

Excavation at Ramla (Ta'avura Junction) - 2011

Early Islamic Graves and Other Features

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This excavation (license B-365/2011) was located in east Ramla (New Israel Grid: 188624/648245; 70m asl), on the east side of Tel Hai Street just south of Ta'avura Junction. The excavation was carried out by Y.G. Contract Archaeology Ltd. in March 2011, under the academic auspices of the Hebrew Union College, with the team including archaeologists Sergey Alon, Alexander Bogdanovsky, Yehuda Govrin, Rachel Jido, Abiad Ovadia and Oz Varoner. The author directed the project, carried out site drafting and illustrated the artifacts. On-site physical anthropology was conducted by Vered Eshed. Animal bones were analyzed by Ayelet Sharir and ceramics with the assistance of Miriam Avissar.

INTRODUCTION

At this small site (40.19m²) were found two stone-lined graves of the Umayyad period (L15, L17), as well as one further probable grave (L21) most of

which was outside the excavation area and therefore not fully investigated. Two further built features were found: a wall (L11) and a stone-lined structure (L23), also extending beyond the excavation limit. All features were oriented east/west. Artifacts from

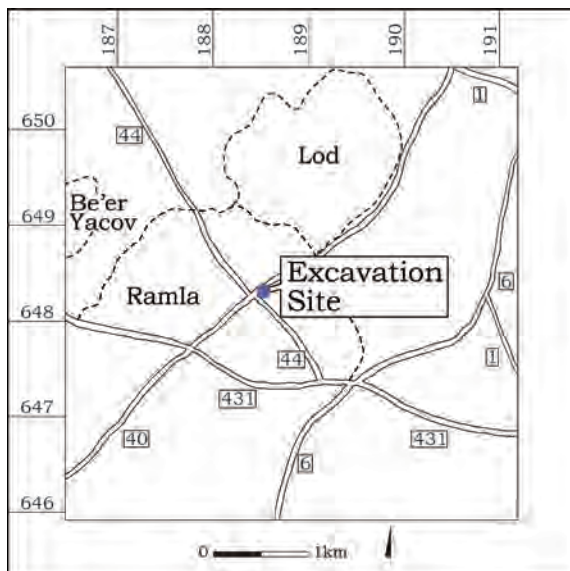


Figure 1. Site location (New Israel Grid: 188624-648245; 70m asl).

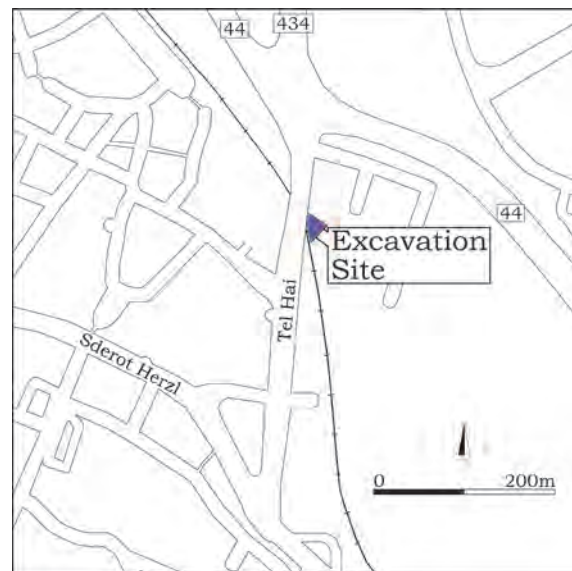


Figure 2. Close-up view of the site location.

the excavation (Figs. 10-11) included Early Islamic potsherds and glass, as well as some later ceramics, and human and animal bones.

THE EXCAVATION

Graves

L15, L17

These two graves were rectangular in plan, with walls built of small, unbonded, and undressed or semi-dressed stones (average stone size: 0.2 x 0.15 x 0.15m). Both graves' north walls incorporated plaster on their exteriors. The features were co-linear and oriented east/west.

Grave L15 measured 2.5 (exposed) x 1.5m, with walls ca. 0.3m thick and surviving to one course in height. We excavated this grave to a depth of 1.02m. Grave L17 was slightly smaller (2.5 x 1.25m) and had thinner walls (0.25m), also only one course in extant height. We dug this second grave to a depth of 1.24m.

