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Landscape, Transport & Communication

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KHIRBET AL-BATRAWY: RISE, FLOURISH AND COLLAPSE OF AN EARLY BRONZE AGE CITY IN JORDAN

LORENZO NIGRO¹

ABSTRACT

Excavations by Rome 'La Sapienza' University at the site of Khirbet al-Batrawy between 2005 and 2009 have brought to light an Early Bronze Age urban centre in the upper Wadi az-Zarqa, north-central Jordan. Architectural evidence and faunal remains portray Batrawy as a strongly fortified caravan centre, which controlled the ford of the wadi as well as tracks crossing the Syro-Arabian Desert and leading into the Jordan Valley. Its material culture too points to an intense system of exchange pivoted on this early city. Public buildings such as the Broad-Room Temple and possibly another major building connected to the city-gate provide interesting insights into the nature of urbanism in 3rd millennium BC Jordan.

INTRODUCTION

The Early Bronze Age (thereafter EBA) fortified town of Khirbet al-Batrawy (Fig. 1),² was first discovered in December 2004 and since May 2005 has been systematically excavated by the Rome 'La Sapienza' Expedition to Palestine & Jordan³ in cooperation

1 Rome Sapienza University; E-mail: lorenzo.nigro@uniroma1.it; Expedition to Palestine & Jordan: www.lasapienazatojordan.it.

2 Lat. 32°05' N, Long. 36°04' E; *JADIS* site n. 2516.011, p. 2.172. Nigro 2006, 2007, 2009a, 2010a; Nigro *et al.* 2008; Nigro and Sala 2009, 2010; Nigro ed. 2006, 2008.

3 Rome 'La Sapienza' team during the fourth (2008) and fifth (2009) seasons included: L. Nigro, Director; M. Sala, Field Director; A. Di Michele, M. D'Andrea, E. Casadei, S. Massi and V. Tumolo (Area B North); A. Massafra, P. Vitolo and M. Zingarello (Area B South); I. Salimbeni and D. Ghigi (Area B South-East); V. Tumolo and P. Vitolo (Area F).

with the Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.⁴ With little in the way of later occupation phases, the site offers an extraordinary opportunity to study the rise, flourish and collapse of urbanism in the Transjordan of the 3rd millennium BC. ‘Urbanization’ is, in fact, a widely discussed phenomenon in the southern Levant. Most recently, Savage, Falconer and Harrison (2007) have levied criticism at this interpretive model, suggesting that caution ought to be exercised in the use of the terms ‘urbanism’, ‘urbanisation’ and ‘city’ to define the Palestinian and Transjordanian phenomenon. Others have argued that signs of urbanization in the Transjordan may be detected as early as the last centuries of the 4th millennium BC (Esse 1989: 82-85; Nigro 2005: 1-6, 109-110, 197-202), and that EBA urbanism in this region should be considered as a distinct historic-archaeological phenomenon, with its own characters and cantonal features (Nigro 2009a: 657-658). Khirbet al-Batrawy occupied a central position in the landscape and was well connected to the communication networks of the upper Wadi az-Zarqa in the highlands of the Jordan Valley. This site, therefore, offers an almost unique opportunity to study the relationship between EBA settlements and their environment in the southern Levant, and to assess more effectively the definition of a ‘city’ in this context.

ENVIRONMENT AND ROAD NETWORK

Long-distance trade, control over movement, and interaction with the semi-nomadic people living between the dessert and the steppe, appear to have been important aspects of the Batrawy early urban experience (Nigro 2009a: 660-662). The site controlled the ford through Wadi az-Zarqa (and Wadi edh-Dhuleyl) and, thus, the access to the Jordan Valley. The Wadi az-Zarqa is the second main tributary of the Jordan River and the easternmost permanent river on the western edge of the Syro-Arabian desert. It provides a direct connection with the major wadis of the Black Basalt Desert of southern Syria and northern Jordan. The site also controlled associated tracks crossing the highlands and the desert. Recent discoveries in southern Syria and north-eastern Jordan also support this picture of intensive interaction between urban dwellers and desert nomads. Systematic surveys carried out in the 1990s along the Wadi Rajil and

