



Archaeological Excavations at Khirbet Beit Bassa, Palestine

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Khirbet Beit Bassa, location East, 2018. Photograph by the author.

Khirbet Beit Bassa is located on a hilltop that rises to 670 m above sea level and overlooks the surrounding terrain in all directions. The total area of the site is about 40,000 m² (ten acres) and lies about 3 km southeast of Bethlehem's historic town center. The site is surrounded by a number of other archaeological sites, including Khirbet Hendaza, Khirbet Beit Ta'mar, the Herodion, the traditional Shepherd's Fields, and the Church of the Nativity (fig. 1). The occupation history of the vicinity of the khirbet is dated to the Early Bronze Age through the Ottoman period. The khirbet is distinguished by its relatively large size and raised elevation. The site was most likely a small village during the Roman period, flourished during the Byzantine era, then declined during the Islamic period. We believe that khirbet Beit Bassa reached its zenith during the Byzantium era is due to its very close location to at least three major archaeological sites and features that played a distinguished role in the early Christian, namely, *Siyer al-Ghanam*, *Kanisat al Rawat*, and the Church of the Nativity.

The name Khirbet Beit Bassa is probably related to the “*bet bazi*” mentioned in 1 Macc 9:60–73. The name is likely related to the Arabic word *bassa*, meaning shiny (or flashy, sparkly), as suggested by Ibn Manthour 2005, 2: 95). Conder and Kitchner, in their 1883 *Survey of Western Palestine* (87) refer to the site as

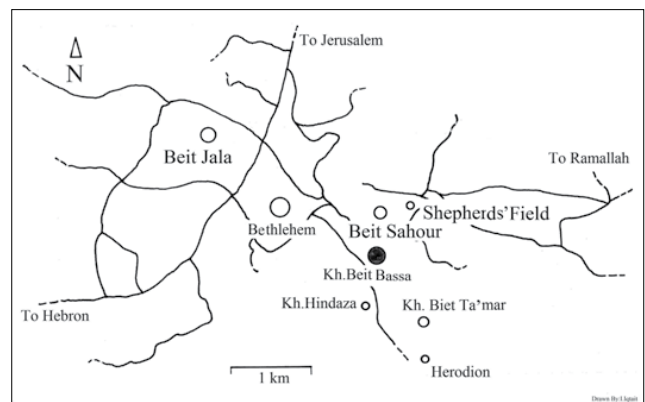


Figure 1. The location of Beit Bassa. Drawing by Ibrahim Iqtait.

Bir Beit Bassa (*bir* meaning spring or fountain); this name might have come from the existence of a huge cistern in the *khirbet*. Finally, the site is known to the local residents of Bethlehem and its environs as Beit Yesseh.

The following study consists of three parts: (1) Outlining the objectives and methodology of this research project; (2) assessing the site; and, finally, (3) presenting the results of both the old and new fieldwork, including recommendations for its future preservation.

