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# THE PERSIAN-PERIOD BUILDING OF TELL ES-SA'IDIYEH: RESIDENCY OR FORTRESS?

Hashem Khries

*The Persian period building of Tell es-Sa'idiyeh belongs to the "Open-Court" type, which is widely attested in the Levant. In dealing with this kind of buildings, archaeologists face the problem of their functional interpretation. Three functional hypotheses have been proposed so far: (1) palaces; (2) villas and residences; and (3) fortresses. The purpose of this article is to call attention to features that are generally overlooked and to present a new hypothesis concerning the functional interpretation of the building of Tell es-Sa'idiyeh by examining Pritchard's excavation reports and discussing his functional interpretation, also by comparing that building with similar structures from the Iron Age and Persian periods in the Levant.*

## Introduction

Tell es-Sa'idiyeh is situated in the middle of the Jordan Valley, some 1.8 km east of the Jordan River. The mound consists of two mounds actually: an upper and a lower tell. The high tell is rising 40 m above the surrounding area while the lower mound is 20 m below the higher one. The building under examination was investigated during Pritchard's excavations that were carried out on behalf of the University of Pennsylvania between 1964 and 1966 (Pritchard 1985).

## Contextual Analysis

The building was built on the hillside of the upper tell, the so-called "acropolis", on a strategic position where there is a slope to the surface rising from west to east (Pritchard 1985: 60-68). Interestingly, the archaeological evidence did not reveal the presence of settlement activity at Tell es-Sa'idiyeh during the Persian period as a whole (Tubb 2007: 281).

The building is a square, right-angled structure, measuring 22 m (north-south) x 22 m (east-west), and contained an open-air courtyard surrounded by a single row of rooms from four sides (fig. 1). The building was built of mud brick con-

structed on stone foundations mostly. The north, west and east walls are 1.25 m-thick and the south wall is 1.60 m-thick. The central courtyard of the building that was designated as Room 101 occupies the largest space of the building. It is a spacious rectangular patio, measuring 7.80 m (north-south) x 9 m (east-west), paved by roughly hewn stones of both big and medium sizes, and the gaps between flagstones were filled with cobbles. The building connected to a drainage channel extending from the southeast corner of the courtyard and continuing underneath the floor of Room 109 and then to outside (fig. 3). At the doorways between the courtyard and Rooms 109 and 102 were built raised stone thresholds. Like the court, Room 102 was completely flagged as well and near its eastern end was erected a perpendicular wall protruding from its northern wall and extending southward and cut off before reaching the southern wall forming a 1m-wide unpaved doorway leading to a narrow stone-paved end space (fig. 4). Four clay ovens were built on its floor. Corridor 103 also had a pavement of stones with remnants of plaster on its east and west walls. Unlike the other rooms of the building, Room 104 had a compact clay floor instead of stones, and only the southwest corner was stone-paved, which prompted the excavator to assume that there was an entrance in this flagged spot. The excavator assumed that there



Fig. 1. Plan of the Persian-period building of Tell es-Sa'idiyeh (Stratum III) (Pritchard 1985: fig. 185).

