

# A Cultic Slab at Damiya

by

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On a casual visit to the Damiya dolmen field, a large limestone slab with hollows around the perimeter was found (see Plate XXXIV, 1). Located on Dr. James Swauger's survey map of the Damiya dolmens,<sup>1</sup> the slab is approximately 10 meters north-north-east of dolmen 2 and 18 meters south-east of dolmen 3 (see Figure 1). The slab is oriented on a true north-south axis. The neighboring dolmens are also oriented north-south but do not have the exact north-south orientation of the slab.

The slab is a monolith of dark gray limestone, which is seamed with ferrous material (see Plate XXXIV, 1 and Fig. 2). Maximum measurements are 3,22 meters north-south and 2,30 meters east-west. The slab varies in thickness between 26 and 8 centimeters. The surface of the slab has been heavily pocked by erosion and some of the stone has broken away (see Plate XXXIV, 2). The slab is partially supported by small stones and appears to have been level originally. At present, it tilts to the west at an angle of approximately 30° (Plate XXXIV, 1). Some of the supporting stones are still *in situ* and other are visible on the slope below the slab. At no point does the slab rest on the natural surface of the slope.

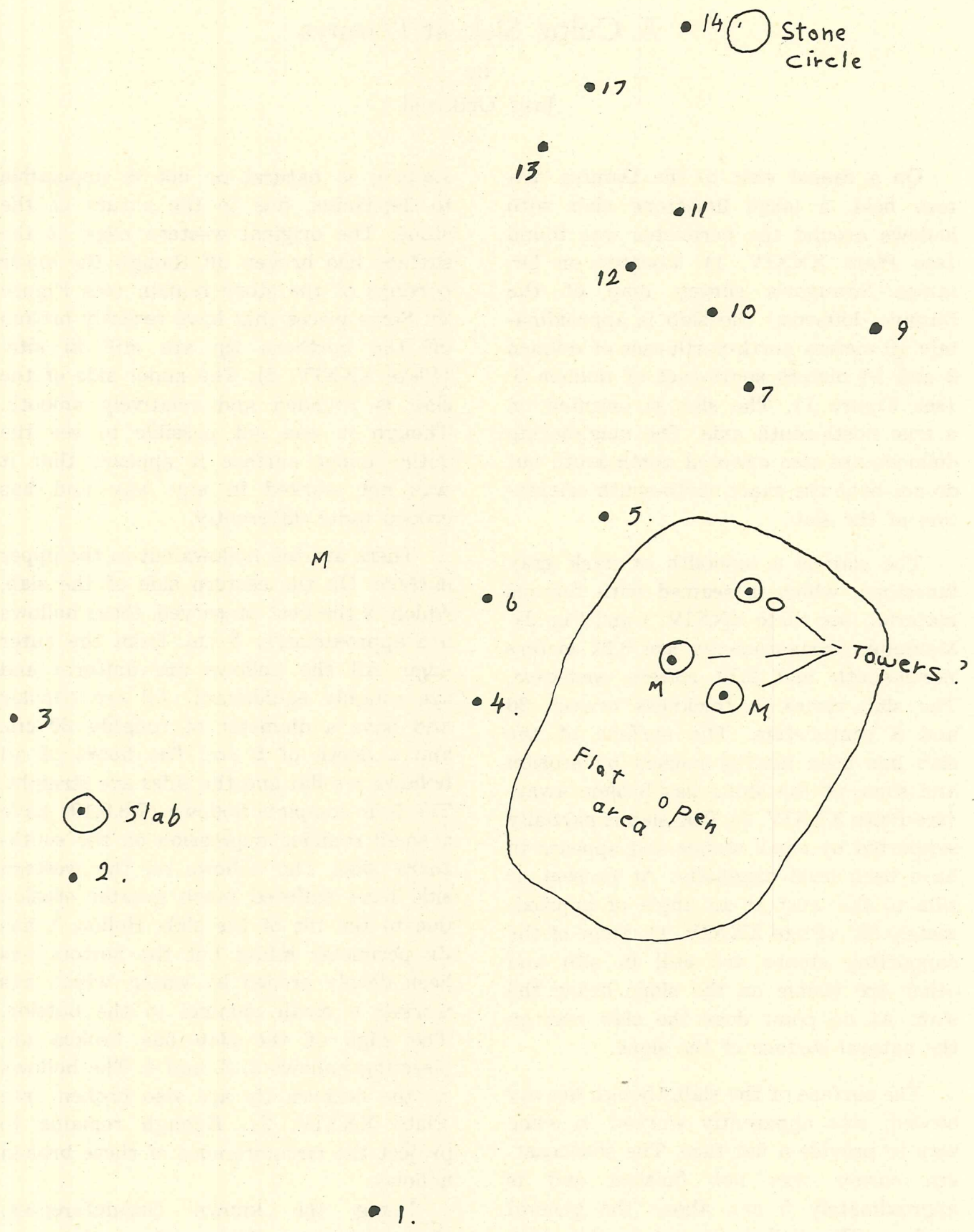
The surface of the slab, though heavily eroded, was apparently worked in some way to provide a flat face. The southeastern corner was not finished and is approximately 5 cm. above the general surface. The hollow carved in this area (hollow 9) is the same depth as the others. The slab shows evidence of shaping on the eastern edge though whether this

shaping is natural or not is impossible to determine, due to the nature of the stone. The original western edge of the surface has broken off though the lower portions of the stone remain (see Figure 2). Some pieces that have recently broken off the northern tip are still *in situ* (Plate XXXIV, 2). The under side of the slab is rounded and relatively smooth. Though it was not possible to see the entire under surface it appears that it was not worked in any way and has eroded quite differently.

