

RECYCLING THE VALLEY PRELIMINARY REPORT OF THE 2012 EXCAVATIONS AT TALL DĀMIYAH

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Introduction

Recent archaeological and associated research has demonstrated intriguing short-term occupation activities in the Central Jordan Valley during the first millennium BC (*e.g.* Petit 2009a, and references therein). Being exceptional in Near Eastern-archaeology and even beyond, this remarkable pattern of sedentary occupation forces scientists to widen their geographical scope in order to understand how people in antiquity interacted with the surrounding areas. Inhabitants with a sedentary way of life were avowedly involved in a continuing process of migration and return migration to search for the most favourite areas. Due to a lack of research in the foothills and on the plateau directly east of the Central Jordan Valley, archaeologist can only guess where the migrating people went to in times of difficulties. The project *Recycling the Valley*, initiated by the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities, intends to investigate the ways in which the valley was recycled by inhabitants during the Iron Age II and Persian Periods (*c.* 950-330 BC). Furthermore, it will try to raise public awareness about the value of archaeological sites in vulnerable areas in modern Jordan. Recycling the valley was not solely a significant issue for inhabitants in antiquity, but is still relevant today.

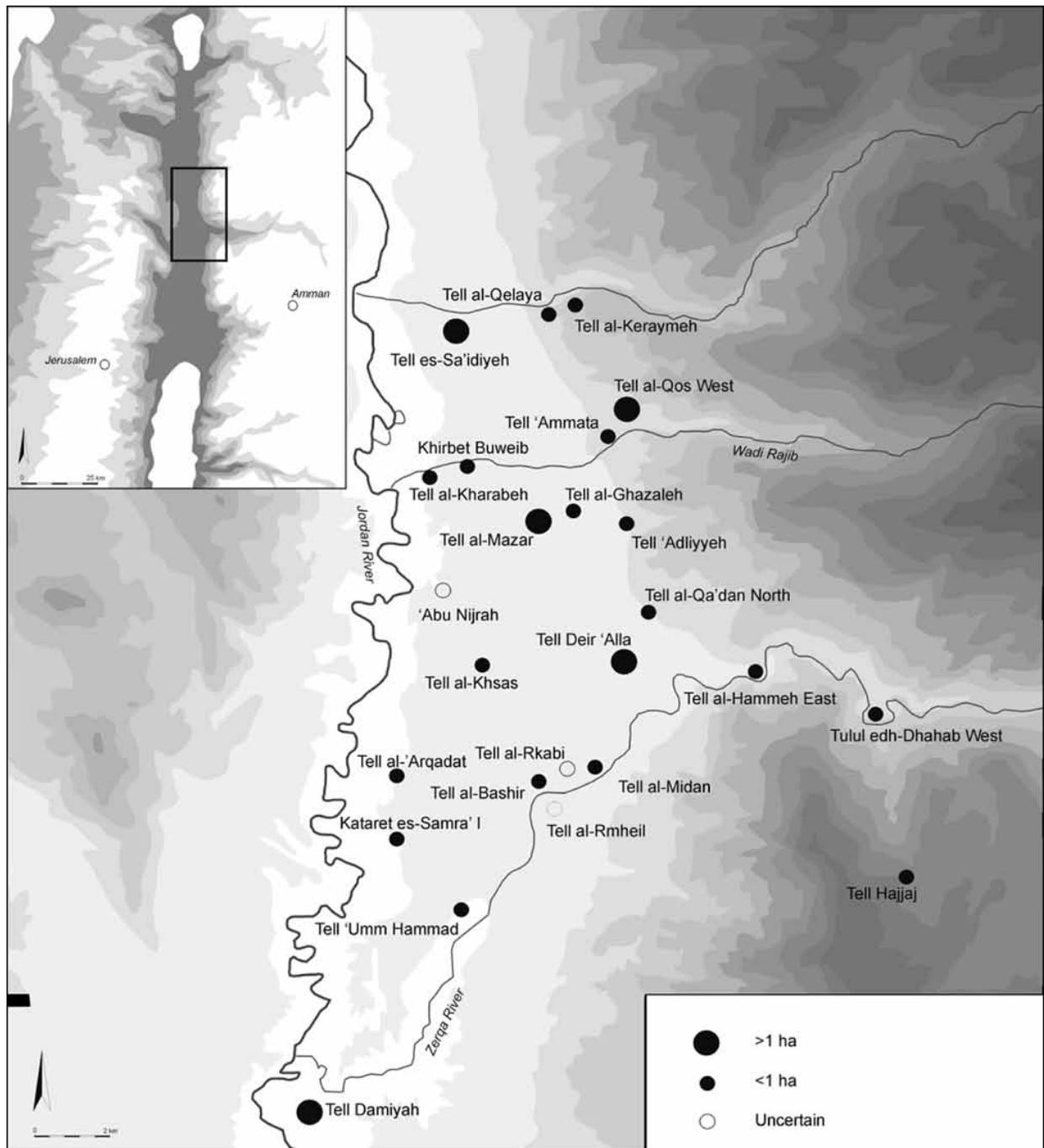
The project *Recycling the Valley*

Previous archaeological expeditions at sites like Tall as-Sa'idiyeh, Tall al-Mazār and Tall Dayr 'Allā (*e.g.* Franken 1969; 1992; Yassine 1984; 1988; Pritchard 1985; Tubb 1988; 1990; Van der Kooij 2001; 2006; Yassine and Van der Steen 2012) have stated that the Central Jordan Valley was extensively, but not continuously, inhabited during the first millennium BC (**Fig. 1**). The area is considered a semi-arid region with insufficient precipitation for sustainable rain-fed agriculture (Wirth 1971: 92).

Even the existence of an irrigation system in the area (Kaptijn 2009; 2010) could not overcome all extremities in climate; the inhabitants were regularly forced to leave the area. Also other processes have influenced the occupation history, such as natural catastrophes, periods of political instability and economic malaise. Occupation in the Central Jordan Valley followed a complex pattern of settling and abandoning during the first millennium BC (*e.g.* Petit 2009a).

Theoretical Background

Migration of sedentary people in ancient societies is regarded by most archaeologist as highly important in affecting cultural evolution (Young 2002). Archaeologists do have, however, difficulties of identifying these human movements. During the last decades, the study of human migration was intensified especially due to the use of models developed by geographers, biological anthropologists, anthropologists and sociologists. An important result was the acceptance that migration can be viewed as a structured behaviour, that “tends to develop in a broadly predictable manner once it begins” (Anthony 1990: 896). The number of publications about human migration in ancient societies increases, but the actual identification in the archaeological record remains rare. Hard evidence derived mainly from other disciplines, like the spatial distributions of human genes and languages (Renfrew 1987; Fix 1991; Cavalli-Sforza *et al.