



Tall Zar`a

Project Name: *Gadara Region Project*

Duration: *9 / 3 – 13 / 4 & 20 / 7 – 2 / 8 / 2008*

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The 'Gadara Region Project' was initiated by Prof. Dr. Dr. Vieweger in 2001. The first extended excavation was carried out in 2003. Since 2004 the project has been a co-operative effort of the Biblical Archaeological Institute in Wuppertal and the German Protestant Institute of Archaeology.

Significant Results in Spring 2008

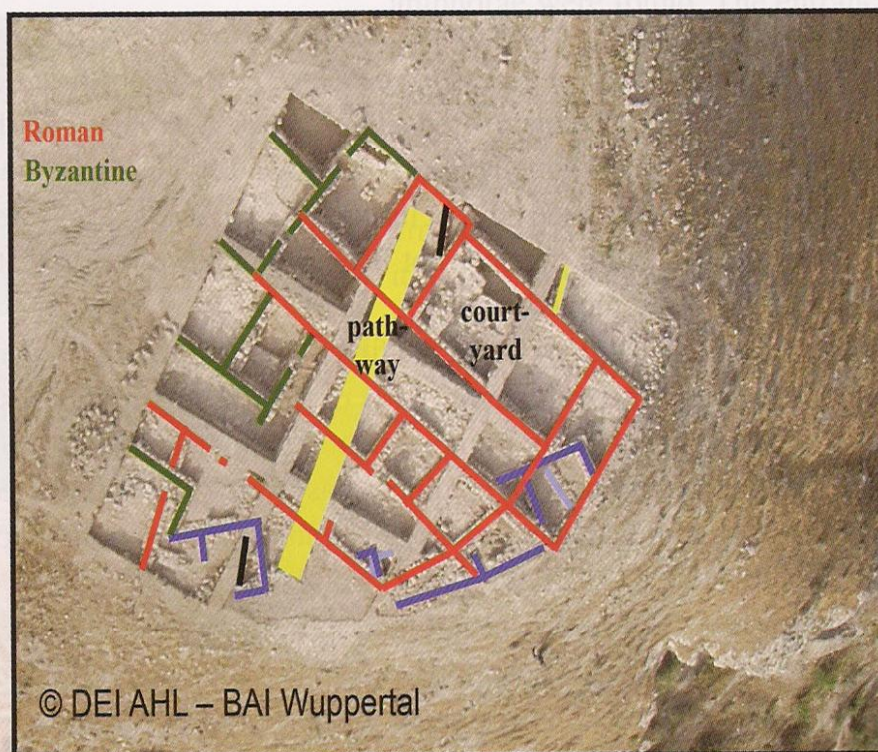
During the spring campaign 2008 the German team worked in Area I on the western side of the tall and in Area II on its northern side.

Area I

The main original objective of opening Area I in the western part was to understand the stratigraphy of the tell. By the end of this year's spring campaign, Area I comprised 1075m² of excavated surface. The evidence from this area is impressive: the successive layers have given us a valuable insight into the history of northern Transjordan from the Late Bronze Age to the Umayyad period. In 2004, the older strata of Middle and Early Bronze Age were excavated in three squares. It is expected a reference stratigraphy for the Gadara/Umm Qays region representing remains from a long succession of archaeological periods (Early Bronze Age – Ottoman period). In 2008, all squares with remains which are younger than the Late Bronze Age were excavated; these are: AG 115-116, AH 115-116, AI 117 and AL 118. Additionally, the squares AQ 120, AR 118-120 in the north and AE-AF 115-116 in the south were excavated.

Two major discoveries were made:

First, the Iron Age I settlement on Tall Zar`a was apparently unfortified, although the structures uncovered do not present a consistent picture. This very interesting period (carbon-dated to 1200 to nearly 1000 BC) can be characterized as an important transitional phase. Approximately one third of the Iron





Age I surface in the south is taken up by a very high quality courtyard house with two integrated silos (2m diameter) made out of mud bricks. A tabun constructed in three layers can also be seen lower in the trench. Another large part of the surface towards the north is taken up by a four-roomed house whose massive walls are well-preserved. While the courtyard house continues Late Bronze Age traditions, the four-roomed house marks the transition to the Iron Age. The area between the two houses is characterized by agricultural installations (e.g. pits for storage), sheds and stables. The Late Bronze Age level has been reached in the whole area of Area I (1025m²), however, up to now only 4.5 m of the expected 12 m cultural layers have been excavated.

