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Short Fieldwork Report: Tel Zahara (Israel), seasons 2006–2007

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Tel Zahara (Israel), seasons 2006–2007

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Tel Zahara (grid ref. 1929, 2131) is a small settlement site approximately 5 km west of Beth Shean, at the confluence of the Jezreel and Jordan Valleys, on the south bank of wadi Harod. The preliminary excavations at the site, conducted during summer 2006, and continued in 2007, were designed to determine the sequence of occupation at the site and examine the social and economic organization implemented by the population there. Seven 5×5 m squares were opened in 2006 and several additional squares were opened in 2007, including one on the top of the tel, to provide additional data (**Figure 1**). The main aim of the excavations was to find and expose remains of the rural Middle Bronze Age settlement, as survey data had revealed a significant quantity of ceramic material dating to this era (see Maeir 1997).

During the course of the 2006 season, three primary burials, dating to the Middle Bronze Age II were excavated at the base of the eastern slope of the site. Although during the following 2007 season there were two additional squares opened in the same area, no additional

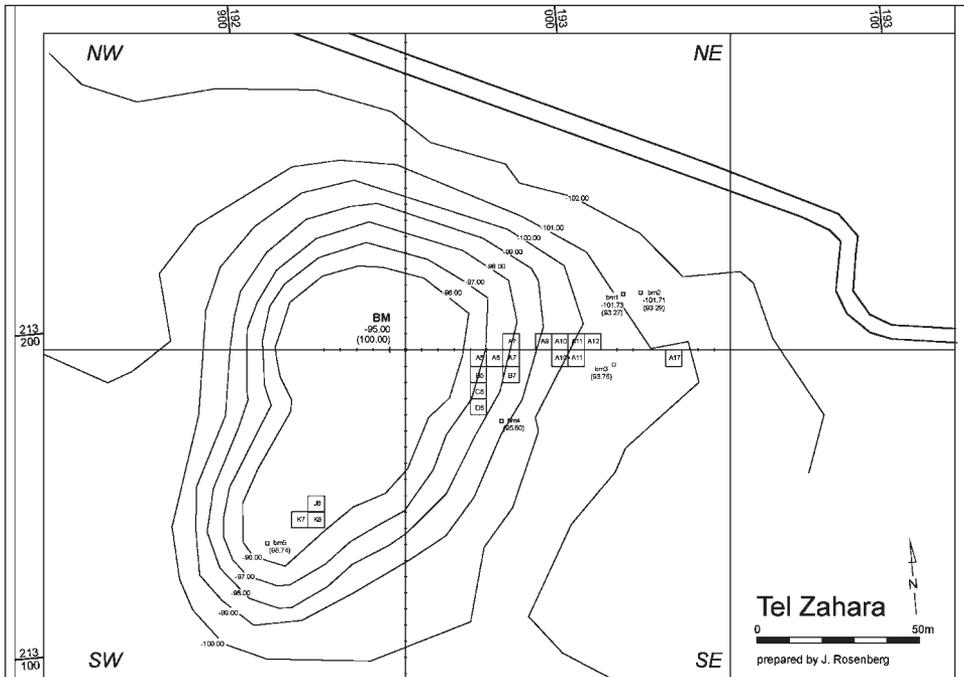


Figure 1. Plan of Tel Zahara. Described remains were found in the squares NE.A.12 (Middle Bronze Age burials) and SE.C.5 and SW.K.7 (Bedouin burials).



Figure 2. An overview of the Middle Bronze Age II B burials (Burial 1 to the right, Burial 2 to the left).

MB burials were unearthed. There were however two additional burials uncovered, in different areas of the tel, identified as Bedouin.

The Middle Bronze Burials. The three MB II primary burials were found in Square NE.A.12, the area of excavation located lowest on the eastern slope of the site (see **Figure 1**). These burials were found while removing a large mixed deposit leveling fill in the area. No pit or shaft lines were found in association with the burials, and it is probable that any superstructure that might have existed above the graves or even pit lines were removed by later activity that cleared the area in order to lay the foundation for the Roman buildings at the site.

The individuals were, for the most part, poorly preserved, which made it difficult to excavate; all measurements and analysis of the skeletal material had to be undertaken in the field since the bones crumbled as they were removed. All three burials were in a line from north to south, lying directly on the western baulk line of the square. Parts of the skeletal material and at least two vessels continued further into the baulk; it is quite possible that additional remains, both skeletal and associated mortuary goods, are located further to the west and thus remain unexcavated.

Of the three interments, **Burial 1** was the most clearly articulated, although its state of preservation was still extremely poor (see **Figure 2**). The individual was lying on the right side in a flexed position, with the head to the north, facing west. No pit or shaft lines were identified in association with the burials. The bones were poorly preserved. 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 wear, indicate an adult age for the individual. The state of preservation precluded any determination of 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.

The grave goods: a small dipper 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 handle was 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, but this association is tentative at best.

