

# Khirbet el-Maqatir

A BIBLICAL SITE ON THE BENJAMIN-EPHRAIM BORDER



By Scott Stripling

Khirbet el-Maqatir sits on the eastern slope of the central mountain ridge of Israel, 9 mi (15 km) north of Jerusalem and ca. 2 mi (3 km) east of ancient Bethel.<sup>1</sup> The eroded natural limestone hill rises 2920 ft (890 m) above sea level and is situated on the east side of the main north–south ridge road which runs from Jerusalem to Shechem. Today, bedrock lies exposed throughout much of the site, a condition that has existed at least since the Late Hellenistic era, as evidenced by the site plan sketched on bedrock in the mid-first century BC (Fig. 10). The ubiquitous subterranean features in the bedrock are often 6.5 ft (2 m) deep, thus a maximum depth of 13 ft (4 m) exists in some areas.

## History at the Research of Khirbet el-Maqatir

Four periods of occupation exist at Khirbet el-Maqatir: a Bronze Age fortress, an Iron Age (IA I–II) village, a small Late Hellenistic/Early Roman town, and a Byzantine monastery. From 1995 to 2010, the work of the Associates for Biblical Research at Khirbet el-Maqatir focused primarily on the Bronze Age fortress that was constructed near the end of Middle Bronze III (MB III), and which suffered violent destruction near the end of Late Bronze I (LB I). Since 2010 significant excavations have been carried out in the other areas,

particularly the Late Hellenistic/Early Roman town. A host of nineteenth-century explorers, including Robinson, Conder and Kitchener, Wilson, and Thomson, documented the Byzantine complex.<sup>2</sup> Victor Guérin in the mid-nineteenth century was the first in modern times to note the four-acre Late Hellenistic/Early Roman settlement.<sup>3</sup> In 1981 Israel Finkelstein surveyed the site,<sup>4</sup> but the Byzantine remains on the summit were ignored in the survey. Excavations have yet to reveal any natural water source, and the abundance of cisterns indicates that the inhabitants depended upon stored rainwater for hydration. The site has suffered from robbing, looting, erosion, and agricultural activity. Encroachment by local landowners in 1999 and 2013 resulted in the destruction and loss of access to a significant portion of the site (Fig. 2).

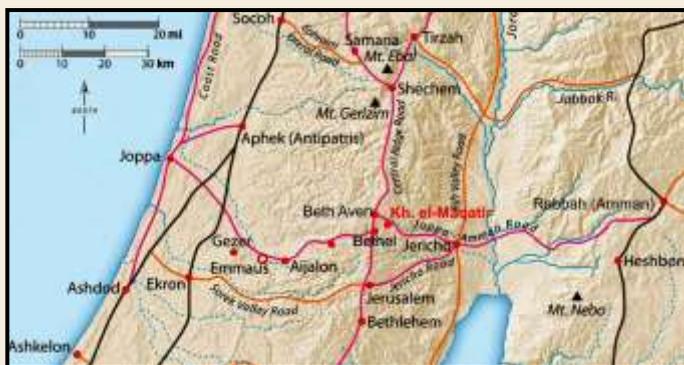
In 1995, the Associates for Biblical Research began excavations at Khirbet el-Maqatir under the direction of Bryant Wood. In 2010 Scott Stripling joined the staff, and in 2014 he became the Director of Excavations. Wood has published extensively on the identification of the Bronze Age ruins, identifying them as Ai of Joshua 7–8.<sup>5</sup> Stripling advocates that the Iron Age village is Ephron of 2 Chronicles 13:19, and the Late Hellenistic/Early Roman town is Ephraim of John 11:53–54.<sup>6</sup>

