

THE LOST LOCI OF TELL EL-‘AJJUL: PETRIE’S AREA C

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ABSTRACT

Flinders Petrie excavated the site of Tell el-‘Ajjul in southern Palestine over five seasons between 1930 and 1938, with publication of his finds following swiftly on the heels of his fieldwork. These reports were only ever meant to be a preliminary investigation into the potential of this rich site, and often raised as many questions as they answered. This material is now the subject of the Petrie Palestinian Project, based at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, which aims to re-evaluate Petrie’s finds in the light of more recent research. In the course of this work a detailed study of Petrie’s field practices has helped clarify a number of issues relating to this site, which remains of major importance to the Bronze Age archaeology of Southern Palestine. One of the more problematic of these issues has been chosen for discussion here: the location of Petrie’s area C.

For several years the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, has been running a project to catalogue, computerize and re-examine its extensive holdings of material derived from the work of Flinders Petrie in Palestine (Ucko 1998). This includes over 3000 objects from the site of Tell el-‘Ajjul, which was excavated by Petrie and his team in five seasons between December 1930 and 1938. Ultimately this material will be made available to the wider academic community in the form of an on-line database, that will also include details of additional objects from this fieldwork now held in other museums around the world.¹

In the course of this work, project staff have become familiar with numerous aspects of Petrie’s working methods, as evidenced by context markings made on sherds and other objects, field tags, and early display labels that follow his dating system and nomenclature. At the same time, close and intense scrutiny of this rich resource has raised a number of interesting issues and problems, one of which has been chosen for further discussion here.

In his first season of work at Tell el-‘Ajjul, Petrie began excavating on the southern part of the tell, where he exposed a series of domestic structures built alongside several streets. He followed his usual practice of identifying this region using letters, in this case A to D, with individual ‘areas’ or loci within the wider regions defined by the addition of a second letter (e.g.: AN, BD, DG). A plan of the work was published in *Ancient Gaza I*, pl. LIV.² While none of this will be news to anyone familiar with the site, there is one strange aspect to his work which has so far received little comment; the absence of an Area C.³

Area C is not marked on any of the published plans, for this season or any subsequent one. The text makes no specific reference to loci belonging to an area C, nor do these get any mention in Petrie’s field notebooks, which are held in the library archives at University College London. The only details given for area C are somewhat generic; we are told that the letter ‘C’ is used as a prefix for material from stratum III, and that it was assigned to an area in the first season of work (Petrie 1931, p. 9; Petrie 1934, p. 2). And there is further supporting evidence. Illustrations of material in *Ancient Gaza I* do indeed make use of the ‘C’ prefix for their contexts (e.g.: CY 740, Petrie 1931 pl. XXXVII.6C7; CAX, pl. XXXVIII.21A), while several objects held in collections at University College London and elsewhere are physically marked with similar contexts. This leaves little doubt that Area C actually existed. But it does leave unanswered the question of where this mysterious area was physically located. While direct evidence for a solution may be lacking, it is nonetheless

possible to make some deductions about the location and nature of this region by going back to the original source material.

Closer study of the stratigraphy of the southern town suggests the following points regarding the relationships between area C and areas A, B and D.⁴ Firstly, Petrie assigned almost all Area A rooms excavated in the first season to stratum II. Area B rooms were assigned partially to stratum II,⁵ and partially to stratum III,⁶ while area C and D rooms were all treated as belonging to stratum III (Petrie 1931, pl. LIV; Kempinski, 1983, plan 5). This phasing of the area C material has been deduced from Petrie's comment that material prefixed with the letter 'C' belongs to his 'XII dynasty' level (his stratum III);⁷ the fact that he published the scarabs from C, under the heading 'Level III' (Petrie 1931, 9, pl. XIII), and the existence of objects which are physically marked with both a 'C' context and 'III' (e.g.: Manchester Museum 9015). Secondly, it would appear that there was a clear physical separation between the structures of stratum II and III in this part of the tell, with a substantial burnt layer lying between them (Petrie 1931, 7). This should have given Petrie clear grounds for allocating any particular structure to a given stratum, allowing us to be reasonably confident in his phasing of this part of the site.