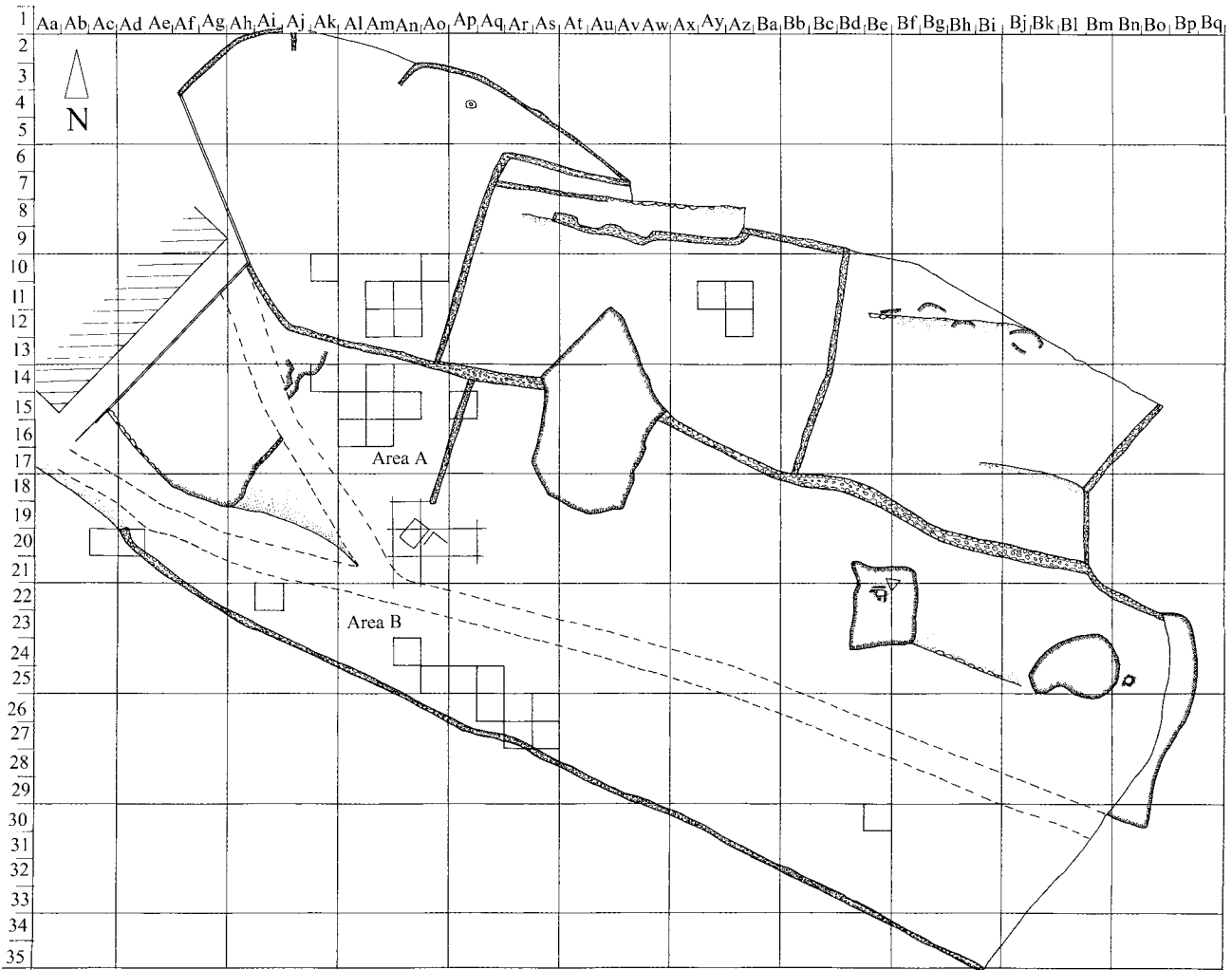


Figure 2. Site plan of Khirbet Beit Bassa. Drawing by Ibrahim Iqtait.

Objectives and Methodology

The excavation project at Khirbet Beit Bassa has three main goals: (1) Exploring the occupational history of the site and highlighting its various architectural landmarks as a preliminary step to developing and opening it up as an archaeological park. (2) Providing students at the Institute of Archaeology of Al Quds University with training in the techniques of archaeological fieldwork, as required by the program of study. (3) Raising awareness among the local community about the value of the site and its material remains, which forms part of the Palestinian cultural identity, and thereby highlighting the importance of its protection and conservation.

Before the team embarked on the first archaeological excavation season, we carried out a network mapping of the site. Its area was divided into numerous excavation squares, each measuring 5×5 m, and each square was given a name that consists of two letters and a number (fig. 2). An unexcavated margin of 50 cm was left around each square (i.e., 1 m balks) for short-term preservation of the stratigraphic profile, while also allowing movement of the team throughout the site. In addition, for

the purpose of leveling, we defined a central datum point at the highest elevation within the site, and several subpoints in areas scheduled to be excavated.

I also conducted various personal interviews with the owners of nearby land and with individuals known to have conducted illegal excavations at the site.

Site Assessment

The parcels comprising Khirbet Beit Bassa are considered private lands, owned by ten different individuals. Until recently, they used to grow winter crops there such as wheat, barley, and legumes; fig, olive, and almond trees are planted and harvested on the hill's northern slope. As a result of the annual cultivation of Khirbet Beit Bassa, which has been going on for several centuries, farmers have cleaned its surface of larger scattered stones and reused them in constructing retaining walls to prevent soil erosion and to define their property boundaries.

During recent decades, the *khirbet* has been exposed to various types of destruction and vandalism, either as a result of urban development or from illegal excavation activities that were



Figure 3. Al Taweel building in the west part of the Khirbet Beit Bassa. Photograph by the author.



Figure 4. External wall destruction by a bulldozer. Photograph by the author.

carried out in search for precious cultural materials. Furthermore, the construction of a 5 m-wide road through the middle of the *khirbet* and other works of urban development have caused serious damage to the site. One of the most blatant intrusions was committed by one of the land owners in 1994, when he built a large residential structure in the western part of the site without first obtaining a permit. This edifice, known as the Al-Taweel Building, consists of twelve floors, each with four apartments. In addition to the physical damage caused by the construction, this building has obscured the westward vista from the hilltop site (fig. 3).