Five suggestions exist to explain the founding of the Byzantine-era memorial church. They are as follows: (1) Abraham's construction of an altar between Bethel and Ai (Gn 12:8; 13:3–4);<sup>7</sup> (2) Abraham's separation from Lot (13:10–12); (3) the church mentioned by Jerome that commemorated God's appearance to Jacob in a dream at Bethel (28:10–19); (4) Israel's destruction of Ai (Jos 7–8); and (5) Jesus' sojourn at Ephraim (Jn 11:53–54).<sup>8</sup>

## Summary of the Remains at Khirbet el-Maqatir

### Bronze Age Fortress

The Bronze Age fortress covers only slightly more than one hectare in size, but it was strongly fortified. The foundations of the excavated walls are ca. 13 ft (4 m) wide. This is consistent with the superior engineering and industrial capability of



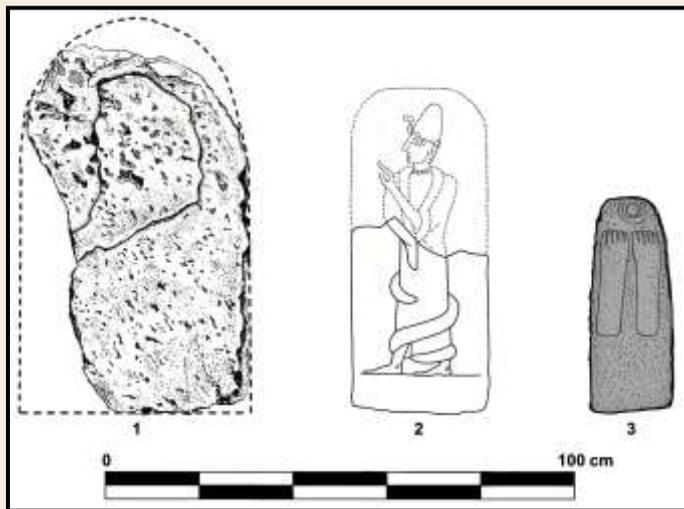
Bryant Wood

Figure 1: Khirbet el-Maqatir in relation to major roads of the ancient world.



based on the circle motifs on its base (Fig. 5). The third scarab dates to the reign of Psametik I in the Iron Age II period.

Pottery from the construction phase dates to late in MB III, and the fortress stood from ca. 1525 to 1400 BC. Numerous ceramic forms continue from MB III into LB I.



Bryant G. Wood

**Figure 6.** Locally-made stelae found in the southern Levant: (1) Kh. el-Maqtir, 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).

During the 2009 season, a badly weathered stele was excavated in Square C17, just inside the southwest area of the Bronze Age fortress. The stone came from a rough paved area of cobblestones packed with earth approximately 11.8 in (30 cm) deep. In composition, it is carved travertine limestone, tan in color, measuring 31.10 in (79 cm) high, 15.75 in (40 cm) wide, and 7.09 in (18 cm) thick, with a flat bottom. The stone is badly weathered, and nothing glyptic is discernable. It is significant, however, in that it is only the third locally-produced stele to be found in the southern Levant, and is the largest of the three (Fig. 6).

### Iron Age Village

The Iron Age I period saw a proliferation of villages along the central hill country ridge. One of those villages stood at Khirbet el-Maqtir. The settlers built a series of houses into the ruins of the Bronze Age fortification wall. The remains of three Iron Age houses have been excavated in Squares Q9,

Q10, Q11, and R11 (Fig. 7). The domestic structures are generally poorly made. In Square Q9, the structure consists of several rooms, with walls the width of one stone. The rooms measure about 4.9 x 6.5 ft (1.5 x 2.0 m). In Squares R11, Q10, and Q11, stone-lined pits typical of the Iron Age I were excavated. The R11 pit yielded a restorable jug and diagnostic sherds from different Iron I cooking pots, along with a mortar and roof roller (Fig. 8). The Q10 pit yielded several interesting objects, including a bronze arrowhead and a limestone and bronze tool (specific purpose undetermined). A bronze needle, flint blades, and pounders found in Q10 suggest a domicile.

