

Tell es-Sultan, Ancient Jericho



By Hamdan Taha

The site of Tell es-Sultan is identified with ancient Jericho. It was mentioned in ancient historical and biblical sources and recently, the name Jericho (Ruha) appeared on a scarab from the second millennium

BC. At 250 meters below sea level, and with a history that dates back to the Neolithic period, it is the lowest and the oldest town on earth. The mound rises approximately 21 meters with many layers of accumulated remains, and covers an area of about one acre. The site is located close to the spring Ein es-Sultan and amid fertile land of alluvial soil, suitable for agriculture, associated with a tropical climate in summer and a mild climate in winter.

The history of explorations goes back to the end of the nineteenth century, with the first soundings undertaken by Charles Warren in 1868 on behalf of the Palestine Exploration Fund. The first large-scale excavation was carried out by an Austro-German expedition from 1907 to 1909 under the direction of E. Sellin and C. Watzinger. These excavations cleared part of the fortification systems from the Early and Middle Bronze ages. In the third campaign, directed by G. Garstang from 1930 to 1936, the excavation was more controlled, but Garstang missed dating the Bronze Age fortification. The fourth major excavation, carried out by K. Kenyon between 1952 and 1958, managed to fix the stratigraphic history of the site, and its results were published in five volumes.

Following the transfer of authority to the Palestinian Authority in 1994, the Palestinian Department of Antiquities, working jointly with La Sapienza University of Rome, resumed the work at Tell es-Sultan. The works proceeded under the joint direction of Dr. Hamdan Taha and Prof. Paolo Matthiae and his assistants, Dr. Nicolo Marchetti and Dr. Lorenzo Nigro. They were carried out within the framework of a comprehensive reassessment and rehabilitation project. Dr. Nigro continued directing the Italian mission later on.



Virtual Image. Courtesy of LionHeart.

The successive excavations uncovered the cultural history of the site that stretches over 10,000 years. The earliest remains belong to the Natufian culture, between the tenth and the eighth millennia BC. The cultural material, consisting of flint tools, attests to the presence of a hunting Natufian camp near the spring. The remains of the early Neolithic settlement is represented by a small settlement of round houses, built of mud brick and surrounded by a wall, and a round tower. These are the earliest preserved remains of a fortification system and stem from a phase known as Pre-Pottery Neolithic A. They were followed by a second phase, Pre-Pottery Neolithic B, that is characterized by rectangular houses built of elongated brick. Plastered skulls were found below the floors of these houses, indicating a type of ancestral cult.

The Neolithic period at Tell es-Sultan reflects transformations that occurred in early human history, as

people moved from a prehistoric subsistence pattern based on hunting and gathering to a new subsistence pattern in the first settled societies that began to rely on the domestication of plants and animals. The production surplus of agricultural products enabled humans to free part of their time, dedicated previously to securing food, to building a house and creating art. The material culture of this period indicates the growing social complexity of Neolithic society.

After a long period of abandonment, the site was reoccupied in the Pottery Neolithic period. The agriculturalists of Tell es-Sultan were the first to produce pottery, responding to their increasing storage needs. Evidence of the Chalcolithic period, preceding the urban period, was not attested in the site itself but in the cemeteries.

During the Early Bronze Age II, Jericho developed into a major urban center; several building phases were observed in the fortification area



■ Middle Bronze Age II fortifications.

west of the mound. A large number of common burial sites from this period were uncovered. Following a transitional period with no permanent dwellings, urban life evolved again in the Middle Bronze Age II, with a fortification that consists of a massive wall built of stone and glaucis, covered by a wall that was built on top. The Palestinian-Italian excavation uncovered a huge mud-brick building outside the Middle Bronze Age fortification wall, indicating occupation outside the city wall. The Middle Bronze Age tombs in Jericho give unique testimony to people who lived a settled domestic life, as evidenced in their pottery vessels, personal belongings, and furniture.

