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NOTES FROM THE FIELD



## Report on the pottery from Tell Sufan in Nablus, Palestine

Loay Abu Alsaud  and Amer Qobbaj 

### ABSTRACT

This research report aims to give detailed information on the pottery from the 1999 and 2013–16 excavation campaigns taking place at the Tell Sufan site in Nablus, Palestine. These were conducted by the Department of Antiquities at An-Najah National University (ANU) in Nablus. It is of note that this ancient pottery has never previously been the subject of research nor has any literature been published on it. Our methodology consists in: analysing the pottery by identifying it, typifying it, and giving it a function; providing chronological information on the site; comparison of the pottery with that from other sites in Palestine, using archaeological information from the site; and contextualising our findings with other historical and archaeological studies. Examination of the functional use of the pottery allows us to demonstrate human activity at the Tell Sufan site, giving information on the most prosperous phases of occupation in regard to economic aspects, through the late Bronze Age, Iron Age and Byzantine–Early Islamic periods.

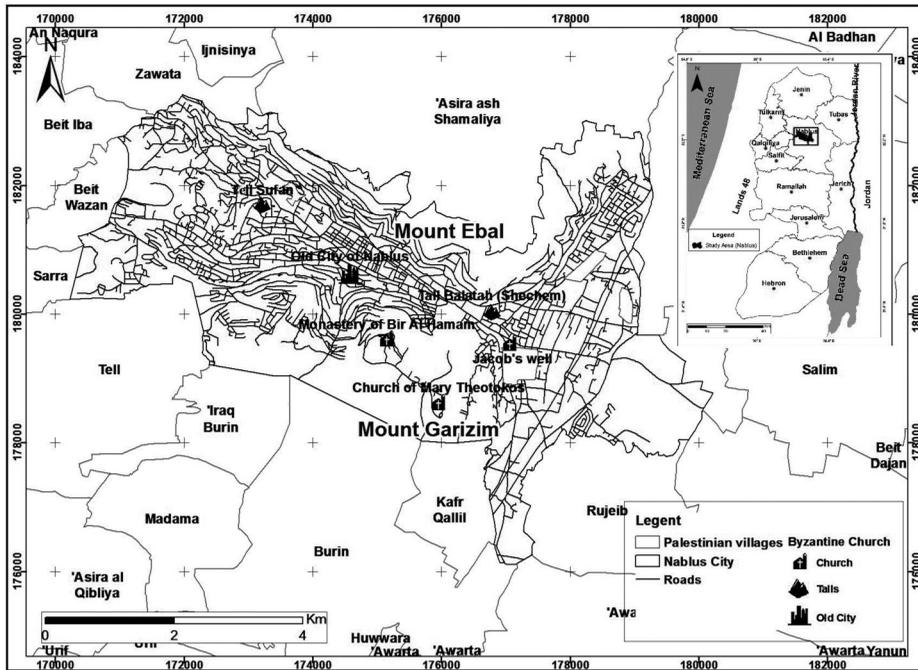
### KEY WORDS

Tell Sufan; Tell Sofer; Palestine; pottery analysis; Iron Age; Byzantine era; Early Islamic period; economic phases; site chronology

## Introduction

In this paper we present the results of our analysis of the pottery from the archeological site of Tell Sufan, known today as Tell Sofer, near Nablus in Palestine (Figure 1). The ceramics include large quantities of tableware, storage jars and small amounts of other kinds of ware. We have analysed the pottery recorded during the 1999 and 2013–16 archaeological excavation campaigns, which were undertaken at the site by the Department of Archaeology at (ANU) in Nablus.

The assemblage dates approximately from the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BC) to the Iron Age (1200–538 BC), and from the Byzantine to Early Islamic periods. A detailed chronological study indicates that occupation of the site mainly occurred between the fourteenth and fourth centuries BC and between the fifth and seventh centuries AD. In addition, we will discuss phases of economic development at the site, based on a functional analysis of the pottery. The ceramics will be introduced in conjunction with archaeological evidence from the site, correlating and contextualising our findings and results with other historical and archaeological studies undertaken in the general area of *Bilad al-Sham*, including historical Palestine.



**Figure 1.** Location of Tell Sufan site (Drawing by M. Burqan).

## Site location and history

### Location

Tell Sufan is located 1.5 km west of the city of Nablus, and has a surface area of 15 donum (1.5 hectare). It is a small hill in an area where there are a number of archaeological sites that date back to various periods, including Tell Balatah (Shechem), the Roman City of *Neapolis*, and Mount *Garizim*, all found to the east of the site (Figures 1 and 2).

In general, the site is one of the earliest inhabited in the Nablus area. However, it is not mentioned in ancient sources, with the first specific reference to it being made in the 1880 Survey of Western Palestine in which it appears under the name of *Saffin* (Conder and Kitchner 1880). The first survey of the site itself was carried out by Böhl in 1931. Due to this, very little information in general has been written or published on the hill.