Area I revealed a continuing habitation area. The most significant structure uncovered so far is the massive casemate wall that once protected the city on its north-western edge. The pottery dates it to the Late Bronze Age and the scientific analysis of charcoal remains confirms this, giving an approximate dating to somewhere between 1450 and 1300 cal. BC. Six casemate chambers have been excavated thus far. Behind the wall was a large courtyard with three covered channels. These collected the rainwater that accumulated behind the city wall into a settling basin in one of the casemate chambers, and from there into a vertical chute.

In the south the casemate wall ended in a large, inward-facing tower in two parts. In the southern half a large room was found which had seen a number of conversions, the latest of which involved a low partitioning wall in the west, creating behind it a small room only one meter wide. On this wall were two large basalt column bases which once supported wooden columns that held up the roof. The peculiar character of this small partitioned structure calls to mind the Bronze Age gate sanctuaries found elsewhere. A large stone, cut flat on the bottom and with a symmetrical peak towards the top, which lay toppled beside the column bases, may be a cultic stone due to its similarity to such cult stones found in Palestine.

To the south of the 'gate sanctuary', a 2.75m wide gate opening was uncovered. This gate would have provided the most direct access for pedestrians to the lower cities to the north and west. To the south of the gateway we also uncovered a bottle-shaped, stone-lined 'hollow' in the ground, the entrance to which was covered by a meticulously worked, disc-shaped stone with a diameter of roughly one meter and bearing a 15 cm wide hole in its centre. It has been excavated to a depth of 2.6 meters. Due to the problem of collapsing, we will not be able to investigate this structure further until the surrounding layers have been removed.

In the spring campaign of 2006, the first domestic structures were found inside the casemate wall. Up to now, we have uncovered large parts of three courtyard houses and parts of another two huge courtyard houses which belong to monumental architecture. The monumental house in the north consists of a large roofed room with a column base, a part of a staircase, a little uncovered part of the courtyard and one more adjacent room. Two radiocarbon samples from this context have yielded dates of 1450/1440 and 1300 BCE with 95.4 % probability. The valuable finds that were made in this structure suggest it may have had a special function. Among these are 28 cylinder seals of varying quality and image type measuring 2.5-3cm in height and (in average) 1-1.3cm in diameter. Most of them are made of faience and covered with a green glaze. They belong to the western group of the so-called 'Common Style' of the Mitanni glyptic and can be dated to the 14th-13th centuries BC. The discovery of an



un-carved cylinder of faience and a cylinder of limestone with an unfinished carving suggests cylinder seal production at the site. The large number of glass beads that have been found and the appropriate industrial pottery vessels suggest that the tell may have been also home to a glass processing workshop in the late Bronze Age. Further excavations have to clear the questions for the function of the complex as entity and the special activities in each room.

