

## A Tomb At Khirbet Yajuz

By  
Dr. Henry O. Thompson

In a surface survey of Khirbet Yajuz, the writer and a member of the Department of Antiquities, Jalil Amr, noted an unusual tomb. Ten loculi (see Plate I) along the south and west sides, are quite large — from 1-1 1/2 m. wide by 1 1/2-2 m. high. The place had also been reused as an olive press, judging by the well preserved basin and millstone (Pls. II & III) in the southeast quadrant. Surface sherding of the area indicated Mameluke (12th-15th century A.D.) and Early Byzantine (350-450 A.D.) but the attractive features of the tomb were the size of the loculi and the reuse for olive pressing.

These features led the writer to suggest to the Friends of Archaeology that this might be a site for a volunteer excavation. The Friends are a group organized in Amman who sponsor public lectures and tours of archaeological sites. They also sponsored an excavation in 1962-3. The executive committee agreed to sponsor the site under the auspices of the Department of Antiquities, as a weekend (Fri, Sat and Sun) dig for volunteers. The Friends offered financial support and publicity. The Department of Antiquities agreed and supplied equipment and the extremely helpful services of Ibrahim Haj Hassan of the Department's Excavation Section. The

digging also benefited from the technical skills of Khamis Dados Fahad, a «Jericho» man trained in the Kenyon method, now living in Ruseifa. Digging was carried on from 11 Feb. to 19 Mar, on the three day weekend basis. Eighteen volunteers were involved at various times. The work also benefited from several visits by Drs. Moawiyah Ibrahim and Fawzi Zayadin of the Department, and the services of the Department's photographers, Sarkis Labijian and Abdulfattah Attar. The main drawings published here (Plates I & VIII) were done by Mr. Ben Ballance whose services are deeply appreciated.

Khirbet Yajuz, or simply Yajuz, as distinct from Kom Yajuz (on a high hill east-north-east of Yajuz), has been visited by a number of scholarly surveyors. Part of its attraction has been its (and/or Kom Yajuz') potential identification with the Biblical city of Jazer (Num. 21:32; 32:35), a site on the border of ancient Ammon and disputed among Ammonites, Moabites and Israelites. The consensus would appear to be that Yajuz is not this ancient city. The name of the present site has no relationship to the ancient name and the ancient site would seem to be in a more southerly position somewhere near Tell Hesban or Madeba.

1. Nelson Glueck, «Explorations in Eastern Palestine, III,» *AASOR XVIII-XIX* (1939), 177ff. C.C. McCown, «Spring Field Trip, 1930,» *BASOR* No. 39 (Oct. '30), 13ff. Selah Merrill, *East of the Jordan*; NY: Charles Scribner's Sons,

1883. C.R. Conder, *The Survey of Eastern Palestine*, Vol. I; London: PEF, 1889. Other observers include Schumacher, Oliphant, Dalman, Germer-Durand, Thomsen, and Brünnow and Domaszewski.

Visitors to our site have included Glueck, McCown, Merrill and Conder among others. (1) They describe an extensive Romano-Byzantine city which served as a way station 7 miles (11 by slightly zig-zag but well paved modern road) out of Philadelphia (Amman) on the way to and from Gerasa (Jerash) some 23 miles away. The ruins included at least two churches and a temple plus other public buildings and two cemeteries, one on the north slope and one on the south. The Wadi Yajuz at this point forms a small plain, a mile wide, with the ruins centering on a perennial spring west of the present village which is on the upper south slope. The ruins are over a mile long. In the 90 years since Merrill's observations, virtually all that he described in the way of statuary and carvings, has disappeared but the reservoir or «birkeh» remains with its upper sides now strengthened and lengthened by modern concrete. A second birkeh was added in 1948. A 1950 map shows a canal running from the spring along the foot of the northern slope (Plate IV). It carries water to Ruseifa, with the first kilometer lined with concrete in 1948. The valley contained orchards and the southern slope a large vineyard. Some olive trees remain, along with pines and a few of the ancient butm (terebinth) trees noted by Merrill and Conder. (2) Several writers note Roman milestones in the vicinity, along the Roman road from Philadelphia to Jerash (today Yajuz lies 1 km south of the Sweileh — Zerqa road). Others note among the recent graves in the area of the spring, the 1823 A.D. tomb of Nimr ibn 'Adwan, poet and legendary hero, and that of his wife. These graves are still there, well marked inside a circle of upright slabs. The wife's tomb and a number of others in the

area, reuse pieces of column and lintels or architraves.