* 1994). It seems time to tackle these difficulties in identifying medium- and short-distance migration archaeologically by investigating associated ancient settlement activities in two restricted geographic areas with different environmental conditions. Migration and return-migration is expected when there are negative stresses in the home region and positive attractions in the destination region (Lee 1966; Gmelch 1980). Former stud-



1. Topographic map of the Central Jordan Valley with location of Tall Dāmiyah and other Iron Age sites.

ies in the research area have indeed stated the existence of stress and attraction, but fail to identify human movements archaeologically (Van der Kooij 2001; Petit 2009a). Excavations in both the home and destination regions will open a new chapter in understanding migration, return-migration and village life in this part of the Near East during Iron Age II and the Persian Period.

Objectives and Methodological Framework

The project *Recycling a Valley* intends to systematically investigate the role of the Central Jordan Valley within a larger area during Iron Age II and the Persian Period. It continues at the point where other projects stopped and includes the investigation of settlements on the eastern plateau. Ceramic analyses did confirm the previously suggested cultural

relationship between the Central Jordan Valley and the eastern plateau (Groot 2011). The project differs in theoretical, methodological and geographical aspects from previous work. Whereas the plateau immediately east of the Central Jordan Valley is largely unknown, the main focus in the valley from the beginning onwards lies on individual sites. Hardly any attempts were directed at studying the area as an intertwined and interrelated system, except maybe for the project *Settling the Steppe* (Kaptijn *et al.* 2005; Petit *et al.* 2006; Hourani *et al.* 2008). A detailed reconstruction of the occupation history of the eastern plateau and the Central Jordan Valley is necessary to test the sweeping theories proposed until now.

Preliminary Results of the 2012 Season

One of the sites that is expected to generate significant information about the role of the Central Jordan Valley in the Southern Levant is Tall Dāmiyah (Fig. 2). This settlement mound is located in the Zor, very close to the confluence of the Zarqa and the Jordan River. Previous excavation work by Dr. Omar al-Ghul of the Yarmouk University and the author in 2004 and 2005 revealed extensive Iron Age occupation, pits from the Persian Period and two undated, but post-Persian burials (Kaptijn *et al.* 2005; Petit *et al.* 2006; Hourani *et al.* 2008; Petit 2008; 2009a: 103-151; 2009b). However, the discovered, almost continuous Iron Age occupation did not correspond to habitation cycles of temporary sites in the area.