### Excavations

In 1999, Tell Sufan was the site of the first excavations undertaken by the Department of Archaeology at ANU. The finding of storage jars and a pit dating to the Late Bronze Age was recorded during the campaign. However, these findings have not yet been confirmed by subsequent investigations. Israeli archaeologists identified Tell Sufan as the site of Sofer (son of the biblical prophet Job [Job 2.11, 11.1, 20.1, 42.9]), but this attribution is not supported by archaeological evidence. The Department of Archaeology subsequently became involved with the site under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of the Palestinian Authority. Five excavation campaigns—in 1999, 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016—were carried out by one of the authors of this work, with the combined aim of collecting information on the site and training students in archaeological techniques.



**Figure 2.** General view of Tell Sufan (Photo by authors).

This report on the site encompasses these first non-salvage excavations to be undertaken completely under Palestinian supervision. In 2008, during construction of a building on the lower slope of Tell Sufan, a large number of pottery fragments and tesserae dating to various periods, including the Bronze Age, Roman Era, and Islamic Period, were found. During salvage excavations carried out, a Late Roman-Byzantine wine press was found. It is *in situ* and in need of restoration.

### ***Chronology***

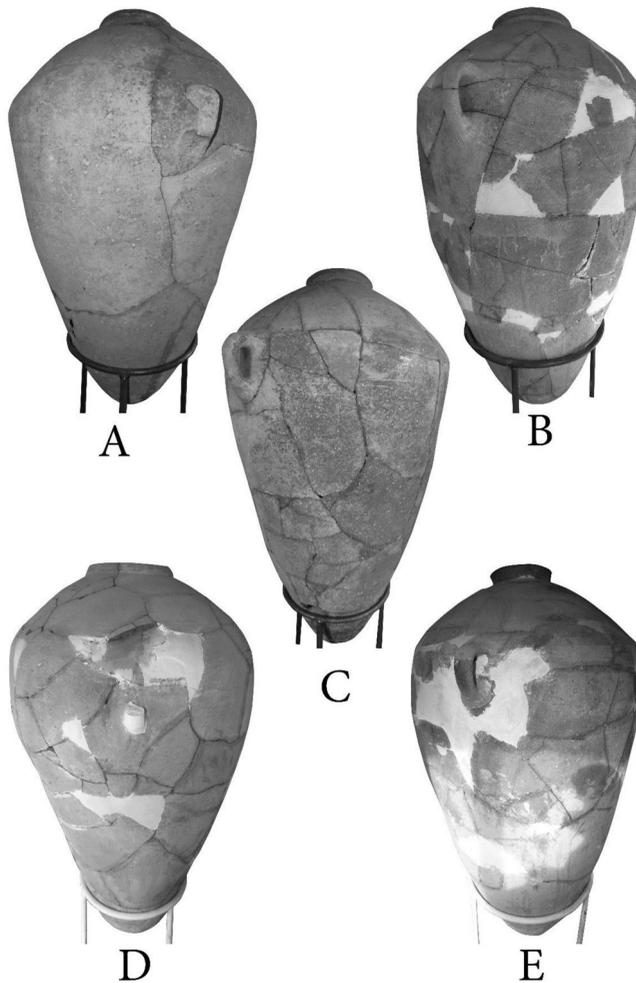
Due to the fact that stratigraphic data was not recorded during the 1999 excavations, dates from that season must be considered provisional, with more precise information to be established in future excavations. There is insufficient information on the pottery in the Nablus area to provide reliable substantiating evidence. Our analysis of the pottery under study, recovered during the 1999 and 2013–16 campaigns, is based on two site areas: Area A, comprising the south-eastern part of the hill (not shown on the site grid or master plan), and Area B, found at the upper part of the site (Figure 3). In order to organise the stratigraphic information we have dated the pottery using these two grid areas and the excavation loci as references. Current permit restrictions do not allow further investigations.

### ***Pottery analysis***

#### ***Economic phases***

The site demonstrates four construction phases (Figures 9–11): the Late Bronze and Iron Age I (1200–333 BC); a cultural gap stage between the Persian (539–333 BC) and





