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FUNERARY SITES IN THE VICINITY OF TELL EL-'UMEIRI

1996 Season of the Madaba Plains Project

The Madaba Plains Project (MPP) is one of the projects doing excavations on the Madaba Plateau, Jordan. The MPP was formed by Andrews University (USA), in a consortium with Canadian Union College, La Sierra University (USA), the Levant Foundation Poland, the University of Eastern Africa, and Walla Walla College, and works in cooperation with the Jordanian Department of Antiquities and the American Center of Oriental Research in Amman. The Project is conducting excavations on two tells and several cemeteries, as well as surveys.

The Polish Archaeological Mission has taken part in this project since 1994\(^1\). This season the excavations done by our mission were part of the excavation on the tell, whereas in 1994 they had been associated with the hinterland\(^2\).

The Polish group decided to concentrate its research on funerary remains around the Tell el-'Umeiri. Three sites on the southeastern slopes of the tell were chosen for excavations: the Middle Bronze IIC cave tomb, partly excavated last season; another partially-filled cave with a slightly exposed, hewn entrance at the tell's southeastern foot, 10 m east of the dolmen; and the area around a megalithic structure, probably a dolmen, exposed last season (Fig. 1).

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\(^1\) Elżbieta Dubis of the Jagiellonian University in Cracow was field director for cemetery excavations. The other team members were Ewa Wiewiórka from Warsaw University, Mariusz Górnia from the Jagiellonian University, and Joan Chase, a physical anthropologist from New Mexico University.

Fig. 1. Map of the Tell el-Umeiri:

K001 - Early Bronze IB megalithic tomb;
K002 - Middle Bronze IIC tomb;
K003 - Early Bronze cave
EARLY BRONZE IB MEgalithic TOMB (K 001)³

One of most unexpected and interesting discoveries of the previous season (1994) on the Tell el-'Umeiri excavation was the U-shaped structure on the southeastern slope of the tell. It appeared to be a megalithic tomb constructed with huge untrimmed rocks. The structure was 3.2 m long, 2.7 m wide and 2 m high, and was oriented east-west, with the entrance opening to the east. The front side of the structure, now open, was at least partially built over, probably creating a kind of “porthole”. We assume that the structure was originally covered by horizontal capstones, or wooden beams – now missing – giving it the appearance of a dolmen. The arrangement of some interior features, close to the entrance – a hole in the southern boulder and an upright stone facing it – suggest that the interior was divided into two chambers, one on top of the other, probably by means of wooden beams. The tomb contained about 20 disarticulated skeletons, both adults and children. They were accompanied by 20 vessels dating back to Early Bronze IB⁴.

The task for the 1996 season was to excavate the exterior of the structure. A large area around the dolmen was exposed: 2m to the north, 4m to the west, and 5m to the east of the dolmen. A series of up to six well-made and well-used surfaces were uncovered immediately to the west and north of the tomb. Four of the surfaces were too close to the topsoil in the south to allow for certainty as to whether they extended in that direction as well, but there are preliminary indications that they did. The surfaces were made up of very hard earth and pebbles with chalk mixed in, giving it a plaster-like appearance. However, they were too fragile to be considered “plaster”. From the initial results of analyses of the floor pieces it can be inferred that one of the floors was made of lime, another of lime mixed with clay, and four of hard earth. Although the excavation extended quite a long way from the dolmen, the boundaries of the surfaces were not found. No objects of any kind were found on the surfaces, which may suggest some kind of ritual connected with the dolmen. But a stone circle surrounding was also exposed. The pottery was all early Early Bronze, mostly Early Bronze I and transitional Early Bronze I to Early Bronze II. The tell’s northern slope (Field C) yielded a high loop handle juglet of similar shape and ware. It was originally dated to Early Bronze III, but it is definitely Early Bronze I⁵; additionally, the southern slope (Field D, dated to Early Bronze III) yielded a few possible Early Bronze I sherds. These facts imply that in this period a settlement began, reaching its apex in Early Bronze III, and abandoned by the beginning of Early Bronze IV⁶.

As for the distant context, the megalith is isolated and does not belong to a dolmen field – at least no megaliths have been found in its immediate vicinity. So

³ The excavation of the K001 site was supervised by Elżbieta Dubis.
⁶ L. G. Herr, Excavation and Cumulative Results at Tell el-‘Umeiri, unpublished manuscript (Canadian Union College, forthcoming).
far the tomb is one of few similar megalithic constructions in the Levant to contain an undisturbed funerary assemblage. It would appear to be the only one to contain such a mass of human skeletons in original interment, along with a very well preserved and homogeneous pottery repertoire and other objects. Unlike other dolmens, the tomb was not robbed, perhaps because it had lost the protruding shape of a dolmen: it was partially covered by eroded soil moving down the slope, and lacked the typical horizontal lid. These facts drew people’s attention away from this structure as a potential treasure horde.

