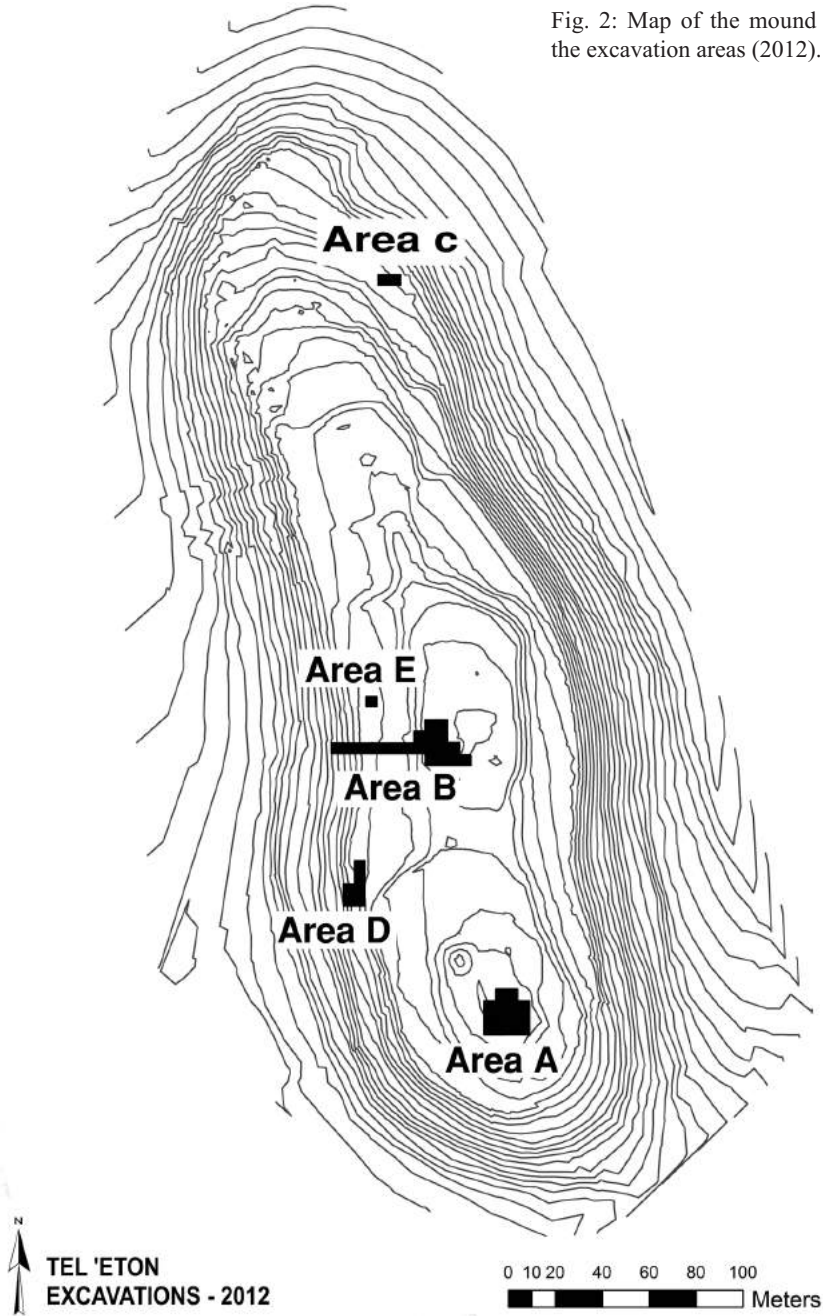Fig. 2: Map of the mound with the excavation areas (2012).