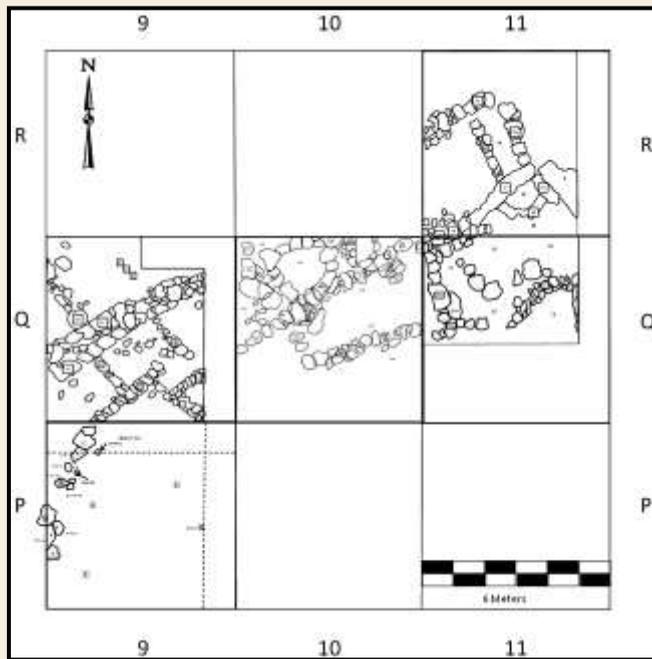
Iron Age I pottery also appears in the area of the Late Hellenistic/Early Roman town. A large quantity of Iron Age I pottery came from Square O21, and two poorly made walls, likely dating to the same period, were built directly on bedrock in the same square. At Khirbet el-Maqtir, 11 percent of the sherds collected (8 of 73) by Finkelstein and Magen were from the Iron Age.<sup>9</sup> Excavations at Khirbet el-Maqtir have revealed an Iron Age settlement, with some of the pottery representing the Iron Age I–II transition.<sup>10</sup> In the 2014 and 2015 seasons, evidence pointed to continued occupation into the Iron Age II and Persian eras. The former is represented by pottery and inscribed stone weights, while the latter is evidenced by lamps and a silver *Yezekiah* coin.

### Late Hellenistic/Early Roman Town

A fortified town was founded in the mid-second century BC and expanded during the reign of Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BC). The finds at Khirbet el-Maqtir show a continuous occupation until the First Jewish Revolt (66–70 AD). Thirty First Revolt coins discovered at the site abruptly end in 69 AD. The logical conclusion is that Vespasian destroyed the site during his campaign into the central part of the country, north of Jerusalem (Fig. 9).

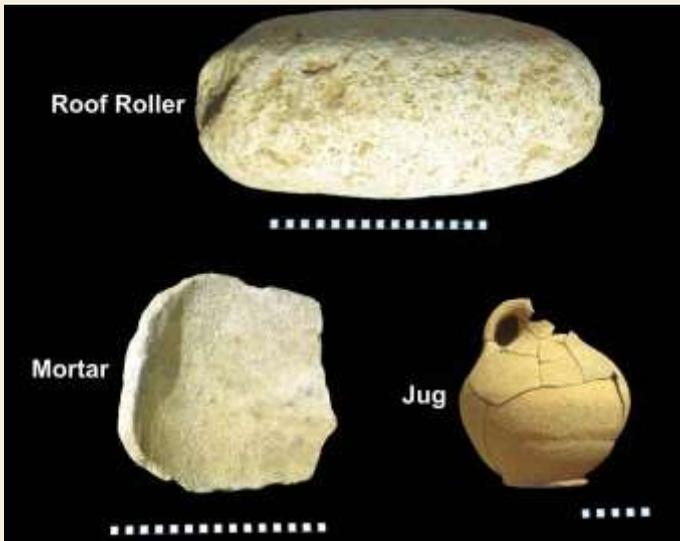
of Jerusalem (Fig. 9).

