

Excavation at Tsur Yitzhak - 2010

Two Byzantine Tombs

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In December 2010, a rescue excavation (license B-358/2010) was conducted in two double arcosolia tombs on the western outskirts of Khirbat Majdal. The tombs were uncovered during the expansion of settlement Tsur Yitzhak, whereupon the Israel Antiquities Authority requested that Y.G. Contract Archaeology Ltd. conduct an excavation. The field work was directed by Eyal Freiman, with guidance by Yehuda Govrin and anthropological consultation and analysis by Dr. Vered Eshed. The finds were analyzed by Shulamit Hadad, photographed by Vladimir Naikbin and illustrated by Anna Dodin.

INTRODUCTION

This site was located in the agricultural hinterland of Khirbat Majdal, a hillside ruin 600m to the east, where previous excavations had exposed the remains of a Byzantine settlement (6-7th centuries CE),

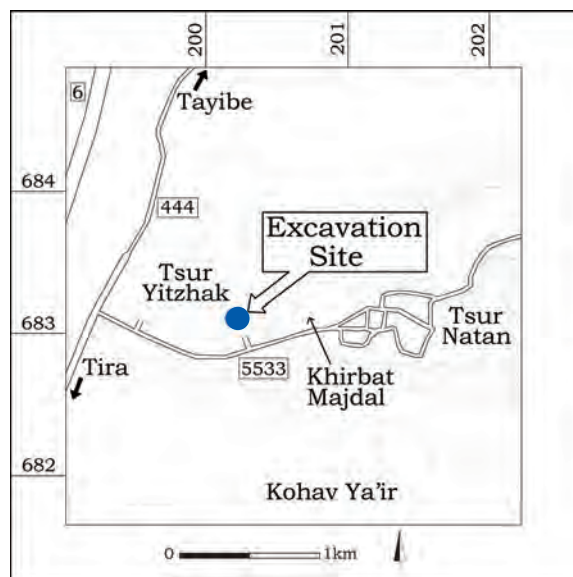


Figure 1. Excavation site location (New Israel Grid: 200157-683041; 128m asl).

including many installations, residential buildings, and a large public building with an apse, identified as a Samaritan synagogue (see Ayalon 2002, Sion *et al.* 2008).

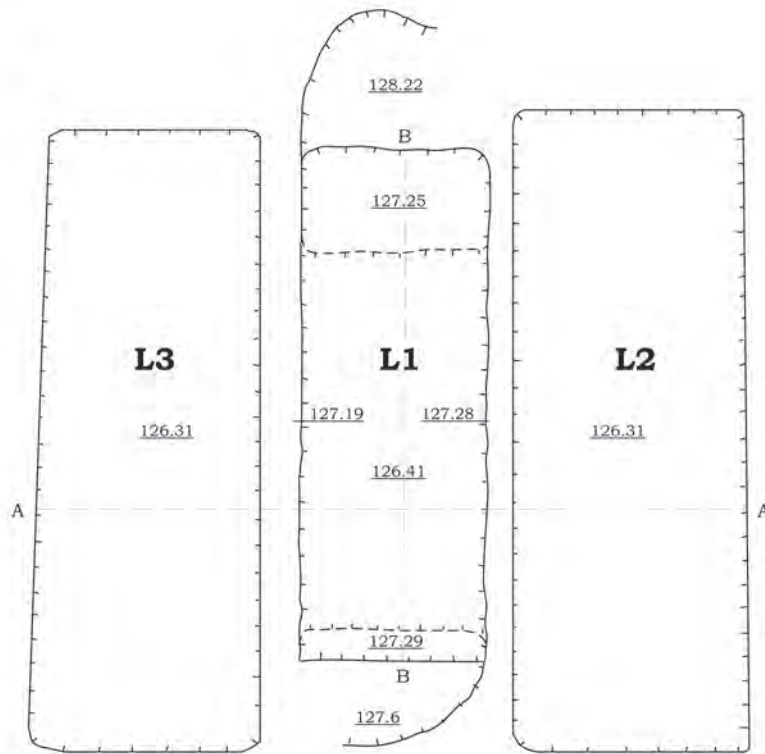
In 2010 the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) conducted test and rescue excavations around Khirbat Majdal, under the direction of Uzi Ad. In the south part of that site were found two double *arcosolia* tombs (K-486 and K-487) hewn into the native bedrock. These had been looted in the past, and were left open to be filled with debris and waste. We excavated these tombs and documented all architectural and artifact findings. The latter included broken glass bottles and decorated oil lamps, including one with multiple wick holes (see below).