The task for the 1998 season will be to continue the excavation of the exterior, to reach the boundaries of the surfaces, and to check for the existence of possible accompanying buildings, connected with the dolmen and used for the events related with it.

**EARLY BRONZE AGE CAVE (K003)** (Fig. 2)

A small cave was cleared, immediately above and slightly to the northeast of the dolmen. The cave had been used by Bedouins as a garbage dump until a few years ago. It was cleared it to see if any finds or skeletal remains could be located, and to obtain a plan of the cave. The structure was found to be a very shallow cave, extending only about 2 m into the hillside. There does not seem to have been a natural cave here before it was hewn out of the soft limestone. It was left unfinished. The tomb-makers probably stopped hewing when they reached another very hard fraction of the rock. A shallow SE-NW passageway led to the relatively high door (ca. 1.2 m). This structure contained no skeletal remains, but very interesting pottery was found. All the pottery ensembles could be dated to the late Early Bronze I and Early Bronze II periods. A similar amount of orange metallic ware – imported from the Syro-Palestine coastal plain, and dated to Early Bronze II – found together with Early Bronze I sherds (Abydos jar) led us to study more carefully the Early Bronze I/Early Bronze II transitional period.

**MIDDLE BRONZE AGE IIC CAVE TOMB (K002)**

The cave tomb with stepped dromos at the south-eastern slope of Tell el-‘Umeiri was partly excavated in the 1994 season. The excavation of the remainder of the cave tomb was carried out in 1996 to see if any more burials could be located.

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9 The excavation of the cave tomb was supervised by Ewa Wiewiórka.
10 The 1996 excavation season was supervised by Mariusz Górniak. He was assisted by Joan Chase, a physical anthropologist.
11 B. Dąbrowski et al., *Funerary sites*, pp. 93–94.
During both seasons there were found at least 18 burials, including one in a ceramic jar, two large male skeletons (one of them laid in a semi-niche), two skeletons of young women, and four children laid on the cave's floor. In the northwestern part of the cave, in a small niche, a deposit of disarticulated human bones was exposed.
Fig. 3. Middle Bronze Age Tomb: W-E and N-S section.
Fig. 4. Plan of the Middle Bronze Age Tomb: chamber, dromos, burials Nos 1-18.
Two of the children had bracelets on their forearms. A bronze pin, part of the clothing, was found associated with the burial of one young woman.

The intact vessels found in the tomb included two ring-based bowls (one platter bowl and one carinated bowl), two round-bottomed jugs, one ring-based chocolate-on-white jug, four jars, three dipper juglets (one found inside a jar), and one lamp with traces of burning. A worked ring base fragment served as a stand for one of the dipper juglets. The pottery assemblage can be dated to Middle Bronze IIC, and partly to the beginning of Late Bronze I\textsuperscript{12}.

Among the pottery fragments excavated in both seasons, there were mostly sherds dated to Middle Bronze IIC, and some dated to Early Bronze. It would seem that pottery fragments from the Early Bronze site located above the tomb were deposited in the cave by flotation and wind.

The tomb was undoubtedly connected with the fortified settlement erected in Middle Bronze IIC at Tell el-\textsuperscript{1}Umeiri\textsuperscript{13}. Burials in cave tombs with articulated skeletons are quite typical for the settled urban population of the Early Bronze II-III and the Middle Bronze II B-C periods in Palestine. But this particular type, with stepped dromos leading to the burial chamber, made its appearance no earlier than in Middle Bronze IIB-C, e.g. the tombs at Lachish, Jerusalem, and Tell el-Farah (S)\textsuperscript{14}.

This feature could have been a kind of family tomb for several generations. On the other hand, the burial in ceramic jar is quite unique in cave burials known from this region\textsuperscript{15}. The deposit of disarticulated human bones could be the result of making space for new burials in the cave by pushing aside the remains of older bodies.

The question as to whether the tomb is part of a Middle Bronze IIC city cemetery or only an isolated tomb will be answered in the 1998 MPP excavation season.

\textsuperscript{12} The pottery excavated in the 1994 season was examined by Maryla Kapica, Tell el-Umeiri 1994 and 1996: The pottery from the Middle Bronze Age burial cave, in the present volume, pp. 101-109.


\textsuperscript{15} Human bones in ceramic jars are usually connected with burials within settlements. An example of jar burials inside a cave is known from the Early Bronze I cave at Asawir in Israel; see A. Mazar, Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, New York 1990, pp. 98-99.