There are ten hollows cut in the upper surface. On the eastern side of the slab, which is the best preserved, these hollows are approximately 8 cm. from the outer edge. All the hollows are uniform and are roughly equidistant. All are circular and have a diameter of roughly 20 cm. and a depth of 5 cm. The floors of all hollows are flat and the sides are straight. The four complete hollows (7,8,9,10) have a small rounded depression on the southern side. The hollows on the western side have suffered much greater erosion due to the tilt of the slab. Hollow 1 has its perimeter intact but the bottom has been deeply eroded by water, which has worked a small channel to the outside. The edge of the slab has broken off, bisecting hollows 2, 3, and 4. The hollows on the northern tip are also broken (see Plate XXXIV, 2). Enough remains to project the circumference of these broken hollows.

Using the known circumferences, the distances from the edge on the best preserved side, and the broken pieces still *in situ*, one can reconstruct the probable shape of the original slab

(1) Swauger, James, "1962 Survey of Three Dolmen Sites in Jordan," chart, page 9.



After Swager, Sheets 1 and 2

Fig. 1

(see Figure 3). From this it can be seen that the slab was most likely a symmetrical egg shape with hollows 5 and 10 on the north-south axis.

Any interpretation of the slab must attend extensive research. Certain observations, however, should be mentioned as possible starting points. First, the slab is clearly artificial. The odds against ten uniform geometrically shaped hollows ranged on the perimeter of a symmetrical slab are astronomical. Second, it appears that the slab had some cultic significance, perhaps as an offering table of some sort. All features of the slab point to extreme care and effort in execution. Some very strong motivation was necessary.

Though the Damiya slab appears to be unique there are certain parallels that can be cited. The first and most obvious are the "cup hollows" which are found in many places in greater Palestine.<sup>2</sup> Most notably, these cup hollows have been observed at Mureighat,<sup>2</sup> Damiya,<sup>3</sup> Um Qeis,<sup>4</sup> in the Yarmuk Valley,<sup>5</sup> and below the lowest Mesolithic level at Jericho.<sup>6</sup> Many of these hollows may be natural; those at Jericho almost certainly are.<sup>7</sup> That primitive man attributed magical or cultic significance to these quite remarkable phenomena seems likely. He did not, after all, have a geologist or a paleozoologist to explain them. From this, imitation is a rather short step.

The hollows at Jericho provide an especially interesting field for conjecture. They are very similar to the ones at Damiya in size and shape, though, judging from photographs, those at Damiya seem to be slightly deeper. The appearance of the natural slab at Jericho again resem-

bles the Damiya slab. Abutting the slab at Jericho is a walled platform, thought by the excavator to be a shrine.<sup>8</sup> Though perhaps not significant, the stones of the wall again resemble the stones under the Damiya slab. That the platform at Jericho is later than the slab is clear from the stratigraphy, though how much later is not clear. The excavator has unusually clear evidence for dating the platform shrine to the Mesolithic period (Carbon 14: 7800 B.C. ± 210). That the structure at Damiya combines the elements visible at Jericho is at least a possibility.

Other possible parallels might be the stone kernoi found during the excavations at Mallia on Crete.<sup>9</sup> These kernoi are much more sophisticated in both shape and technique but the basic idea is the same; hollows carved around the perimeter of a rounded slab. There is a remote possibility that the Damiya slab may be a sort of proto-kernos but to the author's present knowledge, no links exist.

The Damiya slab does not seem to be culturally related to the surrounding dolmens, either from the point of view of position or technique. The position of the slab in relation to the dolmens seems to indicate a relatively earlier date for the slab unless it was erected on a "better be safe than sorry" basis by a different people. At present, the slab is dominated by the other features of the area (see Figure 1). It is considerably lower than the nearest dolmen and is found on the southern fringe of the dolmen field. It is dominated by the cleared area and the towers above it on the hill. It is a considerable distance from the concentrations of dolmens to the north. If the

(2) Condor, C.R., *Survey of Palestine*, page 150.

(3) Dajani, Rafik, "Excavations in Dolmens," page 58. Some "altars" are cup hollows; personal observation.

(4) Personal observation.

(5) Stekelis, M., "A New Neolithic Industry: the Yarmoukian of Palestine," page 1.

(6) See Plate 5A in Kenyon, K., *Archeology in the Holy Land*.