THE EXCAVATION

Tomb K-486 (Figs. 2-4)

This was the southern of the two *arcosolia* tombs. Oriented northwest-southeast, access from the surface down into the tomb was through an opening which measured 1.56 x 0.6m. Within the tomb, the central space (L1) was cut to a depth of 1.8m from the

**K-486
PLAN**



SECTION

← SW

NE →

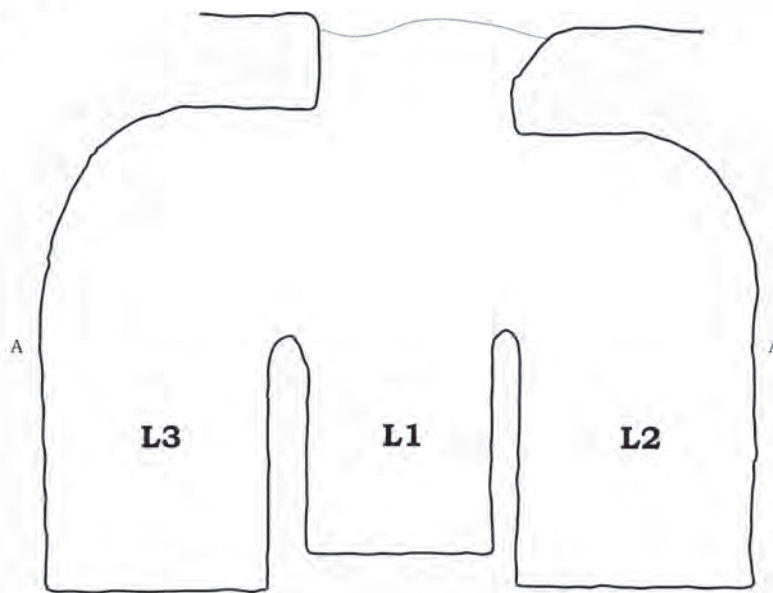


Figure 2. Plan and lateral section of Tomb K-486.



Figure 3. Tomb K-486 after excavation (facing northwest).

surface. To either side of L1 were carved the *arcosolia* (L2, L3), the floors of which were cut to a depth 0.05–0.15m below L1, forming bedrock-hewn sarcophagi (*cubicula*). Between these and the L1 central space were left walls ca. 0.12m wide and 0.8–0.9m high. The L2 and L3 *arcosolia* measured an average of 2.15 x 0.8m, and were about 1.5m high. At the northwest end of L1 a large ashlar stone was laid (0.55 x 0.5 x 0.35m), which served as an access step. About 0.5m above this ashlar stone there was carved in the wall a small notch, apparently intended to be used to facilitate access. The fill of L1 was comprised of modern sediments, waste and rocks.

Near the southwest corner of the middle pit a complete, *in situ* glass vial was discovered (Figure 9:2). The fill of L2 included bone fragments and little-worn pottery fragments. The western *arcosolium* (L3) contained a gray soil mixed with bones. Among other finds recovered on the floor here were a number of broken glass artifacts (Fig. 9:1,3-5), as well as three Samaritan-type decorated lamps, one of which incorporated multiple wick holes (Fig. 8:1-3). Also recovered from this tomb were several metal objects (Fig.