Based on previously collected information, a winepress and part of the *khan* were located where this building now stands. The Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities arrested the owner of this building for causing damage to the site and held him for fifteen days, but in the end it issued the required permits.

The most recent encroachment on the site was committed in 2014, when another land owner bulldozed his property using heavy machinery, again without first obtaining a building permit. As a result, parts of the ancient defensive wall that surrounds the site was demolished (fig. 4), not to mention the destruction of the related archaeological layers with their cultural materials.

Between the years 1987 and 1994, groups of antiquities looters carried out considerable illegal excavation work in various parts of the *khirbet*, causing serious damage to a number of ancient stone constructions, and also leaving behind many open holes throughout the site. I conducted personal interviews with three people who used to engage in this illegal work. After guaranteeing the confidentiality of their personal details, I asked them the following questions:

- How many times have you dug, and when?
- Have you found any cultural materials, and what did they consist of?
- How did you deal with the recovered materials?
- What methods did you use in carrying out your digs, and what special equipment did you use?

One of the individuals (aged 65) said he was working with four other individuals on the site for various periods, and that they found many coins of the Roman and Byzantine periods, in addition to a few glass bottles that were found in the tombs that were situated in the eastern part of the site. He also mentioned that they used a metal detector, and that all of the archaeological materials they found were sold to an antiquities dealer from Bethlehem.

The second person I interviewed (aged 68) is a land owner in the *khirbet*,

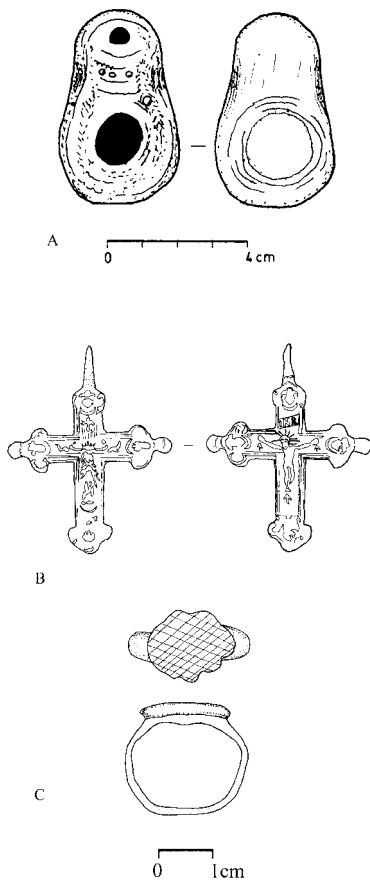


Figure 5. a. A Roman lamp, b. a cross, c. a ring, all found in Khirbet Beit Bassa. Drawing by Ibrahim Iqtait.

who said that he found some antique artifacts in the course of routine work on his land, located in the center of the site. Recovered materials that I was allowed to view in person included an oil lamp belonging to the Roman period (fig. 5a); a bronze crucifix bearing the letters “INRI,” plus other floral and geometric designs embossed on the reverse (fig. 5b); a bronze ring decorated with geometric designs (fig. 5c); metal nails; and a ceramic tobacco pipe that belongs to the late Ottoman period. He added that a girl who lives in a nearby village found a piece of gold while grazing her sheep, and that it was sold to a jeweler from Bethlehem for 100 Jordanian dinars. When I asked the man about the people who

conduct illegal excavation at the site, he said that he frequently observed three or four persons working together, using a metal detector.

The third person I interviewed (aged 64) said that in 1988, he worked in one of the rock-cut tombs with three other people for one night only. There, they found many pieces of pottery sherds and two pottery oil lamps with crosses on them, materials they sold to an antiquities dealer from Hebron city for 100 Israeli shekels.

As a result of these factors—cultivation of fields, illegal looting activity, and ill-advised urban development—Khirbet Beit Bassa has lost forever many of its archaeological landmarks and much valuable historical information that was once embedded among the site’s rich cultural layers and materials.

Excavations Prior to 2008

Conder and Kitchener surveyed the site in 1881; referred to it as “Bir Beit Bassa” (see above); and documented remains of a *khan*, several cisterns, and tombs (Conder and Kitchener 1883, 3: 87). Al-Dabbagh mentions Khirbet Beit Bassa in a publication (in Arabic): “Khirbet Beit Bassa is located to the south of Bethlehem, rising 676 meters above sea level. The site was known during the Roman period as ‘Bethbezan.’ The site contains ruined

walls and subterranean rock-cut tombs” (2002–2003: 453, trans. by the author). In 1992, a rescue excavation was conducted at the site by the Israeli Civil Administration’s staff officer for antiquities. Yuval Baroukh and Ibrahim Makharzeh were responsible for this work, in which they excavated a subterranean rock-cut tomb that is dated to the Roman period (Barouch and Shroc 1996: 147–48).