4 I would like to take the opportunity of this conference to deeply thank the late General Director, Dr. Fawwaz al-Khaysheh, and all the personnel of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan for the their generous support of the excavations and restorations at Khirbet al-Batrawy; the Inspectors, Romil Ghayib and Ahmed Shorma, and the colleagues of the Queen Rania’s Institute of Tourism and Cultural Heritage of the Hashemite University of Zarqa. The Author would also like to thank the Italian Embassy in Amman, the Ambassador of Italy, H.E. Francesco Fransoni, and Dr. Stefano Stucci, for their cooperation, and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – General Directorate for Cultural Promotion and Cooperation, Office V. I am also grateful to the Academic Authorities of Rome ‘La Sapienza’ University, the Rector, Prof. Luigi Frati, the Dean of the Faculty of Humanistic Sciences, Prof. Roberto Nicolai, the Director of the Department of Historical, Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences of Antiquity, Prof. Gilda Bartoloni, who strongly supported the activities of the Expedition.

Wadi al-‘Ajib in the area of the western Basalt Desert, which followed the discovery of Jawa (Helms 1981, 1984), produced a preliminary map of Chalcolithic and EBA sites in the area between the al-Mafraq district and the EB I site of Jawa (Betts *et al.* 1995, 1996), as well as further to the north in southern Syria (Braemer 1984, 1988, 1993). Some of these EBA Jordanian sites in the western fringes of the Syro-Arabian Desert include, from west to east, Tell el-Qihati, Qasr el-Hallabat, Rukeis, Salatin, Karyat Khisha al-Sletin, Tell Umm el-Quttein, Hawshiyān (Sala 2006). More recently, archaeological research in the provinces of al-Mafraq in northern Jordan (Bartl *et al.* 2001), in the Hauran and Jebel Druz regions, and at Khirbet al-Umbashi (Braemer *et al.* 2004), Qarassa (Braemer *et al.* in press) and Labwe (al-Maqdissi and Braemer 2006) in southern Syria, have led to a thorough re-evaluation of human engagement with, and responses to, this ‘marginal’ environment during the Chalcolithic and EBA, especially with regard to the semi-nomadic component of ancient societies (Braemer and Sapin 2001; LaBianca and Witzel 2007; Barge and Moulin 2008).

SETTLEMENT DYNAMICS IN THE UPPER WADI AZ-ZARQA

Surveys in the upper and middle Wadi az-Zarqa were initiated by Rome ‘La Sapienza’ University under the field-directorship of G. Palumbo in 1993 and were carried out systematically until 1999 (Palumbo, G. *et al.* 1996, 1997; Caneva *et al.* 2001). The survey was resumed in 2004, and then carried on in 2007 under the direction of the author and in close connection with the systematic excavations at Khirbet al-Batrawy (Nigro 2006: 229-230; Nigro ed. 2006: vii-viii, 1-8; 2008: 2; Douglas 2006; Nigro *et al.* 2008: 215-220; Sala 2008a). The survey identified a dozen EBA sites, which demonstrates that the region provided a favourable environment for stable agriculture as early as the EB I. These conditions attracted new groups of semi-nomads who gradually settled in encampments, hamlets and villages (Kafafi 2008) and provided the economic basis for urbanism to develop. EB I (3400-3000 BC) rural villages were distributed along the riverbanks from its sources near Amman downstream to the major religious centre of Jebel al-Mutawwaq, one of the largest EB I sites in Jordan (Hanbury-Tenison 1987: 132; Douglas 2006: 51-52; Fernández-Tresguerrez Velasco 2005a, b; 2008). In the latter region, the middle Wadi az-Zarqa, sites concentrated on hilltops north of the river, and clustered around Jebel Mutawwaq. In the upper Wadi az-Zarqa, hamlets and villages were scattered throughout the valley. The main EB I site in the upper Wadi az-Zarqa was Jneneh, a 3 ha village located on a flat terrace overlooking the river, only 1.5 km south-west of Khirbet al-Batrawy (Douglas 2006: 50-51, figs. 1.4, 2.16, maps 4-5; *JADIS* nr. 2516.016, 2.172). Both Jneneh and Batrawy are located in central positions in the upper part of the Wadi az-Zarqa, controlling a relatively wide area of flat, arable land. It is plausible at least that the inhabitants of

