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*Essays on the Archaeology of the
Southern Levant in Honor of Seymour Gitin*

Edited by

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Robert A. Mullins, and Aaron J. Brody

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Three Middle Bronze II Burials from Tel Zahara

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During the first season of work in summer 2006 at the small site of Tel Zahara (Israel grid ref. 1929, 2131), approximately 5 km west of Beth Shean (fig. 1), excavations uncovered three primary burials dating to MB II (Cohen 2006; Cohen and Więckowski 2007).¹ The three burials, one adult and two children, lay on a north–south line directly on the western baulk line of Square NE.A.12, located on the lower part of the eastern slope of the site (fig. 2). No pit or shaft lines were found in association with the burials, and it is probably that later activity at the site—in particular the foundations for the Roman architecture—destroyed any superstructure that might have existed above the graves. Although this damage made it difficult to ascertain the full nature of the burials, as portions of the grave were either too damaged to analyze or inaccessible for excavation, it is still possible to assess and evaluate the meaning provided by these interments.²

The Burials

Burial 1

Of the three interments,³ Burial 1 was the most clearly articulated, although its state of preservation was extremely poor. The individual was lying on the right side in a flexed position, with the head to the north, facing west.

The Skeleton

The skeleton was extremely fragmentary; only parts of the long bones were found in a better state of preservation. The ossification and long bone size as well as the tooth

1. Please note that the terminology and nomenclature used in this article are as follows: Intermediate Bronze Age, Middle Bronze I, and Middle Bronze II.

2. Attempts to find additional burials in ensuing excavation seasons and to uncover the cemetery that is potentially located at the base of the eastern slope of the site were unsuccessful. The Roman building activities cut foundation trenches through the Middle Bronze Age occupation and down to virgin soil throughout this entire area (Cohen 2007; 2008). Any other burials and the cemetery—if indeed it existed—would have been destroyed during this process.

3. Because of the poor preservation of the burials, all measurements and analyses of the skeletal material took place in the field, since the bones crumbled as they were removed.



Fig. 1. Map showing the location of Tel Zahara. Map prepared by S. Cohen.

wear indicate an adult age for the individual. The poor state of preservation precluded determining the sex of the individual.

Bone Inventory

The extant portions of the skeleton consisted of small fragments of the skull, traces of the ribs, shafts of the arm and leg long bones, and a few fragments of the metacarpals. Two incisors, one fragment of a canine, two premolars, and two molars were found in the area of the skull (Cohen and Więckowski 2007).

The Grave Goods

A small juglet was found just to the north of the head, and a small high-necked bowl with rounded carination and a ring base was located in the area in front of the arms and upper body. A large trefoil-mouth jug with a double-stranded handle was