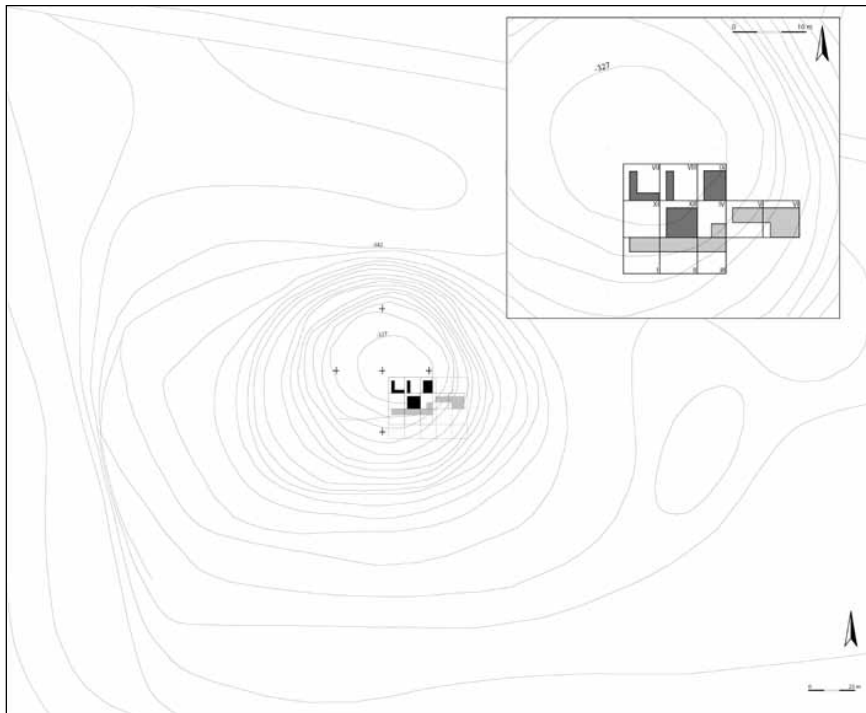
The exceptional situation at Tall Dāmiyah had to be investigated in order to understand the way people interacted with the eastern plateau.

Excavation work at the site, headed by the author, was conducted from the 30th of September until the 8th of November 2012. The work was organised as a joined project between the Yarmouk University and the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities. Due to changes within the board of the Faculty of Archaeology of the Yarmouk University, members of the university were unable to attend the fieldwork. Regular contact kept the university informed about the excavation progress. The team in 2012 included Tine Rassalle, Mariette Driessen, Yannick Boswinkel, Jeroen Rensen, and Lucas Petit (director), assisted by eight local workers. The team members stayed in the Station for Archaeological Research in Dayr ‘Allā. The representative of the Department of Antiquities was Mrs. Sanna Khalil al Bóbbó.

The primary objective of this season was to investigate the role of the settlement at Tall Dāmiyah in the Jordan Valley during the late Iron Age and Persian Period (c. 950-330 BC). The focal points were threefold: first, to investigate the seventh century BC occupation at the site and its relationship with the Neo-Assyrian Empire; second, to elucidate the chronological relationship between the late Iron Age occupa-



2. General view of Tall Dāmiyah in 2012 from the northeast.



3. Contour map of Tall Dāmiyah and areas of excavation, (based on a drawing by Bataineh).

tion and the succeeding storage pits; and third, to study the post-Persian occupation remains at Tall Dāmiyah. In order to achieve these goals four excavation units were opened: three 5x5m squares and one 5x4m trench (Fig. 3).

A post-Persian Cemetery (Phase 2)

The team encountered more than twenty burials in the uppermost layers during the 2012 season (Fig. 4). The occurrence of so many burials was somewhat surprising, since previous excavations in 2004 and 2005 produced only two graves with the skeletal remains of two children (Petit 2009a: 123-124). Associated pottery and small finds, such as beads (Fig. 5) and a glass

vessel (Fig. 6), indicate a Late Roman or Byzantine date for the cemetery. Except for one, all skeletal remains were buried oriented east to west, with the head at the western end. However, the position of the body differed considerably among the graves. Some burials were secondary, with partly dis-articulated bones at the moment of disposal; one grave with the remains of an adult person contained an extra skull, posi-



4. A burial with one adult in square IX.



5. Beads from a burial in square VII.



6. Glass vessel from a burial in square VII.

tioned near the lower legs (**Fig. 7**); and regularly two individuals were buried on top of each other in one and the same, oval-shaped pit.