Jneneh founded Batrawy on a hilltop overlooking the ford of the river (Nigro 2009a: 658-660). Settlement analysis clearly shows a gradual increase of population in this growing city at the beginning of EB II.⁵ Moreover, the dimensions of Batrawy (4 ha), and the impressive defensive wall encircling it (see below) also indicate the influx of new people, possibly from elsewhere in the wadi as suggested by the abandonment of many EB I villages in the middle Wadi az-Zarqa (Nigro 2009a: 664-665).

TERRITORIAL CONTROL AND CENTRALIZED AGRICULTURE PRODUCTION

Batrawy, with its monumental defenses, dominated the landscape of the upper Wadi a-Zarqa, overlooking the tracks towards the east and the south and, of course, the ford through the river itself, as well as the underlying valley where only few sites were occupied during the EB II-III (3000-2300 BC) in contrast to the EB I. These were rural villages, such as Tell el-Bireh, Tell es-Sukhne North, and Khirbet er-Ruseifeh (Nigro ed. 2006: 4-8; Sala 2008a: 363-370) with material culture virtually identical to that of Batrawy, suggesting a direct relationship between the central place and its satellites. Fields along the river cultivated by people living in these villages provided agricultural surplus, which was stored in the city's storerooms. Olive tree cultivation, which reached its peak in the EB III, was practiced intensively to the west of the Zarqa River at sites such as Masarrat (Sala 2008a: 373-374), where the western flank of the hills looking towards the Mediterranean provided a favorable environment. The discovery of sherds of metallic pattern combed jars, a jar type used for olive oil transportation, at Khirbet al-Batrawy speaks for a concentration of products from the countryside in this city.

TOPOGRAPHIC SETTING OF THE CITY

The EB II-III city of Khirbet al-Batrawy was situated on a hilltop dominating the upper course of the Zarqa River (Nigro 2006: 233-235, fig. 1; Nigro ed. 2006: 16-22). The site's topography lent itself particularly well to defensive purposes, but also the exertion of control over the surrounding landscape. Khirbet al-Batrawy was roughly triangular in shape. The base of this triangle, which is located on the western side, overlooks the Wadi az-Zarqa. With the exception of the central stretch of its northern side, where a shallow saddle connected it to a nearby hill, steep cliffs protected the site on all sides. These natural defenses were complemented and reinforced by a massive fortification system, which transformed the site into an almost unassailable citadel.

5 The shrinking and abandonment of many EB IB sites all over Palestine and Transjordan is a general trend in the transition from EB I to EB II (Esse 1991: 146-152; Finkelstein 1995: 50).

At the Origins of the EB II city: The Broad-Room Temple

The erection of a fortification wall may have been the first act of an urban community, but it also encircled at least one public building: a 12.5 m long and 2.7 m wide Broad-Room Temple. The raised circular platform in the forecourt and a niche inside the temple facing the main entrance (Nigro 2009a: 665-666; Nigro and Sala 2009: 377, 380-381; Nigro ed. 2008: 276-284) are features typical of this south Levantine religious architectural tradition of the Chalcolithic and EBA (Sala 2008b). The Temple was erected on the easternmost terrace of the site, which afforded a panoramic view across the landscape and the tracks to/from the east. The dominant position of the temple and its monumental architecture must have acted as a major point of reference in the landscape of the valley below. The location of a temple quarter on the easternmost terrace is also known from the contemporary site of Labwe in southern Syria, where two monumental buildings have been identified (al-Maqdissi and Braemer 2006: 121-122, figs. 3, 10-11).