In 1996, the Palestinian Department of Antiquities (Bethlehem Office) conducted a salvage excavation at the request of one of the site owners, for the purpose of obtaining a building permit. During this work, they unearthed an entire ancient building, however the findings of this excavated area have not been published thus far. In an interview with Mr. Khaled Al-Baw, the person who did the excavation, he stated, “We have found a rectangular building that consists of several rooms, built with large, regular stones directly upon the natural bedrock. The thickness of the remaining external walls is 1.4 m.” He added that this building is dated to the Roman period, as determined from pottery fragments found and associated with it. As a result of this work and due to the presence of archaeological remains in this land parcel, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities did not issue the requested building permit.

Excavation Undertaken in 2008

In 2008, using a bulldozer, the landowners of Khirbet Beit Bassa constructed a 5 m-wide road that crosses the southern part of the *khirbet*. In the course of this work, a mosaic pavement was uncovered. Therefore, the Palestinian Ministry of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage conducted a salvage excavation at this location and discovered part of a Byzantine winepress; the findings of this excavation work have not as yet been published. The winepress is part of the archaeological site now supervised and managed by me and we have recently (2015) worked to complete its excavation and to examine the mosaic floors in order to determine their historical periods and the pavement techniques employed.

In 2015, I also conducted an interview with Mr. Jihad Yasin, Director General of Archaeological Excavations and Museums at the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, regarding access to the ministry’s archives. Unfortunately however, I was unable to gain access to any information related to the 2008 salvage excavation. I conducted another interview with Mr. Nabil Khatib, director of the Department of Antiquities of the Bethlehem District at that time, who had carried out the 2008 salvage excavation in which the winepress was discovered. He informed me that the excavation findings were neither researched nor published, but he agreed to the inclusion of the winepress in this paper, especially as it is such an integral part of the archaeological site.

The Winepress

This installation is located on the southwestern slope of the site, directly north of the road that was constructed in 2008, and about 65 m to the east of the Al-Taweel Building mentioned above. Whereas the major portion of the winepress was

discovered in 2008, a smaller section was excavated by the author in 2015. The winepress consists of four rooms, and is part of a large complex in which one room contains two rock-hewn vats. Based on architectural evidence, this winepress has undergone two structural stages.

The first (and most recent) section consists of a pressing basin, located in a room (Room 1) that is flanked by two side rooms (rooms 2 and 3). The pressing/treading process was carried out in this central room that measures 4.20×3.80 m. The remains of the walls are built of cut stones of different sizes that are laid as regular horizontal courses and set with mortar. The extant height of these walls rises to 1.5 m. The basin's floor is paved with plain white tesserae, and there is a pierced, rectangular stone block set in the middle, slightly raised above the level of the surrounding mosaic. The stone has a carved hole in the center, measuring $35 \times 60 \times 40$ cm, which served as a socket to fix the wooden column that was once used in the pressing process.

To the east of the pressing basin we found another room (Room 2) with dimensions of 4×3.80 m, whose floor has been completely destroyed.

On the opposite side, to the west of the treading basin, we found a room (Room 3), whose western parts we found fully destroyed as well. The surviving (eastern) part of the floor in Room 3 is made up of white mosaic cubes, $1 \times 1.5 \times 1.5$ cm in size on average. In the northeastern corner of Room 3, there is a circular basin set into the floor, 40 cm in diameter and 20 cm deep.

From the middle of the southern wall of the pressing basin (Room 1), a 1.2 m long and 15 cm wide channel—built from medium-sized stones and coated with a layer of plaster that is mixed with small stones—leads to the rock-hewn vat where the juice was collected (Room 4), located directly south of Room 1. The older, original elements of the winepress are immediately evident in Room 4. The northern section of this room was discovered intact; the southern part, however, had mostly been destroyed during the 2008 construction of the road that cuts through the site. The dimensions of the surviving parts of this room are 3.6 m east–west and 4.3 m north–south. The wall construction is similar to that in Room 1. Here, however, there are two mosaic floors,

