

The Ancient Water System of Sepphoris

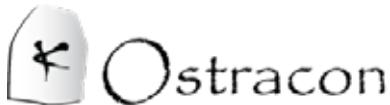
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Back cover: the Shaft Tunnel (photo Tsvika Tsuk), the Roman Bronze Bull (photo Tal Rogovsky).

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CHAPTER 10

THE ARCHED RESERVOIRS

Tsvika Tsuk, Iosi Bordowicz, Dror Ben-Yosef and Jim Parker

BACKGROUND

Following the construction of the Sepphoris National Park visitor center, excavation began in 2002 of the rock-cut, plastered pool near the center, with the goal of preparing it to be opened to the public. When the excavation began, it emerged that what we have are two rock-cut rectangular reservoirs, perpendicular to each other, which were originally roofed with arches emerging from the long walls, and covering slabs above and between them. In each of the narrow walls of both reservoirs, there was a step 0.1 m wide, on which the edges of the roofing slabs were set. The excavation, which took place in 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2011 (to a limited extent) and in 2017–2018 (to a broad extent) was intended to fully uncover the two reservoirs.¹ The excavation method was to uncover the fallen stones of the arches and the roof, to document them, remove them using mechanical equipment, and continue the dig to the floor. Thus, all the fallen arches and roofing stones were removed except for the western half of the Large Arched Reservoir, where walls and a floor were found that dated from a later period (below, Chapter 11).

THE LARGE ARCHED RESERVOIR (FIGS. 10.1–10.3)

The Large Arched Reservoir (the southern reservoir) is rock-cut, and measures 4.9–5.3×8.95–9.15 m, with a depth of c. 3.5 m and a volume of 145 m³. Its roof rested on five arches that collapsed, leaving behind only the piers on which they were built. Only the

southern side of the first arch² was built without a pier, and its base was rock-cut.

In the reservoir, 39 voussoirs made of hard *nari* rock and 62 flat roof stones made of hard limestone were found. The stones of the fill (between the arches and the roof) were apparently made of chalk; only a few were found and most of those were broken. The soil fill was brown-red in color, typical of the erosion of hard limestone. Before excavation, the reservoir was c. 1 m deep and looked like an ancient quarry (Fig. 10.4). At the beginning of the excavation, a row of fallen stones could clearly be seen that belonged to the third arch (the middle one). This row apparently fell in an earthquake, but this happened after the reservoir was already filled with about 1 m of soil. Above this row, as well as below it, voussoirs of the fourth arch were found (Fig. 10.5). This indicates that the arches had collapsed diagonally from east to west. The many voussoirs and roof stones that were found in the rubble were removed in an organized manner, documenting at least two different levels (Figs. 10.6–10.7).

When the excavation was completed down to the reservoir's floor, it emerged that after it went out of use, a winepress was built in it in the Byzantine period (see Chapter 11). In order to install the winepress, eight short, low walls were built in the reservoir (W1–8). Walls 1–4 were built around the treading floors of the winepress and its collecting vats and W 5–8 served as a platform for a staircase that descended inside, adjacent to the western wall from north to south, and turned east. Wall 6 is the highest of these walls: 1.4 m long and 1.45 m high. It lies north–south and was well built of seven courses of dressed stones, plastered on the eastern, outer side. The stones on the western, inner side of the wall were not dressed;

¹ The excavation went on over those years for a total of 70 days, of which 25 days were in 2018. The completion of the excavation in 2017–2018 was made possible thanks to the contribution of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, headed by Vice-President Dr. Jim Parker, who also took part in the excavation (Tsuk et al. 2020).

² The arches were counted from west to east.

a soil fill here supported the steps that led down into the winepress. The southern end of this wall meets W7 at a right angle; this wall lies on a west–east axis, its length is 1.5 m and it survived to a height of three courses, 0.75 m. Roof stones and voussoirs were put into secondary use in W1, W5 and W8, proving that the winepress was built after part of the roof had collapsed. A surface of flat paving stones was laid during that stage on the western part of the reservoir floor (L273). The size of the largest stone is 0.65×0.90 m and its thickness is 0.25 m.