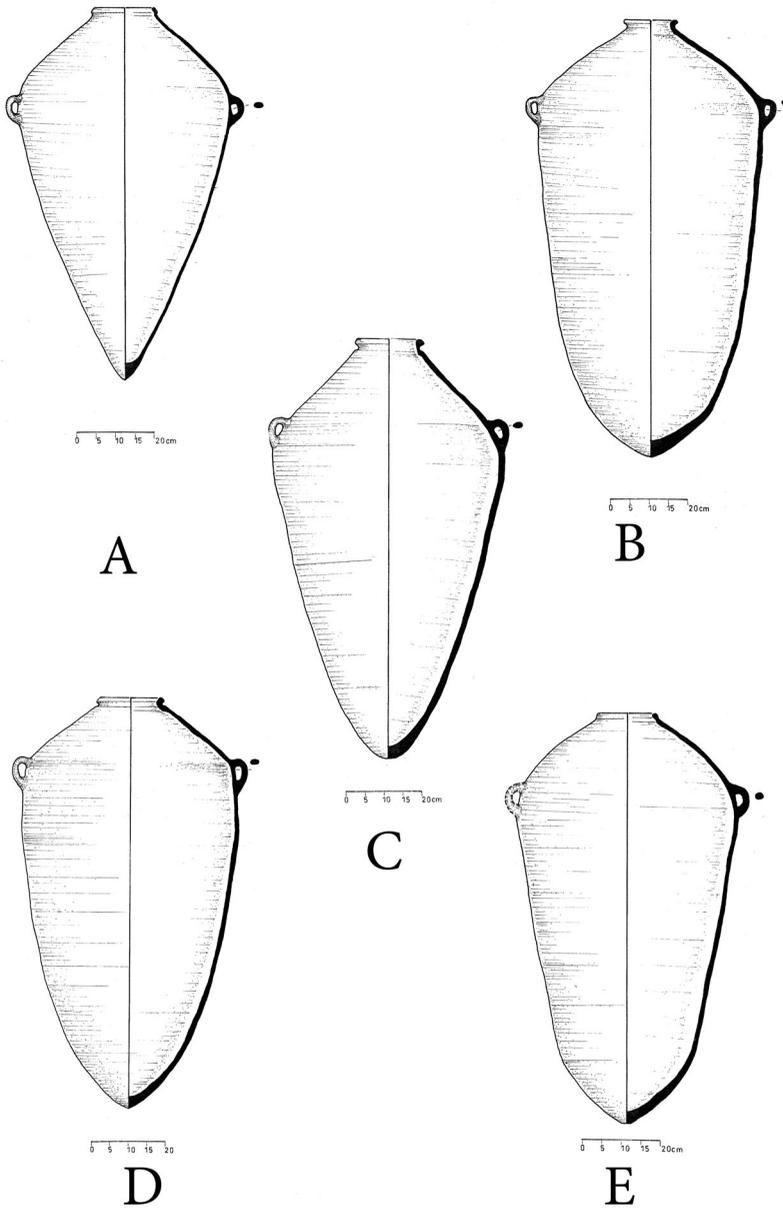
**Figure 4.** Storage jars found in Area A in 1999. See [Table 2](#).

approximately two metres below the surface. However, much of the information on these excavations has been lost, including reference maps of the squares, the site plan, the quantity of potsherds found and the descriptions of buildings uncovered. The only written information available is in the form of the daily excavation notes. The main structures identified were a well with storage jars and the remains of what was probably a storeroom. In the remaining part of the grid area, pottery was found, but no further structural remains. However, a large quantity of stones dispersed throughout the area suggests that other buildings may have been present originally.

The pottery consists of five storage jars for water or grain ([Figures 4 and 5](#)). The sherds are predominantly handles with punched holes and an incision ([Figure 6](#)).

### **Area B**

Excavations in area B brought to light three silos and structures or dwellings with one row of stones surviving. The author found a silo containing three amphorae and other objects in square 14L. The structures appear to have been associated with intensive agricultural



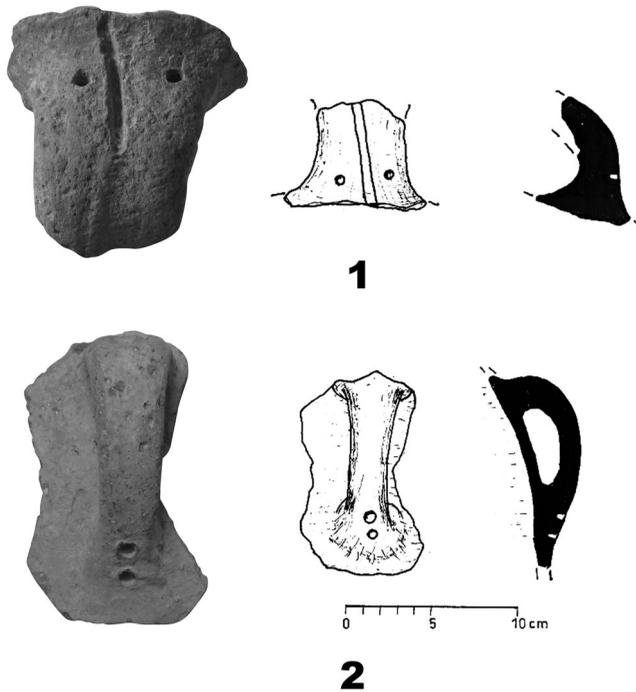
**Figure 5.** Storage jars found in Area A in 1999. See [Table 2](#) (Drawing by I. Iqtait).

activity. They were located standing on bedrock in the archaeological layer beneath the topsoil, less than two metres deep ([Figures 3](#) and [9](#)).

### ***Potsherd count***

#### ***Total***

The total number of potsherds collected from all the archaeological excavations at the site is 21,868. These include five storage jars from the 1999 excavations and three complete



**Figure 6.** Iron Age handles found in Area A. 1. Handle with incision between two holes. 2. Handle with two holes. See [Table 3](#) (Photos by the authors and drawings by I. Iqtait).

bag-shaped amphorae and half a storage jar from the 2013 excavations. The percentage of potsherds forming complete jars is 0.037% of the 21,868.

#### *Per excavation season and area*

During the 1999 season five storage jars were recovered from Area A, but subsequently all the potsherds were lost. Nevertheless, during the 2013 excavations three complete bag-shaped amphorae and an incomplete storage jar were recovered from Area B where a total of 7,208 potsherds were found. In 2014, Area B yielded 9,066 potsherds, but no complete jars. The same occurred during the 2016 excavations in Area B with 5,594 potsherds found but no complete jars.

Consequently, this gives us five storage jars for Area A, and a total of 21,868 potsherds for Area B ([Table 1](#)).

