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Salvage Excavation at Bet Dagan - 2005 Final report

Excavation Permit: B – 296/2005

Excavating Archaeologist: Yehuda Govrin

Y. G. Contract Archaeology Ltd

Academic Sponsor: Hebrew Union College



A general view of brick-lined grave L18



Location map of Bet Dagan excavation site (31°59'55''N / 34°49'33''E).

Introduction

In 2005 Y.G. Contract Archaeology won a Lendko Corporation tender for the salvage excavation of approximately twenty 5×5 m squares (500m^2) on HaDagan Street in Bet Dagan (Plan No. Bet Dagan 2020). The excavation was directed by Yehuda Govrin. With human burials expecting to be found (see below), anthropological work was assigned to specialist Esther Deutsch. The excavations began on the 5 June 2005 and were halted twice following legal court orders by the El-Aksa Corporation. The final day of work in the field was 12 July 2007. The excavation included the opening of all twenty squares and locating the graves. While waiting for the resolution of legal issues pertaining to the burials, none of the graves exposed by our excavation were opened. During subsequent delays totaling over one year in length, a guard was placed on the site. As it turned out, excavation in this area was not to be resumed.

Until suspended, the excavation was carried out in the site's Area B1, according to a grid of 5×5 m squares. These squares were first alternately excavated and later the intermediate squares were also dug (see plan, p.8).

Prior to this project an Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) salvage excavation was conducted by Eli Yannai in the site's Area B (Yannai 2008). This excavation exposed over a hundred and twenty graves which were cautiously dated to the Mamluk and Early Ottoman periods. Test pits were also excavated in Area B1.

Description of the excavation area

The Area B1 site is situated on a hill southeast of the remains both of a modern Arab village and of ancient Tel Bet Dagan. The site's red *hamra* topsoil is approximately 1-2m thick, beneath which is sterile yellow sand. The hill has been severely damaged due to development activity and erosion. Its surface was leveled and orchards planted, probably at the beginning of the twentieth century. In close proximity to the excavation area is a destroyed Mandate period well that most likely served the orchards.

Area B1 is on what remains of the hill, on an east-west slope. The site measures approximately 18 × 30m. This contained seventeen 5 × 5m squares and six half-squares of different sizes, altogether amounting to twenty squares (see plan). The squares were marked with numbers on the latitudinal axis (north-south) and in alphabetical letters on the longitudinal axis (west-east).

The following is a description of the excavated squares and the finds recovered from them (see plan).

Square A1:

This square was dug to a depth of approximately 0.3m. The *hamra* was removed until at 0.2m depth a layer of yellow sand was reached. In this square were found the remains of a gray mud brick grave (L51) that was not preserved, a tree-planting pit (L35) and the remains of three other graves (L41-43) that were not excavated. Possible remnants of a fifth grave (L52) were found close to the tree-planting pit.

Square A2:

This square was dug to a depth of approximately 0.6m. In it the remains of three gray mud brick graves (L12, 13 and 18) were found. The preservation of the westernmost grave (L18) was the best (see frontispiece, p.1). Its entire upper brick cover was intact. The grave measures 2.2 x 1m and is oriented approximately east-west. Halfway along its eastern side a bulge of mud bricks was found. The grave was not excavated. The two other graves were damaged and probably collapsed; from them only portions of walls were discovered. In the section between square A2 and B2 a crumbling skull was found.

Square A3:

This square was dug to a depth of approximately 0.2m. Most of the *hamra* from the surface had previously been removed by mechanical tools. In the square were discovered a tree-planting pit (L17), a mud brick grave (L16) and the possible remains of an additional grave (L40). Approximately 0.15m above the bone remains – i.e. very close to ground level – a fragment of a blue glass bottle was found. The L16 grave had a general east-west orientation and its size was 0.5 × 2m. The grave was not excavated.

Half-square A4:

In the western half of this square, at a depth of 0.1m, a poorly preserved but articulated skeleton was uncovered (L29). Its general orientation was east-west (head to the west) and the face was turned toward the south. The skeleton was probably that of an adult female but was not excavated.

Square B1:

This square was dug to a depth of approximately 0.4m. Close to its center a tree-planting pit (L11) was discovered. A total of eight burials were identified. The remains of a grave and a spread of unarticulated bones (L44) were discovered close to the section between squares B1 and B2. This mud brick grave was discovered at a depth of about 0.3m below ground level. About 0.5m to the east the remains of another grave (L20) were found. It too was in the section between the squares. This grave was probably much smaller than L44. Two additional mud brick graves (L45, 46) were found at a depth of 0.2-0.3m. The remains of a burial (L34) containing a mass of crumbled bones without clear articulation were discovered at a depth of 0.3m on the eastern edge of the square. Two additional graves (L21, 47) were discovered in the eastern section, bordering with square C1.

Square B2:

This square was only partly excavated. The surface was removed and the southern half of the square was then dug. At the center of the square a tree-planting pit (L26) was discovered. Into this square a number of graves from adjacent squares extend, including L20 and 44 from the south, L26 from the east, L19 from the west and L39 from the north. It is most probable that additional graves would have been discovered in the square had its excavation continued.