The plaster that coated the reservoir walls and the voussoirs was up to 4.4 cm thick and included five coatings. An example of such coating was found on a stone from the northern part of the fifth arch, as follows (from earliest to latest):

- Coating 1: thickness 1.2 cm – medium gray mortar.
- Coating 2: thickness 0.6 cm – dark gray mortar with pieces of charcoal.
- Coating 3: thickness 0.8 cm – light gray mortar with pieces of white stone.
- Coating 4: thickness 1.0 cm – white mortar with black grains.
- Coating 5: thickness 0.8 cm – pink plaster.

Coatings 1–3 were apparently the earliest layers, and Coatings 4–5 were the latest layers. Another example of plaster, found on voussoir S145, consists of two layers. One was an earlier layer, white on gray in color, thickness 3 cm, with a well-plastered surface containing grooves 2–3 cm long and 0.3–0.4 cm wide, made with a sharp tool in preparation for applying the next layer of plaster. This layer, red in color and 1 cm thick, was partially preserved. It is white in color and its face had turned reddish because of the soil fill, and contained very few pottery inclusions.

Four engravings were incised on the walls of the reservoir. Engraving A was found at a height of 1.03 m above the floor, at the eastern side of the northern pier of Arch 2. It is a square, measuring 0.33×0.34 m, inside which are two more squares framing a void in the center. Straight and diagonal lines connect the three squares, creating triangles, trapezoids and small squares (Fig. 10.8). Engraving B, measuring 0.1×0.28 m, was found on the eastern side of the northern pier of Arch 3, 1.25 m above the floor. It consists of three shapes that seem to be rings of a chain connected by a line (Fig. 10.9). Engraving C is on the eastern wall of the reservoir, 2.7 m above the floor. It consists of three concentric circles; the largest is 0.18 m in diameter. In the upper part of the engraving are two diagonal

lines facing upward, possibly recalling a schematic head (Fig. 10.10). Engraving D, measuring 0.2×0.5 m, was found at the bottom of the pier of the fifth arch on the southern side, 0.4 m above the floor. It depicts three animals – a bird, a horse and a snake(?) (Fig. 10.11). Presumably all of the engravings were made in the second phase when the reservoir was in use as a winepress.

A large carob tree that had grown in the Large Arched Reservoir had to be moved during the excavation. In a complex operation of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority's forestry department, the tree was transplanted (Fig. 10.12) to the western side of the visitor center. Unfortunately, it died about two years later.

About 2.5 m east of the reservoir a kind of semicircular rock-cutting (L253; 0.9×3.6 m, depth c. 1 m) was discovered. The location was suitable for a sedimentation basin at the water entrance to the reservoir, but excavation there ended at bedrock with no such finding. On the rock between the semicircle and the reservoir are four rock-cuttings in the shape of an elongated peg (length 0.28 m, upper width 8–10 cm, depth 0.15 m). These rock-cuttings show that this area may have been a quarry (Fig. 10.13).

Three water channels were found about 30 m northwest of the reservoir, in a salvage excavation prior to construction of the visitor center (Syon 2001). The floor level of one of them was 271.64 m asl (Fig. 10.14). This channel could have been the outlet of the Large Arched Reservoir, given that its top (273.95 m asl) is 2.11 m higher than the top of the channel (271.84 m asl). This shows that the water could flow westward from the reservoir, from a theoretical outlet that could be 1.5 m above the reservoir floor. Because the northwestern corner of the reservoir has later walls that were not removed, its exit might still be found. There is also a possibility that the water was drawn off upward and was poured into these channels.

