

Excavation at Tsur Natan - 2011

An Iron Age Tomb, Byzantine Quarry and Other Remains

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with contributions by Hagar Ben Basat, Vered Eshed, Gunnar Lehmann & Othmar Keel

Carried out in March-May 2011 by Y.G. Contract Archaeology Ltd. under the academic auspices of the Hebrew Union College, this excavation (license B-362/2011) was located on the crown of a high hill overlooking the central coastal plain of Israel. The project team included archaeologists Sergey Alon, Yehuda Govrin, Conn Herriott, Yitzhak Marmelstein and Oz Varoner, working with students from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a Bedouin excavation crew from Bir al-Maksur. Vered Eshed conducted the on-site physical anthropology. Aerial photography was carried out by Skyview Ltd. In post-excavation work on the tomb artifacts, Sergey Alon restored the ceramics, as well as photographing and drawing all artifacts. The tomb ceramic finds were analyzed by Sergey Alon, Gunnar Lehmann and Oz Varoner. Othmar Keel studied the scarabs, Hagar Ben Basat the beads and shells, and Oz Varoner the metal finds. All finds from the Byzantine quarry were drawn and analyzed by Conn Herriott.



Frontispiece. Left: Some findings from the Iron Age tomb. Right: aerial photograph of the F12 quarry.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

SITE OVERVIEW

The 176m-high hilltop location currently named for Tsur Natan,¹ the modern *moshav* built there, immediately overlooks the central coastal plain of Israel. As well as holding a commanding view, this site has several environmental and positional points in its favor. The altitude provides cooling breezes to mitigate the summer heat, as well as ample opportunities for a diversified economy: the alluvial soils of the plain for growing cereals, the hills for vines and olives, and the rocky areas for grazing (Ayalon *et al.* 1988-89; Ayalon *et al.* 1994: 2). In terms of ancient roads, both an important route from the Hills of Samaria and the *Via Maris* passed near the hill (*ibid.*).

Given this advantageous location, it is not surprising that previous archaeological work at this site has identified a large variety of remains from the Neolithic through Ottoman periods.

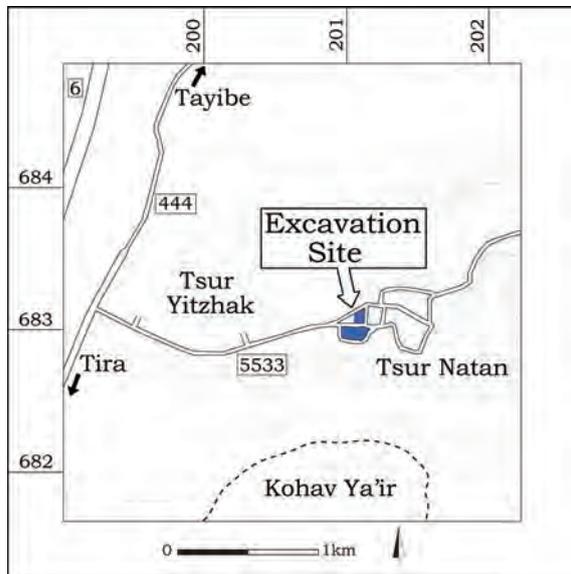


Figure 1.1. Site location (New Israel Grid: 201073-683027; 175m asl).

1 Former names include Khirbat Majdal (Arabic) and Antesion (Byzantine period).

SITE HISTORY

Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (9500-8500 BCE): Numerous cupmarked bedrock installations were found here, with the possibility of some Epipalaeolithic (18,000-10,000 BCE) tools (Marder *et al.* 2007: 79).

Early Bronze Age (3300-2300 BCE): Two caves with anthropogenic deposits from this period were found on the north slope of the hill (Sion *et al.* 2008).

Iron Age II (10-7th centuries BCE): Two small villages—Khirbat Dardar and Khirbat Majdal in Arabic—have been identified, with the land around being used on a limited scale to grow and process olives and grapes (Ayalon *et al.* 1994: 2). There is some evidence that occupation here did in fact date back to the Middle Bronze Age, and extended into Persian and Hellenistic times (Ayalon 2002).