The discovery of a cemetery at Tall Dāmiyah is very interesting concerning the rather meagre evidence of Late Roman and Byzantine occupation remains in the area. The surface has been scattered with pottery shards from these periods as was stated by numerous on- and off-site surveys (e.g. Ibrahim *et al.* 1975; Yassine *et al.* 1988; Kaptijn 2009), but clear remains of villages, cities or towns are rare (Kaptijn 2009: 259). Tall ‘Ammata is probably one of the few exceptions (Kaptijn 2009: 210-230; Petit 2009a: 33-63). However, this site is located more than twenty kilometres away from Tall Dāmiyah. In the 1960s one of the team members of the Tall Dayr ‘Alla expedition, Diana Kirkbride, had discovered several Byzantine graves during her search for an Iron Age cemetery (Franken 1960; Kaptijn 2009: 252-256). Most of the skeletons she uncovered lay extended on their backs with arms straight along the body and orientated



7. A burial in square IX with the skeletal remains of an adult and an ‘extra’ skull.

northeast-southwest. Some of the graves were lined with stones and covered with stone slabs. The finds include beads, rings and glass bottles with long necks (Kaptijn 2009: 255). It is suggested here that the cemetery on the summit of Tall Dāmiyah was used by mobile groups. It was the place with which they were historically associated and emotionally related, and remained the home for their deceased group-members.

The latest feature at the cemetery was a grave with standing stones along the sides and slabs on top. The pit was dug through one of the Roman-Byzantine graves. Three rings, one iron toggle pin and a mirror accompanied the skeletal remains of an older man. The finds and the stratigraphic position assume a post-Byzantine date.

Persian Remains (phase 6)

The graves of phase 2 wrought havoc with several large storage pits, some of them mudbrick-lined (**Fig. 8**). Similar pits were found during the 2004 and 2005 seasons and were preliminary dated to the Persian Period (Kaptijn *et al.* 2005; Petit *et al.* 2006; Petit 2009a: 121-122). The contents of the pits comprise a mixture of settlement debris, grey-coloured, fine organic material and objects used in textile production. The presence of Late Iron Age and Persian pits on settlement mounds in the Central Jordan Valley is well known, but little understood. Tall as-Sa‘idiyah Stratum IV and III-E-F (e.g. Pritchard 1985: 39-42; Tubb 1990: 24-25; 1998: 130-131; Tubb and Dorrell 1991: 74), Tall ‘Ammata phase 9-8 (Petit 2009a: 42-45), Tall Dayr ‘Allā phase IV/V (Van der Kooij and Ibrahim 1989; Ibrahim and Van der Kooij 1997; Groot 2006; 2011; Van der Kooij 2006) and Tall al-Mazār Stratum I (Yassine and Van der Steen 2012: 14-15) reveal lined- and unlined-pits



8. A mudbrick-lined pit in square XII dated to the Persian Period.

filled with older settlement debris, organic residues and an exceptionally high number of loom weights and spindle whorls (*e.g.* Tubb 1985; Petit 2009). No evidence of architecture was discovered associated with those features and it is assumed that the pits were used by semi-nomadic or nomadic pastoralists using the summits of the mounds as camp-sites.

In square VII three pits were encountered of which two were mudbrick-lined. While organic material was exposed at the bottom, no objects related to textile production were discovered. The most northern pit is 1.40 meters deep and the southern mudbrick-lined pit only reaches a depth of one meter. The unlined pit in square IX did match the traditional characteristics with organic residues and loom weights (**Fig. 9**). Located on the eastern slope the original depth of the pit is difficult to reconstruct since sediments have been eroded from the top. A large, perfectly round and mudbrick-lined pit in square XII was documented, but not excavated. The pottery assemblage inside the excavated pits at Tall Dāmiyah is mixed.

Late Iron Age Occupation (Phase 9)

At the end of the 2012 season the excavation team reached undisturbed layers dated to the seventh century BC on a few locations. The excavation of the burials had taken most of the time and the destruction debris of phase 9 could only partly be investigated. The evidence equals the situation as was discovered in 2004 and 2005: a sudden conflagration accompanied by fire that gutted down the seventh century BC houses (Petit 2009a: 117-120). A spectacular find in 2004 was a clay bulla with cuneiform writing (Petit 2008; 2009a: 118, Fig. 8.38: 20). The minor excavation work in 2012 revealed this destruction debris



9. Loom weights from a Persian pit in square IX.

and a collection of restorable pottery (**Fig. 10**). A stone roof roller was discovered in square VIII (**Fig. 11**). The rich Iron-Age finds recovered in the limited excavation area at Tall Dāmiyah are very promising for the future.

General Acknowledgement

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10. Iron Age pottery from the destruction debris.



11. A stone roof roller from roof debris in square VIII.

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