

PRELIMINARY REPORT OF THE 1997  
EXCAVATIONS AND RESTORATION  
WORK AT TALL HISBAN  
(JUNE 18 TO JULY 11, 1997)

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The summer of 1997 found Andrews University once again in Jordan for archaeological excavations.<sup>1</sup> Though under the auspices of the Madaba Plains Project, this season did not command the usual large group of people that the Project is noted for, but rather a much smaller contingent of fewer than 30 archaeologists, students, and volunteers, practically all from Andrews, as well as about 20 Jordanian specialists and workers.<sup>2</sup> This "off-season"

<sup>1</sup>The authors would like to especially thank our principal sponsor, Andrews University. We are also indebted to Dr. Ghazi Bisheh, Director-general of the Department of Antiquities, for the support that he provided for this season, including 10 paid laborers to help with the restoration work, as well as Taisir 'Attiyat, our Department of Antiquities representative.

Dr. Fakhri Tummalieh, principal of the UNRWA-sponsored Amman Training Center and his staff again graciously extended to us the use of their facility as our base camp. In addition, we would like to thank Yusef al Awawdah, the mayor of the town of Hisban, for his support; Mahfooth Abdul Hafiz, the teacher of the Hisban school, for his help with sign painting; and Abu-Nur, a local resident, for storage of on-site equipment, for catering our second-breakfast needs, and for help with numerous logistical problems.

We would also like to extend our thanks to Dr. Patricia Bikai and Dr. Pierre Bikai as well as the staff of the American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR) for their support and the use of their facilities while we were in the field.

<sup>2</sup>The director of the excavation was Øystein S. LaBianca and the chief archaeologist was Paul J. Ray, Jr. Special thanks go to Larry G. Herr, director of the Tall al-'Umayri excavations, for his support and encouragement when he visited the excavations for a few days.

Malcolm Russell, Paul Ray, and Susan Oliver served as dig administrators at Andrews University and the Institute of Archaeology during the planning stages of the excavation.

work was made possible in part by a grant from the National Geographic Society. Besides those working at Tall Hisban and the regional survey, there was another group, about the same size, excavating at Azraq.<sup>3</sup> This expedition, also connected with the Madaba Plains Project, is a continuation and extension of the environmental survey begun in the 1996 season.

In 1996 cleaning and restoration work was begun at Tall Hisban under the direction of Øystein S. LaBianca and Lawrence T. Geraty.<sup>4</sup> This site, which had been excavated by Andrews University between 1968 and 1976, with preliminary reports published in *AUSS*,<sup>5</sup> had greatly deteriorated since its last season of excavation some twenty years ago. Though plans had been made for its restoration in 1976, the site had never since received any such work. Its importance and long occupational history make it a good candidate for restoration and the idea of finally starting such a project received strong support from the director of the Department of Antiquities and the mayor of the town of Hisban. Although the restoration of the site and its development as a tourist attraction were the primary reasons for returning to the site, it was also felt that there were a number of unanswered questions left over from the earlier excavations, and that the site no doubt still held a number of secrets that could benefit from further excavation. The 1997 season at Tall Hisban, therefore, represents a preliminary or exploratory campaign of a new (phase 2) series of excavations at the tall. The objectives for the

Malcolm Russell served as the camp administrator in Jordan. Lael Caesar served as the camp chaplain and Chuck Randall was the head cook.

The pottery registrar was Gabriella Kunze. Paul Ray served as object registrar and dig photographer. Erik LaBianca did data entry and computer support work for the excavation. Doug Schnurrenberger served as geologist and Rusty Low as ethnobotanist, with the help of Rachael Whittaker and Bill Fagal, who operated the flotation lab. We would like to extend special thanks to Tim Harrison and Steve Savage, who graciously offered of their time to do some architectural work on behalf of the excavation.

<sup>3</sup>This group, which had its own camp and facilities but shared equipment and two staff members (Schnurrenberger and Low), was directed by Rick Watson and Doug Schnurrenberger of San Juan College and will be reported elsewhere.

<sup>4</sup>See Randall W. Younker, Lawrence T. Geraty, Larry G. Herr, Øystein S. LaBianca, and Douglas R. Clark, "Preliminary Report of the 1996 Season of the Madaba Plains Project: Regional Survey, Tall al-'Umayri and Tall Jalul Excavations (June 19 to July 31, 1996)," *AUSS* 35 (1997): 227-240.