The results of ¹⁴C dating of seeds found in the first layer of the reservoir plaster (L400, B4000, see Chapter 21), and the type of plaster (see Chapter 20), suggest that the reservoir was built in the first or early second century CE. A coin from the year 59 CE (no. 50; see Chapter 17), was found in the rock-cut water channel north of the reservoir (L406), and so presumably the coin dates from the time of the reservoir's construction. It may be assumed that the reservoir went out of use in the fourth century CE, after the earthquake of 363, or in the fifth century. This

was the period during which the reservoir underwent changes and was turned into a winepress.

At the end of the excavation, it was decided to partially reconstruct the arches and the roof. First, a simulation of the reservoir was prepared (Fig. 10.15). Then, with the help of a project belonging to the Ministry of Heritage, the two eastern arches (nos. 4 and 5) and the two parts of the roof above them were reconstructed with the original stones, and the place became a tourist attraction (Fig. 10.16).

THE SMALL ARCHED RESERVOIR (FIGS. 10.1–10.2, 10.17)

The Small Arched Reservoir (the northern reservoir) was rock-cut and measured 4.0×7.2 m, depth c. 3.5 m, volume c. 90 m^3 . The roof was set on four arches that collapsed, leaving only the piers on which they were built (Fig. 10.2, Section D–D).

The Small Arched Reservoir was completely unearthed. Its excavation was very different from that of the Large Arched Reservoir because most of the voussoirs were not found. However, a significant layer of crushed chalk was discovered, which had become compact and required major efforts to excavate (see below, description of the white-yellowish layer). At first the fill was excavated, consisting mostly of reddish soil, and the entire area was deepened to 0.5 m. Following this, c. 13 m^3 of soil was extracted with mechanical equipment. During the excavation, three voussoirs made of *nari* were found, along with five roofing slabs made of hard limestone, mainly in the area of the two northern arches. Also found were approximately 20 dressed chalk stones, some almost complete. In light of this, it is clear that the voussoirs and the roofing stones had been intentionally removed from the reservoir to be reused in some way. The excavation exposed the plaster on the walls, and the deeper it went, the better preserved the plaster. The color of the soil changed as the excavation deepened, and became white-yellow, apparently due to erosion of the chalk stones used to create the fill above the arches (the space between them and the roof). The plaster, which is white on gray, is 0.5–2.5 cm thick. Pieces of red on gray plaster were also found in the fill.

In the northeastern corner, between the pier of the fourth arch and the wall (L301), a bronze earring (Fig. 14.1:3; B2015/1) and two fragments of bases of wine glasses (Fig. 15.4:16–17; B3017/2–3) were found typical of the late Byzantine and Umayyad

periods. On the floor (L405 in the northern half and L408 in the southern half), a coin from the fifth century CE was found (L405, B4022, no. 49). A small bone handle with an engraved decoration was also unearthed (L402, B4013, Fig. 14.1:1). A sherd of a mortarium rim was found engraved with a half-cross and circles made with a reed (L407, B4029/1; Fig. 13.5:6). A sherd of perforated-base basin was found (L408, B4039/1; Fig. 13.5:7) as well as seven fragments of a hexagonal mold-blown glass jug (L407, B4028, four fragments; L408, B4034, two fragments; L408, B4038, one fragment; Fig. 15.5). These glass fragments date from the late sixth to the early seventh centuries. Thus, it seems that the small reservoir went out of use in the sixth century CE.

In order to examine the floor plaster, a section was cut in it measuring 0.35×0.35 m (L410; Figs. 10.18–10.19). The plaster was found to be 0.1 m thick and particularly strong and hard. It consists of one layer of white on gray. The plaster on the reservoir walls was checked in a number of places and was found to be white on gray with a thin layer of red.

East of the reservoir a rock-cut channel survived (L406, Fig. 10.1) without plaster, on an east–west axis, leading to the space in the reservoir between arch piers 1 and 2 on the eastern side. The channel was poorly preserved and its entry point into the reservoir was not found. Two segments of the channel were preserved, one 1.6 m long and the other 0.8 m long, c. 3 m apart. The upper part of the channel is 0.3 m wide, the lower part is 0.2 m wide, and the depth is 0.15 m.