Most area C material was published in *Ancient Gaza I*, with the exception of a handful of scarabs that were excavated in the third season, when 'more was done in deepening out the south-east town buildings, opened in 1931' (Petrie 1933, 2).⁸ This early publication date means that area C must lie in the southern part of the site, somewhere in the vicinity of areas A, B and D — the only part of the tell that was excavated in the first season (Petrie 1931, 2). We also know that area C must have consisted of several loci, as letters known to have been assigned to objects from here include: CA, CJ, CL, CM, CO, CP, CT, CU, CV, CX, CY, CZ and several three letter loci: CAA, CAB, CAM, CAN, CAR, CAV, CAX and CAY. This means at least twenty different contexts were used; Petrie's practice of assigning loci letters sequentially suggests that we are probably looking at a great many more.⁹

Assuming that area C was somewhere close to areas A, B and D, and that it should be considered part of the stratum III occupation at the site, there seem to be two possible locations for these missing loci.

- Below some of the stratum II buildings in areas A or B
- In one of the open areas adjacent to the architecture shown on the original published plan (Petrie 1931, pl. LIV).

Let us begin with the possibility that area C lies *underneath* some of the structures excavated in the 1930/31 season. Petrie states that letters were assigned to contexts 'in the order in which they were cleared out' (Petrie 1931, 5). This had been his practice when working at his previous two Palestinian sites. At Tell Jemmeh the letters AA–AZ were used to describe the first rooms found, switching to letters BA onwards for further rooms in the same architectural phase. On clearing structures in a single stratum, his men would then remove existing walls and begin digging below them, at which point they would switch to the next letter of the alphabet and the process would begin again. At Fara, the process was simplified, with areas lying in a straightforward vertical sequence: A above B, B above C and so on (Petrie 1930; Macdonald *et al.* 1932). If Petrie was following either system at 'Ajjul, logic suggests that after assigning 'A' and 'B' contexts, 'C' would be the next letter to be assigned. The implication of this would be that rooms given a 'C' context would lie stratigraphically below either area 'A' or area 'B' rooms.

At 'Ajjul, areas A and B appear to be adjacent to one another, while area D lies partially beneath and partially adjacent to the rooms of area B (Fig. 1). As Petrie talks of only two building levels in this part of the tell, area C could not be located in a further phase below the area D structures; these two areas should be contemporary, not consecutive. This