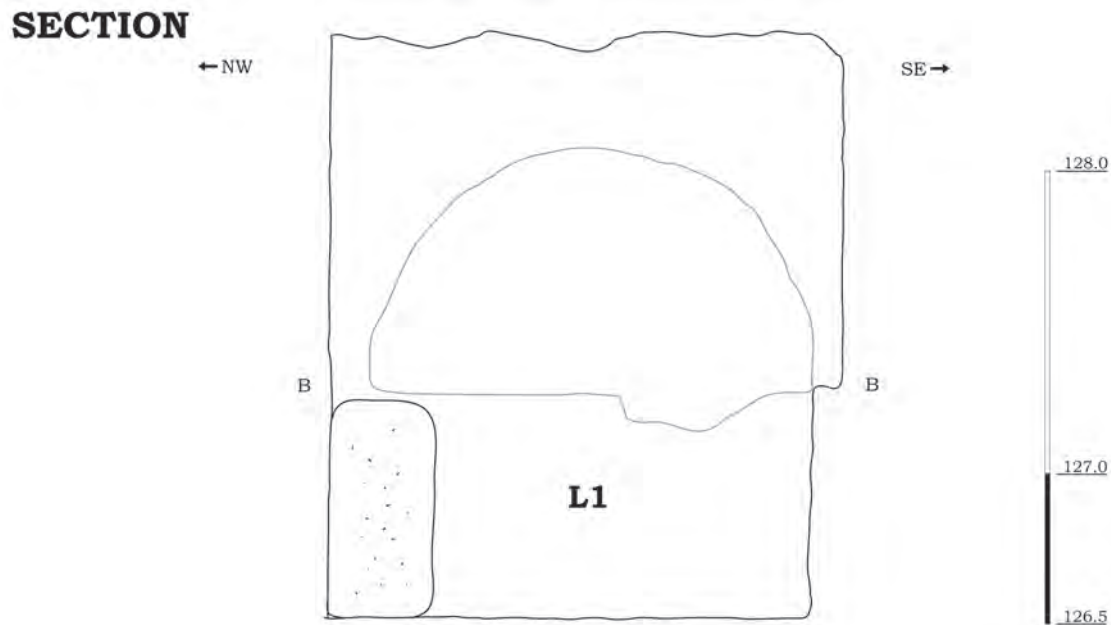


Figure 4. Longitudinal section of Tomb K-486, showing the L2 *arcosolium* from the side.



Figure 5. Tomb K-487 after excavation (facing north).

10). These finds probably dated to the 4-5th centuries CE and suggest that Tomb K-486 was associated with the local Samaritan community. Byzantine-period tombs of this type are known to us, and continued in use until the 7th century CE.

Tomb K-487 (Figs. 5-7)

This tomb was located several meters north of Tomb K-486, and was oriented north-south. The tomb

entrance had apparently been damaged in antiquity. The ceiling of the western *arcosolium* (L6) was almost completely broken. The tomb's contents were looted. In the L5 and L6 *cubicula* we found only non-articulated bone fragments. The tomb entrance measured 1.8 x 0.5m, and stood ca. 1.6m above the floor of the tomb's central space (L4). Two steps had been put in at the north end of L4 to provide access down into the tomb. The floors of L5 and L6 were 0.15-0.4m lower than L4; these *cubicula* measured 1.8 x 0.6m.

Grave gifts would originally have been left with interments here, as in Tomb K-486. However, due to looting we recovered only non-articulated bones.

THE FINDS

Shulamit Hadad

Several artifact types were found in Tomb K-486: lamps, glass vessels and metal objects, which will be presented in that order. Based on these finds the tomb should be dated to the 5th century CE.