The EB II Fortification Wall

The main fortification wall erected in EB II (2900-2700 BC) was a solid stone and mud-brick construction (2.8-3.2 m wide), from which bastions and towers projected at irregular intervals, taking advantage of the natural topography (Nigro 2006: 235-236; Nigro ed. 2006: 25-37). The foundations consisted of large limestone blocks and boulders (some exceeding 1.5 m in length), carefully set into the bedrock, with protruding base for additional support. The lower, stone-built part of the wall reached up to a height of 1.5-2 m and was topped by a mud-brick superstructure. The wall was built in separate stretches of 6-8 m in length, a technique well-known from many EBA sites in Palestine and the Transjordan, which helps prevent earthquake damage (Nigro 2009a: 663-664; Nigro 2006: 175-177; 2008: 77-82). This defensive structure befits the label of a 'city-wall', since it made the settlement into a 'city'. The erection of such a massive structure was a task accomplished by a central institution capable of organizing and supporting large scale building activities. The wall was repaired several times and underwent at least two major episodes of reconstruction in the EB IIIA and EB IIIB, with the addition of an outer wall and a further scarp-wall in the northern sector.

The EB II City Gate

The main gate of the EB II city-wall was located on the north side of the site. In spite of the monumentality of the city-wall (3.2 m in width), the gate was a simple 1.6 m wide opening. The outer jambs of the gate were reinforced with large stone boulders, supporting a monolith capstone on the outer side and wooden beams on the inner side and passage, while a step marked the entrance. There is no evidence for the presence

of towers adjoining this early gate, since the area was completely reconstructed in the following phases. Some meters east of the gate, in the lower stone courses of the wall itself there was a pierced block to tie animals (Fig. 2). Faunal remains from Batrawy include evidence for large numbers of donkeys at the site (Alhaique 2008), which were used as pack animals. One can easily imagine a donkey caravan waiting at the gate to be unloaded. One would have approached the town through a street running east-west, which flanked the main city-wall (Nigro 2007: 349-352; 2009a: 663-664; Nigro ed. 2008: 83-88).

The End of the EB II City

The gate, as well as the city, was badly damaged by an earthquake at the end of the EB II (Nigro 2007: 349, 352; 2009a: 666-667; Nigro ed. 2008: 87, fig. 3.37). Two earthquake cracks on both jambs caused the collapse of the gate capstone and it was subsequently blocked (Nigro 2007: 349-350, fig. 8; Nigro ed. 2008: 89-90, figs. 3.38, 3.40) and a new gate constructed further to the west at the beginning of the EB IIIA. The same destruction event can be identified in the Broad-Room Temple of Area F, causing the southern façade-wall of the temple to collapse and necessitating a rebuild.

EB IIIA RECONSTRUCTION OF THE NORTHERN DEFENSIVE SYSTEM

At the beginning of EB IIIA (2700-2500 BC), the main city-wall was reconstructed and previously-separated wall sectors were joined using a wooden frame. In front of the blocked gate, an outer wall (W.155) made of large limestone boulders, (with a slightly tapering outer face), was added to the main city-wall. In between the two defensive lines ran a 1.7 m wide street (Nigro 2007: 349-351; Nigro ed. 2008: 92-99). Moreover, a curvilinear outwork (with a diameter of around 12 m; W.185) protruded from the outer wall just in front of the blocked gate (Fig. 3), similar to those known from contemporary Khirbet Kerak (Greenberg and Paz 2005: figs. 84, 94-96). On the inner side of the main city-wall, two staircases were built in an inset of the structure (Fig. 4). The two symmetric flights of steps (or supports for wooden posts) allowed us to calculate the original height of this wall to around 6-7 m.

The EB III Broad-Room Temple

The Broad-Room Temple too was reconstructed at the beginning of EB III: the façade wall was reinforced, the entrance reconstructed, and its religious focus reoriented by moving the cult niche to the western (left) short side of the *cella* (Nigro and Sala 2009: 381-383; Nigro ed. 2008: 285-293). A raised platform with two betyls in front of it preceded the niche. These modifications of the EB II temple are mirrored by

the temple of Bab edh-Dhra' in the Ghôr (Rast and Schaub 2003: 157-166, 321-335, figs. 8.2, 10.57). Both temples belong to a deeply rooted tradition of south Levantine sacred architecture, the most eminent representative of which is the temple of et-Tell/Ai in Palestine (Sala 2008b: 125-139, 250-257). In 2008 and 2009 the temple at Batrawy was restored based on its EB III incarnation (Fig. 5).