(7) The excavator does not mention the hollows. See Kenyon, K., "Excavations at Jericho," pp. 88-110.

(8) Kenyon, K., "Excavations at Jericho," page 100.

(9) Personal observation. Also see Plate 27, Alexiou, Stylianos, *A Guide to the Minoan Palaces*.

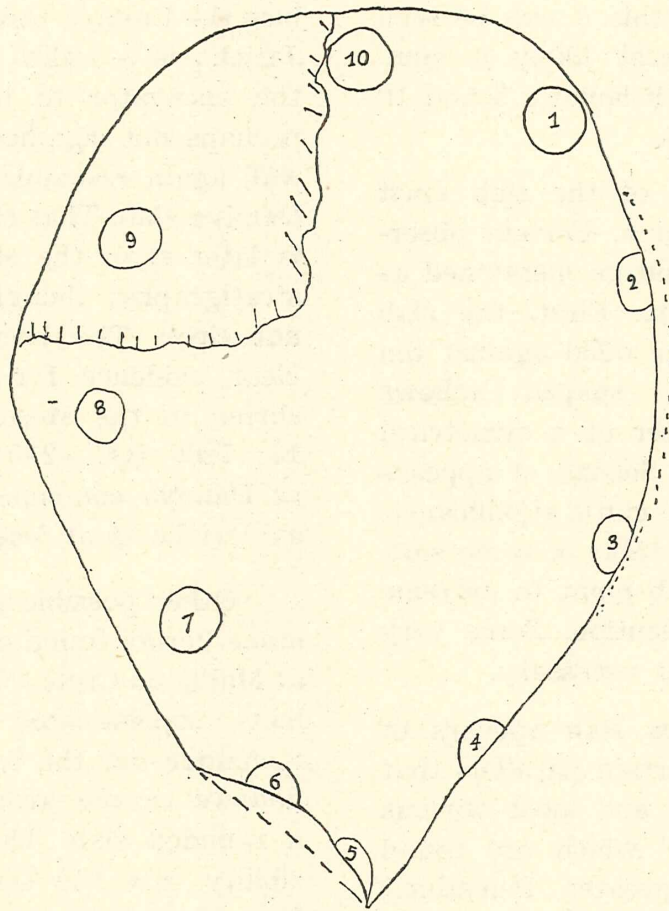


Fig. 2

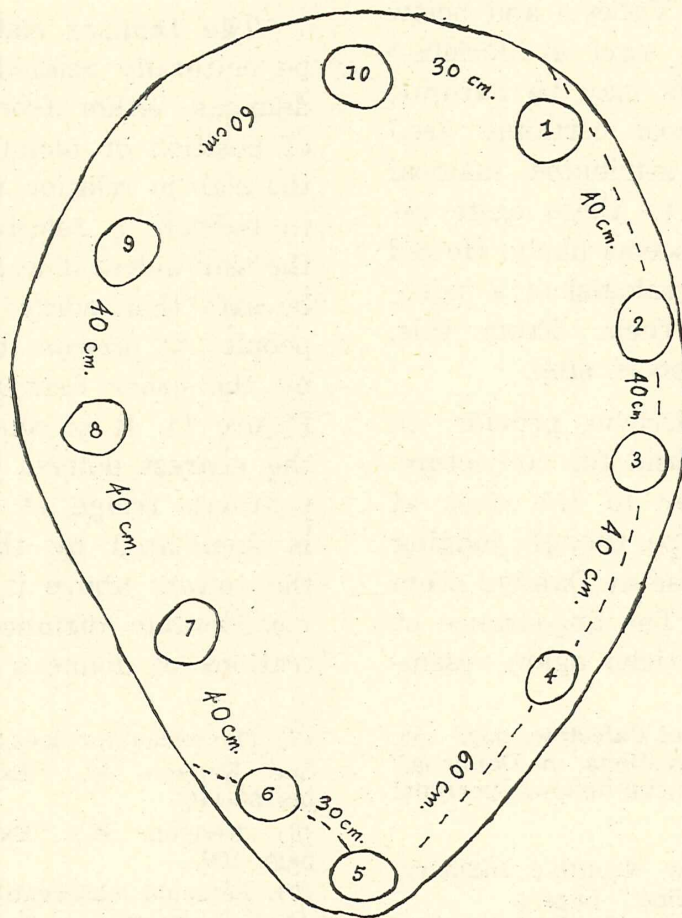


Fig. 3

dolmens existed when the slab was constructed, it is difficult to imagine why the builders placed it where they did. Its position vis-a-vis the natural features of the slope is much more satisfactory, placed as it is in front of a rocky outcrop overlooking the valley (see Plates XXXIV, 1, XXXV, 1).

The previously mentioned technical features of the slab differ at most points from those of the dolmens. The slab has

eroded differently as well. It seems clear that it was made by a different, though possible contemporary people. Any attempt to date the slab is premature. If, however, a relationship can be established between the slab and the Mesolithic levels at Jericho or the kernoi of Greece, this could give us a bit of sure ground in the maze of conjecture concerning the cup hollows and the dolmens themselves.

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