

RECYCLING THE VALLEY: PRELIMINARY REPORT OF THE 2015 EXCAVATIONS AT TALL DĀMIYAH

Lucas Petit and Zeidan Kafafi

Introduction

The project *Recycling the Valley* was initiated by the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities in 2012, in order to understand the varied diachronic use of sites in the Central Jordan Valley and the Jordanian Plateau during the Iron Age (for a lengthy discussion of the project, Petit 2013). In 2014, the project became a joint venture with Yarmouk University. Whereas excavated sites like Tall Dayr ‘Allā, Tall al-Mazār and Tall as-Sa‘idiyeh reveal discontinuing occupation histories (Yassine *et al.* 1988; Van der Kooij 2001; Petit 2009a, and references therein), Tall Dāmiyah was settled almost continuously during the Iron Age II period (Petit *et al.* 2006; Petit 2008; Petit 2009a: 103-49). This asked for an explanation and archaeological investigations at Tall Dāmiyah were carried out in 2012, 2013 and 2014.

Tall Dāmiyah is a small settlement mound (the summit is less than one hectare) on the east bank of the Jordan River, a little south of the confluence of the Zarqa River (**Fig. 1**). It is considered the most southern of the Iron Age sites in this valley, with the exception of some settlement mounds in oases in the Dead Sea Plain (Tall as-Sultan, Tall Hammām). Tall Dāmiyah is strategically located in the Zor, close to one of the few forts of the Jordan River. The Zor is a lower located vale within the Jordan Valley, which was probably flooded seasonally in the past. The site’s position near a fort and along an important historical E-W trade route might provide part of the explanation for its exceptional occupation history.