The EB IIIA Destruction: Structural Crisis and The Biunique Relationship between Urbanism and War

The EB IIIA (2700-2500 BC) was a period of flourish for the city at Batrawy: the Broad-Room Temple was reconstructed according to new architectural and religious conceptions, the city's defenses were rebuilt in a monumental fashion, and its material culture exhibits variety (Fig. 6) and richness, especially with regard to metal finds. This city too, however, underwent a dramatic destruction, which testifies to the precarious nature of south Levantine EBA 'urban' communities. Economic centralization is likely to have resulted in a certain degree of political turbulence, especially in centers such as Batrawy, which is located at the border between different, and sometimes antagonistic, social groups/landscapes. Evidence of violent destructions during the EB III as well as the increasing monumentality of EB III defensive systems across the region (Nigro 2009a: 667-668) suggest that urbanism was in some way linked to warfare, which presented a more direct means of obtaining territorial control and goods concentrated within the walls of a city (Nigro 2009b).

The EB IIIB Rebuilding: Multiple Fortifications

At the beginning of EB IIIB (2500-2300 BC) the fortifications of Batrawy were again rebuilt and strengthened. The addition of a further scarp wall (W.165) to the outer wall extended the overall width of the defensive works in Area B to 15 m (Fig. 7). A new paved street was created by razing the collapse layer in between the main city-wall and the outer wall. The main city-wall was also rebuilt in its upper section in several locations (Nigro and Sala 2009: 374-375; Nigro ed. 2008: 100-101). The scarp wall obliterated the curvilinear outwork and abutted the outer wall with a round bastion (W.825). Moreover a transversal wall (W.177), protruding from the fortification northwards, suggests that the EB IIIB gate was located further to the west.

The EB IIIB Buildings in Area B South

Inside the main city-wall, in Area B South, a domestic quarter with houses and other structures dating to the EB IIIB has been excavated (Fig. 8). To the east, a rectangular domestic unit (House B2) was brought to light, with a circular pillar base in the middle of the room and an entrance on the western side; to the west side of the house, a semicircular device was also adjoined (a fragmentary copper spike was retrieved

from inside the device). This house had access to the small yard already excavated in previous seasons, where a large oven (T.413) protruded from the eastern side of Building B1 (Nigro 2007: 353; Nigro ed. 2008: 148-162). The latter consisted of two rectangular rooms and a staircase leading to an upper storey (Nigro and Sala 2010: § 5.3). West of Building B1, a lane (L.1050) was uncovered connecting it to another large structure, of which only the northern and western walls were brought to light, called Building B3. Inside this building (B3), aligned along its northern wall, a row of pithoi were found *in situ* and intact in the 1 m thick collapse layer (Fig. 9). It seems plausible that Building B1 and Building B3, which display the same building techniques (different from those of House B2), were actually pavilions of an unique building, probably a palace. Further excavations are, however, needed to confirm this hypothesis.

EB IIIB Economic Flourish

A preliminary study of material culture of Batrawy also provides interesting insights into the organization of the local economy. The pottery from EB IIIB (2500-2300 BC) contexts, for instance, displays a strong degree of formal, technological and functional standardization. At the same time, however, there is also an increase in the number and variety of pattern-combed and other metallic wares, pointing to an increased influx of agricultural and husbandry products (mainly olive oil, goat fat, lentils and beans) from farms in the surrounding countryside. Specialized wares such as painted, red-burnished and polished wares become more widespread, indicating a horizontal diffusion of items, to which access had been socially restricted previously. Copper, probably from Wadi Feinan, is also present. Although found in only small quantities, together with balance weights, metals appear to have formed an important part of the economy of the city.

The Final Destruction of Batrawy

The reinforced fortifications of EB IIIB did not prevent Khirbet al-Batrawy from its last dramatic destruction, which occurred towards the end of the 24th century BC. The town was set on fire, and evidence for this dramatic event is clearly visible on structures, finds and the stratigraphy in the form of a burnt horizon.