SECTION

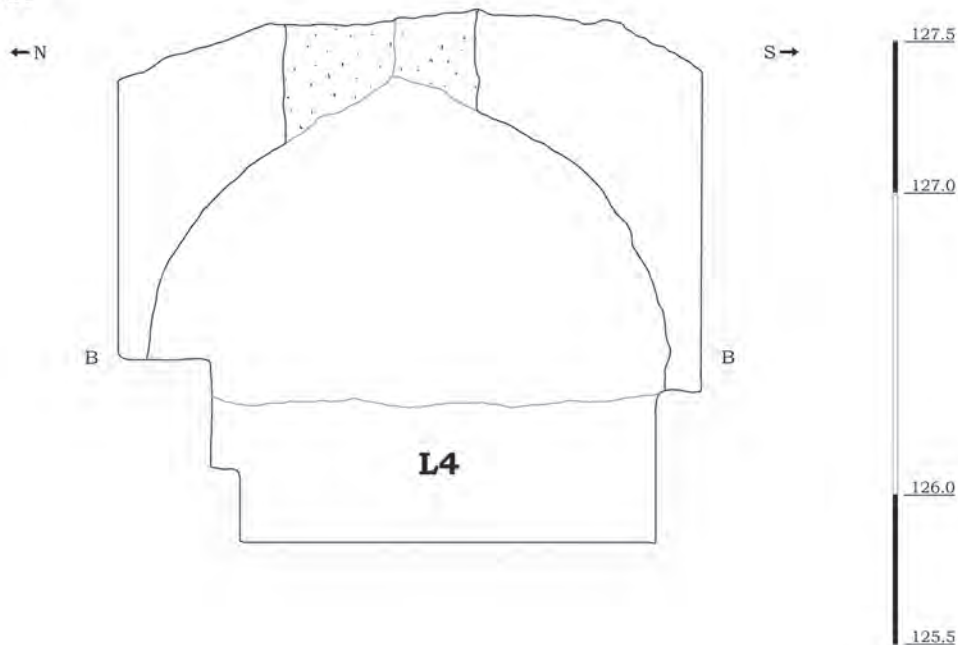
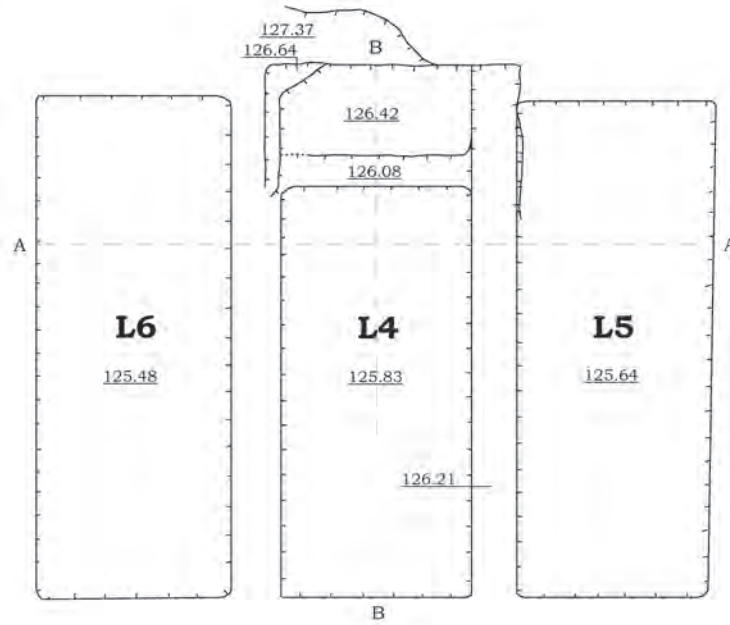


Figure 6. Longitudinal section of Tomb K-487, indicating the form of the L5 arcosolium from the side.