As part of the preparations to open the area to visitors, an arch-shaped wooden frame was constructed between the piers of the fourth arch, to illustrate the way the arches were built (Fig. 10.20).

CONCLUSION

The two reservoirs, which were built during the same period, resemble each other in shape but differ in their fills and history after they went out of use. The soil that filled the Small Arched Reservoir was light gray – apparently the erosion of chalk rock. About 20 chalk ashlars were found in its excavation, while none at all were found in the Large Arched Reservoir. The walls and the voussoirs in both reservoirs were coated with white on a gray plaster containing charcoals, 2–3 cm thick. This attests that both reservoirs were quarried and built in the first or early second century CE. A thin layer of plaster c. 0.9 cm thick was laid

over the first plaster. This plaster was pink in color (sherd powder) on white, and was dated apparently to the Byzantine period. Another very thin layer of plaster, white on gray, coated the winepress. According to the first layer of plaster, it seems that the arched reservoirs predate the Subterranean Reservoir (see Part III). Their combined volume reaches 235 m³, and it seems that they served as the reservoirs of the city. When the city grew and developed in the first half of the second century CE, the Subterranean Reservoir was hewn and the center of the system moved from the Pool Aqueduct (the northern one) to the Reservoir Aqueduct (the southern one) and the arched reservoirs declined in importance until they ceased to be used entirely in the sixth century CE.

There are many similar reservoirs in Israel from the Roman and early Byzantine periods. Among them are Bor Nekarot in the Negev (Erickson-Gini and Israel 2013) and Dir Sam'an, in the Samarian Mountains (Magen 2012), from the Roman period. Other comparisons come from the Byzantine period in the Abraham Monastery in Jerusalem (Gibson and Taylor 1994), Migdal Zedek, Tiberias, Yalu and Umm el 'Amad Reservoir in the Judean Desert.³

In Humayma in southern Jordan, Oleson surveyed dozens of arched reservoirs, the largest of which measured 7×20 m, depth 3.8 m, its roof borne on 16 arches (Oleson 2010:191–198; 483). He proposed dating the beginning of the arched reservoirs to the early first century BCE.