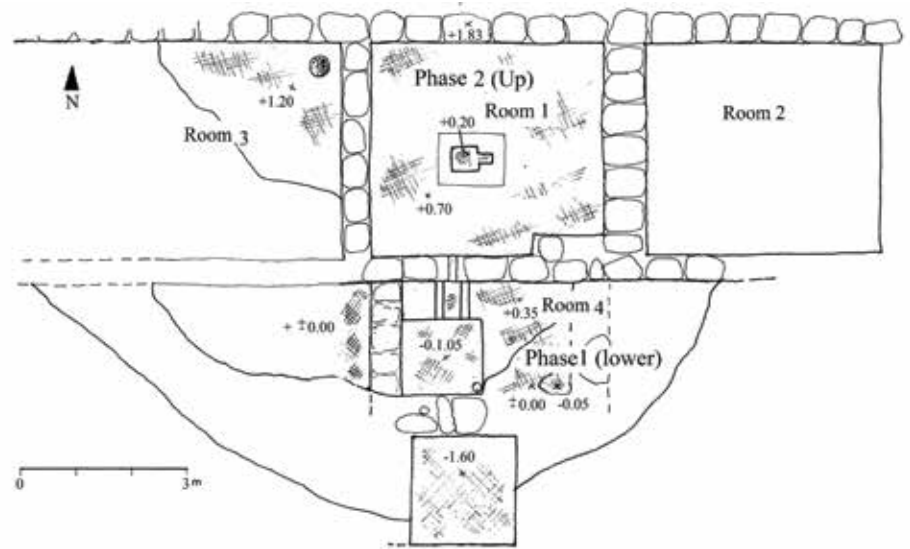
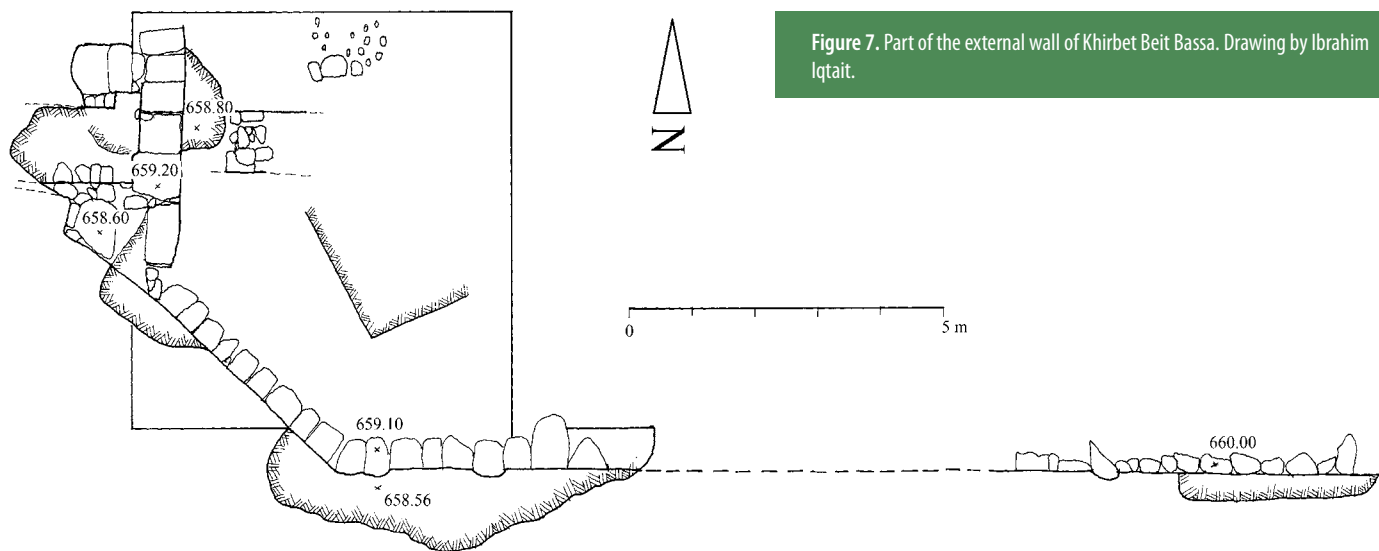


Figure 6. The winepress. Drawing by Ibrahim Iqtait; photograph by the author.

one above the other, which indicates two distinct structural phases. The upper mosaic floor consists of white cubes that are laid out over three layers that consist of (from top to bottom) a mortar matrix, a stone pavement, and a deposit of soil mixed with medium-sized stones. The surface of the upper mosaic floor lies about 35 cm below the floor level of the adjacent treading basin, and the older mosaic floor lies approximately 35 cm below the level of the upper mosaic floor. Similar to the upper mosaic, the lower mosaic consists of white stone cubes, but these are smaller than those of the upper level. The most recent collecting vat in Room 4 is located in its northern part, square in shape (1.5×1.5 m), and 1.05 m deep; it is carved into the natural bedrock and contains remains of a 5 cm thick layer of plaster on the internal walls. Based on our manual analysis in the field, we found that this plaster layer consists of lime, natural and artificial aggregation, charcoal, pottery sherds, and grog.