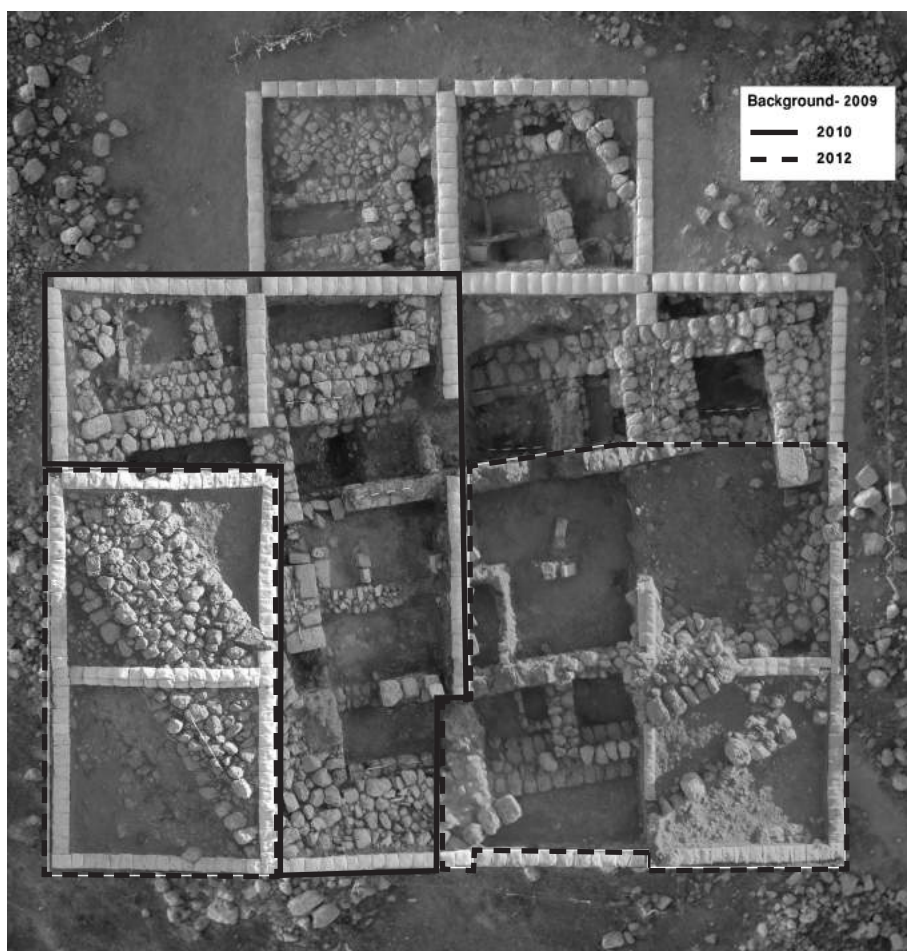
Fig. 3: *In-situ* Late Bronze Age vessels (square BB46).

Fig. 4: A composite aerial photograph showing the governor's residency (Area A) after the 2012 season.
(Photographs by Sky View)
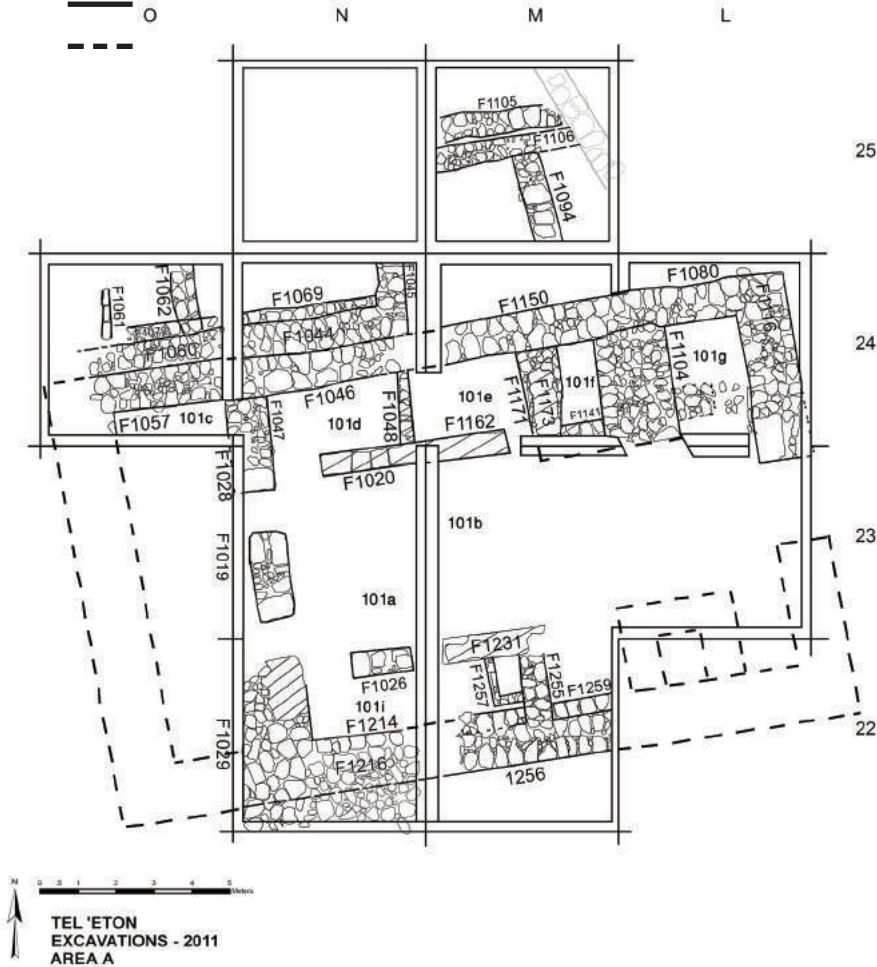
Fig. 5: Reconstructions of the governor's residency (Area A) after the 2011 season.