The tomb under discussion in this report, is in the midst of the village on the upper south slope, southeast of the spring, at the 887 m contour. (3) Several large buildings date from the Turkish period, judging by the style of masonry and a star and crescent carved on a lintel over a door in the courtyard near the storeroom rented for our digging equipment. The tomb has apparently not been used in modern times. The villagers explained that they discovered it recently and cleared it for storage purposes but changed their minds for reasons they left rather vague. The land owner, Mr. Abdul Razak Daudi, noted that he had found and entered the tomb 40 years ago but had found nothing of significance.

In plan, the tomb is about 12 m square (see Plate I) including the south and west loculi. Accumulated debris left clearance inside of about 2 m. In places, it lay 0.35 m. to 1.5 m thick. The north side, toward the wadi, may have had the two loculi but perhaps these were started and then the excavators realized they were too near the outside slope, for it does not appear that the northern loculi were ever completed. In the northeast corner (Pl. V Fig. 1) of the tomb, as found, was an opening to the outside, now filled by the dump from our excavation. There appears to be a large, low ceilinged natural cave here. The tomb excavators cut into it but maintained the symmetry of the south and east walls of the tomb. It is possible that originally the cave was not open to the outside. On the outside where a pre-dump trial trench reached bedrock in 0.05 - 0.35 m, the cave shows ceiling collapse. A rough field wall

2. Air Photography Survey map published under the direction of the Department of Lands and Survey of Jordan, 1950, 1:10,000 Zarqa Basin

Sheet 35/58; London: Air Survey Co., 1950.  
3. *Ibid.*

of field stone south of this outside cave would seem to be of recent origin. No doubt it helped funnel run-off water into the cave where judging by a water mark, it has stood as much as 0.15 m deep. The water laid silt inside was shown by a second predump trial trench to be c. 0.35 m deep. This would seem to suggest that the break in the bedding plane, causing ceiling fall on the outer edge of the cave, and thus opening the tomb to the outside with a «natural» entrance, is also of recent origin. The eastern wall of the tomb contains the door of the tomb in approximately the center.

North of the door and partially breaking into the natural cave, is a large (c. 2x2 m) man-made cave (Pl. V, Fig. 1). Its general appearance is of a burial chamber but a trial trench hit bedrock in c. 0.35 m with no evidence of any kind of use. The south wall consists partly of natural bedrock and partly of cut blocks under the edge of the tomb's doorway. This latter structuring suggests partial collapse of the wall between the door and the man-made cave, as happened frequently between the loculi especially those along the west (Pl. V, Fig. 1).

The door, as presently found, may be slightly larger than the original from exposure and erosion. An upright block stands on each side at the outer edge. This may be left over from an earlier framing with artificial jams and lintel, a common practice in Roman tombs. This speculation is strengthened by the discovery on or near the surface of the debris, and reused in one olive press, of four blocks with an end carved in what may have been

a floral pattern (see Plate VI, Fig. 1). Note the slight curvature along the bottom edge of this block, above the meter stick. This strengthens the suggested usage as a lintel stone.

An additional 14 stones were found, on surface or buried in debris, with a recess of 0.08 - 0.10 m along one edge (Plates III, Fig. 2, and VI, Fig. 2). Two of these were reused in the pavement (Pl. VII, Fig. 1) on the south side of the south olive press and well. We'll come back to this in a moment. Two of the pieces are rectangular blocks with straight sides. One of these is used or reused in a strange box like structure (Plate VII, Fig. 2) as a lower course block (eastern end) which also forms part of a wall across the front of loculus No. 4 (counting from the southeast corner, cf. Pl. 1). At least one of the blocks in the pavement is in this category while the other one is unknown (Pls. I & VII, Fig. 1). The other blocks have a projecting lip (or tongue as though it were for a tongue and groove arrangement). The original function of these blocks is unknown. One speculation is that they may have been placed at the outer (toward the center of the tomb) end of each loculus with a lid fitted into the recess and extending over the body.

