

Excavations at Kh. el-Maqtir 1995–2000, 2009–2013: A Border Fortress in the Highlands of Canaan and a Proposed New Location for the Ai of Joshua 7–8

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The Site

Kh. el-Maqtir is strategically located in the highlands of Canaan, 15 km (9 mi) north of Jerusalem (17378/14693), on the south bank of the Wadi el-Gayeh (Fig. 1). It lies on the east side of the main north-south ridge road through the central hill country, running from Jerusalem to Bethel (modern El Bireh)¹ west of the site and on to Shechem to the north. A major east-west road proceeded from Joppa on the Mediterranean coast to Bethel, past the north side of Kh. el-Maqtir, then on to Rabbah in Transjordan. It is situated on an eroded natural limestone hill whose summit is 890 m (2920 ft) above sea level. Bedrock is exposed in many places, with the remaining soil less than 1 m (3.3 ft) deep in most cases.

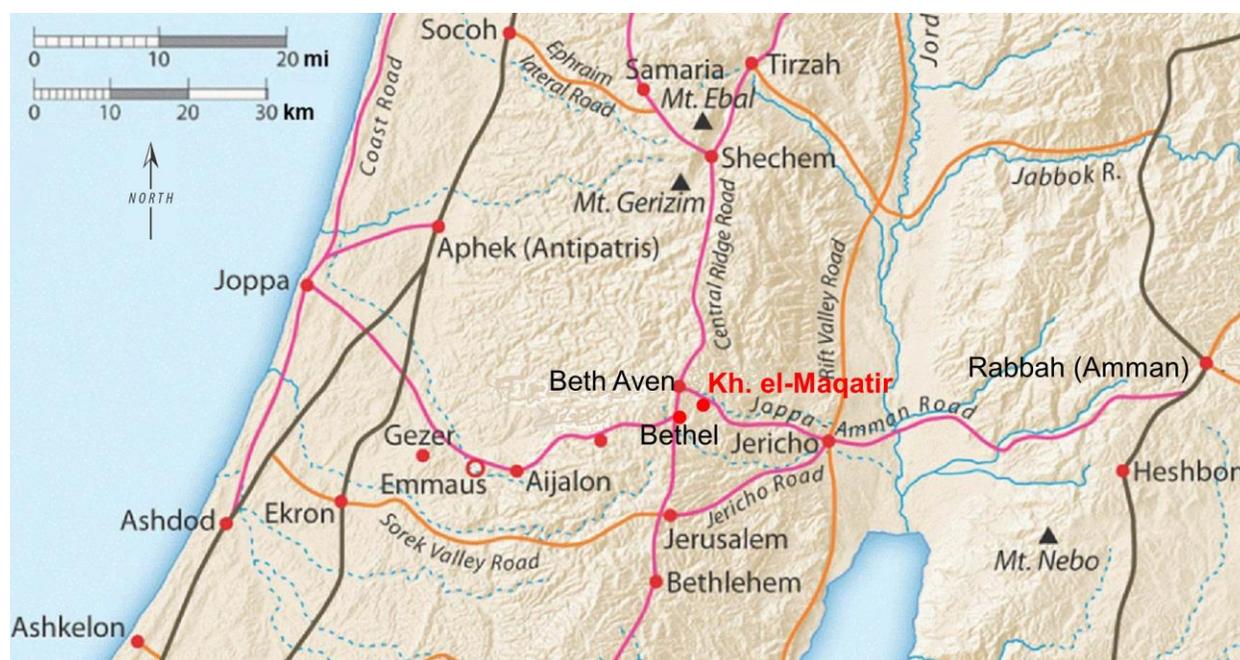


Fig. 1. The location of Kh. el-Maqtir in relation to the major roads in central Canaan in the second millennium BC. © 2014 Associates for Biblical Research.

There are four major areas of occupation at the site (Fig. 2); a Byzantine (Byz) church and monastery on the summit of the hill, a Late Hellenistic/Early Roman (LH/ER) ruin complex 200 m (220 yd) to the southeast some 17 m (73 ft) below the summit, and a Late Bronze I (LB I) fortress and Iron Age I (Iron I) squatter occupation on the southeast slope between the summit and the ruin complex. Early explorers, such as Edward Robinson (1841: 126), and Claude Conder and Horatio Kitchener (1882: 353), documented the Byz church. Guérin (1869: 57) was the first to take note of the LH/ER building complex. A number of cisterns are associated with these remains; no natural source of water has yet been located on the site. Kh. el-Maqtir was surveyed by the Archaeological Survey of the Hill Country of Benjamin in 1981. They were the first to report remains between the summit and the LH/ER ruins, which they dated to the Middle Bronze (MB) and Iron I periods. The LH/ER remains were labeled Site 17-14/36/1 and the MB and Iron I remains Site 17-14/36/2 (Finkelstein and Magen 1993: 22*, 81–82; Finkelstein, Lederman and Bunimovitz 1997: 519–22). The Byz monastery on the summit, however, was not surveyed. The site has

¹ On the location of Bethel, see Wood 2008b: 214–28.

