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The First Season of Excavations of the Khirbat al-Mukhayyat Archaeological Project

Introduction

Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (hereafter Mukhayyat),¹ also called the Town of Nebo (Saller and Bagatti 1949: 204-217; Piccirillo and Alliata 1998: 53-83), is located approximately 9 km northwest of Madaba on a steep limestone promontory. The site overlooks the Dead Sea, Jordan Valley, and Wadi Mukhayyat to the west and is bordered by the Wadi Afrit to the east (Fig. 1). Material culture from a wide range of periods, from the Chalcolithic to the Ottoman, has been documented at and around the site, including Byzantine churches and mosaics, Hellenistic structures, a well-preserved Iron Age fortification system, and an array of tombs, caves, cisterns, and various agricultural installations.

Previous archaeological research at Mukhayyat has given us an in-depth understanding of certain occupation phases at the site (Saller 1941, 1966; Saller and Bagatti 1949; Schneider 1950; Ripamonti 1963; Piccirillo 1988; 1989; 1993; Michel 1998; Piccirillo and Alliata 1998; Mortensen 2002; 2005; Mortensen and Thuesen 2007; Thuesen 2009). In addition, intensive surveys of the archaeological sites in the Nebo region (Glueck 1935; Stockton 1967; Mortensen 1992; 1996; Mortensen and Thuesen 1998; Graham and Harrison 2001; Thuesen 2004; Mortensen 2009; Mortensen *et alii* 2013) have provided a solid foundation for exploring the extensive occupation in the area. While this work has provided a significant contribution to our knowledge of the history of the region, the absence of excavated material from a wide range of time periods has left a gap in our understanding of Mukhayyat's role within this archaeologically and historically important region. With this issue in mind, the Khirbat

¹ The directors, staff, and students of the Khirbat al-Mukhayyat Archaeological Project would like to express their gratitude to Fr. Massimo Pazzini and Fr. Eugenio Alliata of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum who facilitated our first season of excavation.

al-Mukhayyat Archaeological Project (KMAP) was conceived to address this lacuna and explore broader themes, such as pilgrimage, economy, and landscape, across multiple cultural and historical periods.

Previous Research at Mukhayyat

The first mention of the site appears in the account of Félicien De Saulcy, dating to 1863, which is ordinarily credited with being the first instance where the name Khirbat al-Mukhayyat was recorded (De Saulcy 1865: 289-296). Mukhayyat was visited in 1872 by Henry B. Tristram (1874: 324) and in 1881 by Claude R. Conder (1889: 191-219). Alois Musil was the first to systematically explore the site in 1901, describing the remains in detail and creating the first topographic plan (1907: 334-340). The site was then further explored and documented in 1907 by Antonin Jaussen and Raphaël Savignac (1909-1914: 17-20). Nelson Glueck visited Mukhayyat in 1932, comparing its well-preserved fortifications to a Moabite fortress that he documented at nearby 'Uyun Musa. Glueck also noted the Rujm located to the east and the presence of a moat at the southern end of the site (1935: 110-111).

Much of our current understanding of Mukhayyat is the result of the efforts of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum. Systematic explorations by the Franciscans began in 1932 under the direction of Brother Jerome Mihaic who uncovered the mosaics in the Chapel of the Priest John on the eastern slope of the tall and the Church of Saint George on the acropolis (Saller and Bagatti 1949). In the 1960s, an expedition led by Julian Ripamonti conducted excavations at Rujm al-Mukhayyat as well as a survey of the area around the site that produced two Iron Age tombs (Ripamonti 1963; Saller 1966: 165-298). Work continued in the early 1970s under the direction of Fr. Michele Piccirillo. It was during this time that a comprehensive preservation and conservation program began that would involve all of the excavated mosaics and related architecture at the site (Piccirillo 1973; 1988; 1989; 1993; Piccirillo and Alliata 1998: 221-244). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, this work continued with intensive excavations on the acropolis, resulting in the recording of part of the occupational sequence at Mukhayyat (Michel 1998).