#### *Chronological summary*

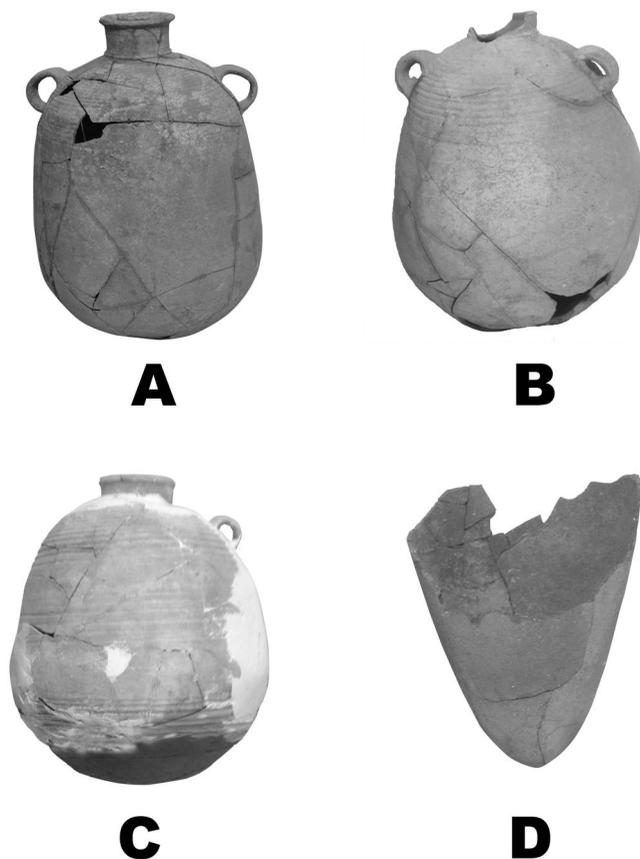
Our detailed analysis of the pottery found during the different excavation seasons at the site has been a first time exercise. On the other hand, excavation methods used and time constraints placed on our study have limited to an extent the scope of our analysis. Therefore, while the sherds analysed represent complete diagnostic objects or fragments, we can only seek to identify them through the study of their morphological typology.

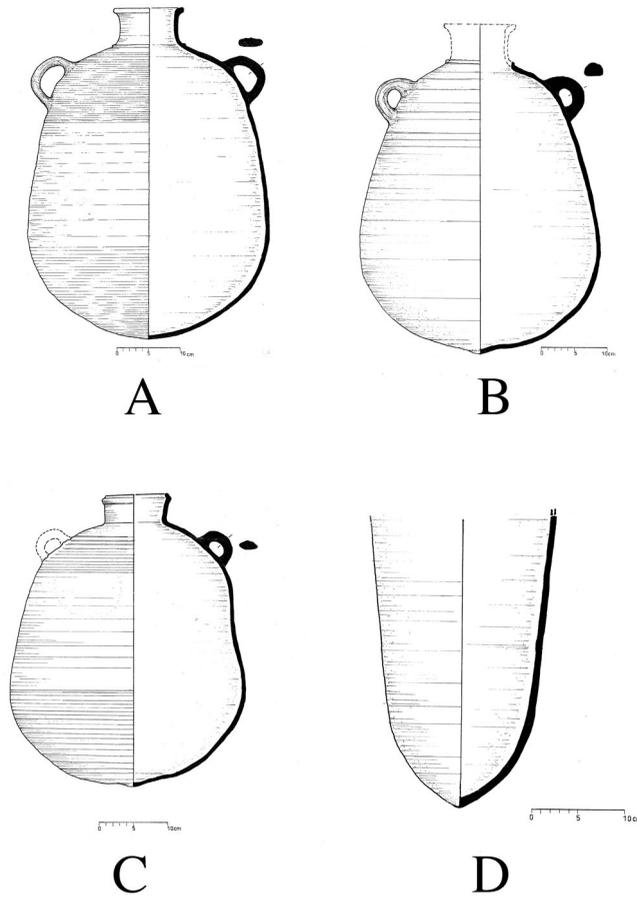
Almost all the pottery from the site is representative of examples produced in potteries belonging to a regional distribution network operating at points of time from the fourteenth to the eleventh centuries BC and from the fifth to seventh centuries AD, and

**Table 1:** Potsherd count from the 1999 and 2013–2016 excavations

No.	Season	Area	Square	No. of potsherds	Storage jars	Bag-shaped amphorae	Date
1	1999	A	A	lost	1	—	Iron Age
2	1999	A	A	—	1	—	Iron Age
3	1999	A	A	—	1	—	Iron Age
4	1999	A	A	—	1	—	Iron Age
5	1999	A	A	—	1	—	Iron Age
6	2013	B	15k	3590	1 (incomplete)	—	Iron Age
7	2013	B	14L	1796	—	3	Late Byzantine Period
8	2013	B	13M	1822	—	—	—
9	2014	B	14K	3635	—	—	—
10	2014	B	15L	2677	—	—	—
11	2014	B	13L	1064	—	—	—
12	2014	B	13K	262	—	—	—
13	2014	B	16L	1428	—	—	—
14	2016	B	14S	1946	—	—	—
15	2016	B	15T	2400	—	—	—
16	2016	B	15S	1248	—	—	—
Total Amount				21,868	6	3	

in some cases it may have originated locally, from the greyware pottery workshop at Scythopolis (Bisan). Ceramics from these sources are well known in the general area due to the work by J. Magness, *Jerusalem Ceramic Chronology* (1993).