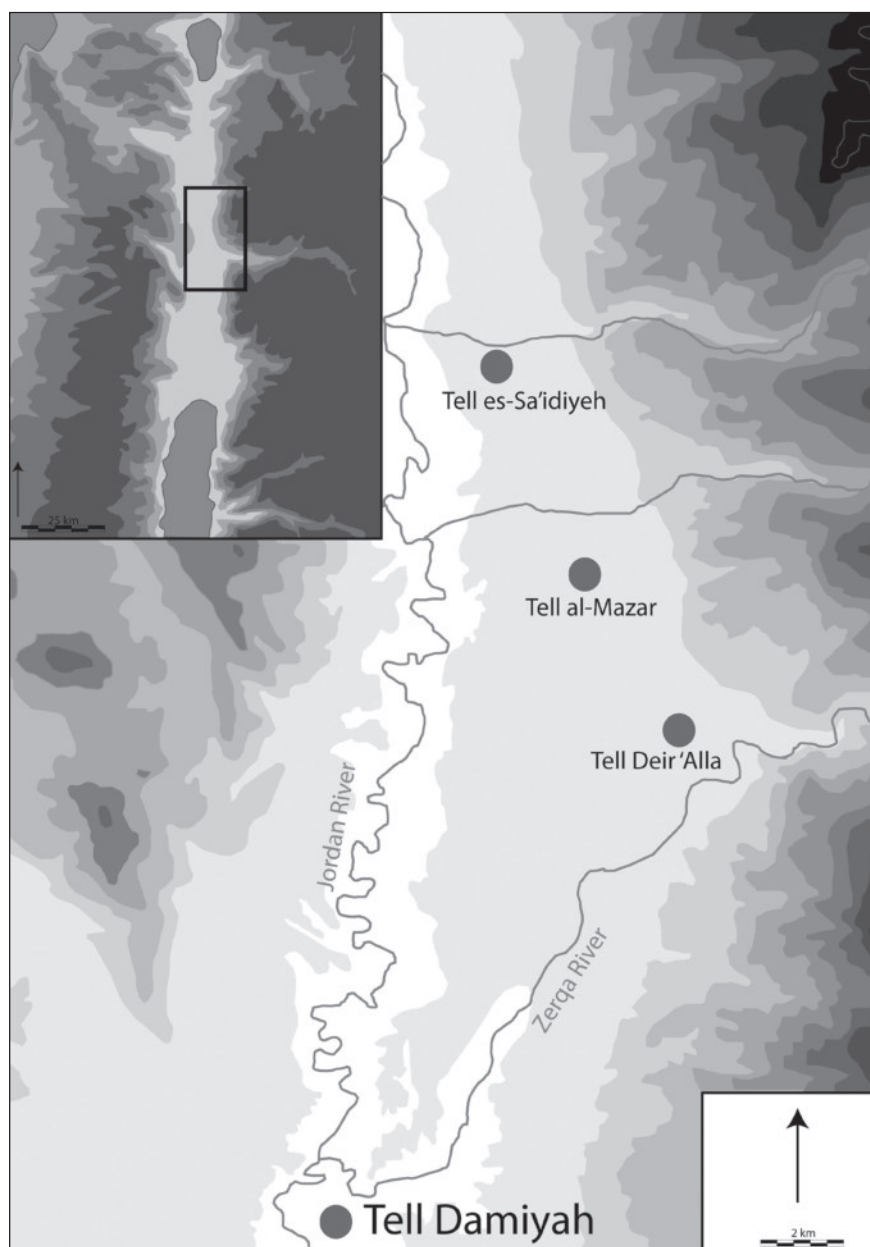
Excavation Work

Tall Dāmiyah was first trenched in 2004

and 2005 by Dr. Omar al-Ghul from Yarmouk University and Lucas Petit, at that time from Leiden University (Kaptijn *et al.* 2005; Petit *et al.* 2006; Petit 2009a). The excavation units were opened along a bulldozer cut that ‘stimulated’ massive erosion. Extensive Iron Age occupation was encountered, dating from the 10th until the 6th century BC. Finds indicating links with the Neo-Assyrian empire were intriguing (Petit 2009a: 117-20). Some Persian storage pits and two burials of unknown date were the only post-Iron Age remains.

In 2012, the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities started a new regional project in the Central Jordan Valley, called ‘Recycling the Valley’; excavations at Tall Dāmiyah continued as part of this project (Petit 2013). In addition to valuable information about the 8th to the 3rd centuries BC, two cemeteries were discovered, dated by grave goods and surface pottery to the Byzantine and Ottoman Period (Petit 2013). In the following two seasons, 2013 and 2014, the team focussed primarily on the late Iron Age remains and the two cemeteries on the summit. In 2014, Yarmouk University, represented by Zeidan Kafafi, joined the project. The aim was to acquire a more substantial view of the site’s latest history. Tall Dāmiyah is one of the few sites in the Southern Levant with Neo-Assyrian objects, including cuneiform writings. The finds suggest that Tall Dāmiyah was in use as an important centre, possibly with a cultic function (Kafafi and Petit 2018; Petit and Kafafi 2016). Furthermore, the spectacular discovery of a Byzantine and Ottoman cemetery on top of Tall Dāmiyah has increased our understanding of the late-Antiquity in the Jordan Valley.

Excavation work at Tall Dāmiyah continued

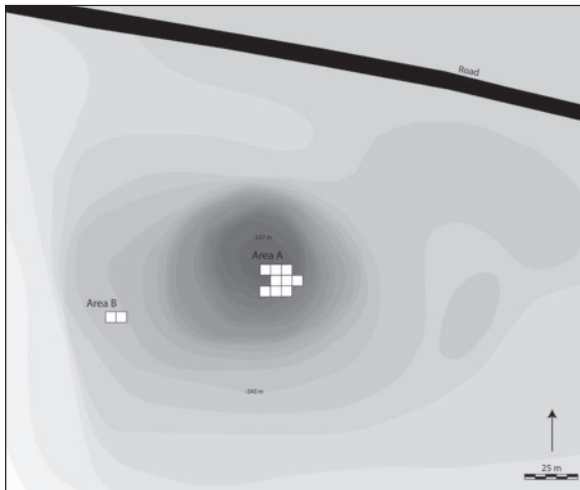


1. Map of the Central Jordan Valley and the location of Tall Dāmiyah (Drawing by Lucas Petit).

in the autumn of 2015, between October 4 and November 5. The season was organised and sponsored by the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities, represented by Lucas Petit, and Yarmouk University, represented by Zeidan Kafafi. The excavation team included Muwaffaq Bataineh, Yousef al-Zu'bi, Jeroen Rensen, Mariëtte Grimbergen, Hendrik Uleners, Yannick Boswinkel, Sophie Tews and Diederik Halbertsma. The Department of Antiquities (DoA) Representative was Ziad Ghunaimat. The work was carried out in two areas: Area A on the summit (Squares IV, VIII,

IX and XII) and Area B on the western lower terrace (Squares XIII and XIV) (**Fig. 2**).