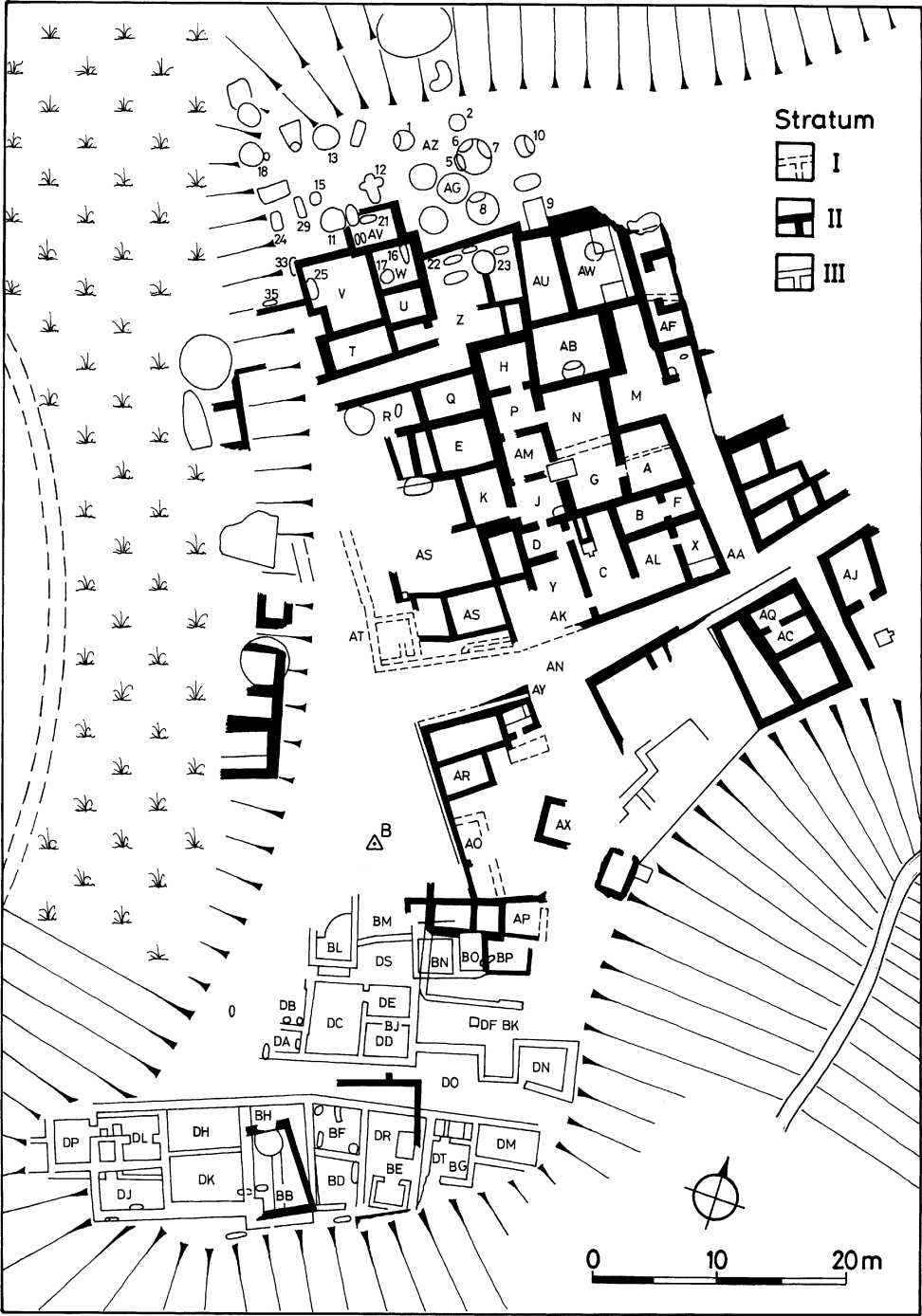


Fig. 1. Tell el-‘Ajjul, areas A, B and D, excavated in the 1930/31 season. (after Petrie 1931, pl. LIV)

suggests that we could be looking for C below the rooms of area A. Of course this is only possible if these buildings were removed and work continued beneath them. Is there any proof that this was the case? Work recommenced in this part of the site during the third 'Ajjul season, when the buildings here were 'deepened' (Petrie 1933, 2). Unfortunately no plan exists for this later work. While some new area A contexts appear at this point (such as AJ'', AO'' and AQ''), other contexts known from earlier work are continued. For this to be the case, we must assume that by the third season these loci were still standing, visible, and identifiable. So clearly not *all* of area A had been already dug through. Contexts that were excavated further in 1933 include AA, AF, AJ, AK, AL, AM, AN, AO, AR, AS, AT, BL, BM and DS. The horizontal spread of these loci is quite wide, and it is hard to imagine that they would have been left untouched had the rest of the area already been taken down a phase.

If area C does not lie below existing structures, then we are left with the other possibility; that it was found *adjacent* to some of the buildings marked on the plan. This would be more in keeping with Petrie's later comment about how he assigned letters to different parts of the tell, in order to provide a context for objects recovered before any architecture had been exposed (Petrie 1934, 1). This does imply the use of a horizontal labelling system for his areas, rather than the vertical system that had been employed previously at both Tell Jemmeh and Tell Fara. The confused way area B has been used in early work at 'Ajjul, partially adjacent to area D and partially lying above it, may thus reflect a transitional period between these two systems during which the excavators realized their need to adopt a new strategy for describing different regions of this particular site.

