

Survey and Excavations at Ghor es-Safi 2004

Survey and excavations were conducted in the Ghor es-Safi during March and April 2004. The project was sponsored by the Hellenic Society for Near Eastern Studies and supported by the Palestine Exploration Fund in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. Excavations were conducted at Tawahin es-Sukkar, An Naq' and Khirbet Sheikh 'Isa while the survey was extended with the major sites in the greater Ghor es-Safi area being co-ordinated over scanned aerial photographs.

An intensive ground survey conducted in the Ghor es-Safi located known as well as newly identified sites. They included the pre-1970 town of Safi, Ayyubid/Mamluk Al Ameri and Birkat, Iron Age Tuleilat Qasr Mousa Hamid, the Byzantine monastic hermitage and possible Nabataean dam site at the mouth of the Wadi al-Hasa, the ancient road leading down from the eastern plateau in the Wadi Sarmuj and the Nabataean-Roman fort at Umm Tawabeen.

The main objective of the excavation was to establish the extent of the eastern mill-house at Tawahin es-Sukkar and to define its relation with the city at Khirbet Sheikh 'Isa.

At Tawahin es-Sukkar, Trench VI (opened in 2002) was extended northwards in order to establish the entire extent of the eastern mill-house. The northern extent of the mill-house was uncovered and the northern façade was cleared to a depth of 4.20m. The northern wall of the building was two-tiered, incorporating an arched doorway in its lower storey and the spring of two large arches in its upper storey. The arched doorway (2.05m x 1.90m) facilitated access to a vaulted chamber beneath the millstones while the large-spanning arches of the second storey essentially fronted the milling room. The area directly outside the doorway (to its north) was used for the collection of crushed sugar syrup as attested by the presence of hundreds of broken sugar pots located in the lowest layer at the base of the wall.

At Khirbet Sheikh 'Isa a 10m x 10m trench was laid to establish the nature of a monumental wall, previously unearthed in the 1990s through bulldozer activity. The wall is constructed with finely cut ashlar masonry. The excavation established the height of the wall, from the spring of an arched doorway to the base of the foundation trench, as 3.34m (maximum height). The wall's formation and associated pottery profile suggest that it be associated with a large early Abbasid-period building and that it does not represent a delimiting feature of the city as was initially thought. This also concurs with the width of the associated doorway (minimum width of 1.70m) that would not accommodate passing packed animals (barely one); hence the wall probably defines a large and finely built structure but not a city entrance.

The excavation also provided evidence for a long-term high standard of living at the city site with an integral relationship with the adjacent sugar industry at Tawahin es-Sukkar. The discovery of an intact sugar pot funnel not only provides the first complete example at the site, but also bears out this close relationship between Khirbet Sheikh

‘Isa and Tawahin es-Sukkar. Recovery of fine examples of almost complete glazed pots and a variety of other glazed sherds excavated in every context demonstrate the high level of material culture at the site.

At An Naq‘ (just above Tawahin es-Sukkar) a test trench yielded ten extended articulated burials. The graves were lined with unworked stone slabs and covered with large roughly cut capstones. The graves were arranged on a north-south axis with the head to the south. In one instance the head was secured in place by pebbles positioned to either side skull. Only one skeleton was associated with any grave goods, represented by two small Early Bronze Age pots found beside the skull.