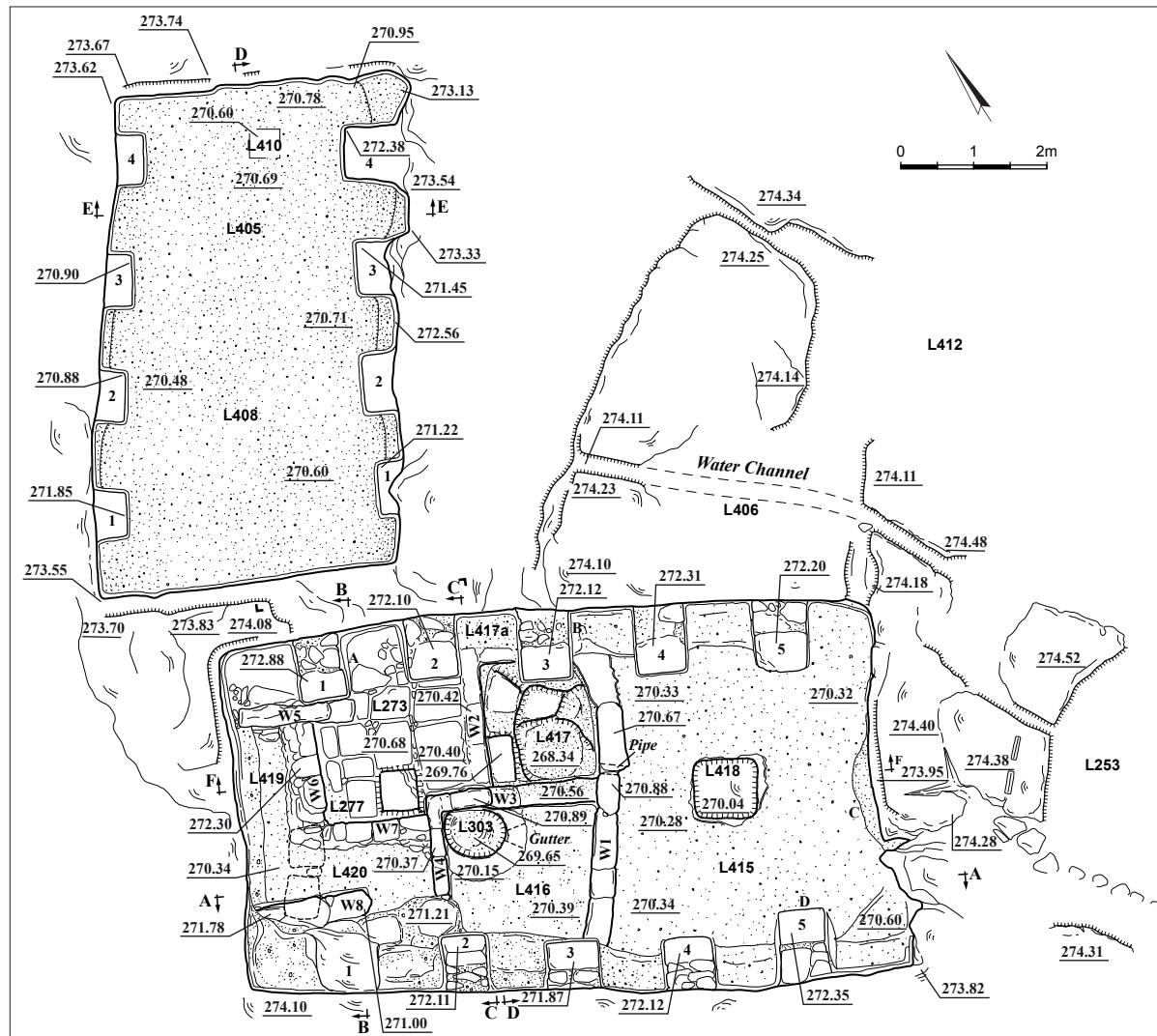


Fig. 10.1. Plan of the two Arched Reservoirs.

³ These last four reservoirs have not been published.