Within each of these graves were uncovered the skeletal remains of a single human. The Grave L15 interment retained much of its skull and body bones in articulation (Fig. 4), revealing the primary burial of an adult male¹ laid on his right side, with hands placed at his sides, and the head—at the west end of the grave—facing south. The degree of tooth erosion indicated that this man died at the age of 18-25.

The Grave L17 interment also comprised a primary burial of a male² of at least 15 years,³ found in anatomic articulation (Fig. 5). Here too the deceased was placed on his right side, hands at his sides, head to the west and facing south.



Figure 3. General view of the site, after excavation.



Figure 4. The remains of a young man, Grave L15.

1 The evaluation of sex was based on arm bone measurements (vertical diameter of the femoral head: 45mm) and the morphology of the lower jaw bone (mandible).

2 The evaluation of sex was based on the dimensions of the humerus (epicondylar width: 64mm) and the morphology of the pelvis.

3 The assessment of age was not definite, but given the degree of bone fusion it was concluded that the individual was over 15 years of age.



Figure 5. The male burial in Grave L17. Note the off-center location within the grave—evidence enough to conclude that the interment pre-dated L17?



Figure 6. Graves L15 and L17 (facing east), with L6 visible on the left abutting L17.

What is curious about this burial is that the body was not located in the center of the grave, but rather to one side. As the project anthropologist (Dr. Vered Eshed) observed, this mismatch with the grave walls and the fact that the walls by no means extended down to the levels of the skeletons—neither in L15 nor in L17—raises the possibility that the built feature of L17 post-dated and physically overlay this burial. Supporting this interpretation is the fact that Wall L11 was partly under the walls of Grave L17.

Finds from these graves (Fig. 10:5,8,11-12,14-15,17) included sherds from a Byzantine-Umayyad arched-rim basin and storage jar and an Early Islamic storage jar, buff jug, cooking bowl lid, and a jar handle (buff with barbotine), none of which could be restored. Also found were some glass sherds dating to the Early Islamic period, and Mamluk and Ottoman bowl sherds (e.g. Fig. 11:1), but on balance we have concluded that these features were Umayyad/Abbasid in date. Finally, a sheep or goat tooth was found in Grave L15 and two more animal bones in L17.

Given that Muslim burials do not usually include grave goods or offerings, we assume these object fragments found their way into this special context by accident. This is supported by the fact that we recovered no restorable vessels.

L6

Parallel to and abutting the north side of Grave L17 was found another feature which, given its orientation and dimensions, appeared to be another grave (Fig. 6). Due to space constraints, however, we could not investigate fully.

L21

This feature was in a poor state of preservation and ran beyond the excavation limit (Fig. 7). However, we uncovered three sides of what was most likely a quadrilateral stone-lined feature, the stones—a single course high—varying from undressed fieldstones to fully dressed blocks (0.25 x 0.15 x 0.1m – 0.45 x 0.25 x 0.2m). We excavated the interior to a depth of 1.21m, finding sherds of mostly Early Islamic—as well as Crusader-through-Ottoman—storage jars, and a buff bowl and jug. We also recovered a sheep or goat horn.

Adjacent to this feature was found a concentration of bones and soil (L22).

Given its likely dimensions, construction method, east-west orientation and finds, we interpreted this feature as another grave, with L22 best understood as the spoil from a robber's trench.

Other Features

L23

This structure (Fig. 8) followed the same orientation as all other features, and was physically linked to Grave L17 by Wall L11. However, L23's dimensions and construction—wider walls, also without bonding, but incorporating more dressed blocks (0.3 x 0.2 x 0.15m – 0.55 x 0.25 x 0.2m)—indicate a different function. It was not possible to fully expose the feature as it continued beyond the site limit.

Finds from this feature included an Early Islamic large bowl with combed decoration (Fig. 10:4) and a cooking pot (Fig. 7:9). We also recovered some Mamluk-Ottoman artifacts (Fig. 11:4,8,9). Finally, six unidentifiable bones of medium-sized mammals were found in L23's fill.

DISCUSSION

This site was built piecemeal, with not all features in use at the same time, as indicated by the overlaying of Wall L11 by Grave L17. It may also be the case, as noted above, that the burial found mostly within L17 actually pre-dates that grave. In short, this is a portion of an Ummayyad/Abbasid cemetery.