<sup>5</sup>See Roger S. Boraas and Siegfried H. Horn, "The First Campaign at Tell Hesban (1968)," *AUSS* 7(1969): 97-117; Roger S. Boraas and Siegfried H. Horn, "The Second Campaign at Tell Hesban (1973)," *AUSS* 11 (1973): 1-16, Roger S. Boraas and Siegfried H. Horn, "The Third Campaign at Tell Hesban (1973)," *AUSS* 13 (1975): 101-116; Roger S. Boraas and Lawrence T. Geraty, "The Fourth Campaign at Tell Hesban (1974)," *AUSS* 14 (1976): 1-16; and Roger S. Boraas and Lawrence T. Geraty, "The Fifth Campaign at Tell Hesban (1976)," *AUSS* 16 (1978): 1-18.

season were (1) to try to answer some questions remaining from the earlier (phase 1) excavations; (2) to pursue further excavations in selected areas, and (3) to preserve both previous and currently excavated features deemed interesting for tourists. In addition, two other objectives were to continue the new regional survey around Tall Hisban and the deforestation study within the project area, both begun in 1996.

### 1. *The Regional Survey*<sup>6</sup>

Though there had been an earlier Heshbon survey (1973-1976), the Madaba Plains Project has since developed more sophisticated survey techniques. It was felt that our knowledge of the area around Tall Hisban could benefit by the newer methodology. The 1997 season was spent examining the remaining 50 of the 100 randomly selected 200 x 200 m squares generated by Geographic Information Systems (GIS) for the five km radius around the tall. Although a number of new sites were noted, in addition to the 20 sites located in 1996, these were left to be followed up in 1998.

### 2. *Deforestation Study*

A grant from National Geographic Society enabled continuation of field research begun in 1996 concerned with reconstructing the history of deforestation in the Hisban Project Area. The study built on previous research on the historical environment of the Hisban region by the Hesban Environmental Survey.<sup>7</sup> Methods used included an arboreal survey to ascertain the current and potential state of the forest, and an archaeological survey to deepen understanding of long-term changes in settlement patterns and technologies for managing soil and water resources, geoarchaeological research in selected wadies to determine patterns of erosion and soil loss, and a reexamination of faunal data on hand from earlier excavations at Tall Hisban to search for clues that might help fill out the picture regarding long-term environmental change. The survey succeeded in establishing a link between episodes of food system intensification and abatement, and cycles of environmental degeneration and regeneration in the project area.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Gary Christopherson was in charge of the random survey. Other staff members included Tisha Entz, Eric Christopherson, Erik LaBianca, and Richard Haglund.

<sup>7</sup>Øystein S. LaBianca and Larry Lacelle, *Environmental Foundations: Studies of Climatological, Geological, Hydrological and Phytological Conditions in Hesban and Vicinity* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1986).

<sup>8</sup>Øystein S. LaBianca, "A Forest that Refuses to Disappear: Cycles of Environmental Degradation and Regeneration in Jordan" (Unpublished Report to the National Geographic Society, Research Grant 5758-96, 1998); see also <http://www.andrews.edu/BHSC/ngs>.

### 3. *Tall Hisban Restoration Project*

Although Tall Hisban is a well-known and relatively frequently visited archaeological site in Jordan, very little has been done to highlight for the visitor its most important archaeological features. As mentioned above, this situation began to change during the summer of 1996. The effort to clean up the site was continued in 1997, resulting in an improved presentation of a number of archaeological features. To bring these features into focus for the visitor, viewing platforms were constructed in selected locations throughout the mound, and paths were constructed leading the visitor from the bottom of the tall to each of the viewing platforms. On each viewing platform signs were mounted to explain the ruins in clear view.

A deliberate effort was made to involve village residents in this effort. To this end the cooperation of the village mayor was sought and obtained. The local iron smith was hired to make the signs and a local school teacher painted them. Tours were provided on a daily basis for village visitors to the site and the workmen were empowered through daily instruction about the site's history to teach their family and friends about the history and significance of the village. One local resident was trained to serve as a guide for tourists visiting the site throughout the year. New road signs were also made (free of charge) and mounted by the Ministry of Public Works along the Amman-Naur-Madaba road to make the site easier to find.

### 4. *Tall Hisban Excavations*

This season concentrated on two as yet unresolved problems remaining from the earlier excavations at the site, as well as a follow-up excavation of a preliminary exploration and mapping of a large cave complex begun in 1996. Both of the former involved the interpretation of Iron Age features. In order to deal with these, two new soundings were made on the southern and western terraces of the tall. Four additional soundings were made in and adjacent to the cave complex, also located on the southern shelf.