About 2000 years ago, an aspiring artist carved the city plan on exposed bedrock, except that the tower is missing. This closely matches Maqtir staff architect Leen Ritmeyer's rendering of the city as depicted in Figure 12. The walled-in portion of the settlement measures 1.5 hectares and sits atop approximately one-third of the Bronze Age fortress. The fortification wall is massive, ranging from 13 to 16 ft (4.0 to 5.0 m) in thickness. The tower measures 98 x 52 ft (30 x 16 m). Jews clearly populated the town and practiced strict ritual purity. Along with the 120 pieces of ritual stone vessels, including three restorable vessels, and an ossuary



Don McNeeley

**Figure 7.** Remains of three Iron Age houses in Squares Q9, Q10, Q11, and R11.



Michael C. Luddeni

Figure 8. Objects from Pit 7 in Square R11.



Gary Goldberg

Figure 9. Vespasian's campaigns, First Jewish Revolt.

fragment, four *miqvaot* have been excavated. A typical Second Temple period tomb with seven *kokhim* was excavated 328 ft (100 m) north of the Late Hellenistic/Early Roman town.

What originally appeared to be a fifth *miqveh* actually turned out to be the opening into an underground cavern (CAV 1), connected to a large first-century cistern (CAV 2) and a hiding tunnel and small cave (CAV 3). Excavations revealed CAV 1

to be an olive oil production facility with an *in situ* screw press comprised of two megalithic stones and four massive weights. Fifteen well-preserved steps lead into the main cavern. All three interconnected subterranean installations were part of an elaborate hiding system used in the First and Second Jewish Revolts. Coins of Tyre (AD 93/94–195/6) and Trajan (AD 114–117) found in CAV 1, and a Bar Kokhba Revolt year 3 (AD 134/5–135/6) coin found in CAV 2, provide the only evidence for usage to date of the site after 69 AD. In addition to producing olive oil, during the Late Hellenistic/Early Roman occupation a wine press may have been built into the extant chamber of the Bronze Age gate.



Michael C. Luddeni

Figure 10. LH/ER city plan etched in bedrock.

A large dwelling sits in the center of the site (Fig. 13). The house is typical of the complex-courtyard houses of the Late Hellenistic/Early Roman era. The size indicates the prominence and wealth of the extended family that lived there. It has a large courtyard surrounded by rooms. Excavated walls in some rooms survive to a height of 5 ft (1.5 m). A well-preserved fenestrated wall was excavated in Square P20; such walls were commonly used to separate humans from animals in compliance with *halakhic* requirements. A typical Hasmonean-era “pinched” oil lamp was excavated in the foundation trench of Wall 5. An intact Herodian lamp dating to the first century AD was found at the floor level. These lamps reinforce the two primary phases of occupation. This conclusion is further bolstered by the fact that an adjacent room in Square O23 has a doorway from the earlier phase that was sealed by flagstones in the ER period. Carbon dating additionally reinforces the dating of the occupation.

In Square O22, a subterranean chamber was excavated. Eight steps led into the chamber's arched entrance. There was a secondary opening to the surface through a circular cut in the ceiling of the room. The lid to this opening was found *in situ*. A triangular niche for an oil lamp, typical of the first century, was cut ca. 11.8 in (30 cm) below the opening to the surface. The chamber itself measured ca. 8.2 ft (2.5 m) high by 6.5 ft (2 m) wide, with a sealed area to the south of the arched entrance. The chamber's function is uncertain at this point; perhaps it served as a basement for storage.

## Byzantine Monastery

A Byzantine monastery stood on the western spur or summit from ca. AD 375 to 525. The building remained in secondary use until the earthquake of AD 749. Excavations in Squares ZH010 and ZI010 (Fig. 14) revealed evidence of this secondary use, including a wall blocking the main entrance, an intact Early Islamic oil lamp, and Early Islamic coins and pottery. In Judea alone there were dozens of monasteries from the fifth to the seventh century, and the Khirbet el-Maqatir monastery is similar to the other monastic complexes, except for the rare arched bema area in Squares ZG05 and ZH05 and the notable absence of a narthex.