In more recent years, the Tall Madaba Archaeological Project conducted three survey seasons at Mukhayyat. The 2000 and 2001 seasons were devoted to topographic and surface collection surveys (Graham and Harrison 2001). The results of these two seasons have largely shaped the strategies for the renewed excavations at Mukhayyat. The 2012 season focused on preparing the site for excavation in future seasons and documenting the various caves, tombs, and architectural features visible on the surface.

History of Mukhayyat

The ancient Town of Nebo is first mentioned on the mid-9th century BCE monumental stele known as the Mesha Inscription (Pritchard 1955: 320-321; Gibson 1971; Dearman 1997; Gass 2009). Lines 14-18 indicate that Nebo was occupied by the Israelites during the early IR IIB period, when it housed a sanctuary to YHWH, and that the Moabite king Mesha took this settlement and removed the Israelite cultic presence from the site (Routledge 2004: 135-136). Although the term Nebo is most often associated with Siyagha, or Mount Nebo, located 2.5 km northwest of Mukhayyat, the Mesha Inscription implies that ancient Nebo was in fact a settlement, most likely a small town. Archaeological investigations at Mount Nebo have not uncovered any significant Iron Age occupation levels; thus, ancient Nebo must be associated with a nearby settlement containing substantial Iron Age remains. Mukhayyat is the most likely candidate for such a settlement, as evidenced by the presence of considerable quantities of Iron Age material collected in 2001, the visible architecture at the site, and the previously excavated Iron Age tombs (Ripamonti 1963; Saller 1966; Piccirillo and Alliata 1998: 110-127).

The Mesha Inscription points to a strong cultic function for the site. Indeed, Mukhayyat may have been at the center of a sacred landscape that has its roots in much earlier periods. A large stone circle dating to the Early Bronze I (ca. 3300-3000 BCE) was first documented by Conder during his survey east of the Jordan River (Conder 1889) and later investigated by Peder Mortensen while he was conducting his survey of the Mount Nebo region (Mortensen 2002, 2005; Mortensen and Thuesen 2007; Thuesen 2009). This prominent feature highlights the ritual importance of this area from an early time.

Apart from its possible role as the focal point of a sacred landscape, Mukhayyat also played an important part in monitoring movement from the Dead Sea and Jordan Valley to the Madaba Plain. Coupled with the stone tower at Rujm al-Mukhayyat (Fig. 1), the site commanded an important position along the east-west wadi systems that served as access points between the valley and the plain. As a result, Mukhayyat would have been crucial not only to local cultic activity but also for the control of trade goods and population movements along certain key routes in central Jordan.

Mount Nebo and the region surrounding it feature prominently in a variety of Jewish sources dating to the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman periods. Most of these texts reiterate that this area is the location of the death and burial of the Prophet Moses. There are also a handful of texts that refer to inquiries about the tomb of Moses made by the Roman government in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE and their inability to locate it (Piccirillo and Alliata 1998: 65-69). Prior to the 2014 excavations, only scant remains dating to the Hellenistic period had been recov-

ered. Excavations conducted in the late 1990s exposed a large double cistern on the site's acropolis that dates to this period. In addition to this feature, a large collection of Late Hellenistic ceramics was also recovered (Michel 1998).