#### *Iron Age I*

Probe D.<sup>7</sup> was 6 x 2 m trench opened to intercept the eastern extension of a bedrock trench, originally excavated on the southern shelf (in Areas B and D) in the 1974 and 1976 seasons and reencountered, while cleaning up a small cave, in 1996. The feature as originally excavated averaged 2-2.5 m in width and 4 m in depth. Though the excavators were unable to reach the bottom of this new section of the bedrock trench (7 m below the current

<sup>7</sup>The area supervisor was Lael Caesar. He was assisted by Michael Russell, Gabriella Kunze, and Rachael Whittaker.

ground surface) before the end of the short three-and-a-half-week season, excavation revealed its southern edge (Plate 1) and the 1.5 m depth of material that was exposed within it included vast quantities of Iron I sherds, among which were some very similar to those found in the central hill country of Cisjordan.

Among the possible explanations for this feature after the original excavations was that it was either a dry-moat or a water channel. The latter explanation would seem to be unlikely in that the water channels found along with the Iron Age reservoir, excavated earlier at Hisban, were considerably shallower (15-55 cm deep) and narrower (20-65 cm wide). Iron Age moats are now known to exist at several sites in the region. All of these are found only on the most vulnerable side of the tall. Their other sides, as at Hisban, were naturally defensible due to deeply cut wadis. Although there is a lack of "exact" parallels, and the trench is narrower and located high up on the tall instead of at its base, as are the dry moats at other sites in the region, the feature nevertheless appears to have successfully cut off the tall from its approach from the southwest.

### *Iron Age II*

Excavations were renewed in Area C, Square 3, on the western shelf of the tall.<sup>10</sup> The original excavations revealed a north-south wall, which zigzagged or offset to the west and continued south into Square C.7 (Plate 2). This section of walls was founded on a bedrock shelf. Further to the west, a large wall founded in a bedrock crevice was stepped up for 3.5 m, abutting the above-mentioned wall near the point of offset. Running parallel to and underneath this wall was a line of large unhewn boulders, partway down in the crevice (Plate 3). While the walls in Square C.3 were originally dated to the Iron IIC/Persian period, the section which ran into Square C.7 not only produced sherds from the same period on bedrock immediately below the first course on both sides of the wall, but also Hellenistic sherds underneath the upper courses when they were dismantled. In addition, two phases of a more poorly-built wall, originally thought to be part of, and unfortunately given the same numerical designation as the offset wall, abutted it on the west and extended into Square C.2. This wall dated to the Hellenistic/Early Roman period. As a result, the overall wall system has been dated anywhere from Iron II to the Roman period in the literature.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup>The area supervisor was Phil Drey. He was assisted by David Jarnes, Kristy Kline, and Erik LaBianca.

<sup>11</sup>Henry O. Thompson, "Andrews University Heshbon Expedition: The Third Campaign at Tell Hesban (1973) Area C," *AUSS* 13 (1975): 179-180; and Larry A. Mitchel, *Hellenistic and Roman Strata: A Study of the Stratigraphy of Tell Hesban From the 2d Century*

In his dissertation, one of the authors (Ray) had tentatively redated this wall system to the Iron IIC/Persian period with later rebuilds in the Hellenistic/Early Roman period. In order to test this hypothesis, a 7 x 2 m trench was laid perpendicular to the main part of the wall in Square C.3 at the edge of a subbalk left by the original excavators. Within it, a 1 x 2 m probe along the western (outer) face of the wall was excavated (Plate 4). As no stratigraphy was located due to the rocky nature of the sediment, pottery pails were changed every 30 cm in order to gain control of datable pottery. The top 30 cm yielded sherds from Iron II through the Umayyad periods. The remaining 60+ cm, however, yielded pure Iron IIC/Persian pottery (including burnished black-ware sherds).

An attempt to find a foundation trench on the east (or inner) side of the wall yielded only large stones laid up against another cut in the bedrock shelf with very few (mostly body) sherds and no pottery at all within the last several centimeters over bedrock (Plate 5). It would appear that the offset-inset wall of Squares C.3 and 7 was laid directly on bedrock and that the wall system as a whole dates to the Iron IIC/Persian period. If this is correct, the other two walls to the west functioned along with it as revetment and retaining walls lower down in the bedrock crevice. It would appear that the overall system was defensive in nature, and that the main wall was reused and had new courses inserted into it during the Hellenistic/Early Roman period.