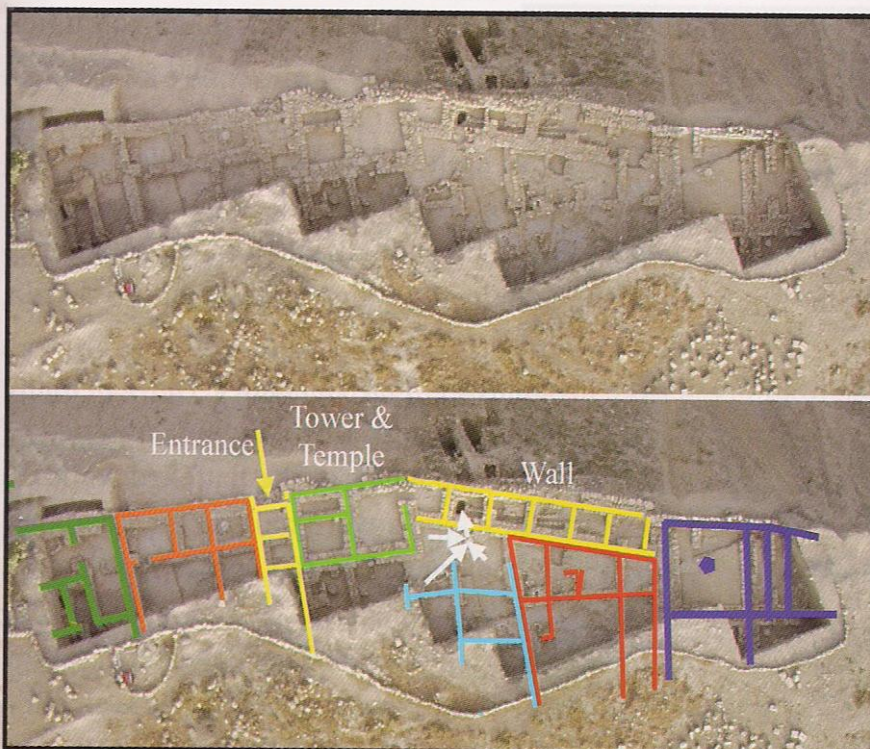
The solid architecture of the new, partly-uncovered house in the south of Area I points to an important function of the complex and an important owner for the house. Up until now, four well-made rooms and parts of two additional ones were exposed. The wealth of the city and its wide-reaching trade links are reflected in the manifold finds of this period, among them five scarabs and imported pottery from Cyprus and Mycenae. Apart from these finds a well-preserved kernos, a part of a silver miniature vessel, some bronze tools (needles, awls, a chisel), an Egyptian/Egyptianising painted figurine, other figurine fragments and well-preserved daggers were found.

Area II

Area II is situated in the northeast of the tell. Because of its high position this area was expected to yield administrative and/or cultic buildings. By the end of spring 2008, an area of more than 800m² (AT-AX 128-133) had been opened. A large building with several building phases of the Roman-Byzantine period has been uncovered which was re-used in the Islamic period. It was built over smaller houses which probably date to the Roman period. The southern extension of the large Roman-Byzantine building excavated in the last two years could be followed. Three rooms and two courtyards have been found which show a reorganisation of the large structure after heavy destructions which can be dated to the Byzantine period. In the debris inside the rooms two complete and two almost complete

amphorae were found. The entrances were blocked at the end of the occupation. A tabun, a storage basin and a pillar base were found on an earlier occupation level in the northernmost room. In the room south of it a floor covered with lime plaster was found. A large oven was also found in the eastern room as well as in one of the courtyards. Some fragments of wall paintings discovered in the debris show that the house was originally decorated with frescoes.

In the easternmost square, a separate building with several building phases could also be identified. In AV 132 and AW 132 the eastern-





most extension of the large Roman-Byzantine building complex could be verified. In the squares AV 132 and AV 133 the eastern extension of the thick wall could be found. However, in AV 133 all walls in this direction eroded down the slope. In the squares AY 131 and AX 132 the northern limit of the large Roman-Byzantine building could be identified.

Significant results in summer 2008

Area III

The excavations on Tall Zar`a in Summer 2008 focused on the new Area III in the southern part of the tall plateau. This area is the highest on the plateau and has a large number of stones and wall structures on the surface. The surface survey of 2001 produced in this area a great deal of Roman and Byzantine pottery, suggesting a large Roman-Byzantine building complex. Closer initial investigations also revealed the existence of a large Roman cistern. In spring 2007 all surface stones not obviously belonging to walls were removed and aerial photographs were made using a helium balloon. In summer 2007 a test trench was opened in the western part of the area, revealing a wall with gateway and part of a courtyard with some mosaic floor still intact.

