

NEW DATA ON SETTLEMENTS AND OASIS PATTERNS

AN OUTLINE OF RECENT DISCOVERIES AT SALUT IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

Alessandra Avanzini, Carl Phillips

It was considered appropriate to include in the proceedings of the seminar some information about the excavations at Salut since it was one of the first Iron Age archaeological sites to be recorded in Oman¹. It is also a site whose name is familiar from local historical narratives. The place is associated with a visit from Sulayman bin Dawid and the building of *aflaj*, and later the battle between Malik bin Fahm and the Persians in which the Arabs prevailed. It is said that the victory of Malik bin Fahm al-Azdi, known as the *yawm as-Salut*, marks the end to the Azd migration and brought about the dominance of the 'Arab in Oman. And thus, according to tradition, Salut is the essential place for the beginning of Omani history.

The Italian Mission to Oman (IMTO) has been working at Salut on behalf of the Office of HE the Adviser to HM the Sultan for Cultural Affairs since 2004². The head archaeologists have been A.V. Sedov for the 2004-5 campaigns and C. Phillips from 2006 onwards. Salut today is a lot different from when the excavations first started and is now beginning to emerge in all its monumentality (figs. 1-2).

The area around Salut (fig. 3) had been surveyed by several different missions prior to the beginning of the excavations conducted by the IMTO. A summary of these works has already been presented³, and will not be repeated here. One should mention, however, the current project being conducted by Birmingham University, the objectives of which include the reconstruction of Bronze Age settlement patterns and landscapes in the al-Hajjar region, including the Wadi Bahla and Wadi Sayfam⁴ where Salut is located.

At Salut itself, the remains of at least three main periods of settlement have been identified. These comprise remains of an Early Bronze Age occupation which dates from the early third millennium BC, two major Iron Age building phases which date from the latter part of the second millennium to the late first millennium BC and Islamic occupation dating from the 12-13th and 19th-20th centuries, with the latest building activity being a few generations ago when the grandfather of today's sheikh constructed a small house on the highest part of the site.

¹ HUMPHRIES 1974. Salut can be identified with the site Humphries called BB15.

² Information on the excavations can be obtained from the website:

<http://arabianitica.humnet.unipi.it>.

³ AVANZINI *et al.* 2005.

⁴ ORCHARD J. AND ORCHARD J. 2002.