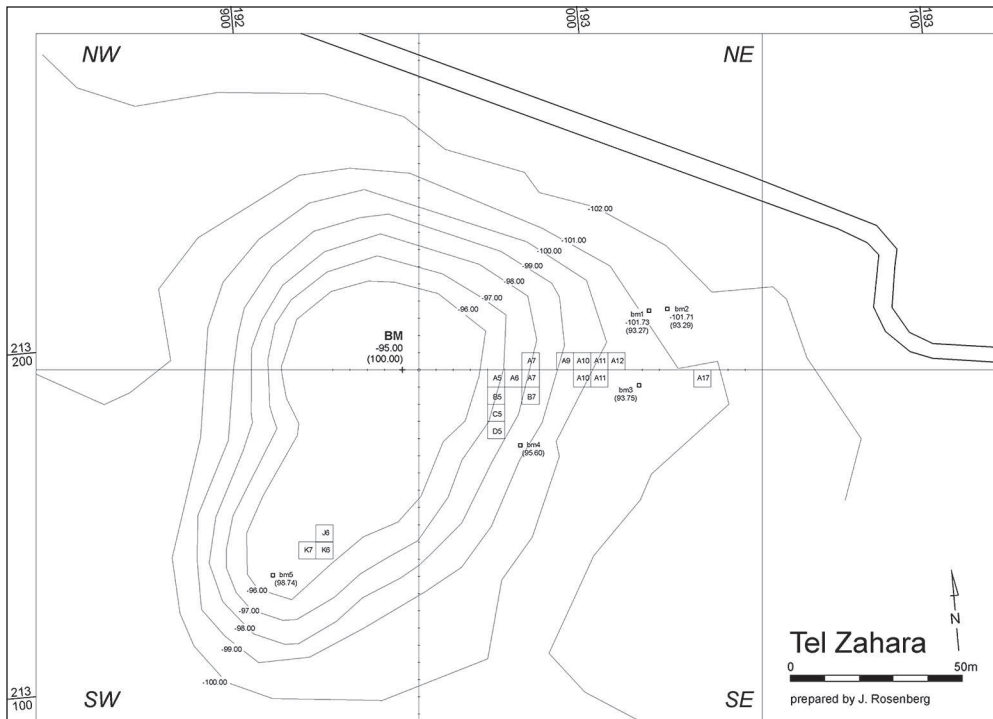


Fig. 2. Map of Tel Zahara, with excavation areas marked. Map prepared by J. Rosenberg.

found just in front of the individual's legs. Two additional juglets found between the legs of this individual and the head of Burial 2 may also be associated with the deceased (fig. 3).

Burial 2

The Burial

Burial 2 was extremely poorly preserved and found in a very fragmentary state; almost nothing remained of the skeleton other than the cranium and several teeth as well as a few scattered and poorly preserved pieces of the lower skeleton located by the feet of Burial 1. The placement of these fragments suggests that the individual was oriented with its head to the south. The morphology of the teeth indicates that the individual was a child less than 6 years old (*infans I*; Cohen and Więckowski 2007).

Bone Inventory

The extant portions of the skeleton consisted of large fragments of the skull vault and small fragments of the lower jaw. In addition, fragments of the deciduous teeth and buds of some permanent teeth (molar and premolar) were found.

The Grave Goods

Two whole vessels, a small piriform juglet, and a larger rounded piriform juglet with a double-stranded shoulder handle were found lying between the legs of Burial 1



Fig. 3. Photo of Burial 1 (long bones on the right) and Burial 2 (cranium on the left), with associated grave goods, including the piriform juglets located between the two interments. Photo by J. Baker.

Table 1. Descriptions and Parallels for the Ceramics Found with the Burials

No.	Reg. #	Burial #	Description	Parallels
1	355	Burial 1	Ring base, high rounded carination, simple everted rim	Aphek Str. A XII (Beck 2000: pls. 10.21:7, 10.22:6); Yoqne'am Str. XXI–XIXa (Ben-Tor et al. 2005: photo IV.4: a, b); Jericho T 51 (Kenyon 1965: fig. 165:15)
2	356	Burial 1	Ring base, oval body, everted simple rim, and single handle with a rectangular section	
3	410	Burial 1	Piriform juglet with high ring base, double-stranded shoulder handle; rim unknown	Megiddo T24 (Guy 1938: pl. 23:26); Jericho T A34 (Kenyon 1960: fig. 141:6–7).
4	354	Burial 1	Piriform juglet with ring base, single loop handle; rim unknown	Efrata Cave 5 (Gonen 2001: fig. 31:6); Jericho T B35 (Kenyon 1960: fig 150:4–5); Jericho T B48 (Kenyon 1965: fig. 97:6, 8); Jericho T A38 (Kenyon 1960: fig. 136:7–12); Jericho T G46 (Kenyon 1960: fig. 131:1–2); Jericho T A34 (Kenyon 1960: fig. 141:8–11)
5	429	Burial 1	Jug with wide disc base, oval body, figure-8 handle and trefoil rim.	

and the head of Burial 2, making their association difficult to determine (fig. 3). As it is more frequent for small juglets to be placed in the vicinity of the head of an individual, it is possible that these items should be associated with Burial 2. This determination is far from certain, however, because it is equally likely that these juglets were originally placed with Burial 1, while Burial 2 was interred in such a way that the head was deposited near or over the ceramics.