Room 4 contains, besides the mentioned collecting vat, another vat that belongs to an older construction period. The collecting vat from the first (older) structural phase is located in the southern part of Room 4, while the original, mosaic-paved surface in the northern part of the room—mostly destroyed or covered by the alterations of the second phase—would have served as the treading floor. Our excavations also revealed remains of a low wall that once separated the original treading area from its adjacent collecting vat. This wall was built from stones similar to those used

Figure 7. Part of the external wall of Khirbet Beit Bassa. Drawing by Ibrahim Iqtait.



in the construction of Rooms 1, 2, and 3. The older collecting vat is carefully carved into the natural bedrock, with dimensions of 1.85×1.85 m, at a depth of 1.55 m; its walls are coated with lime plaster, and its floor is covered with white mosaic as well.

Based on the analytical study of the architectural remains of the winepress, we can argue that its construction went through two distinct structural phases. The oldest phase included only Room 4, which contained a mosaic-paved treading floor and the southernmost juice-collection vat. During the more-recent, second structural phase, an enlarged winepress facility was built that reused the older space (Room 4), but added a new collection vat and pavement, and furthermore expanded also structurally to include the three rooms to the north: Rooms 1, 2, and 3 (fig. 6)

Based on my study and analysis the remains of the different architectural elements of the winepress, the identification its two structural phases, and considering also the pottery fragments that I found in the winepress, I can affirm the following:

- The mosaic cubes of the first and second structural phases differ from each other in size. We note that the number of mosaic cubes per 100 m^2 of floor area amounts to twenty-eight pieces in the first phase and to only twenty pieces in the second phase.
- In Room 4, the level of the mosaic floor from the second phase lies 35 cm above the floor of the first phase.
- There is a difference in the size and volume of the two collecting vats. The vat from the older phase has a volume of 5.3 cubic m ($1.55 \times 1.85 \times 1.85$ m), while the vat that belongs to the second phase holds only 2.3 m^3 ($1.05 \times 1.5 \times 1.5$ m).

The Pressing Technique

It was impossible to reconstruct the complete, original configuration of Room 4, due to the room's partial destruction and because a large section of it is covered by the upper mosaic floor and the new collecting vat from the second phase. Thus, we could not definitively establish the pressing technique that was employed in the first phase. However, lacking any evidence of a

mechanical press, we have used the term "treading floor." During the second phase, however, the process clearly involved (at least in part) a screw-type press with an upright, spiral-carved wooden column that was fixed at the bottom into the above-mentioned slot in the rectangular stone that is set into the floor at the center of the pressing basin (Room 1).

This process of pressing was done by placing bunches of grapes in baskets or fabric bags, which were then stacked in layers around the spiral column and within a wooden cylinder. The screw mechanism was turned by wooden handles, creating the pressing action. (Such screw presses sometimes augmented the crushing of grapes by foot, to extract the maximum amount of juice.) All of the extracted juice drained onto the pressing basin floor, which slopes down towards the collecting vat in Room 4, passing first through the channel that penetrates the shared wall of Rooms 1 and 4. We can see clear evidence of the spiral column (screw-press) technique also in the floors of Khirbet Shuwayka (Al-Houdalieh 2005), Saffa (Al-Houdalieh 2010: 184–85), Aiyalon (Hirschfeld 1983: 211–15, figs. 5, 7), Khirbet Duran (Roll and Ayalon 1981: 111–15, figs. 2, 7), Khirbet Yajuz (Khalil and Al-Nammari 2000), and Khirbet Kafr Qari (Sion 1991: 117, fig. 130), as well as at the Jerjis, Saint Lout, and Broqobios churches in Khirbet Al-Makhiat, all of which belong to the sixth century c.e. (Piccirillo 1992: 177–84).

Based on a comparison of this winepress structure and its pressing technique with other similar installations, in addition to an analysis of the pottery fragments found in the collecting vat, we can say that the construction of this winepress dates to the Byzantine period, and that it remained in use until the beginning of the Umayyad period.

Archaeological Excavations Undertaken in the Summer of 2009

The Archaeological excavation work in the 2009 season was carried out under my supervision, with the participation of thirty-five team members: twenty-six students from the Institute of Archaeology at Al Quds University, a draftsman, a guard, six

square supervisors, besides myself. The excavation season extended over thirty days, during which time the team focused on two locations, designated Areas A and B (located 45 m distant from each other). Excavation was carried out in sixteen squares until the natural bedrock surface was reached: seven squares in Area A and nine squares in Area B (fig. 2). Soil accumulations in these squares averaged between 20 and 90 cm in thickness, reaching up to 2 m in some places. The total excavated area in the two locations (A+B) amounts to about 390 m².