The church reflects the classic basilica style with the central apse extending eastward. The side apses on the north and south may be the result of a rebuild in the early fifth century, but this assertion is speculative. The total ecclesiastical complex spans 129.10 ft (39.35 m) from the atrium entrance on the west end to the east end of the central apse. Although the atrium awaits excavation, traces of all four of its walls (ca. 2.9 ft [0.90 m] wide) are observable. The nave is 19.7 ft (6.0 m) wide, and the aisles are 9.8 ft (3.0 m) wide. The main entrance into the nave measures 5.9 ft (1.8 m) wide and has a threshold with sockets for a double-winged door. It is flanked by two smaller entrances, each being ca. 3.9 ft (1.2 m) wide. Early explorers noted Corinthian columns that supported the church. Numerous column bases remain *in situ*, and one intact column was unearthed to the south of the vaulted bema, with its Corinthian capital nearby. The flooring was a combination of limestone slabs and mosaic tiles. The roofing reflects the classic imbrex



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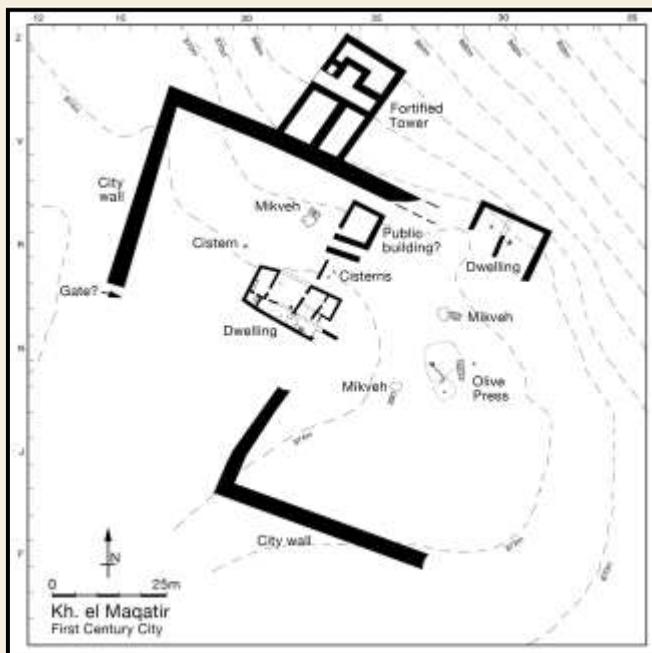
Figure 11. Mikveh in Square M23, excavated in 2013.

and tegula style. Multiple fragments from the marble chancel screen and the limestone cornice have been recovered. Figure 15 shows how the monastery appeared at the height of the Byzantine era. Coins found in the church date from the late fourth century to the early sixth century and help date the period when the monastery was in use. An intact radiated candlestick lamp and an abundance of diagnostic Byzantine pottery serve to corroborate this date.



Michael C. Luddeni

Figure 14. Monastery entrance.



Leen Ritmeyer

Figure 12. Rendering of the LH/ER city (2014).

## Summary and Conclusions

Fourteen seasons of excavation since 1995 revealed four primary periods of occupation at Khirbet el-Maqatir. Significant contributions have been made to the understanding of regional settlement patterns from the Bronze Age to the Byzantine period. Insights have been gained into the possible identification of the biblical sites of Ai, Ephron, and Ephraim. Two volumes of final publication are forthcoming over the next five years.



Figure 15. Reconstruction of the monastery (2012).