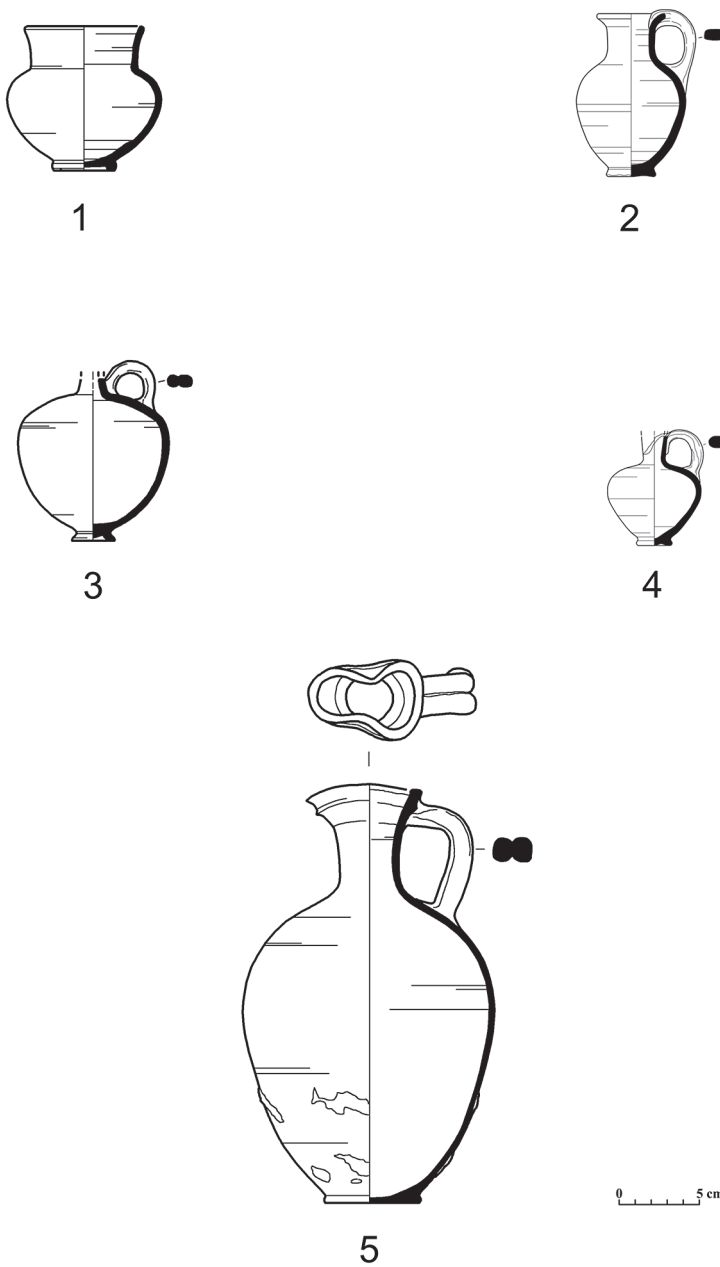


Fig. 4. The ceramics found with Burials 1 and 2. Drawings by F. Amirah.

Burial 3

The Burial

This individual was lying at a slightly higher level and farther to the south of Burials 1 and 2, and, like the first two, the skeleton was extremely poorly preserved. Only

the cranium, which was smashed with a badly destroyed *splanchnocranium* (face), some teeth, and a few fragments of rib, vertebrae, and upper arm bones were recovered. The skeletal remains indicate that the body was lying on a north–south axis, possibly in a flexed position, with its head to the south.

Bone Inventory

Almost all the skull bones, however fragmented, were present. The other extant portions of the skeleton consisted of a piece of the upper arm, traces of the ribs, and some vertebrae. In addition, several teeth, including permanent incisors, canines, premolars, and molars in which the roots were not fully developed, one deciduous canine, and two deciduous molars were found. The eruption stage as well as the development of the permanent teeth indicate the age of the individual to be approximately 12 (*infans II*; Cohen and Więckowski 2007).

The Grave Goods

No ceramics were found in association with this individual. A few fragments of animal bones were excavated from among the human bones, but it is not certain whether these represent remains of a deliberate mortuary offering or are simply bones in the large backfill that covered the burial. Given the lack of large offering bowls typical of other food offerings dating to this era, the latter interpretation is more probable.

The Ceramics

Five ceramics were found in association with Burials 1 and 2 (figs. 4, 5). The corpus consists of three juglets, one carinated bowl, and one jug; no open bowls, kraters, or jars of any kind were found. All of the forms are, with some exceptions discussed further below, typologically consistent with the MB II repertoire in Canaan.