Summer 2008 was the first large-scale excavation campaign. 24 squares of 5m x 5m; 600m² in total, were opened in the central part of the area. These were U 123-128, V 123-128, W 123-128, X 123-128. The entire area, especially in the south, was badly disturbed by recently-dug holes, presumably the result of grave-robbing activity. The oldest stratum exposed consists of a large Byzantine-period courtyard with a gateway of finely dressed stones. Towards the middle of the courtyard itself are what remains of a mosaic floor: a large roundel of patterned mosaic stones (red, black, white) embedded into a thick, white plaster floor. To the east is the opening of a large underground barrel-vaulted cistern. A basin and drain leading under the mosaic floor into the cistern were revealed to the north of the opening. Adjoining the south of the courtyard are two 5m x 5m square-shaped rooms with thick walls, similar to those found in areas I and II and suggesting that rooms of this shape and size were a main component of the ground plan of this period. At a later date, the spacious Byzantine rooms and courtyards were subdivided into smaller spaces using thick, well-built walls. Across an alleyway opposite the gate into the courtyard, a new building was added. As yet, only one wall of this phase could be revealed: a large wall (preserved circa 1 m high) with a low, long shelf attached to the south. The filling of this shelf and the floor behind the wall (a room?) contained nothing but Byzantine sherds, dating it also to the late antique period.

In a further phase, probably dating to the Mamluk period, in squares U 123-125 and V 123-125 many of the earlier walls were leveled to create a large, stone-flagged courtyard. The flagging consisted of large, flat stones taken from the earlier walls and incorporated the top edges of the flattened walls. In squares W 124-125 and X 124-125 (towards the north) some new walls were built in the courtyard area, but much thinner than the previous walls. A tabun was constructed in the corner of the new, stone-flagged yard.

In a transitional period between the construction of the stone-flagged floor and the appearance of the structures visible on the surface, a number of small alterations and additions were made to the existing structures which appear to have continued to be used, including a forewall in zig-zag pattern along the



eastern wall of the Byzantine courtyard and a small building that used previous walls as foundations further to the south. It is interesting that in all of these building phases, earlier structures were reused and altered, showing that there was never a period of disuse long enough for the original ground plan to no longer be visible and workable. Perhaps the complex was even used continually throughout these phases.

The same cannot, however, be said for the most recent phase: The stone structures that had been visible on the surface revealed themselves to be extremely shallow. Although in some cases built in roughly the same direction, these structures did not present a reuse of the earlier building complex, nor did they use earlier walls as foundations, only the building material from the earlier complex was reused with fieldstones in these structures. The thickness of the earth between these and the earlier structures is also considerable. In other words, the period of disuse of this area between this and earlier periods must have been quite long, at least long enough for the original ground plan to have disappeared from view. No floors or foundations have been found for this phase and because it is so close to the surface it has been severely disturbed. As a result, it is impossible to date at this stage.

The chronological relationships of a set of structures excavated in the easternmost squares of the summer 2008 excavation area (W 127-128 and X 127-128) has yet to be clarified. They include a number of thick, well-built walls preserved to a height of over 1 m and finely built doorways with threshold stones. One of the rooms of the complex was filled with charcoal and ash, and the remains of a well-built door were found in the form of nails, hinges and handles. The courtyard of the complex was used over a long period: various levels of floor were revealed, each with a tabun oven still embedded into the floor. In the north easternmost corner of this area a well-preserved oil mill was uncovered, consisting of a round surface made of segment stones and bordered by a thin wall toward the outside. In the

middle, the stone hub of the wheel contained a square opening to hold the structure supporting the arm of the mill. The mill sits c. 40cm high in the room, however the bottom has not yet been reached. The lowest of the floors excavated contains a great deal of Mameluk pottery, indicating the structures were used intensively in this period. A further stratum below this floor was, however, partially uncovered on the last day and appears to consist of well-made, intact mosaic floor resembling that of the large Byzantine courtyard described above, suggesting a much earlier original date for this complex and some of its walls.





Area I

Some work was also undertaken in Area I. In squares AE 116 and AF 116 a mud-brick wall was removed in order to prevent it from collapsing into the surrounding area as a result of weathering. With the removal of the mud-brick wall, the Late Bronze Age stratum is at one level and ready to be excavated to a further level in 2009. Area I was also extended by 500m² to the north, but only to remove on the surface the waste soil from previous campaigns in 2003 and 2004 and the colluvium which had been severely disturbed by ploughing in the modern period. Excavation of the cultural layers below will begin in spring 2009. Under the courtyard of the southern courtyard house a second bottle-shaped, stone-lined 'hollow' in the ground (AF 116) has been uncovered. It has been excavated to a depth of 1.4m. An Egyptian faience figurine and a mace head belonged to the special finds from this context.