Figure 1 - *Salut hill before excavations.*



Figure 2 - *Salut, after 2009C campaign.*

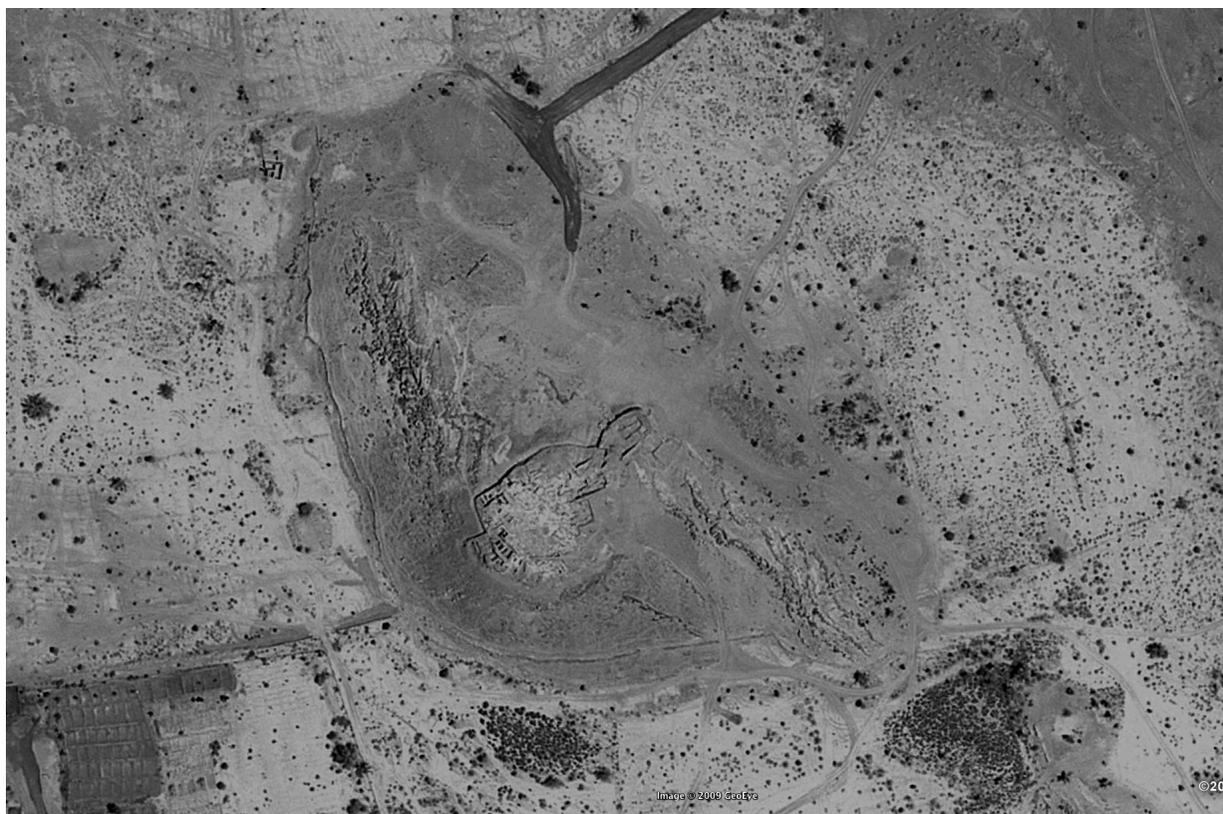


Figure 3 - *Salut, satellite view.*

THE BRONZE AGE (FIG. 4)

The foundations of a circular stone-built Bronze Age tomb have been uncovered (fig. 5). The foundations sit directly on the bedrock at the highest point on the hill and Iron Age structures were built over the earlier remains, perhaps after intentionally razing them.

The tomb appears to have comprised at least five concentric walls in large stones with smaller angular stones used to fill the spaces in between. Its diameter has been estimated at approximately 12 meters. The circular plan and building technique, especially the concentricity of the walls, have a striking resemblance to some Early Bronze Age tombs. The remains are also similar to the concentric wall structure of the characteristic bee-hive tombs that are frequently found on hill-tops and ridges in the area surrounding Salut. Given these resemblances, the likely date of the tomb's construction is sometime during the first half of the third millennium BC.

During the winter campaign of 2008 the partial remains of two human burials (fig. 6) were found in association with the tomb structure and a number of interesting finds, probably grave-goods, were retrieved. The objects include a white stone mace-head, a bronze pin, and a number of stone and shell beads in a variety of sizes and shape (fig. 7). None of these finds can be shown to be of definite Bronze Age date but nothing precludes them from being Bronze Age either. Bronze Age tombs have been shown frequently to have undergone re-use in the Iron Age. That said, no other Iron Age or later burials have been found in the excavations at Salut, thus increasing the chance that they date from the Bronze Age and were amongst the original burials placed in the circular tomb.

Five Bronze Age towers have been identified near the village of al-Dhabi, not far from Bisya in the Wadi Bahla, and in the wadi Sayfam, where Salut is located, there are at least three more towers. By contrast with those found in the Wadi Bahla, the towers in Wadi Sayfam are located on the plain and not on rock out-



The location of Bronze Age remains in relation to Iron Age buildings

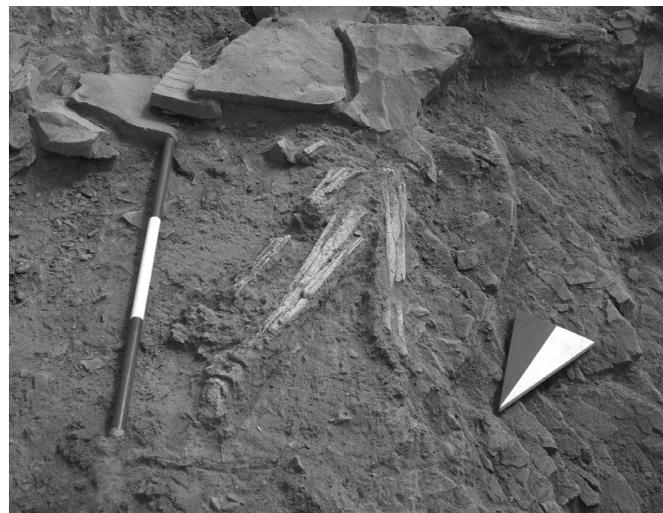


Figure 4 - The Bronze Age tomb plan, with location within the site.

Figure 5 - The Bronze Age tomb, view from NW.

Figure 6 - The Bronze Age tomb, human burial.



Figure 7 - *The Bronze Age tomb, grave-goods.*

crops. Beehive tombs are also visible on the hilltop ridges near Salut.