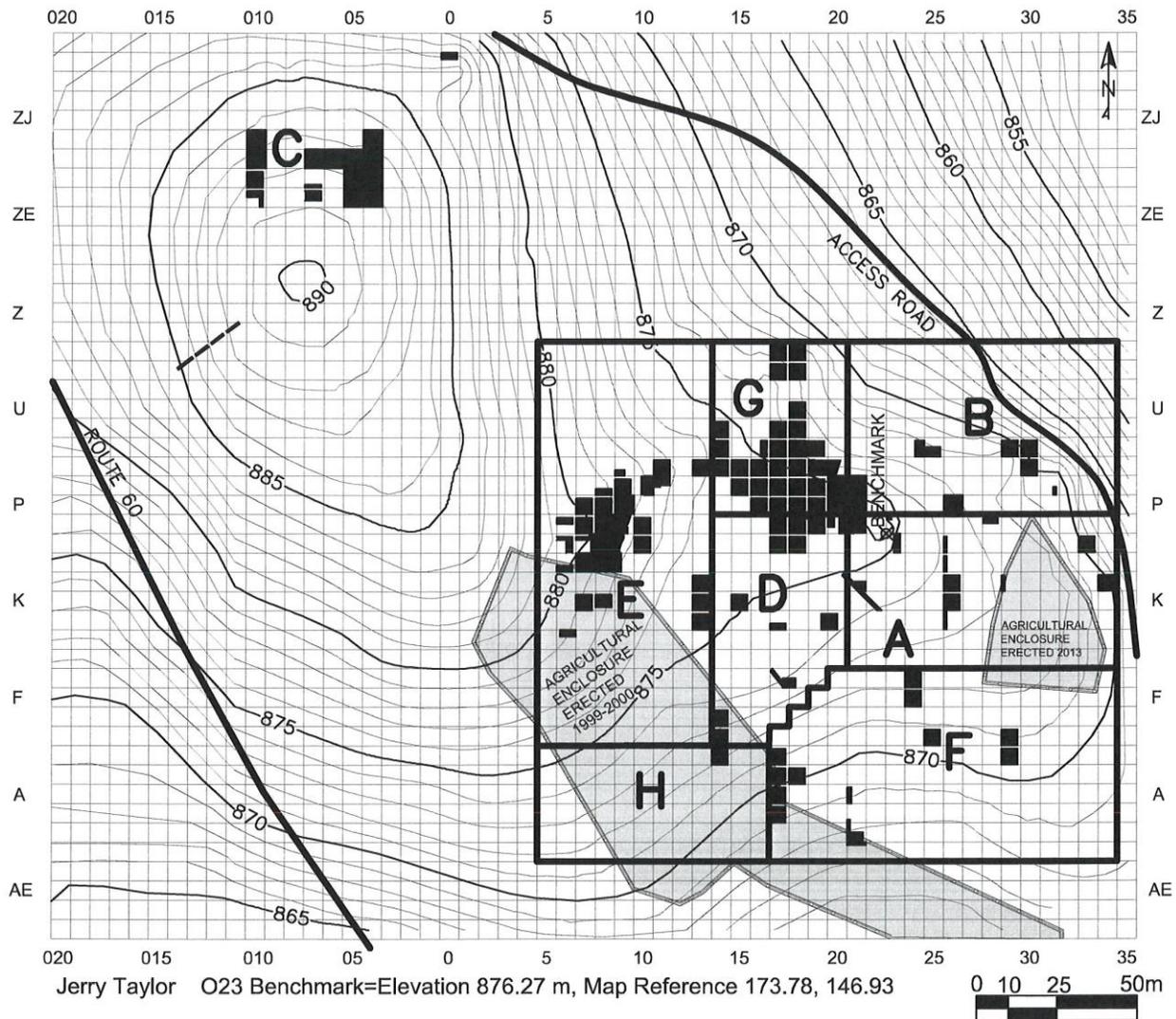


Fig. 2. Kh. el-Maqtar Excavation Areas as of 2013. © 2014 Associates for Biblical Research.

suffered from extensive robbing, agriculture, erosion and other disturbances from antiquity to the present, and is currently threatened by impending development.

History of Excavations

Salvage expeditions have been conducted from 1995–2000 and 2009–2013, sponsored by the Associates for Biblical Research, Akron PA, under the direction of the author. All builders at the site built directly on bedrock. Extant soil is the result of fill operations in antiquity and the accumulation of erosional material against surviving wall stubs. Fill stones from the walls of the fortresses, left behind when the larger stones were robbed out, blanket the site today.

History of the Site

Late Bronze I Fortress

Remnants of a small fortress dating to LB I have been found on the southeast slope of the site, Archaeological Survey of the Hill Country of Benjamin Site 17-14/36/2 (Fig. 3). Although some parts of the fortress are inaccessible due to a fenced-off agricultural plot, based on present evidence it appears to