Bowl

The one bowl found with the burials has a low ring base, high rounded carination, a high neck, and a slightly everted simple rim (figs. 4:1, 6; table 1:1). No surface treatment is evident on the piece. Similar bowls are attested in Str. A XII (“Post-Palace”) at Aphek (Beck 2000: pls. 10.21:7, 10.22:6), in Str. XXI–XIXa (MB IIC), at Yoqne’am (Ben-Tor et al. 2005: photo 4.4: a, b),⁴ and in one example from Tomb B51 at Jericho (Kenyon 1965: fig. 165:15). The chronological range of this form ranges from the late MB I or MB I–MB II transition and continues through the end of the Middle Bronze Age. The change from a low disc base to a ring base may be an indicator of

4. This form is most common in the later Middle Bronze Age phases at Yoqne’am, although single occurrences are also attested in Str. XXV, dated to MB IIA [MB I], and Str. XXIIIa (MB IIB) [MB II] (Ben-Tor et al. 2005). It should be noted that all the examples from Yoqne’am are slipped, while none of the bowls of this type from Aphek had any surface treatment, nor does the piece from Tel Zahara.



Fig. 5. Photo of the ceramics found with Burials 1 and 2. Photo by Z. Radovan.

chronological development for this form and suggests an MB II date overall for the Tel Zahara bowl.

Oval Juglet

This one example has a small, oval body, a very low ring base, and an everted simple rim (figs. 4:2; 7; table 1:2). The simple loop handle is rectangular in section. There is no surface treatment on the juglet. The wide, raised disc base is unusual within the repertoire of Middle Bronze Age juglets, as is the wide mouth with the plain flared rim. Few parallels exist for this form; a similar juglet from Grave 14 in the Gesher cemetery (Garfinkel and Cohen 2007: fig. 5.14:3) may be an earlier attestation of this type.

Piriform Juglets

One juglet (figs. 4:4; 8; table 1:4) has a low ring base and a loop handle from mid-neck to the upper shoulder. The juglet is broken in the neck above the handle. The juglet is covered by a gray slip and burnish.



Fig. 6. Carinated bowl. Photo by Z. Radovan.



Fig. 7. Oval juglet. Photo by Z. Radovan.

There are numerous parallels for this piece at Jericho (Kenyon 1960: figs. 131:1–2, 136:7–12, 141:8–11, 150: 4–5; Kenyon 1965: fig. 97:6, 8); another parallel comes from Cave 5 at Efrata (Gonen 2001: fig. 31:6). In the ceramic sequence identified at Jericho, this piece is commonly found in both Group II and Group III tombs, suggesting that it is a standard form that spans a large chronological period in the Middle Bronze Age.

The other juglet (figs. 4:3; 9; table 1:3), which is slightly larger, has a more rounded body, a small, high ring base—almost a trumpet base—and a double-stranded shoulder handle. The juglet is broken midway up the neck, above the handle. This piece has parallels with a juglet from Megiddo Tomb 24 (Guy 1938: pl. 23:26) and with two juglets from Tomb A34 at Jericho (Kenyon 1960: fig. 141:6–7).

Jug

The jug (figs. 4:5; 10; table 1:5) has a strongly pronounced trefoil mouth, a disc base, and a figure-eight handle that extends from just below the rim to the upper shoulder. The piece is extremely friable and has no surface treatment or decoration. While the shape of the jug, the trefoil mouth, and figure-eight handle are common on other pieces in MB II, the wide disc base appears to be otherwise unattested on this form in this period, and no close parallels for this jug exist.



Fig. 8. Piriform juglet with gray burnish. Photo by Z. Radovan.



Fig. 9. Piriform juglet with double-stranded shoulder handle. Photo by Z. Radovan.

Discussion

Burials represent the means and methods by which a society chooses to dispose of the deceased members of its community. Burial practices provide a window into a culture's activities, offering a glimpse into societal values and cultural change. As such, in addition to the ideology that might exist about what happens to the dead, burials also reflect developments in the customs of the living. In so doing, variations in mortuary practices illustrate changes in a culture's development, such as social value, economic change, or political reorganization.