Given this evidence, an impression is gained of how the hill at Salut was incorporated in the Bronze Age archaeological landscape. Far from being the substantial and peculiar site that it became during the Iron Age, Salut was the location of one of many third millennium stone-built tombs which appear to be connected with the massive towers built on the adjacent plain.

THE IRON AGE

So far there is no clear example of an early second millennium occupation at Salut. The evidence currently available from Salut and in general in the Wadi Bahla and in the Wadi Sayfam suggests a period of abandonment at this time. The establishment of a site at Salut, along with other Iron Ages sites, would therefore indicate a significant re-occupation of the area.

It is generally accepted that the Iron Age was a period when settlements were being re-established or growing in southeast Arabia and, in most respects, there

was a marked break with earlier Bronze Age traditions. The towers typical of Bronze Age settlements appear not to be characteristic of Iron Age sites where instead more open villages appear to be the norm.

Given the three-fold division of Iron I-III widely accepted for the south-east Arabian Iron Age, radiocarbon data from Salut suggest that the site was first established early in the Iron Age I period (c.1300 BC) and continued throughout the Iron Age II and III periods (to c. 300 BC)⁵. Until recently the amount of Iron Age III pottery (c. 600-300 BC) at Salut was quite limited and was taken as indicative of a short and declining occupation of the site in this period, concluding tentatively some time in the middle of the first millennium BC. Further excavation, however, has completely changed this view, and a significant second phase of building can be attributed now to the Iron Age III period.

In 2009 it became clearer that there are two distinct Iron Age architectural phases at Salut. The earlier of these is represented by the appropriately named burnt building and adjacent rooms in Area 1 (figs. 8-9). The burnt building can also be related to parts of the outer stone wall and especially the tower that projects from the south-west side of the site. The main external wall was clearly an imposing and fundamental part of the site, already in the very first phase, serving not only a defensive purpose, but also meant to support buildings on top, as is the case for the burnt building and other rooms to the south.

Several alterations can be seen in the general plan of the first building phase and suggest a prolonged period of use. It is clear that some parts of the earliest building phase, including parts of the burnt building itself continued to be used in the Later Iron Age, Iron III period. Parts of the earlier phase building were also incorporated in subsequent architectural changes. But elsewhere there was a definite new architectural phase. There is less clear architectural evidence from the second phase than there is for the first but further excavation might remedy this; almost one quarter of the upper part of the site remains to be excavated. Nevertheless, the almost complete obliteration of some earlier structures indicates a clear shift from the earlier phase. The general layout of the site in the second phase includes an impressive arrangement of

⁵ See Phillips, this volume, for a more detailed discussion about the

Iron Age chronology at Salut.