We have described our findings and could just leave our discussion there. This is standard practice—in 'salvage' archaeology especially ('rescue' may now be a more accurate term). Two arguments for this minimalist approach are often put forth:

1. The necessarily small scale of the dig, a problem sometimes called keyhole or telephone box archaeology.
2. The other factor encouraging a minimal effort at this end of a rescue archaeology report is—ironically—the intimidatingly large quantity



Figure 7. L21 (facing west).



Figure 8. L23 (facing east).

of information available. In the case of Ramla (and many other settlements and areas), there have been hundreds of excavations over the years, at sites all across the ancient city. Between 1990 and 2008 alone, over 120 such digs were carried out (Avni 2011a). But generally speaking each dig report supplies its own piece of the puzzle without paying much attention to the jigsaw. In recent years nobody has taken all of these excavations and put them together to give us a fuller picture of early Ramla—let alone discussing related historical and anthropological issues (but see Avni 2011a, 2011b). To do so would require time and money, and Islamic archaeology remains a low priority in the scholarly community of Israel. As for rescue archaeologists, we

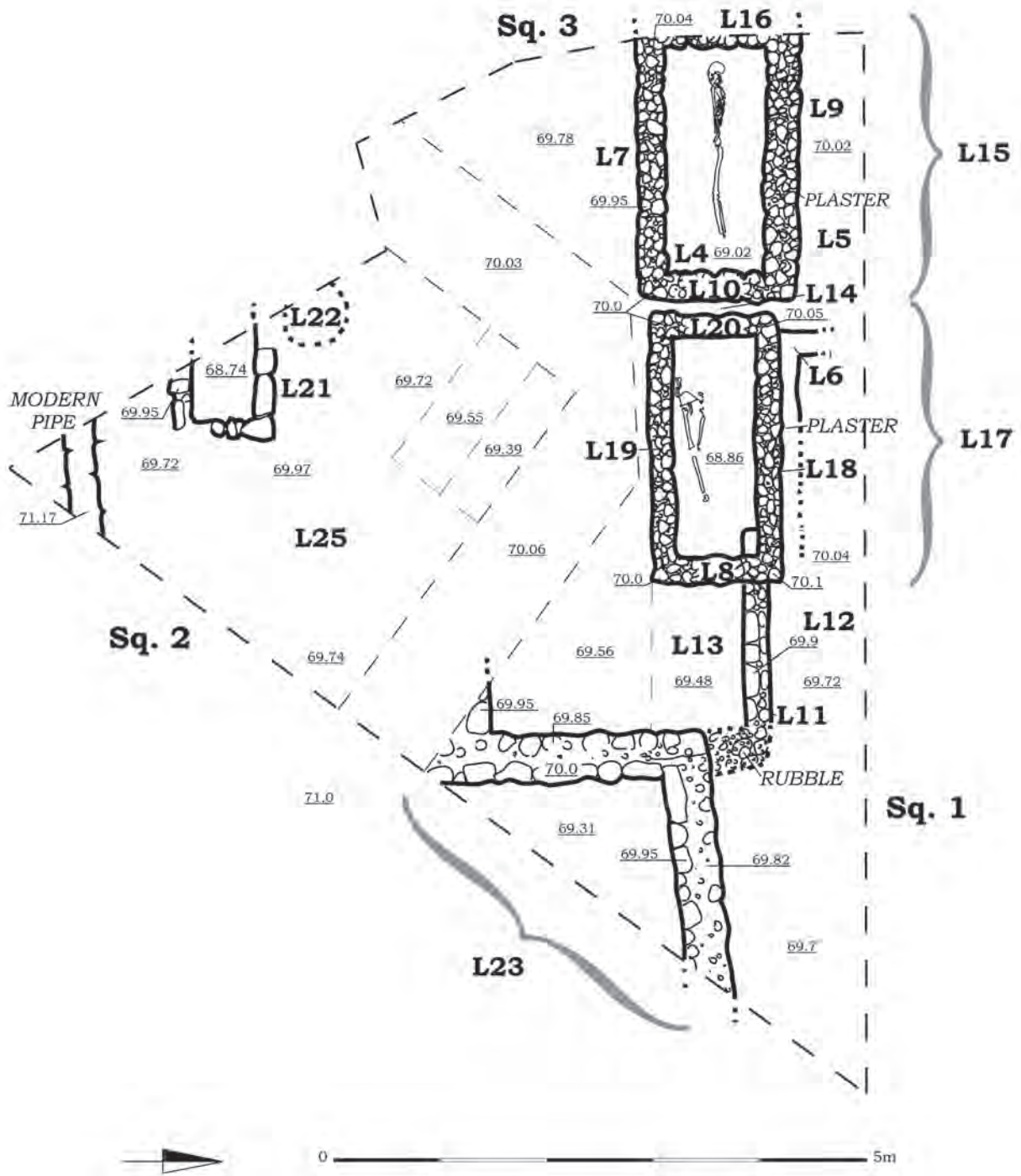


Figure 9. Post-excavation plan of the site.