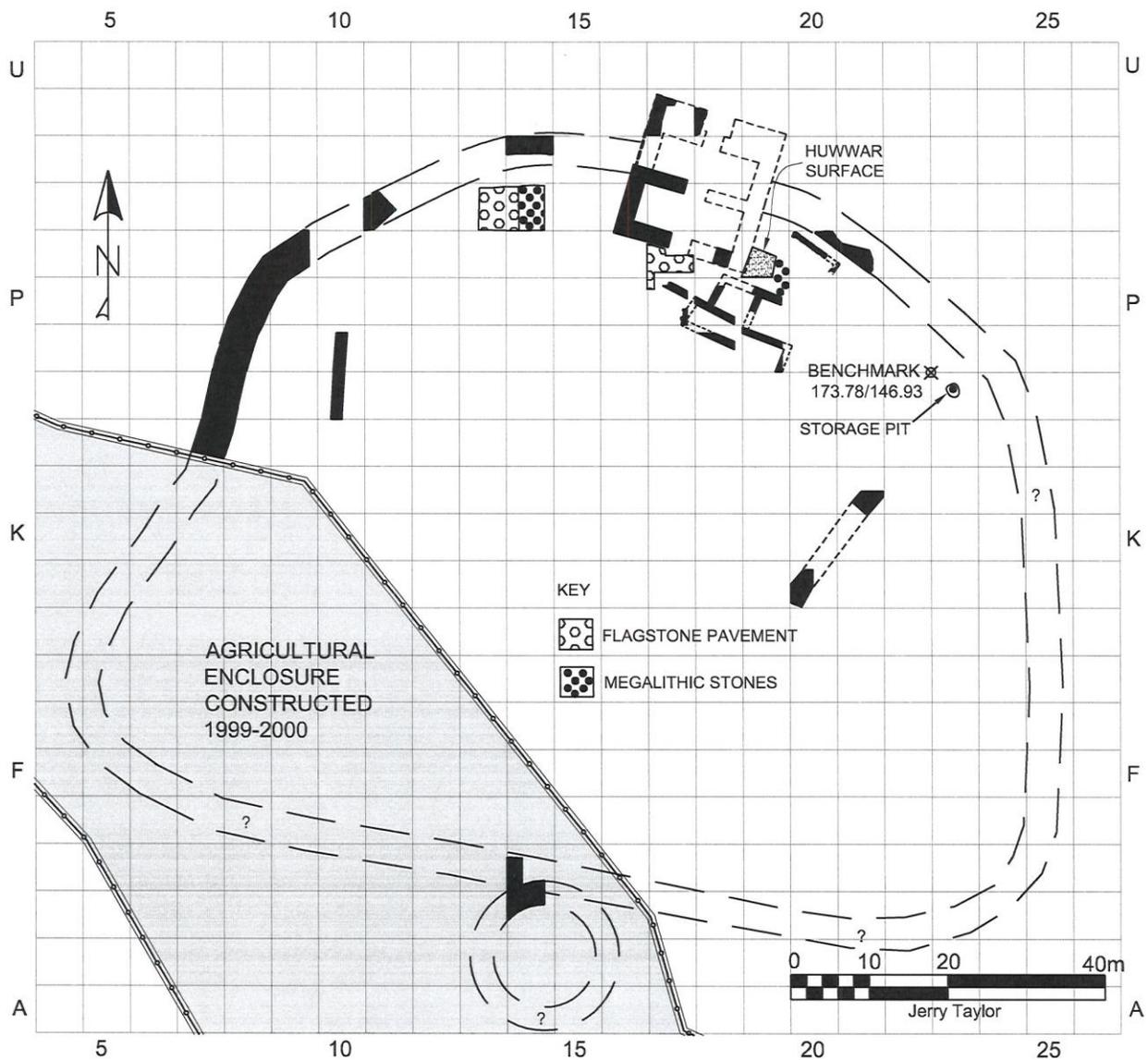


Fig. 3. Proposed Plan of the Kh. el-Maqatir Late Bronze I Fortress, 2013.

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have occupied an area of ca. 1 ha (2.5 acres). In spite of its small size, the bastion was strongly fortified. The remaining foundations of the north and west walls are ca. 4 m (13 ft) wide (Figs. 3, 4). A gate socket stone was observed on the surface in 1995 and in 1996 the west chamber of a gate was exposed. The rest of the gate was largely robbed out in antiquity, but surviving remnants suggest that it was originally a four-chamber gate. Two lower socket stones and one upper pivot stone were excavated in Square Q17 in 1996 near the inner entryway and an additional lower socket stone was discovered in Square R19 in 2013 (Fig. 5), no doubt originally associated with the outer entryway.

In the 1999 season a portion of a curved wall 3 m (10 ft)-thick was excavated in Squares C-D14 (Fig. 3). On the last day of the season the top of a 4 m (13 ft)-wide wall was reached on the west side of Square D14 north of the curved wall. Sometime between the 1999 and 2000 seasons a wall was erected to enclose an agricultural area which included these structures. The area inside the enclosure is now inaccessible for excavation. In Fig. 3 the curved wall segment has been reconstructed as a round tower and the 4 m-wide wall as the southern wall of the fortress. Unfortunately, at the present time it is not possible to confirm or refute these assumptions.



Fig. 4. Segment of the western wall of the Late Bronze I fortress in Square M7, with a modern fenced-in agricultural plot visible in the background.
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Pottery found on a flagstone pavement just inside the gate and in the clay bedding of the pavement indicate an LB I date for both the construction and destruction of the fortress (Fig. 6). A number of poorly-preserved walls were found immediately inside the gate (Fig. 5). In 2009 an infant jar burial was discovered in the northeast corner of Square O18, adjacent to one of these walls (Fig. 7). The burial jar was 37 cm (15 in) below the surface, resting on bedrock. Scattered about the jar were the bones of a neonate, evidently removed from the jar by a rodent. The offering vessels, burial jar and typology of the burial suggest a date early in LB I for the internment, ca. 1500 BC.