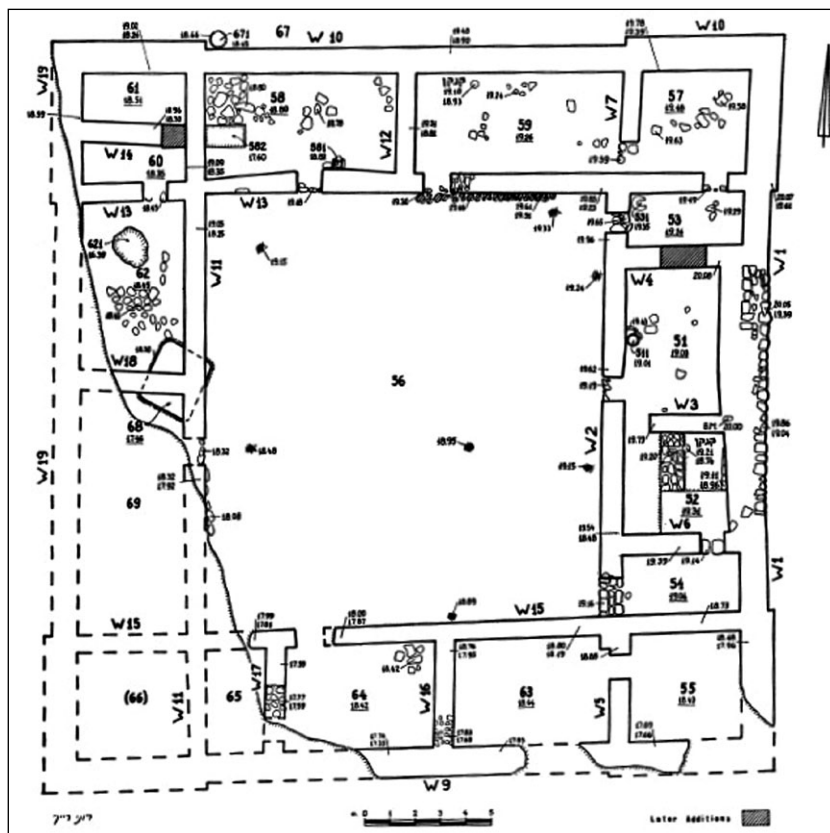


Fig. 2. Plan of the fortress of Ashdod (Tal 2005: 81, fig. 7).

was another entrance through Room 106. As a matter of fact, the only clear entrance in the plan was in the southwest corner of the building that opened immediately to Corridor 103, which, in turn, opened to Rooms 102 and 104. The courtyard reaches only to two sides: Room 102 on the south and Room 109 on the east. The latter led to Room 108 on the north and Room 110 on the south by stairs built near the southwest corner. On the opposite side, Room 104 reached to Rooms 105 and 106. Room 108 also communicated with Room 107 and both had a solid clay floor and a stone doorsill placed at their shared entrance.

In front of the doorway between Room 102 and Corridor 103 (fig. 5) were found remnants of charcoals, charred wooden beams, and burned mud. The excavators have found blackened plaster remains on the eastern and western walls of Room 103, which would mean that a conflagration broke out in this part of the building. It seems that the massive fire had extended into Room 104 northward, as evidenced by the fragments of the mud brick wall on its floor, the ash, charcoals, and traces of charred gypsum on its eastern wall.

In the stone pavement of Room 105 a conical clay silo was dug into its northeast corner. In front of the entryway with Room 106 was a stone threshold. In Room 106, the squatters dug several pits into its floor as well. As opposed to the rest of the walls of the building, the east mud brick wall of Room 106 was built directly on bedrock without stone foundations. J. Pritchard has explained it to mean that this wall was subsequently constructed in a later architectural stage and was never in the original floor plan. The walls of Room 110 were consolidated by doubling their thicknesses and erecting a solid cross-wall in its inner space bonded the northern and southern walls together.



Fig. 3. The drainage channel under the open courtyard of the Persian-period building of Tell es-Sa'idiyeh (looking west) (Pritchard 1985: fig. 118).



Fig. 4. Room 102 of the Persian-period building of Tell es-Sa'idiyeh (looking east) (Pritchard 1985: fig. 124).

Object no.	Type	Provenance	Bibliography
1	Lamp	Room 101	(Pritchard 1985: fig. 18: 20)
2	Fibula; Iron nail; Spherical loom weight	Room 102	(Pritchard 1985: fig. 18: 27)
3	Jar; Cosmetic palette; Anklet; Spindle whorl; Iron tool; Loom weights; Eleven tiles	Room 103	(Pritchard 1985: fig. 18: 18, 24, 30; 168: 9)
4	Incense burner; Bronze pin; Tile	Room 104	(Pritchard 1985: figs. 18: 22; 174: 1-6)
5	Bronze needle; Stopper with string impression on top; Pottery sherds; Animal bones; Shells; Bronze needle; Bronze ring	Room 105	(Pritchard 1985: fig. 18: 26)
6	Amber bead; Fibula; Juglet; Bronze kettle	Room 107	(Pritchard 1985: fig. 18: 19, 23, 25, 29)
7	Basalt mortar; Silver ring; Tile	Room 109	(Pritchard 1985: fig. 18: 21, 28)

Tab. 1. Miscellaneous material culture from the building of Tell es-Sa'idiyeh.





Fig. 5. The Corridor (Locus 103) of the Persian-period building of Tell es-Sa'idiyeh (looking north) (Pritchard 1985: fig. 125).