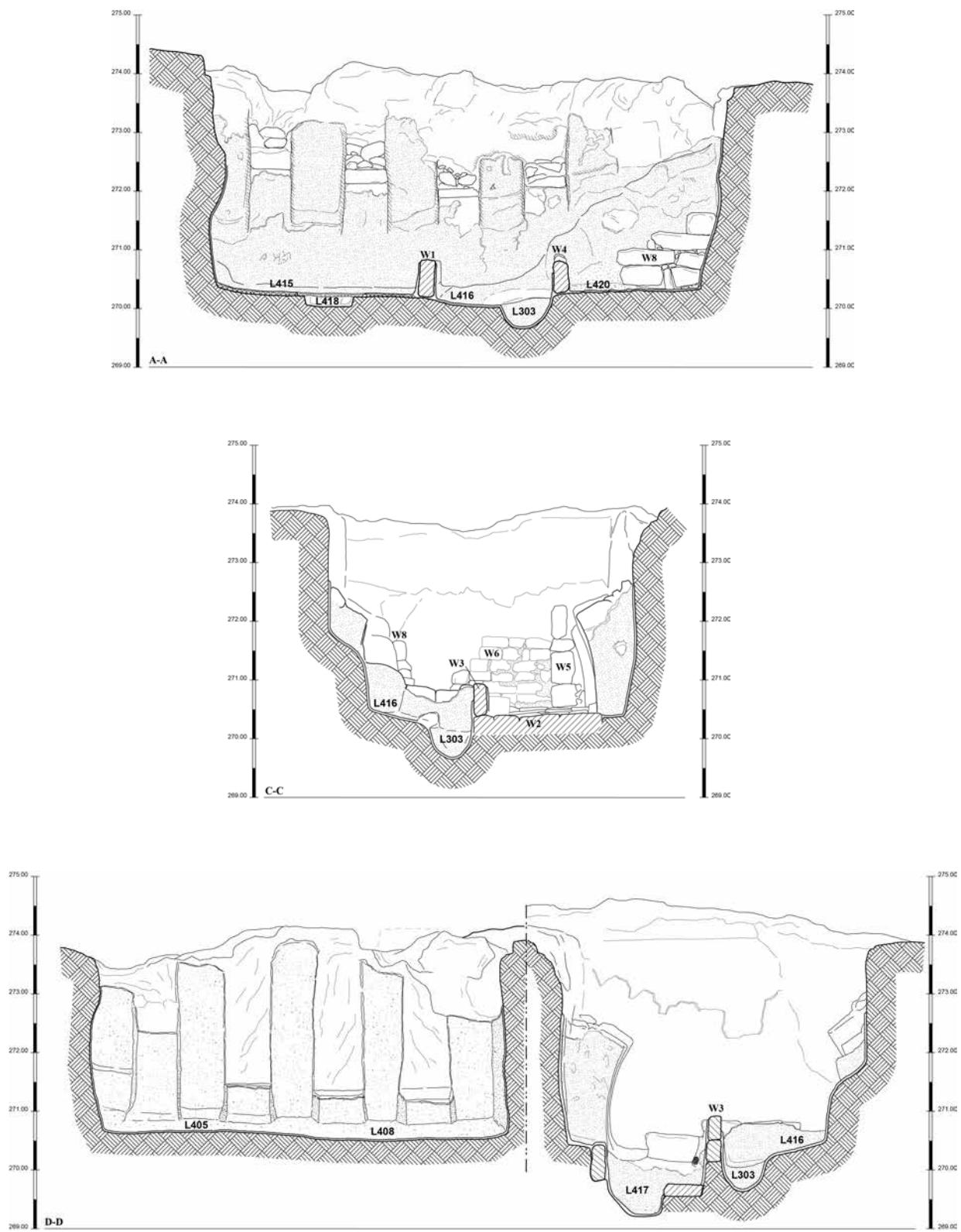


Fig. 10.2. Sections of the two Arched Reservoirs.



Fig. 10.2. Sections of the two Arched Reservoirs (cont.).



Fig. 10.3. The Large Arched Reservoir at the end of the excavations, looking north.



Fig. 10.4. The Large Arched Reservoir before the excavations.



Fig. 10.5. A lower level of the Large Arched Reservoir.



Fig. 10.6. An upper level of the Large Arched Reservoir, October 1, 2017.



Fig. 10.7. A lower level of the Large Arched Reservoir, December 2, 2017.



Fig. 10.8. The Large Arched Reservoir, Engraving A.



Fig. 10.9. The Large Arched Reservoir, Engraving B.



Fig. 10.10. The Large Arched Reservoir, Engraving C.



Fig. 10.11. The Large Arched Reservoir, Engraving D.



Fig. 10.12. Removing the carob tree from the Large Arched Reservoir.



Fig. 10.13. Rock-cuttings east of the Large Arched Reservoir.



Fig. 10.14. Syon's excavation of the three channels. Photo: Israel Antiquities Authority.



Fig. 10.15. Artist's rendering of the Large Arched Reservoir (David Zell).



Fig. 10.16. Reconstruction of two arches and roof slabs on the eastern side of the Large Arched Reservoir.



Fig. 10.17. Probe in the floor of the Small Arched Reservoir.



Fig. 10.18. Section of the probe in the floor of the Small Arched Reservoir.



Fig. 10.19. The Small Arched Reservoir, looking north.



Fig. 10.20. The Small Arched Reservoir with wooden frame demonstrating the built arches. Photo: Meital Aharon.

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