**Figure 7.** Bag-shaped amphorae found in Area B in 2013. See [Table 4](#).



**Figure 8.** Bag-shaped amphorae found in Area B in 2013. See [Table 4](#) (Drawings by I. Iqtait).

Judging from its visual aspect, the pottery from Tell Sufan can be dated to the Umayyad (661–750 AD) and Late Byzantine (491–640 AD) periods ([Figures 7–8](#)), due to the fact that it is similar in appearance to pottery from the same periods found at other sites east of the River Jordan and at other Palestinian sites. The Late Byzantine pottery resembles pottery from both Tell Hesban and Tell Sherhabil (Sauer 1982:1, 330). Pottery similar to that of the Umayyad period from Tell Abu es-Zeit was also found at Tell Sufan (Sauer 1982: 331, figures 3 and 4).

### ***Function of the pottery***

In order to analyse the function of the pottery from different periods at Tell Sufan we have selected the two most representative functional groups: tableware and storage jars. We counted the sherds in locus 1 of the squares. These types of ware indicate that the site was mainly devoted to production of pottery, rather than being residential. In fact, it is likely that from the fifth century onward, the site was solely used for production, without a residential capacity. The pottery from Tell Sufan was produced in the workshop at *Scythopolis*.

**Table 2:** Storage jars dated to the Iron Age found in Area A in 1999

No.	Type	Reg. No.	Square	Locus	Description	Neck diam.	Parallel and Date
1(4A)	Storage jar	NA6974	33	13	Complete, orange material, height:135 cm, pointed base, coarse mouth, rough surface.	16cm	El 'Umeiri, Iron Age (London Fig. 26: 148).
2(4B)	Storage jar	NA6975	33	13	Complete, brown material, height:120 cm, pointed base, coarse mouth, rough surface.	14cm	Tell Dan and hill country of central Canaan at the end of 10th century B.C. (Davis 1992: 58, 67).
3(4C)	Storage jar	NA6976	33	13	Complete, grey material, length:130 cm, pointed base, coarse mouth, rough surface.	18cm	Shiloh, Iron Age I (12th-11th centuries BC). The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Registration No. 1AA 1-5537.
4(4D)	Storage jar	NA6977	33	13	Complete, brown material, length:115 cm, pointed base, coarse mouth, rough surface.	18cm	Northeast Sinai Peninsula (Kuntillet [?]Ajrud). 8th Century BC (Jan, Perlman, Meshel 1985: 270-283).
5(4E)	Storage jar	NA6978	33	13	Complete, brown material, length:130 cm, pointed base, coarse mouth, rough surface.	15cm	Tell Dan and in hill country of central Canaan at the end of 10th century BC (Davis 1992: 58, 67).

Pottery production represents an essential aspect during the prosperous period of the fifth–seventh centuries, but the use of storage jars is clearly an aspect of pottery production from Iron Age II. The disappearance of these vessels, however, cannot be taken as an indication that production ceased completely, as the falling into disuse of ceramic containers for liquids was widespread throughout the Mediterranean region during the Late Byzantine period. Conversely, we cannot assume that all the sherds from storage jars recorded were produced in local workshops, as many may have been from vessels transported to the site. Olive oil production can be reliably determined as an economic activity during the Byzantine period due to the identification of an olive oil press in Area B in 2016. We do not as yet have evidence of olive oil production in subsequent periods. We suggest that if it did continue to be produced in later periods, it took on relatively less importance, with occupation of the site in the early Islamic period. More evidence is needed to understand why other types of ware, especially cooking ware, appears so rarely in the archaeological records of Tell Sufan.

**Table 3:** Pottery sherds of significance found in area B in summer seasons, 2013 and 2016

No.	Sherd	Area	Square	Locus	Description	Fig.
1	Handle (Iron Age)	A	15K	2	Two horizontally placed holes	5.1
2	Handle (Iron Age)	A	15K	9	Incision between two vertically placed holes	5.2
3	Handle (Byzantine Period)	B	14S	1	Cooking pot handle	6
4	Sherd (Islamic Period)	B	14S	1	Cream line decoration	7.3
5	Sherd (Islamic Period)	B	15S	1	Geometric decoration	7.2
6	Sherd (Islamic Period)	B	15S	1	Fine ribbing on rim	7.1

**Table 4:** Bag-shaped amphorae found in area B in 2013

No.	Type	Reg. No.	Square	Locus	Description	Neck diameter	Parallel and Date
1(7A)	Bag-shaped				amphora	NA6986	14L
5	Complete, length: 45 cm, orange,				decoration: ribbing in neck & body, one handle on each side, round base.	9 cm.	A type common at Caesarea Maritima, used in homes and shops for liquid and dry commodities. This Amphora dates to the fifth or sixth century BC (Holum <i>et. al.</i> 1988: Fig. 114: 166).
2(7B)	Bag-shaped				amphora	NA6987	14L
5	Complete, length: 45 cm, beige,				decoration: ribbing on neck & body, handle on each side, round base, uneven surface.	10 cm.	Pella (Jordan), dates to the fourth century (Smith <i>et. al.</i> 1992: 67).
3(7C)	Bag-shaped				amphora	NA6988	14L
5	Beige and orange, length: 41 cm,				decoration: ribbing at neck, one handle, round base, uneven surface.	11 cm.	Palestinian bag-shaped jar. The type appeared in quantity throughout much of the Mediterranean region during the Byzantine period.(Parker 1999: 165).
4(7D)	Storage jar (Iron Age)	NA6989	15 K Area B	12	Half of storage jar remaining, length: 60 cm, grey. Two handles, pointed base.	Broken	Tell Dan and hill country of central Canaan at the end of the 10th century BC (Davis 1992: 58, 67).