In addition to its association with the Mesha Inscription and the Late Hellenistic / Early Roman literature, Mukhayyat is perhaps best known for its cultural material dating to the Byzantine period. The town housed a number of churches that catered to the local Christian population and the growing influx of pilgrims during the 6th through 8th centuries CE. Monasteries in and around Mukhayyat include the Monastery of al-Kanisah in the Wadi Afrit, the Monastery of the Theotokos in the Wadi Ayn al-Kanisah, and, of course, the Monastery of the Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo (Fig. 1). The Monastery of al-Kanisah, dating to the mid-6th century CE, is located east of Mukhayyat, on a ridge overlooking the Wadi Afrit. This complex contained several tombs, a possible reliquary, and a bedrock-carved wine press (Piccirillo and Alliata 1998: 205-209). The Monastery of the Theotokos is located 3 km west of Mukhayyat and contains a small chapel decorated with mosaics and inscriptions that reference the holy men of this region (Piccirillo 1994; 1995; Piccirillo and Alliata 1998: 209-217). The monastery at Mount Nebo is the largest in the area and formed the core of a network of monasteries east of the Jordan (Saller 1941; Piccirillo and Alliata 1998: 151-205; Foran 2005). It was certainly the main destination for pilgrims and travelers to the region. The Byzantine structures at Mukhayyat seem to go out of use in the 7th century CE (Michel 1998: 380), at which time the site appears to have been abandoned completely. Occupation at Mukhayyat only resumed during the Late Ottoman period, sometime in the late 19th century CE, and this new settlement was confined to the slopes on the northeastern side of the mound.

The 2014 Excavation Results

During the 2012 season, three potential fields of excavation were identified. Field A is located along the southern slope of the acropolis, Field B is situated at the top of a ridge to the south of the acropolis, and Field C comprises a flat area north of the acropolis. Several excavation units were opened in each of these three fields (Fig. 2).²

² The 2014 season was conducted between May 18 and June 16, with Debra Foran acting as Project Director, Annlee Dolan as Associate Director, Jennifer Lewis as the Director of the Community Based Archaeology Program, and Steven Edwards as Field Supervisor. An archaeological field school was also run with students from Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Toronto. Kholood Agrabawi served as the representative of the Department of Antiquities.

Field A

A trench consisting of five squares (A25, A35, A45, A55, and A65) was opened on the southern slope of the acropolis (Field A) in the hopes of elucidating the occupational history of the site. Excavations began in square A25 at the northern end of the trench, and three east-west walls were exposed (Plan 1). Due to spatial constraints, the soil between the two earliest walls (W1001 and W1003) could not be fully excavated. Pottery from this area dates from the Iron Age to the Byzantine period and thus cannot aid in establishing a precise date for this architecture. A35, to the south of A25, was opened later in the season when further excavation in A25 became too difficult. Another east-west running wall, W1004, was uncovered; however, the bottom of this wall was not exposed.

While it is not yet possible to determine the exact function of these walls, they would prevent the erosion of material down the slope and their deterioration provides a source for new material moving towards the base of the acropolis. These walls were likely part of a retaining system used to secure the acropolis and support the paved courtyard annexed to the southern side of the Church of St. George.

The walls were all buried underneath several layers of rock tumble. Above these tumble deposits is what appears to be an intentional levelling layer for the top of the acropolis done prior to the construction of the Byzantine church. This thick layer consisted of many boulders and decomposed limestone and our excavations seem to confirm what was recognized during the earlier excavations to the west of the church (Michel 1998: 359-369); namely that the top of the acropolis was levelled prior to the construction of the Byzantine Church.

It should also be noted that square A65, at the southernmost extent of Field A, was also opened. No architecture or surfaces were found in this square and many layers of tumble that had eroded down the hill were exposed.

Field B

Two excavation units (B14 and B25) were opened on the top of a ridge located to the south of the acropolis. Excavations quickly revealed that the visible wall lines in B14 do not belong to the Iron Age fortifications, as had been previously assumed. Instead they are part of a large Hellenistic period structure (Plan 2). The corner formed by walls W2001 and W2002 contains bossed ash-lars at the junction where the two walls meet. The remainder of these walls was constructed of semi-hewn and hewn boulders measuring more than 1.00 m in length. This architecture likely represents the corner of a tower or bastion-like structure dating to the Hellenistic period.

A third wall, W2003, was exposed running through the southwestern corner of B14. Stratigraphically, we cannot say with certainty if this wall was constructed earlier or later than W2001 and W2002, as none of the foundations of these walls were exposed and a surface extended between them. Unlike W2001 and W2002, W2003 was constructed in a boulder and chink fashion and was made of unhewn and semi-hewn cobbles.