### *Chronology*

The excavation processes beneath the courtyard that was termed as Phase IIIa have revealed three architectural sub-phases: IIIb, IIIc, and IIId (Tubb, Dorrell 1994: 54-57). Phase IIIb came into sight at a depth of 0.15-0.20m below Phase IIIa and is correlated with ovens and covered by remnants of plaster and pits filled with bones of cattle, deer, birds and fish. At a shallow depth underneath Phase IIIb, the floor of Phase IIIc had emerged. It is similar to, but better-preserved than the previous floor and contained pits, an elliptical clay oven, and ashes. Phase IIId is represented by an open courtyard paved with stones and cobbles unearthed at a depth of 1 m below Phase IIIa. Two ovens were built on its floor. At any rate, the pottery belonging to Phases IIIb-c suggests the later part of the sixth century B.C.E. and the pottery sherds of Phase IIId indicate the sixth century B.C.E. (Tubb 2007: 284-288).

The Persian-period date of the building was not limited solely to the findings due to their poverty, but also was confirmed by the Aramaic text incised on the incense burner found in Room 104 (see Object no. 4). The form of the letters of the inscription indicated the period between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C.E. i.e. the Persian period. Moreover, the excavator had conducted a radio-carbon analysis (14C) on some grain and charcoal samples collected from the building, and the results provided identical results to the Aramaic text (Pritchard 1985: 66). In addition to the studies mentioned above, the author thinks that the Persian-period date of the building may also be proved by other excavated objects that are similar to other objects excavated elsewhere in the Levant and belong to the same period as well. Stratum III

in Tell es-Sa'idiyeh yielded a figurine of a pregnant woman in a prenatal phase (Pritchard 1985: fig. 169, 6-7). Pretty similar figurines were found in the shrine of Makmish (Tel Michal) in the northern coastal plain of Palestine termed as Sharon Plain (Avigad 1960: Pl. 11, A-B), in Shrine 2 (Level II) of Sarafand (ancient Sarepta) located between Sidon and Tyre (Pritchard 1988: fig. 12, 34) and on the forecourt of the sanctuary of Kharayeb south of Sidon (Kaoukabani 1973: Pl. VII, 3). The incense burner excavated in Room 104 is similar to three limestone incense burners found at Tell Jemmeh and dated to the Persian period as well; one of them was excavated inside Fort A (Room AG), and the others were found in Palace B (Rooms BM and BW) (Petrie 1928: Pl. XLI, 14, 16, 19).

### *Functional Interpretation*

Pritchard proposed that no one of the supposed entrances mentioned above represented a big gate, which would mean that this building was built for defensive ends and thus, it was reinforced against any potential aggression. Nonetheless, he acknowledged that the perplexity of distinguishing the character of the building arises from the relatively insufficient number of the findings found in the rooms and the unusual distribution of their types (Pritchard 1985: 60, 64-65). Moreover, he concluded that the entrance to Room 110 was by means of a narrow staircase parallel to the west wall of the Room 109, which would signify a protective function of this room i.e. a watching tower, especially since the room was consolidated by a cross-wall from inside (Pritchard 1985: 63-64). In the author's view, a more plausible interpretation is that this wall was built to block off the stairs leading to the terrace or the roof of the building.

Evidently, in his classifying this building as a fortress, Pritchard adopted principally the resemblance between it and some Iron-Age fortresses excavated by R. Cohen in the Central Negev, primarily at Horvat Mesora (20 × 20 m), Horvat Ritma (21 × 21 m), and 'Atar Haro'a (fig. 6) (Cohen 1979: 70). Admittedly, the similarity between the floor plans of those buildings and the building of Tell es-Sa'idiyeh cannot be disregarded, but the interpretation of the buildings excavated in the Negev as fortresses may need a thoughtful re-examination and, therefore, this interpretation is not reliable. In his turn, R. Cohen (Cohen 1979: 63) has typified the Iron-Age fortresses into four main categories: (A) Oval fortresses; (B) Rectangular fortresses without towers; (C) Square fortresses