The basin and millstone in the southeast quadrant of the tomb, were noted earlier.<sup>(4)</sup> A smaller (worn down?) millstone lies 1.40 m southwest of the basin. In the southwest quadrant (Pl. VIII) is a pile of stones with an upright slab 2.10 m high, 0.38 m. thick, and 0.85 - 0.90 m. wide. A smaller slab, 1.75x0.20x0.55

4. An excellent example of this type of millstone and basin, are illustrated at Qasr el-Feifeh, although it is in the open air (p. 9, Fig. 2, Nelson Glueck, «Explorations in Eastern Palestine, II,» AASOR XV, 1935). The use of caves for olive presses is reported for the Bronze Age and the

Roman period at Lachish. Unfortunately the use is not clear for the latter and the design of the caves does not appear comparable. Cf. p. 242, pl. 9:4, Olga Tufnell, *Lachish III* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953) and pp. 71, 282, 288, pl. 7:4, Tufnell, *Lachish IV* (1958).

0.60, leans against the upright one. Inside the upright are upside down «L» shaped grooves as shown in the west side elevation. At the base of the slabs is a well, dug in the bedrock with a sump in the bottom (Pl. IX, Fig 1). A similar arrangement exists in the northwest quadrant of the tomb, except that the leading slab is the larger of the two uprights (Pl. IX, Fig. 2). The area around the north well was not excavated. A pavement of thick huwwar blocks is laid in the huwwar bedrock south of the south well and olive press. It is in this pavement that the two stones with the recess are reused. These installations are probably olive presses.<sup>5</sup> The olives would have been crushed in the basin by the millstone, probably turned by an ox or donkey (a small square hole in the ceiling above the basin, may be evidence of an upright beam). The olives would have then been placed on a screen upheld by bars fitted in the small slots on the north and south lips of the well (east and west for the north well), as seen in the plan (Pl. I). A weight, guided by the «L» shaped grooves and perhaps lowered by a screw principle, squeezed the olives and the oil was collected in the well. The weights are probably the rectangular blocks found in locus 24 (Plate X).

No evidence has appeared to indicate whether the large loculi are the original size or if they were enlarged by the olive press people. Almost every one of the loculi had bits of plaster still on the walls while loculi 1 and 2 retain a considerable covering of plaster (Pl. X, Fig. 2). Out of the nine loculi excavated, only No. 4 had a portion of a plaster floor still preserved

(Pl. XI). From this, however, one might assume that all loculi had plastered floors, walls and maybe ceilings. Numerous fragments of this plaster were found in the huwwar fill within the loculi and as noted below in loci 17 and 22. The partition walls have crumbled except for the one between loculi 1 and 2 (Pl. II Fig. 1). On the west, only vestiges remain at the ceiling level. These presumably form the huwwar fill in the loculi and in loci 6, 17 and 22. The rectangular block with recess was noted earlier as forming a wall across the front (toward the interior of the tomb) of loculus No. 4. Four blocks form a wall across the front of No. 8 and half of No. 9.

Inside the door of the tomb as found was a quantity of soft loose (fine grain ed) black soil. It is assumed that this came from the blocked doorway which local villagers claimed was opened about two years ago. Covering exposed areas in the rest of the tomb was a black layer c. 0.05 - 0.10 m thick, with an oily surface. Dr. Ibrahim noted that this is common in the vicinity of olive presses, judging by observations near Nablus. Below this layer, in several areas (e.g., loci 17 and 22) was an irregular layer of huwwar, thicker toward the loculi. These loci are near the loculi and this huwwar presumably represents fallen rock from the broken partitions between the loculi. In the eastern edge of loci 17 and 6, a rocky or rubbly layer was just below the oily black. Below the huwwar and the rubbly layer, was a layer of red brown fine grained soil, very rich in postsherds, with numerous bones, brick and tile fragments, and a few tesserae (white). Interspersed were patches

5. This identification was made by Dr. Fawzi Zayyadin of the Department of Antiquities. His very helpful discussion along with that of Dr. Moawiyah Ibrahim and Mr. M. Murshed Khadijeh, contributed to the interpretation given here. Their assistance is gratefully acknowledged. Vats ranging from 1-2 m deep were found at Jeru-

salem in 1923-5. The excavators call them olive presses. The design is not clear but there does not seem to be any comparison with the Yajuz installations, Cf. R.A.S. Macalister and J. Garrow Duncan, *Excavations on the Hill of Ophel, Jerusalem: PEF Annual, 1926.*

of light gray soil of ashy consistency. This soil tended to blend with the overlying huwwar and was extremely difficult to isolate.