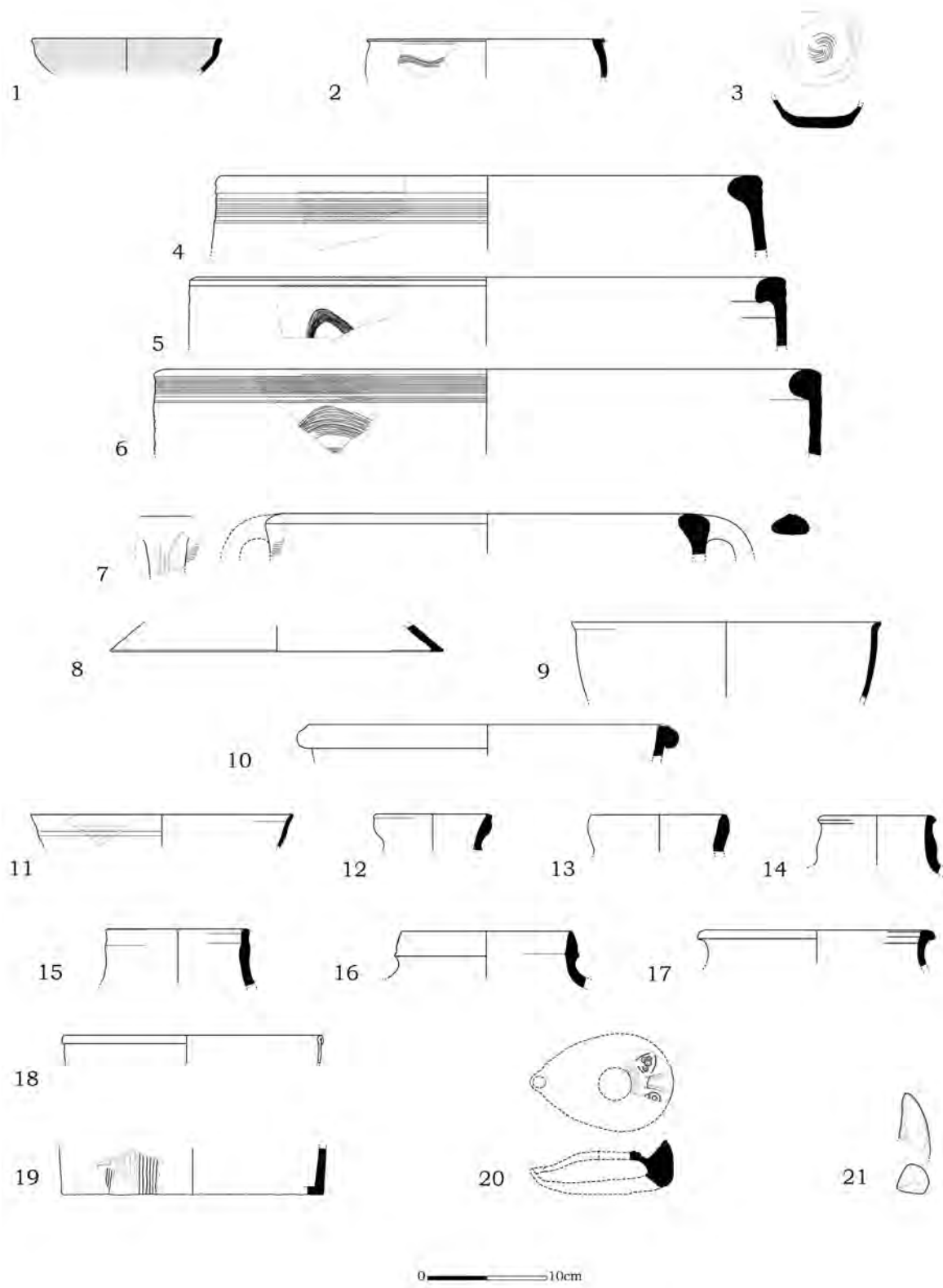


Figure 10. Early Islamic period finds.