### *Classical Period Cave Complex*

Within the second (or middle) level of the trilevel cave complex<sup>12</sup> mapped in 1996, a probe (G.22) was made in the northwest corner underneath an arch. It revealed dung and ash layers mixed with roof collapse for ca. .75 m down to the original cave floor (Plate 6). Upon reaching floor level one was able to stand upright and move comfortably under the arch. Ceramic evidence embedded in the floor at this point indicates that the arches (3 on this level) were originally made during the Byzantine period, though fill evidence shows that the cave continued to be used during later times.

Two ca. 1.5 m-deep storage silos were excavated northeast of the above-mentioned trench. Both had evidence of plastering. The easternmost (G.24; Plate 7) produced a fill which was dominated by Mamluk pottery. It consisted of loamy soil and dung. The second of these features (G. 25) vaguely resembled an Early Bronze shaft tomb (Plate 8). The fill material in the "shaft" area

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*B.C. to the 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1992): 57.

<sup>12</sup>The area supervisor (including probes G.22, 24, and 25) was Bill Fagal. He was assisted by Kristy Messersmith and Jason Randall.

was similar to that in the other storage silo and also contained mostly Mamluk sherds. The "chamber" area, however, consisted of sloping fill and ash lenses (Plate 9) which contained predominantly Iron II pottery.

The entrance to the cave was located ca. 2.5 m below the present surface and was found to be bipartite, entering both the middle and upper levels (Plate 10). The major feature of the upper level was a barrel vault. Byzantine pottery was found on the threshold of the entrance, making it apparent that both the entrance and the architecture (see above) of the middle level date to this time, though they continued to be used during later periods. The original entrance area<sup>13</sup> (Probe G.23) to the cave complex exhibited at least 2 walls and arches, one of which was fallen (Plate 11). While these were drawn and measured, they were left unexcavated this season. An almost complete sugar pot was found on a higher level in the entranceway together with Mamluk sherds and a ram's horn (Plate 12).

<sup>13</sup>The area supervisor was Bob McDaniel. He was assisted by Kristen Jarnes and Yoshiko Miyashita.

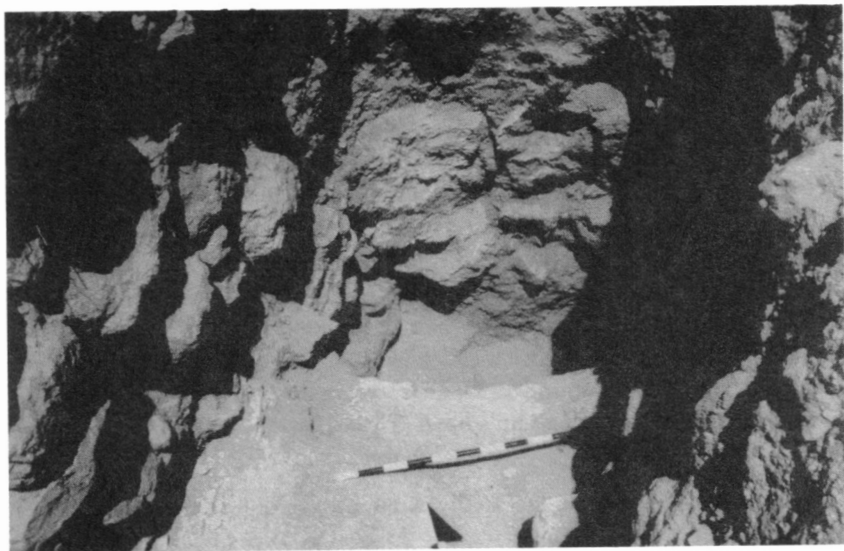


Plate 1. Early Iron Age I bedrock trench, Area D.7 (looking N).