## Description

### Storage jars

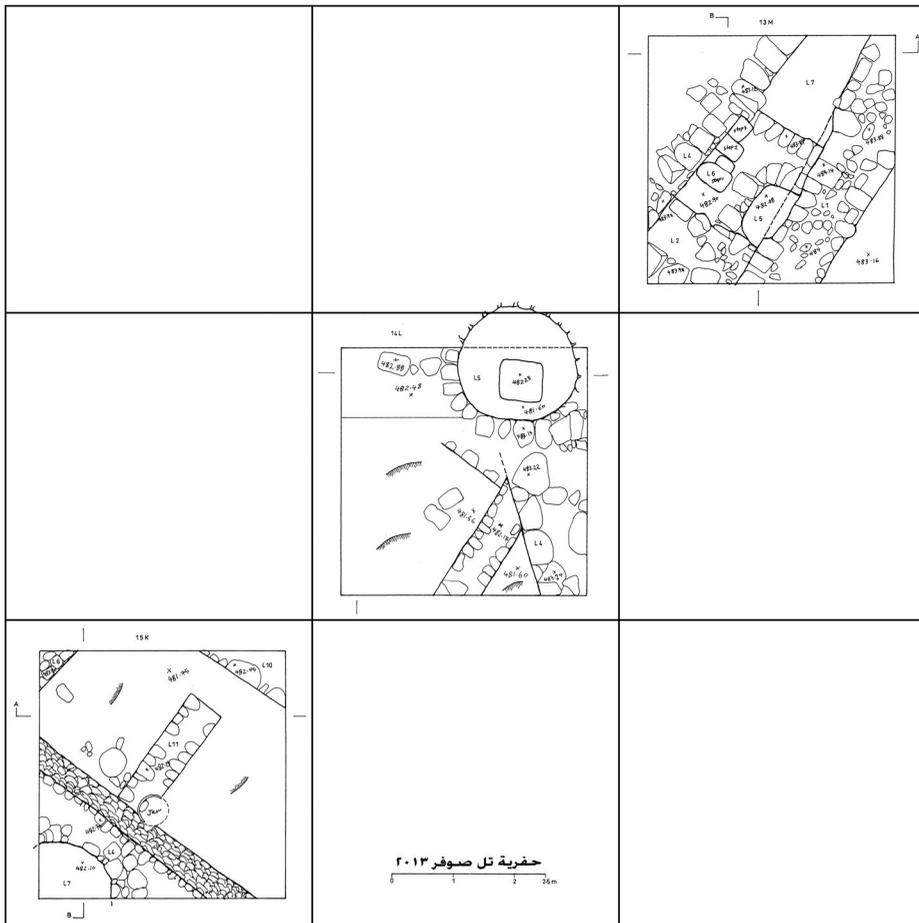
Five Iron Age (1200–539 BC) storage jars have been recorded, all found in area A in 1999 (Figs 4 and 5). They were restored by the Department of Archaeology (Figure 4) (Table 2). We consider that they would have had a grain or water storage capacity of between 52 and 103 litres (Hendrix, Drey and Storfjell 1997:169) (Table 5).

### Handles with incision and holes

Two handle fragments found at Tell Sufan, one with an incision between two horizontally placed holes and the other with two vertically placed holes, resemble handles from Tell Shiloh, which is located between Nablus and Ramallah (Finklestein 1988: 287, fig. 98)

**Table 5:** The capacity per litre of complete vessels found at Tell Sufan

No.	Season	Area	Square	Locus	Fig.	Capacity per Liter
1	1999	A	A	13	3A	52
2	1999	A	A	13	3B	103
3	1999	A	A	13	3C	87
4	1999	A	A	13	3D	91
5	1999	A	A	13	3E	81
6	2013	B	14L	5	5A	14
7	2013	B	14L	5	5B	20
8	2013	B	14L	5	5C	24



**Figure 9.** Plan of the 2013 archaeological excavations (Drawings by I. Iqtait).

(Figure 6) (Table 3). Handles with holes are first seen at the beginning of the twelfth century BC and continue to appear into the tenth century BC and perhaps even later: Giloh, Mt. Ebal, Taanach IA, Taanach IIB, Megiddo V (Yadin *et al.* 1958: Pl. LXXXIV: 8-10).

It is not possible to determine whether the holes had administrative significance, or were purely for decorative purposes, until more examples of complete vessels come to light.