Burial 2 was extremely poorly preserved. Almost nothing remained of the skeleton other than the cranium, several teeth, and a few scattered and poorly preserved pieces of the lower skeleton that were located by the feet of the Burial 1 (see **Figure 2**). The placement of these fragments suggests, however, that the individual was oriented with the head to the south. The morphology of the teeth indicates that the individual was a child less than 6 years old.

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 germs of some permanent teeth (molar and premolar) were found.

The grave goods: Two whole vessels, a small piriform juglet and a larger juglet with a double handle, were found lying between the legs of Burial 1 and the head of Burial 2. Because small juglets of this type are more commonly found placed near the head of the skeleton, these vessels are tentatively associated with Burial 2. It is possible, however, that these juglets were originally placed near or around the feet of Burial 1, and Burial 2 was placed in such a way that the head was deposited near or over the ceramics.

Burial 3. This individual was lying at a slightly higher level and further to the south of Burials 1 and 2, and like the first two, was extremely poorly preserved. Only the cranium, which was smashed with a very badly destroyed face, some teeth, and a few fragments of the ribs, vertebrae and upper arm bones were recovered. The skeletal remains indicating that the body was lying on a north-south axis, possibly in a flexed position, with the 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 vertebrae. In addition, several teeth, including permanent incisors (shovel-shaped), 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 indicates the age of the individual to be approximately 12.

The grave goods: No ceramics were found in association with this individual, but a few fragments of animal bones were excavated from among the human bones. It is not possible to tell if these faunal remains represent deliberate offerings placed with the deceased.

The Bedouin Burials. Remains of two individuals were excavated during the 2007 season at Tel Zahara. Both of them were remains of very young individuals, and according to current interpretations, were associated with the possible Bedouin burial ground located on the highest part of the tel (see the discussion in Cohen 2007). The burials were recorded using capital Latin letters so as not to be confused with the MB burials.

Burial A was found in fill in Square SE.C.5 (see **Figure 1**). No pit lines, or any stratigraphic remains, can be associated with these remains. The lack of stratigraphic context emphasizes the secondary character of the deposition; the bones may have been removed from the upper part of the site (where the Bedouin cemetery is presumed to be located) when the top of the site was shaved off and used to backfill areas on the slope of the tel previously removed by heavy machinery (see Cohen 2007).

The burial: The remains were of a child's skeleton consisting of an almost entire skull (with mandible) and one identified fragment of the upper body — right scapula. The overall morphology and the state of the dentition with no doubt suggest the very young age of the individual. According to the state of the dentition (forming of the permanent teeth buds) this individual was no more than 4 years old.



Figure 3. Bedouin burial from the square SW.K.7

Bone inventory: The bones present included the fragmented, but entire skull, lacking only few pieces of the mandible body and some parts of the vault and right scapula. Also deciduous teeth from both maxillae and mandible were present as well as some germs of the permanent premolar and molar teeth.

Burial B was found while excavating the test square in the southern part of the highest portion of the tel (Square SW.K.7) (see **Figure 1**).

The burial: This was an almost entirely preserved child skeleton, in primary deposition. The skeleton was laid on its back, in an extended position, hands along the trunk, and head towards the west. Overall morphology, length of the long bones, state of skeletal ossification and the dental traits observed suggest an age close to five at the time of death.

Bone inventory: The bones present included the entire, well preserved *in situ* cranium and an almost fully preserved entire skeleton (lacking only fragments of the pelvis, vertebral bodies and carpals/tarsals). All of the deciduous teeth from the mandible were present, as were most of the teeth from both maxillae (only 3 incisors were not present in the material); the germs of the permanent upper incisors were clearly visible.

Measurements: maximum cranial length – 156 mm; left humerus length (without epiphysis) – 129 mm; left radius length (without epiphysis, restored) – 90 mm; left femur length (without epiphysis, restored) ca. 170 mm; right femur length (without epiphysis, restored) ca. 169 mm; right clavicle length (without epiphysis) – 70 mm

Grave goods: Bronze bracelets were found on both lower arms, suggesting that the individual may have been female.

Conclusions. To date, evidence indicates the presence of two cemeteries at Tel Zahara. One, dating to the Middle Bronze Age II, is located at the base of the eastern slope of the site, and

the other, a Bedouin cemetery, of a date yet to be precisely determined, located on the top of the tel. In both cases, the cemeteries have undergone extensive damage, the former from the later Roman building activities at the site, and the latter from heavy mechanized equipment, probably within the past century (see Cohen 2006 and 2007).

The small data set for each cemetery limits the amount of information that can be gathered from the human remains at Tel Zahara. The severe damage to the top of the site, which seems to have destroyed a large section of the Bedouin remains, as well as the very late nature of the cemetery, precludes further examination in this regard, while attempts to find additional remains from the Middle Bronze Age cemetery proved unsuccessful in the 2007 season. Further excavations at the site will be continued in future seasons, however, during which time it is hoped that additional primary burials from the Middle Bronze Age may be uncovered, further to the north of the current excavation areas where the previous remains were unearthed, and thus add to the data regarding the nature of the occupation at the site in this era.

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