A NEW RURAL LANDSCAPE: THE EB IVB VILLAGE ON THE ACROPOLIS

In the last century of the 3rd millennium BC (EB IVB, 2200-2000 BC), and for a short duration only (some decades), the ruins of the EB II-III town were resettled by a rural community. EB IVB occupation contexts were excavated in 2008 and 2009 in Area F and in Area B South. Two occupational phases could be distinguished (Nigro 2007: 352-353; Nigro 2008: 164-176). The earlier phase exhibited flimsy installations,

while the later included a rectangular structure (L.450) directly abutting the inner face of the collapsed EB II-III city-wall. It had a stone-paved floor and appears to have been devoted to the processing of liquids (wine?). This indicates a certain degree of continuity in agricultural activities, though at a household level. In the central sector of Area B South, two infant burials were uncovered (Nigro and Sala 2010: § 5.2) accompanied by stone mnemonic or symbolic elements such as small stelae (Fig. 10). Flint, stone tools and pottery from this phase all suggest a reversal to a rural economy, with little craft specialization and limited typological variety.-

CONCLUSION

Five excavation seasons (2005-2009) at Khirbet al-Batrawy have demonstrated that this site was a regional centre in the upper Wadi az-Zarqa during the EBA, featuring a massive fortification system in the EB II-III (2900-2300 BC), the site was re-occupied by a rural village in the EB IVB (2200-2000 BC). The presence of a temple strengthens the interpretation of this site as an EBA south Levantine city. Nonetheless, further research is required to clarify the city plan and occupation history as well as to evaluate the socio-economic and historical role of the site in its wider regional context.

NOTE OF THE AUTHOR

After the reading of this paper, the discovery of the Palace of Batrawy (Buildings B1 + B3) provided a wide set of extraordinary finds in an almost complete state of preservation. They are presented in a preliminary publication (Nigro 2010b).

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Fig. 1: General view of the site of Khirbet al-Batrawy with the EB II-III lines of fortifications on the northern slope of the hill and the EB II restored city-gate at the end of season 2009, view from the north.



Fig. 2: Khirbet al-Batrawy: the pierced block interpreted as an animal lock, set in the lower course of the outer face of the EB II Main City-Wall, from east.

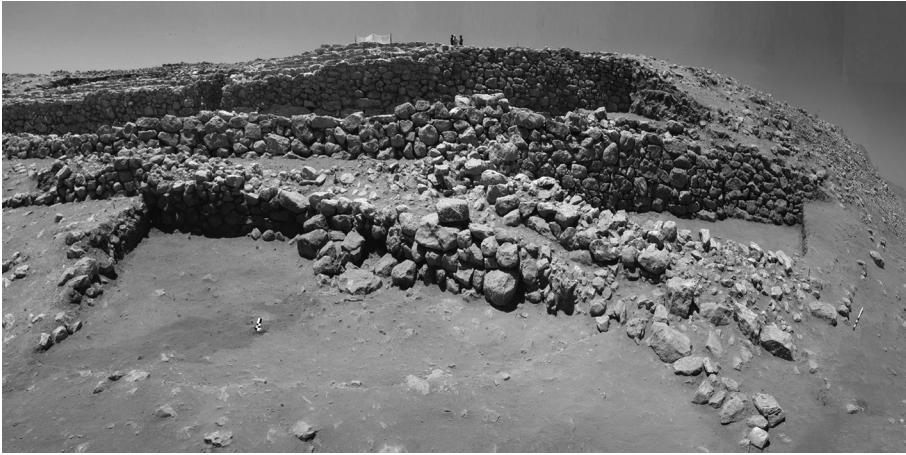


Fig. 3: Khirbet al-Batrawy: EB IIIA Curvilinear Outwork W.185, from north.



Fig. 4:
Khirbet al-Batrawy:
general view of the
row of EB IIIB
(2500-2300 BC)
buildings and street
L.1060 parallel to the
EB II-III Main City-
Wall, from west; note
the two facing
staircases (W.181 and
W.1067) in the inner
side of the Main City-
Wall.