The numerous surfaces that seal against the outer face of these monumental walls suggest a secondary use of this space. Though no architecture was unearthed in B25, there is occupational continuity with the surfaces from B14 extending through the entire area. The surfaces that extend through B14 and B25 held a large collection of complete Hellenistic cooking pots that were found upright, a surprising fact given the angle of the slope in B25 (more than 20°). More than 20 cooking pots (Fig. 3) were found on or embedded into these surfaces. The lack of Byzantine ceramics suggests a *terminus ante quem* of sometime in the Late Hellenistic / Early Roman period for this area.

Field C

Two areas in Field C were selected for excavation in 2014. Eight 5 × 5 m squares were opened along on the top of a small rise to the north of the acropolis (Field C Central). Three additional squares were opened along the western edge of the mound (Field C West).

Field C Central Area

Our initial assessment of this area, prior to excavation, was that it was a good candidate for the location of the Byzantine settlement associated with the churches at Mukhayyat. This assessment was further supported by the Byzantine ceramics collected in this area during the 2001 survey. However, after one season of excavation, it is clear that there are no Byzantine structures in the central area of Field C. Instead, this area is dominated by ancient fill layers that are likely the result of the clearing of a large cave located nearby as well as agricultural activity. All of these squares are characterized by numerous sloping layers of alternating pebbles, cobbles, and boulders (Fig. 4) that contained a mix of ceramic material. If the central part of Field C had once been occupied, any standing architecture was removed in antiquity.

The only clear cultural contexts in this area come from two bedrock features, C100 and C200, excavated in squares C37, C38, C46 and C47 (Plan 3). That the bedrock contained the best preserved cultural material is further proof of the limited occupation in this area. C100 is a small stepped rectangular installation

cut into the bedrock. Three rock-cut steps measuring between 1.12 and 1.18 m wide extend down to a chamber flanked by two piers. The space between the piers is 0.77 m wide. The chamber is roughly rectangular in shape and measures 2.16 by 1.31 m. The feature appears to have been open to the sky as there are no signs of any kind of roofing material. The eastern edge incorporates a slight bedrock overhang. Plaster found along this wall may have been used to maintain the integrity of the overhang.

The ceramic assemblage from C100, characterized by several examples of cooking pots and amphorae, suggests a Hellenistic date for the final use of this installation. The ceramic and artifact assemblages from C100 bear a striking resemblance to that of Field B, indicating that the occupation in these two areas is contemporary. The exact function of the feature remains unclear. While it may have functioned as a tomb in an earlier period, in its final use phase the room appears to have served as a storeroom for household items.

To the southwest of the rock-cut installation is a circular, plaster-lined reservoir (Feature C200). This reservoir is cut into the bedrock and measures 3.84 m in diameter (Plan 3). The eastern half of C200 was excavated down to a depth of 1.90 m, but the bottom was not exposed. At the top of the reservoir, a hard-packed beaten earth surface was found sealing in its contents. This surface (C47:14) was 0.15 m at its thickest along the northern edge of the reservoir. Below the surface were a series of cobble and boulder layers mixed with loosely-packed soil all of which yielded Iron Age and Hellenistic pottery. The reservoir walls widen from top to bottom and are plastered in their entirety. Numerous samples of the plaster were collected and will be submitted for analysis.

It is difficult to discern the relationship between this feature and the nearby rock-cut chamber; however, it is not unreasonable to assume that they were in use during the same period as they both yielded similar pottery. They also seem to have gone out of use at the same time. Paleoethnobotanical analysis suggests that both of these features were intentionally filled. Moreover, the complete lack of structural remains from the other squares in the central part of Field C implies that C100 and C200 cannot be directly associated with any contemporary buildings.

Field C West

Although this area was not initially selected for excavation, wall lines on the surface suggested the presence of architecture on the western edge of the mound. After it was confirmed that the central area of Field C was mainly comprised of fill layers with mixed cultural context, three additional squares (C2, C12, and C21) were opened along the fortification wall that circumscribes the site.