Small quantities of Mameluke (12th-15th centuries A.D.) pottery were found on or immediately below the surface of loculi 9 and 10, loci 6, 17, 24, near the doorway, inside the basin (locus 11) and the north well (locus 18). They suggest that the tomb was open in this period. It might point to use of the basin and the wells which contained a black granular soil similar in consistency to that mixed with rubbly soil of nearby loci 6 and 17. However, the basin also contained bits of tin can and the south well contained the bones of a dog. This points to a cleaning out of more recent date, either for potential use or perhaps during a hunt for antiquities.

The red soil contained early fifth century A.D. pottery equivalent to the Early Byzantine of Tell Hesban. (6) Since this soil covered the weights noted above, this tation trench (locus 23) for the basin, are homogeneous with this red soil pottery, this suggests that the press was built and used in the fifth century also. The only other example known to this writer, of an olive press inside a cave or tomb, is a screw type press in an unexcavated natural cave Jabal Qa'qir west of Hebron. The surface sherds there were Late Roman- Early Byzantine (7).

The loculi suggest a Roman tomb. The reuse of the architectural fragments (Pls. VI and XII) clearly show the olive press as later than the tomb usage. This suggests a Roman date for the tomb. Apparently the olive press builders completely cleared the tomb, for no traces of earlier material were found.

6. James A. Sauer, Heshbon Pottery 1971 (Michigan Andrews University, 1973). Dr. Sauer analyzed the Yajuz pottery and his assistance is also

gratefully acknowledged.  
7. This information was supplied by Dr. William Dever.

YAJUZ 1972

Locus list

Explanation : Following the general information on the loci, the detailed information is presented in columns: 1. Numbers of pottery pails; 2. Numbers of registered sherds; 3. Field Dates; 4. Objects

*Unnumbered Locus:*

Surface cleaning around door, inside, on 11-12 Feb., found loose wash of brownish gray soil, with rock tumble.

- |    |            |  |
|----|------------|--|
| 1  | none saved | Ayyubid/Mameluke paint and glaze, E. Byzantine |
| 5a | »          | » Early Byzantine                              |

*Locus 1:*

On 11-12 Feb., dug a pre-dump probe trench on the north slope of the wadi, below the tomb entrance. Dark brown surface soil lay over ash, with reddish soil on bedrock at c. 35 cm. The trench was 0.70 m. E-W x 3.85 m. N-S.

- |   |            |   |
|---|------------|---|
| 2 | none saved | Ay/Mam painted ware; E. Byz; possible Iron Age                    |
| 4 | »          | » Ay/Mam, E. Byz, modern ware, possible Iron Age; painted plaster |

*Locus 2:*

On 11-12 Feb, dug a pre-dump probe trench on the north side of the tomb, near the north opening. Red moist soil was removed to a depth of c. 35 cm, when bedrock was reached. The trench was 1 m N-S x 0.50 m.

- |   |            |                   |
|---|------------|-------------------|
| 3 | none saved | E. Byz (1 handle) |
|---|------------|-------------------|

*Locus 3:*

On 12 Feb, dug loculus No. 6 (west side of tomb, southwest corner) in a trench 1.5 m x 2 m. No pottery.

*Locus 4:*

On 12 Feb, dug loculus No.7 (west side) in a trench 1.5 m (N-S) x 2m. No pottery.

*Locus 5:*

On 12-13 Feb, dug loculus No. 8 (west side, middle) in a trench 1.4 m (N-S) x 2.70 m. Below the surface huwwar was a layer of gray over more huwwar. No pottery was found but the top of a glass vessel was located near the east end of the trench, which terminated in a wall running north-south across loculi 8 and 1/2 of 9. Obj. No. 1. rim of glass vessel

*Locus 6:*

Surface excavation south and north of the south well, near loculi 5 and 6. Soil consisted largely of huwwar. The overall dimensions were 4.5 m N-S x 1.5 m. The fill lay over loci 7 and 8. Excavation dates were 12-13, and 18-19 Feb.