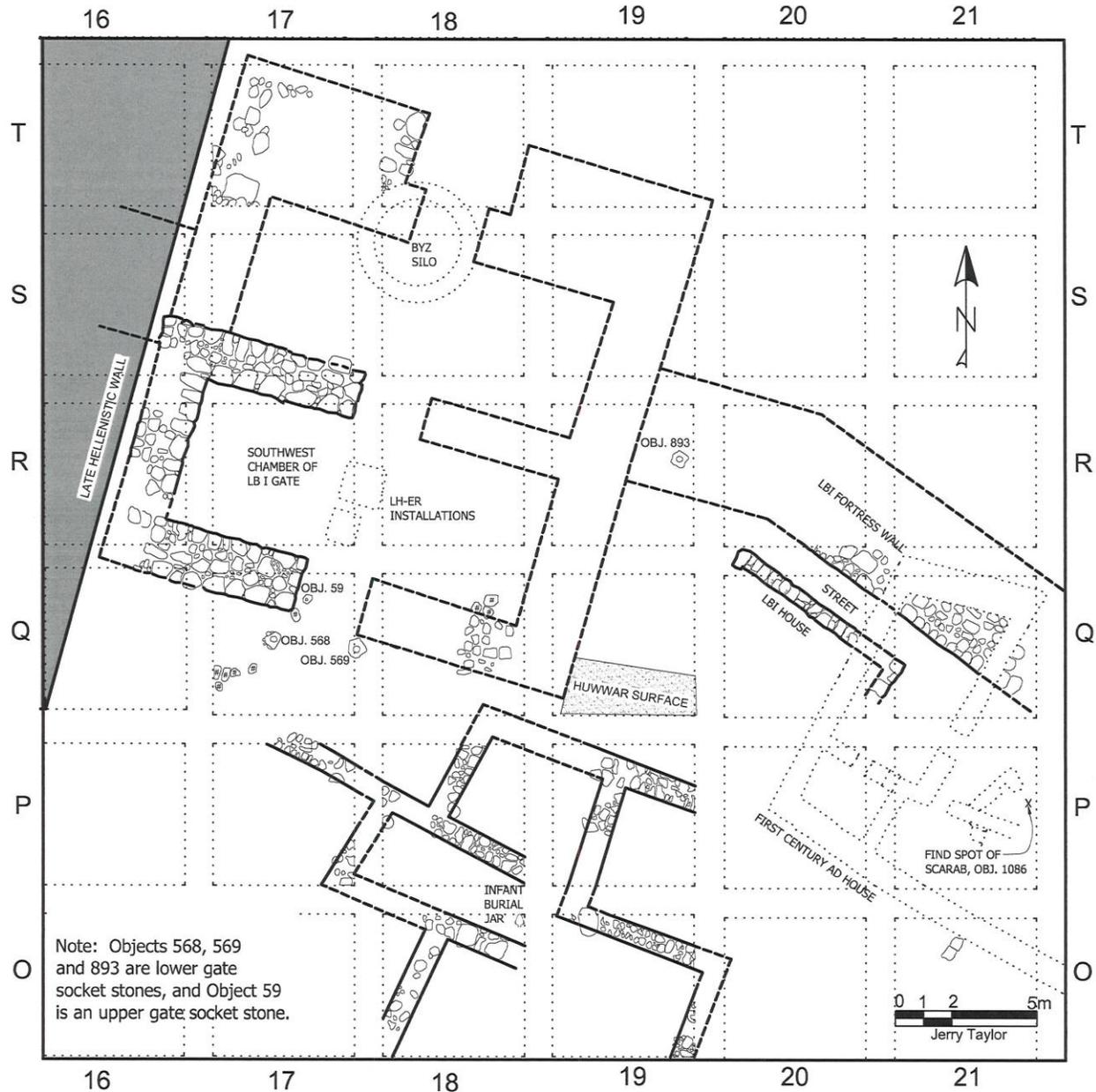


Fig. 5. Area of the Late Bronze I Gate and Proposed Gate Reconstruction, 2013.
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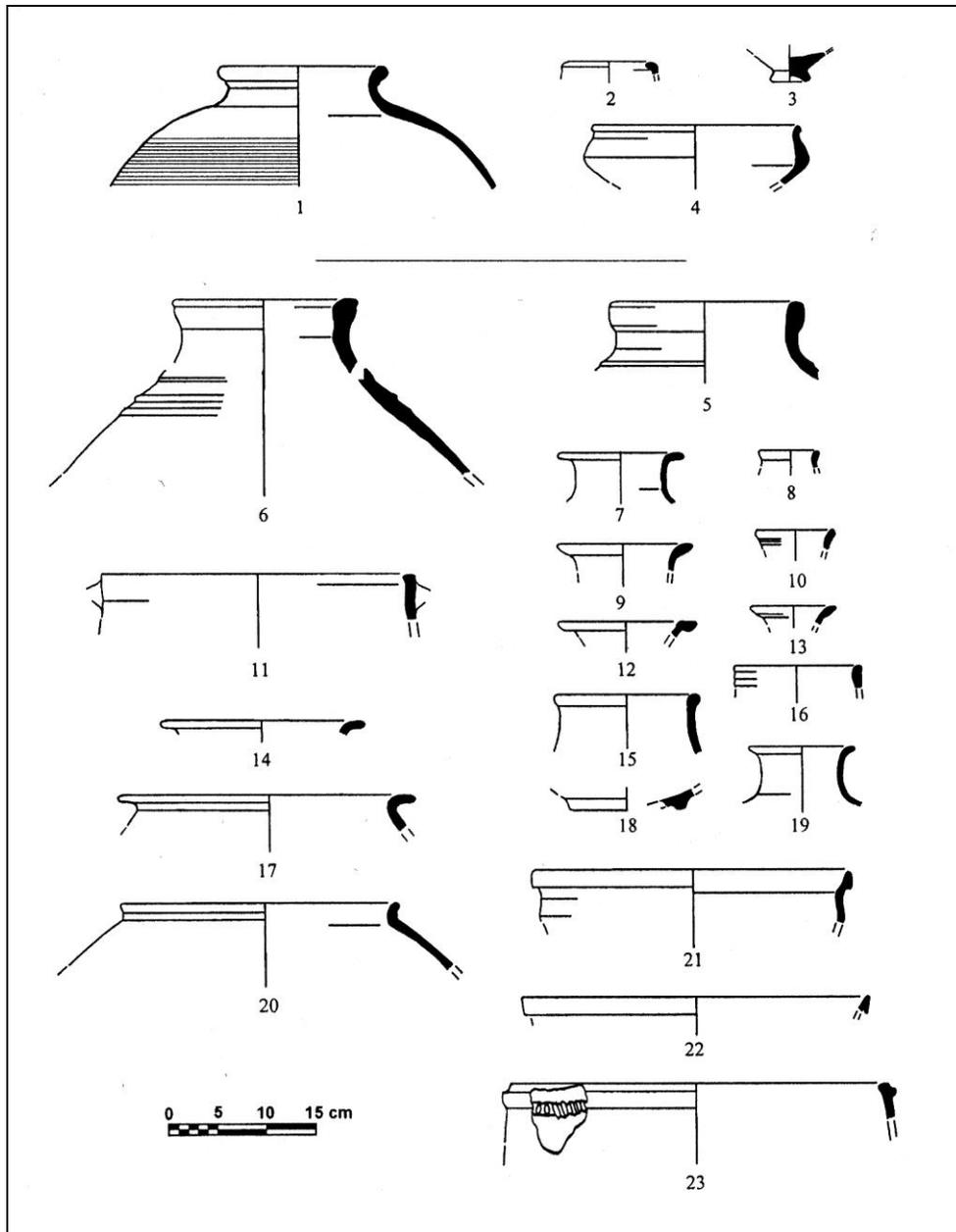


Fig. 6. Late Bronze Age I pottery from Square Q17, flagstone pavement inside gate: 1–4, Locus 10, surface of pavement; 5–23, Locus 12, clay bedding below pavement.²
 © Associates for Biblical Research 2008.

² For a description and analysis of this pottery, see Wood 2008b: 232–36.