Square B3:

This square was dug to a depth of 0.25m below ground level. Close to its center a tree-planting pit (L10) was discovered. In the northwestern corner of the square a small mud brick grave was found (L14), probably belonging to a child. Close to the southeastern corner a concentration of broken mud bricks was found (L38), probably the remnants of a damaged grave. An additional mud brick grave (L39) was found close to the southwestern corner of the square. This grave continues into the southern portion of the square, an area that was not excavated. The eastern quarter of the square was damaged by the digging of a recent rubbish pit.

Half-square B4:

The entire half-square was excavated. A tree-planting pit (L56) was discovered. No additional finds were made. The eastern portion of the square was damaged by a recent rubbish pit.

Square C1:

This square was dug to a depth of 0.4m. Close to the center a tree-planting pit was discovered. A grave (L21) was found close to the square's northwestern corner, but it was not exposed. Two probable additional graves were also found. The first (L47) extends into square B1. The second (L53) is located close to the southern baulk of the square. In the northern portion of the square a meter-wide baulk was left unexcavated, running south-north.

Square C2:

Most of this square – especially its center – was badly damaged by a recent rubbish pit (L15). Close to the southwestern corner two graves were discovered. These graves continue into the neighboring squares. The first (L21) was found at the southern edge of the square. The second (L26) was found at the western edge of the square.

Square C3:

Over the entire area of this square the L15 rubbish pit extended. This pit was excavated to a depth of 1.5m, down to the archaeological-sterile soil. In this square also an IAA test pit was located.

Half-square C4:

The entire square is entirely within the L15 rubbish pit.

Square D1:

The remains of two graves were found. The first (L49) is located at the center of the square, the second (L48) is located at the northern side of the square.

Square D2:

In most of this square's northern area the L15 rubbish pit is located. The remains of one grave (L48) were found at the southern edge of the square (and continue into square D1).

Square D3:

The entire square is located within the L15 rubbish pit.

Half-square D4:

The entire half-square is located within the L15 rubbish pit.

Square E1:

This square was halved along its north-south axis. In the center of the western half a disturbed spread of bones was discovered (L27). As the project continued, the eastern half of the square was also excavated. In it two tree-planting pits were discovered. One (L33) was close to the center of the square. The second (L32) was found close to the northeastern corner of the square (adjacent to square F1).

Square E2:

Near the center of the square a tree-planting pit was discovered (L25). The remains of crumbled bones (L55) were found in the south side of the square, following an approximate east-west orientation but without signs of an associable grave. Evidence for two additional graves (no locus numbers given) was found in the east side of the square. In order to investigate these, a further 1m² test section was excavated in the southeastern corner of the square.

Square E3:

Except for the southeastern corner of the square, in which no finds were recovered, most of the square's area was badly damaged by the L15 rubbish pit.

Half-square E4:

This entire half square was located within the L15 rubbish pit.

Square F1:

In this square was found a concentration of various remnants of thin walls (0.15m wide) made from gray mud bricks. These walls (L28, 30, 31, 36 and 37) were found at a depth of about 0.2m below ground level, except L28 whose remnants in the southwestern corner of the square were found at a depth of 0.1m. It is possible that

these wall sections, whose lengths do not exceed 1m, are part of the architecture of graves that were moved as a result of agricultural work in the area. With the exception of L30, they follow an east-west orientation.

Square F2:

1m² test pits were dug along the southern and western sides of the square. In the center of the square (L50) no finds were discovered down to 0.2m, at which depth the virgin sand lay. Between the eastern side and southeastern corner, within the L50 layer at a depth of 0.1 m below ground level, a broken blue glass bottle was found *in situ*.

Half-square F3:

The northern half of this half-square is part of the L15 rubbish pit. In the rest of the half-square no finds were made.

Partial squares G1 and G2:

These partial squares were opened in the eastern part of the hill. Here at three test section points were discovered gray mud-brick-lined graves (L22-24), clearly discernable against the red *hamra* soil. The section view suggested that at some point a burial ditch had been dug into the *hamra*. This ditch was then covered by a thin layer of gray clay slabs. This layer collapsed at various points, falling into the grave space. Other portions of the gray clayey layer were disturbed by agricultural work.

Summary

During pre-excavation ground clearance works, much of Area B1's topsoil was removed by machines. In several cases this disturbance caused severe damage to graves buried close to the surface. Previous agricultural and other activities have also damaged the burials. We saw that skeletal remains were generally in a poor state of preservation. Bones were often in an extremely deteriorated state, having been mixed with the *hamra* soil to the point that it was difficult to identify osteological details.

This aside, the excavation bore some fruit in adding to our knowledge of the site. Most of the graves were oriented east-west. Some were not associated with any extant architectural remains or artifacts of any kind. The built graves were all constructed from gray mud bricks that stood out clearly against the *hamra* soil and yellow sand. From these built graves also very few artifacts were discovered, making it difficult to date them. Two fragments of blue glass bottles were found, and a very limited number of ceramic body sherds incorporated with the mud bricks. It is possible that the area was settled as part of the hinterland of Late Roman and Byzantine Bet Dagan (Rauchberger 2008). The cemetery may belong to these periods, or to the Early through Late Islamic periods, before the area was used for agriculture.

The excavation of this site was halted a number of times by court order, due to complaints by Islamic religious groups. Excavation was never resumed, and indeed our work was far from complete.

Further Reading

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Plan of Bet Dagan Site (area B1)