Fig. 5: Khirbet al-Batrawy: general view of restored EB II-III Broad-Room Temple in Area F, from west.

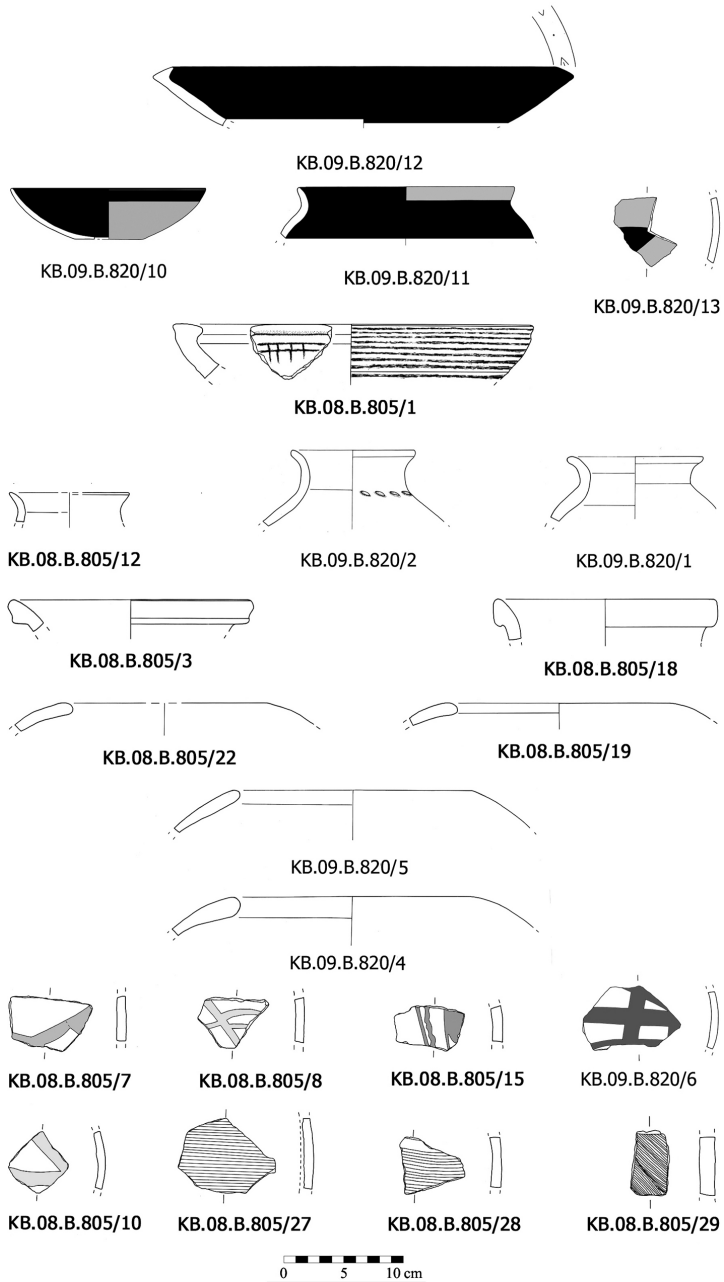


Fig. 6: Khirbet al-Batrawy: pottery sherds from EB IIIA destruction layers.



Fig. 7: Khirbet al-Batrawy: the EB IIIB triple line of Batrawy fortifications, from west: to the left, EB IIIB Scarp-Wall W.165 with protruding wall W.177; in the middle, EB IIIA-B Outer Wall W.155, gradually turning northwards; to the right, the EB II-III Main City-Wall.



Fig. 8: Khirbet al-Batrawy: general view of dwellings and public buildings in Area B South, erected in the EB IIIB (2500-2300 BC) inside the EB II-III Main City-Wall, from east.



Fig. 9: Khirbet al-Batrawy: EB IIIB (2500-2300 BC) pithoi retrieved in Building B3.



Fig. 10: Khirbet al-Batrawy:
EB IVB (2200-200 BC)
stone-cist child burial
D.1020, from north-west.