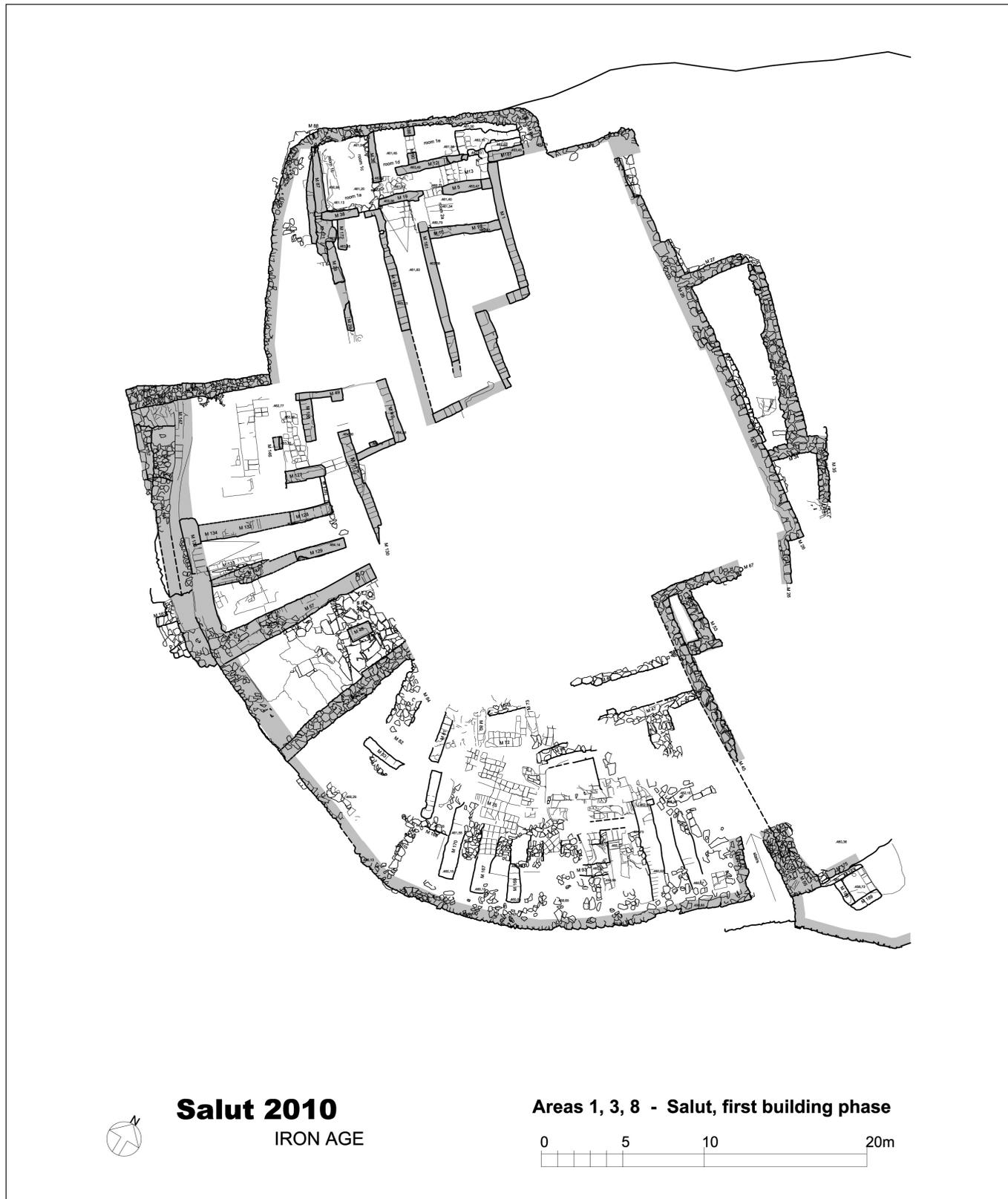


Figure 8 - Early Iron Age architectural phase.



Figure 9 - *The Burnt Building, rooms 1-3, from NE.*

platforms and terraces extending over much of the upper part of the site (fig. 10). Apart from its evident monumentality, what is striking about this platform system is its building technique. Excavation has so far shown that a complex network of retaining walls was erected on the bedrock just for containing intentional fillings which served as a base for the platforms. No trace of occupation came to light from these “compartments” or on the upper surface of the terraces.

It is possible that the tower on the east side of Salut and which extends down onto the plain (fig. 11) was also added during the second architectural phase. If this is so then it leaves open the question of access to the site in the first phase. This is because so far the only clear evidence of an entrance (fig. 12) and stairway leading up to the top of the site (fig. 13) are in association with the tower. There is a doorway that leads through into the tower on its east side and this then leads to a stone stairway that leads to the top of the hill (fig. 14). Work is still in progress in this part

of the site and hopefully the purpose and dating of the tower will become clearer.

Buildings from the second phase are far less evident than in the earlier phase. Apart from the mudbrick terraces the only coherent plan that can be discerned is that of a small building built directly above the first phase building. This building has been previously described as a pillared room⁶. This description should, however, be used with caution so as to avoid any unintended comparison with the larger and more elaborate pillared rooms known from Rumeilah, Muweilah and Qarn Bint Saud. Besides, in these other examples the pillared rooms are larger and far more elaborate. They also appear to be representative of the Early Iron Age and not the later, Iron Age III period. As already stated above, some parts of the earlier buildings at Salut were apparently re-used, or continued to be used, in to the Iron III period. And it is very clear that the second architectural phase at Salut should be dated to the Iron III period, c. 600-300 BC.

⁶ AVANZINI *et al.* 2005.