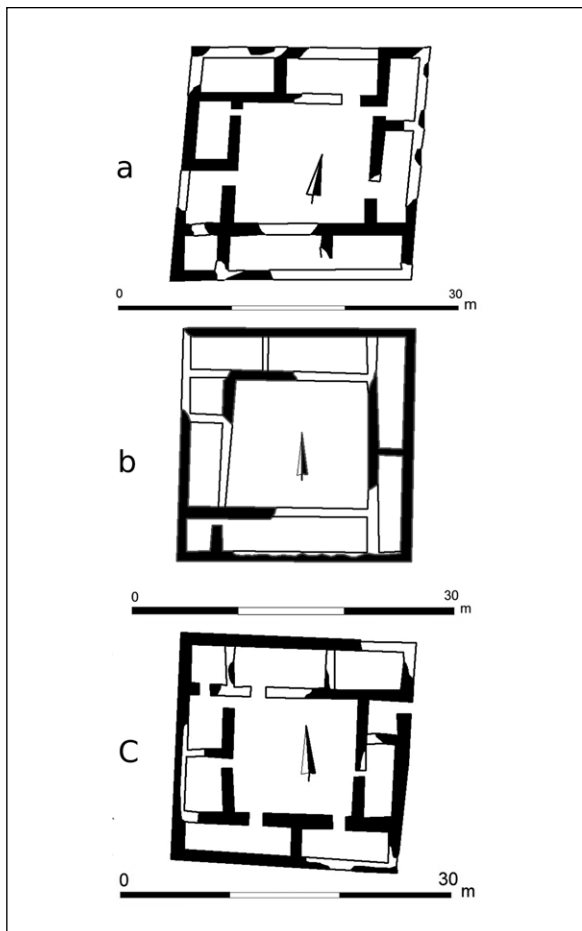


Fig. 6. Plan of the Iron-Age fortresses in the Negev: (a) Horvat Mesora; (b) Horvat Ritma; (c) 'Atar Haro'a (Cohen 1979: fig. 7, 2-4).

without towers; and (D) Fortresses with towers. According to this classification, the former buildings including the building of Tell es-Sa'idiyeh fall within Cohen's third type, namely square forts without towers.

In point of fact, the "Open-Court" scheme is the most important hallmark of the Persian period and was encountered in the majority of the Levantine sites. The architects adopted this design chiefly when erecting palaces, residences, and forts. Temples were also built infrequently in this style such as the "Solar Shrine" of Lachish (Tell ed-Duweir). This type gave birth to three sub-groups in the Persian period: (1) "Open-Court" buildings surrounded by rooms from four sides; (2) "Open-Court" buildings surrounded by room from three sides; and (3) Buildings with an open court flanked by rooms on both sides only. At any rate, the building of Tell es-Sa'idiyeh belongs to the first subgroup. Within the same subgroup,

there are buildings with an open court besieged by a double or triple row of rooms on one or two sides. The Palace of Lachish, Citadel II of Hazor, and the Area A Palace of Buseirah would seem to be the best illustration in that respect. Whatever the case may be, these buildings are not identical to the building of Tell es-Sa'idiyeh, so they could be excluded from the scope of the study. On the other hand, there are some comparable Persian-period buildings to the building of Tell es-Sa'idiyeh. Some had corner towers and they were designed definitely for defensive aims. The best examples of this form are the fortress of Ashdod on the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea (fig. 2) and the fortified agricultural estate of Nahal Tut (Wadi el-Shaqaq) in the northern coastal plain (fig. 7). On the other hand, we encounter similar buildings without corner towers and they were designed principally for residential purposes<sup>1</sup>. The closest example of these buildings is the Residency of Tell Mardikh in Idlib Governorate in Syria (Mardikh VIA: 1-3) (fig. 8).

Because of this confusion and the planimetric and structural differences between these types, the residential nature of the building of Tell es-Sa'idiyeh could be proved by the following four criteria:

- Installations: the four clay ovens laid on the floor of Room 102, a silo in Room 105, and some pits in Room 106 imply a domestic nature of the building;
- Material culture: although the objects excavated inside it are not sufficient by themselves to determine the function of each room, it is possible to assume its domestic nature by some findings which points to engaging in household activities (mainly weaving and sewing), as evidenced by the loom weights, spindle whorls, and needles. Other findings represented luxury items attesting to their use by a wealthy class, as shown by the fibulae, cosmetic palette, anklet, rings, amber bead, and the decorated incense burner;
- Topographical location: the building's position on the top of the settlement with no other

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the buildings belonging to the first category, there are many buildings in the Levant fitting the second and third sub-groups and were designed for multiple purposes including the residential and defensive ones. A comprehensive PhD study conducted by the author shows that the key sites that contained these types of structures are Ashkelon, Beth-Zur, Megiddo, Tel Ya'oz, Tell Qasile, and Tell Jemmeh. Noticeably, all these buildings do not contain corner towers, except Palace B at Tell Jemmeh.