The town was deserted in the Late Bronze Age (fourteenth century BC), and the city wall of Jericho alleged to be taken down during Joshua's invasion has not been found by archeologists, indicating a contradiction between the biblical narrative and archeological evidence. Very scanty remains from the Iron Age and Persian periods attest that the site was fully abandoned, and

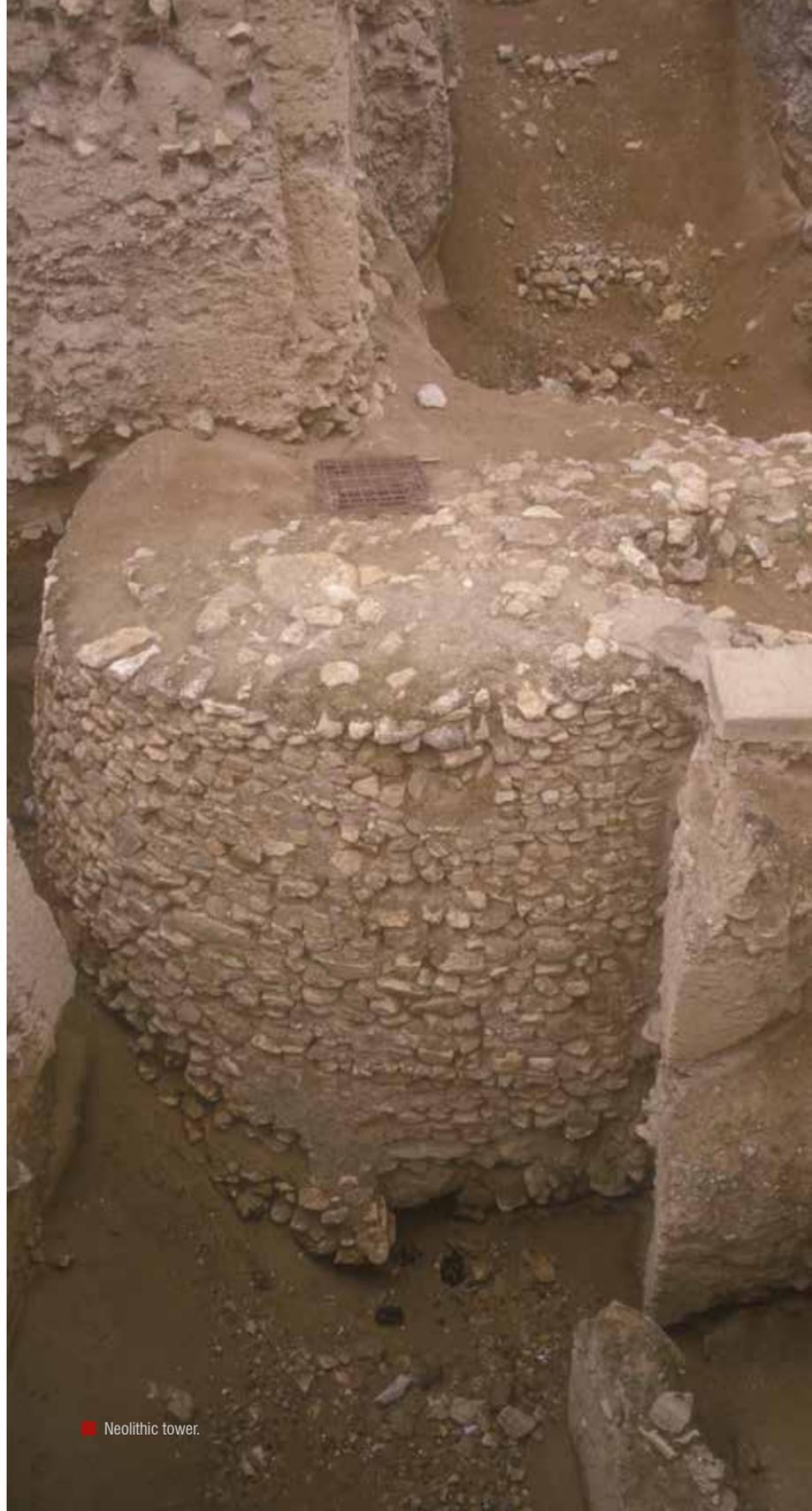
the center of ancient Jericho shifted to Telul Abu Alayeq in the Greco-Roman period.

A series of rehabilitation works was carried out on this site during the last two decades by the Palestinian Department of Antiquities within the framework of cooperation with the La Sapienza University of Rome, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and UNESCO. In 2010, an interpretation center was established at the main entrance to the site, supplemented with a film about the site's history. The center and the film were subsidized by the Japanese government through JICA. A protective bridge was erected in 2010 around the Neolithic tower in Trench I, through a grant from the American Ambassador Fund.

At this time, a nomination file for the site's inscription on the World Heritage List is being prepared by a team of experts under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities. The file will be submitted to the World Heritage Committee in 2022.

Article photos are courtesy of the author.

Dr. Hamdan Taha is an independent researcher and former deputy minister of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities. He served as the director general of the Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage from 1995 to 2013. He is the author of a series of books as well as many field reports and scholarly articles.



■ Neolithic tower.