All aspects of a burial have a purpose, and the entire burial as a unit expresses the beliefs and ideas of the community. In addition to the grave goods themselves, the factors most commonly evaluated in the interpretation of mortuary remains include position and direction of the body, gender, age, and method of interment (e.g., cist burial or cave burial). Consequently, the differences or changes in these practices and methods may speak to changes in the living culture and/or society itself.

The three burials excavated at Tel Zahara were laid out in simple graves dug into virgin soil at the base of the eastern slope of the site. As noted above, any superstructures that may have existed and the tops of the pits or chambers were destroyed by later Roman building activity at the site. As a result of this, no further information is available about the nature of the grave architecture. Given the location of the burials



Fig. 10. Jug with trefoil mouth and flat base.
Photo by Z. Radovan.

on the slope of the site, however, and the remnants of the pits into which they were placed, it is probable that the burials originally were simply shallow cist graves. Any stones or other material used to mark the opening and/or the entrance of the graves (e.g., Garfinkel and Cohen 2007) would have been destroyed by the later occupation.

The ceramics found with the burials are generally consistent with the standard MB II repertoire in Canaan. There are, however, some discrepancies in form, most notably represented by the wide disc base on the jug (fig. 4:5) and the wide mouth and large disc base of the oval juglet (fig. 4:2). The flat base, while attested in the MB I ceramic corpus, tends to disappear and be replaced with ring bases during MB II. Bases in general become smaller and higher throughout the period, as illustrated by the base on the larger piriform juglet in the Zahara corpus (fig. 4:3). The unusual nature of these two forms, however, is consistent with types found in the earlier MB I and may

indicate a transitional phase between the two periods.

No open bowls or food offerings were uncovered in connection with the burials, nor were any large store-jars found. The former would have been placed near the head or chest of the individual, while store-jars are generally located near the feet. While unusual, this discrepancy in the distribution of grave goods may be in keeping with a trend noted for the Middle Bronze Age in which the presence of subsistence-based ceramics in graves, usually associated with food, declined in favor of smaller objects more traditionally associated with status or luxury (Hallote 1995: 114).

The position of the bodies, though poorly preserved, indicated that they were buried in a flexed position. In two cases, the head of the individual was to the south, while one was oriented to the north. The individuals in Burials 1 and 3 faced toward the west while Burial 2 possibly faced east.⁵ This variation in orientation and direction

5. It is difficult to make this determination for Burial 2, as only a few teeth and mandible fragments remained.



Fig. 11. Mud-brick wall and associated courtyard layers dating to MB II at Tel Zahara. Photo by S. Cohen.

is also consistent with other cemeteries dating to the Middle Bronze Age (Hallote 1995). Rather than having any one fixed direction of interment, however, the individuals in the graves were more probably placed facing “out”—toward the opening of the burial—which then dictated the direction and orientation of the body.

The three burials clearly must be associated with an MB II settlement at Tel Zahara itself. Although this occupation has not been excavated, one test trench in Square SE.A.7 (see fig. 2) reached Middle Bronze Age levels in a small exposure (less than 5×5 meters). The excavations in this probe uncovered one mud-brick wall (visible in the northern balk of the probe) approximately two courses high and several layers of courtyard debris (fig. 11).

Numerous burned patches, large quantities of ceramic and faunal remains, and several basalt grindstones were excavated from the courtyard. The ceramics consisted predominately of domestic forms, including large store-jars and both handmade and wheel-made cooking pots. While the majority of the sherds were again consistent with an MB II date, the presence of handmade cooking pots with rope decoration also suggests that the settlement may date to a transitional phase between MB I and II.

Evidence suggests that burial practices changed at a less rapid pace in the countryside than did those at urban locales (Cohen 2009) and that mortuary practices overall retained a significant degree of continuity in tradition and value from the Intermediate Bronze Age through Middle Bronze I and perhaps continuing into Middle Bronze II as well. The three burials from Tel Zahara exhibit traits that are typical of MB II as well as components that link them to MB I. These burials, therefore, may reflect a separate but significant strand of mortuary traditions in MB II. Further discovery and excavation of MB II burials will open up new venues of mortuary data, and subsequent interpretation of their meaning will increase our understanding of the peoples who lived and died in Middle Bronze Age Canaan.

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