To test this idea, a closer examination was made of the specific topography of the south-eastern spur of the tell.¹⁰ The plans of structures in areas A, B, D, E, F and T were overlaid onto the topographic plan of the tell itself, using the government survey pegs marked on these plans and an overlay provided in *Ancient Gaza II* for orientation, along with a later plan that showed the relationship between areas A and E (Petrie 1931, pl. LIV; Petrie 1932, pl. LI; Petrie 1934, pls LXII-LXIII; Fig. 2).¹¹ This combines the architecture of strata II and III, and shows how the excavations cut into the sloping edges of the tell in a number of areas.

This plan makes one point immediately clear; many of the 'blank' areas actually represent the edges of excavation, as defined by the edge of the tell on its western side, and a deep gully on its eastern edge. The latter is most probably the 'convenient ravine' that Petrie used to deposit the soil from his excavation in the first season (Petrie 1931, 2). Furthermore, Petrie states quite clearly that the blank area around survey peg 'B' represents the highest point of uncleared ground — telling us that this area was left unexcavated (Petrie 1931, 5). This untouched piece of ground is visible in some of his field photographs from that year (Petrie 1931, pl. III). As this survey peg was being utilized by field staff as a reference marking, this decision makes perfect sense. For our purposes, it means that there are therefore only a few blank areas that remain on this map that *could* accommodate the missing area C.

The first of these lies north/north-east of Petrie's 'shrine', AF, and a cluster of unnamed rooms on the north side of street AA. This is unlikely to have been the site of area C, as a plan published in *Ancient Gaza III*, shows the buildings of A running right up to area E, which was opened in 1934 (Petrie 1934, pl. LXII). These area E buildings are either of the same date as the area C material, or later than it, so C could not have lain *above* them and been excavated first.¹²

The next 'empty' area appears in the area west of rooms V, AV, Z, AU and AW, which is marked as an open space containing a series of grain pits, cut down into bedrock. Some of these were used for or later disturbed by burials. Petrie mentions that 'walls of houses were run across the old graveyard' (Petrie 1931, 5). Here he could be describing the area A rooms bordering on this zone, which in the case of AV, seems to run into some of these pits, with