C2 yielded arguably the most significant remains of the 2014 field season. In the eastern half of the square, a large plaster-lined installation (feature C300), framed at the surface by walls W3002, W3003, and W3007, was excavated (Plan 4). C300 consists of 10 steps plus a landing at the bottom, all of which are lined with thick plaster (Fig. 5). Two steps are located at the top of the installation, on the northeastern side, and are oriented to the west. From these two steps, a small flat area (0.98 m by 0.75 m) opens up to a much smaller step to the south. This 4th step is bounded on both sides by plastered ledges which restrict the width of the step. Below are seven additional steps, all oriented to the south. These steps are considerably wider than the previous ones. They span the full width of the pool, broadening out to a maximum length of 2.13 m. The main chamber is plastered in its entirety. All of the corners are rounded as are the steps themselves. In total, one descends nearly 3.5 m from the top of the installation to the landing at the bottom. The ceramic and artifact assemblages recovered from C300 are also very similar to that from C100 and Field B, indicating that all three of these areas were occupied during the Late Hellenistic period.

Feature C300 appears to have functioned as a ritual bath. A cistern, located directly east of the installation, is likely the source of water that was used to fill the pool. Given its depth, a person could easily be fully submerged when standing on the bottom steps. There is no drain at the bottom of the pool. Similar installations have been uncovered at Tall al-‘Umayri (Herr *et alii* 1991: 37-52), Herodium (Netzer 1981: 47-50, ill. 79), Macharaeus (Corbo and Loffreda 1981: 269-274, fig. 33), Jericho (Netzer 2001; 2004), and Qumran (Magness 2002: 134-162).

West of feature C300 is a large wall, W3004, that forms part of the Iron Age fortification system (Plan 4). It appears to follow an offset-inset layout, with the walls measuring roughly 1.90 m thick. Parts of the same wall were exposed in both C12 (W3005) and C21 (W3006). In the latter case, the western face is clearly footed on bedrock, and the eastern face of the wall is founded on hard-packed soil. Further exploration of this fortification system is required.

C12 also yielded a stone-lined channel (C400; C12:6) capped with flat-lying stones. At present, this feature does not appear to be connected to C300, but further excavation may reveal that this channel was used to transport water into the pool. The ceramics recovered from C12 and C21 date mainly to the Iron II period which suggests that this is indeed part of Mukhayyat's Iron Age fortification system. Only a single surface was uncovered in the western part of Field C, and it remains unexcavated. More work will be conducted here in the future in order to elucidate the nature of the Iron Age occupation on this area of the site.

Conclusions

The 2014 excavation season at Mukhayyat succeeded in uncovering several different structures and features previously unknown at the site. Although many of our original objectives had to be modified in order to incorporate the newly excavated remains, the occupational history of the site is now more complete.

The excavations in Field A, on the southern slope of the acropolis, revealed multiple east-west walls that are associated with the construction of the Church of St. George in the 6th century CE. It appears that an area to the south of the church was levelled off in order to create a large courtyard to accommodate worshippers.

Work in Field B, to the south of the acropolis, uncovered part of a large defensive structure that likely dates to the Hellenistic period. The excavation of these walls was not completed during the 2014 field season; therefore, an exact date has yet to be determined. However, it is clear that the area ceased to be defensive in nature and was reused for a different purpose as more than 20 complete cooking pots were recovered here.

Excavations in Field C, north of the acropolis, indicate that this area was not used for habitation during the Byzantine period as had initially been proposed. On the contrary, it seems that the residents of Mukhayyat used this location as a space for dumping soil and stones, perhaps in preparation for agricultural activities. The bedrock that lay under the successive fill layers contained two distinct installations, both associated with the use of the site during the Hellenistic period. To the west of the main excavation area, the presence of a large, plastered, stepped pool associated with a cistern are further testament to the Hellenistic occupation at Mukhayyat.