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No.	Object	Reg. no.	Locus	Period	Description
1	Bowl	2/4	2	Umayyad/Abbasid	White bowl, splashed and modeled, fine-glazed green and white
2	Bowl	2/3	2	Umayyad	White ware, with combed wavy band decoration
3	Bowl	4/4	1	Umayyad/Abbasid	Grenade bowl; spiral combed decoration on base exterior; over-fired light red ware
4	Bowl	14/1	23	Umayyad/Abbasid	Combed decoration; red ware, burnt on interior
5	Bowl	12/3	15	Umayyad/Abbasid	Combed wavy decoration; red ware, creamy-colored on exterior (slip?)
6	Bowl	16/1	12	Umayyad/Abbasid	Combed and wavy decoration; light red ware
7	Bowl	4/3	1	Umayyad/Abbasid	With handle; combed decoration; light red ware, burnt on rim interior
8	Lid	11/4	17	Byzantine/Umayyad/Abbasid	Black ware
9	Cooking pot	14/2	23	Byzantine/Umayyad/Abbasid	Red ware with occasional quartz-like inclusions; burnt on exterior
10	Bowl	1/ 4	1	Byzantine/Umayyad/Abbasid	Light red ware
11	Bowl	11/3	17	Byzantine/Umayyad/Abbasid	Cream-colored ware
12	Storage jar	11/5	17	Umayyad	Light red ware
13	Storage jar	1/ 2	1	Byzantine/Umayyad/Abbasid	Jerusalem Ware; light orange/red
14	Storage jar	12/1	15	Byzantine/Umayyad/Abbasid	Light red ware
15	Storage jar	11/1	17	Umayyad	Light red ware
16	Storage jar	16/2	12	Umayyad/Abbasid	Dark creamy/red ware
17	Krater	12/2	15	Byzantine/Umayyad/Abbasid	White ware
18	Bowl	4/5	1	Byzantine/Umayyad/Abbasid	Glass vessel; light blue color
19	Bowl	1/1	1	Byzantine/Umayyad/Abbasid	Steatite; flat base; vertical striations
20	Oil lamp	1/3	1	Umayyad/Abbasid	Grape decoration
21	Lamp handle	15/2	13	Byzantine/Umayyad/Abbasid	Very large; cream-colored ware