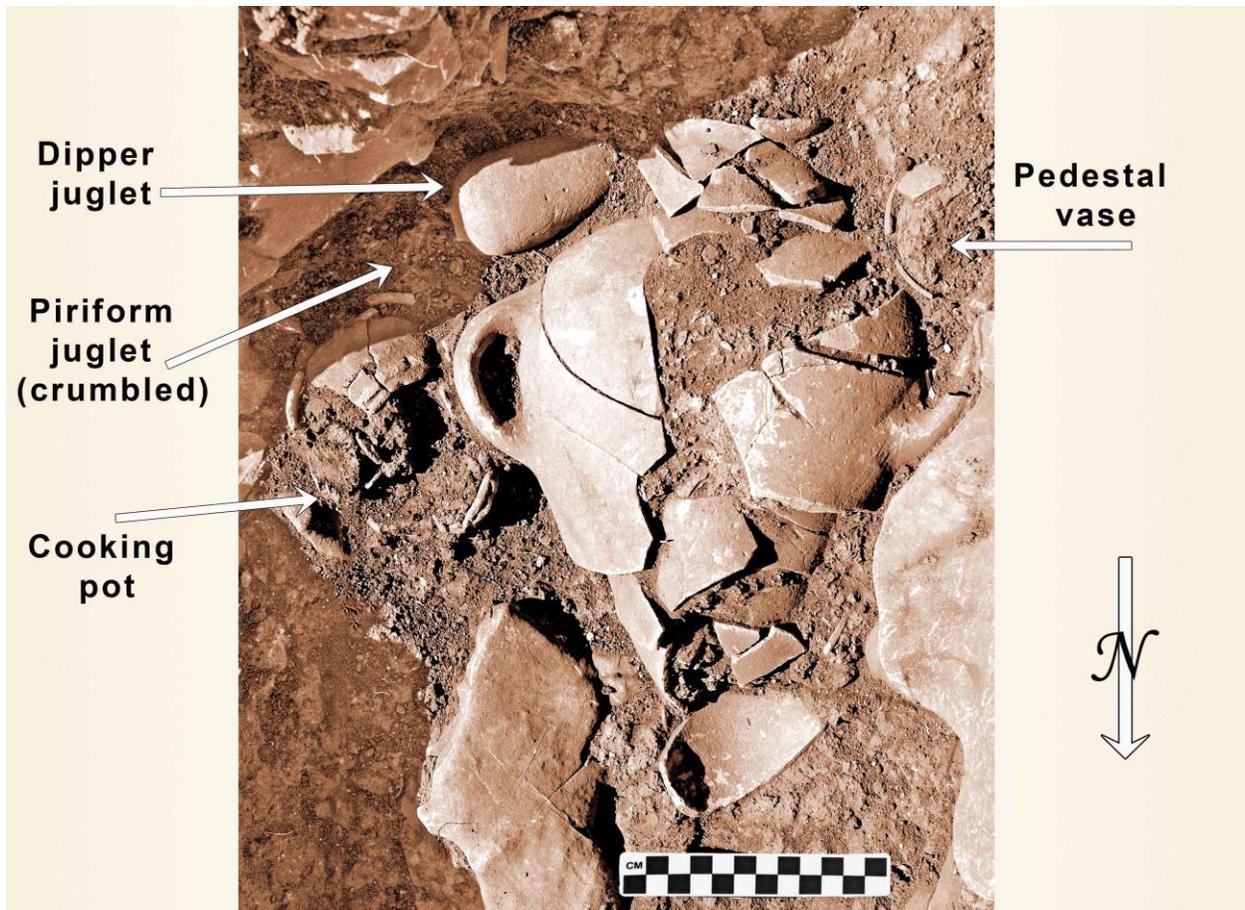


Fig. 7. Infant jar burial surrounded by offering vessels.
© Associates for Biblical Research 2009. Photo by Michael C. Luddeni.

Another significant find in 2009 was in Square C17, at about the proposed location of the southern wall of the fortress. There, a large stela was found embedded in a cobblestone matrix, its top just visible on the surface (Fig. 8). A pictorial representation was carved in raised relief on the front surface, but extreme weathering has rendered the image illegible. This is the third Canaanite stela to be found in the southern Levant and is thus far the largest (Fig. 9).



Fig. 8. Front and side views of a Canaanite stela found during the 2009 season.
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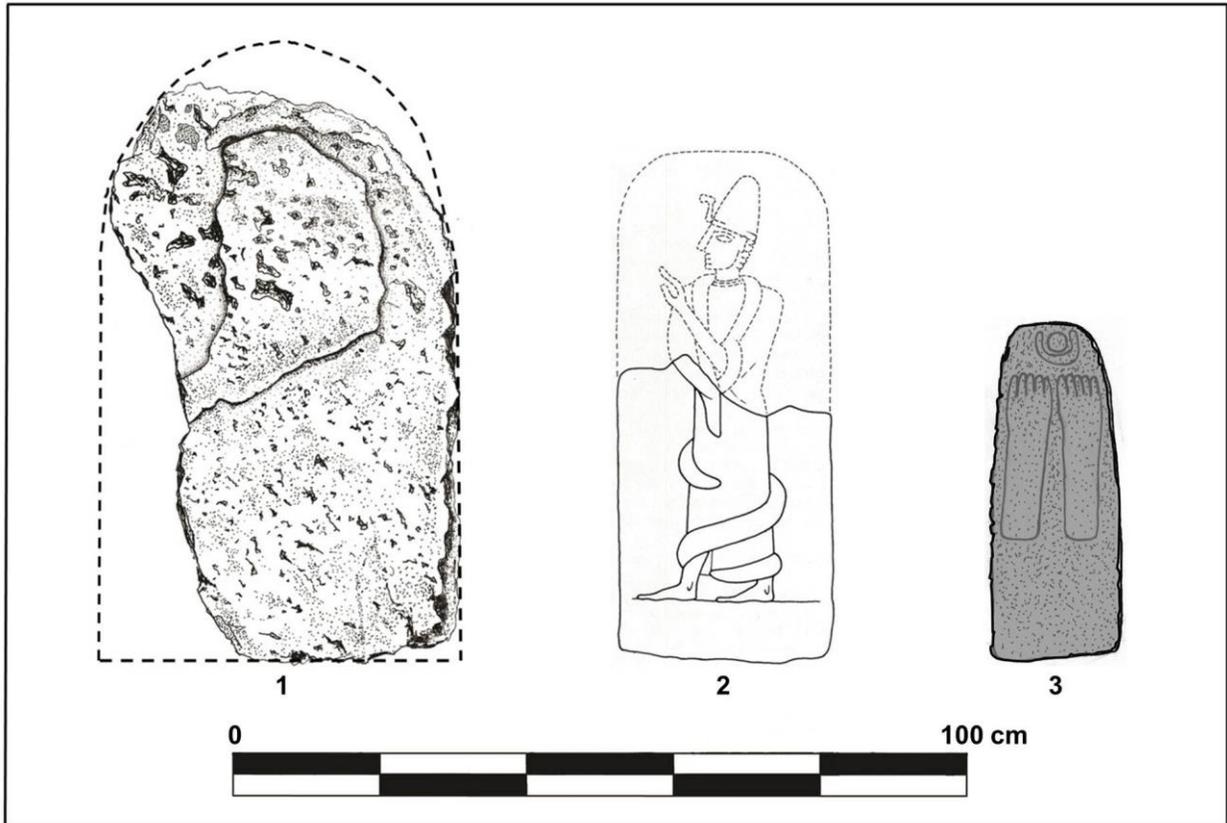


Fig. 9. Canaanite stelae found in the southern Levant: 1. Kh. el-Maqatir, limestone, 15th century BC; 2. Tell Beit Mirsim, limestone, Str. D, 16th century BC (Merhav 1985: Pl. III.2); 3. Hazor, basalt, Str. 1-a, 13th century BC (after Yadin et al. 1958: Pl. 29.2). © 2013 Associates for Biblical Research.