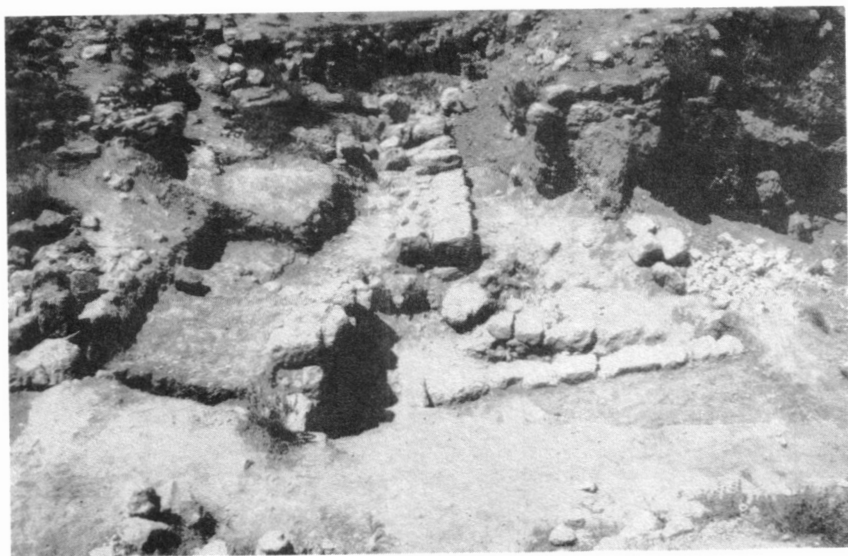


Plate 2. Offset-inset defense wall on the western shelf, Area C (looking S).





Plate 3. Revetment and retaining supporting walls (looking E).

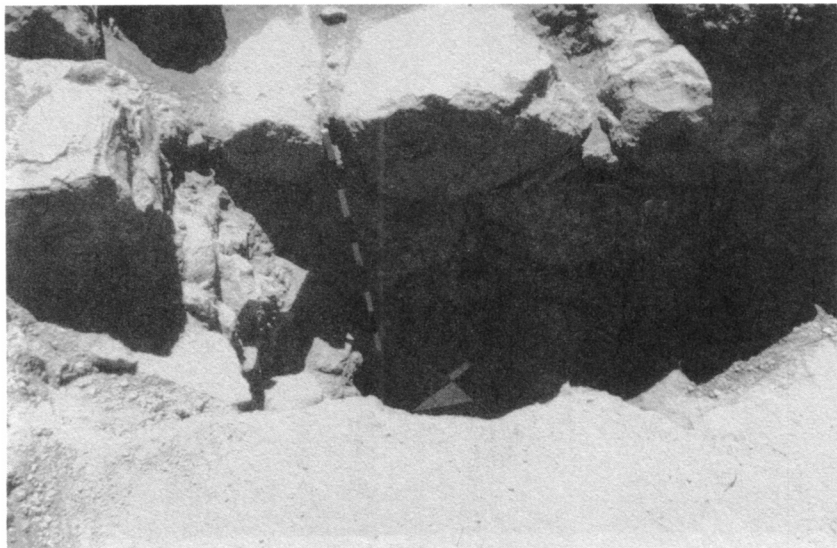


Plate 4. New excavation section along offset-inset wall (looking E).



Plate 5. Inner or eastern side of the offset-inset wall (looking S).



Plate 6. Probe G.22 excavation below arch in cave complex.



Plate 7. G.24 storage silo.

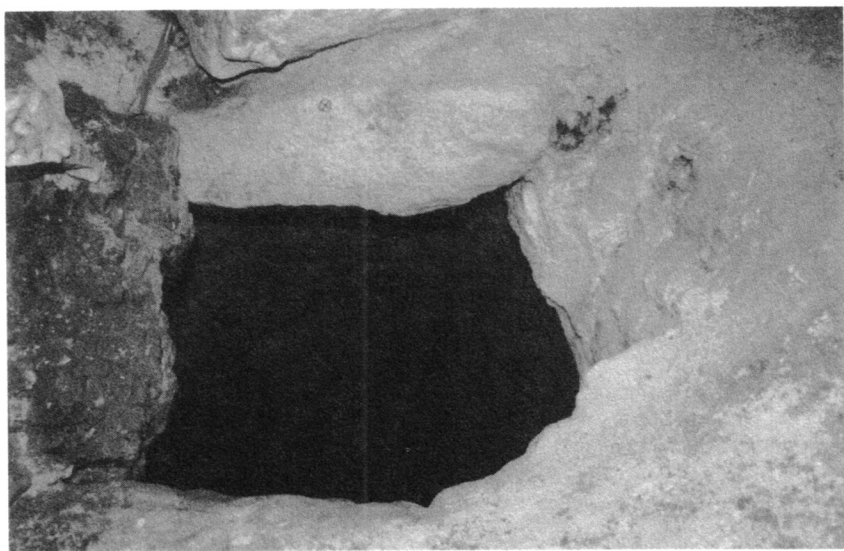


Plate 8. G.25 storage silo.



Plate 10. Entrance to cave complex.