### **Late Byzantine bag-shaped amphorae**

Among the pottery from Area B three bag-shaped storage jars were identified, representing a type of container made in a range of different fabrics and with a ribbed body (Magnes 1993: 160–1, 221–31) (Figures 7 and 8; Table 4). With a typical grey surface, they were light-brown or dark red in colour. The grey ribbed jars have a geometric pattern of cream-coloured lines. Their capacity would have been from 14 to 24 litres. They were mendable and all of them were restored by the Department of Archaeology



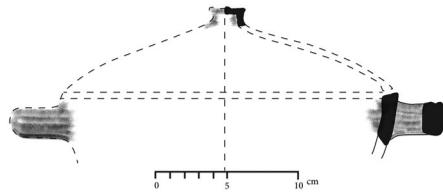
**Figure 10.** Photo of silo discovered in 2013 in area B, square 14L, locus 5 where three bag-shape amphorae were found (Figure 7 A-C).

at ANU by the author and his students in 2014-2015. We can find a close parallel, dated to the late Byzantine period, at the Monastery of *Bir Al Hamam* on Mount *Garizim* at Nablus, not far from Tell Sufan (Taha 2015: 69).

It is important to note that the Type 4 storage jar, according to Magness' typology, encompasses the Late Roman 5 and Late Roman 6 amphorae, of which both types were produced in Palestine and mainly distributed there (Magness 1993; for definitions of LR5 and LR6 see Peacock and Williams 1986). With minor morphological differences from Magness's storage jar types, these amphorae have been dated to the fifth–seventh centuries, falling exactly within the period for Magness' forms 1–6. As well as these

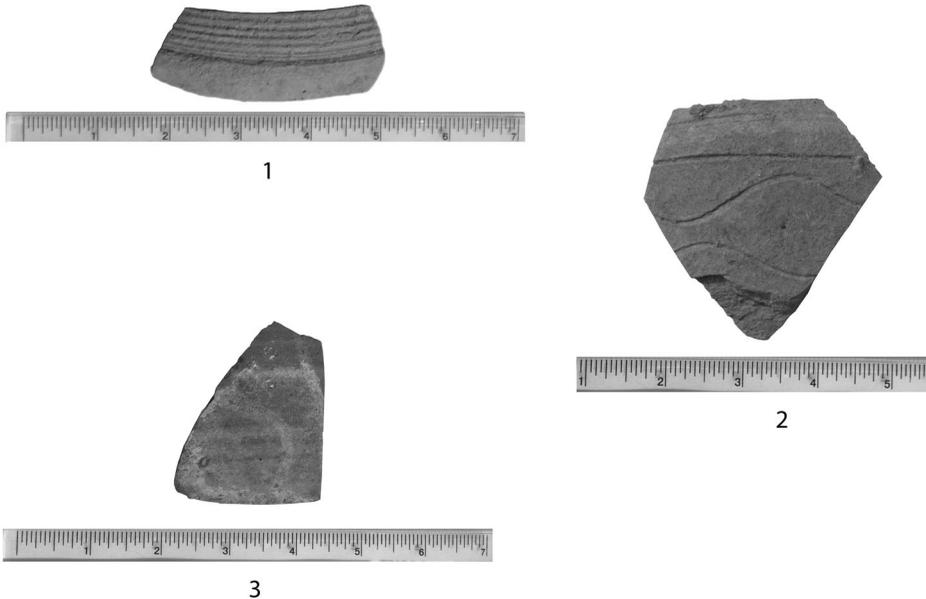


**Figure 11.** Photo of silo discovered in 2013 in area B, square 15 K, locus 7 (in the corner) where half a storage jar was found (Figure 7 D).

**1****2**

**Figure 12.** Cooking pot handle found in area B. 1. Scale of handle on cooking pot. 2. Handle.

amphorae, two fragments of vessels, identified as Late Roman 1 have been recorded, one from each area (Peacock and Williams 1986). Originally from Cilicia (although copies composed of a fabric that is thought to be from Cyprus are recorded), Late Roman 1 was widely distributed throughout the Mediterranean area between the mid-fifth and mid-seventh centuries.



**Figure 13.** Umayyad sherds from Tell Sufan. 1. Sherd with ribbing. 2. Sherd with incised geometric pattern found in topsoil in 15 T of Area B. 3. Sherd with ribbing and cream lines.