**K-487
PLAN**



SECTION

← W

E →

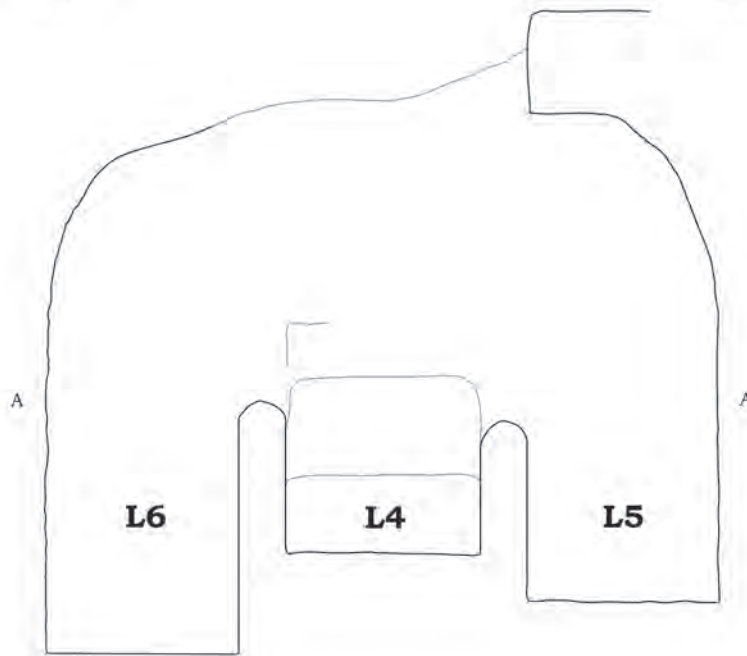


Figure 7. Plan and lateral section of Tomb K-487.

The Lamps

Three lamps were recovered, all in *cubiculum* L3 of Tomb K-486. Two lamps are complete, small and share a similar shape (Fig. 8:1,2).. Both have a nozzle which is slightly concave on both sides; the Fig. 8:2 nozzle has small wings. In each case the filling hole was formed by breaking the discus after this was defined by a ridge. The lamps both have a small knob handle and a ring base. They differ in decoration. Fig. 8:1's nozzle is decorated with a circle, while the rim is decorated with half circles and dots. The Fig. 8:1 lamp appears not to have been used at all, while the Fig. 8:2 wick hole is quite sooty. This item was decorated with a square on the nozzle, while the rim is adorned with small dot-centered circles. Near the handle several parallel lines divide the rim decoration.

Fig. 8:3, of which only part of the nozzle survives, is a lamp with multiple wick holes (*polylychnoi*); three such holes are preserved. This fragment is decorated with triangles, lines and dots, and is very sooty. Based on the flatness of this sherd it seems that the lamp was quite large.

The lamps presented here belong to the early subset of the "Samaritan" typological group. They fit with my Type 18, dated to the 4-5th centuries CE (Hadad 2002: 35-37), and Sussman's Types S1 and S4, dated to the late 3-5th centuries CE (Sussman 2002: 341-343).

The Glass Vessels

Six glass vessels were found, again all from Tomb K-486 and mostly from *cubiculum* L3. Most of the glass vessels are closed—a phenomenon typical

of tomb artifacts dating to this period. Fig. 9:1 is a bottle/jug of which the ring base and part of the wall are preserved. Two bottles were found (Fig. 9:2-3); the former is almost complete. It has a wide opening, the neck is constricted near where it meets the globular body, and the base is flat. Fig. 9:3 has a simple rim. The sole recovered jug (Fig. 9:4) has an inward-folded rim and one handle attached from rim to shoulder. It is decorated with two thin threads on the rim and a thick thread on the neck. Fig. 9:5 is part of a double tube adorned with threads. The vessel is made of green glass, while the threads are blue.

In addition were found (not illustrated): one handle fragment, perhaps belonging to a double tube; a small base fragment, possibly from a mold-blown beaker decorated with indents; a neck bottle decorated with a thick thread; and other unidentifiable glass sherds.

