



Fig. 56. Aerial image with map overlay of site with Fields (image by Ian Jones)

The 2017 excavation season of the Balu'a Regional Archaeological Project focused on three field locations (Fig. 52). Excavation in Square 24.42 examined the context of the Qasr and attempted to provide new insights into the dating of its construction and use. Work in Square 25.62 reopened and expanded the excavation of an Iron Age house. A new excavation area, Square 41.31, investigated the fortification line dividing the upper city from its later, eastern expansion.

The goal of this season's excavation was to narrow the date of the large standing structure called the Qasr al-Balu'a. A 3 x 3 m probe was opened against the Qasr's north wall. A cobble and packed-earth surface was reached at about level with the surrounding area. A few Roman glass fragments and early Nabataean pottery sherds indicated an early 1st century A.D. Nabataean reuse of the structure and surrounding area. Excavation below this level revealed two east-west walls and several layers of earth debris covering and running up to the Qasr wall. Diagnostic pottery indicated Iron IIB as a probable period for the deposition of these layers.

Time limitations did not allow us to excavate to the bottom of the Qasr wall. The lowest layer excavated appeared to consist

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of destruction debris interspersed with charred wood and numerous animal bone fragments. This layer contained a quantity of pottery which was dated earlier than any of the other layers encountered in the 2017 season. Tentatively, it appears this debris layer, if not of secondary deposition, could provide a terminus ante quem for the construction of the Qasr, which would place its construction date no later than the Early Iron Age.

The excavators returned to Square 25.62 with the intent to expand the exposure of an Iron II domestic structure encountered in 2012. A major objective was to establish a date for the destruction of the building and to understand the phases of use represented by several surface layers encountered in the 2012 sondage. Two rooms were partially exposed with additional rooms indicated by an unexcavated doorway to the southwest and a passage to the east. The latest use-surface was cleared in all areas excavated of the 3 x 3 m area. A rectangular bin was located in the eastern room and two circular bins were in the western room. The latter room also had several pithoi crushed by the collapse of the dividing wall between these two rooms. The surfaces of these two rooms were constructed over a prepared plaster surface associated with the lowest level of the walls constituting this house.

An area of excavation was chosen to overlap with what appeared from the surface and GIS mapping to constitute a defensive wall that separated the upper city from the lower, eastern expansion. This seven-meter-wide wall probably served as the exterior wall prior to the Late Iron Age expansion. Excavation revealed three phases of fortification, all dating to the Iron Age II. The latest phase entailed the construction of towers along the destroyed or abandoned line of the earlier fortification wall. Excavation between two towers showed the seven-meter-wide wall to actually be two large walls in parallel with a space between them. The layout strongly suggests a casemate construction for Phase 2. The excavated portion of the casemate room produced 45 clay loom weights and a number of groundstone fragments. A third phase was indicated in a probe on the eastern external side of the east casemate wall. This probe extended more than 3 m down to the wall's founding level on bedrock and showed evidence of three phases of construction.