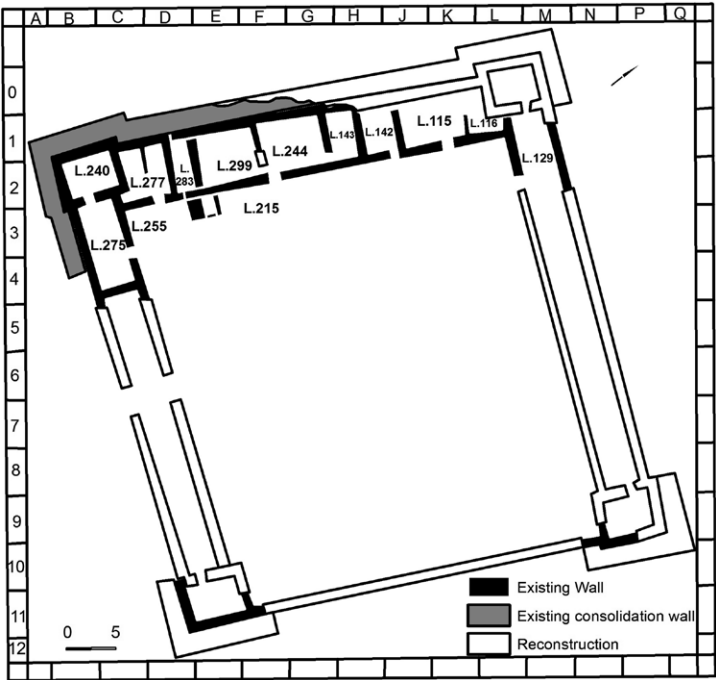


Fig. 7. Plan of the fortified agriculture estate of Nahal Tut (Alexandre 2006: 140, plan 3).

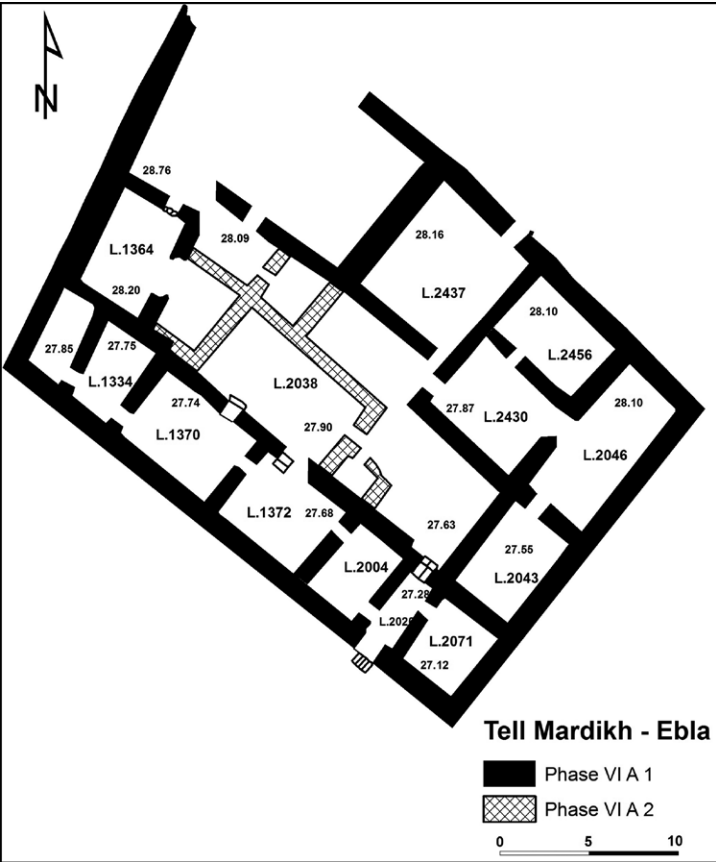


Fig. 8. Plan of the Residency of Tell Mardikh (adapted from Matthiae 1984: plate. 94).

buildings (publics or dwellings) near it may mean that it was a rural residency;

- Building techniques: several technical solutions inside the building have been noticed, including the neatly stone-paved floors, the plastered walls and stone sills.

To sum up, the author thinks that the arguments mentioned above undermine Pritchard's functional interpretation. Therefore, the Tell es-Sa'idiyeh building's functions seem to have been private and residential within an "Open-Court" villa type, being an elite site among other nearby ones of the Jordan Valley.

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