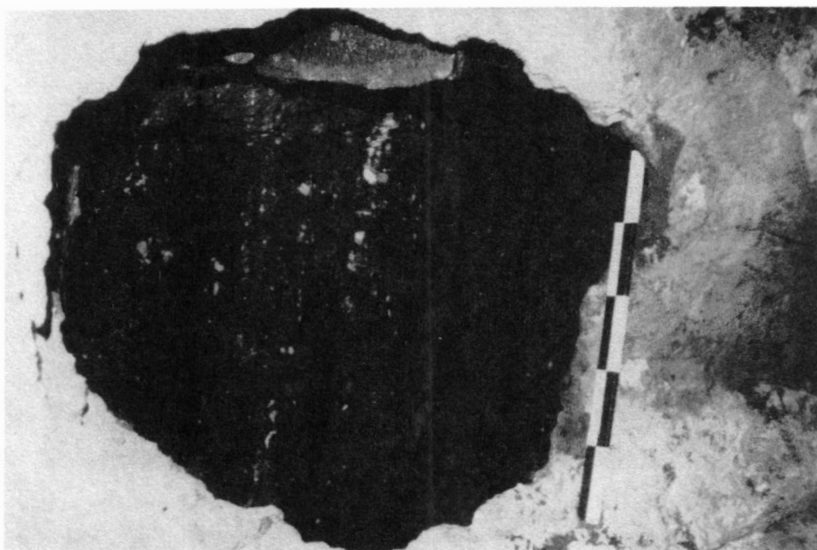


Plate 9. Fill and ash lenses within G.25 storage silo.

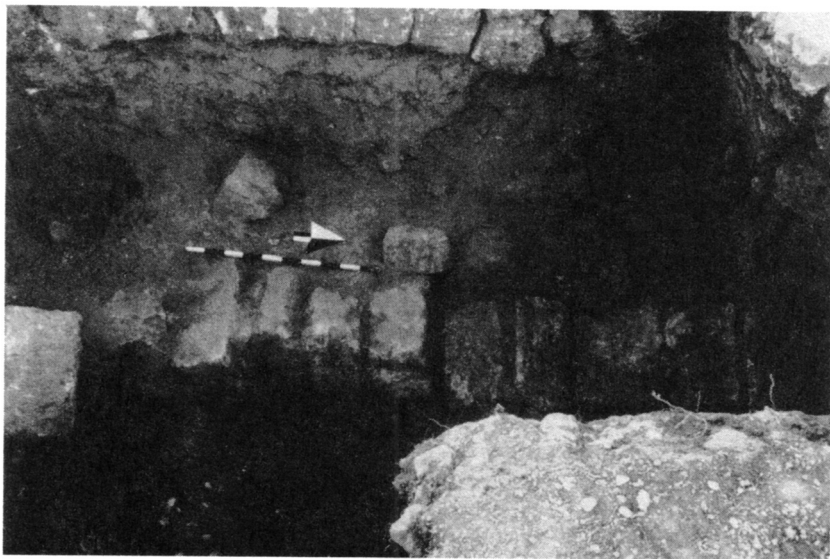


Plate 11. Walls and arches outside entrance to the cave complex.

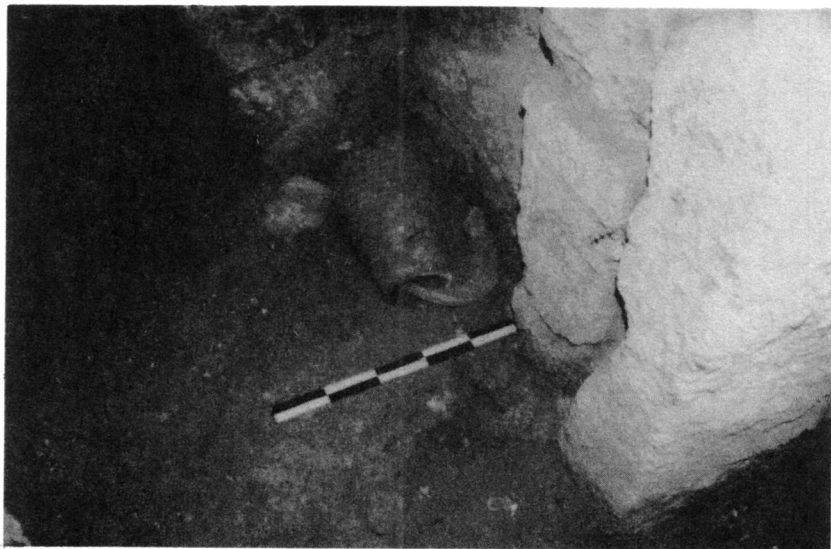


Plate 12. Ceramic and fauna finds within entranceway.