The results of the 2014 season at Mukhayyat clearly indicate a significant occupation at the site during the Hellenistic period. We are hopeful that future excavation seasons will reveal more of this important phase of Mukhayyat's history as well as reveal archaeological features associated with other historically significant periods.

Acknowledgements

The 2014 field season was conducted in cooperation with the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum of Jerusalem, under the direction of its Dean Fr. Massimo Pazzini, the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, and the Franciscan Archaeological Institute at Mount Nebo, under the direction of Fr. Eugenio Alliata. The field season was also made possible in part through funding from the Office of

the Dean of Arts at Wilfrid Laurier University. The excavations were conducted in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, which provided guidance and access to field equipment. The results described in this report would not have been possible without the dedicated help of the Director General of the Department of Antiquities, Dr. Monther Jamhawi, and Mr. Bassem al-Mahamid, Director of the Madaba Archaeological Directorate. The authors would also like to thank Natalia Handziuk who prepared the plans of the excavated areas and all the students and staff of the 2014 season of the Khirbat al-Mukhayyat Archaeological Project.

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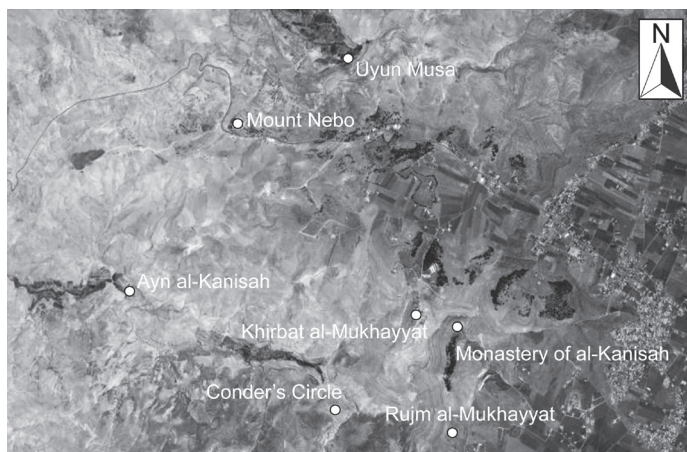


Fig. 1. Map of the Nebo Area.

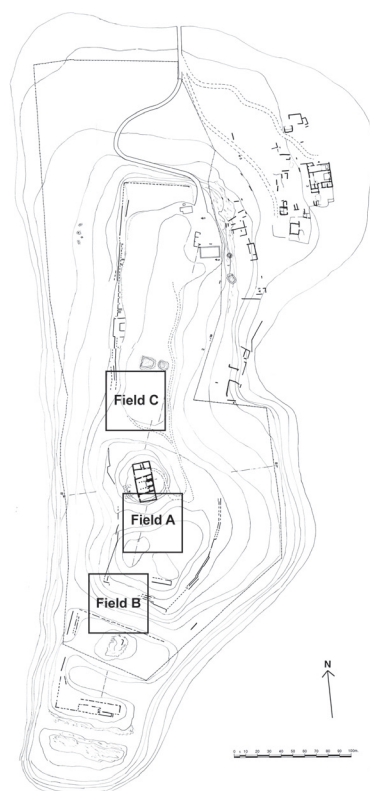
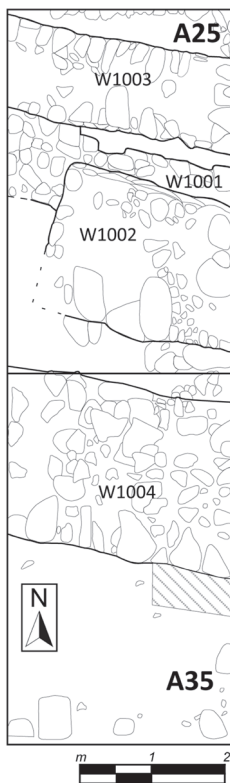
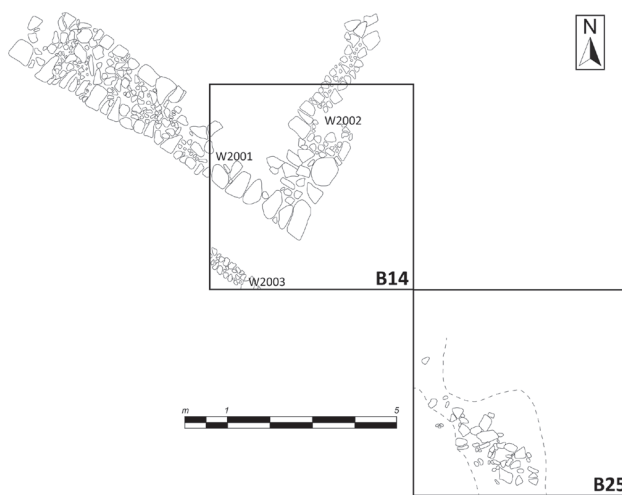