**Figure 14.** Late Byzantine sherds from *Scythopolis* found in 2016 at Tell Sufan.

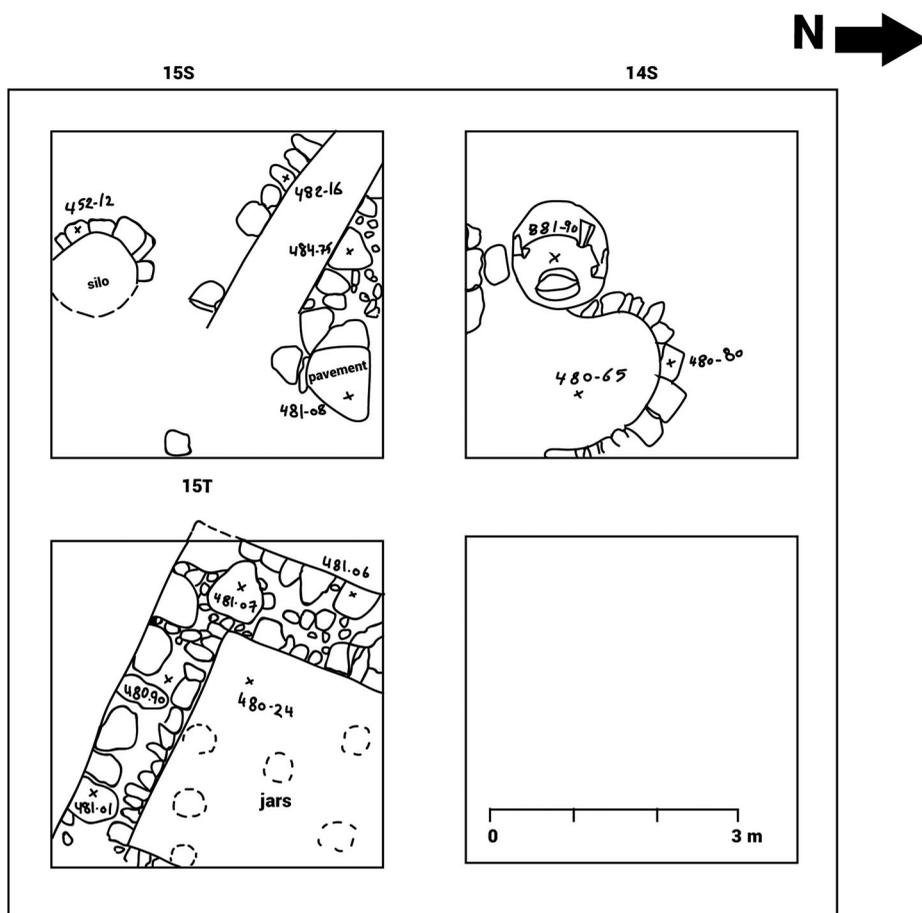
Early Byzantine pottery was directly related to the Late Roman corpus as exemplified by a continuation of the Roman morphology and surface treatment of the vessels (Hendrix *et al.* 1997). Late Byzantine (fifth–sixth centuries) ceramics were a continuation of the early Byzantine assemblage, but with new additions and greater variety. Because some forms were utilised throughout the whole Byzantine period and were not well enough differentiated stratigraphically to provide an absolutely fixed typology, it is sometimes difficult to delineate early from late Byzantine vessels. For this reason, the pottery examples of the Byzantine period are combined into one group (Hendrix *et al.* 1997). The Byzantine pottery is represented by common ware. It consists of body sherds, rims, bases, jars, juglets, bowls, cooking pots, and handles (Figures 12–14). No ceramic lamps were found (Table 5).

### **Other Wares**

The other recorded wares from the site are much less significant in terms of quantity, although some of them provide chronological information relevant to the aim of this article. Only one fragment of a cooking pot has been recorded (Magnez 1993). Located in area B, it is an almost whole example of dark brown brittle ware with white inclusions (probably quartz). The fragment is not chronologically relevant to this text, as it appears to be of late Ottoman or even contemporary origin and possibly came from nearby inhabited sites. No medieval Islamic glazed ware was documented during the excavation seasons.

### **Pottery from 2016 season**

A large quantity of sherds belonging to jars from the pottery workshop at *Scythopolis* were found during the 2016 season. They were located in locus 4 in area B in square 15 T



**Figure 15.** Silo, jars, olive oil press and structures found in 2016 (Drawing by I. Iqtait).

(Figures 3 and 15). The jars, of grey material with white lines and ribbing at the neck, were produced on a potter's wheel (Figure 14) and were of three types: (1) red, ovoid body, round base, handles at shoulder, decoration of white lines and ribbing at the neck; (2) grey, ovoid body, round base, two handles at shoulder, decoration of white lines and ribbing at neck; and (3) black, ovoid body, round base, two handles at shoulder, decoration: white lines and ribbing at neck.

Dating to the late Byzantine period (fifth – sixth centuries AD), the jars were used for storage of agricultural products and olive oil and were in a storeroom near an olive press (Figure 15). Only one sherd with geometric decoration was found, in the topsoil of square 15 T (Figure 3). The sherd is decorated with two undulating lines below two incised straight lines (Figure 13).

### Conclusions

The pottery documented during the 1999, 2013–2016 seasons included abundant tableware and storage jars, with some other wares in lesser quantities, but with very little

cooking ware. Although there have been no pottery kilns found in the Nablus area, the storage jars and amphorae are of local production, with some types of pottery imported from the city of Bisan. The assemblage was dated to the late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BC), Iron Age (1200–333 BC) and the Byzantine (AD 324–638) and Early Islamic periods by correlating archaeological information with comparison of the pottery with that from local and Mediterranean sites, and referring to relevant literature. Storage jars and sherds from Tell Sufan were found to belong to the Umayyad and Late Byzantine periods due to their close similarity to pottery from other sites in Palestine and Jordan.

The function of the pottery suggests that the site was used for pottery production during the periods of occupation, along with agricultural activity, the pottery being mainly used for storage or transport of agricultural products or water. The olive oil press located adjacent to a Byzantine storage area indicates production during that time. Our study results suggest that the site was mainly occupied from the fourteenth to the fourth centuries BC and from the fifth to the seventh centuries AD.

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