Fig. 6: Composite photograph of the fortifications and the adjacent buildings (Area D).
(Photographs by Sky view)

Fig. 7: The Assyrian destruction in Area B (square S48).
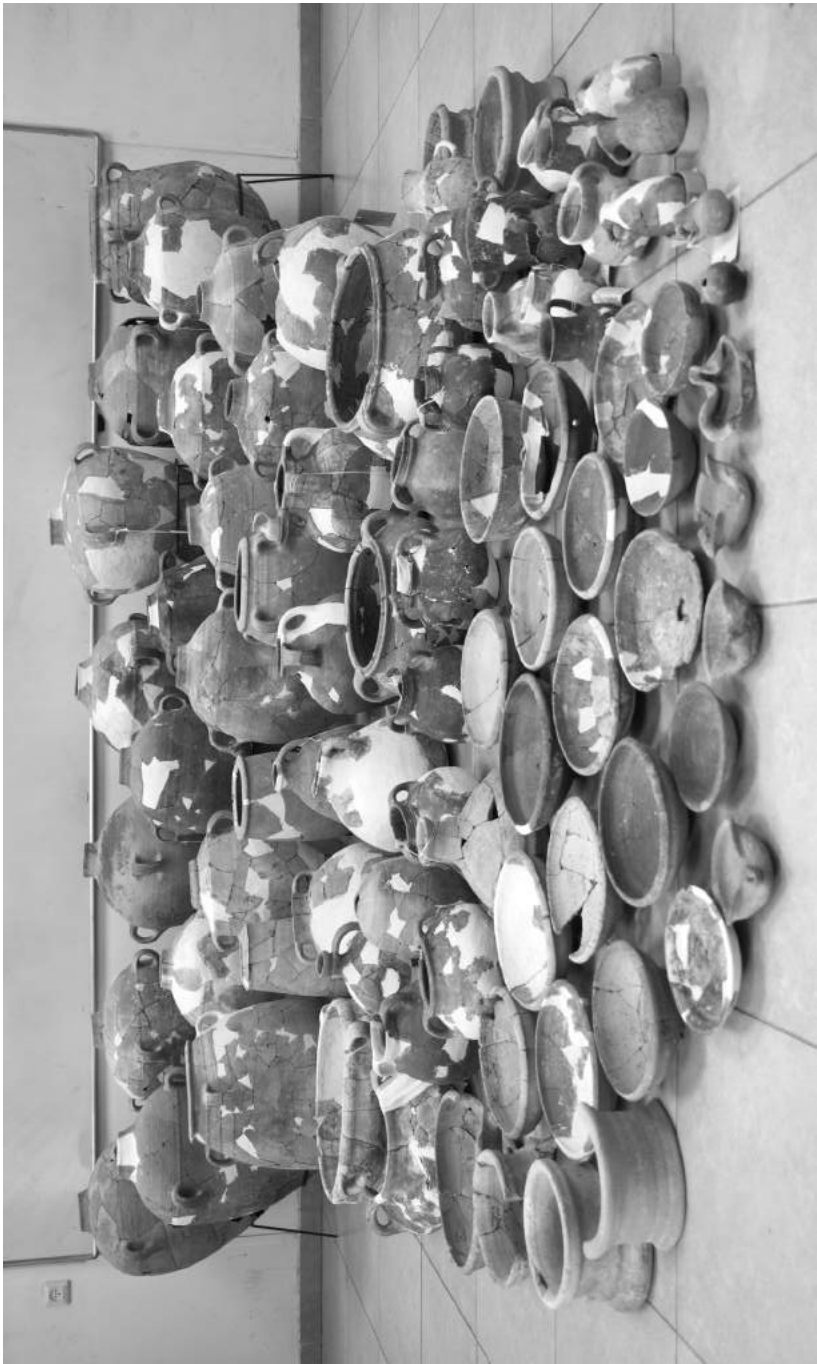
Fig. 8: Photograph of the ceramic assemblage from the destruction layer (after the fifth season).