The fortress was destroyed by a massive conflagration as evidenced by severe burning in the form of reddened and fragmented bedrock in the gate passageway, burned and calcined building stones and calcined bedrock in the area of the gate, ash deposits in various places and refired LB IB pottery throughout the fortress. The latest pottery associated with the fortress is LB IB, indicating a date at the end of the 15th century BC for its destruction (Fig. 6). This date has now been reinforced by the discovery in 2013 of a datable scarab found in a secure LB I context (Figs. 5, 10). It was found beneath an ashy deposit within the leveling fill for a 1st-century AD house. It was 2 cm (0.8 in) above bedrock in a 5 cm (2 in) thick layer of compacted soil separated from the ashy deposit above by a layer of randomly-placed flat stones. Accompanying the scarab in the layer of compacted soil were four diagnostic LB I refired sherds. Preliminary research suggests that the scarab was manufactured in the 18th Dynasty, most likely in the reign of Amenhotep II (ca. 1455–1418 BC).



Fig. 10. Scarab discovered during the 2013 season featuring a falcon-headed sphinx with an *ankh* (life) sign before and a *neter* (god) sign above.
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A major focus of the excavation is to determine if Kh. el-Maqatir meets the Biblical requirements to be identified as the Ai of Joshua 7–8.³ Those requirements can be divided into two types, geographical and archaeological.

Geographical Correspondences between Joshua’s Ai and Kh. el-Maqatir:

- **Ai Must Be a Strategically Significant Site (Joshua 7:2).** Kh. el-Maqatir is located on the southern bank of the Wadi el-Gayeh, which was the border between the central area of the highlands, under the control of the city-state of Shechem (Wood 1997), and the territory of Jerusalem to the south (Finkelstein and Na’aman 2005: 186). From Kh. el-Maqatir there is clear line-of-sight communication with Jerusalem. Based on its strategic location and archaeological findings there, Kh. el-Maqatir appears to have been a northern border fortress for the Jerusalem city-state in the 15th century BC. After the Israelites defeated Jericho (Joshua 2–6), thereby gaining a foothold in the Promised Land (Cis-Jordan), Joshua sent spies to Ai in the highlands to the west (Joshua 7:2). Ai clearly was important in Joshua’s overall military strategy for conquering Cis-Jordan. After eliminating the “early-warning system” of Ai (Joshua 8), the Israelites conducted a campaign against a coalition of southern city-states led by Jerusalem (Joshua 10). Thus Kh. el-Maqatir is consistent with the Biblical description of Ai as a militarily important site that needed to be eliminated prior to conducting a southern campaign.
- **Near Beth Aven (Joshua 7:2).** When Joshua described the location of Ai to the spies, he said it was “near Beth Aven.” The most likely location for Beth Aven is Beitin (Wood 2008b: 221–28); Kh. el-Maqatir is just 1.5 km (1 mi) southeast of Beitin.

³ For a detailed discussion of the location of the Ai of Joshua 7–8, see Wood 2008b.

- **East of Bethel (Joshua 7:2).** Joshua further told the spies that Ai was “to the east of Bethel.” The best candidate for Bethel is El Bireh (Wood 2008b: 214–21); Kh. el-Maqatir is east of El Bireh.
- **Near Bethel (Joshua 12:9).** In the list of defeated kings in Joshua 12, Ai is described as being “near Bethel.” Kh. el-Maqatir is 3.5 km (2 mi) east-northeast of El Bireh. Bethel was aligned with Ai, as the men of Bethel joined forces with the men of Ai in fighting the Israelites (Joshua 8:17).
- **An Ambush Site West of Ai (Joshua 8:9, 12).** Joshua placed an ambush force (or forces) “between Bethel and Ai, to the west of Ai.” This requirement is met by the Wadi Sheban between El Bireh and Kh. el-Maqatir. It is a very deep valley, hidden from view from both Kh. el-Maqatir and El Bireh.
- **A Militarily Significant Hill North of Ai (Joshua 8:11, 13).** When the Israelite army arrived at Ai, Joshua and his generals “set up camp north of Ai, with a valley between them and the city...they had the soldiers take up their positions—all those in the camp to the north of the city and the ambush to the west of it.” Jebel Abu Ammar, 1.5 km (1 mi) north of Kh. el-Maqatir, is the highest hill in the region and would have been an excellent command post from which Joshua’s generals could have viewed the entire theater of operations.
- **A Shallow Valley North of Ai (Joshua 8:13–14).** Joshua did not remain with the main army, but rather took a small diversionary force and spent the night in the valley between the camp and Ai. This mimicked the small force that initially attacked Ai and was defeated (Joshua 7:4–5). “When the king of Ai saw this, he and all the men of the city hurried out early in the morning to meet Israel in battle.” The valley north of Ai was necessarily a shallow valley in order for the king of Ai to observe Joshua and his men. The Wadi el-Gayeh between Kh. el-Maqatir and Jebel Abu Ammar is a wide shallow valley, with the bottom of the valley only 4 m (13 ft) lower than the floor level of the surviving gate chamber and readily visible from Kh. el-Maqatir.