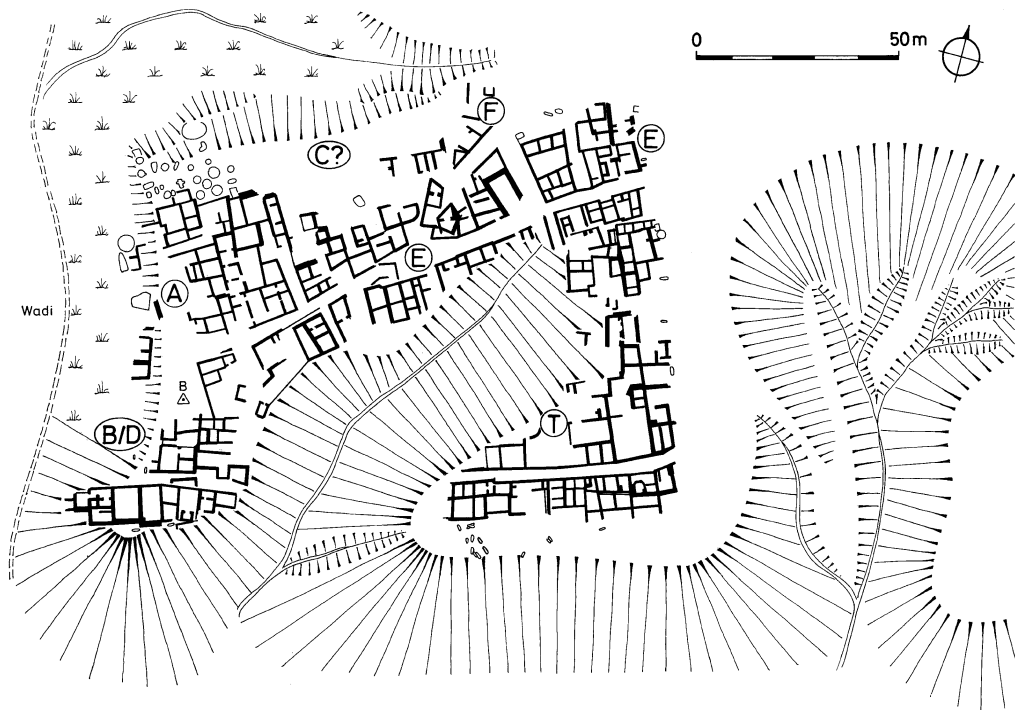


Fig. 2. Architecture from strata III and II overlaid onto a topographic plan of the site. Areas A, B and D were excavated in 1930/31; Areas E, F and T were excavated in 1933/4. (after Petrie 1931, pls LIII–LIV, 1932 pl. LI, and 1934 pls LXII–LXIII)

two further areas, AG and AZ marked in the region of the pits, but with no associated structures. Alternatively, the ‘missing’ rooms of Area C may have extended over this region, in which case they would have been excavated, removed, and then work continued beneath to expose the pits themselves. However, one can argue against this theory by looking at the chronology of this region in more detail, and in particular, the way in which this space was reused. If there were area C structures here, these should belong to Petrie’s stratum III. The original grain pits, therefore, must have lain below this phase, and predate it. Any reuse of them for burials should also predate any structures built over them. However, several of the pits and burials in this region would seem to post-date stratum III occupation, including tombs 11, 12 and 13 which all fall into the MBIIC–LBIA date range (Kempinski 1983, 136–37; Keel 1997, 140, 142).¹³ This might argue against there being any ‘missing’ phase of stratum III buildings over this part of the site.

One final area that appears to remain untouched lies to the east of this region, extending from the last marked pit, tomb 10, skirting the edge of a ravine to its north, and bounded by a series of rooms in areas E and F on its eastern and southern edges. As Figure 2 demonstrates, there are no excavated structures marked in this space at all. Was it left unexcavated; or could this be the real home of our ‘area C’? Level readings at the tops of walls in the E buildings are marked at 833, 799, 802, 744, 790, and 770 inches above sea level, running along the edge of this blank area, from west to east. Unfortunately, few levels were recorded for area C loci, but we do have readings ranging from 792 down to 715, with a handful lower than 700 inches. These would therefore be of a similar absolute height, or

lower than, the tops of the area E walls in this part of the tell. This makes it at least possible that area C loci may have been located somewhere in this region.

Irrespective of these points however, one thing is apparent — that there is sufficient space in this part of the tell surface to accommodate anywhere between the twenty to forty nine loci that are required for area C. Moreover, this is the only space left on the south-western spur of the tell that is not otherwise accounted for by Petrie's trench clearances. In my opinion, this region therefore becomes the most likely home of the missing loci of area C. As for why Area C appears to have been 'misaid' in all the field records, we may never know. The absence of a plan was probably an oversight, that was compounded when the work came to be published. Either a plan was never made, or some disaster happened to it before the site report was finalized. Whatever the truth of the situation, it is hoped that this paper has at least managed to offer researchers fresh insight into Petrie's work at Tell el-'Ajjul, while rescuing this most enigmatic of areas from its previous obscurity.

NOTES

¹ The author would like to thank Peter Ucko for initiating the project in 1999 and for his unstinting support throughout, Elizabeth Grey for her assistance in cataloguing and researching the collection, and Graham Reed for providing the plans in Figures 1 and 2.

² Petrie's means of identifying individual contexts had been previously applied to two other sites in Palestine, Tell Jemmeh, excavated in 1926–27, and Tell Fara (South), excavated from 1928 to 1930 (Petrie 1928; Petrie 1930; Macdonald *et al.* 1932).