- |     |            |  |
|-----|------------|--|
| 5b  | none saved | E. Byz; plaster, roof tile, piece of metal   |
| 6   | 1-8        | Ay/Mam, Umayyid (Early Arabic), E. Byz; plaster, roof tile                           |
| 10a | none saved | E. Byz; plaster, roof tile   |
| 29a | 9-32       | E. Byz; brick, 3 tesserae, cattle and sheep bones. Obj. No. 2 base fragment of glass |

*Locus 7:*

Fill below locus 6, north of the south well, near loculi 7 and 8. Consisted of reddish brown soil interleaved with gray, with large rocks, over huwwar bedrock. Dimensions 2.20 x 2.15 m. Excavated 19, 20, 25-27 Feb, 4 Mar.

- |   |       |                                     |
|---|-------|-------------------------------------|
| 7 | 33-44 | E. Byz, UD; plaster, tile, tesserae |
|---|-------|-------------------------------------|

- 9 45-9 » » » » »  
 12 50-67 » » »  
 14 68-70 » » ; lamp base, tufa, tesserae  
 18 none saved » ; bone fragments  
 24 71-9 1 Ayyubid/Mameluk (balk trimming), E. Byz  
 31 none saved E. Byz; brick, tile, nail, bone fragments, olive seed

*Locus 8:*

Gray dirt and huwwar on top of the pavement south of the south well, under locus 6, 1.5 x 1.5 m. Excavated 19 Feb 72.

- 8 lost

*Locus 9:*

South well in southwest quadrant of tomb, 0.75 N-S x 0.70 x 0.70 deep (plus the lip 0.30 m thick). Sections and plans indicate the uprights above the well. Excavated 19, 25 Feb.

- 17 none saved E. Byz; bones of a dog

*Locus 10:*

Pavement south of south well, under locus 8, 4.25 x 3.0 (N-S) m. Exposed 13, 18, 19 Feb.

*Locus 11:*

Inside the round stone basin with millstone in the southeast quadrant of the tomb. The basin is 0.75 m high outside by 0.40 m deep inside, 2.10 m in diameter with width 0.10 m thick at the top. The center piece is 0.60 m across with a center hole 0.25 x 0.27. The millstone is 0.375 m thick, 1.20 m in diameter, with the hole 0.40 x 0.42 outer edge, 0.31 x 0.31 recessed edge. The interior of the basin was excavated 20, 25 Feb.

- 10b 80-83 Ay/Mam, E. Byz, UD; flint, tesserae, metal, olive seed  
 15 84-94 Ay/Mam, E. Byz; 1 tessera, bone fragments, button

*Locus 12:*

Locus 9 along the west wall was dug

- 20, 25 Feb in a trench 1.20 (N-S) x 6.60 m.  
 20 none saved E. Byz.

*Locus 13:*

Locus 10 along the west wall (northwest corner) was dug 20, 25 Feb in a trench 1.50 (N-S) x 1.30 (N. edge) - 2.10 (S. edge).

- 11 none saved Ay/Mam; plaster  
 16 none saved 1 sherd of E. Byz; plaster

On 20 Feb, excavated portion of locus 5 (southwest corner) under the «cross piece» which is 1.90 E-W x 0.35 thick. The over-all structure with the cross piece is 1.60 m high. The excavated portion is 1.00 E-W x 0.75 N-S, consists of huwwar mixed with ash and appeared continuous with locus 6, surface soil south of the south well.

- 13 none saved E. Byz, UD

*Locus 15:*

Locus 1, south wall (southeast corner) was excavated on 25 Feb., in a trench 1.0 (E-W) x 2.20 m. No pottery.

*Locus 16:*

Locus 2, south wall, was excavated 25 Feb., 1 Mar., in a trench 1.0 (E-W) x 2.20.

- 19 none saved UD  
 26 none saved E. Byz; bone fragments.

*Locus 17:*

East of loculi 9 and 10 (loci 12 and 13) and north of locus 24, cleared surface black soil and rubble over gray which was over huwwar bedrock at north end, red brown soil at south end in a trench 1.35 (E-W) x 2.50 m. Excavated 25-7 Feb, 4-5 Mar.