Area A

In Area A, we could not find any architectural remains in five of the seven squares. Soil accumulations here ranged between 20 and 50 cm and contained two cultural soil layers: the upper is loose and grayish, containing plant roots and scattered stones; the lower layer is yellowish-white and compact, containing a few small- and medium-sized stones in addition to scattered, detached mosaic cubes. The reason for the lack of any architectural remnants in the five squares may be the fact that they are located on a rather steep slope, in an area that was used as an agricultural zone for many years. In the remaining two squares in Area A, however, we found remains of a wall that was built directly on bedrock and from roughly shaped stones that on average were 30 cm high and 80 cm wide. Set into this wall is a doorway, 80 cm wide, with a stone pavement at the outside. An analysis of the pottery fragments in these two squares indicates that they belong to the third to sixth centuries C.E.

Area B

Nine squares were excavated down to bedrock in Area B. Three cultural layers were found in each square. The upper layer consisted of loose gray soil, 25 cm thick on average and containing random, differently sized stones, plant roots, and mixed cultural materials that belong to various time periods. The middle layer consisted of a compact reddish-brown soil, 50 cm thick on average and containing scattered stones and various cultural materials, including pottery sherds, metal objects, and shells, among others. The bottom layer consisted of loose reddish-brown soil that contained scattered stones and a few pottery sherds.

The excavations in this area brought to light first, an east-west oriented wall segment that had survived to a height of only one course, built directly on the bedrock. It appears in three squares, where the remains of a possible tower, attached to the outer part of this wall, have been found. The thickness of the wall reached approximately 1.3 m, and the total length of its angled three segments was approximately 12 m. It was built with stones of various sizes and shapes—except for the possible tower, which was constructed with regularly shaped stones. In the excavation to the east, a continuation of the east-west wall segment was found, showing the same construction method and type of stones. This wall, which was subsequently strongly affected by agricultural activities, marked the southern limit of the excavated area. In 2014, the owner of the land on which

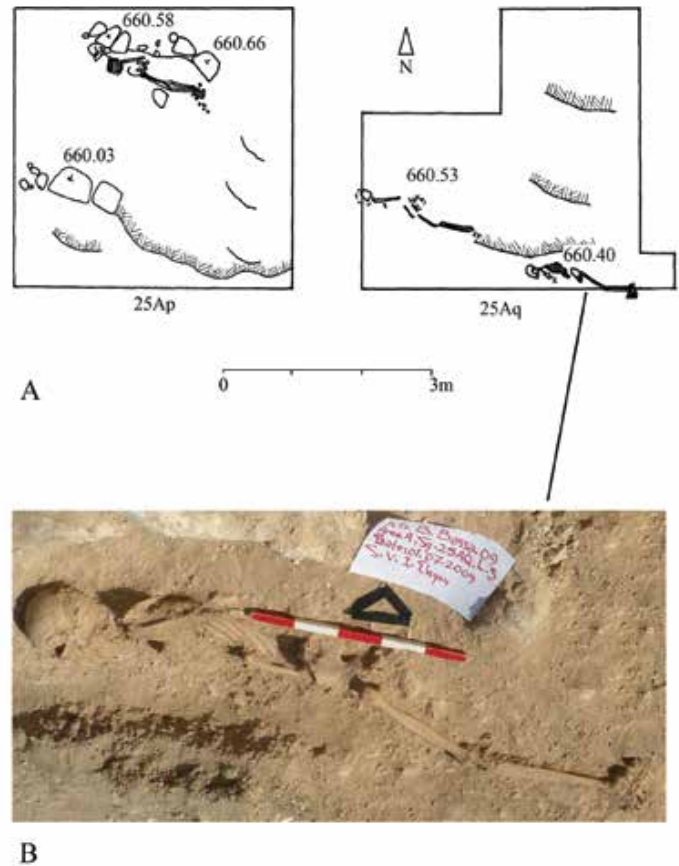


Figure 8. A: Graves exposed; B: One of the skeletons from the Muslim cemetery. Drawing by Ibrahim Iqtait; photograph by the author.

the wall had been discovered proceeded to bulldoze a wide area of his land, including the remains of the wall extension. He was prevented from further work after I visited the site. After obtaining permission from the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, I then conducted a salvage excavation in the recently affected area, in which I found the wall's natural extension to the northwest (fig. 7).