The objective for excavation in Area A was to discover further information regarding the Late Iron Age (8th-6th centuries BC) and the Persian/Hellenistic Period (5th-3rd centuries BC); the results will be compared with material culture from other contemporaneous sites located in the Jordan Valley. The decision to open Area B on the lower terrace was made at the end of the 2014 season, mainly to explore the nature and extension of the occupation at Tall Dāmiyah, as other similar sites in the Jordan Valley, such as



2. Contour Map of Tall Dāmiyah with Excavation Areas (Drawing by Muwaffaq Bataineh).

Tall al-Mazār and Tall as-Sa'idiyeh, have lower settlement areas and cemeteries at the foot of the site.

Preliminary Results in Area A (Summit)

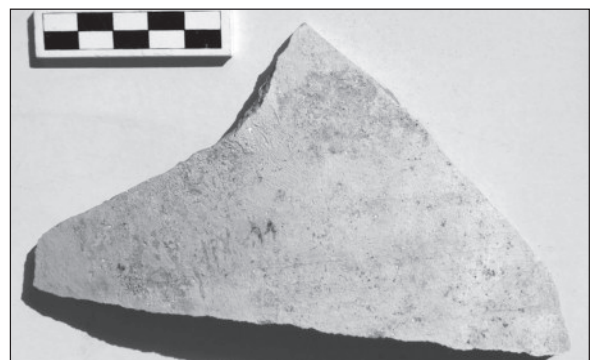
A few skeletons from the Ottoman and Byzantine Period were excavated during this season, most of them discovered during the removal of the baulks. Two Ottoman graves were encountered and studied in Square VII; both were covered by stone slabs (**Fig. 3**). The discovery of an Ottoman pipe in the fill above these slabs in 2014 dates those burials to the latest occupation phase at Tall Dāmiyah. Over the five seasons, more than 50 skeletons have been carefully excavated and studied; results will be published in the nearby future.

During the 5th, 4th and 3rd century BC, the summit of Tall Dāmiyah was used for storage. Numerous pits cut through earlier Iron Age layers, sometimes more than 2 meters deep. Reports from previous seasons have described their outlook and content in detail (Petit 2013; Petit 2014; Kafafi and Petit 2018). During the 2015 season, two interesting finds were discovered in pits from this period. One was a single large fragment of a jar with an Aramaic ink inscription (**Fig. 4**), and the other was comprised of fragments of two storage jars, one of which could be reconstructed. Neither object has been discovered previously, and both provide additional information about the function and date of the pits.