Roman/Byzantine: This period saw a significant increase in cultivation and land use (Ayalon *et al.* 1994: 2; Sion *et al.* 2008), including groupings of wine presses, oil presses, water cisterns and a tomb every 100-200m among the terraces. Some 50-60 such groups were found and we estimate that 70-80 originally existed. It has been suggested that these clusters represent family holdings (Ayalon *et al.* 1994: 2). Also found were quarries, cupmarks, stone clearance heaps, *shomera* field towers, lime kilns, a road, a potters' kiln, a columbarium, and a rich urban complex yielding evidence for olive oil, wine, flour, and glass industries, as well as a *kasr* tower and a large apsidal building understood to be a synagogue (later a church). This settlement was interpreted as having been founded by Jews in the 1st-2nd century, later occupied and expanded by Samaritans in the 5th-6th century, and subsequently taken over by Christians (*ibid.*).

Umayyad-Abbasid: There was found evidence of a possible mosque near the Jewish-Samaritan complex, as well as a potsherd with an Arabic inscription (Ayalon *et al.* 1994: 13). This suggests at least some degree of occupation during this period, which abruptly ended some time in the 8th century.

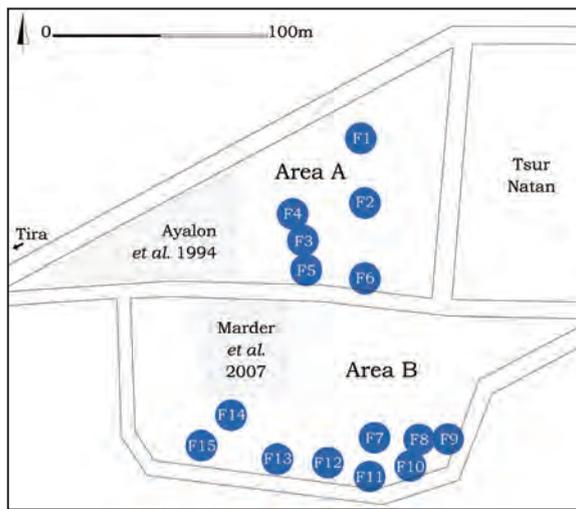


Figure 1.2. Site map with excavation features marked.

Mamluk-Ottoman: It seems the site was forgotten for all but as a source of building stone until a small village developed again in the 13th century (Ayalon *et al.* 1994: 14). The 16th-17th century tomb of Sheikh Musharef would later be built over the church. Around the tomb a graveyard would grow. The rest of the settlement remains were destroyed by modern roads and agricultural terraces.

It must be emphasized that our knowledge of this hilltop's rich and intriguing history—to which we are unable to do justice here—is due largely to the excellent fieldwork and publishing of E. Ayalon of the Eretz Israel Museum, working first with A. Kidron and Y. Sharvit, and later with E. Matthews, W. Neidinger and a team from the Texas Foundation for Archaeological



Figure 1.3. Area A (facing northeast).



Figure 1.5. Area B-east, (facing southeast).



Figure 1.4. Area A (facing north).



Figure 1.6. Area B-west (facing west).

and Historical Research. The work of O. Marder *et al.* (2007), whilst less relevant to our own report, is also an excellent resource. The Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) work carried out by teams led by O. Sion, M. Haiman, B-A. Artzi, H. Torge, and Y. Dagan is also useful, although their publications (e.g. Sion *et al.* 2008) were limited in scope.

THE CURRENT EXCAVATION

In our excavation we uncovered four loose phases of activity:

1. An Iron Age IB/IIA rock-cut shaft tomb (L2) comprising a shaft cutting diagonally down to a roughly egg-shaped chamber. The shaft had been truncated by later quarrying (Phase 3) at the site. Seven skeletons in various degrees of articulation were found within the chamber, as well as many fine artifacts including scarabs, beads, a zoomorphic ceramic vessel and metal bracelets.
2. Within the quarry were found features which the quarry respected, but which most likely post-dated the Phase 1 tomb. These features

include an olive press (L5) and a press basin (L7). Several cupmarks (L6, L8) were also found; we could not date these, but one was respected by a quarry feature. Therefore—somewhat arbitrarily, it must be said—we have assigned all cupmarks to this phase.

3. In terms of sheer scale, the dominant archaeological features of the site are the 15 quarrying features (F1-F15) that were cut into exposed outcroppings of *nari* bedrock on the hilltop. They showed evidence of standard block and tool sizes. Finds from the quarry—in large part simple pottery vessels—were mostly Byzantine, but ranged from the Iron Age to the Crusader/Mamluk periods.
4. This post-quarrying phase of the site consists of a built feature (L4) and another activity area (L1) constructed inside the amphitheatre-like hollows formed by the quarries. Like the latter, these features yielded pottery dating to the Byzantine/Early Islamic period.

We will document our findings in two parts: the first focusing on the Phase 1 tomb, and the second on the quarry and other features from Phases 2-4.

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