Archaeological Correspondences between Joshua’s Ai and Kh. el-Maqatir:

- **Fortified at the time of the Conquest.** Since a gate figures prominently in the account of the capture of Ai (Joshua 7:5; 8:29), it can be assumed that Ai was fortified. Evidence of a gate and fortification walls have been found at Kh. el-Maqatir dating to the time of the Conquest.⁴
- **Gate on the North Side of the Fortress (Joshua 8:11).** When Joshua arrived at Ai with the “whole army” (Joshua 8:1, 3), he was “in front of” Ai on its north side (Joshua 8:11). The “front” of the fortress would have been the side where the gate was located. The gate of the LB I fortress at Kh. el-Maqatir is on the north side of the fortress.
- **Smaller than Gibeon (Joshua 7:3; 10:2).** When the spies came back from Ai they reported to Joshua that “only a few men are there” (Joshua 7:3), indicating that Ai was a small place. This is further quantified in Joshua 10:2 where it is recorded that “Gibeon...was larger than Ai.” In the MB period (ca. 1800–1500 B.C.) Gibeon was ca. 2.8 ha (7 acres) in size (Broshi and Gophna 1986: 74, 82). We can assume that it was about the same size at the time of the Conquest. The LB I fortress at Kh. el-Maqatir is much smaller than Gibeon as it occupies an area of about 1 ha (2.5 acres).
- **Occupied by Women (Joshua 8:25).** “Twelve *elephs* (units) of men and women” were killed at Ai. The infant jar burial discovered in 2009 demonstrates that women were living in the fortress at Kh. el-Maqatir in the LB I period.
- **Destroyed by Fire (Joshua 8:28).** After defeating the armies of Ai and Bethel “at a certain place overlooking the Arabah [wilderness]” (Joshua 8:14), the Israelites returned to the fortress and “killed those who were in it” (Joshua 8:24). They then plundered the fortress (Joshua 8:27) and set it ablaze (Joshua 8:28). Abundant evidence has been found that the LB I fortress was destroyed by fire, such as burned stones and calcined bedrock in the gate area, ash at a number of locations, and refired pottery throughout the fortress.
- **A Ruin Forever (Joshua 8:28).** “So Joshua burned Ai and made it a permanent heap of ruins, a desolate place to this day.” Following the destruction of the LB I fortress it was abandoned and left to the ravages of the elements, later scavengers and the farmer’s plow. Much of the eastern half of the fortress was robbed out by the later LH/ER builders. The western half was similarly robbed out when the Byz church and monastery was constructed on the summit of the hill. Subsequent to the Byz period

⁴ The date of the Israelite Conquest of Canaan determined from internal chronological data in the Hebrew Bible is adopted in this report, i.e. 1406–1400 BC, the end of the LB I period. See Wood 2005, 2007, 2008a.

there has been additional looting of the site. The foundation of the southwest chamber of the gate and additional remnants of the fortress, however, have survived. These sparse remains are visible on the surface or can be found just below the surface. Despite the plundering over the centuries, there remains a “permanent heap of ruins” at Kh. el-Maqatir yet today.

Iron Age I Squatter Occupation

Iron I pottery from squatter occupation has been found dispersed throughout the area of the LB I fortress. It dates to the early part of the Iron I period, ca. 1200–1100 BC. The best preserved remains were found in Square Q9 where a poorly-made domestic structure was built into the ruins of the LB I fortification wall. The structure, with one-stone wide walls, consists of several small rooms. The plan of one room measuring 1.5 x 2.0 m (4.9 x 6.5 ft) is complete. In Square R11 a stone-lined pit ca. 0.7 x 1.0 m (2.3 x 3.3 ft) was built into the corner of a similar structure (Fig. 11). In it were a restorable jug and rim sherds of several Iron I cooking pots, as well as a broken mortar and a damaged limestone roof roller 21 cm (8.3 in) in diameter, 48.5 cm (1 ft 7 in) in length and weighing 32 kg (71 lb).



Fig. 11. Iron Age I stone-lined pit in Square R11. On the left is a restorable jug, in the center a mortar and on the right a roof roller. In the background is the ruined inner face of the north wall of the Late Bronze I fortress. © 1999 Associates for Biblical Research. Photo by Michael C. Luddeni.

Late Hellenistic/Early Roman Fortress and Settlement

A building complex ca. 0.3 ha (0.74 acre) in size on the eastern side of the site, Archaeological Survey of the Hill Country of Benjamin Site 17-14/36/1, dates to the LH/ER period. Fortification walls found to the west, north and south of the complex indicate that a later fortress was built over the eastern half of the LB I fortress in the LH period. The northwest corner was excavated in Square X17. From there the western wall can be traced 48 m (157 ft) south-southwest to Square Q15, passing just to the west of the southwest chamber of the LB I gate. In Square X17 the wall is 4.0 m (13 ft) wide at its base and in Square Q15 it is 5.0 m (16 ft) wide. On the north the wall can be traced from Square X17 ca. 80 m (260 ft) east-southeast to Square S29. In Square X17 the wall is 4.0 m (13 ft) wide and appears to maintain that width to Square S29. In Squares S29 and S30 there is a northeast projection 3.5 m (11 ft) wide and 4.5 m (15 ft) long, apparently part of a gate, with a clear approach road leading to it from the northwest. No additional architecture from the gate has survived. A coin of Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BC) from the north wall and coins of John Hyrcanus I (134–104 BC) and Alexander Jannaeus from the west wall suggest a date in the reign of Alexander Jannaeus for the construction of the fortress.

In the 2011 season a well-preserved house from the first-century AD was exposed in Squares P-Q 20-21 featuring an intact fenestrated wall dividing two rooms (Fig. 12). Coins indicate that the house was built in the early first-century AD and occupied until AD 69.



Fig. 12. A well-preserved first-century AD house excavated during the 2011 season, view south.
© 2011 Associates for Biblical Research. Photo by Michael C. Luddeni.

Byzantine Monastery

Systematic excavations of a church and coenobium⁵ monastery on the summit of the site were begun in 2010. The church is of the classic basilica style with the central apse extending to the east (Fig. 13). The total length is 39.35 m (129 ft) from the atrium entrance on the west to the east end of the central apse. Although the atrium has not yet been excavated, traces of all four of its walls are observable; they are ca. 90 cm (3 ft) wide. The nave is 6.0 m (20 ft) wide and the aisles are 3 m (10 ft) wide. An enclosed agricultural terrace likely ran the length of the structure on the north. The main entrance into the nave is 1.8 m (6 ft) wide and has a threshold with sockets, likely for a double-winged door; it is flanked by two smaller entrances into the aisles, each 1.2 m (3.9 ft) wide. Originally, the nave was separated from the aisles by columns with Corinthian capitals as attested by early explorers. Four column shaft fragments are lying about on the surface. A.M. Schneider reported that two columns he observed in a schoolyard in El Bireh, 3.5 km (2.2 mi) southwest of Kh. el-Maqatir came from the site (1934: 189–90). James Kelso stated that the Kh. el-Maqatir church had been plundered to furnish stone for the mosque in El Bireh (1958: 3–4; 1968: 8). Five of the original columns and a large foundation stone can be seen in the fenced-in center of the traffic circle at the western approach to Deir Dibwan, 1.8 km (1.1 mi) east-southeast of Kh. el-Maqatir. According to local residents, these were removed from Kh. el-Maqatir in 1990. The columns are 46 cm (1.5 ft) in diameter; the most intact of the columns and the only one with a capital has a total height of 2.37 m (7.8 ft), including the capital which is 46 cm (1.5 ft). The capital is worn but appears to be

⁵ A coenobium (or cenobium) was a type of monastery in which the monks lived communally, as opposed to a *laura* in which the monks lived separately as hermits around a common church.