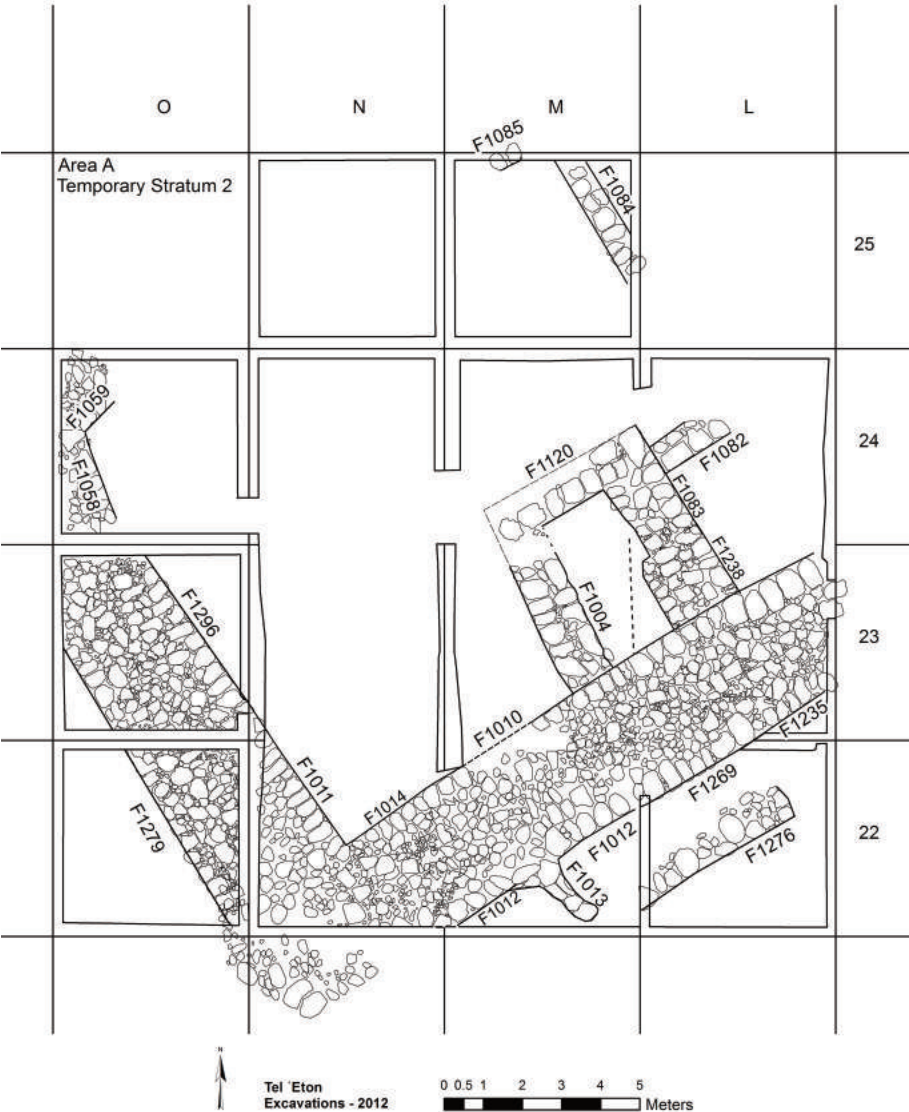
Fig. 9: A plan showing the excavated parts of the Persian-Hellenistic fort (Area A).
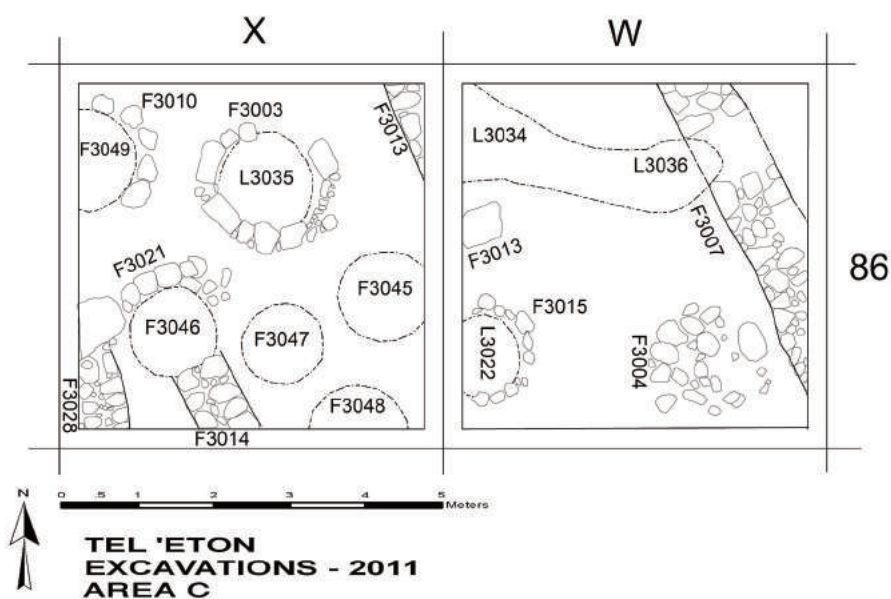
Fig. 10: A plan of the Late Persian – Early Hellenistic period pits in Area C[4].