In addition, three ground graves were discovered. Two of them were found in square 25AQ, and the third in square 25AP. The first grave, which had been carved into the natural bedrock surface, was discovered in the southeastern part of square 25AQ and was 2 m long × 80 cm wide × 60 cm deep. The second grave was found near the first grave in the same square, to the northwest, and shows the same characteristics. The third grave was found 3 m northwest of the second grave, and it differs from the other two in that it was built *upon* the bedrock using medium-sized stones, rather than being a rock-hewn feature. Graves 1 and 3 were found intact, without any damage, while Grave 2 had been partially destroyed. A single skeleton was found in each of the three graves, with the bodies oriented east-west and devoid of any funerary attachments. Further, in each instance the head was directed toward the west, and the face turned toward the south (Mecca). Based upon these orientations—of the graves themselves and the heads and faces of the



Figure 9. Residential area. Drawing by Ibrahim Iqtait.

interred—we can conclude that these burials belong to a Muslim cemetery (fig. 8).

From our reading of the pottery fragments found in Area B, we can conclude that the site's occupation dates from the first through the tenth centuries C.E. (Ibrahim and Jose 2015: 9–10).

Archaeological Excavations Undertaken in the Summer of 2010

Thirty-five students participated in the 2010 archaeological excavation season in addition to two square supervisors and three paid workers. The team worked in nine squares.

In 2010, a residential building was discovered consisting of five rooms, separated by an internal central corridor. The eastern part of the building comprises three rooms: The main room (Room 1) is rectangular, with internal dimensions of 2.15 m × 3.5 m. The western wall has a doorway that is 80 cm wide. The maximum surviving height of this room's walls, built of regularly shaped stones, is 90 cm. It is obvious that originally there was also an entrance in the eastern wall of Room 1, which was blocked at some later time. It is likely that the three eastern/northeastern, partially unearthed rooms were reused during the Umayyad period, since part of a pottery oil lamp belonging to that era was found in an undisturbed layer associated with this wall. The blocked doorway leads to Room 2 (to the east of Room 1), with internal dimensions of 3.7 m long × 1.5 m wide, at least. Room 3 is located to the north of Room 1, and is partially excavated.

On the western side of the corridor, two rooms—Rooms 4 and 5—were partially unearthed. Room 4 has internal dimensions



Figure 10. Photograph of the residential area. Photograph by the author.

within the square of 2.2 m (the full eastern wall), 1.3 m (partial northern wall), and 1.5 m (partial southern wall); the northern and southern walls extend westward into the adjacent (as-yet unexcavated) squares. The entrance to this room, an 80 cm-wide doorway, is located in the eastern wall. Room 5 is larger than room 4: 3.7 m (eastern wall) and 1.5 m (partial northern wall). This room, likewise, extends westward into unexcavated squares.

As our excavations continued toward the northwest in nearby square 10AK, parts of another room (sixth) were discovered. Here, the room's complete eastern wall was revealed, with an internal length of 2.5 m and a thickness of 80 cm. This room has an entrance that is 80 cm wide in the middle of the eastern wall.

Of the northern and southern walls, only 1.5 m of their lengths could be documented within our excavated trench (partial square) due to the existence of a modern concrete wall, which prevents any further work. The original room, however, obviously extended toward the west.

In the northeast corner of area B three intersecting walls were discovered that probably represent a cluster of service rooms. A partial oven was found in the southwestern part, while on the eastern side of the main north–south wall a damaged plaster floor was documented, probably once the bed of a mosaic pavement (figs. 9, 10).

Based on our reading of the pottery fragments (e.g., bowls, cooking pots, jars, lamps) recovered during the excavation activities, we judge that for the area excavated during 2010, the main occupation history relates to the fourth through the eighth centuries CE.

Conclusions

Khirbet Beit Bassa is considered one of the largest and most distinctive archaeological sites in the Bethlehem region. It reflects a long and continuous period of settlement that began with the Roman period and lasted until the late Abbasid period. The results of our fieldwork indicate that the site was abandoned from the late Abbasid period until the beginning of the Ottoman era, at which time a large *khan* was built on the southwestern part of the site.

During recent decades, the site has been exposed—as have so many other archaeological sites throughout Palestine—to many types of destruction and vandalism as a result of both natural processes and human activities.

To protect the site, we suggest the following:

- Define the site's archaeological boundaries and fence them in; this measure should be carried out by the Institute of Archaeology at Al Quds University in cooperation with the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and the legal property owners.
- Engage the local communities of the surrounding area in safeguarding the site. To this end, hold awareness-raising lectures and workshops on the importance and value of cultural heritage resources for Palestinian society.
- Create a buffer zone with a width of 40 m around the site in order to prevent all construction activities in the future.
- Add the site to the tourism map of Bethlehem, and encourage local schools and their students to visit.

- Reduce the phenomenon of antiquities theft through activities that are carried out cooperatively between government entities, academic institutions, and local organizations relevant to and interested in cultural heritage. For example, in order to raise awareness of the detrimental effects of such looting activities to heritage conservation, hold lectures, and conduct workshops for the general public.

Acknowledgments

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