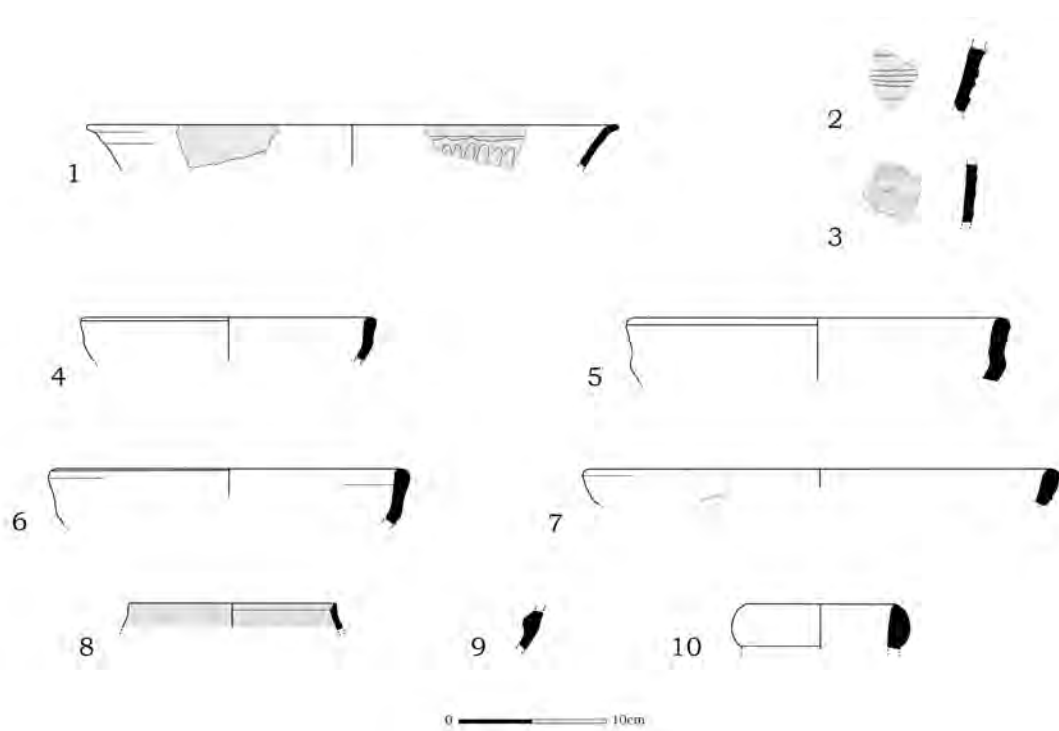


Figure 11. Mamluk and Ottoman period finds.

No.	Object	Reg. no.	Locus	Period	Description
1	Bowl	11/2	17	Mamluk	Splashed and modeled; glazed green, creamy white and golden brown on interior and exterior; incised decoration on interior
2	Bowl	4/1	1	Mamluk	Splashed and modeled; glazed green on interior and exterior; linear relief decoration on exterior; black ware with occasional chalk-like inclusions
3	Bowl	2/2	2	Mamluk	Splashed and modeled; glazed green on interior and exterior; relief decoration on exterior; light red ware, poorly fired
4	Bowl	14/3	23	Mamluk/ Ottoman	Light red ware
5	Bowl	2/1	2	Mamluk/ Ottoman	Red ware, poorly fired
6	Bowl	15/3	13	Mamluk	Gaza Ware; dark gray
7	Bowl	15/1	13	Mamluk/ Ottoman	Red ware; possible linear relief decoration on exterior
8	Bowl	14/5	23	Mamluk	Red ware; green/brown glaze on interior and exterior
9	Bowl	14/4	23	Mamluk	Gaza Ware; dark gray; thickened rim interior
10	Storage jar	4/2	1	Mamluk	Gaza Ware; dark gray

are particularly incentivized, or pressured, to write our reports quickly. Meanwhile, the cost of this much-needed project of collating our information increases with each new excavation. The puzzle of early Ramla remains an ever-growing scatter of non-integrated excavations, usually published as little more than site descriptions.

In this report we are equally constrained to be brief. However, we will try to place this cemetery in its immediate cultural and physical contexts.

Cultural Context

The bowls, jugs, jars and glass vessels found in the graves were not offerings, but neither were they high-status or remarkable. The same can be said for the east-west orientation of the graves, with the head to the west and facing south (i.e. Mecca); this was standard Muslim practice.

The young age of at least one of the individuals is worth mentioning. It would be interesting to know more about average life expectancies in Early Islamic society. One scholar estimates it to have been above 35 years for the general population (Conrad 2006: 137), which—Muslim modesty in burial practice notwithstanding—would support the same conclusion as that implied by the simple construction of the graves: these were most likely not upper class members of society.

The animal bones may or may not say something of cultural importance. That sheep or goat remains were

found in the fill of two of the three graves is perhaps noteworthy. We add here that other bones of medium-sized mammals were present around the site, without concentration. We also recovered horse bones with butcher marks, from the site topsoil—although, given the many modern contaminants also in this context, we are hesitant to read too much into these finds.

Physical Context

We do not know the exact scale of this cemetery. Neither do we have an integrated picture of its context and associations. However, previous digs uncovered Umayyad graves as far north as 140m from our site (Sion 2009), all oriented east-west like the graves at our site. Other digs show evidence only of fairly light construction in the area—mostly Abbasid—of a mixed industrial and residential nature.

Despite its sketchiness, therefore, the provisional impression given by these excavations is of an Umayyad cemetery on the outskirts of Ramla, the capital of Jund Filastin⁴. As the city expanded during the Abbasid period, this cemetery was overlaid by residential (Sion 2009) and industrial (Haddad 2010) activity—which in turn was either sparse originally, or was leveled by the 715 CE earthquake and then had much of its masonry subsequently removed during the reconstruction of the city. In the Crusader, Mamluk and Ottoman periods this part of the city retained its residential and small-scale industrial characteristics, as indeed it does today.

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4 ‘The military district of Palestine’, one of five such in the Umayyad and Abbasid province of *Bilad Al-Sham* (Syria).