Fig. 2. Plan of Mukhayyat with 2014 Excavation Areas.



Plan 1. Field A Excavations.



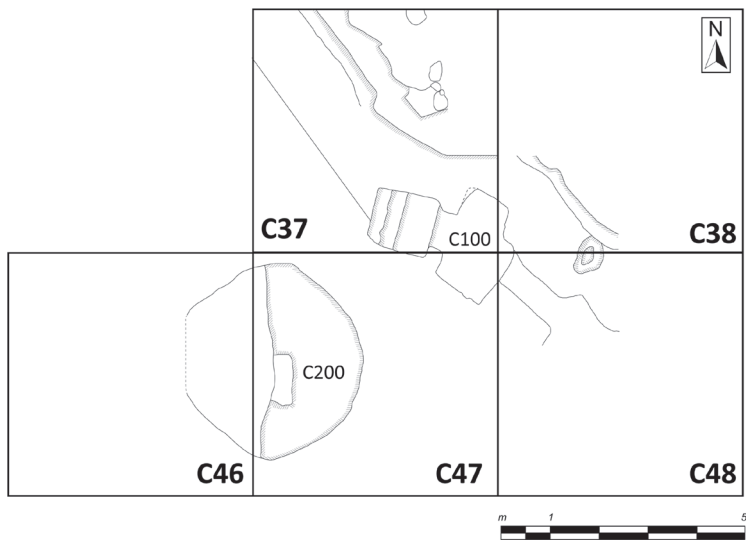
Plan 2. Field B Excavations.



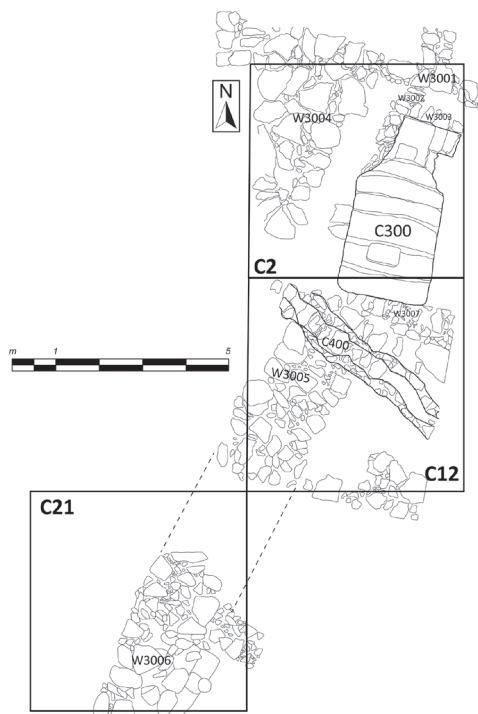
Fig. 3. Hellenistic Cooking Pots from Field B.



Fig. 4. Fill Layers from Field C Central Area.



Plan 3. Field C Central Area Excavations.



Plan 4. Field C West Excavations.



Fig. 5. Feature C300.

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