³ Although researchers working with Petrie material in museum collections have no doubt encountered this problem before, very few authors have commented upon it. Exceptions include Tufnell, who stated that this area was 'apparently unplanned', and Daviau, who noted that rooms with a C prefix do not appear on Petrie's plan (Tufnell 1984, vol. 2 part 1, p. 93 note 8; Daviau 1993, 171).

⁴ This information has been gathered from Petrie's publications and context markings on actual objects.

⁵ The attribution of area B rooms to particular strata is not clear on the published plan, where BP is the only context that is definitely associated with stratum II (Petrie 1931, pl. LIV). Kempinski later suggested that this room should be assigned to stratum III (Kempinski 1983, fig. 5). However other area B contexts, such as BH and BJ, seem to be positioned awkwardly over stratum III wall lines, and may rather represent the phase above; BK is placed in the same space as DF, while BG similarly occupies the same locus as DT. This suggestion is reinforced by area B material that is attributed to stratum II on the published plates — namely scarabs from BA, BE, BF, BJ and BT. All of this suggests that many B loci were probably assigned to the upper building level in this area, but by overlapping stratum II and III on the plan, this has become unclear.

⁶ Area B material with a clear association with stratum III is limited to objects from BB, which were also marked and published with an annotated 'III', and possibly the rooms labelled BL, BM, BN and BO on the plan, which seem to be part of a structure running below two unlabelled stratum II rooms.

⁷ The original date assigned to this stratum proved too high, and has subsequently been revised (Albright 1938; Tufnell and Kempinski 1993).

⁸ No plan of this further work was ever published, although judging by the additional items that appear, it must have encompassed areas A and C, and a very small amount of areas B and D.

⁹ The letter 'I' was usually not made use of, as it could be easily confused with the Arabic or Roman numerals for 1. Allowing for this, there was probably a total of 49 loci used — 25 loci, represented by the letters CA to CZ, and an additional 24 loci represented by letters CAA to CAY.

¹⁰ Unfortunately, this cannot be compared to the current topography of the site, as this has changed since Petrie's day, due to the combined effects of his own clearances, subsequent erosion, farming and bulldozing (Fischer and Sadeq 2000, 213).

¹¹ Olga Tufnell was the first to publish this kind of overlay, correcting the orientation of the original plans which had north pointing in the wrong direction (Tufnell 1984, fig. 1). The version presented here has been redrawn from the original plans, and varies from Tufnell's plan in some respects.

¹² Some confusion seems to have crept into the record regarding the phasing of these area E structures. Petrie states that the street level associated with them was of the same phase as the area A street excavated in 1931 (e.g. stratum II); however the conventions he uses on the published plan, along with reference to a thick ash layer, implies that some of the E buildings here belong rather to stratum III (Petrie 1934, 15, pl. LXII). This was certainly how both Stewart and Olga Tufnell interpreted the phasing when they discussed the chronology of the site (Stewart 1974, 13; Tufnell 1984, 14; Tufnell and Kempinski 1993, 52). Epstein however took the view that stratum II had two phases, which she named city IIA and IIB (Epstein 1966, 185); an idea continued by Kempinski, Bergoffen and Oren (Kempinski 1983, fig. 5; Bergoffen 1989, 165; Oren 2001, 135). The pottery coming from this lower phase of area E tends to support Tufnell and Stewart's dating, as it lacks most of the fabrics that would be usually seen as diagnostic of stratum II (e.g.: bichrome wheel made ware, Cypriot white slip and base ring ware). It is possible that Petrie simply confused the phasing of the 1931 area A and 1933 area E structures along street AN, and created a connection that did not actually exist. This idea gains some support from Stewart's

comments on the inaccuracy of the planning and levelling undertaken in the fourth season at ‘Ajjul, when he worked at the site (Stewart 1974, 13).

¹³ The calcite kohl vessel in tomb 12 is of a type that does not appear in Egypt until the Eighteenth Dynasty (Aston 1994, type 162–4).

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