According to Barag (1970: 175-179, Type 12), the double tube first appeared in the 5th century CE. Double tubes, sometimes with bronze and bone Kohl sticks inside, have been found in almost every tomb dating to the late Roman and Byzantine periods (Hadad 2010: 192-193, Pls. 14.4:2; 14.5:3, 4).

The Metal Objects

The metal objects include a small ring (Fig. 10:1) and an undefined cylindrical bronze object, within which was incorporated a small iron piece (Fig. 10:2). In addition was found a possible bracelet made of bronze and covered with iron (Fig. 10:3).

Figure 8.

| No. | Vessel | Reg. no. | Locus | Tomb | Description |
|-----|----------|----------|-------|-------|----------------------|
| 1 | Oil lamp | 104 | 3 | K-486 | Yellowish-brown clay |
| 2 | Oil lamp | 103 | 3 | K-486 | Orange-brown clay |
| 3 | Oil lamp | 102 | 3 | K-486 | Orange-brown clay |

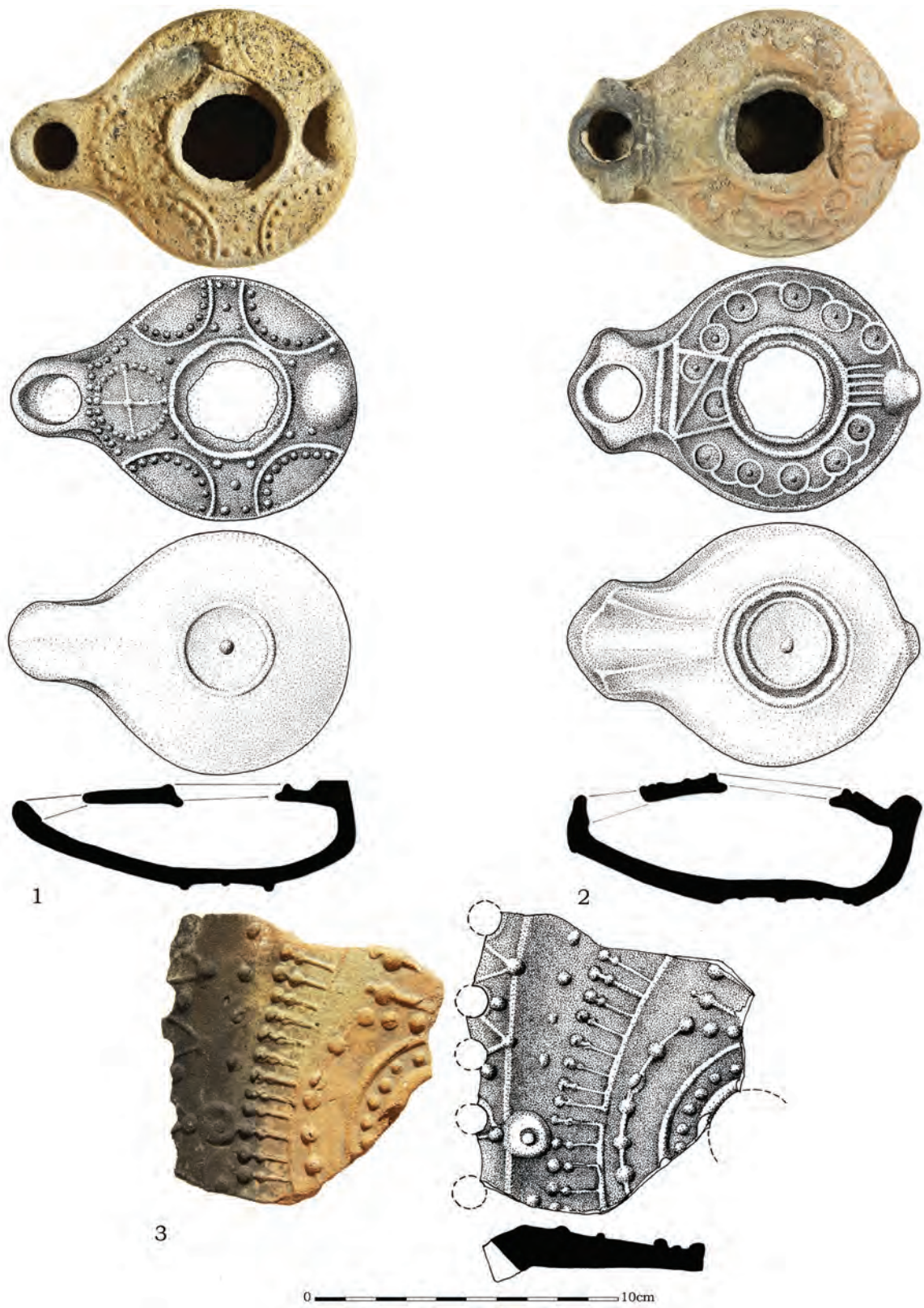


Figure 8. The ceramic oil lamps.



Figure 9. Glass vessels.

| No. | Vessel | Reg. no. | Locus | Tomb | Description |
|-----|-------------|----------|-------|-------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Bottle/jug | 106 | 3 | K-486 | Green glass |
| 2 | Bottle | 100 | 1 | K-486 | Light bluish green glass |
| 3 | Bottle | 105 | 3 | K-486 | Light bluish green glass |
| 4 | Jug | 101 | 3 | K-486 | Green glass |
| 5 | Double tube | 107 | 3 | K-486 | Green glass, blue threads |



Figure 10. Metal objects.

| No. | Object | Reg. no. | Locus | Tomb | Description |
|-----|-------------------|----------|-------|-------|--------------------------------|
| 1 | Ring | 111 | - | K-486 | Bronze |
| 2 | Unidentified | 112 | - | K-486 | Bronze exterior, iron interior |
| 3 | Possible bracelet | 113 | - | K-486 | Bronze covered with iron |

SUMMARY