- 21 none saved 1 Ay/Mam (possibly from same pot as Pail 6, Loc 6), E. Byz; plaster.  
 22 95-102 1 Ay/Mam, E. Byz; brick, bone fragments.  
 32 none saved E. Byz.

33 none saved E. Byz.

*Locus 18:*

The north well (northwest quadrant of tomb, east of loci 12 and 13, north of locus 17) was cleared on 27 Feb and 3 Mar., along with a small probe trench on its eastern edge. The latter is 0.90 x 0.60 m. The well is 0.82 (E-W) x 0.82 x 0.82 deep excluding the lip

23 none saved E. Byz, UD  
27 none saved Ay/Mam, E. Byz; bone fragments.

*Locus 19:*

On 3, 4, 10, 19 Mar, the reddish brown fill outside the door way, on the south of the present steps, was partially excavated, in a small trench 2.00 (E-W) x 1.65 m. The fill was very rich in sherds.

25 103-121 3 Ay/Mam, E. Byz; glass fragments, bone fragments.  
28 122-34 E. Byz; brick, glass, teeth (probably sheep/goat),  
29b 135-64 E. Byz; tile, 4 tesserae, bone fragments.  
30 165-87 E. Byz; basalt, 5 tesserae, glass fragments.  
34 188-97 E. Byz.  
36 198-211 E. Byz.  
49 212-32 E. Byz, tile, 13 tesserae, bone fragments, horn (probably sheep/goat); a piece of tile has a figure like a Greek theta incised on it.

*Locus 20:*

Dug loculus 3 on 5 Mar in a trench 1.00 (E-W) x 2.50 m, on the south side of the tomb. No pottery in the huwwar fill.

*Locus 21:*

On 5 Mar, Loculus 4 was excavated on the south side of the tomb in a trench 1.10 (E-W) x 2.50 m, to fragments of a plaster floor - the only floor found in any of the ioculi though a slight streak in the

huwwar fill may be evidence of floors in other loculi.

25 233 E. Byz; bone fragments.

*Locus 22:*

From 10-12 Mar., cleared c. 5 square meters in SE quadrant of tomb giving an east-west balk between the basin and the south press, and between the basin and ioculus 2. The black surface soil overlay huwwar (thicker toward loculus 2, so presumably roof fall or from the partitions) which overlay reddish brown soil which was over bedrock. The bottom of the spare (worn out?) wheel was reached as well as the bottom of the basin with a foundation trench (see locus 23).

27 none saved E. Byz, UD  
38 234-48 E. Byz; bone fragments.  
44 none saved E. Byz; brick and tile fragments.

*Locus 23:*

Foundation trench for the basin, excavated on 12 Mar. No soil color distinction from reddish brown of locus 22, but dug into bedrock and contained several chunks of solidified ash (cp. loc 7). The trench is 25-30 cm. wide and 25 deep.  
39 249-52 E. Byz, UD; brick and tile frag.

*Locus 24:*

The balk between loci 17 and 6-7 was removed on 12, 17-19 Mar, in an area 1 m x 1.60 m. The black surface soil and rubble overlay a gray layer which was over huwwar which was over reddish brown which was over reddish brown but slightly more brown. More of the «weights» were uncovered but the excavation did not reach bottom or bedrock under the weights.

40 none saved 1 piece of Mam, E. Byz, UD; tile.  
41 253 E. Byz, UD; lamp frag.; sheep/goat teeth



- 42 254-61 E. Byz,
- 43 262-92 E. Byz; tile, 1 tesserae  
bone frag, glass frag.
- 45 293-300 E. Byz; tile. 2 tesserae
- 46 301-5 E. Byz; tile, brick
- 48 306 E. Byz; brick, basalt,  
cattle bone. Obj. No. 3: basalt grinder

*Locus 25:*

A small probe trench excavated 17-18 Mar, in man made cave in NE corner. Trench was laid out in a perpendicular to the built wall under the north side of the outer door, and covered an area of 0.80 m x 1.35 m. Soft (fine grained) black fill overlay reddish brown soil which overlay huwwar bedrock.

47 none saved Ay/Mam, E. Byz; 2 tess.

*Henry O. Thompson,  
Director, 1971-1972,  
ACOR, Amman*