Leen Ritmeyer



Michael Tims

Figure 16. Four intact lamps. From left to right: (1) pinched Hasmonean lamp; (2) undecorated Herodian lamp; (3) radiated candlestick Byzantine lamp; (4) channel nozzle Early Islamic lamp.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Albright, W.F. 1968, The Site of Bethel and its Identification, pp. 1–3 in James L. Kelso, *The Excavation of Bethel (1934–1960)* (Cambridge MA: American Schools of Oriental Research). See also Schneider, A.M. 1934, Bethel und seine altchristlichen Heiligtümer, *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palastina-Vereins* 57: 186–90.

<sup>2</sup> See Conder, C. 1881, The Mountains of Judah and Ephraim, pp. 193–238 in *Picturesque Palestine* 1, ed. Charles W. Wilson (New York: D. Appleton). Other older sources include Dalman, G. 1911, Die Ultertumswissenschaft im Institut, *Palastinajahrbuch* 7: 3–31, and Sellin, E. 1900, Mittheilungen von meiner Palastinareise 1899, *Mittheilungen und Nachrichten des Deutschen Palastina-Vereins* 6: 1–15.

<sup>3</sup> Guerin, V. 1869, Description géographique, historique et archéologique de la Palestine, Première Partie, Judée, Tome Troisième (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, reprinted 1969 Amsterdam: Oriental).

<sup>4</sup> Finkelstein, I., Lederman, Z.; and Bunimovitz, S. 1997, Highlands of

Many Cultures, the Southern Samaria Survey: The Sites 2, *Sonia and Marco Nadler Institute of Archaeology Monograph Series 14* (Tel Aviv University).

<sup>5</sup> Wood, B.W. 2008, The Search for Joshua’s Ai, pp. 205–40 in *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History*, eds. Richard S. Hess, Gerald A. Klingbeil and Paul J. Ray Jr. (Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns).

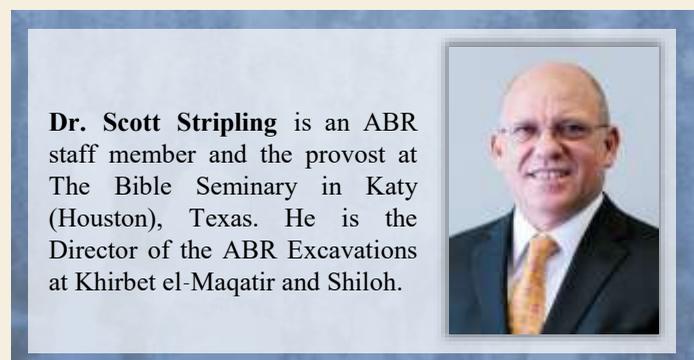
<sup>6</sup> Stripling, S. 2014, “Have we walked in the footsteps of Jesus? Exciting new possibilities at Khirbet el-Maqatir,” *Bible and Spade* 27.4.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, C. 1869–1870, On the Site of Ai and the Position of the Altar Which Abram built between Bethel and Ai, *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement* 1: 123–26.

<sup>8</sup> Stripling, S. 2014, Excavations at Khirbet el-Maqatir, *Annual Report to the Civil Administration of Judea and Samaria*, January 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Finkelstein, I. and Magen, Y. 1993, *Archaeological Survey of the Hill Country of Benjamin*. Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority.

<sup>10</sup> Stripling, *op cit*.



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# The Stratification

## of “Tel” Maqatir

By Brian Peterson

It is with a degree of humor that I chose to include in the title of this article the expression “tel” Maqatir. Anyone who has been following the excavations of ABR over the past two decades knows full well that the name of the site we had been excavating is in fact *Khirbet el-Maqatir*, not *tel* Maqatir—a *khirbet* being a “low ruin,” generally with minimal surface evidence of previous occupation. Yet, during the excavations held in 2015, I happened upon a phenomenon unique at Maqatir, at least up to that point in our excavations. After clearing away almost 7 ft (2 m) of top debris (most of this labeled as Locus 1) during the 2014 season, I reached the level of bedrock, at least on the western and southern perimeters of the square (see Fig. 3). In 2014, my team had revealed a number of walls and/or possible walls, which we felt were a part of the courtyard house dating to the Early Roman period that I have been working on since 2011 (see Fig. 1).