These tombs were associated with the multi-period site of Khirbat Majdal. According to the Samaritan oil lamps discovered in Tomb K-486, one might associate the tombs with the Samaritan population in this locality—attested to by the aforementioned nearby Samaritan synagogue (Ayalon 2002). The tombs were probably 4-5th century in date. This rock-cut

tomb type continued in use until the 7th century CE, and was a common burial tradition of the Byzantine period. The tombs were evidently looted in ancient times, incurring damage to the tomb entrances. This looting activity may also have contributed to the disarticulation of skeletal remains. It is also possible that secondary burial was practiced here, whereby bones may have been collected and redeposited within the tomb.

TWO BYZANTINE TOMBS

Table 1. Catalogue of objects from Tomb K-486.

| Reg. no. | Object | Locus | Tomb | Description |
|----------|-------------------|-------|-------|---------------------------------------|
| 100 | Bottle | 1 | K-486 | Light bluish-green glass |
| 101 | Jug | 3 | K-486 | Green glass |
| 102 | Lamp | 3 | K-486 | Orange-brown clay |
| 103 | Lamp | 3 | K-486 | Orange-brown clay |
| 104 | Lamp | 3 | K-486 | Yellowish-brown clay |
| 105 | Bottle | 3 | K-486 | Light bluish-green glass |
| 106 | Bottle/jug | 3 | K-486 | Green glass |
| 107 | Double tube | 3 | K-486 | Green glass, blue threads |
| 108 | Double-tube? | | K-486 | Handle fragment? |
| 109 | Beaker? | | K-486 | Base fragment; decorated with indents |
| 110 | Bottle? | | K-486 | Decorated with thick thread |
| 111 | Ring | | K-486 | Bronze |
| 112 | Unidentified | | K-486 | Cylindrical form; bronze and iron |
| 113 | Possible bracelet | | K-486 | Bronze and iron |

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