Excavations have verified that, during the

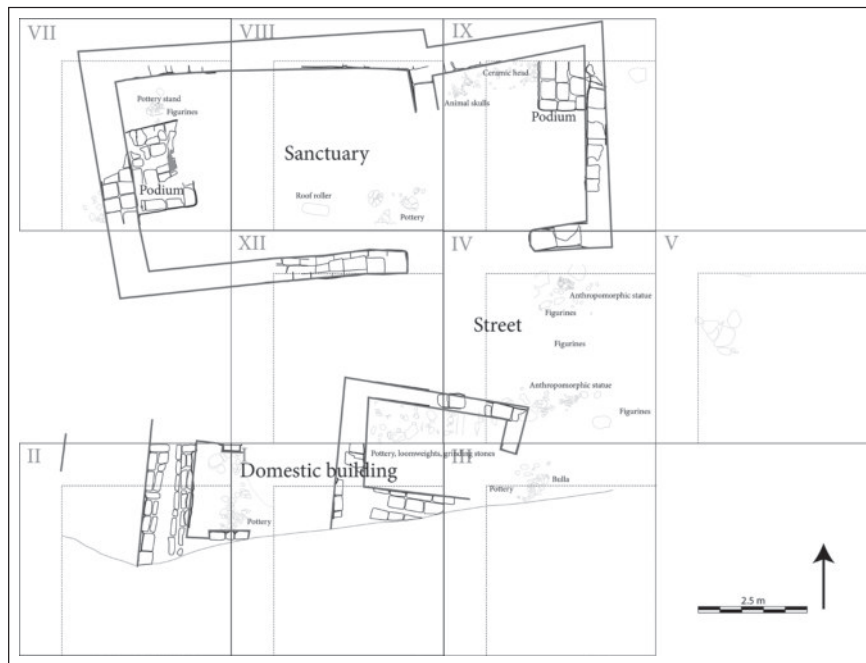


3. An Ottoman Burial in Square VIII (Photo Lucas Petit).



4. Pottery Sherd with Aramaic Inscription (Photograph by Youssef al-Zu'bi).

late Iron Age, the summit was inhabited by at least two buildings (**Fig. 5**). Whereas the most southern building seems to be domestic in nature, finds near and in the northern excavated structure suggest a cultic function (Kafafi and Petit 2018). In 2015, the archaeologists concentrated on the better preserved northern building and the street in between. The baulks were excavated and remaining debris on top of the floor was removed. By the end of the



5. Top plan of the Iron Age II C occupation (Drawing by Lucas Petit).

2015-season, this level was reached in almost all squares.

The largest of the two buildings is rectangular in shape, oriented east-west, and has a doorway in the central part of the long southern wall. It was built on the top of a layer of artificial fill. At a few places, older wall remains were used as foundations, and one of these stumps acted as a division wall between the eastern and western part of the large room. In this rectangular building, all inner walls and installations were coated with white lime plaster. The inner dimensions are ca. 10.6 m in length and 4.2 m in width, and the building is considered large compared to contemporaneous structures at other sites in the vicinity. The roof was made of wooden beams, covered with smaller branches, reeds and packed clay. A heavy, stone roller was found on top of a layer of roof debris inside the building. Two mudbrick installations were found; one against the western wall and one in the north-eastern corner. The remains of the latter are difficult to interpret, due to its location close to the present surface. The western platform, probably the primary offering installation, was stepped, and plastered with lime (Petit and Kafafi 2016).

Several pottery stands and figurines, both of horses and females, were discovered inside and outside the building, and cultic activities can be assumed. The excellent condition of the figurines

and the remains of two anthropomorphic statues are unique objects that have only a few parallels (Petit 2009b). Moreover, a clay bulla with cuneiform signs (found in 2004), Assyrian Palace Ware, a few Egyptian objects and Cypro-Phoenician and Ammonite pottery sherds, indicate relationships with the Jordanian Highland, Lebanon, Mesopotamia and Egypt. The head of an anthropomorphic statue (**Fig. 6**) was discovered near the northern wall, together with two animal skulls carefully placed on the walking surface.

Three other complete female figurines were uncovered in street-layers towards the southeast of the main building (**Fig. 7**). These objects were probably used during an earlier stage, implying that Tall Dāmiyah had a cultic function during large parts of the Iron Age. The co-directors suggest that Tall Dāmiyah was a significant and international religious centre during the late Iron Ages, along two major trade routes and close to one of the few fords crossing the Jordan River (Petit and Kafafi 2016).

Preliminary Results in Area B (Foot)

The identification of Adama in biblical and Egyptian sources as an important town (Petit and Kafafi 2016), does not fit the situation found at Tall Dāmiyah, a small settlement mound with space for only a few buildings. Either the identification is wrong, or the remains of the



6. Ceramic Male Head (Photograph by Lucas Petit).



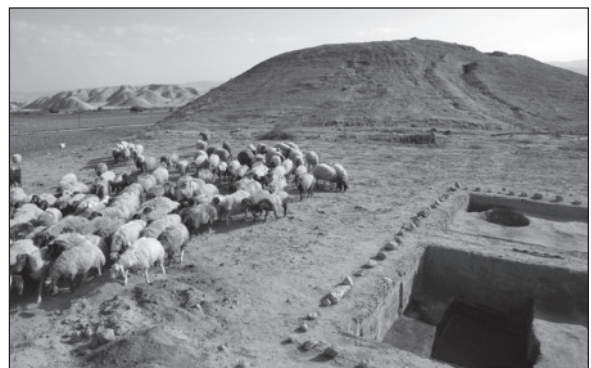
7. Street Layers south of the Sanctuary (Photograph by Yousef al-Zu'bi).

town must be located elsewhere; for example, at the foot of the 'acropolis'. Two squares were opened at the elevated south-western foot of Tall Dāmiyah (**Fig. 2**). Historical photographs suggest that it is part of a peninsula of white Qatar material that connect Tall Dāmiyah with the eastern Qatar hills.