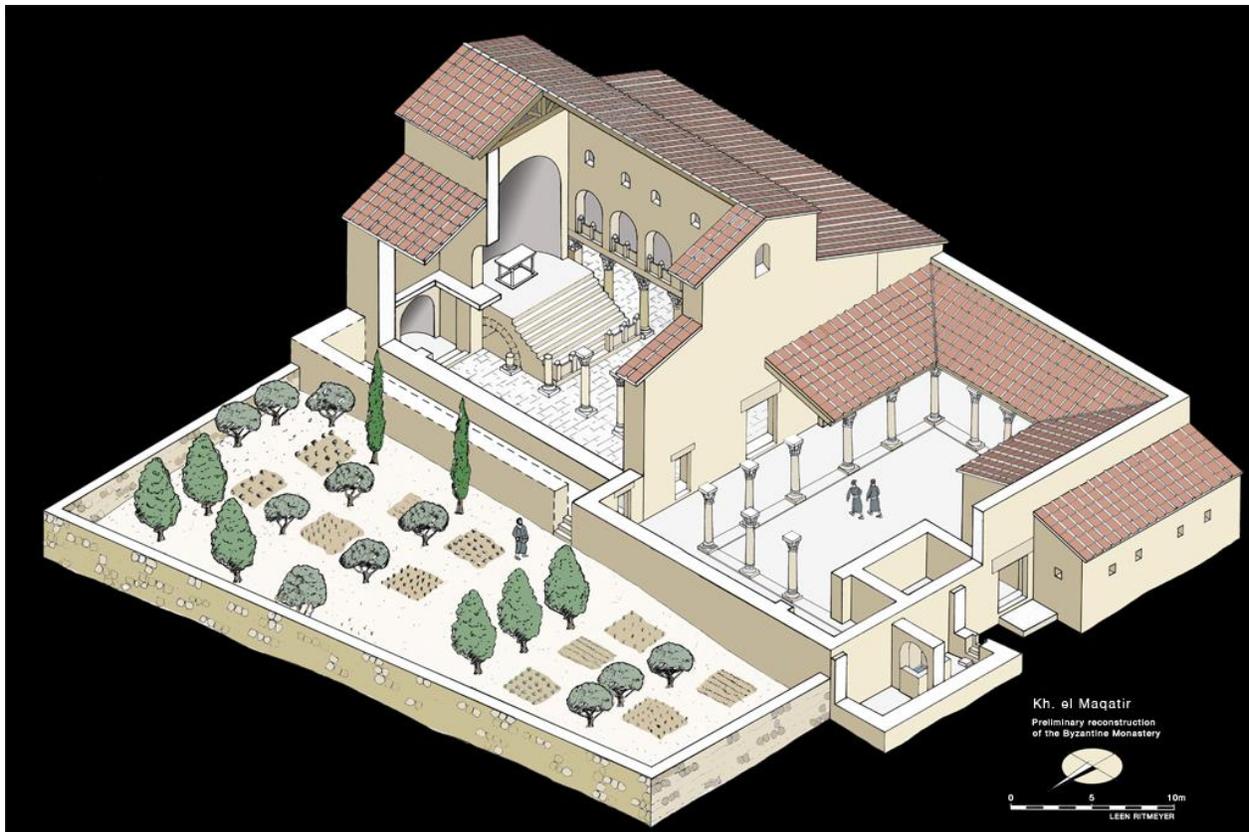


Fig. 13. An isometric reconstruction of the monastery, based on excavation results and visible remains.
© 2013 Ritmeyer Archaeological Design.

Corinthian and the base is 64 cm (2.1 ft) square. Coins found in the church date from the late fourth to the early sixth century, the apparent time period the monastery was active.

Many times Byz churches were built at a particular location to memorialize a biblical event that was thought to have occurred there. That is certainly a possibility at Kh. el-Maqatir since its isolated location raises the question as to the reason for building a church at this site. There were numerous other churches in nearby villages, such as Burg Beitin only 1.0 km (0.62 mi) northwest (Kelso 1958: 3, 1968: 53; Albright 1968:2; Ovadiah and de Silva 1981: 208; Bagatti 2002: 33–34), Beitin 1.2 km (0.75 mi) northwest (Conder 1881: 219, 221; Kelso 1968: 7, 53; Ovadiah and de Silva 1981: 208; Bagatti 2002: 32–33) and Kh. Haiyan 2.2 km (1.4 mi) southeast (Callaway and Nicol 1966; Bagatti 2002: 34–35). Three suggestions have been put forward as to the event that precipitated the founding of the church at Kh. el-Maqatir. In the absence of a more detailed early Christian source or an inscription, however, these suggestions must remain speculative. They are: (1) Abraham’s construction of an altar to *Yahweh* between Bethel and Ai (Genesis 12:8; 13:3–4; Wilson 1869–1870: 124; Conder 1881: 222; Sellin 1900: 1; Schneider 1934: 187–89; Albright 1968: 2), (2) Abraham’s separation from Lot (Genesis 13:10–12; Dalman 1911: 14) and (3) the church mentioned by Jerome that commemorated *Yahweh*’s appearance to Jacob in a dream at Bethel⁶ (Genesis 28:10–19; Schneider 1934: 189–90; Albright 1968: 2). We must now add a fourth option—that the church at Kh. el-Maqatir venerated the Israelite capture of Ai described in Joshua 7–8.

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⁶ Freeman-Grenville, Chapman and Taylor 2003: 13; curiously, the note added by Jerome concerning the church at Bethel appears in the entry for Ai (Aggai), rather than under Bethel.

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