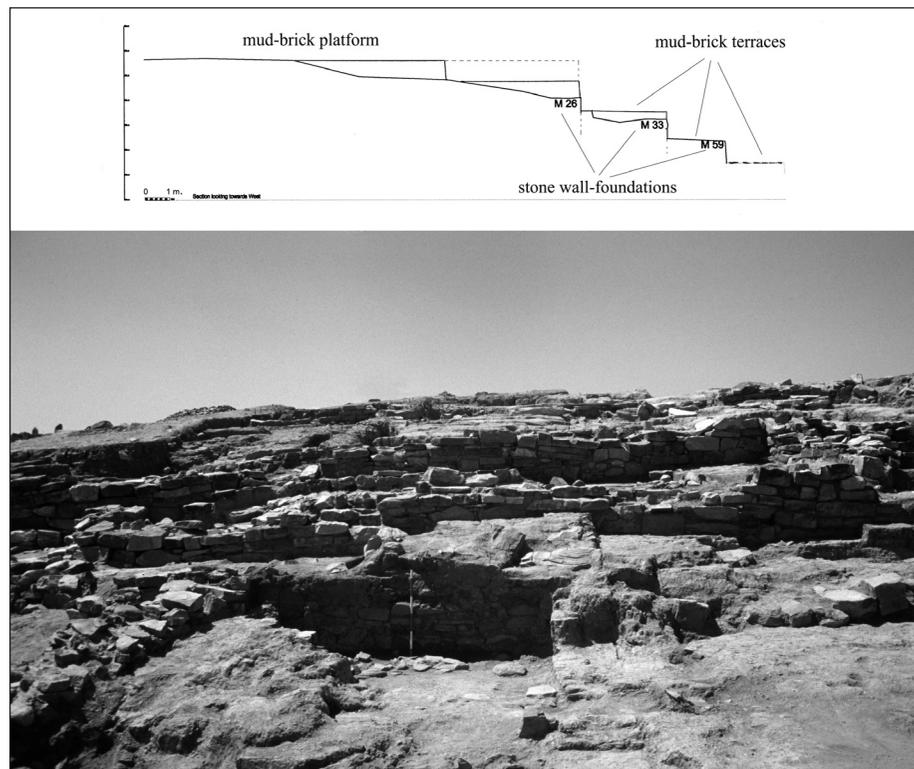


Figure 10 - *Second architectural phase, picture and graphic reconstruction of the platforms/terraces.*

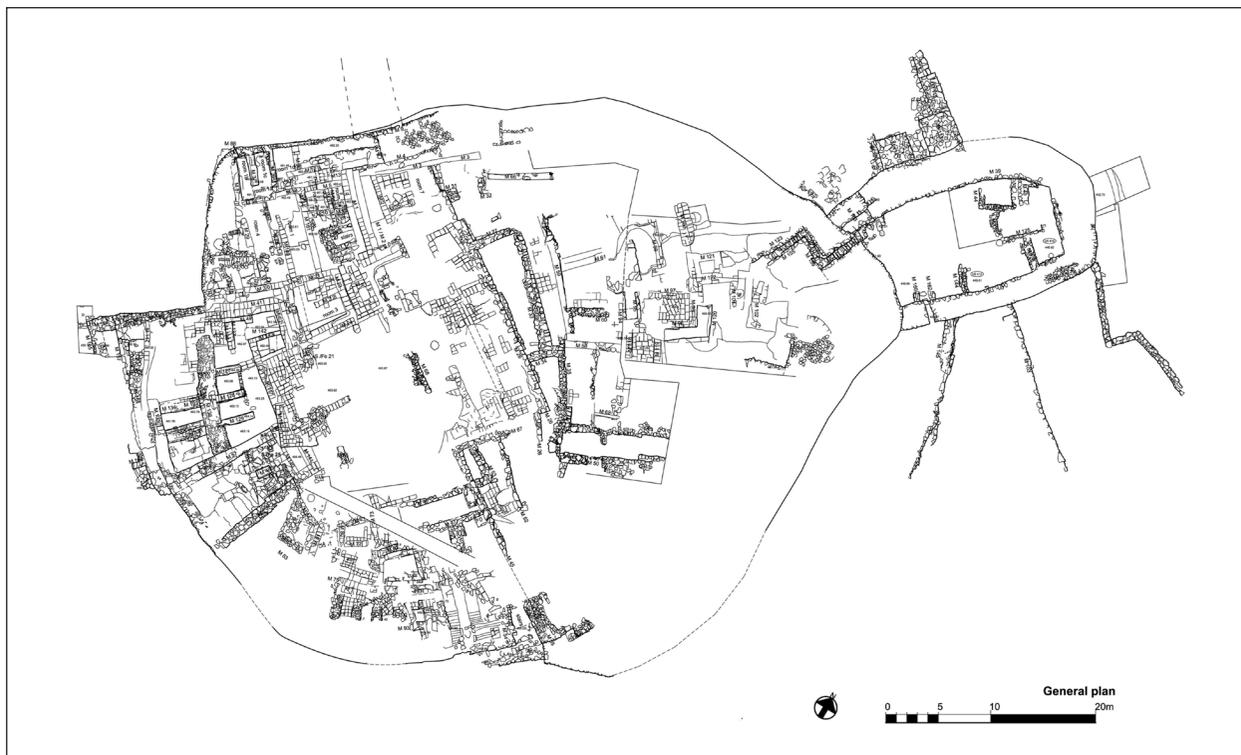


Figure 11 - *General plan of the site.*