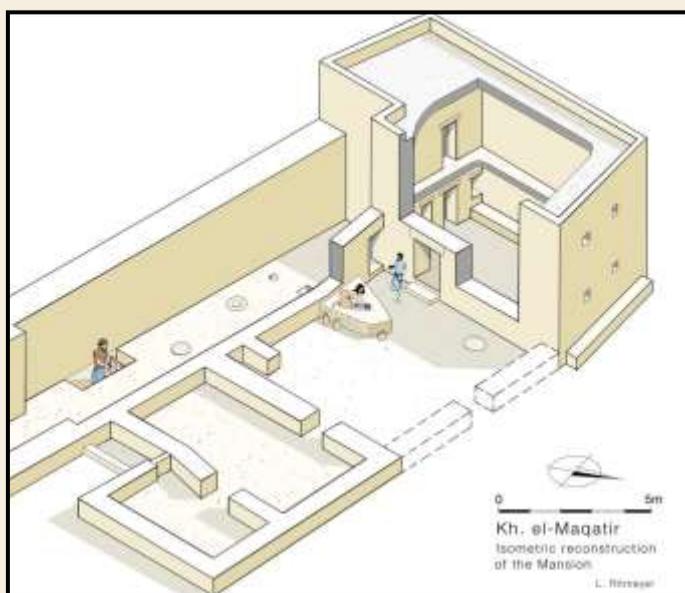
During the winter of 2015, Maqatir dig director Scott Stripling set out our excavation goals for the 2015 season, one of which was for my team to “clean up” Square P22 to bedrock, close it out, and move on to excavate the public building to the

northeast of P22. However, upon my return in May of 2015, I discovered that my square was far from being finished. Those familiar with the archaeological process know that no square is complete until bedrock is revealed throughout the *entire* 16 x 16 ft (5 x 5 m) (or 20 x 20 ft [6 x 6 m] if you are removing balks) of the square. What was supposed to take a couple of days to complete turned into an ongoing excavation that lasted not only throughout the three weeks of the 2015 season, but continued into the first week of the 2016 season! How, might you ask, is it possible for a team of seven or more diggers to spend more than two seasons digging one square? The answer actually surprised all of us. You see, almost the entire square of P22 opened up to reveal a pit in the ground, the bottom of which was an indeterminate distance below the surface. A square with this feature is indeed unique in a *khirbet*.

To a certain degree I felt what I am sure Yigael Yadin felt when he began excavating the water system at Hazor in 1968. After several days of intense digging, Yadin finally broke down and brought in the heavy equipment, only to find that the water system descended some 130 ft (40 m, including the shaft and the sloping tunnel to the water source). Now, I am not saying that I was digging the water system at Maqatir, although the theory crossed our minds, but at 13 ft (4 m) and descending, I felt like I would never reach the end. As we excavated, we went through no less than eight, if not eleven, occupational, destruction, and abandonment levels and phases. Now to be sure, as ABR has excavated over the past twenty years, they have revealed evidence of many of these levels spread across the Maqatir site. What made P22 so interesting was that all of these phases and levels could be seen in a single square (see Figs. 3 and 4)

### Early Roman Period

Without question, the Early Roman Period boasted the most extensive and discernable ruins in P22. This was due mainly to the fact that this uppermost stratum evinced clear walls and floors. However, even within this level, numismatic evidence appeared to support construction and/or abandonment dating from both the late period of the Early Roman era (destroyed ca. AD 69) and the earlier period of the ER era, ca. 63 BC–AD 11 and before (i.e., Hellenistic ca. 290–64 BC). This appears to be attested by the way walls associated with the LH/



Leen Ritmeyer

Figure 1: Reconstruction of courtyard house, first century AD.