Several graves and pits were discovered. The pits were circular and in almost all cases bell-shaped. They were filled with debris, some of which was mudbrick fragments. The pottery was a mixture of several occupation periods

at Tall Dāmiyah; the presence of Byzantine pottery suggests that the pits were dug during or after this period. The graves must also have been post-Byzantine in date, based on similar reasoning. There were no funerary objects, and the skeletons were not buried according to the Islamic tradition.

All these features cut through a somewhat puzzling block of very regular white, black and yellowish layers (**Fig. 8**). Most of the material seems to be the result of some kind of industrial activity using intense heat. No structures have been detected yet, but the presence of burnt mudbrick suggest that some buildings were standing in the vicinity. Only fragmentary pottery with a mixed character was found. Coarse tempered pottery sherds might suggest an Islamic date, but in the lower ash layers, an increase in Late Bronze Age sherds was encountered, among them fragments of Cypriot milk bowls. The colourful accumulation of ash layers has, however, an identical parallel only a few kilometres to the north (Steiner 2008: Fig. 9). At Tall Abū Sarbuṭ similar layers were discovered between 1988 and 1992 dated to the



8. Trenches on the Lower Terrace, Looking Northeast (Photograph by Lucas Petit).



9. A Bell-Shaped Pit and Horizontal Ash Layers, Looking Southeast (Photograph by Lucas Petit).

Ayyubid/Mamluk period (De Haas *et al.* 1989; 1992; Steiner 2008). Although archaeobotanical research could not confirm the idea that sugar cane was processed, the excavators of Tall Abū Sarbut believe the layers are the result of large-scale burning, which took place somewhere else on the site (Steiner 2008: 165). Although the situation at Tall Dāmiyah equals these findings, future investigations should bring more information about the date and function of the layers. A natural sand deposit was reached below the ash layers, containing no material culture.

Discussion

The excavation results of 2015 at Tall Dāmiyah have resulted in a better picture of the occupation during the late 8th and 7th century BC, as well as of the occupation remains at the foot of the settlement mound. Although heavily disturbed by Persian and Hellenistic pits, as well as later burials, the remains of two rectangular buildings on the summit, dated to the Late Iron Age, were further investigated. A clear relationship existed with the Neo-Assyrian Empire, as well as with Ammon and the western areas. However, the role Tall Dāmiyah played in this period is still unknown, and needs further research. Was this building some sort of trading post, or an Assyrian fort, as was previously thought (Petit 2009a)? Or was Tall Dāmiyah a religious centre with the white-plastered building functioning as a sanctuary? The material culture especially, such as the complete figurines, statues and animal skulls, are strong evidence to assume religious activities at the site. However, in contemporary layers, especially in and around the southern building, cooking pots and loom weights were found, implying that around 700 BC, Tall Dāmiyah was more than just a sanctuary. At least in the southern building, people were living, hunting, farming, producing textiles and possibly trading.

General Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the DoA, represented by His Excellency the Director General Dr. Munther Jamhawi, for his continuous support of the project. Without the help of the Director General and other staff-members of

the department, this project would not have been so successful. Also many thanks to Rami Freihāt and his crew at the Dayr ‘Allā office, and the DoA Representative, Ziad Ghunaimat. Further appreciations should go to the military in the Dāmiyah area and the inhabitants of the Dayr ‘Allā village. Thanks are due to the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities, and the Deanship of Research and Graduate Studies at Yarmouk University, who financed the project. The co-directors were privileged to have an excellent team, and appreciated the work of the local staff who worked on the excavation and in the house. As always, it was a pleasure to stay at the Station for Archaeological Studies in Dayr ‘Allā, and we express our thanks to Yarmouk University for housing us. We would also like to thank Gerrit van der Kooij for his comment on the Persian jar inscription.

Dr. Lucas P. Petit
National Museum of Antiquities
Papengracht 30
PO Box 11114
2301 EC, Leiden, The Netherlands
l.petit@rmo.nl

Prof. Dr. Zeidan Kafafi
Yarmouk University
Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology
zeidan.kafafi@gmail.com

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